American Literary Review

Volume XXI, Number 1, Spring 2010

American Literary Review

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Marylee MacDonald

Finding Peter

In previous summers, the break from teaching had never seemed long enough, but this summer felt like it would never end. Her blouse still damp, a bra chafing her skin, Anna Ringaard splashed through puddles on Prague's Charles Bridge. A dozen sooty saints scowled down from the balustrades. Cowering like a mom who'd let go of a toddler's hand only to have him disappear, she offered her missing-person's flyer to Czech street artists in olive drab. The flyer's picture looked a little menacing; her son's eyes glowered out from under his mop of hair. Peter hadn't liked being photographed. No biggie. Art was more truthful. It spoke from the soul, her soul, at least. She had drawn him as she remembered him: a troubled young man.

Across the bridge in Lower Town, she caught a tram. Every day after lunch, she went to the station to wait for the Thalys, the international train. Unless her son was hitching, he'd have to be traveling by rail. Sometimes he did hitch, though. According to Peter's friends, the day after graduation, he had left Boulder, hitched to Denver, and flown to Amsterdam. He'd sent her an email.

> Sorry to cut out without telling you. Don't worry, Mom. I'm not hitting the Red Light District. Ha! Ha! Sketching tourists in squares. Looking for others of eastern European descent, same physiognomy. Lots of people in Holland look like you. Didn't realize how many blonds were in the world until I landed here. Plan to head south, then east. Finding my dark-haired clan.—Peter

For a while, she'd tracked him by his ATM withdrawals.

Then, those had stopped, and she began to panic. A postcard from Florence had reassured her that he was still in the land of the living, though not anywhere he could be contacted.

> Museums closed. Frescoes behind scaffold. Italians fun—*bella, bella Italia!*—but so far Amsterdam and Prague are where the action is—Peter

Standing on the platform, she looked at the big, round clock. Only minutes until the Thalys arrived. If Peter's money ran out, he'd come back here. Prague was the bean-bag chair where all young, cash-strapped travelers eventually landed. She could picture him, an easel bungie-corded to his backpack, stepping down and looking around. The platform wasn't crowded today: five American college girls, assorted Germans with big suitcases, and two little girls traveling with their parents. It would be easy to spot him. A whistle blew. The train, chuffing and hissing, bucked to a stop. From behind the snack bar a young woman, early twenties, stepped out. A nest of hair was loosely pinned to her head, and she wore a diaphanous blouse and a long, brown skirt with three tiers of ruffles. "Are you English-speaking?" she said.

"Yes," Anna said, standing on tiptoes. The tall girl blocked her view. "Excuse me. You're in my way."

The girl moved aside. Disembarking passengers, none with Peter's slouch, spilled down the train's steps.

"If you're leaving, you might have some spare change," the girl said, "or perhaps a phone card?"

"What?" Anna said.

The girl repeated her request.

"I'm not leaving," Anna said.

"I'm sorry to trouble you," the girl said.

"Oh, you're Dutch," Anna said, catching the accent. One of those nice Dutch girls with the wide lips and high cheeks, like the ones in Amsterdam. She'd spent ten days there and not once visited the Rijksmuseum. She took out a flyer. "I'm looking for my son. I wonder if you've seen him."

The girl held the flyer in both hands. She looked from

Anna's face to Peter's. Even when Anna had pushed Peter in his baby carriage, passersby had looked up, back, up, back. The difference in hair and eye color was the first thing people noticed. Anna could see the girl studying the S-curves of Peter's eyebrows and the intense dark eyes.

"Oh, he's a Peter!" the Dutch girl said. "My son is a Peter."

"Have you seen him?" Anna said.

The young girl looked up and frowned. "Maybe."

It was the first "maybe" Anna had heard. A man in uniform came toward them.

"I have to go," the girl said. She turned and started down the litter-filled subterranean passage that led to the station's exit.

Anna ran to keep up. "Where did you see him?"

The girl was outside already, heading toward the tram stop.

"Can I buy you a coffee? Or strudel?"

"I must get home." The girl looked over her shoulder. The uniformed man spoke into a walkie-talkie. "You can come with me if you wish," the girl said.

"I will!" Anna said. "Is that man following you?"

"Probably," the girl said. "I come here a lot."

"Me, too," Anna said.

They arrived at the tram stop. A tram rang its bell. "Hurry!" the girl said, looking over her shoulder. "We must take this one." She sprang onboard.

Anna's way was blocked by an old Czech woman with heavy ankles and worn shoes. Anna pushed her aside and fingered her sweat-crumpled pass, trying to force it into the punch. Finally, it clicked. The penalties for riding without a ticket were stiff. She couldn't afford to get in trouble. The police were sick of seeing her at the station. The Dutch girl took Anna's hand. In the back of the tram was an empty seat.

Anna put her hand on her heart. "My goodness," she said, stepping around shopping bags in the aisle. "That was close." At first, the police, who could barely speak English, had been sympathetic. Now, they treated her like some kind of nutcase. She was a mother with a lost child. Under the circumstances, hysteria was normal. It had taken her a while to figure out that

Peter had cashed his student loan check, not put it in his bank account. For all she knew, he could have been robbed and lying in some morgue.

"Sit." The girl motioned for Anna slide in. Their hips touched, and Anna caught the sickeningly sweet smell of patchouli hovering like a cloud around the Dutch girl. The smell was familiar. In Amsterdam, Anna had passed out flyers in coffee houses that reeked of pot and patchouli; she had been shocked to see young mothers buy marijuana like bulk granola scooped from plastic bins. In Prague—and Amsterdam, too, of course—the police told her drugs were rampant. But, perhaps the Dutch girl was merely covering up body odor. No one showered the way they did back home, and on the trams, there was always a sour, underarm smell. From frequent washings in the hostel's sink, even Anna's white blouse smelled strongly of mildew.

The Dutch girl hadn't said so much as peep.

"Have you really seen my son?" Anna said.

Jiggling in her seat, the girl said, "Yes, of course. I said that once, didn't I? Just give me a few minutes to think."

The tram sped away from Old Town and rumbled alongside the Vlatava River, where a barge moved slowly through the languid, green water. In the window, Anna caught a glimpse of her blue eyes, as blue-white as the overheated sky, and wondered when Peter had become so fixated on his looks.

THE FIRST HINT of trouble came when he started hanging out with the stud-wearing dope-smokers who gathered in the mini-park across from school. While her students worked at their easels, she had looked out the second-floor windows and seen him, big as life, a cigarette in his mouth. She still didn't know what kind.

Students at Centennial had to commit to the six Ps: they had to be prompt, polite, and prepared; they had to participate, have a positive mental attitude, and produce. Peter, despite his P-name, had never bought into the school rules, or the rules she tried to enforce at home. Listening to his iPod, he painted after dark, and turpentine fumes, supposedly odorless but toxic

nonetheless, circulated in the heating ducts. One morning, headachy, still in her bathrobe, Anna came into his room and asked him to open the windows. He put down his brush and came toward her. She thought he was going to give her a hug. Instead, he put his hands around her neck and stared at her throat, squeezing it softly. "That's how a python kills," he said. She backed out of the room and slept with a locked door, wishing her husband had not moved out and that she had not been so preoccupied with the paperwork of the divorce.

Something was wrong. The school psychologist recommended a therapist, the best in Boulder—Dr. Tanner, a specialist for troubled youth. Peter began seeing him, and a month later, Tanner invited Peter's parents to attend an appointment with their son. Peter's father had not been able to come, but then he had never really shown up for his son. More and more as the years progressed, it had become clear to Anna how much Peter had been her project and not her husband's. Later, she thought her husband's departure might have made Peter feel abandoned. But maybe not. She suspected the demons had been there all along.

She and Peter had sat silently in the waiting room. Peter, circles under his eyes, examined his fingers, but when Tanner opened the door, Peter, allowing the doctor to grasp his hand and pull him into the office, had actually smiled. Tanner asked her to take a seat and get comfortable. She sat. The room was barely large enough for two office chairs plus Dr. Tanner's desk, piled with manila folders. A painting hung above it: a woman with orange eyes and a blue face crowded her pink-faced son out of the picture. Anna wondered if this was some sort of Rorshach test to see how teens felt about their mothers. If not, then Tanner had terrible taste in art.

Dr. Tanner had dressed in layers—wool slacks, vest, and sport coat—as if he were eager to present an image of rumpled authority despite the oppressive closeness of his office. She peeled off her black sweater and smoothed her electrified hair, wondering if it was appropriate to ask him to turn down the heat. Through the doctor's trifocals, she could see his magnified eyes.

"Peter?" Dr. Tanner said. "Would you like to start?"

Aside from his jiggling foot, Peter was sitting absolutely still, his arms crossed. The fluorescent light made his skin look jaundiced. He stared up at a corner of the room, his eyes bugged out like a lemur's. Now, Dr. Tanner would see what it was like at home: Peter clamming up, not telling her what was bothering him. Just like her ex.

"Yes, Peter," she said. "Please tell me what's wrong."

"You know," Peter said, "sometimes I don't feel like I belong here."

"Belong where?" she said, feeling a clutch in her throat.

"Boulder. All the outdoor types. The snowboarders. The guys who live for rock climbing. I feel like I'm suffocating."

"Where do you belong?" she said.

"I don't know," he said. "I want to travel. Maybe I'm a gypsy at heart."

"Excuse me, Peter," Dr. Tanner said. He held his pen like a corn-cob. "Do you mean a vagabond or a real gypsy?"

"I dunno," Peter said. "A real one, I guess."

Anna took a deep breath. Tread carefully, she thought.

Peter pushed back bangs that covered his eyes.

The dark hair, often greasy, the body hair on his chest, unlike anything she'd seen in her fair, Danish family—it was remotely possible some gypsy girl had deposited a little blanket-bundle on a church step. Over there in Czechoslovakia or Bulgaria or Romania or Hungary or wherever he came from.

"I suppose it's possible you could be Romany," she said.

"Now, we're making progress," Dr. Tanner said.

"I've never seen a single other person who looks like me." Peter touched his high cheekbones. "Sometimes, kids at school call me 'the Indian,' but I'm not, because American Indians don't have this much facial hair."

His beard had come in thick. He needed to shave twice a day, but didn't. "You're becoming a man," Anna said. "That's all."

"But what kind? I'm certainly not a jock."

"Most artists aren't," she said.

"Peter is having a hard time finding a mirror of himself."

Dr. Tanner glanced over at the picture.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Anna said.

"A mirror. You know, a mirror?" Dr. Tanner jotted a note to himself. He looked down at his scratch pad then raised his eyebrows. "When you look in the mirror, don't you see your ancestors?"

"Well, of course," she said. "I'm Danish, and proud of it."

Peter leaned forward, his hands on the chair arms as if he might spring to his feet. "But I'm not Danish! When I was a kid, my friends' parents were always saying stuff like, 'He looks like his mom or dad or my side of the family or yours.' I never heard that from you, not once."

"We know you look like someone," Anna said. "We just don't know who."

"So, Peter," Tanner said. "Can you say more about how you feel about being adopted?"

"I feel like I'm supposed to be grateful she rescued me from the trash heap."

"You don't have to feel grateful," Anna said, reaching for a Kleenex. Honestly, he could be so self-dramatizing. "You were an adorable baby. I was thrilled."

Peter swiveled around to face her. "You wanted someone who'd look like you and be like you, *but I'm not like you at all*."

"Of course, you are," she said. "You're an artist, just like me."

"I wish you weren't an artist," Peter said. "I don't want my art to come from you."

"Thank you, Peter," Dr. Tanner said. "Let's give your mother time to process this information."

"I'm processing it all right," Anna said.

Tanner looked at her and raised his eyebrows. "All right, then." He turned to Peter. "I wonder if you could share more of what being adopted is like for you."

Peter sat back. He seemed more relaxed than she'd seen him in a long time: less sulky teenager, more man. He looked down at his stomach. "I have this hole inside."

"What kind of hole?" Dr. Tanner said.

"A hole." Peter held up his hands. The circle his fingers

made was the size of a pie pan.

This new revelation about the hole was more than Anna could bear. Peter had no idea what it felt like to lose three babies, babies with heartbeats, whose turnings reminded her of miniature gymnasts. The last had died at eight and a half months, a blond-haired boy born covered with wax, a cord wrapped around his neck. She didn't even have a name for the longing that had grown more intense, year by year, for the pleasures of motherhood that these deaths had denied her. And all that time, she'd thought, if I'd only been able to carry those babies to term, it would have been different. Peter wasn't totally unlike her, but a child with her genes might have had an easier adolescence. She wouldn't be sitting here trying to come up with answers to unanswerable questions.

"How are you feeling, Ms. Ringaard?" Dr. Tanner said.

None of your goddamned business, she thought. She was here to talk about Peter, not herself. "I feel fine," she said.

"Is our discussion giving you some empathy for your son?" Dr. Tanner said.

"Yes, of course," she said. "He feels a void."

Dr. Tanner glanced at Peter, then back at her, blinking and frowning as if puzzled. "You do understand, he's asking your permission to search for his birth mother."

Anna remembered how Peter's eyes looked: black, angry, watchful. Her face turned hot. "When he turns twenty-one, he can do what he wants."

Looking back, she could hardly believe how blindsided she'd felt, or how stupid she'd been to react so negatively. If he'd just waited until he was out on his own, he could have brought whomever he wanted into his life, and she wouldn't have had to know about it. Not that finding his birth mother was even possible. His adoption had been private, handled by a lawyer who specialized in babies from former Soviet satellites. Peter's biological father and mother worked in a factory, that much she knew, but the most the lawyer could tell her about his ethnicity was that he was "of eastern European descent."

He had been four months old.

Twenty minutes outside the city, the girl stood up. "My stop."

"But you haven't told me anything specific," Anna said.

"I'm trying to remember." The girl moved to the tram's door.

Anna had never come this far from the center of Prague, but it would be an easy matter to cross the tracks and return. The girl was waiting. Sighing, Anna stepped onto the platform, introduced herself, and offered her hand.

The girl shook it. "I'm Neeltje."

"Neeltje," Anna said. "It's hard to say."

"Not if you're Dutch," Neeltje said. "We learn the 'cghh' sound as babies." She looked across the tracks at a white, concrete apartment building where fire had scorched a balcony. Windows were boarded up. She pointed. "That's it."

"Where are we?" Anna said.

"Home," Neeltje said. "The Soviets built this."

Neeltje led the way through a tunnel beneath the tracks. It reeked of urine. Graffiti covered the walls. Coming up the stairs, Anna took a deep breath. Above ground, steppingstones led through dry knee-high grass. There was one plain tree with a thick trunk and low, horizontal branches. As she walked beneath it, Anna noticed how much the leaves resembled the maples on her wooded lot back home. In Boulder, she was surrounded by trees, and she wondered if there had once been more landscaping. If so, the trees had died or people had cut them for firewood. The building was in worse shape than the yard. The building's concrete corners were chipping off. Orange rust in vertical and horizontal streaks showed through the concrete. The place looked like an early Mondrian.

"I never imagined life in such a place," Neeltje said, waving an arm. "We don't have such places in Holland."

"It's hideous," Anna said.

"Welcome to the gulag." Neeltje lifted her long skirt and started up the stairs.

Anna felt squeamish about touching the dirty handrail. Painted and rusty and utilitarian, it looked like a handrail in a warehouse. "Does Peter live here?"

"Americans have better places."

"What does being American have to do with it?"

"Americans have money." Neeltje turned, looking down. "I'm sorry. I have a lot on my mind. If you want to know more, you have to come with me."

"What floor do you live on?" Anna asked.

"The fifth," Neeltje said.

"Is there an elevator?"

"It's broken."

"Unless you know Peter, I'd rather not," Anna said.

"I have a good memory for faces."

"Okay, then." Anna put her head down and climbed to the second landing. "But you're sure you met my son."

"Yes, of course," Neeltje said. "I can picture his face."

When she reached the fifth landing, an open-air space that was fifteen feet wide and dark at its far end, Anna felt light-headed and leaned against the wall.

Neeltje unlocked a door.

"I want you to see how I and my baby live," Neeltje said. "Then, maybe you agree to help us."

"But what about my son?" Anna said.

"You are offering a reward for information, aren't you?"

"Yes, of course," Anna said. "Three hundred dollars."

"The exchange rate is bad," Neeltje said.

"Three hundred Euros, then."

"Okay," Neeltje said. "I will try to remember."

Anna entered a room with a rose-colored couch and a high-backed, wooden chair. An old woman sat on it. Her knees were spread and her stockings rolled. She wore a kerchief that covered her forehead, and her lips sunk in, like one of the poverty-stricken, sickly women in Käthe Kollwitz's prints. Behind the woman, Anna saw a futon mattress on the floor. White sheets were jumbled. There was a worn, figured carpet, but the colors had bled. In the middle of the carpet sat a drawer. Neeltje gave the old woman money, and the woman left.

On her way to the couch, Anna glanced in the drawer. Inside was the kind of doll the school nurse used for teaching CPR. The doll's head moved.

"My God!" Anna said. "There's a baby in there!"

"Yes, of course," Neeltje said. "That's what I told you. I live here with my son."

The baby had a round head and fuzzy, blond hair that stuck straight up like a baby chick's. He was sleeping on his back, and his arms were thrown up in a pose that reminded Anna of Laughing Buddha. Despite the heat, a blanket covered the baby's legs, and Anna fought an urge to uncover him; he must be hot. She was. Hot and thirsty. Forcing herself to take her eyes away from the child, she looked around.

Behind the door, Anna saw the rest of the dresser. Neeltje had arranged a sort of kitchen on the dresser's top, and she was wiping the rims of two teacups with a rag. "I never wanted a baby, but..."—she snapped her fingers—"...you miss your period and think, it's just because you don't eat, and then, you have no money, it's a Catholic country you're stuck in, and it's too late."

Neeltje put down the cups, opened the apartment door, and went out to the hall. There was no water in the room, as far as Anna could see. There must be a common bath and kitchen. Maybe Peter's biological mother had lived in a place like this.

In the early nineties, white babies flooded out of eastern Europe. There were big problems with Romanian orphans, kids with attachment disorder because they'd spent so long in cribs and never been held or comforted. A lot of the Russian babies had fetal alcohol syndrome because their mothers were drunks. Anna stood, looked down at the baby, around at the room, then moved the chair closer to the drawer and sat down.

Neeltje returned with a plastic jug of water. She plugged a wire coil into an outlet and plunged it into two cups of water until they steamed. She brought Anna a cup of tea, and Anna wiped the rim with her handkerchief. "I'll be right back," Neeltje said. She went out again, leaving the door wide open. Flies buzzed in, and Anna got down on her hands-and-knees to brush them off the baby. He stirred, eyelids fluttering. He had complexion so pale that, between his eyes, she could see a tiny, throbbing vein. His ear was a cowry shell.

"Hello, little Baby. Look at your hair." It was almost white. A blanket covered him, and Anna pulled it back. His faded snappy-suit was soaked. She pressed his bottom. His diaper squeaked.

Closing the door, Neeltje held up a diaper. "I begged a neighbor for this. Until you came, I wasn't having a very good day, but you have changed my luck."

The man Neeltje lived with had left that morning and taken her money. She'd hidden it in the sugar jar, where her mother always hid her household money. Wanting sugar for his tea, he'd raised the lid and found it. Not a lot, just what she earned at the station.

More like begged, Anna thought.

Sitting on the floor beside the baby, Neeltje sighed. She lifted him out and placed him on the rug to change his diaper.

Anna leaned over. "How old is he?"

"Three months," Neeltje said, "but he's not big like a normal Dutch baby. Some are giants."

"Is his father Dutch?"

Neeltje shrugged. "I don't know." Living like this, she said, wasn't the same as having a settled life with a husband and women friends who would have a baby party. And the Czechs didn't help. They'd help their own kind, but not a foreigner. The woman who babysat was Bulgarian. "As you can see, she does nothing for my son except sit in that chair."

Anna got to her feet. The girl needed money. She wanted the reward. It was very unlikely she knew Peter. Anna decided to put her to a test. "Maybe you've seen my son's work in a gallery," Anna said. She had been to all Prague's galleries. None of the owners had recognized Peter's face.

"I don't go see art," Neeltje said. "It's false."

"False!" Anna said. "Why do you think that?"

"Art bores me. No one can tell me what it means." Sitting with her feet tucked beneath her, Neeltje unbuttoned her blouse. She picked up the baby. He rooted blindly, his nose bouncing against the breast. Neeltje pinched the brown aureole of her nipple and slid it in his mouth.

Anna sat down again, resting her elbows on her knees. The

baby sucked noisily.

"He's taking the last ounce of my energy," Neeltje said.

"Oh, yes! I remember that feeling," Anna said, "but even though I was forty-five when I got my son, I was lucky because I've always had ten times more energy than the average person."

"You were old to get a baby," Neeltje said.

"He was adopted," Anna said. She told Neeltje about Boulder, right in the heart of the Rockies. It was the perfect place to raise a child: year-round, outdoor activities and excellent public schools, not just academics, but art. "That's how my son developed as an artist," Anna said. "I taught him."

Neeltje frowned. "Are you a painter?"

"I teach high school art," Anna said.

"Oh," Neeltje said, her face relaxing. "I thought you might be a painter. They're awful."

"Was the man who left a painter? A friend of Peter's perhaps?"

"No," Neeltje said. "He was just someone who lived here."

Neeltje shifted the baby to the other side.

Anna, sitting rigid, a hand on each knee, leaned forward to see if there was milk in the other breast. Not much. As the baby sucked, the balloon deflated.

Neeltje looked up. "You must be very proud of your son." Her knee began to jiggle. "His name was Peter, wasn't it? An artist. It might have been in Wenceslas Square that I talked to him. Only for a few minutes. I am always asking Americans for change, and I can't remember them all specifically, but he seemed very openhearted."

That would be Peter. Anna could feel the question she did not want to ask coming out like a soap bubble. "Was he high?"

"High?" Neeltje reached up to stabilize her unruly nest of hair.

"Yes, high. You know what I mean."

Neeltje's eyes turned to slits. She pulled the baby away from her breast and held him out. "Would you mind burping him?"

Anna took him, gasping with pleasure to hold a baby after all these years. Pressing his cheek against her shoulder, she

thumped his back. While Neeltje was looking for a spit-up towel, a sweet little burp erupted. The baby had his fingers inside his mouth. His lips were wet.

"I need to buy diapers before the store closes," Neeltje said. "Would you mind staying with him for half an hour?"

"Not at all," Anna said. "I don't get to hold babies very often."

"It is good to have someone I can trust." Neeltje explained that she needed other things—milk, eggs, yogurt. She was very hungry, and the baby was taking all its nourishment from her body. "If I could fix a meal for myself, I could think of the next step to take, for myself and the baby. I don't need much." Neeltje stood there waiting.

"How much do you need?" Anna said.

"A hundred Euros?"

She probably should say no, but holding the baby, whose skin smelled so sweet, even unwashed as he probably was, feeling his back arch and his floppy head bang rhythmically against her shoulder, Anna thought, why not? This little boy looked like the blond babies her body had rejected and the grandchildren she might have had. She opened her purse. "I can let you have fifty."

Neeltje counted the money and went to the door. "I'll be back in half an hour."

"Fine," Anna said. "I'll amuse myself."

Holding the baby on her hip, she sprang up and opened drawers until she found a saucepan. She poured in water from the plastic jug and warmed it with the heating coil, then, remembering an old trick, flicked a few drops on her wrist. Not too warm. There was a dishtowel to dry the baby with and a clean suit to dress him in. She assembled all the ingredients for the bath and carried them to the drawer, pausing a moment to look at the little boy on her hip. His eyes were so intelligent and blue, an alert personality already evident. She unsnapped his suit and removed his diaper, laying it carefully aside. Seeing his pipe-cleaner legs, she realized the truth of what Neeltje said. The baby was not getting enough to eat. The child's ribs looked like wishbones. He was uncircumcised, the tip of his

penis showing through the foreskin like a tiny, pink thumb. While she bathed him, he looked at his hands; his eyes were on the verge of focusing. She wondered if he could see her. She clicked her tongue. His eyes turned toward the sound, and he smiled. Probably only a reflex, she thought, pleased nonetheless.

"Hi, Baby," she said, drying him with the dishtowel. "My name is An-na."

She retaped the diaper and put on a clean outfit. "An-na rhymes with Ma-Ma."

His eyes followed the sound of her voice. The corner of his mouth flickered. There was a little person in there. Then, she remembered. His name was Peter, Neeltje had said.

"Hello, little Peter." Anna picked him up and held him against her breasts. He smelled like Herbal Essence, the shampoo she used at home.

The first week of July, Peter's last communication, and the one she most wanted to forget, had come in the mail. She had immediately gone on Priceline to find a cheap fare to Europe. Inside the envelope he had sent, she found a pen-and-ink drawing of Alois Dryák's Hotel Europa in Wenceslas Square. There was none of the abstraction of Peter's usual art, nor of the diagonal lines that often slashed through his paintings. This was purely representational, a drawing for tourists.

> Forget I ever existed. Okay? Don't come looking for me. I'm learning the language. I have friends. I have enough money to get by. I feel at home here.—~~Peter~~

She had no idea why he'd crossed out his name. That implied a complete erasure of self. If she could just talk to him and get some reassurance he was still alive, then maybe, yes, he could put college off for a year while he did his European walkabout. He was barely eighteen. She didn't see how she could return to Boulder and leave him here. The baby tensed, and his knees drew up. She remembered the spasms of a colicky baby and the hours from 4:00 to 9:00 that were Peter's fussiest. With a hand on the chair, she pushed herself up. My

goodness, she thought, the old knees sure have gotten creaky. Sitting in the chair, she reached down and, laying the baby across her lap, rubbed his back. "There, there little Peter," she said. "You're going be okay."

He whimpered, and his whimpers turned to cries. The cries grew angrier. He was like a porpoise, arching his back, then curling over her knees to let out another scream. She put him on her shoulder. His mouth opened wide. His screams echoed off the walls. Wahhh! Wahhh! Wahhh! Wahhh!

All right, now, all right, she thought. We're going to be just fine. She walked in circles around the room, bouncing him and cradling his head. "There, there, Peter. Don't cry."

Peter arched his back and tossed his head. His fists pounded her shoulder. He was heavier than he looked. She'd been walking on cobblestones all morning, and her back ached. She wished she hadn't had that tea because now she had to go to the bathroom. The toilets were those squat things. She couldn't very well take him with her. Bending down, she put him in the drawer. He drew his knees up, then his feet shot out. His fists were tight. Tears tinier than raindrops squeezed from his eyes, and a rage-cry rang out.

"Oh, dear," she said, looking around. Maybe he would calm down if she gave him some sugar water. On the dresser, she lifted the top of the sugar bowl. She moistened her finger and tapped the white powder, touching it to her tongue. Yes, it tasted sweet; she would not be poisoning him with some sort of powdered drug. She picked up the plastic jug. Not even a teaspoon of water left. First, she needed a baby bottle. She opened a drawer. Two little outfits. In another, Neeltje's underwear. In the bottom drawer were wool socks. She might use a sock, moisten it in sugar water, and let him suckle. He was used to a teat. Anything to make the crying stop! It was frightful how a crying baby could eat at one's nerves.

Propping open the door with the chair, Anna looked out in the corridor. Although Neeltje had said she'd gotten a diaper from a neighbor, it didn't seem possible that anyone other than the desperate Dutch girl would pay rent to live here. If she did pay rent. Maybe the building was occupied by squatters. There

were two doors across the way. She knocked at one. No one answered. She put her ear to the door. Nothing. She stood at the second door. Inside, she heard voices. "Hello?" she said, rapping loudly. "Can you tell me where the kitchen is?" Peter's screams were surely audible to the people behind the door. Maybe they were calling the police to complain about the noise. She tried the door. The voices went quiet. She banged her fist. "Open up! Please! I just need to know where the water is!"

Then she noticed the peephole. A shadow darkened the lens. Standing on tiptoe, she put her eye right up to it. "I know you're in there," she screamed. "Open. The. Door." Backing away, she held up the jug and mimed drinking a glass of water.

Behind her, Peter's cries were dying down. Thank God, she thought. Maybe he'd just cry himself to sleep, and she could sit on the sofa and not worry about feeding him. But she did still have to go to the bathroom. She put the jug on the chair, and seeing the peephole, thought, I must be crazy because anyone could be living in there, the Russian Mafia or gypsies. The hostel's desk clerk had warned her not to go out at night alone. Gangs of gypsies roamed the subways, attacking like feral dogs and robbing unsuspecting tourists. She thought of her son Peter, wondering if he had inherited criminal tendencies, and what kind of people he'd fallen in with.

Heading toward a dark alcove at the end of the hall, she discovered that the corridor jogged to the right, forming an open balcony that faced the hills. She walked down it, hoping to find a door that said W.C. Instead, there were half a dozen identical doors, spaced like those in a hospital. Suddenly, she knew: the building had been a dormitory, a place to warehouse factory workers. That meant there had to be a communal toilet. She looked over the balcony. Down below, she saw cans, bottles, and bags of garbage. The humid air formed an opaque glaze that reminded her of Monet's atmospheric light and turned the scene of squalor into something almost beautiful. Then, she heard slow, deliberate footsteps above her head. The footsteps halted. She held her breath. Smoke drifted down.

The people who lived here must be the dregs of society—ruffians, beggars, and thieves—but even lowlifes needed a

bathroom. It had to be in that shadowy alcove she'd avoided. That would make sense, a bathroom right there at the end of the hall. Returning to the alcove, she saw a door. She twisted a knob. It fell off in her hand. "Ew!" she said, letting the knob drop to the floor. The space smelled like every drunk in the building had used it as a urinal. The corners were black, and there were white rivulets that reached all the way to a center drain, where the door knob had rolled. Breathing through her mouth, she hiked up her skirt and squatted. Pee spattered her shoes. She stood part way up, said, "Oh, well," and wiped herself with her skirt. She wasn't going to be able to stand herself if she didn't get back to Prague soon.

A puppyish whimper echoed down the hall. She hurried back to the apartment, picked up the jug, and pushed aside the chair. Peter had wedged himself into a corner of the drawer. "Poor little fellow." She picked him up. Unsnapping his suit, she stuck her fingers in his diaper. Fluorescent-green shit squirted out. It smelled like ammonia.

She placed Peter on the dish-drying towel, still damp from his bath. Anna saw the used, rolled-up diaper by the door. A wet diaper was definitely better than a poopy one. She used it to clean his bottom. It had turned red. His stomach was concave. Looking back at the dresser for something she could use as a diaper, she noticed the hand towel beneath the tea things. She moved them to the floor. Then, down on her knees, folding and refolding, she tried to tuck in the towel so it would stay closed; the frantic gestures of Peter's little arms frustrated her efforts. With her free hand, she lunged for the dresser and pulled out his clothing drawer. She found another outfit, fastened him into it, and put him back in his bed. His eyes rolled back and his eyelids closed. For a moment, she thought, Oh no! he's dying on me, but he was just going to sleep. She was tired, too. Dead tired. She was desperate to get back to the hostel, wash her hands, and throw her skirt in the garbage. Old Town was twenty minutes away.

She got to her feet again.

Adjusting the straps of her knapsack and putting it on, she looked down at the drawer. Peter's eyes were closed, and his

hands were as loose as the paws of a sleeping cat. He should be okay for a minute. She checked her watch, then opened the door and listened for footsteps. Neeltje had been gone an hour. Surely, she'd come home soon.

Anna looked around at the open drawers, the tea things on the floor, and the disheveled sheets. She couldn't very well leave him here. Sighing, she bent over and spread the baby-blanket on the rug. Folding down a corner, she placed Peter in it, then bundled him tight as a burrito. Going downstairs would be tricky. He was heavy, and she worried she might trip.

She grabbed the sheet off the mattress, put Peter in the middle, and made a sling. Maybe Neeltje had decided to take advantage of the free babysitting to go back to the train station, Anna thought, closing the door behind her. She felt guilty leaving the place a mess, but then Neeltje had promised to come back, and she hadn't. The best thing was to meet her on the platform. Neeltje would have diapers and food. Anna could tell her about the diarrhea. The baby needed to see a doctor.

With the sling around her neck, holding the baby tight in one arm and clutching the handrail, Anna descended the stairs. The third landing jutted out like the prow of a ship. She stopped to rest. On the boarded-up windows, someone had spray-painted three, fat blue letters: LUV. Anna stood and looked at them, feeling the baby's weight on her arm. He shifted and whimpered. In the distance, a tram was coming toward the suburb. Commuters were packed like sardines. Probably Neeltje had had to run around to several places to buy what she wanted. It wasn't convenient to shop here, not like in America. Anna hurried down the remaining flights, picturing Neeltje, with her long determined strides, coming through the tunnel and up the steps.

At ground level, out of breath, Anna stopped and looked around. The tram was speeding away. Across the tracks, she saw a woman in a pink, spring coat. The woman walked quickly along the gravel embankment beside the tracks and dropped out of sight. There must be stairs, Anna thought, and possibly another housing development on land that sloped down to the river.

In the shade of the tree, she took off her knapsack and, cradling the baby in his sling, crossed the steppingstones to the platform. Looking back, she saw that the building next door didn't have boarded windows. Beyond it was a two-story, salmon-colored house with a vegetable garden. Beans grew up poles. There were fruit trees. This wasn't a totally bad neighborhood. She shifted the sling to her back. The knot had rubbed a raw spot on her skin.

She returned to the tree, untied the sheet, and retied it around a branch. She looked in. The baby's eyes were open. He was turning his hands and staring at them. She held out a finger. His hand moved slowly; then his fingers grasped her index finger. He looked at her, his bright, blue eyes focusing on her face.

"Are you okay?" she said.

He held tight, a death grip, as he moved her finger toward his mouth.

"No, Baby." She pulled her finger free. "I need to wash my hands." He was such a lovely baby, but he wasn't the baby she loved.

She gave the sling a push and stepped back. It swung like a hammock. The breeze would cool him. She picked up her knapsack and returned to the platform. A tram was coming, heading back into Prague. The headlight flashed. Brakes screeched as it came to a stop. Through the windows of the tram, Anna saw Neeltje just coming up the embankment that the woman in the pink coat had earlier descended. The conductor barked out something in Czech and motioned impatiently.

Anna stepped onboard and punched her ticket. The tram picked up speed. She bent to look out the window, and in the distance she saw Neeltje emerge from the tunnel beneath the tracks. Neeltje stopped, dropped her grocery sacks, and ran. She reached the tree, where a branch arched like the neck of a stork, holding a triangle of white. Sitting down, Anna sighed. Fingerprints streaked the glass, and her mind rattled like the tram's unsteady wheels. Really, she thought, you can only do so much, and then you have to quit.

First Prize: ALR 2009 Poetry Contest
Final Judge: Andrew Feld

Arthur Brown

Defenders of Wildlife: Florida Manatees

I.
Above them was the surface of the sea;
below it was direction and duration.
Rhythm, light, instantaneity
and in their world the sequence of creation.
Amorphous shapes of dark and lighter blue
cut by a swath of dark and lighter gray
that mirrored back the larger of the two
and turned to purely physical display
the subject of the photograph—
the journey of the mother and her calf
across the rock and sand horizon line
that cut the squared-off photograph in half
and deepened the symmetrical design
above the heading "June 2009."

II.
Above the heading "June 2009"
the frameless photograph was balanced by
a dark that seemed opposed to the design
and blurred the sand and rock horizon line
that marked the limit of the human eye
and of the lens and of the shutter speed,
and made the subject of the photograph,
the journey of the mother and her calf,
a thing in time, more difficult to read—
the medium of light and clarity
now foreground to a deep and opaque blue
below the changing surface of the sea,
that shaped, across its curving canopy,
the dark and light-gray passage of the two.

First Prize: ALR 2009 Creative Nonfiction Contest
Final Judge: Bill Roorbach

Julie Wade

Prom Date

There's more than one answer to these questions, pointing in a crooked line…
—Indigo Girls, "Closer to Fine"

Truth be told, I hadn't wanted to go to prom at all. Proms only applied to a particular social stratum--easy and elegant, the see-and-be-seen types—while I was a periscope-in-the-purse sort of girl, lurking around the corner with a deftly mirrored view.

But the prom was important to my mother. She was always quick to remind me that beauty and brains weren't mutually exclusive; they went together, by her estimation, as readily as franks and beans, or ice cream and chocolate syrup. "Cindy Crawford was the valedictorian of her high school class," my mother often intoned. "*You're* the valedictorian of *your* high school class. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Michael Jordan didn't make his high school basketball team," I'd reply, one for one on the factually unverified anecdotes.

"So? What does one have to do with the other?" Her brows arched, her temples pulsing.

"I'm just saying that maybe—for some of us—it takes awhile to see our true potential."

On the beauty front, I wasn't holding my breath. While my skin had cleared up and my glasses been relegated to evening reading time, there was still the matter of the atrocious perms, which my mother assured me were a "feature enhancement," girding my round face with the chlorine-tinted frizz of an electro-shocked sunflower. I stood tall and awkward in my odd

body—too large in places, too small in others, stiff and wooden as a marionette in the hands of a novice puppeteer. I wore all the make-up my mother prescribed—Great Lash Mascara from Maybelline, 503A lipstick from Wet 'n' Wild—and daily, I smoothed my slick pores with powder from a Cover Girl compact, doing my best to "reduce the shine while maintaining the glow"—more contradictions I preferred to ignore than to challenge.

There was a bright spot slowly emerging, though, like the fabled light at the end of the cavern, the looming conclusion of this tiresome spelunk through adolescence. My high school, in the last semester of my senior year, offered its inaugural creative writing class. The teacher, a laywoman with wide hips and ringed hands and a self-professed "mouth like a sailor" once the doors were closed and the nuns in the hallway out of earshot, began to express interest in my work. Mrs. McLaughlin had even taken me aside one day after class, sun trickling in through ancient windows and splattering the hall with light.

"Promise me you're going to major in this in college," she said.

"I didn't know you could. *Creative writing?* Isn't that more of a pleasure sport?"

"Fuck all, Julie. Do your homework. It would be a damn shame if you didn't continue." She had small, blue eyes with huge, black pupils. They were always dilated, perhaps because she regarded the world so intently.

"I'm supposed to be a doctor," I explained. "I've convinced them now that I'll get a Ph.D. in psychology, that it'll be almost as good as an M.D. in something else. But I think a writing major might be pushing my luck."

"So do a double major. Do whatever you have to do as long as you keep doing *this*." She slapped the stack of papers in her hand. "I'm fucking serious."

I smiled then. "Me, too."

Meanwhile, my mother expressed her concern that I had not made any male friends since the previous year, severely limiting my options for prom. Since I attended an all-girls school,

every formal event was a de facto tolo, with dates necessarily imported from an extracurricular population. "It's almost ten months later, and we're back in the same boat," she said, jabbing at the calendar with her blue ballpoint. "See? We're here. *March*. The prom is here"—flipping ahead two pages—"*May*. Do you want a repeat of last year?"

No. I emphatically did *not* want a repeat of last year.

FOR THE JUNIOR prom, my mother had taken it upon herself to procure me a date. "You've been uncooperative and reticent, so I had to spearhead this campaign," she announced, likening my social life to that of a politician on the brink of impeachment.

My mother worked as a teller at Seafirst bank, where she waited on the wife of a Korean missionary from church. Mona Lee's son, Scott, was a first-year student at the Lutheran Bible Institute, a devout Christian and a champion soccer player. He had also taken the vow of chastity until marriage at a local abstinence extravaganza and wore the virginity ring on his left hand to prove it.

"Mona told Scott that you'll be asking him to accompany you to your prom next Sunday before service. We'll make sure to get there ten minutes early."

"Which one is Scott?" I asked, standing at the entrance to the sanctuary while the organist performed a prelude rendition of "Lift High the Cross."

"Take a wild guess," my mother snapped, gesturing toward the lone Asian rose in our congregation of pale Scandinavian calla lilies.

Scott was sitting down as I approached him, but he turned when he sensed my presence, or perhaps my unwilling perfume. "Julie?"

"Yes. Hi." I perched tentatively beside him and shook his hand. "So—prom. Three weeks from Saturday."

"It would be an honor to escort you," he grinned.

"Ok."

"And we should go to the mall and rent my tuxedo together," he suggested, feigning spontaneity. "I want my cummer-

bund to match your dress."

"Ok."

"I will get your phone number from my mother and call you to set up a time."

"Great." I nodded. "I guess that just about covers it."

I stood up, and he stood also, and I gaped in horror at the difference in our height—at least a solid eight inches.

"Is something wrong?" Scott inquired, straightening his tie and brushing lint from his sport coat. *Was he oblivious? Was he insane? Had the chastity vow permanently warped his brain?*

"No," I sighed. "Everything's fine." And just like that, I had a prom date.

"WHATEVER HAPPENS, I'm not asking Scott Lee to senior prom. I want to make that absolutely clear," I told my mother.

"There is nothing wrong with Scott Lee," she replied. "I think you can do better—I know you can do *taller*—but he's a perfectly fine young man of the best moral fiber I could imagine."

Yes, it was true. He had told me over dinner at the Alki Homestead the entire history of his coming to Christ and the evolution of his moral code. Over poached salmon and baked potatoes, he sermonized the need for religious tenacity in a world bereft of values. "For instance, I don't watch Disney movies," he professed proudly.

"Because they're made for small children?"

"Because they're filth, that's why," he explained, his expression hardening. "And no child of mine would ever be allowed to watch them." He considered my face as if we were discussing the fate of *our* future child.

"That's a shame," I replied, scraping my fork deliberately across my plate. "I really liked *The Little Mermaid*. I bought it the day it came out. I'm planning to plop my kids down with that one just as soon as they're old enough to sit up."

"Not me." Here his tone rose to project the superiority of his position, even as his gold and black braided bow tie twittered comically against his Adam's apple. "I won't watch a film that contains profanity, nudity, or any insinuation of adultery

or fornication."

"What does that leave?"

"*Soccer*," he said. "I watch a lot of soccer. And of course, we're fortunate that nowadays many church services are broadcast on television."

My mother sat at the kitchen table, making a list of potential prom dates. I watched her hand hovering in mid-air, debating whether or not to write something down. "You know, Scott Lee does have a brother. Two, I think. One might even be in your grade."

"Off limits," I said. "The entire Lee family is off limits."

"I didn't want to say this," my mother sighed, which was her way of communicating that she had been saving the forthcoming remark for just the right moment. "It seems to me you're being rather shallow."

"Me?!" I laughed aloud at the absurdity. "*I'm* being shallow?! I'd be perfectly happy spending prom night at the library!"

"Studious alibi aside…you're turning up your nose at Scott Lee, and anyone related to him, because you're embarrassed to be seen with a young man who's shorter than you are. Perhaps you're prejudiced against Asians—you with your *liberal, enlightened ideas*." Her last three words leapt up like oil from a frying pan.

I knew this strategy. I was quite familiar. She planned to fire my temper, then guilt me into submission.

"Not Asians, Mother—*Christians*. Very short, very know-it-all *Christians*."

After dinner, Scott and I didn't say much to each other the rest of the night. I let him pay because I figured I was paying in my own way, and if he wanted a refund, he should ask my mother for it. Then, he drove us to the Daughters of the American Revolution mansion on Capitol Hill, where we parked on a cobbled residential street with a tree growing out of the road.

"Dangerous," he remarked, and rested his clammy hand against the exposed skin of my back.

Inside, I tried to pretend I didn't notice the eyes of my peers popping out of their heads like insects. I tried to pretend I wasn't bothered by the photographer asking me to "squat down" beside my date. "Your dress," he said. "It has a very wide skirt. No one will be able to tell your knees are bent." Scott slid his arm around my waist and smiled.

When we danced, I looked down and counted the pieces of red and white confetti floating across the floor. My neck hurt from holding it at such an awkward angle against his shoulder, and my back throbbed from several hours bent over at the waist, longing for the DJ's voice to croon into the microphone "last song."

As we walked to Scott's car, he took my hand in his, and I did my best not to recoil. "Julie, I have a serious question for you," he murmured, stroking my thumb with the steady beat of a metronome.

I figured he was going to ask if we could do this again sometime; if I would give him another chance; if I was lonely, like he was. Instead: "I get the sense there's a lot of tension in your life," he observed, "and I wondered if it might not be because"—the tree and the ruptured walkway coming into sight—"if it might not be because things aren't quite right between you and the Lord."

Nothing but the screeching tires of my mind followed by the palpable stench of burnt rubber.

"I know it's presumptuous, but if you'd like me to pray with you, it would be my great pleasure."

I curled my toes and released them, clenched my one free fist and released it, bit my lip until I tasted blood. *Was he oblivious? Was he insane? Had the chastity vow permanently warped his brain?* "That's ok," I mustered finally. "I—I decline."

"Well, the offer doesn't expire," he promised. "It doesn't have to be tonight. I would be willing to pray with you anytime, and I will pray *for* you." Scott opened the passenger door and lifted the electric seatbelt over my head. Once he started the engine, it would snap across my chest and seal me tight—just like a chastity belt, I thought, with a wry smile.

The surprise came, however, when Scott reached his arm back in what I assumed was the standard, masculine gesture for "putting it in reverse." The whole body is involved, the left hand guiding the steering wheel while the right arm, chest, and shoulder direct the car's backward motion. My knees were turned toward my door, buried under the golden bulk of my gown, my head leaning back in relief. That's when he pulled me toward him—suddenly, a whiplash motion—and forced the wet heft of his tongue into my mouth. I sputtered in disbelief as his fingers pinched my chin, as his breath poured into me like a CPR dummy. "I've been waiting all night to do that," he grinned, then steered the blue stick-shift away from the curb and across the city in self-congratulatory silence.

NOW IT WAS story time. My mother had made tea and invited me—a mandatory invitation—to sit with her while she drank it.

"You know, I went to my prom with a handicapped boy," she began. He probably had a hang nail, I thought, or a low-income family. I had no way to be certain this story was true, but doubting her wouldn't make the time pass faster.

"He wasn't always handicapped," she continued. "He used to be an excellent athlete, showed a great deal of promise. But he slipped getting into the bathtub and injured his spine. A permanent injury. There was nothing they could do. He knew, at seventeen, that he would be wheelchair-bound for life."

While this story reeked of Lifetime movie or after-school special, I imagined the boy, pictured his face, the resignation written there, the sad roulette of fortune. I allowed myself to believe that he was real.

"So he asked you to prom?" I prompted.

"Yes. We had gone to a number of less important dances together, and he was afraid to ask me, afraid I would only say yes out of pity."

"Did you?"

"Yes," she said, squeezing her tea bag over her cup, then squashing it under her spoon. "But he didn't know that. And I really did like him. I hope he found a good desk job and a

patient wife."

"Do you still have the pictures?"

"Somewhere," she sighed with a wave of her hand, turning now to the paper. "I have everything, somewhere."

AT SCHOOL, Mrs. McLaughlin assigns us a collaborative journal project. This seems like an oxymoron to me, since journals are meant to be private. "Think of it more as a correspondence," she says. "You will be exchanging thoughts and observations with another member of the class, drawn at random. Occasionally, I'll read your exchanges and add another voice to your conversation."

My assigned partner is Pauline Gates, a sophomore with an advanced vocabulary and a juvenile fetish for R.L. Stine books. I sense the other students regard her with suspicion, watch as they avoid her in the halls. Unlike me, she has not mastered the art of blending in, of keeping quiet during large-group discussion. She sees every suggestion box and "Are there any questions?" as a forum to present her latest manifesto. When she speaks, the other girls roll their eyes, yawn; sometimes they pelt her with paperclips and rubber bands.

Dear Julie,

I think this journal activity sounds superb! I especially appreciate Mrs. McLaughlin's suggestion that we make it epistolary in nature—writing directly to each other. As a child, I often kept my diaries as a series of letters. I named my diary Louise, so I could write in exasperation, "Geez, Louise, you'll never believe what happened!" So what's your story? I always notice you in class and your moody blue eyes. You always look sleepy or very far away. Where are you while the rest of us are here?

Warm regards,

Pauline Gates

FOR SEVERAL DAYS, the journal sits in my locker. There is no deadline for responses. Mrs. McLaughlin simply said we should write when we had something to say, something we wanted to share. I keep my own journal for when I have something to say, but confiding in a classmate seems a treacherous enterprise. Finally, I write:

Hi Pauline,

I guess I look sleepy because I have piano lessons very early in the morning. What about you? Do you like music?

Sincerely,

Julie

Imagine my surprise when, several periods after submitting the journal to our drop box in the yearbook office, Pauline appears at my locker, journal in hand, blond head shaking. "You're going to have to do better than this," she says, smiling, her manner overly familiar, her retainer clicking against her teeth.

"What do you mean?"

"I already have a pen pal. Her name is Susan, and she lives in Minnesota, and we exchange letters that are about this boring on a weekly basis."

I stare at her, a short, plump girl in mint green stretch pants and an oversized white t-shirt. I wait, but no words slide down the chute from my mind to my mouth.

"You can trust me," she says, leaning in close enough that I can inspect the Morse code of freckles dappling her nose and cheeks. Instinctively, I step away.

"I don't have much to say right now," I tell her. "I guess I *am* kind of boring."

Pauline blocks my path when I attempt to move, wielding her bright orange binder like a road work *SLOW!* sign. "Don't misunderstand me. I didn't say *you* were boring. I said your *entry* was." She hands the journal back to me. "You can do better. I'll be waiting."

AT HOME, my mother flutters around me, giddy with excitement. "I've had a breakthrough," she says.

"Better than a *breakdown*," I murmur under my breath, unloading the contents of my backpack onto my bed.

"You've heard of the Make a Wish Foundation?"

"For sick kids…sure."

"Well, many children meet celebrities through Make a Wish. Sometimes they go to ballgames or movies or out for burgers

with their favorite stars. It's good for the celebrities' PR, so their managers are only too willing to arrange it."

I look at her, waiting for the point. "And?"

"Why don't you invite a celebrity to your senior prom?"

"Mom! I'm not a kid, and I don't have terminal cancer!"

"Did I say anything about *using* the Make a Wish foundation? No. It was only that the Make a Wish Foundation *inspired* this idea. You could write a fan letter. You're good at that. But you only have two months, so you'll have to act fast." She hands me a sheet of scented stationery and a matching envelope. "*Immediately,* in fact."

"Mom, this is crazy. Who am I going to ask? Who's going to take that kind of letter seriously?"

She beamed at me in her best Cheshire way. "Alex Rodriguez, from the Seattle Mariners."

"The rookie?"

"*Exactly.* He's young, he's good-looking, he's going to be *hugely* wealthy, and you never know—stranger things have happened."

"Stranger than *what*?"

"Well, if you two hit it off…" She smiled suggestively, opening and closing her palms. "You'd be set for life—your very own Cinderella story."

I HAD NEVER cared much about baseball, certainly not *watching* it on television. But in 1995, the spring of my sophomore year, the Mariners catapulted from local interest to national craze, winning the World Series and waving their ubiquitous banners, "Refuse to Lose." From following the play-offs with my parents, I learned the names of the players, their respective positions, and an assortment of odd facts about their lives. Even as baseball fever had abated over the past two years, the Mariners of 1995 were forever canonized; we regarded them, collectively, as the saints of our city.

"Here's an article about Alex Rodriguez," my mother said, handing me an L-shaped cut-out from *The Seattle Times*.

"Maryann Erickson has a friend who works for the Mariners, so she's going to provide us with the address. That only

leaves the letter for you to write, and then of course we'll need to send a picture. Let's look through the album and find your very best one. Dad can take the negative to Bartell's tomorrow and have them print a copy."

"Why do we need a picture?" I asked.

"Well, it's nice if he'll do it—and it wouldn't hurt his image. But we want to make sure he knows this *isn't* charity." She pinched my chin. "*You* are *not* a charity case."

Hi Pauline,

My mother wants me to ask a Seattle Mariner to the prom. I'm not sure if that's interesting, but it's what I've got to work with. She thinks I should ask Alex Rodriguez, but I think that might be shooting a little high. If I'm going to ask anyone, it needs to be a more peripheral player—someone constant, dependable, but not the star of the team or the beacon of its newest hopes and dreams. I'm thinking of asking second baseman Joey Cora. Any thoughts?

—Julie

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Pauline Gates was leaning against my locker when I emerged from Spanish class. I turned to walk the other way, but she shouted my name down the corridor, singling me out, making my face flush instantly and my body spin around in submission.

"This is painful," she said, patting the journal against her palm. "Painful and appalling."

"Maybe," I said, "but it's just how things are."

"Do you *want* to go to prom?"

Pauline's question stopped me like a touch in freeze tag. No one had ever asked me that question before; no one had ever bothered to inquire. Stymied, I shrugged. "I'm not sure. I honestly have no idea what I want."

"That's what people say when they think they can't have what they want."

"Are you a Christian, Pauline?" I asked suddenly.

"Agnostic," she said. "With Unitarian tendencies."

So she was emerging in this story as a very short, very know-it-all *agnostic*.

"Well, I have class…" quickly switching my books and re-

treating toward Sister Mary Annette's English class.

"Meet me after school in the chapel," Pauline instructed. It was not a question. "We can talk more about this then."

THE CHAPEL AT Holy Names Academy was a miniature replica of the Sistine Chapel, hand-painted generations before by a sister of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary. Around the curved altar, with its dome like a soft-boiled egg, pink-tinted and smooth-textured, this anonymous woman had emblazoned an intricate pattern of gold. "She never used a stencil," my theology teacher alleged. "A true artist, she understood about proportion. Legend has it she was ambidextrous and painted the pattern with both hands at once."

Another legend concerned the fragment of rope still dangling from the ceiling's crown. "A priest killed himself there," a girl once whispered to me in mass.

"Why?"

"He was in love," she said, "and distraught."

"I can see that."

"Tell her the rest," another girl intoned. "He was in love, and distraught, over a *man*."

I AM NOT SURPRISED that Pauline is there already, waiting for me, stretched out flat on a pew with her head propped against her Jansport, browsing the pages of an unfamiliar book.

"Why did you come to an all-girls school?" she asks the moment she sees me, moving cautiously around the confessionals and sinking slowly onto the floor.

"There's plenty of room here," Pauline says, patting the wood of her pew.

"No, it's ok. I'm not feeling particularly penitent—" and I watch her face light up at the word. "I'd rather just sprawl in the aisle."

"Sacrilege!" Pauline smiles, raising her arm like a spear. "So—why an all-girls school?"

"My parents said it would be a better education. They wanted me to infiltrate the Catholic system, steal some learning from their rivals."

"So you're Protestant?"

"I'm—*uncommitted* right now, I'd say."

Pauline unmoors herself from the pew, where she had looked comfortable, all settled in, and comes to sit beside me on the floor—a little too close, a little too earnest. "Do you *like* the fact that it's an all-girls school?"

"It's harder to get a prom date, that's for sure," I quip.

"Why do you deflect my questions? m I making you nervous?"

She is. No." ausing: "Why did *you* come to an all-girls school?"

"So glad you asked!" auline unfolds her legs, and I notice she wears shoes like a woman four times her age, granny sandals with cumbersome straps and thick, reinforced heels. "I read about this commune once—somewhere in Florida, or South Carolina—and it's only women who live there. hey cook together, they quilt, they make art and music and poetry, and they live, self-sufficiently, off the land. sn't that incredible? Just women together—no men, no children even."

"No proms I take it?"

"You're doing it again," and lays a moist, doughy hand on my wrist. "Wow," she says. "You really have beautiful hands."

At home, my mother doesn't have to remind me to write the letter. I head to my room straightaway and sit down at the glossy white desk with its matching white chair and pink satin cushion. Everything looks formal in my surroundings, formal and feminine—lacy curtains at the windowsill, ballerina memorabilia, a collection of dolls from around the world, each one contained in her original packaging.

Dear Mr. Cora,

My name is Julie Wade, and I live in the suburbs of Seattle. I attend an all-girls Catholic high school on Capitol Hill. This year I'll be graduating, and I would like very much to attend my senior prom. The event will take place at the Seattle Space Needle on May 26th at 7 o'clock in the evening. I have seen the Space Needle many times in the distance, but I have never yet set foot inside.

I am writing to ask if you would do me the honor of attending my

prom with me. I don't know any young men to ask, and you are my favorite player on the Seattle Mariners. You never hog the spotlight, but you're always there—working hard for the team, making a consistent difference. That is the kind of person I hope to be in my own future career.

Thank you for considering this request. You can reach me as specified below.

Yours truly,
Julie

"I still think you should have asked A-Rod," my mother sighed, studying my letter again before folding it into thirds and tucking the point of the envelope under its cream-colored lip.

"Trust me, Mom, my chances are better with Joey Cora."

"And the picture? Which did you choose?" We both knew this matter of choice was for show—a pantomime that my selection would stand against her own.

"I thought this one—it seemed the most like me, the most you can capture on film."

"You're wearing *jeans*! And *sneakers*! And a *baseball cap*!"

"Well, he does play baseball…" I offered.

"This is what I mean, Julie. *Common sense*. Were you born without it, or have you lost it along the way? When are you going to understand that the last girl to look good in jeans and sneakers and a baseball cap was Ann-Margret in *Bye, Bye, Birdie*?"

"It seemed nice to me—not pretentious, not trying too hard."

"Bill, get in here!" She called for my father as she placed another picture beside the one I had chosen. "Bill, which of these pictures do you like best? Now, be objective."

He bent over the table, peering at the first picture—of me on the front porch on my way to a Mariners game; at the second picture—of me on the terrace in a fitted white dress, clutching my clutch purse a little too tight, anticipating a night with my parents at the Pacific Northwest Ballet.

I remembered that night so clearly, like a lucid dream that lasts long into the morning, well past breakfast and into first

period. We sat in the balcony at the Opera House, my parents and I, and all around us I admired the grandeur of the place, the red brocade curtains minced with gold. My mother poured over her program, paying close attention to the Principal Dancers, one of whom was a blond and chiseled man named Brent Davies.

"Look at him," she whispered. "He's *gorgeous*. If you play your cards right, you could have a man like that."

Later, when he stepped onto the stage in his transparent tights, I blushed at what seemed such a conspicuous bulge, there below the waist where his courtier's vest cut away. I felt I shouldn't be watching; he looked so exposed. My mother nudged me, her elbow nesting deep in my ribs. "That's him! Do you see him?"

"Yes, Mom."

"Isn't he *dreamy*? Wouldn't you *love* him to lift you up like that—as if you were light as a feather?"

"I think *she* actually is," I observed, gesturing to the rope of a woman he had tossed into the air, her long legs parting in instant arabesque.

My mother had wanted us to swoon together, to share the same enthusiasm she had performed there, and would perform again at every subsequent ballet. I didn't believe my mother—not really. I didn't believe Brent Davies sent "shivers down her spine" or caused her "heart to skip a beat" as she claimed he did. Rather, I thought she was trying too hard, exaggerating her own reaction to model for me what mine should be. And if I didn't "feel it"—whatever *it* was—I knew I was supposed to "fake it"—whatever *it* was. That much I understood. I was supposed to pretend that watching Brent Davies inspired in me some miraculous shift in body chemistry, some deep, visceral longing. I kept waiting, but I couldn't feel it—for him, for anyone. I had never felt it in any context my mother ordained.

"Both of these pictures are nice," my father remarked. "I think you'd be just fine sending either one."

"Bill! You're a man. If a young woman asked you to a

dance, and you had never met her—only had a picture of her to go by—which of these pictures is going to win you over, the one where she looks like riffraff or the one where she's actually put some effort into making herself presentable?"

"Well, then, the second one, I suppose." He glanced at me, and I thought I glimpsed an apology in his gray-blue eyes.

"All right. That settles it! Bill, tomorrow you will take this negative and get a copy made. To be safe, why don't you make a couple? Then, we'll put it in the mail Wednesday morning, and you'll have your prom date to order."

I PICKED UP the journal before first period, before I had even stopped by my locker. Pauline's note was enigmatic: *See present*, she wrote. *It will explain everything.*

"Secret admirer?" someone asked, brushing past me in the hall. When I got closer to the tall row of wooden cupboards, I saw my combination lock adorned with crepe paper—several crimped, pastel snakes—and on the floor, the paper was threaded through the woven handles of a gift bag, my name sketched on it in pseudo-calligraphy. I grabbed the bag quickly and disappeared into a bathroom stall.

Inside I found two shrink-wrapped CDs of *The Indigo Girls*. I stared blankly at the unfamiliar covers, the compelling name. A Post-it note added this cryptic equation: *Amy + Emily =Pauline + Julie*. She had also included, beneath a tissue paper shroud, the same book I had seen her reading the day before. It was a collection about angels and psychic powers, heavily highlighted, filled with her notes and marginal commentary. Pauline had inscribed it to me: *I think the best gift is the gift of a book. Don't you agree? We are kindred spirits—angels-to-be.*

"Julie, are you in here?" She stopped in front of my stall, recognized my shoes. "I see you got the present. What do you think?"

"It's nice, but—" unlatching the door—"you really don't know me that well."

"On the contrary, I think I know you *very* well. I think it's *kismet* we were assigned to be journal partners."

I stand at the sink, washing my hands, Pauline looming in the

mirror behind me. It is hard to meet her eyes. "This is starting to freak me out a little," I say at last.

"What is?" That intensity, that leaning too close.

"This. This whole—*dynamic*."

"But you feel it, don't you?"

"Well, I feel *something*…"

"Don't fight it. People always try to fight it. We don't have to. We can break the cycle."

"What cycle?! What are you talking about?!"

"You're not like the other girls here," Pauline coos. It has the ring of a bad pick-up line, the vibe of a campy horror film where any moment, she'll transform into a three-headed monster dripping with slime.

"I have to go."

"No, you don't."

"*Really*," I say, holding up my hand, the fingers spread. "I do."

Mrs. McLaughlin is scanning photographs when I tap on the window of the yearbook office. She motions for me to come inside. "This is unexpected," she smiles. "Take a load off," and gestures to one of the many, graffitied chairs.

"I need to ask you a favor," I say.

"Letter of recommendation? Say no more. I've got you covered."

"Thanks," I blush, "but that's not it. I wanted to know if you could shuffle the journal partners, mix things up, you know."

"Ah," she nods. "Pauline's getting to you."

"I wouldn't say that. I just—I think it would be good for all of us to correspond with different people."

She winks at me. "You're very diplomatic, aren't you?"

I shrug. "Maybe."

"It was a rhetorical question. I know you are. And I know Pauline's a handful. She's really smart, and I see a lot of myself in her at that age—" I must have looked startled because she bends toward me and confides, in a softer voice—"yeah, it's true, people can change." Mrs. McLaughlin stands, stretches, so at ease in her own skin. "There are some boundary issues

there, a lot of loneliness. What can I say, Julie? This life does a fucking number on us, doesn't it?"

I nod, never having heard it put quite that way.

"Don't worry," she says. "I'll take care of it. *But*—you'll have to do a favor for me."

I look back over my shoulder nervously. "What's that?"

"What do you think? Get a fucking writing degree; do what you love."

I DIDN'T MAKE IT to my senior prom, which I can't say is very surprising. My mother wept, and my father took her out to dinner. I laid on my bed, listening to the Indigo Girls. One song in particular—like a coda for something about to be over, like a blessing for something about to begin.

I thought of our freshman dance at the Seattle Aquarium, of Anna Shope in her tight, pewter dress—shimmery and velveteen both at once—and of the boy's hands on her hips, so happy to have found someplace to land. They were swaying to the music, like creatures under the sea, and I couldn't take my eyes off her. Overhead, the blue light of the water, the sharks' finned shadows as they circled and passed. My own date, no less and no more—only a body beside me.

I thought of Sara Timmons and Heather Graham, of walking in on them in the bathroom, their own kind of dance.

"It's ok," Sara said, waving to me, her lips blubbed from kissing, her hair wild. "We're gay, not shy."

"Oh," I said. And I lingered a little too long in the doorway, watching her untie Heather's tie. *What other prerequisites were there?* I wondered. *What if I was, after all— a little bit shy?*

Colleen Harris wanted to go to prom so badly she didn't care that she didn't have a date. She bought a life-sized Superman from a comic book store, got her hair done, made a grand entrance. This was our junior prom, and as I contorted my body to match my date's infinitesimal torso, I watched her, waltzing with Superman, her friends grinning, even her non-friends grinning. She looked like she was having a good time. In that moment, I think I envied her most of all.

Pauline Gates continued to write me letters. She sent them to my parents' address, and each week when I came home from college, there they were in a tidy pile. Eventually, she left Holy Names to attend an alternative school. The last I heard she was choreographing an elaborate ballet—to Bonnie Tyler's "Total Eclipse of the Heart."

Julie, she wrote, *it's all a trap. We don't need these institutions—college, church, marriage. We can escape it all; we can transcend it. Someday you'll come to your senses.*

Mrs. McLaughlin left Holy Names, too. She fell in love there, with another woman—a younger teacher with whom she shared a four-year love affair. Their romance had begun to blossom during my senior year, despite the nuns, despite her three children and her husband and the life she had intended to live.

They stayed together—she and her lover—and they went on to teach at a different school, one that didn't discriminate, a place that was happy to have them. When she wrote me, years later, after reading a literary journal that referenced my name, we had to begin to know each other all over again. No longer "Mrs. McLaughlin," I had to learn to call her "Sally."

So glad to read you kept your end of the bargain! she effused. *I hope you're still as diplomatic as you ever were, but far less lonely.*

I wrote and told her it was so.

The most surprising of these outcomes, however, came about on an inauspicious afternoon. I had come home from college, enjoying that rare hour of solitude before my mother returned from the store, resumed her inquisition. I heard the mailman arrive at the door, the sound of the red flap slapping shut, his footsteps diminishing to a faint scrape down the walk.

Among the bills and coupon books I found a lean letter, business-sized and opaque, with only the letters *JC* scrawled in the upper-left-hand corner. The thin envelope was addressed to me.

Carefully, I tore it open. There was a sense of wanting to preserve the suspense, so I moved slowly, unsure of what I would find.

The letter was typed on a piece of ordinary white paper. No letterhead, no fancy insignia. It read:

Dear Julie,

Thank you for your correspondence of last year. I receive many letters, and though I do read them, it often takes me many months to respond.

While I was home in Puerto Rico during the off-season, I read your letter about the prom. I'm sorry that I was not able to escort you. I hope that you celebrated somehow the accomplishment of your graduation.

I wish you all good things in the years to come. Always believe in yourself, and remember where true beauty comes from.

—Joey Cora

It was perhaps the best letter of my life. I read it again—simple, direct, compassionate. My nose bristled in anticipation of tears. Then, I heard my mother's key in the lock and, knowing I would soon be summoned to help, I slipped the letter, a secret worth keeping, deep in my dark denim pocket.

First Prize: ALR 2008 Fiction Contest
Final Judges: Joseph and Amanda Boyden

Michael Isaac Shokrian

Asphalt Like Moderns

Asphalt was something new. Asphalt was black gum that stuck to everything: the road, the air, shoes, heels, fingertips, nostrils. Nader smelled the asphalt with curiosity when it was new, and soon it became just one more smell of his day like eggs frying in butter, jasmine flowers wilting in the summer sun and plucked chicken feathers on the kitchen floor. When Nader and his little brother, Amir, went out of the house, they saw the asphalt machines. Big black boxes, rumbling, smoking, chewing, oozing and melting. On wheels. One of the neighbors, Hassan with the shaved head and Winston cigarettes from America in his shirt pocket, said they were "moderning" the road and soon it would be called a "Street." Think of that, thought Nader, to be living on a Street. Like moderns.

Still they walked barefoot on the road before it turned into a "Street." Chunks of tar stuck to the soles of their feet each day. Asphalt was more permanent than most things. Something that would not wash off so easy in the neighbor's pond next door.

THEY WERE KISSED and teased by flies at dawn. Flies everywhere. Flies tickled their warm cheeks and dry noses. Flies sat on their lips, causing them to quiver. The air was warm. Birds whistled. Roosters crowed. A man at the top of the hill at the edge of town sang the Morning Prayer. In the summer the two boys slept outdoors. They slept beneath the sparkling black sky, hearing crickets vibrate the dark. And then, like magic, they would awaken and it would be light. Nader would wake first to watch the flies dance on his brother Amir's face. A slight warm breeze swirled the flies together with dust from flowers and the

smell of tar on the dirt road.

A long wall made of red brick separated Nader's yard from the neighbors'. Two boys lived next door, Abbas and Ali. The four of them together, Nader-and-Amir and Abbas-and-Ali, played in the summer. During the days, they ran along the road without shirts, peeled tar from each other's feet, played with ducks from the pond in Abbas-and-Ali's yard, threw rocks at frogs in the creek behind their houses, and talked about mysteries. Lots of things were mysteries. How did a bicycle balance itself on two wheels? How would that black gum turn their dirt road into one of those smooth black streets they had seen in town? How did day turn into night? This last one was Nader's big question. It was day with sun, then it was night with stars, then day with sun again. When they went in for dinner it was daywithsun. When they came out afterwards, it was nightwithstars. So sudden. So quick without explanation, without change. Nader's question. It was even more of a mystery than Fatimah-the-witch.

There was no question about Fatimah's witchness. Nobody had actually seen her do witch things. No one had ever seen her float on the air or cast spells like the jinn or spirits do in stories. She never made an apple appear and never turned anyone into an animal. But she was a witch. She was ugly like a witch. Dark wrinkled skin that was thick as leather. Black downturned lips always sneering. Long blistered downhooked nose. Yellowed eyes. Dark bushy eyebrows. She carried a ragged straw broom wherever she went in the house. The boys heard her uttering incantations under her breath as she swept the floors and rugs during hot summer afternoons when adults were gone.

Fatimah-the-witch cleaned Nader's house in the days and on warm nights as they sat beside the open window in the kitchen, she predicted neighborhood infidelities, failed marriages, deadborn babies. She cracked and held a sugar cube between her dead teeth while pouring hot tea from her cup into a saucer. She sipped the tea from the saucer through the cube held between her teeth. The sugar granules turned brick red as they absorbed the tea, and white again as she sucked the

sweetened tea from the other side of the cube. She swallowed, let the remainder of the melting cube crumble into her mouth, and made her magical predictions. Nader's mother laughed and screamed in astonishment, along with Fatimah-the-witch and any assortment of new and familiar women from the other houses on the road who would spend long warm nights in the kitchen, listening, adding facts, smoking cigarettes and drinking tea. Their laughter careened through the house at different pitches and volumes like a party of drunken ghosts.

Fatimah lived in the basement.

There were certain things Fatimah-the-witch did do that proved her witchness. She said when it would rain and when it would be dark. She made a dull, echoing laugh from deep inside her lungs that sounded like storms when predicting the future from inside of coffee cups for the women in the neighborhood. And on days when their mother was out and the boys ran noisily around the house, Fatimah used her witchness to quiet them. Leaning her trusty broom against a wall, she pulled her teeth—all of them together—out from her mouth! She held her teeth in the wrinkled pink palm of her hand. Her long and skinny fingers, old twigs, had a shine to them and trembled as she held out the teeth. The boys gathered around her to watch the teeth that were smiling, dead, in her palm. She asked the boys to touch her teeth but the boys did no such thing. Fatimah-the-witch laughed, her brown gums glowing, and chased the screaming boys throughout the house with her teeth. Her dark stormy laugh. Her long brown chador floating in the air behind her.

On a hot afternoon when Fatimah-the-witch and Nader's mother went to get chickens and okra from the bazaar, the boys decided to find out more about Fatimah's witchness. They went down to the basement where she lived. The cement floors cooled their feet as they squeezed gently through the half-opened door of Fatimah's room. They found her belongings wrapped in a shawl beneath the bed and rummaged through it. They found garlic cloves, a small dark blue jar of Vick's full of pins and needles, three paisley scarves, a long wooden pipe, and a certificate with a photo of her dark wrinkled witchface

pasted on the corner. There were numbers on the certificate. Abbas was the oldest and believed he had learned his numbers and that he was learning his letters fairly well. His thick dark eyebrows went up into his forehead as he tried to study the certificate the way his father, the policeman, studied important papers.

"One number," said Abbas in a small secret voice, "is the day she was born. The other," he stopped, looked to the door, then put his long arms around the huddled shoulders of the rest, "the other is the day she died!"

The boys decided to stay out of the house when she was there alone.

On the dirt road outside, beside the asphalt machines, the boys took turns riding the bicycle that Nader's father had given them last winter. With the two small wheels on either side, it was easy to ride.

Hassan, smoking his cigarette and scratching his shaved scalp because of the heat, told them that it was time for them to get rid of the baby wheels and learn to balance the bicycle on two wheels. "Don't you boys know how to ride a bicycle—a two wheeler—yet?"

The boys all looked up at Hassan, squinting from the sun. "We just want to stay out of the house and away from Fatimah," said Nader.

"Why?" asked Hassan.

"She's a witch," screamed Amir.

"A true witch," echoed Ali, "she was alive and also dead." Abbas, the oldest one, nodded in grim agreement.

"Didn't you know that?" asked Nader of Hassan.

"She's no witch," said Hassan. "She's a poor woman with no education or kin. Telling fortunes from coffee grounds does not make a witch. You boys go in the house while I fix your bicycle so it rides on two wheels." Hassan guided the boys toward Nader's house.

Unconvinced and confused by Hassan's disbelief, the boys went into the yard. They sat on the wall instead, as a breeze blew and rustled the tall eucalyptus weeds and the patches of jasmine flowers and lulled the boys as they waited for their

mothers to come home and give them lunch. Until the ducks hopped onto the wall from the pond.

The ducks were beautiful, and safe. They had dark glowing green and yellow feathers and purple eyeballs. They made funny expressionless musical noises and didn't mind being picked up and held. They waddled along the wall and sat on the laps of the boys who spent the lazy afternoons reexamining asphalt, bicycles and the witch from the safety of the wall with the comfort of the ducks.

Although he still thought about it, Nader had stopped discussing the day's change to night with the others. The group had decided that it wasn't truly a mystery anymore. "Day turns into night and that is that," said Abbas.

"First it's white, then it's black, then it's white again. What's the mystery," said Ali in support of his big brother's declaration.

"Maybe God just switches it off at night and flicks it on again in the day," suggested little Amir in an attempt to bring his own big brother back in harmony with the group.

But to Nader, day and night was still a valid question. He didn't believe the switch-on-off theory. He'd never seen it happen, and when no one was talking and all was warm and quiet, he still thought about it. He determined that he would have to figure out night and day by himself sometime.

The new mystery, it was unanimously agreed, was Esau, the baby that Abbas-and-Ali's mother had brought home during the New Year celebration in spring. Esau was fresh, smelled good, had soft skin, and got a lot of attention from the entire street. Abbas-and-Ali's mother had brought Esau out for all the other boys and mothers and fathers to view. She was a small gentle woman with large brown eyes and a soft warm smile. She had brought Esau back with her, and that summer Esau kept the boys busy with new mysteries: Where did the new baby come from? How would he become big like Nader-Amir-Abbas-Ali? Where would he learn words from? Would he ever stop crying? These new mysteries kept the boys wondering all summer.

THE DAY WHEN Nader's questions about day, night, bicycles and the witch were answered was an odd one.

A stifled hot late summer morning where the flies did not dance. Fearless, they walked slowly upon the hot sleeping faces of the boys. When Nader woke, he tried to shoo them away with his small hands and the flies, as though irritated, slowly moved off Amir's face and onto the sheets. Nader noticed that the rooster had not crowed but was clucking beneath the shade of the trees below, digging into the soil with his claws. The birds, too hot to sing, just sat in the trees and ruffled the leaves with their heavy feathers, as if stuck and fighting to break free. Instead of these morning sounds, instead of the Morning Prayer being sung by the man at the top of the hill at the edge of the town, there was the shrieking of women.

Loud and angry, the screaming voices floated up and hung bluntly in the still heat of morning air like spitting "caws" of mean black crows awaiting some doom.

Nader ran outside onto the half-road-half-street, in front of Abbas-and-Ali's house. The asphalt machines choked and spat out the black gum. The smoke had partially blackened the air, making it look like night was coming even though the boys had just woken. And through the smoke and sounds of the machines, Nader could see the yelling and ranting.

Fatimah-the-witch, yellow eyes and brown lifeless teeth, waved her long branch-like arms at Abbas-and-Ali's mother. Abbas-and-Ali's mother, large brown eyes sharpened, her long brown hair falling out from beneath the green scarf that was wrapped around her head, screamed back while gently rocking the baby Esau on her shoulder. Nader's mother, wrapped in her white morning robe and smoking a cigarette, screamed from their front door. Some of the flying words that Nader could make out were "Whore" "Gossip" "Charlatan" "Trash" "Ancestors" "Mother" "Children" "Disease" "Death." Nader's mother tried to stop the two by interjecting whenever possible with words like "Reputation" "Honor" "Blood" "Family."

Abbas-and-Ali's father, a small gray-haired policeman, came out of the house wearing his blue uniform and holding a cigarette between his fingers. He chuckled and shook his head at

the sight of the screaming women. They stopped long enough for the policeman to kiss his wife and the baby on her shoulder as he went to work. "Ladies," he smiled, "it is going to be another hot day and we are just waking up. At least have your tea and toast before you start your debates."

Across the street, Hassan with the shaved head was leaning on his car and lighting an American Winston cigarette inside his cupped hand. He looked at the policeman. "These women, dear officer, sir," he said jokingly, "no matter how much we modern this town, almost a city now, they'll still have the village in their hearts."

"Have you been here all morning, Hassan," asked the policeman.

"Just long enough to hear that three women each relayed a message to the other. I believe it involved lipstick, a broken egg and a revoked invitation."

The policeman grinned and nodded, blew smoke from his cigarette and watched it mingle with the black smoke from the asphalt machines. He sat in his black and white police car and rode down the nearly finished road and onto the smooth, nearly completed street. Almost no dust flew now and very few pebbles crunched beneath the wheels as he drove on to the new blacktop and glided away from them to town. Nader watched as the car disappeared, thinking that with this new road, coming and going would be so easy. The moderns come and go so easily.

And the barefoot women fought on, the witch's long brown chador floating from a small breeze that temporarily interrupted the morning heat. Then Nader witnessed the witch's incantation. She screamed in a thick voice, a real witch curse: "Cursed is the eye of the child whose mother accuses me of such dishonesty." Nader flinched at the words. But Esau's mother, Abbas-and-Ali's mother, was unmoved. She continued to scream, clutching her baby to her fleshy bosom and spitting equally blistering curses back at the witch. Her strong bare feet stood firmly on the yet unpaved part of the road in front of her house, her calves hard with life. The hot air gently played at her skirt. Nader was concerned for her, the hot fool who

fought a witch. He wanted to protect her. To lift her.

The boys went to the creek to throw pebbles at frogs. Abbas had brought marbles and the boys threw them wildly as the frogs jumped and squatted through the wet bushes. As they flew in the air, the marbles caught pieces of the sun in them and looked like small fire balls hitting the water and trees and frogs. When Nader went to retrieve his marbles, he noticed one frog on its back by the muddy bank of the creek, its soft white belly shining in the patches of sunlight that flowed through the trees. The frog didn't move, even when Nader nudged it. Not even when he turned it over with the tip of his tree branch. Nader had never actually seen a frog get hit. Not like that. He felt its small black eyes fixed on him and his body trembled. He ran through the muddy creek, shuddering in disgust, back to the wall. He sat.

Waiting for their mothers to call them for lunch, the boys played with the ducks on the wall. It was getting too hot to run. Abbas-and-Ali's mother was on one side of the wall, humming to baby Esau who crawled around the yard while she hung wet clothes on a line of rope tied to a tree by the pond at the center of the yard. The dripping clothes made small quick holes on the pond water. Nader thought of how wonderful Abbas-and-Ali's mother had looked that morning, fighting fearlessly with the witch. He thought again of her brown hair spilling out from beneath her green scarf, of how it would look all loose around her face without the scarf. He wondered what it would be like to be the policeman in uniform, to kiss her hearty cheeks and arms each morning before going to work, to smell her neck at night. He was thinking of that while one of the ducks jumped onto his lap. As he tickled the duck's small fuzzy head and gently tapped at its beak, the duck took Nader's finger in its mouth. In a daze in the quiet heat, his fingers played with the moist ridges inside the duck's beak. At first they didn't feel like teeth and all he could feel was the duck's tongue moving along his finger, squeezing his finger. Biting, his finger. Eating!

"Ah, are those teeth," Nader screamed jumping up, "does this monster duck want to eat my finger? Hey!" He shrieked

and jumped off the wall.

"What's that sound?" said Abbas, also jumping off. There was a steady clanging coming from the road. The boys ran outside and saw Hassan, long ashed American Winston dangling from his thick lips, pounding on Nader-and-Amir's bicycle with a rock.

"This new street is almost finished," he yelled to the boys. "You should start learning to ride without these baby carriage wheels on the sides." And he knocked until the small side wheels loosened off the bicycle.

Nader and Amir tried to protest, to let Hassan know that their mother would become angry and their father might even beat them if he saw that their bicycle had become broken. "It's not broken," said Hassan, "it's being fixed now. Now it's going to be a bicycle."

The boys stood in amazement as big Hassan sat on the little bicycle, knees bent high on the pedals, and rode on two wheels. He rode on the old road—slow, wobbly, raising dust and crunching pebbles—onto the new street, where he rode quickly and smoothly on the blacktop, fast as a car, thought Nader. They all jumped up and down barefoot and small, pointing at big Hassan who was riding back toward them, fast, feet stuck out as the pedals went by themselves. He was "yahoo-ing." Until that moment, none of the boys had ever actually seen anyone sit on a two-wheeled bicycle and ride it, on two wheels. They were amazed by the sight of it.

Abbas was the first of the boys to get on. The other boys held the back of the bicycle for balance as Abbas rolled, and when they let go, his feet on the pedals, he rode to the asphalt before he lowered his feet, like airplane wheels, to slow to a halt. Then he ran back toward them, holding the bicycle by its handlebars and yelling. "Balance," he screamed, "it's all like balancing yourself. It's like floating! Who'll be next?"

Nader was next. He sat up on the seat as Hassan held the bicycle for balance and rolled him toward the blacktop. When Nader's feet were secure on the pedals and they had motion, Hassan let go. Nader floating on the road, a thin trail of dust floating behind him. But as he neared the blacktop, Nader

didn't land with his feet. Rolled. Onto the new street, the smooth black asphalt that accelerated his speed. The pedals began moving by themselves. No balance needed. Faster than Nader's feet and he lifted his feet up as the bicycle moved down the street. Nader wide-eyed and straight ahead. He barely heard the boys yelling in excitement behind him; barely heard the noisy flashing car coming in front. Barely heard the pack of curious chickens, scattering. The swerve of the big car.

Feathers floating. Not dust. Asphalt. Hardens when it dries but stays hot. Burns knees. Skins them and burns them, like food cooking. Burnt chicken feathers.

Women were screaming when Nader opened his eyes. Hassan stood tall on the pavement over him, holding a crushed rooster with its crowned head fallen back. Feathers floated in the air and a loose one caught on his eyelash. He was looking back toward the direction of the screams. Car doors slammed and the ground beneath Nader's head shook. Fatimah-the-witch beating her chest. Wailing. Running out on the road. "A tragedy," she screamed, "it's a tragedy. The poor boy."

Nader lifted his head and noticed the black and white police car. He'd never seen its red light flash before. The crowd in front of their house. Hassan picked up Nader and they both ran toward it. An ambulance rolled from the smooth blacktop, crushing the dirt road toward the house. The policeman came out of his car. His wife, wet cheeks red, held her baby at the neck pushing him into her own neck. Nader saw baby Esau's eyes, frozen open, like the frogs at the creek. All the neighbors were talking.

"She found him floating in the pond."

"She thought it was his clothes fallen in from the line."

"Probably was reaching in to play with the fish."

"Probably something had fallen in and he tried to grab for it."

No one mentioned that the baby had been cursed by a witch that morning during a heated fight. They had all heard, thought Nader.

The policeman tried to calm the crowd and keep them at a distance from his wife and baby. Red face. Lips turned inward.

He began to cough uncontrollably, to cover his cheeks. He bent over, heaved, spit, straightened himself back up. He still had the screaming women that needed to be calmed. He had order he needed to maintain. Nader was glad the policeman was there, to hold the witch and take her to the station. Probably he shouldn't have left after hearing the curse. Shouldn't have laughed. But, finally, all the policeman did was raise his arms to hush the crowd. The gold badge on the chest pocket of his blue uniform rising with his arms, glinting in the orange afternoon sun. He looked like the policemen who wave and stop cars at the square in town.

Then Nader watched as the policeman and his wife went with their dead baby to the ambulance driver who was sharing a cigaret with Hassan and Fatimah-the-witch. Hassan gave the dead rooster he was holding to the crying Fatimah. Nader wondered why Hassan would share his cigarette with the witch. He had been there in the morning as well. He had heard the curse as well. Nader waited for someone to recall the morning curse. He waited for Abbas-and-Ali's mother to scratch and tear at Fatimah. He waited for the policeman to take her. But the policeman did not put holding bracelets on Fatimah's bony wrists. He watched as Hassan put his arms around her thin crooked shoulders and guided her back to the house. A real witch can even fool the police. No one would blame her. She had made everyone forget. The policeman, the father, wiped his brow and looked down. Dug his hard black shoes at the dirt. He held his quivering wife and walked her back into the house next door to Nader's house.

Long after the ambulance drove by, red flash in silence, floating past to the blacktop, crushing gravel and raising dust lit up against the burnt orange rays of disappearing sunlight on the horizon of the unfinished road, the crowd remained at the door of the house.

Most people had returned inside to their homes. Nader sat alone on the wall. Little brother Amir slept inside. Abbas-and-Ali were home. The afternoon was getting late and the air began to cool. The tar machines had stopped. Dinner would be late. He sat and thought about what would happen now to

poor Esau. Small body, curly head now gone. Voices still murmured outside on the road.

Fatimah came outside to set a dinner table in the yard. She mumbled to herself. She put a cooked chicken on a platter in the center of the table. Nader could see her dark figure clearly outlined against a new and different light. A dimming sky. She picked something off of the chicken from the platter. Something with ridges. He could make it out clearly against the violet light. The ridged crown of a rooster, wilted and dripping with juice. Fatimah-the-witch dipped it in and out of her mouth. Chewed.

Nader wondered why nothing had happened to the witch. His whole body trembled on the wall. The sky felt so large, larger than he ever had seen it before. A small breeze blew, raised bumps on his bare arms. The eucalyptus leaves and jasmine vines gave off a strong scent that filled his nostrils and lungs.

Then he noticed it.

No sun. The light had changed before his eyes. He stared past the houses and the trees. The sky was turning a dark purple. He could see a sliver of moon rising at one end of the sky and small stars were beginning to glow. They quivered in the sky as he did on the wall. Everything became purple. All the houses and trees became slanted black shadows against the big dark sky. This is the coming of night, he thought excitedly. It is happening. I am seeing it happen!

He sat back on the wall and became one of the shadowy figures of the dusk.

First Prize: ALR 2008 Poetry Contest
Final Judge: Tony Hoagland

Roy Bentley

Famous Blue Raincoat

Well I see you there with the rose in your teeth
One more thin gypsy thief…
—Leonard Cohen, "Famous Blue Raincoat"

The year I first heard Leonard Cohen sing of gypsy thieves
and the sort of loss you dread like conscription, I bought
a black leather motorcycle jacket. I didn't own a motorcycle.
I owned my experience: enlisting to avoid being drafted
and sent to Nam. The jacket was my Famous Blue Raincoat,
a symbol. I'd seen *The Wild One*, and it was that jacket—
the kind with the belt in the back and silver snaps, zippered
sleeves, a design to cover anatomic regions of the upper body
in case of a crash. The first time I wore it and waltzed in
to the Union Bar & Grill in Athens, Ohio, I liked the way
women paid attention to me. I liked the man I was then:
back from the air force, a giant chip on my gypsy shoulder
the size of a country. I drank beer and didn't mind crashing
and burning for the better part of a day afterwards. Some men
are halved by their lives; some women, too. But whatever else
a self is, besides a set of understandings we put on and take off
like this year's fashion or a uniform, in the jacket I felt whole.
I was building myself from a kit, and the black leather jacket
was my Cloak of Visibility, you could say: Whatever mystery
surrounds attraction, whatever prayer for peace wearing it was
(the Beatles wore jackets like it, in their early publicity stills,
or John Lennon did) the thing drew women. On top of which
I wore wire-rimmed glasses with tinted lenses (like Lennon)
night or day. They were part resolve, part a promise I made
myself to look past appearances, to scratch the surface for
whatever depth is, even if it's more surface—the way a Plato

or Aristotle might. I think it was Plato who said, *Only the dead have seen the end of war*. I'm not saying I was Marlon Brando, metaphorically slouching on some iron horse in movie light, or Plato. I'm saying I was from Ohio and learning to live.

First Prize: ALR 2008 Creative Nonfiction Contest
Final Judge: Emily Fox Gordon

Karin Forfota Poklen

Lyukas Kezü (Butterfingers): A Memoir

Klausenburg, Transylvania, 1943. I was six years old that year, a thin little girl with skinny legs and bony knees. Already, I had learned to mask (and often hide even from myself) a sadness that felt like a dull ache on the edge of my awareness. What sadness? What ache? It was 1943, yet I knew nothing of the wider world and the war that was sweeping across Europe; I did not know that *Siebenbürgen* (Transylvania), too, would soon be brought to its knees. My world was small, and confined to the immediacy of my own experience. Our genteel household by the river with its garden enclosed by a high, wrought-iron fence was like a sanctuary. I was secure in the love of my parents, whom I adored; and I loved my two sisters and my baby brother, who had been born in the spring. Our white-aproned maid, Mariska, had been in our household for years, and her I loved too for the mysterious tales and whispered secrets that she would tell while she polished the silverware and the brass door handles.

Klausenburg teemed with life, the streets a tumult of *fiakers* (horse-drawn conveyances) and black cars, and a hubbub of German and Hungarian, the languages we spoke at home. Gentlemen with elegant canes doffed their hats in greeting as they passed each other on the sidewalk. An enormous cathedral stood in the plaza, its narrow steeple rising high above a massive roof. Inside, there was a cool, shadowy silence, broken only by whispers and echoing footsteps that evoked a shivery sense of mystery. The smoky scent of snuffed candles floated in the dusky twilight, while narrow stained-glass windows soared skyward, their multi-colored shafts of sunlight stabbing

the shadows.

Outside, in the glare of the sun-washed plaza, the familiar equestrian statue of a Hungarian king stood high on a stone platform, its bronze turned black and green with age, immortal. Beyond the black chain encircling the statue grew a mass of colorful pansies, their faces turned up to the sun; above them, hovering butterflies, ephemeral as a dream. Finally arrived at the longed-for *Konditorei* (cafe/confectionery), we were met by a rousing aroma of strong coffee, and sat on delicate, spindly-legged chairs at tiny round, marble-topped tables. The lure of delectable, sweet confections in pastel hues behind curved glass was irresistible.

Such forays into the city with my parents were memorable treats. More often, my older sister, Erika, and I roamed in the big park across the swift, green-flowing *Szamos*, the river that ran by our house. Enormous chestnut trees shaded the wide paths. In the spring, their white, upright blossoms resembled candles on a Christmas tree; in the fall, their ripe chestnuts were coveted prizes of shiny brown globes hiding under autumn leaves that rustled underfoot. Vendors sold balloons and colorful paper windmills that spun and whirred like pigeons' wings. Serene, long-necked swans glided by on the lake, their graceful forms mirrored in the water. In the winter, the swans were gone. The lake was frozen over, but there was lively music and skating on the ice. The vendors now sold golden-brown, aromatic slices of pumpkin roasted over small, glowing braziers, and hot chestnuts in newspaper cones. A delicious, nutty fragrance suffused the cold air.

On one such winter afternoon, my hands buried in the brown fur muff that matched my coat's collar and cuffs, I stood in awe as I watched Erika's graceful movements on the ice. She circled the lake in gliding swoops, torso bent and arms extended, one straight leg held out behind her like a ballerina. Unlike me, my sister was perfect, a star. Everyone said so. Watching her, the thought came to me with a pang that I could *never* do that! The familiar sadness, like an ache, rose within me. Where Erika was sturdy and confident, I was fragile and uncertain, given to fumbling and stumbling over my own feet.

My mother's massages of my calves conveyed the certainty that I was deficient in some way, and though I relished her attention as I lay on my stomach and felt her hands knead and pummel my calves, my perceived inadequacy made me feel vulnerable and small. She called me *lyukas kezü* (Hungarian for "one who has holes in her hands").

The green breath of spring slowly melted the snow in the garden. Between ragged patches of ice that grew smaller each day, tenuous green shoots surged up from the damp earth and were gradually transformed into the first heralds of spring: tender snowdrops, their delicate, white bells nodding in the breeze. Vibrant green patches of moss, soft as velvet, glowed along the shadowy edges of the lilac bushes. Soon, the garden was a tumult of color: yellow daffodils, delicate *Maiglöckchen* (lilies of the valley) with clusters of fragrant, tiny white bells, and patches of sweet-smelling violets. Long-stemmed tulips slowly spread open their buds, and the lilacs became a mass of purple and white. The garden was filled with the extravagant perfume of spring. Around Easter, Erika and I shed our long wool stockings and put on *Kniestrümpfe* (knee-high socks), our bare thighs yet unused to the feel of the breeze and the tickle of our aproned frocks brushing against them. Easter came with red sugar bunnies and colorful eggs that we exchanged for a sprinkle of *Eau de Cologne* (diluted with water) from male visitors to the house.

As spring slowly gave way to summer, our thoughts turned to Minarken, a small village in the Transylvanian countryside, where some of my father's relations lived. Minarken beckoned with the promise of long, golden summer days. One morning, the old, scuffed leather suitcases stood packed and ready in the hallway. *Wir gehen nach Minarken, wo die Katzen schnarchen!* (Laughing, we repeated a silly little jingle that we children had made up and that translates as "We're going to Minarken, where the cats snore!"). A horse-drawn wagon met us at a small railway stop in the verdant countryside. I took my turn on the high plank seat next to the driver as he flicked the leather reins and clicked his tongue. A tug, and the wagon creaked and lurched forward, and a cloud of dust rose behind it on the country

road. Sitting on the high, swaying seat, I looked down at the horses' broad, undulating rumps, their honey-colored coats gleaming in the late afternoon sun. I was giddy with happiness.

Arrived at the familiar farmhouse, we sat on the carved corner bench for the evening meal amidst embroidered cushions. Inhaling the odor of bacon and goat cheese, I watched the steam rising from a bowl of course, yellow cornmeal. Rich, homemade buttermilk was poured from an earthen jug, while thick strips of bacon rind sizzled and foamed in the pan and curled into mouth-watering, crunchy morsels. A bowlful of cherries, fresh from the orchard, gleamed like rubies on the table. There were sprinkles of gay, red poppies on the cushions beside me, red poppies on the painted plates and pitchers on the wall shelves, and red poppies in my heart!

At daybreak, awakened by the persistent crowing of roosters, I sprang up at once, bare feet on the cool, earthen floor, and remembered with joy that I was in Minarken! Outside, tiny chicks resembling cheeping, yellow balls of fluff swarmed around the mother hens that clucked and scratched in the dust of the barnyard. Hissing geese pursued me with outstretched wings if I came too close, and threatened to bruise my bare legs with their menacing yellow beaks. An enormous spotted, floppy-eared sow lay luxuriating in the early morning sun while her pink, squealing piglets squirmed and crowded around her. Mulberry trees lined the roadway; waddling ducks eagerly snapped up the overripe berries on the ground. Looking up, I shaded my eyes as a large, white stork with black-edged wings and long, yellow legs descended in a graceful arc on its nest on the thatch-roofed barn, met by a clamor of small beaks straining upward. Storks bring good luck, people said.

In the mottled half-light of the barn, dark heads of horses loomed above me. When I reached up to touch their velvet noses, they backed away, snorting and shaking their manes. I breathed in the pungent odor of the barn. Swallows flitted in and out of their nests under the rafters. Softly mooing cows with bulging sides and swollen udders turned around to look at me with big eyes as I stood, entranced, and watched the milking: hissing white jets aimed at the wooden bucket, where the

warm milk foamed and frothed.

The sweet scent of a profusion of wild, yellow roses that covered the fence alongside the farmhouse saturated the air. A beehive hummed and buzzed. One day, as large pieces of honeycomb were slid into slots on a wooden frame turned by a protruding handle, I watched and took my turn at catching the honey. It emerged from a wooden spigot in a sticky, glistening strand that zigzagged and collapsed onto itself and formed an amber pool in the bowl that I held cupped in my hands.

The village millhouse shook with the rumbling din of machinery as revolving gears ground corn and wheat into sacks of flour. The air was thick with a fine, choking dust that settled white on the caps and the hairy arms of the men. Outside, the big millwheel turned, sending small streams of water tumbling back down into the millpond. When the sun burned hot, Erika and the village children splashed and swam in the water, causing the ducks and geese to rise into the air with a loud flapping of wings. I had not yet learned to swim. For a while, I stood watching, and then, determined, I made my way down the sloping edge of the millpond. Chest-high in the water, I ducked down, and with a deep, shivering breath let the water cover my shoulders. Imitating the arm movements of the swimmers, I walked along the oozy bottom with bent knees. I, too, could swim!

On Sundays, the church bell sent echoing peals from the tower of the small white, broad-beamed church. The villagers assembled in their traditional festive dress, the men in black boots with white leggings and wide-sleeved, linen shirts that came to their knees and were belted at the waist, topped by embroidered sheepskin vests. They wore tall, black hats. The young women appeared in vividly colored, lace-edged skirts and scarlet boots. Their aprons, bodices, and linen blouses were sprinkled with luminous embroideries. Holding freshly cut bouquets of flowers and crowned with elaborate headdresses from which colorful silk ribbons fluttered down their backs, they filed into the church in a festive procession.

In a summer that seemed timeless, one day flowed seamlessly into the next. These were lazy, unstructured days with

the freedom to roam and to explore the mystery that was all around me. My skin became brown, and my feet grew accustomed to running barefoot through the village. At its furthermost edge, where the dusty road merged into fields and meadows, stood a small, noisy gypsy encampment, all the more seductive because it was the one place I was strictly forbidden to approach. I remembered the mysterious gypsy who had once appeared at our kitchen door in Klausenburg. I had watched in wonder as he sharpened our kitchen knives and scissors amid a rainbow of flying sparks and, with a magical blue flame, mended a hole worn into a saucepan. I had heard that gypsies were chicken thieves. Our maid, Mariska, believed that they could foretell the future and tame wild animals. She said that gypsies never slept but sang and danced all night, and that they never wore any underwear! What could be more fascinating? Thus, in Minarken one day, my caution overcome by intense curiosity, I found myself silently studying a green wagon near the edge of the gypsy encampment when a blanket was suddenly pulled aside and an old woman appeared—not the exotic fortune teller of my imagination with multiple colored skirts and glistening beads, but an old crone with long, wild hair, who shook her fist and screeched, "What are you staring at?" Before I could even think of an answer, she grabbed a bucket by her side, and I was instantly drenched with foul smelling water. For a moment I stood rooted to the spot, and then I ran as fast as I could, pursued by her cackling laugh.

That day, I did not regain my composure until I reached the edge of the mysterious forest that spread a cool, mottled shade. Here, the breeze bore the sweet scent of *szamóca* (wild strawberries). Resembling tiny, crimson hearts hiding among green leaves on the forest floor, the delectable, concentrated essence of these wild strawberries was a consoling treat that helped me temporarily forget the gypsy woman. After eating my fill, I picked an apron pocket full of berries for my mother and thereby felt absolved from having to tell her about my misadventure at the gypsy camp.

The big meadow was a mass of wildflowers, a riot of color: deep red poppies, bluebells, cornflowers, yellow buttercups, tall

white daisies and many others whose names I did not know. It was my favorite place. Time seemed suspended while I sat in the tall grasses amidst hovering butterflies, weaving wreaths of wildflowers and creating artfully composed bouquets as the sun warmed my back, bees hummed, and the cuckoo called from the forest. Sometimes, I would flop down on my stomach and peer through the grasses, which now, at eye level, had become a forest. In my imagination, I was as tiny as the ants and lady-bugs that made their way up the stalks of grass, and a whole new, private world came into being. When I finally rolled over onto my back, my hands behind my head, I squinted at the sun and watched the high eagles draw slow, lazy circles in the blue sky. Savoring the fragrant scent of the meadow and listening to birdsong and the soft swishing of the breeze in the grasses, I let the insects skitter across me and drifted into daydreams.

Dusk. After the evening meal, the day's tasks were put away. The villagers sat on benches in front of their houses, smoke from the men's pipes drifting and mingling with the scent of the gentle evening air; quiet talk and soft laughter; waiting for the cows to come home from the pasture. Slowly they came, one by one in a leisurely procession with a soft clanking of bells around their necks, their advancing hooves raising little puffs of dust. Abruptly, each stepped away from its fellows and ambled toward its farmyard; each knew where it lived. The sound of crickets and the croaking of frogs filled the air. Fireflies, like winking stars, enlivened the deepening dusk. By and by, the oil lamps were lit and threw dancing shadows on the wall, and I was put to bed on a mattress filled with fragrant grasses. My coarse, homespun covers smelled of soap and sunshine. I lay listening to the faint, distant barking of a dog until I fell asleep.

Inevitably, these magical days and nights in Minarken came to an end. I did not know that it would be forever! But it was time to return to Klausenburg. Nothing was changed, but still I sensed an unspoken anxiety in my parents' voices. The glowing, green eye of the radio in my father's study assumed a malignant look as he listened to the hoarse, bellowing voice of the Führer. The radio seemed to tremble with the rousing

notes of German marching songs and stamping boots and impassioned shouts of *Sieg Heil* from many throats. My father's face looked troubled. I gave little heed to these things, however. I would soon be seven, and was now old enough to go to the *Deutsche Schule*. It was one of the oldest and best German schools in Transylvania, my father had said; he himself had been a pupil there when he was a little boy. Erika, a first-rate student, had already passed the first and second grades. Perhaps I, too, could shine. I longed to show that I, too, was competent and smart.

The school was a little distance away, and each morning I endeavored to keep pace with Erika's confident stride. A roofed gateway led into an old cobble-stoned courtyard graced by a large Linden tree. Beneath it stood an ancient well within a low stone enclosure. In my father's day, water had been drawn from the well in a bucket fastened to a sturdy rope. Now, it was modified by the addition of a hand pump, whose creaking handle sent a gush of water from the open jaws of a green-tinged lion's head. Long, two-storied structures enclosed the courtyard, their outer walls mottled by fallen pieces of stucco and their terra-cotta roof tiles turned dark under many seasons of sun, rain, and snow.

My classroom on the second floor exuded a stuffy, stagnant air. The broad, wooden floor planks were scuffed and gray with age. Rows of sloping, wooden desktops smelled vaguely of old polish and were marred by numerous inkblots and carvings, perhaps by the pocketknives of small boys like my father long ago.

Irene Teiss, a plump, friendly young woman, reigned over the hubbub of voices. Auburn braids that she wore like a wreath around her head accentuated the smooth roundness of her high-colored face. When she smiled (and she smiled often), her dimples deepened, and fine lines appeared at the outer corners of her wide-set, hazel eyes. She would quietly pace back and forth between the rows of desks, and when she stood behind me and leaned over to look at my awkward scrawl, the touch of her plump hand felt like a little bird alighting on my shoulder. Often, while my classmates were absorbed in their

work, I would secretly watch her as she gazed out the window, absently biting her lower lip and sweeping out of her face a strand of hair that had escaped from her braids. I loved her!

Fräulein Teiss' gentle voice could rise to an authoritarian pitch when she brought our class to attention. On her desk stood a white, porcelain cup with a curved handle—large, vivid red dots were sprinkled across its gleaming surface—and this cup was the object of a ritual in which we all participated. From time to time, just before ten o'clock, before the echoing bell was struck in the courtyard and everyone streamed out for recess, Fräulein Teiss would stand on her raised platform and face us with a smile playing on her lips, round arms folded across her soft bosom. We would raise our heads expectantly, and the classroom would quiet down to a hush. Whose name would she call out today, who would be entrusted with her white, red-dotted cup to take down to the courtyard and return it filled with water from the old well? My turn never seemed to come. We would wait in silence until the chosen classmate returned with a confident, triumphant air and placed the full cup on Fräulein Teiss' desk. Her congratulatory nod and the warm smile that she bestowed on the student of the day did not escape my notice. Oh, how I longed for her to call my name! The thought filled me with trepidation, but still I yearned to be acknowledged. Days and weeks went by, yet my turn never came, and gradually I began to believe that it never would. But I loved school, and I listened eagerly as Fräulein Teiss began to crack open the mysteries of letters and numbers. Big A looked like the roof of a house, she said; the numeral five was like half an apple with a fragment of leaf still clinging to its stem on the right. She showed me how to grasp the awkward, wooden pen, and how to dip its nib into the inkwell set into my desk so that drops would not splash across my notebook.

Time passed. I was now old enough to be out in the world on my own, and I relished this freedom. In defiance of my mother's instructions not to linger but to come straight home from school, I ambled and explored the alleyways and the little shops that I passed on my way home. My face pressed against

its grimy windowpane, I would peer into a dark old shoe shop and watch the ancient cobbler on his stool as he bent over his work below a naked light bulb hanging from the ceiling. A heavy odor of boot polish, old leather and sweat came from the open doorway. I watched, amazed, as he cut and scraped and sewed and hammered, stretching and shaping the leather over what looked like an amputated, wooden foot.

The *füszáros* on the corner drew me like a magnet. This was a store that sold just about everything and was a wonderland of curiosities and spicy aromas. A large black dog, who was always stretched out on the stone steps, would slowly rise when he saw me approaching, stretch, and welcome me with wagging tail and sniff and lick my hand. Inside, rolls of shiny, colorful ribbons and laces vied with sausages strung end to end in chains above the counter alongside Hungarian salami, thick as my arm. Overhead, flies wriggled on strips of flypaper that hung like limp flags from the ceiling. On the floor, sacks of flour and corn leaned against each other in disarray. Beside a barrel of fat, crunchy cucumbers submersed in a greenish bath were tumbles of shiny peppers, onions, and red apples, and heaps of potatoes and cabbages resting in wooden crates. The shelves behind the counter were a jumble of mysterious bottles and boxes. Thick, black ropes of licorice hung enticingly almost within my reach and made my mouth water. Sometimes, the grocer's son, Max, would grudgingly cut me a piece with his pocket knife. He was an arrogant boy some years older than I and wiser in the ways of the world. His freckled face was topped by red hair that stubbornly stuck up from his round head. One day, he opened his cupped hands and showed me a panting, battered little sparrow whose eyes resembled the small black beads on the pins in my mother's sewing box. He let me touch its trembling, feathery breast and feel its rapid heartbeat. Max knew his way around the store, and he winked conspiratorially when he showed me magazines with the glossy photographs of famous actresses of the day in alluring poses. Once, behind a stack of crates, he grinned and pulled out his *csurli* (his small penis) to show me. I was unimpressed. Still, I was drawn to his mischief. Later at home, when I spoke of my

adventures at the *füszáros*, my mother scolded me. *"Már megint csavarogtál?"* (Were you loitering again?) As for Max, he was strictly *"nem hozzád való!"* (an inappropriate playmate.) Why could I not follow my other sister's good example? My mother's criticisms raised in me a stubborn anger. I argued and defended myself, and then she became even angrier and called me *nagy száju* (big mouth.) Erika never invited such outbursts.

Spring, 1944. I was now seven years old. Now, there were notable changes in the park across the river. Under the spreading chestnut trees and against the backdrop of regal swans making their unhurried way across the lake, there were now rows of looming *Pancer* (military tanks) with long, menacing guns. But the handsome young German soldiers in smart uniforms and slicked-back hair smiled at us and waved, and returned Erika's innocent *Heil Hitler* with mock salutes. It was a game that they played. Erika could have been a poster child for the *Deutsche Hitler Jugend* (an organization of German youth enlisted into the Hitler movement), for she had a confident, blue-eyed smile and long, glossy blond braids hanging over her shoulders. Moreover, her name, Erika, was also a song that everyone knew. The soldiers took it up and sang it with gusto, which made her glow with pride. Soon, however, we were no longer allowed in the park. Once, a procession of trucks rumbled down the street, their beds crammed with grim, wordless people wedged against one another. Prominent, yellow stars stood out on their coat lapels. People came out of their houses and stared. An ominous silence descended like a white sheet covering a secret.

At night, when the light had been clicked off and my father's *"Schlaf gut, mein Kind"* still murmured in my ear, I was filled with anxious thoughts. Sleep would not come. What did I know of war? It was a word on everyone's lips, but I knew only that it had something to do with dying. Dying! I thought of the little green tree frog with blinking, yellow eyes that I had put to bed in a matchbox with a folded leaf for a pillow. Days later when I remembered him, his eyes had no longer reflected the light, and his little body had hung limp and lifeless from my finger. Now, snuggled under my blanket, I peered anxiously at

the yellow line of light under the bedroom door and listened to my parents in the adjoining room, agitated voices rising to a pitch and then dying down to a murmur. "Please don't let them die!" I whispered in the darkness.

IT IS A BRIGHT spring morning. With the taste of bread and butter still in my mouth, Erika and I hurry to school, accompanied by birdsong and the perfume of lilacs blooming in the gardens along our way. Later, sitting on the hard school bench with an elbow on my sloping desk, I begin to trace my letters, making sure my pen holds neither too much nor too little ink. Absently, I hear my friends' voices around me. It is like every other morning. Soon, I am lost in daydreams. Suddenly, I am conscious of a silence in the classroom. The big clock on the wall shows it is almost ten o'clock. Fräulein Teiss is calling my name, not once, but twice! Everyone is looking at me! A tight ball of bewilderment knots in my stomach. I am caught unprepared! My heart beats wildly. Slowly, I rise from my seat. My limbs feel heavy as I slowly make my way to the front of the classroom. I stand before my teacher and look down at my shoes, wordless. My throat is dry. Fräulein Teiss looks at me, and her face breaks into a smile. She bends down and whispers in my ear, "You can do this!" Then she hands me her cup. Carefully, I hold it in both hands. As I turn towards the door, I feel the reassuring pressure of her hand on my back.

Holding the cup like a precious chalice, I walk down the creaky, wooden stairs, mindful not to stumble. In the old courtyard, the morning sun spills across the cobblestones under my feet. "You can do this," still echoes in my ear. Then, I repeat to myself again and again, like a mantra: "I am **not** a *lyukas kezű*!" A soft breeze sweeps across the courtyard and rustles the leaves of the old Linden tree leaning over the well. The courtyard is silent, except for the persistent, repetitive cooing of a mourning dove. It is not yet recess.

Arrived at the well, I lift the creaking handle of the pump, watching the water as it emerges from the mouth of the lion and fills the cup. Then, I slowly walk back toward the classroom, firmly gripping the cup's handle, holding it level,

mindful of my feet on the cobblestones. I am absorbed in my task. Time is suspended. Then, I am aware of a sudden noise coming from the edge of the courtyard. Fast-running boots are approaching, pounding the cobblestones. A scuffle, and then they are upon me in a violent collision, a big fellow chasing a small, panting boy. Intent on their chase, they pay me no heed and disappear as quickly as they have come.

I am on my knees. In front of me, the cobblestones are stained dark by a jagged wetness, and small rivulets of water snake in the cracks between them. Broken shards of the shattered, red-dotted cup come into focus, red spots on white porcelain, like drops of blood in the snow. My eyes come to rest on the slender handle, still attached to a curving piece of the cup that gently rocks back and forth.

R.W. Black

Thaw

The dulled edge of March and the city is a fist,
    blunt, tightly gripped, winter caving in
a little more each day. And the people waking
    and moving through the city are themselves
a species of fist, coiled like shells, ropey,
    levered into a horizontal threshing of wind.
They know that spring is a tiny, unrustable seed,
    a protozoan something, raw with origin, clenched
even now in their thickly-gloved hands. They believe
    in its fierce pliability, a tidbit of redemption,
like some Megaraptor spore frozen for eighty,
    maybe ninety million years in Siberian tundra,
then nuked by a rogue, disenchanted Bolshevik,
    thawed and fed with radioactive stew, and half
of Moscow tumbles. It's a lesson the Soviets learned
    long ago, how White Nights give way to cool,
sky-domed summer avenues, drowsed with willows
    and the Czar's beloved oaks. It's why, at the ragged
end of winter, you sometimes see three or four kids,
    sixth or seventh grade boys, kick-starting their way
home from school. Why they stop, sometimes, these kids,
    at the largest maple on the block, a yard-busting,
wind-shearing mother of a tree. They're not so old
    to have forgotten wonder, or so young they haven't
learned to distinguish dirt from dream, element
    from the siren song of myth. So they look up into
the sprawled, skeletal branches and then, as though
    they'd rehearsed for days, join hands and circle
the tree with their bodies, their cheeks imprinted
    with the Mesozoic topography of the trunk.
Perhaps they've read in school about the layer
    just below the pebbled bark that moves the juices up
from the roots, and what they want to do is hug

some warmth back into the bole of that old beauty.
Or maybe they're tired of waiting for bud-tip
and leaf-curl to flute open, hell-bent on squeezing
the bejesus out of the granddaddy maple, strangling it
back into green-flumed action. As for the tree itself
and the faint possibility of arboreal reciprocation,
no one sees the flecks of mapley DNA sifting into
the cheek pores and palm lines of the circled boys.
It'll takes some years before they feel the phloem-like
cellular tug, a reed-thin trilling in their veins.
A man hard-raking the blanched winter grass
from his lawn, kicking away the few last turds
of snow from under the boxwoods, watches
the kids unlink, regroup, sees them look up
one more time into the crazed geometry
of the tree, then head off down the road.
Nothing to it, he thinks, shaking his head.
Or not much to joining the ends of two seasons
together, seeing the body for what it is,
a fulcrum, a suture, a flesh and bone winch
that you roll out into the yard a few times
each year, put to work. It's fractal and wild
as ice, a bit of chaos theory detheorized, laid bare—
a fern-tip unfurling from fossilized stone.
A woman walking her mutt of a dog watches
the man leaning on his rake, wagging his head
at something she's missed. She's glad to see
someone else outside, someone broken free
or breaking, someone unknotting out here
beneath the sun's smeared thumbprint,
tiny birds ribboning from his half-open mouth.

Amber Flora Thomas

After

Two appaloosas come from deep
in their field to take crab apples
from my palm, ears tilting toward
my voice. I tell them, "easy, easy"
as though I could calm a storm in
the trees. I have been so long moored
in the dark you cast in me, tell me
am I to know the fathoms of touch,
the terrain of a lover's body?

They whisk fly and dust
with their tails, one pushes her head
between my breasts. Let me know
daily the waters of those brown
eyes. Let me go from the fear that
climbs me into sutures of prayer.

Sweat and hoof stomp—the prickle
and shed of a million particles. After
all that haunts me, I want to give you
No and Enough already. From the woods,
a chorus command of small sounds,
tenderfoot in the undergrowth. They
throw their heads as they leave.

Peter Cooley

Poem Spoken to Me on My Knees

I am a windowpane you can look through
called your soul. You have left me smudged
by past malfunctions you can make right
this one day of your life you have to live.
First, wipe me clean of everything you've done.
Good. Now, try to see that distant landscape
far back, where sky and water meet, one blue
indistinguishable second in Paradise,
yours some day if you will follow what I say.
To see the trees in motion that place holds
you must come back as if for the first time,
you must throw yourself headfirst on the glass.
Very good. Now that didn't hurt, did it?
You'll get used to the stink of your own blood.
Now that you've broken me? We're both reborn.

Peter Cooley

Poem Which Could Have Been in Many More Than Two Parts

Close to death, I hope I will have these words
still coming toward me with the morning's light
as this instant, even distant, they sing
their songs caught in flight, green and stupendous
wild as the wild parrots down the street.

I saw my mother and my father die
of old age, ninety-three and ninety-one.
If they had written it, there was still time
for poetry. I listened to the light
shining brighter in their last moments here.
I want it brighter still my last moments.

II

When I go, as Mother used to call it,
it won't be different, so I'm dying today.
When I woke up I said: this day's your last.
I know I'll lose it, but since I said that
this last hour everything I touch has sung, the screen
of the computer, my desk, the window,
my coffee cup, my pajamas and robe,
everything ordinary has been miraculous.

Christopher Buckley

Panis Angelicus

The bread of heaven
ends all prefigurations
—St. Thomas Aquinas

Clouds like even loaves
of bread floating
above the blue
table of the sea . . .
a path zigzagging down
to the beach—eucalyptus
when I was five,
butter-white blooms
and boughs of pittosporum
covering me as I sat here
on the cliff.
Now
in back of everything,
I sometimes see
the blueprints, the lines
and diminished
stratagems of air—
a fragment or two,
some spangled,
light-thin hosannas
lost across the bay. . . .

This is not a blessing.
I have no more hope
than a cloud edging
the horizon, a shooting star.
The sky reaches past me,
and yet today, bird-like,
sits a minute

on my shoulder
with an emptiness
almost beyond recall . . .
that girl, at the end
of the lane,
with sea-green eyes—
so little sustains us.

There are few demands
for anyone who wishes
to inhabit the light—
next to nothing,
it seems, is finally
required to lift us
from the famine
of our breath.

Christopher Buckley

Cantata for Clouds and Bones

mis alas rotas en esquirlas de aire
—Jose Gorostiza

The wind was old,
all we had
was the information of the dust—
neither told us anything.
The rain fell
through most of childhood
when the afternoon sun wasn't trembling
briefly among the lilacs.
Rough angels,
their wing tips gnawed by desire,
stood in the stained edges
of light.

The evidence is
any three birds
lifting from a phone line
like half notes
rusting in the sky,
then the silent recitatives of stars—
but it had little
to do with stars,
where we were formed,
where we will be
ground in fire
finer than the flour lost forever
in my grandmother's apron—
the grist of years
into almost nothing . . . .
So I'll take any cloud,
a window still looking out

on a dream,
on the trees poorly dressed in November.
Then, I'll no longer
have to answer
to the stooges and big shots
who ran us out of air,
and everything
will be blindness,
equal once again.

This cold
whistling by the window glass,
it feels like God
is sifting through my skin,
the dulled phosphor
of my cells,
looking for his notes,
the elaborate schematics
of hope
he's sure
he placed there initially.
And when everything inside me is grey
as a sheep's brain,
when he's done with me for no reason
beyond cosmic grit
and gravity draining away,
they'll make a small monument
from the available sticks,
and leave it
at the edge
of that childhood field
near the sun-bleached sycamore,
another place where
angels no longer patrol the rafters
of the sky—
one silence after another . . . .

Knife blade of the blue
for decades
at my throat,
the handkerchiefs of the 20th century
are drifting away,
surrendering
on the wind.
A shadow from a plane blocks the sun
as if a hand
were reaching down from heaven—
I say "as if" for none of us
are 8 years old
any more and believe
in the personal touch
of God.
I keep the moon
on my left
as I walk away,
my right hand across my heart
where I swear
to nothing.
There is no framework
for the light,
the spun threads
and loose trimmings
of the galaxies.
There are only fragments,
the splintered
atoms of my bones—
wings, if I ever had them—
floating
randomly on the air.

Christopher Buckley

Spindrift

Man needs nothing so much as a stretch of sea
And a shore of hope on the other side of death . . .
—Blas de Otero

It helps at evening to have something
to unlock the clouds, to fill in the blanks,

given the past glazing our eyes—sea foam and
breeze, blow-back of breakers, surf ascending

like dust, swirling with a subtext that does not reach
much beyond our skin. Little more to weigh

than the sketchy evidence of the heart, the verandas
of second guesses, where anyone can find us, a haze

still drifting in from the plains where our families
are buried. The faint transcriptions of blood, of salt,

lost so long ago, how could it matter? But waves
calm us a while, a predictable meter suggesting

there is more despite all the stars moving away.
4 pm, and the leaves prefigure the affidavits of light—

random regardless of what we think we see.
The sea opposing everything, choosing me

as I stand on the cliff to represent the earth before
the bright savannahs—never mind the paper cup of ashes

on the bench that tips, and in its dots and dashes, spells out
nothing close to help. We're tracked by ruin, by fog.

For poetic effect I can say I'm a blind man, but who is not
tired of exaggeration, all the way back to the Holy Cards

we were given for our silent comportment in class—
Saints rimmed in radiant air, gold dust leaking like stars

from their fingers? Too late to stop and wonder whether
someone is listening? 60 years scattered like scraps

across my desk—I have a drawer with old grains
of moonlight only a child can open, and I see no great order,

no design in the grey winds, not even the dark is infinite . . . .
Before I know it, I'll put on my white shirt and walk

across the sand into the mists—the sea deaf to all
of this—a lesson it keeps learning from God.

Daiva Markelis

The Lithuanian Dictionary of Depression

With each passing year my parents grew more accustomed to their life in America. They put money in high-yield savings accounts, supported the local Lithuanian Saturday School and the Cicero Public Library, subscribed to the Lithuanian daily *Draugas* and The Book of the Month Club, and voted in both national and local elections. Occasionally, however, they lapsed into reveries of sadness and concern; their melancholy was most palpable on days when letters arrived from Lithuania. For every four or five letters my parents sent relatives during those Cold War years, they received one, admonishing them for not writing: *Dear Adolfai, we are doing well except for the inevitable sicknesses. We are lucky when we can get aspirin. Why don't you write? Please write. Perhaps you have forgotten us, what with your fancy cars and automatic washing machines.*

The first time I saw my father cry was when a letter arrived from Lithuania, on paper thin as skin, saying that his mother had died. Her already fragile lungs had collapsed under the strain of the Siberian winter. Her last breath froze in mid-air; that's how I pictured it in sixth grade. In her one existing photograph, black and white, her deeply lined unsmiling face, shrouded by a black babushka, bears witness to a grim existence—a difficult husband; one son, the beloved, killed in a mining accident in Vorkuta, his body sliced in half by a machine whose job it was to shatter large and stubborn chunks of coal; another son destroyed by vodka; yet another, my father, lost in that difficult hour when the desire to remain with his wife and new-born daughter in Dusetos was overpowered by a stark vision of life under the Russians. And then of course there was the deportation itself, the uprooting, the loss of the little farm, the garden she found solace in, planting tomatoes,

tending to the rue. Their names had found their way onto Stalin's dreaded list—they were Enemies of the People because of an unregistered hunting rifle my grandfather had owned.

My mother's more privileged family had also boarded one-way trains for Siberia. Great-aunt Irena, forewarned by a neighbor that a disgruntled servant had spoken to the authorities about some small, perhaps imaginary slight, buried the good family china in the middle of the night beneath the shadow of the largest oak. Fifty years later, after the restoration of independence, her children unearthed the delicate cups and saucers, the dishes encrusted with mud, but still whole, still usable. That same year they dug up the bones of their father and grandmother, brought them back from Siberia to the warmer soil of Suvalkija.

Sometimes, however, my parents' sadness had less to do with harsh political realities than with bittersweet remembrances of youth, often evoked by music or nature. Beethoven's Sixth Symphony, the Pastoral, provoked the same response in my father every time the flute emerged from the surrounding forest of strings in the second movement. "Listen to the cuckoo's call," he'd say. And then, in wonder, "You've never heard a cuckoo!" My sister and I would roll our eyes. "That's because there are no cuckoos in America, da-ad," I'd answer. A trip through the Wisconsin countryside would bring back memories of the forests of Lithuania with their birches and pines. My mother would speak of the holiness of trees, their sacred status in Lithuanian culture.

"The souls of the dead migrate to surrounding oaks and maples," she would explain as matter-of-factly as if she were telling us where birds go in the winter.

A stay at the Indiana Dunes would invite the inevitable comparison with Palanga. "After a storm, my brothers and I would run to the beach and gather bits of amber," my mother would reminisce. "Here, of course, there is no amber."

In general, the men in the family were more resilient than the women in dealing with the day-to-day concerns of life and the gusts of melancholy that arose like a strong and unex-

pected northerly wind. A fondness for routine coupled with a sure sense of their place in the Lithuanian patriarchal order prevented both my father and my grandfather— my mother's father—from slipping into extended bouts of sadness.

Accustomed to a life of hard physical labor as a boy, my father would begin his day with half an hour of jumping jacks and deep-knee bends from a booklet published by the U.S. Air Force Academy. After eating the eggs and toast prepared by my mother, he'd grab the thermos of coffee she'd hand him on the way out. He'd arrive early at the engineering firm where he worked for many years as a draftsman. He was a steady, reliable employee, careful not to let a weekend's worth of living it up interfere with Monday morning responsibilities.

On those evenings when my father wasn't at school completing his engineering degree, he'd sit in the living room puffing on a cigar and listen to records, vinyl LP's he didn't let my sister or me touch. His taste was eclectic; he enjoyed opera and Lithuanian folk songs and country music. A Brahms string quartet might be followed by Hank Williams singing about "them ol' cotton fields back home." The Kingston Trio's rendition of Nancy Whiskey would tread on the heels of Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde.*

My grandfather, my mother's father, also lived a life governed by self-imposed routines; by training he was a mathematician. He addressed my grandmother in the formal "jus" instead of the intimate, expected "tu." He was friendly, if not affectionate, towards his grandchildren, saving his energies for his daily mile-and-a-half walk and his two-hour perusal of both *Draugas* and its rival paper, *Naujienos*. My grandfather ate a raw onion every day, peeling back the layers slowly with a paring knife. He lived to be ninety-six.

Among his later-life passions was writing. Like many of his peers, my grandfather published his memoirs. *Sketches of the Past* he called the book, funded by his youngest brother, Kazys, a prosperous farmer who'd immigrated to Canada from Lithuania. The action in *Sketches* is recounted in the formal language of a man deeply uncomfortable with the vocabulary of feeling.

There is no mention of my grandmother—their courtship and marriage—or of his children. Affection intrudes upon the narrative only once, when my grandfather writes about his grandfather, a bee-keeper, who would bless his bees with the sign of the cross before attending to them. He once scolded his grandson for saying that some of the bees had "keeled over": "You have to say that they died."

The fact that sentiment is largely absent from *Sketches of the Past* is not surprising. My grandfather had no patience for anything that interfered with his orderly, uncomplicated life. Once, when my mother was complaining about the rising cost of Catholic school tuition and my grandmother was grousing about the bad manners of the neighborhood children, my grandfather announced: "I have an idea. Why don't we go into the backyard, dig a really deep hole, and all jump in?"

Compared to my taciturn grandfather, my grandmother was a complainer of gold medal caliber. She found the small apartment in Cicero stifling, the opera too expensive, the women with curlers in their hair shouting at their children in the laundromat undignified. Even the workers, members of the so-called Democratic Party, seemed more loyal to Mayor Daley than to any principles of international brotherhood, so unlike the social democrats she had known and supported back in Lithuania.

Of the many indignities cast upon my grandmother in this new country, the greatest was English itself. She was in her sixties when she came to America, too old, she said, to learn another language. My grandmother rarely ventured outside. With her grandchildren growing older and her husband involved with his writing, she spent her days sleeping and eating and complaining and watching television in a language she claimed to despise.

"Do you think *mociute* could have been clinically depressed?" I asked my mother once.

"Clinically?" she said and wrinkled her nose. "I don't know what that means."

We took the English-Lithuanian Dictionary off the shelf. There was no definition for "clinically" or "clinical."

"Your grandmother endured many losses," she continued. "Her mother at a young age. Her brother during Stalin's purges."

"Others lost entire families. Children, spouses, parents. But they still waved their flags at Vasario 16th meetings and baked *krustai* and wrote letters to *Draugas*."

"You are being judgmental."

Like my grandmother, my mother was sensitive to slights, both real and perceived. She felt things deeply. She took Milltown for her migraines and Valium for her nerves. I once came upon her sitting on the couch with her head in her hands, weeping, listening to the chorus of the Hebrew slaves from Verdi's *Nabucco* on the classical music station.

"What's wrong?" I asked her.

"Nothing," she said and looked up. "We are born, we suffer, we marry, we suffer, we bear children, we suffer, we grow old, and we die."

She was consumed by anxieties that threatened to fill the space around her like the carbon monoxide she feared might kill us all. She was frightened of driving a car and never got her license. I tried to teach her once—I'd been a late-bloomer myself when it came to driving, and thought my patience and maturity would work to her advantage. After a shaky Sunday morning start, my mother's hands gripping the wheel as if holding on to a life-preserver, we came to an intersection without a stop sign. It was clear that the cars on Austin Avenue, the bigger street, had the right of way. My mother, instead of slowing down before crossing, simply closed her eyes and continued.

"Mom, you *have* to keep your eyes open when you drive," I yelled. "That's a basic rule."

"Why do you always criticize me?" my mother asked.

Not only driving a car, but riding *in* a car produced anxiety in my mother. Her rules for living safely in the world included avoiding the front passenger seat as often as possible.

"Always sit in the back," she'd tell me.

"Why?"

"You're more likely to survive an accident."

"But what if I'm on a date?"

"Your date will understand."

She was the first mother in the neighborhood to learn the Heimlich maneuver. Even before this, she had her own methods of dealing with choking, garnered from her brother, a doctor, to whom she'd admitted that she had almost died chewing on a Lifesaver: "You need to scream as loud as you can. That loosens the vocal cords."

My mother's depression was mitigated by the hope she had for the future of her children as well as by a few simple things that gave her pleasure: British comedies on PBS, peach pie with vanilla ice cream, the household plants that thrived under her gentle, experienced care. She loved beautiful, more costly things as well. Our house was filled with paintings: several important Petraviciuses; two or three Ignas graphics; an expensive Domsaitis—an oil of a few small apples and a withering pear lounging in a blue ceramic bowl, a solitary lemon leaning against the bowl upon a wooden table.

"I feel like that lemon," my mother told me more than once.

Because the Lithuanian Dictionary of Depression contains only two entries—1) Grief Caused by War/Exile and 2) the Inevitable Sadness of Existence—I was stuck with a limited vocabulary when I experienced my first episode, during the summer of 1981. My life seemed to change overnight from mildly chaotic to disturbing, though in retrospect the signs had been pointing to a psychic breakdown for some time. The black dog, Winston Churchill called depression, and perhaps that image comes closest to evoking the nature of the beast. You turn around: the dog is always there, though sometimes he sits on his haunches and watches at a distance and sometimes he nips at your heels, trying to nudge you into a corner with silent determination.

One June evening, standing on the platform of the Dearborn el stop in downtown Chicago where I worked, I was transfixed by the electric spark of an oncoming train. "Jump," a voice whispered. I stepped back and closed my eyes and counted to twenty. Safely inside the train, I looked around to see a woman sitting across from me with patches of white

running down her cheeks. "Coward," she said. Was that chalk smeared on her face? Slashes of cold cream? Did she have some incurable disease of the skin? I began to sweat. Walking home from the Cicero Avenue el stop, I thought that maybe I'd imagined her.

For months afterward, I awoke to the image of the woman's face. The simplest activities frightened me. I began to chew food very slowly, afraid I'd choke on a sliver of bone or a bite of apple or a small pea. I began to walk deliberately, fearful I'd trip on a stone or a piece of paper or my own two feet. I'd check my parents' gas stove constantly to make sure the pilot light was on. I couldn't fall asleep and spent entire nights in anxious wakefulness, sometimes getting up to look out the dining room window of my parents' spacious apartment, staring out at the empty streets. Once or twice I thought I heard the strains of piano music coming from the ceiling, a melody vaguely Debussian.

My parents were reluctant to acknowledge depression as the cause of changes in my behavior. My mother believed my problems would be solved if I married a nice Lithuanian boy with a bright future and moved to the nearby Chicago suburbs.

She even looked up the word "depression" in the English-Lithuanian Dictionary. *Idubimas*. "A hollow," she said, "an indentation. A really big hole."

That summer I tried to keep intact my crumbling self with white wine and vodka, spending weekends with my non-Lithuanian boyfriend, Tom. I moved out of the house, against the wishes of my parents, to an apartment in Berwyn several miles away. Buying place-mats and posters and coffee mugs, arranging books on an old bookcase I'd found in the alley, sneaking in a runty cat I named Mimi (after the heroine of *La Boheme*)—all these served as temporary distractions from my mental and emotional troubles. After the newness of independence wore off, I felt more miserable than before. Coffee gave me a lift; I drank gallons. When I couldn't sleep I drank wine and popped Nytols. I tried cocaine with the hope that it would stabilize my falling spirits. I called the gas company at midnight once, insisting there was a leak, I could smell it, I could feel it. The gas

man came at one in the morning with a red rubberlike stick he waved back and forth like a magic wand.

"No gas," he announced.

I bought books about mental illness that focused on chemical imbalances. I considered adding genetic predisposition as another entry to the Lithuanian Dictionary of Depression, but my melancholy wasn't followed by bouts of mania; perhaps manic depression was inherited, but I wasn't so sure about hopelessness. Other books suggested vitamins and running and positive thinking as cures for persistent sadness. Nothing helped. I took a depression questionnaire in a woman's magazine; when the results suggested I seek immediate help, I dragged myself down to the Student Counseling Service at the university where I was finishing my master's degree. The administrator, alarmed at my conversations with oncoming trains, assigned me to a psychiatrist.

Dr. G. was not only a psychiatrist, but a psychoanalyst in training. Seeing an analyst as opposed to a regular therapist made me feel better immediately; I was quirky and sophisticated, a heroine in a Woody Allen movie. My elation was slightly dampened by the fact that Dr. G. looked less like an analyst, or my idea of one, than a bricklayer: stocky build, unmanicured hands, ruddy complexion.

His defining feature, however, was a black patch that covered one of his eyes. I tried my hardest to avoid gawking at his face during that first session—I stared instead at the wilting plant in the corner of his office.

"What are you trying so hard not to look at?" he asked.

"Your eye patch."

"What crosses your mind when you look at the patch?"

"Pirates," I answered.

I had the sense that Dr. G. was looking for a specific response—a big tunnel, perhaps, or an endless hole—and that I had disappointed him.

"You don't have to please me," Dr. G. said.

He suggested a parallel between my anxiety about saying the right thing and my fear of not living up to the expectations of my parents. After initial resistance to this idea, I realized I was

hiding major parts of my life from my parents, highlighting those feelings and actions they would approve of.

I began to talk about Tom, whom I loved, or thought I did. I talked about how my parents looked upon the idea of my marrying Tom with as much support as if I'd told them I was joining the Young Spartacus League to ring in a new era of socialist brotherhood. I talked about how other voices, real and imaginary, present and past, joined in the chorus of disapproval. There was the famous Lithuanian priest who had survived Dachau and whose mantra reverberated through my entire being whenever I imagined myself as Wife of Tom: "It's better to marry a drunken Lithuanian than a sober American." There were the Saturday school teachers who told me that I was responsible for the continuation of the Lithuanian language, the oldest spoken European language in the world.

I talked about how a life without Tom seemed impossible—would I ever find anyone who would love me as much, who would drive me places, buy me nice dinners, keep me occupied on weekends? Yet I couldn't imagine betraying what I solemnly called My People, abandoning the ideals of my childhood, the hopes that had centered on the dream, now increasingly remote, that Lithuania would one day be free, that we could go back, we could all go back.

"Would you really want to go back?" Dr. G. asked me.

"I've never been there, so I really don't know."

"What is it that you like most about Lithuanians and Lithuanian culture?"

The idea that I had a choice in this matter—that I didn't have to buy or reject the entire package—came as a revelation. I thought about Dr. G's question over a dinner of a vodka tonic and oranges. *What is it that I like most about Lithuanians and Lithuanian culture?* I asked myself, as if taking a particularly difficult essay exam. After a second vodka tonic, I decided that I really didn't like Lithuanians very much. They were cliquish and provincial; many were racist and anti-Semitic. Their cuisine was nothing to write home about, and their national costumes made women look fat. I waited for the thunderbolt to strike, the Lithuanian Angel of Death to pay a visit. When nothing

happened, I sighed in relief and poured myself more vodka.

As for the things I liked, at first nothing came to mind. Then I thought about the language, the way almost every word can be cajoled into a variation of itself, for example, "boy": berniukas, bernas, bernelis, bernuzelis, bernytis. I loved Lithuanian folk songs about ducks and horses and the planting of the rue. I loved the primitive wooden sculptures of Christ the Worrier that used to dot the Lithuanian countryside before the Communists took over, though I had only seen them in books. I admired the way that earlier Lithuanians had worshipped trees and prayed for bees.

I loved Lithuanian legends, like the one about Egle, Queen of the Snakes. The story begins as Egle (Fir Tree) is bathing with her two older sisters in the Baltic Sea. As she dries herself off she discovers a water snake coiled in the folds of her white dress. The snake demands marriage. The sisters tell Egle to agree—after all, she can always back out. Three days later, the snake slithers down to the family's farmstead along with a posse of fellow serpents and abducts Egle, taking her down to the amber palace at the bottom of the sea. She discovers that the snake is really a handsome prince. She bears him four children, three sons and a daughter, all named after trees.

Nine years pass and Egle begins to miss her family. She asks the Prince for permission to visit the old farmstead. He grants her a nine-day leave with the children. "How will I find my way back?" she asks. A special chant will bring him out of the waters, the Prince explains. The reunion is a happy one, though Egle's overjoyed parents and siblings begin to wonder whether she really needs to go back. "How can she be happily married to a snake?" they ask one another. They become aware that there are special words to lure the serpent to the shore; they try to wheedle them out of the children. The brothers are firm in their resolve to keep the secret, but the daughter breaks under pressure. The family calls up the snake and kills him.

I told Dr. G. the story. We talked about the meaning of the legend, what it said about Lithuanian culture, how it related to my experiences.

"Listen to your words," Dr. G. said. "*How can she be happily*

married to a snake? Who does that sound like?"

"My parents?"

"Exactly. And who do you think the snake is?"

"Tom?"

The Dictionary suddenly expanded to allow an entry for depression caused by conflicted family relationships and unrealistic cultural expectations. I continued to see Dr. G. for eight more months. I was still drinking—and reluctant to talk about my alcohol abuse; ordinary human happiness still eluded me. But my suicidal impulses disappeared, and the sense that one day I might find satisfaction in what Freud termed the cornerstones of our humanness—love and work—gave me a profound sense of hope.

Towards the end of my therapy I received and accepted a job offer from a high school in Germany to teach English. The school catered to the children of Lithuanian immigrants who'd been born in the western part of Lithuania that had once belonged to Germany.

"You're moving far away from your parents," Dr. G. commented.

"They're not very happy about that."

"And yet the high school is a Lithuanian one. The teachers and students are Lithuanian."

"Yes."

Dr. G. nodded his head slowly. I began to nod as well. We both nodded our heads for what seemed like a very long time, neither of us saying anything.

THAT YEAR TEACHING abroad was difficult in many ways. Though the students seemed to like me, I was not an effective teacher—too lenient and eager to please. Evenings I'd drink huge glasses of beer at the local Bierstube. I still didn't drive a car. But because my parents weren't there to advise me—I couldn't call my mother every day or even weekly—I began to make my own decisions. I bought a bike and once pedaled all the way to Heidelberg, a day's journey. I took the train to Paris and Munich and Amsterdam. I broke off my relationship with Tom; I began to enjoy my own company.

That year living abroad I'd think back to the woman with the patches of white on her face. I wondered whether she was a ghost, fierce and white, visible only to me. Maybe she was my future double—a crazy homeless woman riding the trains all day. Perhaps she was my guardian angel—and the "coward" she whispered was more a warning than a taunt. She was saying I lacked courage not because I hadn't jumped but because I had left unexamined the beliefs of my parents. Fearful of the anger I might experience and the terrifying love I might find, scared of the daunting possibility of freedom, I had leapt, instead, into the widening hole of darkness.

Will Felts

The Legacy

He had a glass eye, my dad. It was coffee-colored, like the good one, and if he looked straight at you, you could hardly tell that one was as soulless as a marble. He was a handsome man in a rural way, with a bony face, straight-and-considerable nose and black hair combed back from a widow's peak. Abe Lincoln sans beard. He had the weathered appearance and force of personality of a man who seemed never to have been a boy.

From the trunk of the Chevy he extracted the shotgun. "It's about time you learned how to handle a gun," he said, holding it vertically, barrel up. It was my birthday and he'd driven us to a remote dirt road that bordered a farm field.

He explained that this was a single barrel, break action, sixteen gauge shotgun and a lot of other stuff about how to stand and shoot it. Then he broke the action and handed the gun to me. From the trunk he fished out an empty Campbell soup can and walked over to a fence post twenty yards away. He balanced the soup can on the post.

With my arms outstretched, I held the heavy gun the way I'd hold a poisonous snake. He returned, took the gun, loaded a shell and explained that a hunter points rather than aims. "Like this," he said, raising it easily to his cheek and against his shoulder and firing it. The tin can flew off the post. Some crows cawed and lifted from nearby pine tops.

He again broke it open and removed the spent cartridge from the chamber. "Hold this while I put the can back up for you to try." I imagined what ordinary 11-year-old boys were doing that day and wished I were ordinary.

The irony of this gun push was that a gun had ruined any chance my dad had had at an ordinary boyhood. He grew up in Houston and lost the eye at eleven when a friend shot it out in a BB gun battle. That handicap kept him out of WWII, which

was an ignominy. I learned quickly not to ask him, "What'd you do in the war, Dad?" Mom was the one who told me how he had badly wanted to join the Navy, fight the Japs and see the world.

When he returned from posting the can again, he stood behind me to reach over my shoulders, load and close the gun, finally taking his hands away. "Go ahead. Try it."

The gun was even heavier, holding that barrel up in the direction of the tin can. Looking back, I know I didn't tuck it in snugly. That's why the blast bruised my shoulder.

The tin can was unimpressed. So was my dad. That much I could see.

When I whimpered that the gun scared me, his voice spoke indifference but his eyes showed disappointment. The lines from his nose to the corners of his mouth became deep. He seemed to be looking at the distant tree line when he murmured, "What kind of footprint am I leaving?" I know now it was a rhetorical question, but at the time I looked down in the soft mud and thought that two of mine could fit inside his footprint.

With the clarity of hindsight, I now can look back and align the puzzle pieces, see why he was so concerned with his footprint, with his legacy. The first piece happened when he was working on the Houston shipping docks as a stevedore… which was as close as he got to his ambition to fight in the war. When WWII ended, inertia kept him on the waterfront for years. He was nearly forty when an accident jarred him out of that rut. A loaded cargo net being lifted onto a ship broke its hoist and fell on Dad's best friend, killing him. Dad was standing three feet away.

He took it as a portent, Mom told me, that long life isn't guaranteed. Afterward my father changed everything—where he lived and what he did and even his marital status. He switched to selling life insurance and moved to the East Coast, to Charlotte.

Of course, at eleven, I wouldn't have understood what standing so close to death can do to a man.

He gravely put the shotgun back into the car trunk. I

climbed onto my seat with some relief. Neither of us said anything. My mouth quivered too much to speak and my saliva tasted coppery. When he didn't start the car right away, I looked up and caught him staring at himself in the rearview mirror.

When we got home, I didn't ask about the gun.

Alone with Mom that evening, I relayed my fear of the gift. She stroked my head and said, "Maybe your father is rushing things a bit."

I wouldn't see that shotgun again for eleven months, when it would be fired one final time.

Mom was a secretary in the Charlotte home office when Dad showed up there, starting his life over. Mom was twenty-eight and divorced. Her first husband had been a bastard about alimony, and she had been struggling to make ends meet. Dad was twenty-two years older than she—*twenty-two years*—so I'm guessing he must've seemed like either a savior or a father-figure.

That he got a late start with fathering a son goes without saying. I'm his namesake. He insisted I be called John Junior. After I was born, the three of us moved to a small town in Colleton County, South Carolina where Dad bought an old, two-story house in a residential neighborhood. It was shaded by water oaks and pecan trees.

Walking toward downtown, we were one block from the county library. In the opposite direction, two blocks to my elementary school. The Baptist Church where my scout troop met was around the corner.

The house was a fixer-upper, but there was nothing Dad couldn't fix or build. He converted the downstairs bedroom into an office. Out in the front yard on a white 4x4 post, he hung his shingle—John Darden, Independent Insurance Agent.

His work took him all over the state—soliciting clients and collecting monthly premiums—and I know the driving tired him. It's the only complaining he did, talking about the road trips.

Early on he got busy shaping me. One of the first lessons

was about how to meet adults. "John Junior," he said, "you get only one chance to make a first impression." He taught me how to shake hands firmly, look a person in the eye and say, "Hi, I'm John Darden's son."

Back then he didn't have much use for self pity. One time I complained about not being a very good ball player. He looked at me with those eyes—the glass one as compassionate as the butt end of a baseball bat—and said, "You got two good eyes. You can do anything you set your mind to."

He was full of sententious clichés like that. Other favorites were "A man's ambition should exceed his grasp" and "You can't make a sale if you don't make a friend first." When he was in a darker mood, I'd hear "There are no guarantees in life."

Mom was as slender as a deer and had farm girl obedience and simplicity. Family album photos of her back then suggest a little girl innocence, like she ought not to be facing life alone. She had a deviated septum that whistled faintly when she breathed with her mouth closed. Her nails were short and cut straight across. She rarely wore makeup and was ill-adept at applying it. Her brown hair was shoulder-length and lank. Her clothes were monochromatic and her only jewelry, a wedding ring and a locket with opposing photos of her son and her husband.

She became Dad's secretary. When he was visiting out-of-town clients, she was fairly homebound as we owned only the car Dad used for those road trips. So she kept things from falling apart—both with the business and the house. But when Dad returned home, he took charge again.

In that town he was a big fish in a small pond. With a hard handshake and a big voice as solid as the color of his Navy blue ties, he was the take-charge type. He kept a copy of Norman Vincent Peale's book *The Power of Positive Thinking* on his bedside table. The community's leading civic group of businessmen elected him president, twice. Winning that second term was so unusual, it made the headlines of the town's weekly paper. Dad got a copy framed and mounted it on the office wall.

Mom joined the women's auxiliary to Dad's club, but she was more of a follower. Her favorite club function was the annual Christmas party when she'd dust off and polish her dancing shoes. Their song was "Moonlight Bay." Before going out, Dad would put the LP on the record player and they'd practice waltzing in the living room.

Dad's club meetings were held in a barbeque restaurant where the walls were festooned with black-and-white photos of local boys who'd been sports heroes, of high school teams that had won championships, and of famous men who'd dined there and left PR photos—framed legacies so looming that patrons must've felt intimidated.

Sometimes the club officers met in our home. Dad stood half-a-head taller than any of them and I saw deference in the way they regarded him. During any discussion, they'd stop talking and turn to him if he as much as cleared his throat.

If he drank in those early years, I didn't know it. But he'd go through black coffee like gas through a funnel, and he smoked a pack a day—Pall Malls. I guess he needed all that caffeine and nicotine to fuel his work ethic. Outside of FDR, he was the only man I ever knew of to use a cigarette holder—a short, black affair. It gave him an air of authority. But often when he'd change the filter in the holder, he made sure I saw it, saw how tar had turned the filter black. "Don't ever let me catch you smoking," he'd say, nodding his forehead toward the used filter in his hand. I worried about all that blackness inside of him.

For the men's club he instituted a monthly newsletter which he wrote, printed and mailed out. Mom tried to tease him about his love affair with a byline, especially since he was the publisher. He stiffened and said that "the printed word is the closest a man can come to immortality." To that end, he was never without a pen and carried three-by-five cards in his shirt pocket for jotting down ideas. He had pointed, Etch-a-Sketch handwriting but could type thirty words a minute. His typewriter was an Underwood and, at night abed, I'd hear the clacking downstairs, him punching the keys with his forefingers.

To earn my allowance and "learn the value of a dollar,"

I had an office job. Daily I'd empty the office waste baskets and ash trays, take the mail out to the box and put the flag up. Sometimes there were large envelopes to *The Saturday Evening Post, Reader's Digest* or *Boy's Life*—the three magazines we subscribed to. Once I asked about those envelopes and Dad was dismissive. "If anything comes of them, you and your mother will be the first to know." Which closed the subject.

Getting back to the shotgun, it was not the only way he rushed my growing up. Because my birthday was in January, I could've started first grade either younger than everyone else or (waiting a year) older. Over Mom's muted objections, Dad insisted on younger. It was he who accidentally gave me my first bloody lip, trying to teach me to defend myself against bigger classmates who called me a momma's boy.

Because I was such a late bloomer, these father-son rites of passage typically scared me. I didn't realize what his big hurry was. Even with the Boy Scouts. He asked the scoutmaster at our church to accept me six months before I turned eleven (the official eligibility age). I got my tenderfoot badge fairly quickly because Dad-the-former-stevedore knew all the knots and taught me. "We'll make an Eagle Scout out of you in no time," he told me.

That summer after I turned eleven, things began to sour for our family when his bad eye became infected, worsening his headaches. He was in the hospital in Charleston for all of June, July and August. When he finally came home, he wasn't robust any more. He had to quit his business, but he refused to take down his insurance shingle. Months later Mom explained it had been his last remaining "byline." He dropped out of the civic club. Eventually he stopped leaving the house and stayed in his pajamas and bathrobe all the time.

The insurance office was converted back into a bedroom, and he began sleeping downstairs, apart from Mom. Around Thanksgiving I remember seeing Mom's dancing shoes in a box for Goodwill.

About that time I outgrew getting a weekly allowance, the insurance office being defunct. "If you want spending money," Dad told me, "I suggest you get a job." So I got a bicycle news-

paper route, with no idea I was on the ground floor of my life's career.

Although she didn't get paid as Dad's secretary, Mom was, like me, out of a job. The same day that she would apply for work with the local newspaper, an agent of the Social Security Administration—a Mr. Reynolds—was to visit and verify my father's full disability claim.

Early on the day of that visit, after Mom had left the house to walk uptown for her interview, Dad told me, "I'm going to stay in bed when this Mr. Reynolds is here. I'll be asking you to do things that maybe I'd usually do myself. You just do as you're told."

A misty rain fell all of that day. I waited on the front porch rocker, wearing a coat against the December chill and studying the twelve points to the Scout law from the *Handbook for Boy Scouts*.

I had memorized as far as the seventh law—obedient—when I saw the black Studebaker. It was coming slowly down the street and paused in front of our house, then parked at the curb, its wipers slapping back-and-forth. A green wreath with a bright red bow was attached to the car's conical grill. I closed my handbook on my index finger to hold my place.

Mr. Reynolds had a kindly, Captain Kangaroo face. His hair was thick and white, and his eyebrows reminded me of a great horned owl. His upper lip was hidden by a walrus mustache. He wore bifocals, a red sweater vest, white shirt and scuffed wingtips. He smiled at me the way you'd smile at a lost child. He smelled of peppermint. When I asked if he were Mr. Reynolds, he touched his index finger to his nose and then pointed at me.

When he spoke, he strung the words together quickly. I asked if he would follow me and his "Lead-on-MacDuff" slurred into a single, four-syllable word.

So I led him inside and through the house to Dad's bedroom in the back. As we walked, he touched a sideboard and said, tonelessly, one word—"veneer."

I knocked on my dad's bedroom door and his voice said, "Come."

In we went. Walking into his room was like walking into his mind. Even mid-morning, despite the bedside lamp, the room was murky because the windows were shuttered and curtained. I think Dad had a bit of theater in him. He was indeed in bed, somehow appearing more wan and wasted than I'd seen him. Mr. Reynolds introduced himself, took the beige, wing-back chair near the door, and I was excused from the stage. I went back to the living room to be within earshot and resumed studying my Scout handbook. Dad called me once, to fetch two mugs of the coffee he'd made earlier, before the curtain went up.

That charade of being bedridden was the first of only two times I would see dishonesty in my father.

I was deciphering diagrams of knot tying when Mr. Reynolds closed the bedroom door. Their conversation became indistinct murmuring until later I heard the volume of my father's voice ratchet up. It stayed elevated and I understood snatches—"forty years of paying taxes" and "damn government" and "I'll be damned."

When the door opened and Mr. Reynolds emerged, he passed wordlessly down the hall and out the front door, avoiding eye contact with me. His head wagged faintly and his expression was stone.

That evening Mom's face glowed as she stood at the stove, frying chicken breasts for supper, but she wouldn't tell me what had happened with her job interview. "Let's first hear what happened with your father," she said, "and save my news for dessert."

When Dad came to the supper table, he smelled of liquor. I didn't know there was alcohol in the house. He'd taken his glass eye out and was wearing the black "pirate" patch, something he did when the glass eye irritated the socket. His forehead was prominent and the good eye was recessed deeply beneath it.

"I'm not hungry," he growled and, with his thumb, shoved his plate away. That action and the reek of alcohol silenced us. With an elbow on the table, Dad leaned his head onto his fingertips and massaged the temple over the bad eye. Mom's denim blue eyes flickered between her plate and me. She sat

hunched with her hands in her lap. In the silence I could hear the whistle from her nose.

Finally Mom said in a tentative voice, "I have some good news. I start tomorrow selling ads for the newspaper." She looked at me with such wonderment, as if the very idea of someone wanting to hire her was a shock on par with a woman President. Then she bit her bottom lip, slid a hand across the table and touched my Dad's forearm. "But I'll need to use the car, John, if that's all right."

Surprisingly, this good news seemed to upset my dad. He put both fists on the table, paused, then pushed his chair back, stood and left the room. We heard his bedroom door close with authority. After a moment of sitting frozen in our seats, Mom put her napkin on the table, got up and followed Dad, quietly opening and closing the door behind her. I saw that her napkin had been twisted like a rope.

In the time it took me to clear the table and put away the perishables, she returned. No eye contact. As she washed and I dried dishes, I kept looking at her, expecting her to say something. I could see the line along her jaw where the job-interview makeup ended. She concentrated on the dishwashing with movements so deliberate, as if each were considered: *sponge the plate, rinse the plate, hand it to my son.*

Then she stopped, her hands in the dishwater, her head tilted down the way she did when she was thinking. In a low voice she finally said, "Your father's not feeling well. I think there must've been a problem with the disability claim." Then she mouthed the following as if tasting each word before releasing it—"Your father is a very proud man."

Close to my bedtime, Dad, by then fully drunk, returned to the kitchen, this time wearing neither his patch nor the glass eye. The empty socket looked wet, red and angry. "Looh at me!" he said. It was hard to understand him because he'd also taken out his teeth, causing his lips to fall back into his mouth. "Looh at me and tell me you lub me…that you can lub me the way I really am."

As he waited for my allegiance, he glared at me with that adamantine good eye, leaning his back against the stove, strok-

ing his dewlap with his thumb and index finger. Liver spots showed on the backs of his hands. It was like being stared down by a turtle.

"I still love you, Dad," I said, but I was scared and unconvincing. I'd never before seen him in such a pitiful state of undress. He seemed smaller, somehow, as if no longer inflated by life.

He massaged his waddles, considering my answer. His jaw stuck out and his mouth receded. But that good eye suddenly shimmered wetly. Then he looked away to disengage and returned to his bedroom, again slamming the door.

Looking back, I imagine he had an epiphany during that exchange. Maybe he realized he had never seen me as someone to love and be loved by. I had been a byline, a namesake to sustain him into the future. It might've been from that too-late epiphany that his self pity sprang.

I was going upstairs to bed when I saw Mom try to open his door to talk with him again, but she couldn't. It was locked. She retired upstairs not long after I did.

As I lay in bed, I heard the furnace click on and off. A windblown pecan bounced on the roof. Shortly after midnight he began playing "Moonlight Bay" loudly enough for Mom to hear.

Still later I was asleep when the shotgun blast bolted me upright in bed. Almost immediately Mom was in my room, clutching her nightgown at her neck. "Come with me," she said, held my hand and led me in my pajamas downstairs.

Her first knock was small and shy. He didn't answer. She tried the knob but it was still locked. She ran splayed fingers through her hair, called his name softly and knocked again, more loudly. Her face became pleated with fear. She kept calling him through the door, beating on the wood, her inflection quickly rising with anxiety. Finally she quieted and told him in a trembling voice, "I'm going to call the police because I can't tell what's going on. If that's not okay, please *say* something." The word *say* rose up a note. Not a sound came from the room.

We went to the kitchen and she called the police, gripping

the handset tightly.

Some minutes dragged by before a young cop with a belly that hid his black leather belt rang our doorbell. The metal nametag over his right breast pocket read Anderson. He came in.

As Mom explained what was going on, he gnawed the inside of his cheek and cocked his head to the side the way a dog does when it's listening. He nodded a few times too many. He was uncomfortable. The three of us walked to the back of the house to Dad's bedroom.

When the cop knocked on Dad's door, it was the loudest I'd ever heard a knock. He stood to one side of the door and motioned us aside, too. "Darden," he said, "John Darden! I'm Officer Anderson of the city police department. If you can hear me, say something or open the door."

When he, too, got no answer, he turned to Mom and asked if there was another door into the bedroom. "We never use it, but there is a door from the back porch. We'll have to go through the kitchen," she said.

His bull neck creased as he looked in the direction she pointed. "Show me," he said, and they went back down the hall, rounded the stairs and headed to the kitchen.

Ignored, I stayed right there in front of the bedroom door, my hands tucked into my armpits. Their footsteps had died, when I heard a faint creak. I stopped breathing and stared at the door knob.

It was my father's bed springs. He was alive.

The faint creak sounded like he was easing himself out of bed. I listened as his feet whispered across the wood floor. He slipped over to the other door and I heard the pitiful click of the deadbolt as he locked Mom and the policeman out.

Stunned, relieved and offended, I absorbed the deceit and silently stiffened. With the distance of twenty years and my mind now unmuddied by emotion, I can conjure the headline: Father Fakes Suicide, Strains Family Affections.

The cop and Mom returned shortly, having tried the other door without success. I told the officer what I'd heard. He put his hand to his lip and began plucking it. He grimaced as he

came to a decision.

This time when he banged that right fist on the door, there was steel in his voice as he said, "Open this door or I'll force it open."

Silence followed. We strained to listen and finally heard the bedsprings creak and Dad coming. The officer's right hand came to rest atop his hip revolver.

Dad opened the door. The hall light fell over his face and pushed back the darkness of his room. I could see the shotgun leaning against the wing-back chair and, on the wall, the yellowing newspaper he'd had framed. We could smell the gun powder and the liquor. His teeth and eye were back in place, but he had this pissed-off look for my benefit, a look hard enough to hurt. I knew he must've heard me telling on him, and I felt the weight of his stare. "What's all this banging about?" he said, his voice gravelly from a lifetime of smoking.

"You all right?" the cop asked.

"I don't see where my health is any of your business."

"Well, your wife and I have been trying to get you to open the door. She wasn't sure you weren't hurt or something. She heard a gunshot."

With his good eye Dad glanced at Mom and shook his head left once, right once. "There's no emergency here, officer."

Mom was looking at Dad like he'd just slapped her. Her face scalded with humiliation.

Then his eye shifted back to Officer Anderson. "I emptied the lead shot out before I fired the shell."

With his left hand, the officer pinched his chin, nodding because he was expected to. His patent leather gun belt creaked under the weight of that right hand, resting atop his revolver.

My mom's hands were clinching and unclinching against the sides of her night robe. Small gasping noises were coming from her—not quite crying but not breathing either. She'd closed her eyes.

The policeman turned to Mom. "Anything else, ma'am?" She vaguely shook her head no. Her eyes were still closed.

Then he glanced at his watch. I think it showed three something. He scratched his chest before finally saying he'd leave

but not without the shotgun. My father turned to fetch it, but the cop barked no, that he'd prefer to get it himself.

My father mumbled, "Suit yourself" and stepped aside with a be-my-guest wave of his arm.

The officer reached in, turned on the wall switch for the overhead light, went in and came out holding the shotgun vertically, the way Dad had months earlier out at the cemetery.

That was all. The cop left with the shotgun. Dad retreated into the darkness of his room, shutting his door. Mom and I returned upstairs. I listened to the rain against my windows a long, long time before I closed my eyes. Distant thunder rumbled continuously, like a printing press on the horizon.

It was strange that I could see that whole scene through Mom's eyes but not my father's. That's why I felt sure she didn't sleep the rest of that night. That she, too, had an epiphany—that no one can hurt you, really hurt you, except those you love.

The ripples of consequences were immediate. After that night's performance, my father and mother stopped talking to or even seeing each other. He emerged each morning after she left for the newspaper office. And disappeared back into his room before she came home about five.

I got home from school mid-afternoon, but he didn't speak to me either. I could never tell where in the house he might be because he moved about so quietly in that old-man shuffle, leading with his knees.

A month later an aneurism in his brain burst and killed him. I think Dad somehow had known something was wrong. I wasn't quite twelve.

Mom had to put the house on the market. I remember helping her clean out his bedroom. To judge by her expression, the funeral had not upset her. I decided then that grief doesn't necessarily mark a person, that sometimes people struggling with remarkable problems appear unremarkable.

She was kneeling at the side of his bed, reaching under for empty bourbon bottles and placing them into a cardboard box. I was at his chest of drawers, extracting and boxing socks and underwear and thinking about the man we'd just buried.

The moment seemed pregnant with insight and I said, "You know, Mom, I don't think Dad ever hugged me or told me he loved me."

She looked over at me, her expression both rueful and wry—faint, parenthetical lines on either side of her mouth. "Honey," she said, "your father loved you. Please know that."

I muttered something about his having an odd way of showing it.

"He just didn't have it in him to show it. You know they say that's the longest eighteen inches in the world, from a man's heart to his head."

My expression must've showed my doubt, so she added, "Life dealt your father some hard knocks. I think he wanted to prepare you for the same thing…to make you tough." She paused then said, "I tried to offset that."

A poignant pause followed. I couldn't articulate why, but my eyes were welling up. I walked over to her, bent down and hugged her. She stroked my head, then turned away to pat her eyes with a tissue from her apron pocket. I stood and went wordlessly back to work.

Parallel lines of sunlight were leaking through the shutters, so I opened them. A bright rectangle fell across Dad's desk. To the left of the Underwood, in packs held together by rubber bands, were ragged, inch-thick stacks of three-by-five cards. On the opposite side of the machine were typed short stories in all stages of drafting. I sat in Dad's chair, picked up a stapled packet of three or four pages and read the first paragraph. *The young Texan was busting a mustang in a corral when a band of bank robbers rode by, carrying off a beautiful, screaming woman. The Texan opened the corral gate, strapped on his six-shooter and took off after them. Although he had only one eye, he was a deadly shot.*

I put it down and picked up another. *During the height of the Kamikaze attack, the young sailor from Texas, blinded in one eye by shrapnel, lay on the battleship's deck next to his machine gun, his only thought, "there are no guarantees in life." Barely conscious, he suddenly heard the cry of the ship's captain, calling for help.*

"Dad wrote stories?" I asked. "Is this the stuff he was mailing off to those magazines?"

Again the rueful look. "Oh yes," she said. "He wanted so badly to be remembered for something, to leave a legacy." She stood and walked over to my chair, getting down on one knee next to me, kneeling the way a coach does before giving his player a crucial tip—

"Of all people, you should know that."

Michael C. Peterson

On the Torn Engraving of a Boy Jumping to the Thames

As to its precise fantasia, so too the narrative inflamed.
Rend it, the copper song goes on forever. As for the

solemn figures of temperance and grace, rend you
to halves. Where is your family, your vocation. You

are orphaned. Plummet and wonder: are you flight or
are you invisibility, are you the ocean or the river

or are you estuaric, recursive, falling then falling
more. Watch how you are moving, the world too, halved

between the static and fluid, halved as in *semi. Semi-*
there and *semi*-gone-again, the song forever goes. Heroics

are also halves: knowledge and fortune, impatience and
opportunity, virtuous ego: splashing separately down into

predictably torn between the giving of oneself or
to oneself. For life, for life. One half the torso hovering

one half the flailing legs. For union, more union, un-
unified field through which you quietly leapt, piously

bound to air, on action beyond disapproval, erring.

K. A. Hays

Imagine Shelley Drowning

It slaps and licks, sure. It clasps and throws,
but it doesn't watch us and it doesn't hear.

Byron swam across this sea
and Shelley drowned in it. Silly romantics,
asking nature to breathe through them—

I am careful. I know how nature breathes.
I stay in the mountains above the sea.
A wild boar rustles in the shrubs.
I hold a long, sharp stone

as a priest holds a chalice—as carefully,
and for the same terrified reason.

At some point, all love of the earth must go;
the earth will not reciprocate.
But let it not go soon.

Imagine Shelley swimming, thrilled
by the current. Imagine his back buoyed up
with the foam, a false brother who sings
and whispers with white lips—

imagine the joy that falls to understanding.
The sea will not ease him back.

Sharon Dolin

Lament of Shovel and Bell (noon)

Closest to sun-strength
at what well do I waver
upon which sky-web do I catch
with which still bell and with what
lavender toll do I shovel
my green self out
of this daily dolor?
At this noon glower I am sticky with despond
the ensign of my faith a fallen
rainbow caught in the roiling
teal of doubt.
I am praying my brokenness to You
but this searing bright has blinded me of Your face.
See, my eyes are scorched with squinting up
my branches have done flowering
but this toil however twig-
blunted I offer up amidst cloud thunder.

O do not abandon me to my enemies now.

Roger Reeves

On Visiting Opelousas, LA, the site of a massacre of 200 former slaves

Grief, according to Dr. Johnson, *is a species of idleness.*
Then let me be idle—idle as one thousand orphaned oars,
vessel-less and beached in this cornfield, idle as a field
of black women underneath the hoof and boot of a swarm
of stallions robed in wedding gowns—not a bride among
them. I will mourn for what fails here—the deer, there,
dead in the ravine—the bees latching combs of honey
to its larynx, lungs, and breast. This is the idol of idle—
the bees harvesting honey in the good and rotting meat,
the drone's body, still in the last pitches of pleasure, taken
from the queen's chamber and cast from the hive by the workers—
the deer unaware of the work being done in its still body.
Sometimes, we entertain angels and violent strangers unawares.
You should know: "nothing you love will be spared." Mercy.
Yes, mercy is at the end of grief. It is somewhere between
the deer's body collapsing on the hive and one thousand bees
aching to be stung in hopes of not being the last one to die.
Isn't that what we pray for: misery anywhere but here?

Sally Ball

Plate Tectonics

A suture zone is where a giant
mountain range emerges:
Rockies, Alps, Sierra Madres,
the great plates ground together
and held fast. *Cheyenne belt suture zone,*
the closest one to where I live,
closest of those scars.

Ice, joy. Proximity to heaven,
the heaven of fixed stars—
Let us turn our eyes
to the beautiful eyes.
I am a gemini: those twins.
Fusion, concatenation—atomically
aortically—the magma and the clouds,
the flesh and also psyche,
I'm not aiming to contain,
                but go there
        everywhere,
                be that much alive.

Dana Curtis

Dagmar as Death (portrait by Lilly Obscure)

The sickle curving over her head, and light
bouncing, ricocheting from it to the lens and
she's trying not to cry, not because
this won't be a great portrait—so appropriate,
in black, in a wheat field, the clouds turning
green overhead—she feels like
she really could be Death, could be
a blindfold, a last request. Except
she can feel it like a blossom
in her throat, feels out of
control as if it were a country
whose border she can never really cross:
always trapped at Customs, forced
to declare her hands, her eyes, even
this pervasive sense of betrayal
baked into a loaf she will break
into tiny pieces and eat over
years. And good: she will be
the sad, broken Death
lost in the crops and
she turns toward the sky—
this is what she remembers.

Richard Foerster

Indifference

If to be godlike were to exist wholly beyond
certain kinds of guilt—moral hangnails, pangs
blown out of all proportion to their size,
no matter the cause—the latent sociopath in me
smirks at the merest spark of such Promethean fire.

I could care less goes the flubbed cliché,
but who would want to attain a degree
more absolute than zero or delve more deeply
than the depths Doré imagined when he engraved
Satan in ice? Of course, indifference is weightier

than a feather of ignorance on the heart's scale
or the airy-headed oblivion of the self-absorbed.
But if it's a callus that time accretes, hardened
like dust atop a half-forgotten city, what blistering
does it guard against, what abrasions of affection?

Yesterday a homeless woman, who seems always
to be threading rush-hour traffic stopped
on Biscayne and 163rd, thrust her cup
at the driver just ahead in my lane, and I checked
the door locks were shut, the windows tight

and prayed hard for the light to turn, despite
my ashtray's brimming heap of useless change.
I stared dead on, beyond her need, with a composure
so reptilian as to appear lifeless . . . but aware.
I'd like to think I wore a card sharp's blank-

faced calculation, played to advantage—a means
of survival, part of the game. That might be easy
I thought today, even as I cracked my window just
enough to drop a meager clattering in her plastic cup,
then continued to wait for the light as I idly watched

her nimble routine recede in the side-view, and for a moment
I pictured my mother on her hundredth birthday, dancing
before those who'd parked their wheelchairs in the assembly hall
or made their way on walkers to eat some cake, while I
sat among them. And waited. And did not care to dance.

David Wagoner

In the Nursing Home

After those bad, old times,
now, when no one
is telling you what to do
to earn your keep and before
even more orderly keepers
have begun to tell you
(in each ear
and on pieces of paper
delivered by bare hands
or pinned to the walls
or inside the only door)
what today will have to do
with tomorrow—after all
those familiar surprises,
when you find yourself prepared
at last for opening night
in darkness at the edge
of a curtain where stage-light
has brightened a place for you,
where spectators are waiting
through a spirited overture
and a solemn introduction
for you to justify
your appearance and their attention,
you'll show all of them now
or never why they're here
watching and listening.

Kat Gonso

To Drown in All This World

Nana's always wanted to eat lobster and one day Uncle Ham packs us up in the truck—me, Cousin Loretta and Nana—and we drive all the way to rusty ol' Larry's Lucky Lobster Shack. It's so close to the shore that the waves jump up and lick it. I look out into the sea for a whale, but I don't see none. Nana breaks into her funny, no-tooth grin and says her lobster won't be so lucky and we all chuckle.

The restaurant is empty. There are no ketchup bottles on the tables and I say so. Loretta whistles and calls it fancy though I never thought checkered tablecloths meant fancy. Uncle Ham slips into the booth next to me and suddenly I'm all closed-in, like a firefly in a mason jar. A girl called Judy comes by the table to wipe off the clamshell crumbs and butter bits. While Judy pours our colas, Nana gets on up and hobbles over to the lobster tank and I follow because someone's got to keep an eye. Loretta's cooing in the busboy's ear and Uncle Ham eyes up the menu. I don't care about any of that; I eat whatever you put in front of me. Daddy used to say I'd eat worms if you just put some ketchup on 'em. Nana doesn't like ketchup, says it's the devil's blood. I haven't had any in years, not since Ma died and Daddy left and I went to live with Nana and now there's laundry up to my ears because Uncle Ham brings his over every Sunday. I even have to wash Loretta's tiny white panties. She's his daughter from the second marriage. Uncle Ham's underwear is all stretched and worn.

Nana presses her forehead to the lobster tank. Brown and dirty, those lobsters are. "Too many legs," I say. "I won't eat that." In response, Nana smacks her lips. She don't care which lobster, so we pick one out together. Nana calls him a real son-of-a-bitch.

Uncle Ham ties the plastic bib around Nana's neck and the lobster comes out with corn and melted butter and a roll. I'm pretty sure it's not the lobster from the tank, but don't say so. Ma begins grace. I hide my crossed fingers under my skirt so no one

knows I'm faking my Amens. Sliding fried clams down his throat, Uncle Ham lets out a low grunt of pleasure. Loretta picks at a roll. Nana grins and bobs, but doesn't eat, just stares on down at her lobster. I don't say anything because no one listens anyway, but finally Loretta asks Nana why she won't eat. Nana says she just wants to look. Uncle Ham finishes his fried clams and starts digging into Nana's lobster, cracking open that pretty red shell and diving in uninvited. Tightlipped, she watches. Uncle Ham tells us that lobsters scream as they're dunked into the boiling pot. Sometimes I look around and feel like I'm in a pot of water that's just about to boil—like I'm gonna up and drown in all this world, and it's all I can do not to scream. Uncle Ham sucks the butter off the lobster real good and smiles, patting me on the thigh, getting my best blue skirt all greased-up. I know that stain won't ever come out.

I ask Nana if I can finish her roll and she says thank you for asking sweetie. Uncle Ham rips off the next claw and I can see that Nana is on the verge of sayin' something important, somethin' I might want to hear. That hot butter smells real nice and suddenly I want some and I want Nana to get hers too.

"Uncle Ham," I say, real loud so that everyone looks. "Why're you eating Nana's food?"

Rolling his eyes, he rips off the next claw. "What's it matter to you?"

"It's just, she was real looking forward to that lobster and you're takin' it all. And that's not real nice."

Uncle Ham lets out a belly laugh. Little bits of lobster meat and corn are stuck in his teeth. "You don't know the meaning of nice," he says. Loretta looks at me with her big blues and mouths *stop*. So I do because you never know when Uncle Ham is gonna blow up. Daddy used to say that he was a firecracker without a fuse.

When Uncle Ham isn't looking, I nab a thin strip of lobster, wrap it up in a napkin, and keep it hidden in my fist the whole ride home. Later that night, I give it to Nana. A present, I say and her face lights up like it's the Fourth of July. And although there ain't any warm butter, I can tell that lobster tastes real nice.

Yona McDonough

Capricorn Rising

It was sometime in January that the goats first appeared. There were about twenty of them, mostly black, though some were marked with small patches of white. Their fur was coarse and their eyes were as dark as their coats; they moved quickly and with great delicacy, as if on tiptoe.

Libby was the first to see them and she told no one, not even Stanley. Her status here on the kibbutz was a fragile commodity at best; she was aware of the slight derision with which the older, more experienced kibbutzniks viewed her, the newest *Anglo Saxit* from America. She had shown up at that first day wearing Chinese style cropped pants and a matching top of figured, apple-green satin and black ballet flats. Her lipstick was crimson, to match her nails. Why she chose this outfit, purchased in New York during her brief stay before the boat embarked for Israel, was unclear even to Libby. She just knew that she wanted to appear in something that no one back home in Detroit would have thought to own or wear.

The kibbutzniks who watched her descend from the wagon with Stanley just stood and stared at this festive, if highly inappropriate ensemble. Libby could feel, through the thin soles of her flats, the hard packed earth, the stones that littered its surface. By the time she reached Stanley's tent, her feet and calves were covered in a powdery, tan-colored dust.

"Tomorrow we'll see about getting you some work clothes," Stanley had said, slipping the shoes off and wiping her feet with a grimy looking handkerchief. "And boots. You'll need them." Libby just nodded, happy to be here, happy to see him again.

She had met Stanley at a Zionist youth group meeting in Detroit. He was four years older, in college already, and the smartest, most charismatic boy in the room. Her mother didn't like him. "That one has his head in the clouds," was Sonya's comment. "He'll trip over his own two feet one day because

he's always looking up." Libby didn't care, and when he dropped out of school to go live in Israel, she was burning to follow him. He wrote to her, covering page after page of thin, onionskin sheets with his precise, dense printing. "What we're doing here is a miracle," he wrote. "You have to come and be part of it." And after a protracted battle with her parents, during which her mother twice threatened to put her head in the oven, that's just what Libby did.

So for the goats to have revealed themselves to Libby first would have been unseemly, presumptuous even, in the kibbutz hierarchy. Libby knew this and was silent. Soon enough, everyone else had seen them too and speculation about their origins consumed the small community.

"They might have belonged to an Arab," said Yonkeleh, a young, balding man whose remaining reddish hair stood out from the sides of his head, like ear muffs. Yonkeleh's uncle was the Mayor of Beer Sheva and that gave him a certain stature in the community. "Maybe they escaped. Or were abandoned. They could be diseased you know." He was thinking of the tubercular cows, scrawny and wall-eyed, that had to be sold off some months earlier, the barns thoroughly scoured and disinfected before another lot could be brought in.

"They're not diseased," said Nissim, a Syrian Jew who had shared Stanley's tent before Libby came. Nissim had walked from Damascus to Israel, wearing the outgrown herringbone suit from his bar mitzvah, hair slicked down by pomade from a jar that had been bought before the Germans invaded Poland. All his papers and photographs of his family had been burned by the British; he was told it was too dangerous for them to exist. He had been unable to contact his parents for several months. Finally, he learned that they had been killed along with his sisters and his grandmother; their house blown up by neighbors incensed at the family for harboring a Zionist. If Yonkeleh had a sense of privilege conferred by birth and connections, Nissim's was the kind conferred by endurance.

"Are you sure?" Yonkeleh didn't like being challenged.

"If you don't believe me, you can look yourself." Nissim walked away, leaving Yonkeleh standing there with his thumbs

in his belt, looking foolish.

The goats certainly hadn't seemed diseased to Libby that first morning when she encountered them, trotting together in a pack on the dusty, rock-strewn road that led to the *maxan,* or laundry. At first, Libby thought they were a trick of her mind or her eyes: the sky was not fully light yet and she was tired. As she hurried to work, she saw a what seemed to be a dark cloud up ahead. But the cloud was not in the sky, it had instead settled in the road. And it seemed to be moving at a very rapid pace.

Libby slowed as the cloud changed shape once, twice and then turned out not to be a cloud at all, but the herd of goats. Coarse black fur, black eyes. Dainty, mincing hooves. Libby let them all pass before she resumed her walk to the laundry. She would be late now, and Vered, the woman who dropped off the first batches of clothing, would be annoyed. "The *Anglo Saxit* likes to sleep," she would say in her thickly accented, sing-song English. At least she spoke English. So many of them didn't. Nor did they want to. English was a distraction, an impediment. They were here to build a nation, not have a tea party. What did they care about English? Hebrew, that coarse, starkly beautiful language resurrected from the dead was good enough for them; after all, so many of them felt resurrected from the dead too.

The laundry, where Libby had been working for the past month, was the longest she had been anywhere. Before that, her jobs had shifted almost daily. She had picked the wizened green olives from one of the few trees in a deserted Arab orchard that bordered the northern edge of the kibbutz. Where was that Arab family now? Libby knew enough not to ask the question aloud. Instead, she concentrated on the work: tying grape vines to stakes for ten hours at a time, watering rows of newly planted trees out of a fat hose that dangled from a big barrel of water mounted on wheels. She mended socks she was given in the clothing store room, great mounds of them, some without heels, others without toes; it was her task to make them whole again.

"You're a *pkak*," Stanley explained.

"A what?"

"*Pkak*. A cork. You fill in whereever they need you."

"I see," Libby said but she really she didn't. The constant moving around left her disoriented and confused. It seemed like she wasn't good at anything, was in everyone's way wherever she went. The grape vines she staked never seemed to hang properly; after an entire day with the olives she had barely a bucket's worth, a paltry showing, for her effort. Sewing was the worst of all, her stitches hard and granular, guaranteed to raise blisters on the foot of the unfortunate wearer. She was so rattled by her lack of skill that she kept pricking herself with the needle and by the end of the morning, all the socks she had handled were dotted with blood. It was like high school all over again, but worse, because she had traveled so far, and left behind so much to get here.

She thought of her mother, weeping back in her spotless kitchen on Burlingame Avenue, her father, downing a glass of *schnapps*. She was their only child, or the only one who lived; her leaving was like a death to them. And there had been so many deaths before; Libby was painfully familiar with the litany. There was the brother who died of pneumonia at the age of eight months, the one who died of rheumatic fever at four. Then there were the stillborns, a boy, and a girl, barely a year apart. So of course her parents worried all the time, her mother believing that each breath Libby took was her own personal triumph over the dark angel that seemed to hover above their heads. But the weight of that collected sorrow was too much for Libby and when Stanley offered her a way out, she leapt. Now that she had been here for a few months though, she was still waiting for the meaning of her daring move to crystallize. There had to be some reason for her to be here, something that would redeem the botched socks, the drooping vines. If only she could stay in one place where she might actually learn something, she might find out what it was.

But the laundry was at least an improvement. For the past month, she got up at five, put on a kibbutz-issued brown jacket made of coarse, itchy wool, and emerged into the still, black sky, which seemed to press, with a palpable weight, right down

onto the hard desert floor. She walked quickly along the road to the crude building with its corrugated tin roof and once there, lit the water heater as she'd been taught. At home, her fearful mother could barely stand to let her light a match; what she would have done if she'd watched Libby lighting the huge, archaic heater, flame rising in a sudden, brilliant spire, was not to be imagined.

The washing machine had a rounded front that opened like a roll-topped desk. First the screws had to be unloosed and even then, it didn't slide easily. No matter how hard Libby grunted and pushed to grind it open each morning, the next day would find it sealed tight again, as if welded shut by the sharp night air. She supposed it could be oiled; that might have helped. But she didn't want to ask, didn't want to seem like she was weak or complaining, the *Anglo Saxit* who needed special attention and favors.

After the clothes were loaded into the machine, Libby sprinkled them—sparsely, because it was always in short supply—with a dry and biting flaked soap. Once she had gotten the merest speck of it in her eye and the sting lasted all day. When the clothes were loaded, she tightened the bolts and turned it on.

As it did its noisy work, she tried to study Hebrew from the old child's reader Stanley had gotten for her. The sky brightened and she could see the distant hills now, etched crisply along the horizon. The book lacked both cover and spine, but she handled it with great care, trying to connect the strange characters to the simple images. *Kelev* meant dog. *Chatool* was cat. At night, Stanley helped her sound out the unfamiliar words as they clattered off her tongue like breaking dishes, but during the day, she was on her own. *Chalav* was milk and *davash*, honey. Land of milk and honey. But Israel now was a brave new world, no milk, no honey. Instead there were khaki colored tents for the *chalutzim* who slowly built their houses and eked what they could from the dry, ungiving soil.

After the hulking machine had finished, Libby unloaded the clean, wet clothes—who could have imagined how heavy they would be?—into large willow baskets that had gone silver with

age. There were several lines outside, whose grayed, fraying ropes were suspended by a series of pulleys. She hung the sodden shirts and pants, shorts and jackets, fastening the garments with wooden clothespins. When it was all done, she took an unreasonable satisfaction in seeing the yards and yards of clothing, all those arms and legs joyfully splayed, embracing the sky. She put the soap away, gathered up her book and went to the dining hall for a short coffee break before returning for the next round. The coffee, boiled for a long time, was called, *botz*, or mud, and it had an earthy, unfamiliar flavor. Although she had found it undrinkable at first, she soon got over that, and even looked forward to its acrid but satisfying taste.

Nissim and Stanley built a pen for the goats. It hadn't taken long; over dinner one night Nissim sketched the thing on a piece of brown paper saved from an overseas parcel, and with Stanley's help, it was assembled in a matter of days. Behind it was a partially enclosed shelter, corrugated metal for the roof and three sides, the front opening directly onto the pen. The goats, Libby observed, seemed happy enough in their new home, milling about companionably and blinking in the weak, winter sun. But if the goats were without an agenda, the kibbutzniks were not. As winter played itself out, plans were being made. A meeting was held one chilly night in the dining hall, one of the few buildings with electricity. Wearing her brown jacket over a stiff, gray sweater—her silk pants and top had long been relegated to the bottom of her suitcase—Libby sat huddled by Stanley, her breath making little wisps as it rose and flew away from her.

"We should sell them," Yonkeleh proposed. "At the market in Beer Sheva." He took off his glasses, rubbed the lenses with his untucked shirt tail to clean them before setting them on his nose again.

"Why?" said Gisella. Gisella was from Berlin. She had straight brown hair that she wore in pigtails, dark blue eyes and a tattoo of an even darker blue, on her forearm, where the camp guard had incised it. "We've never had goats before. Maybe we should keep them. Breed them." She pulled gently

on the ends of her hair.

"Look what happened with the cows," Yonkeleh reminded her. "We're not experienced enough for goats. We should sell them while we can. Use the money to buy chickens. Chickens aren't as hard to raise as cows. Or goats."

"But we don't know anything about chickens either," Gisella said. "We could learn about goats. How hard can it be?"

"Wait until they all start getting sick and dying," said Yonkeleh. "Then you'll see."

Other voices chimed in. Libby watched and listened, sometimes understanding what was being said, sometimes not. Nissim had not spoken yet. When he finally did, everyone grew quiet.

"Pesach is coming," Nissim said calmly. "We should feed them until then. Fatten them up. Keep a few to breed, like Gisella said. The rest we should eat. At the Seder."

"It would be a feast," said Yonkeleh thoughtfully.

"God sent them," Gisella added. "They should be killed in His name." Nissim nodded and smiled encouragingly, as if it had not been his idea from the start. Stanley looked pleased; Libby knew he admired Nissim. A vote was taken and it was decided: two of the sturdiest looking animals, a male and a female, just like Noah and the ark, would be spared. Vered, from the laundry, had a cousin in New Jersey who knew about goats. She would write to him for books, information they could use. The rest would be fed and tended. And when the holiday came—it was in April this year—they would be killed in the kosher manner, and roasted in the name of freedom, and of God, who had sent them, a random and mysterious act that to many, seemed to typify His relationship to His people in this bitter and forlorn century.

Like the others, Libby accepted the paucity of food here: the small eggs with their thin, pebbly shells that came once a month, the dessiccated chickens that came even less frequently. Dried, powdered milk from which a thick layer of dead flies had to be skimmed before it could be used. It was all part of living in this fledgling nation. So she could understand the excitement about cooking and eating the goats. Yet she didn't

want to eat them. It was not as if she didn't eat meat. She thought of her mother's brisket, so tender it gently eased from the bone without so much as a fork to help it along. But this was different. She had seen them first, an apparition, a sign of something, though she didn't know what. She did not want to think of them skinned, their flesh hacked then charred.

She said nothing. She continued her work at the laundry, studying Hebrew during her breaks or whenever she could. Stanley was a good teacher. Hebrew had come easily to him, like so many things. Languages, math, literature. In college he had written poetry and worked on the school paper. He could adroitly wield a hammer, a saw, a rifle, a violin. Whereas Libby was clumsy and slow, the girl who had been failing gym, science and French, the one who sat in the back of every classroom, just hoping not to be noticed. Why Stanley had picked her was as mysterious as the appearance of the goats.

After the midday meal, the kibbutzniks, many of whom had been up since four in the morning, went back to their tents to rest. Stanley and Libby went too, securing the tent's flap with a wooden peg in the ground, so that they wouldn't be disturbed. Their mattress was on the floor, and when they lay on it together, Libby could feel the wind come rustling all around them. It seemed like the tent was protecting them, but just barely. They made love then, their hoarse breathing mingled with the sound of the wind, the feel of it cooling their damp, naked bodies. Later, when Stanley went back to work, Libby sometimes visited him during her late afternoon break. He was working in the *refet*, or dairy, which was considered one of the most essential places on the kibbutz; she was proud that he had been selected for the job. He was important here, the way he'd been important back home.

The pen where the goats were kept was nearby, so she always found herself slowing down when she passed them. They looked fuller now, their coats shinier. Libby began to notice the small but telling distinctions between them: there was a diminutive female with a diamond-shaped bib on her chest, another whose tail seemed unusually long, a sturdy male with one brown eye and one black. Their behavior too was

distinguishable: here was one who came trotting up to nuzzle her outstretched hand in search of food, while another hung back whenever she appeared, eying her cautiously from his customary place at the far end of the pen. There were those who sought the company of the other goats and those who appeared to shun it. Some of the males were very bold in pursuit of the females; others seemed more hesitant, content to watch the antics of their more aggressive kin. Which ones would be spared? Could she guess?

"They're all so different," she told Stanley one evening as they left the dining hall. The sky was already a deep, moody blue and milky clusters of stars had begun to appear.

"I guess," said Stanley. He seemed preoccupied.

"Don't you care?" Libby felt hurt.

"Care? What's to care about? They're going to be dinner soon." He squeezed her hand as they walked.

Libby was silent. She had not told Stanley about her first encounter with the goats, nor had she told him how their sacrificial role in the upcoming feast made her want to weep. At first, the omission seemed unimportant, but as the time for their slaughter grew closer, it began to take on a greater significance. They continued walking until they reached their tent. *Tell him*, she willed herself as he stepped inside, unlaced his boots and unbuckled his pants. *Tell him now.* But she did not.

Purim came in March. There was a party planned in the evening and all the kibbutzniks were supposed to come dressed in costume. Creating a costume when the raw materials were so limited was going to be a challenge. Nissim bartered several packages of chewing gum with an Arab in exchange for his *kaffia*; Vered planned to wear the wedding dress that had belonged to her mother. Gisella dressed as a soldier. Stanley thought the whole event was silly and even decadent. "I'm not going," he announced to Libby when they were alone in their tent. "You don't have to go either."

"I want to," Libby had said.

"Suit yourself," Stanley answered. He turned away and Libby looked at the rigid line of his back, feeling a flash of annoyance. Sometimes he carried his beloved principles a little too

far. Oh, she knew how pure he was, how idealistic. But what was wrong with a little party once in a while?

Libby planned her costume carefully. She would go as the Queen of Sheba. For over a week, she had been saving the foil paper from cigarette boxes, smoothing out the little squares and keeping them in a neat pile. Since nearly everyone on the kibbutz smoked, she had amassed good number of the small, silver sheets. She was able to fashion a simplified crown from some cardboard that had lined a box and she covered the crown with the foil. There was even enough to make a foil-covered cardboard pendant that she suspended from her neck with string. She made a dress from a bed sheet borrowed from the laundry.

Best of all were half-filled cans of paint she had found in the toolshed. Arabs used paint for their stucco dwellings and for the most part, the colors—melon, coral, rose, a pale, greenish blue, and a light shade of aquamarine—were the ones she had seen on houses in Beer Sheva. She loved those houses, their fairy-tale prettiness a rebuke to the lives contained within them. It had not been easy for these people; not now, not ever. But this was another of those thoughts Libby was not supposed to have much less say.

There was one paint can that stood out from the rest—it was dark, dark brown—almost black. What had it been used for? Libby could not tell; she had not seen a house in such a color. And it was this paint that Libby applied to her face, arms and shoulders, hiding in the women's showers, after everyone had gone. She had no suitable brush, so she used a pair of her old, ragged underpants to gently apply the pigment to her body.

Naked from the waist up, she watched the gooseflesh rise on her newly darkened skin as she waited for it to dry. There was only a small, clouded mirror in the dressing area, but Libby was dazzled by the way the dark tone of the paint brought out the green of her eyes. "*I am black but comely*," she whispered, draping and tying the sheet over her slender body. She fastened the pendant and set the crown on her head. Then, she turned and headed for the dining room, where the party was to be

held. The night was cool but she didn't care. She hardly felt the chill; it was as if the paint were magical coating, keeping her warm.

The road to the dining hall was lit with lanterns. Libby loved their muted glow and wished Stanley could have seen them. But he was back in their tent, reading. Or asleep. He did work hard, harder than almost anyone. She felt a pinch of guilt but banished it and continued on her way. When she arrived, it was already crowded. The long, narrow tables and the benches that flanked them had been pushed to the sides of the room. Libby picked out Nissim in his black and white *kaffia* talking to Vered, in her satin gown. The room was brighter than usual, owing to the groupings of small white flames flickering on the tables. A closer look revealed them to be dozens of *yarzheit* candles. Though not religious, Libby was shocked. All those candles were meant to commemorate the dead, not light up a room of mildly intoxicated revelers. But before she could register her surprise to anyone, she was aware of a sudden quiet descending as people turned to stare at her costume.

"Who is it?" she heard again and again.

"It's the *Anglo Saxit*. Libby," said Vered, but her voice was hushed, respectful.

"I wouldn't have guessed," said Yonkeleh. He was dressed as a rooster, with some soiled, white batting glued onto his clothes; a red wool scarf that had been twisted and knotted was his comb.

"Me neither," added Gisella. Libby stood still, drinking in their wonder. Several people came close, extending a hand as if to touch her skin but somehow not daring. "It's just me," Libby wanted to tell them, but she didn't. Instead, she let Nissim lead her to the center of the room and put his arm around her waist. Someone had turned on a radio. The song was in Hebrew and she couldn't make out the words but the tune was nice. Nissim was a very accomplished dancer; he twirled her gracefully around the floor while other people moved aside, out of their way.

"Where's Stanley?" he said softly into her ear.

"He didn't want to come," Libby said. There it was, that

flash of guilt again. "The Puritan said no?" Libby stared. What else did he know about Stanley that he wasn't saying? She wanted to ask him, but the music was too loud and anyway, Nissim didn't look interested in talking. He held her close as they danced, breath warm on her hair. Up close, she could see the tiny pock marks that flecked his forehead and chin. She had a sudden urge to touch them. "Don't worry," he added. "I won't tell him what a good time you've been having."

Libby stayed very late at the party; she had several glasses of beer and then a glass of *ouzo* that was bitter and strong. She was enjoying herself immensely. After months of feeling estranged from the group, an uneasy outsider wishing she could find her way in, she had suddenly been admitted, ushered easily through a door that had previously been closed. People were gracious, charming, welcoming. She was asked all the questions whose answers would have interested no one other than Stanley before tonight: where did she come from, who were her parents, what did she think of living on the kibbutz, did she want to stay. Libby hadn't talked this much at one time since she had arrived.

When Stanley appeared, she wasn't ready to leave. At first she didn't see him; she had been talking to one of the older kibbutzniks, Sarah, a *sabra* whose family had been in Palestine for over one hundred years. Instead of a costume, Sarah wore a cream-colored blouse and a navy blue skirt. With her neatly cropped silver hair and the strand of crystal beads winking at her throat, Libby thought she looked regal, the night's true queen. Sarah's Hebrew was slow and clearly enunciated; maybe it was just the *ouzo* but Libby felt she understood every word.

"It's late," Stanley said abruptly, ignoring Sarah and putting his hand on Libby's shoulder.

"Is it?" Libby asked. "I didn't know." Why was he being so rude to Sarah? Libby was ashamed. Nissim was right—he *was* a Puritan.

"You're drunk," Stanley said disapprovingly.

"Drunk? Me?" Libby laughed and Sarah smiled benevolently. Tonight it seemed she could do no wrong. Except where Stanley was concerned.

"I think we should go now," he said, taking her by the arm and leading her towards the door. Libby didn't resist but when they reached the door, she turned and faced the kibbutzniks who had opened their arms to her for the first time that night.

"*Lila tov*," she said, the Hebrew farewell rich and golden as honey in her mouth. "Good night, good night."

Stanley said nothing on the way back to their tent, but he had brought her jacket and she let him slip it around her shoulders now, without protest, because she was suddenly cold. He didn't say anything to her when they got back; he just undressed and got into bed. It seemed he was asleep—or feigning it—in seconds.

The next day Libby woke with a headache that felt like a slow, persistent knocking, and despite the sweater she wore over her nightgown, she couldn't stop shivering. Most of the kibbutzniks had the day off but Stanley was not there in the bed beside her. He must have gone to milk the cows—no holidays for those who took care of the animals—and Libby felt an irrational burst of panic. She couldn't remember another time that he had left her—even for an hour—without kissing her good-bye. She got up, dressed quickly and headed over to the dairy. The air warmed as she walked; soon she took off her jacket and tied it around her hips. It already felt like spring.

As Libby had guessed, Stanley was there, scrubbing out the tall metal milk cans with steaming water and a long brush.

"You were quite the sensation last night, weren't you?" He didn't look up.

"It was a costume, that's all. A sheet. Some paint."

"Everyone is still talking about it. The costume. You in it."

"I just wanted to have fun." Libby looked down at the toes of the work shoes she wore. They were scuffed and a size too big; she had to wear two pairs of socks to approximate a decent fit. "I haven't had all that much fun since I've been here," she said in a low voice. But even as she said it, she knew it wasn't true. No she hadn't been having fun, exactly. She had been having the time of her life.

"And did you? Have fun?"

"Yes. I did. I only wish you would have been with me."

Libby was not sure this was true. Had he been there, he would have been self-righteous and sullen, but she was frightened by the rift between them, and wanted to bridge it.

Stanley put down the brush and turned the water off. The milk cans were clean now; he turned them upside down and shook them out, so no water remained in the bottom. Then he opened his arms; Libby quickly crossed the space that separated them and let herself be enfolded.

"I'm sorry," they both said at once and then they both laughed. Our first fight, thought Libby, though she could not have said, exactly, what it was about.

Spring came, and with it, the preparations for Pesach. Though the nights were still cool, the days were hot, with bright sun streaming down over everything. Poppies covered the distant hills; scores of wildflowers—yellow, blue and white—softened the hard-packed desert soil.

Now that Libby had been inducted into the community's midst, she became an integral part of all the plans. A group of kibbutzniks were painting a mural for the dining hall: Moses leading the children of Israel out of Egypt. Since she was so good at painting—smiles and winks accompanied this observation—did she want to help? Several others formed a choral group. Would she join them? Everyone was assigned a passage to read at the Seder. Vered coached Libby on her part: *And Miriam, the prophetess, took the drum in her hand, and all the women set out after her with songs and dances.* Soon Libby could utter the Hebrew words with conviction, even authority. She knew what she was saying. She had found her place. She belonged.

The only thing in which she would not participate was the preparations for the meal. A *chocket*, a ritual butcher, was coming all the way from Chaifa. Vered and Sarah were in charge; they had managed to get potatoes, to go with the roasted meat, and carrots too. Gisella knew a recipe for a flourless cake—it was made with nuts and egg whites—that could be used for the dessert. Egg whites were a problem, but Gisella learned she could get them powdered, in a can. And if they could get berries, any kind of berries, she could make a sauce too. Libby

listened, feigning enthusiasm. Inside, her heart throbbed wildly, a caged and anguished bird.

She began to visit the goats once, sometimes twice, a day. Now they no longer appeared content to her but seemed instead to harbor some great agitation. Was it possible they had some inkling of what was going to happen? She thought about the *chochet*, who would be coming from Chaifa. What would he do first? Say a prayer? Grab a goat, tilt back its head, slit its throat in a clean, even stroke? Would there be a lot of blood? Did it soak his hands, his clothes, the ground beneath his feet? And what about the goat? Was it alone when it was killed? Or did the other goats wath? She knew that there were strict rules governing such things but she did not come from a religious family, and she didn't know them.

At night, Libby found sleep was slow in coming, no matter how tired she was. As Stanley slept beside her, head heavy as stone against her shoulder, she slapped at the bedbugs and thought about the goats. The days until Pesach dwindled to five, four, three, two, one.

The day that the *chochet* was due to arrive, Libby awoke earlier than usual. Stanley lay snoring beside her, one foot off the mattress, arms spread wide. She still had not told him about her rapport with the goats, and she knew suddenly that she never would. They were her talisman, her charm. Her bright secret, the one she alone was meant to keep. She had to see them one last time, difficult as it would be. Quietly, she pulled on her clothes, laced up her boots. Stepping outside into the cool air, the sky was still dark. It didn't matter though; she knew her way by now. There were muted sounds: cows, donkeys, the low howl of the jackals that sometimes came close to the kibbutz in search of food. Libby strained to hear the sound of the goats but she could not.

When she reached the pen, she was sweaty and panting a little. The sky had lightened slightly, and her eyes scanned the place, searching, But instead of the huddled shape of the animals, saw an empty pen. The gate, the one Nissim and Stanley had built and that was carefully latched in three places, was wide open, swinging gently on its hinge. The goats were gone.

Gone! Libby's hands flew to her mouth. As mysteriously as they came, the goats had vanished. Apart from some of their hard, dark droppings that littered the ground, there was no evidence of their presence at all. And again, Libby was the first to know.

She turned away and began walking to the laundry, more slowly now. Soon enough someone would come and find the open gate, spread the news. It would travel swiftly, the tale growing more embellished, more astonishing as it went. Everyone would speculate and wonder about what had happened, but only Libby would rejoice. *Pesach*—the feast of freedom—would have a new meaning this year. Libby wrapped her arms around herself, as if her own embrace could contain the wild, unadulterated elation that suddenly filled her, like a great warm breath, and carried her across the threshold of the breaking day.

Valerie Wohlfeld

The Peacock and the Panther

I am to make no graven image.
I'll draw my daughter's face like an Amish doll,
plain as muslin unembellished.
No button eyes, no embroidered mouth.
How will my child call me or cry? How will I keep
my brushes and the watercolors in their little
shallow pots that turn muddy when overused,
away from the world and all the world's colors?
How will I not paint the clouds and the clod
of dirt in the horse's hoof? Meanwhile,
I see that god has fearlessly made
the peacock and the panther; the one feathered in
a hundred chartreuse eyes lined in mascara,
and the other always with the red rim
of another's blood on its mouth.
If only I could paint the moths that feed on locust
and willow, or in the milkweed the Monarch
that will turn into gold and black-lined wings
as if tiffany glass held in leaded panes!
Now in the night I undo my blouse to offer milk
to my child. I hear a cry
and in the dark room I do not
know if it is god crying, or just my child
waiting for my breast.

Charlie Clark

Purity

Because lately I can't stop thinking
about purity, even this line of black

ants running from the crack in
my kitchen counter to the trash can—

ants I am trying to decide upon
the best way to kill—makes me pause

and consider the way sci-fi stories
like to deliver predacious monsters

to new worlds to root out their lesser
species. Psychotic to a man, they

slay their quarry one by one by one.
There's usually a simple moral

to these stories, like the natives
finally save themselves in a manner

that celebrates human ingenuity
over mechanical prowess.

I say human because the heroes
are always human, or are at least

meant to stand for our condition.
We can see ourselves in anything.

It's why some schools of thought
propose, and I right now half-believe,

that the souls of my ancestors might
reside in the bodies of these creatures

crawling on my floor, and therefore
claim it's wrong to participate in

the little violences I'd otherwise
consider good housekeeping. I think

there has to be a middle ground
between butchery and righteousness.

Some formal way to tell the cosmos
that I know doing this is, on some level,

cruel, but sometimes my need for
a hygienic, organized home supersedes

the rights these creatures have to
their lives. That's an equivocation

I don't want to think out to its logical
end, because it's quick to turn

into a bloodbath from which
there's no return. I think this is why

we came up with the word *amen*.
It's supplication, yes, but it's also

an ending. A way to stop the moral
universe from shrinking or expanding

beyond its usefulness. And so I say
amen when I start to pinch the beasts

up off the floor, each inside its own
tissue, which feels appropriate,

as though whatever enduring
wrongs come from my crushing

them are mitigated some by first
swathing them in something white.

Joanna Rawson

Light Again, Precisely

Here the dogs lie belly up in the shattered reedstalks.
The small bodies stretch out on dirty rag-rugs, singed in dust.

For this morning's runs the kill-box is small, doable.
Nothing exactly quivers but the quick raids give the air a loose fit.

The kids' skins have been bronzed by days of glorious late glare.
The river's so distilled by now it's turned their hair green.
The air hasn't had a wind in it in days.

All of this, all of everything, is necessary, said someone.

When the five-jet formation dips to its target and rips up the pine slope

the register the day's pitched in
alters so slightly the girls twitch and the animal's fur
twitches and flicks,

and the black cellular flies mobbing their dozing bodies
lift, swarm, and light again, precisely like

the determined machines they are.

Lauren Berry

The Pale-Skinned Catholic Girls Go Topless Sunbathing

We could divide, so easily, our body parts by color.

At night we lined up in the alley behind our rented rooms and poured
bottles of whole milk over our shoulders. We eased our hairless bodies.

To be sunburned was an act of God, the triangles
glowing through the blow of our white skirts.
We believed the world was with us.

How else would a man know which parts he could not touch?

Lisa Lewis

All Inexplicable Desire

1.

Spare me, I'm innocent,
if only I weren't lying on my back in the bathtub.
I should locate the offshore beliefs, a basin
shaped to snug the hips: douse with salts,
cure the imbalance
argued in the canals.
I remember opening
to you like a cut bared to the sting of styptic.
Wherever we were,
pine and a blanket and a warbler
in the woods:
I stand back from my body in the chambered past
where we trampled meadows.
I can't stand the surprise
bent at the end like a hook
in my cheek, your finger prying my jaw
for prongs:
I complained of stretching in that heat,
the wasps waking
when we rolled over their tunnels,
grave robbers slinging bags
over their humps, and basalt monuments we'd never heard
mentioned outside the workaday world.
The admiral moth's stripes lit the landscape
like alcohol lamps. I could be single
-minded, palsy
coursing through me like cymbals' clash.
The percussionist worries not
about harm
in the heat of the sounding moment.

2.

I'm not so bad. I can set aside ambition
as long as you want
hobnobbing, and if it's insurance yearning
your insides out,
my policy's full of codicils.

The producer takes up her canvas chair
in the grain chute, brushing pellets from the brim
of her cap. She's a stalwart, like me,

and you too, sweet cicely.
She advises us to learn our lines in *The Miracle Worker*.
Tonight, you whisper, your tuning fork
nicks the rim of my cut glass,
and I want to reply to cool things off—I'm not well yet—
but I have only one set of calipers.

Kind as a bonnet
scented with paper tulips,
I realize I've been named warden,
which will cut into my work: trying to cordon off
all those little lords,
forget it.

Come on, whittle me down.
Those just look like tight pants.
You don't have to worry
about breaking a nail. You got a problem
with the science of animals?
Okay, prepare yourself, and a velvet box
for me to land in feet first.
The jeremiad of passion comes to closure
in your mouth, but for now
you don't know it.

That's what I love about you.
Once you get started
peering into the microscope,
I don't have to worry about you coming to bed.
You're the peacenik of my sexuality,

which I'm often pressured to explain
to someone sympathetic.

A patient with bone disease, or a parks and recreation counselor—
someone whose business it is to maintain
a flute song.
Put your arms around me. Not so high. I meant my waist,
like you were measuring me for the next century.

Sharon Dolin

Psalm of the Flying Shell (4:30 a.m.)

At what solstice hour do I arise
(at what daybreak dark do wingtips whir)

knowing I can never see Your face

knowing my life is spiraled in the conch
of consciousness (inside the solar plexus

of space) how can I see in
to the wings' filigree I'm fused within—

what does the sea-rushing sound announce—
how decipher the architecture of cells alchemy

of stars as angels for Your will?
My heart is a volute inside a body-whorled

spire that obelisks
the air I am thrumming

Your praises as the only way to hear
with the soul's inner ear.

Tell me what You require of me.

Tom Pierce

In the Loop

Plummer saw a young woman he thought could be his daughter. It didn't seem likely, but he had loved someone long ago, and the resemblance was striking. Plummer sat on a park bench not far from the girl, his heart pounding. When the wind lifted just right he could hear her singing softly to herself. Dean, Plummer's son, was beside him, asleep in a stroller. Dean would be six the next day. He was small for his age, and did not speak, had never spoken. He lived life internally, in silence, and in a strange way, Plummer thought, this made him free. Dean slept and Plummer listened to the young woman's voice, rising and falling with the breeze.

The day before, Friday, they'd driven from Chicago to Louisville, where Plummer's mother lived. Plummer had hoped to celebrate Dean's birthday with his wife, Dean's mother, in Chicago, as a family. But after his wife's weekend visit to her parents turned into a week and then two, Plummer called to let her know that he and Dean would visit his mother, celebrate Dean's birthday there, if that was okay. He thought that she would protest, perhaps even suggest that they celebrate together. But she said, Sure, have fun. She sounded strangely cheery. When he held the phone up to Dean's ear, he could hear his wife's voice through the receiver—I love you, Dean-o, I miss you. Plummer had called her on her cell phone on Friday morning and had assumed she'd be at work but, really, she could have been anywhere.

As they drove through the flat miles of Indiana, the constant drone of the engine lulled Dean to sleep and muffled Plummer's thoughts so that he could not grab hold of any thread that would unravel certain meaning in his situation. He knew his wife meant what she'd said about loving and missing Dean, but he also knew that Dean's silence had opened up into a wide silence between them, something invisible but almost

physical, a molecular silence. They'd met eight years ago at the *Sun-Times*, where they both worked, and they'd had such fun together that marriage seemed the right urge to fulfill. But now, they circled each other as if at opposite poles.

There was snow still on the ground when they left Chicago, but six hours south the weather was fair and mild. The roads were salted white, and the sky was the color of the roads, but crocuses pushed through ground still saturated dark with melted snows, and young leaves fluttered like confetti in the oak trees along Eastern Parkway. They reached Plummer's childhood home shortly after six p.m. on Friday evening, when dusk had started to sift down from the low-clouded sky.

Plummer's mother met them at the door. She was happy to see them but Dean flummoxed her. She did not know what to make of his silence or his inability to show affection. Still, she took the boy from Plummer's arms and struggled to plant a kiss on each cold round cheek as Dean twisted away. Plummer she welcomed like a prodigal son, though he called her once a week and had seen her only nine months before, at his father's funeral.

Come in, come in, she said and hugged him. Her face shone with a smile. Are you hungry?

Plummer was struck by the change in her appearance since he'd seen her last. Never a large woman, she had once achieved a middle-age stoutness, but she'd lost a lot of weight in nine months. Her face, particularly, seemed to be retreating into itself, eyes sunken and lips stretched thin. She looked small and old. She wore slippers, corduroy pants and a bulky fisherman's sweater that hung loose and swaying from her bony frame.

Still, Plummer's mother seemed happy, almost preternaturally so. Are you alright? Plummer asked. Have you been sick? He regretted his alarmed tone, but she only dismissed him with a mild scoff and told him to come in, dinner was almost ready.

She had fixed a large amount of roast pork tenderloin, buttered potatoes, and asparagus, and after they finished, they sat in the living room eating slices of yellow cake and sipping coffee, talking like two old acquaintances. It was nice to sit there and talk with the one woman who had always loved him

and always would but at the same time Plummer felt intensely lonely. He had convinced himself that he was looking forward to the visit, but since they had just finished eating, his impulse was to bolt. Thank her for the meal, kiss her on the cheek and be gone. He pictured his wife back home in Chicago, enjoying a hot cup of tea, waiting for them. He imagined walking in, leading Dean by the hand, and her face lighting up, happy to see them.

He scraped the last bit of icing and crumbs off his plate and looked around. The living room was as he remembered it, except messier. Newspapers and books were scattered about, and he noticed something he'd missed before: his father's walker and the plastic urinal he used to avoid trips to the bathroom still stood beside his chair. His mother had been talking about her church committees, but Plummer could only think about the plastic urinal sitting there, crusty with crystallized piss. Why in God's name? But he didn't say it aloud.

You two will work it out, she was saying, and Plummer realized she was now talking about his marriage. For Dean's sake, she said. She sipped her coffee, nodded to her grandson sitting on the floor on his haunches, his hands holding his feet, rocking back and forth, eyes locked onto the TV screen. Dean? she said, the skin of her forehead pressing her eyebrows down, an expression that compressed into that one-word question a hundred other questions. Plummer glanced at his son. Blonde locks swayed gently as he rocked on the floor and he saw what might have been a smile on Dean's round, placid face. This was familiar ground and there was nothing new to report. Different doctors said different things—microcephaly, autism, aphasia—but none had definite answers. He wanted to return her question with one of his own: Why, after nine months, had she not removed his father's walker or the plastic urinal? But he suddenly whiffed the must of old piss and he realized how alone she was in this house. Plummer shook his head, shrugged his shoulders. She smiled and reached over to pat his hand, then took the plates and coffee cups into the kitchen.

They slept in his old room, the room of his youth, which had remained largely unchanged since he'd left for college

twenty-odd years before. The walls had been stripped of concert posters, but the pine dresser where he once hid cigarettes and *Penthouse* magazines still stood opposite the bed and the same old coil rug, flattened with time, still padded the hardwood floor.

He began to slip his son's clothes off. At first, Dean twisted away, his muscles rigid. But then he yawned and rubbed his eyes, and when Plummer reached for him again, Dean was pliant in his arms. He dressed his son in pajamas and put him in bed, pulled a blanket over him, then snapped off the light and crawled in beside him. Dean huffed, and turned on his side, and Plummer waited in the dark for his son to fall asleep. In the hallway outside, he heard the familiar creak of floorboard as his mother passed by. Soon, he saw the quiet rise and fall of Dean's chest, heard the softly rasping flow of sleeping breath. He waited a few seconds more and then, gently, he reached over to stroke his son's hair.

THE NEXT MORNING after breakfast, his mother went grocery shopping, and Plummer decided to take a walk in the fresh and dewy air. He put Dean in the stroller and they walked the few blocks to Cherokee Park, the park Plummer had loved as a kid. When he reached the park entrance he found that the Parks Department had closed off a lane of road in one section to vehicular traffic to make way for pedestrians, joggers, bike riders, and in-line skaters. The Cherokee Loop, as a sign called it, began at the entrance to the park, near a verdigris statue of Daniel Boone, and Plummer pushed the stroller up the street.

They wound their way through two miles of hilly terrain, past the picnicking pavilion at Hogan's Fountain, past softball fields, dusty playgrounds, and wooded trailheads, past open fields where rugby players scrummed, Frisbees flew, and couples sat on blankets in the spring air, and over stone-block bridges spanning Beargrass Creek, which meandered brown and gurgling through the park on its way to the Ohio River. Near the end, up a long, steep stretch of hill, stood another pavilion overlooking the park. Here, Plummer sat on a bench to rest for a few minutes. Dean had fallen asleep in his stroller,

and Plummer positioned it next to the bench. He gazed eastward over the undulating canopy of the park, blooming green in the young spring. To the left stretched the manicured fairway of a golf course, to the right slices of angled roofs from the neighboring houses hidden beneath the trees, and off in the distance a few church steeples poked through the far stretch of scalloped treetops.

Plummer had spent a lot of his childhood in this park, playing, exploring. Usually, someone had been with him—friends from school or the neighborhood—but he remembered riding his bike alone one day to this overlook and noticing, really noticing, perhaps for the first time, the beauty laid out before him. It had been a warm afternoon at the height of the fall season and the trees were ablaze with color—bright reds and golds and oranges, as though great dollops of paint had fallen from the sky. He'd been so carefree as a boy, so thoughtless. Plummer bent down and wiped Dean's nose with a tissue, and when he did, he noticed the young woman sitting on a bench nearby. Her resemblance to his first love, Janey, was uncanny and Plummer could not take his eyes off of her. She was pretty, with long blonde hair that fell straight along her face and pooled at the top of her perfectly rounded belly, which she encircled with her arms.

Janey, too, had had long blonde hair. He recalled the sweetness of the two years they'd spent together, the naïve talk about spending their lives together. They'd even talked about what they would name their kids: Miles for a boy and Kate for a girl. He'd been happy. But then that horrible Sunday morning came when Janey showed up at his door and abruptly broke up with him. He had been frantic with heartbreak, out of his mind for days, calling her, pleading. But she was resolute. That was over twenty years ago. What if…? No, she would have told him. Still, the girl's looks, her age. It was possible.

There was no one else around and no cars nearby, so Plummer assumed she had walked from a nearby house, as he and Dean had done. Her steady gaze seemed mournful, and Plummer saw that her lips were moving as if in silent prayer. He didn't think he seemed threatening, especially with

a young child, but still he watched her with the slyness he felt his thoughts required. When the breeze lifted, he could hear that she wasn't praying silently, but singing softly, presumably to her unborn child, though he could not make out the words. He closed his eyes and continued listening in the breeze. The singing stopped and in a few moments he opened his eyes to see the girl standing before him.

How old is your boy?

Up close, looking into her eyes, he thought he could see his own. He felt an instant love for her that made him sure.

Six tomorrow, Plummer answered.

Well, happy birthday, she said, patting her belly. I'm expecting my first in May.

Congratulations, he said. I heard you singing. She looked embarrassed so he added quickly, No, no. It was nice. What was it?

Just something my mother sang to me when I was a baby, she said.

She turned to leave, as if she had reached her limit of polite conversation with a stranger in the park, so Plummer spoke quickly.

I lived in this park when I was a kid, he said. I knew every square inch of it. The girl shifted uncomfortably, hugging her belly, but he went on. I chiseled my initials in creek rock down there, he said, pointing. They're probably still there. He wanted to tell her his name, ask if hers was Kate, but he thought better of it.

She smiled and tossed her hair back and said, Well, have a nice day, before walking quickly away.

He felt her departure as a wisp of movement along his spine, there and gone. Stupid, stupid! Plummer thought. He sat there with Dean for a few minutes—as though to prove to anyone who may have been watching that they had been only strangers exchanging polite pleasantries—before it dawned on him to follow her. He pushed the stroller quickly back down to the park entrance, near Daniel Boone. There, four roads radiated out from the statue, and he could not see her in any direction. He hesitated only a moment before pushing the stroller

quickly up Eastern Parkway.

Soon, he saw her, midway up the block. Plummer slowed his pace, thinking to keep a distance that would not raise any suspicions. But when she turned down another street, he quickened his pace, then—worried he would lose her—began to jog, the stroller bumping and jostling along the uneven sidewalk. When he reached the side street, aching and out of breath, Dean awake now, grunting and struggling against his straps, he watched her turn another corner. This was crazy. What was he going to do? Panting and heaving, he continued on.

At the next corner, Plummer stopped abruptly when he saw the girl climbing the front steps to a house in the middle of the block. He waited until she went inside and then walked calmly up the street. There was no harm in seeing where she lived, in imagining her living there with her mother. He might even see Janey working in the yard. Perhaps she was not married. Perhaps she would recognize him and confess her long-ago mistake.

He walked slowly, to calm his heartbeat, but as he approached the house, his heartbeat quickened again. In the front yard, he saw a "For Sale" sign, and another smaller sign that read "Open House, Sunday 2-4."

That night, after dinner, Plummer and his mother watched television and sipped coffee while Dean stared at the screen. Plummer wasn't paying attention to the program, he was thinking how, when he was a child, his mother had told him that babies were delivered to earth by sunbeams. Even now, when Plummer saw a ray of sun breaking through clouds he imagined a phalanx of pre-diapered infants floating down, kicking and cooing happily. He told his mother what he was thinking and asked her, Why? How did you come up with sunbeams?

She shrugged. It was something silly I made up, she said. Parents tell young children silly things when they're not old enough to understand the truth.

Are we ever old enough?

Plummer sipped his coffee and thought about all he still didn't understand. He asked his mother, How can a woman

leave her son? Her husband, yes, but how can she leave her child?

He immediately regretted the question because he did not want to open that discussion with his mother, but she only gave Plummer a tender look and said, You can never know what's in a person's heart. You just can never know.

The dreamy, faraway look in her eyes and her knowing tone made it seem as if she were answering not Plummer's question, but her own posed from deep within, and Plummer wondered what question it could be. He always thought that his parents had been happily married, but had they? After forty-seven years of marriage, Plummer's father died suddenly and peacefully in his sleep. He'd had trouble walking, and he was lazy about getting up to pee, but he was not infirm, there had been no warning signs. Early on a summer morning last year, he was simply gone.

Plummer's mother had told him she was up early that day and had dressed quietly so as not to disturb his father. But he was already dead. When he did not rise at his normal time, she checked on him and his body was cold to the touch. He had not been in pain, nor struggled, since his hands were folded on his stomach and his feet were comfortably crossed. She called Plummer in Chicago at midday to tell him. Later, at the funeral home, he'd asked her, If he died early in the morning, why did you wait so long to call me? The answer had repulsed him. She told Plummer that she had crawled back into bed that morning and had fallen asleep next to him. She had slept for three hours next to the cold body of her dead husband. He wanted to ask her why, but mourners had diverted his attention and he had forgotten about it until this moment.

When Dad died, he asked, why did you sleep next to his body? He could not imagine such a thing. She got the same faraway look in her eyes and said, It was like he was having a dream—a nice dream—and he just decided to stay in that dream and I wanted to be in that dream, too. She gave a short little laugh that seemed disconnected from her.

Isn't that what it's supposed to be like when we die? she asked. Like a wonderful dream?

She looked at her son. Plummer understood that she was seeking reassurance—perhaps for his father, perhaps for herself—and he felt unqualified to give it.

Yes, he said. I'm sure it is.

At breakfast, Plummer's mother tried to sing Happy Birthday to Dean. But Dean flapped his hands and took off down the hall. Let him go, Plummer said. They ate their eggs and Plummer's mother told him she hadn't gotten Dean a birthday present yet. She'd go shopping after church. She'd fix a cake and they'd celebrate his birthday that evening. Plummer asked if she'd watch Dean for a while that afternoon, he had something he needed to do.

His mother went to eleven o'clock mass and Plummer grew anxious when she had not returned from shopping by two o'clock. He paced between the kitchen and the living room. Dean rocked on his haunches in front of the TV. At two-thirty, Plummer's mother walked in with a shopping bag. Dean's watching TV, he said, I'll be back.

When? his mother called out, but Plummer was already out the door.

He drove to the girl's house, a brick two-story with a porch swing and a slate roof, and parked across the street. A man came out and stood on the porch, inspecting the place, and Plummer felt a surprising twinge of anger toward him. The man walked down the steps and through the front yard. He looked up at the roof, the gutters, and ran his finger along the glazing of a front window. When the man left, Plummer got out of his car.

Inside, Plummer found himself in a neatly furnished living room that spanned the front of the house. Directly ahead, a hallway led to the basement door and past that to the kitchen. To the right a staircase, to the left, through an arched opening, the dining room. At one end of the room, bookcases flanked a fireplace. The realtor introduced herself and Plummer shook her hand. She looked to be in her fifties, with short platinum hair and a lined, tanned face. She wore a string of pearls and a white sweater over a belted green dress and she smelled of

spicy perfume.

If you wouldn't mind signing in, said the woman. Are you from here?

Originally, said Plummer, signing his real name. I'm in Chicago now. We may be moving back.

Wonderful, said the realtor. Feel free to wander around and ask questions. I'll check on you later.

Plummer scanned the living room walls and saw only art prints. He inspected the bookcases and was disappointed to find no photographs. He wandered slowly around the first floor, the dining room, the kitchen with potpourri simmering on the stove, the tiny half-bath, before making his way upstairs. On the second floor were four bedrooms, two on either side of the landing, with a bath in between. Plummer looked in the bedrooms on the backside of the house first. One, he gathered, was a guest room with a twin bed and simple chest of drawers; the other held a desk and computer, a chair, shelves of books.

Plummer felt lightheaded, mysterious, as he walked slowly to the front bedrooms. In the master, he thought of Janey, tried to imagine what she might look like today, but the room appeared stripped of anything personal—a tautly made bed, two nightstands with lamps, a bureau and mirror, a TV in the corner, again no photographs, nothing revealed. He opened the closet door and ran his fingers gently across dresses and blouses. There were no men's clothes or shoes—a good sign. In the master bath, he opened the medicine chest and the shower door, smelled soap and lavender shampoo.

He was alone and he glided back out along the wall as a furtive spy toward the last bedroom, where the young woman—Kate!—no doubt slept. In the doorway, he paused and took a deep breath. To step inside seemed thrilling, but when he did, he was surprised to find that it appeared to be the room of a teenage girl, not a young woman. The walls were painted pink, and the bed was white wicker, with a white frilly bedspread. A net stretched high in a corner held stuffed animals. Above a white wicker chest of drawers, a cork bulletin board hung and tacked onto it were photographs, ribbons, and ticket stubs.

Plummer examined the photographs; they were all of kids. The girl was in some of them, laughing and smiling with other girls. Some had boys in them. There were photographs of soccer games and of girls and boys in formal dress at a dance. The ribbons commemorated a cheerleading championship. There were no photographs of the girl's mother, and none with a single boy that might give Plummer a clue about who her baby's father could be.

He sat down on the bed. The girl in the photos was in high school, that much was clear, perhaps sixteen years old. His daughter, if he had one, would be at least twenty-one by now. Plummer heard someone coming up the stairs so he quickly got up and pretended to be looking around the room. A young couple came in.

Oh, isn't this cute! said the woman.

We wouldn't have to paint it, the man said.

They looked around and talked as if Plummer wasn't there. They inspected the closet. Plummer looked out the window. Another car pulled up outside. When the couple finally left the room, Plummer again sat on the bed. He smoothed the bedspread with his hand and was about to lay down where the girl slept when his cell phone rang.

It was Plummer's wife. She asked how everything was, and he told her fine, everything's fine, and Dean was doing well, and his mother. He asked about her, and she was fine, too, she said. He told her they'd be home Monday night, half-expecting, half-hoping to hear her express some kind of relief or pleasure at that, but she just asked to speak to Dean. Hang on, Plummer told her. He held the phone in his lap for a few seconds before raising it again to his ear. Go ahead, he said and then he held the phone out at arm's length. Dean, it's Mommy, he said. Listen to Mommy.

A woman poked her head in the door but left quickly when she heard Plummer talking to himself, his phone extended to no one. Plummer again held the phone to his ear and listened quietly.

Dean-o, hi baby! It's Mommy! his wife said brightly. Happy birthday. Happy birthday, big boy. You're six years old today!

she said, as if talking to a puppy. You're six! It's Mommy. Can you hear me? She paused. Can you say hello to Mommy? She paused again and then her voice started to crack. Oh baby, it's your mommy, she said. Happy birthday. Mommy loves you. Can you hear me? Mommy loves you. She sighed, and then the line was silent.

Plummer turned his phone off and sat a long time on the edge of the girl's bed. He did not bother to look up when another couple came and went from the room. His wife had spoken with such longing and pain that Plummer wanted to love her anew, and deeply. But when he'd heard her voice crack, he knew he would never have the chance.

He smelled the realtor's perfume before he heard her speak. It's past four o'clock, she said. Plummer looked up. The woman looked disturbed, even frightened. She gripped the cell phone clipped to her belt as though it were a gun ready to draw. Do you have any questions? she asked.

Plummer stood up and smoothed the bed and looked around the room one last time. No, he said. No questions.

PLUMMER DROVE AROUND the park awhile, thinking. It wasn't true, but he allowed himself to imagine that the young woman he had seen in the park the day before was, in fact, his daughter, Kate, and that he did, in fact, have an entirely different life. He was happily married; he was about to be a grandfather—a grandfather! Kate was on her own and he and Janey were free to go and do as they pleased. No pain or loss had ever touched him. His mother would not die soon. And his father was alive, still peeing like he used to, standing at the toilet like Superman, fists on his hips.

When Plummer got back to his mother's house, it was nearly six o'clock. He walked into the kitchen and was surprised to find it empty. He expected his mother to be preparing dinner. The kitchen was clean and quiet. The whole house was quiet, and no lights were on, though the rooms were darkening with early dusk. Plummer moved silently through the house. On the dining room table stood the shopping bag his mother had brought in earlier. In the living room, the TV

was on but the sound was off, the walls flickering in bluish hues.

Plummer found them both in his mother's bedroom. Dean sat on the floor, a mound of white tissues in front of him. Two boxes sat on either side of him, and he was methodically pulling tissues out of each box, one and then the other, carefully laying each new tissue on top of the pile. His mother was on the bed, balled up on her side. Plummer lifted Dean in his arms.

What's going on? he said, stepping to the bed. Plummer's mother turned toward him. She'd been crying, her face glistened in the graying light and her small bloodshot eyes looked out from dark, sunken sockets. Plummer sat on the edge of the bed, Dean still in his arms. The mattress crackled and sunk under their weight. Mother, he said, what's wrong?

I don't know, she said. I just don't know.

Plummer thought that he knew, though, and he wanted to provide her with some comfort, some degree of hope, but what could he say at the end of her life that would make any difference at all except I love you? So that's what he said. I love you. But saying it had the opposite effect of what he intended, and she turned her face and wept into her pillow.

Dean started fidgeting uncomfortably in his arms so Plummer put him down. He teetered a bit to gain his balance, and looked up at his father for only a moment before turning and running quickly from the room. Plummer watched him disappear around the corner and as he watched, a vivid sadness welled within him that can only be described as deep love. He was tired. He was no longer young and the work and grief of a life still stretched far before him. Sliding off the bed to his knees, Plummer slowly collapsed until his head lay on the soft pillow of tissues on the floor. He only wanted to close his eyes and rest for a minute, but after a few seconds, the mattress crackled again. Then he heard his mother's footsteps padding across the carpet, purposefully, as if she had someplace to go.

Melissa Yancy

Notable Alumni

There invariably came a point in an interview when the questions would turn to Leonard's college years. Leonard had liked this interview so far—the man was young, and understood Leonard's novels, but didn't feel the need to demonstrate it with essaylets, where the question—if there *were* a question—came like an anticlimactic spook in a horror film, the audience waiting in suspense to see the killer only to be startled by a mewing housecat.

The interview was for a culture magazine, sleekly designed, with music, food, and politics features. Leonard preferred conversations for these sorts of publications, and over the last hour, he had ruminated on baseball, on Duchamp, on Dashiell Hammett and the Superman films. For the writer's digests, the questions were usually about the minutiae of process—whether he wrote in the morning or the evening, whether he wrote drafts longhand or on the computer—as if writing were like baking, and the temperature of the yeast was all.

Do you still keep in touch with them? the interviewer asked him now.

By them, the young man meant Bret and Anna, never Hillary, whose success had been short lived. They had all gone to Harden College together in the late 80s. Leonard kept in touch with Hillary, who was still writing, but he had long ago stopped mentioning her name in interviews, because he could not suffer the indignity of the blank faces or confused questions this would elicit. More often than not, the interviewer had not heard of Hillary Rosenstad. Despite how good Hillary's work had been, she had no cultivated persona, and that had cost her. Even their college had failed to list Hillary as one of the notable alumni, a slight he tried to rectify with the alumni affairs department to no effect. Everyone wanted to hear about Bret and Anna.

We don't really talk, he told the young man.

But you were friends, right, back in your Harden days?

This seemed to be an important point to people. They were hell-bent on imagining the three of them as undergraduates, self-possessed and eerie, as though they had foreknowledge of how successful they would all become. It hadn't been like that. But it hadn't been entirely *unlike* that, either. Sometimes he pictured camps of literary fans descending on Harden college, like civil war re-enactors but with trunks full of silk scarves, engraved cigarette lighters, worn copies of Euripides' plays, trying to recreate the atmosphere that must have enabled three (or four, counting Hillary) young writers in the same class at a small college to become renowned novelists.

The atmosphere had been creepy. If he had to identify any one thing, it would be that. In the 1950s there had been a string of unsolved disappearances in the green mountains that overlooked the tiny Vermont college. The men and women who had gone missing had so little in common that a serial killer—or at least any kind of serial killer known to profilers—was ruled out. Somehow, that seemed worse. That left room for theories about a paranormal trapdoor, a mountain monster, a hidden cult.

And then there was the story. The town that housed the college was the subject of a famous short story in which the townsfolk stoned a family as part of a ritualistic killing. Decades later, in Leonard's time, the town still had a foreboding stillness.

We weren't really friends, he told the interviewer.

That was not exactly true, but he and Anna and Bret had not been friends in the way people liked to picture, and it was better not to entertain these ideas. One of their fellow students from Harden would have certainly said yes, that Leonard had been one of them. He had stood with them in the quad, their shoulders turned in, uninviting others. But Leonard had always felt as though he'd merely been granted a temporary pass that could be easily revoked. Permanent status would have required a sacrifice, something to cement the allegiance.

The college had the reputation as a playground for spoiled, privileged children who couldn't bother with the academic

rigor of the Ivies. Bret had attended a school in Los Angeles that would later spit out Paris Hilton; Anna had come from a cloistered Christian academy in a sleepy Southern town, where she rarely attended class. But Leonard had not been one of those students. His parents were bohemian types who re-used soup cans as pencil holders and wine bottles as vases; their house was filled with books, they went to the museum on the free days, and they ordered in Ethiopian food. He had always thought they were sophisticated. He arrived at Harden in jeans and a leather jacket, not expecting to feel inferior. He was from Brooklyn, but at Harden, he felt like a hick.

You're all so different as novelists, the interviewer said.

Are we? Leonard replied.

When he liked an interviewer enough, as he liked this young man, he sometimes wanted to tell the truth. They all *looked* like different novelists, to be sure. Leonard was considered funny, inventive, the genre-bender. Anna was classic, with a preternatural gift for pacing and atmosphere. She had always been the most talented one. Bret's work was timely, harsh, with loose regard for storytelling. But Bret and Anna's work bore striking similarities. They both crafted reckless, privileged characters, dealt with gruesome subjects, and their most famous novels were about murders.

Did they have an influence on your work? the man asked.

They defined it, Leonard said. But it was hardly in the way the interviewer would have guessed.

Almost everything people said about Anna was true. The first time Leonard had seen her in a tailored wool skirt and a dramatic silk blouse, he had to laugh. Nobody dressed like that, not at 19, not in 1985. Bret was equally ridiculous, Truman Capote trapped in a more handsome man's body. Anna used her eyes and Bret used his tongue to elicit scorn among their classmates. Harden students joked that Anna's eyes were kryptonite green. It was an overblown description, Leonard thought, but they did have a glow that was almost unearthly. And Bret, for his part, could insult you so thoroughly you might not get the joke until days later.

Leonard could still remember the beginning, his surprise

at finding an ace of spades in his campus mail box on a cold Thursday afternoon in February. The card was wrapped in a piece of white paper, an invitation to a speakeasy. The password for entrance was *prohibition*. He didn't have to wonder who was hosting. But he didn't know how he'd become an invitee. Perhaps they'd heard he wrote stories.

He considered refusing the party. He knew he was supposed to feel privileged to be invited, which angered him. And shamed him, because he did feel lucky.

It felt like it was going to snow that Friday night, and the campus was quiet from students leaving town for the weekend. It was so cold his teeth hurt as he walked out to Russell Street. It turned out that Anna lived in a house—a house!—a cottage that was a hundred years old. It had never occurred to him that a fellow student might live like that.

Bret was keeping guard at the door, asking for passwords.

Prohibition, Leonard said.

And? Bret said. From what? He stood in the doorway, blocking Leonard's entrance.

Oh stop, Anna said, suddenly coming into view behind him. From the Latin, *prohibere*, she said. Let him in.

He followed her into the kitchen, and she handed him a snifter of syrupy liquor. It burned his nose before he even got the liquid to his lips. He wanted to ask her what it was, but he was afraid it was another thing he was supposed to know.

It might have been the dim lighting, or the alcohol, or the biting cold outside that made the house seem intimate to him. Later, he would not remember his conversations, only that he'd been happy to inhabit that space for a few hours.

Whatever he had said, it was good enough. After that night, Leonard found himself their provincial toy. They invited him along, and teased him thoroughly. But once, when he'd shown up at their smoking spot in a borrowed blazer, hoping to impress them, they wouldn't even talk to him. They wanted him to remain their funny little Brooklyn boy.

Anna had an air between a nun and Norma Desmond. She always stood completely erect, and her hair never seemed to grow long or sloppy, but was magically trimmed to the exact

same chin length at all times. She could drink more than the street kids he'd grown up with, but she never seemed to lose her composure, and he never saw her sick the next day. In spite of her tailored suits, she was still gamine beneath the surface, as though you would see a wild horse if you could only get her clothes off.

To be near her, Leonard tolerated Bret's occasional ogling. Plus, Bret knew people. He already had a literary agent, which Leonard found incomprehensible. When he was a kid, Leonard's teachers had treated him like he was prodigious, and he'd almost believed it, until he'd gone to Harden.

It was Hillary to whom Leonard went for with help on his story drafts. He wouldn't take any writing classes, and he was afraid of Bret and Anna. Hillary thought they were phony. She didn't see how Leonard couldn't, too. Do you want Anna *because* she's frigid? Hillary had asked. She sleeps with Hendricks, he'd said. Hendricks was Anna's mentor, her Latin teacher. Please, Hillary said. She only wishes.

And then, in the spring of their junior year, a townie died. He was 21. The townies were generally treated with derision, and any Harden student who deigned to date one risked their social standing. Sleeping with a townie, slumming it for a night, was acceptable, as long as you weren't seen with one on campus.

The story had been on the front cover of *The Harden Review*. But the news didn't last long. The police had few leads, and the boy, whose name was Roger Geffies, didn't have the sort of family who made themselves a nuisance to the police.

The story had stood out to Leonard because of the bar where Roger had last been seen. It was Carmine's, a real drinker's bar that he and Anna and Bret frequented when Bret felt like mingling with the hoi polloi. Few Harden students ever went there, so they could drink in relative peace, Bret alternately making fun of the locals then hoping a muscular one would go home with him.

Bret and Anna had been there the night that Roger Geffies died. Leonard was supposed to have gone with them, but he had to study. He was on an art scholarship, and he was barely

pulling a D in French. Bret and Anna didn't seem to have to study. In the classes they loved—like philosophy and literature—they read far beyond the required reading. But in everything else, they skipped class, forgot assignments, and always managed to pass their exams.

We'll speak French to you all night, Anna had said, begging him to come along.

I can't understand your French.

We'll speak slow-ly, won't we, Bret?

He's such a bore, Bret said.

I'm going to flunk out, Leonard said.

And an exaggerator, Bret said.

He had wanted to go. Of course he had. It was one more night with Anna, an inebriated Anna. But if he lost his scholarship, he wouldn't see them anymore at all.

It had been hard for him to study, knowing they were at Carmine's, being snarky, sitting as close as a couple. Bret, for all his homosexuality, had a desire for Anna that bordered on the erotic. Leonard could barely focus on his French. He didn't understand the subjunctive, no matter how many times Professor Montrose had tried to explain it to him. Anna was fluent in Italian and French and studied Greek and Latin. Bret knew Latin and French and was learning Italian. When they wanted to speak privately in Leonard's presence, they always picked another language.

Hey, Leonard said to Anna when the story about Roger Geffies came out later that week.

Did you see that guy? he said. The one who died?

What guy? she said. And why are you still saying *guy*? She hated that word.

The one in *The Harden Review*. He was last seen at Carmine's.

Since when do I read *The Harden Review*?

I know, but I thought you might have seen it. Leonard walked across the room and found a discarded copy. Here look, he said. This is the guy. Did you notice him there?

She glanced at the paper. He hardly looks notice-able, she said. Bret was busy hitting on someone at the bar, she continued. A straight black guy.

I just thought you might have seen him. That would be a story.

It would have been something if we had, wouldn't it?

She smiled at him.

He hadn't asked Bret about it. Leonard usually let Bret control their conversations. But it was Bret who brought it up a week later.

You know I saw that townie who died, he said to Leonard.

Roger Geffies?

At the bar. I remember him. I went up there to get a drink, had to squeeze myself in, rub against a few nasty guys. He ordered a Manhattan. Unusual choice for Carmine's.

Right, Leonard said. It was usually Pabst, or something straight up.

Thought he might be a fag, for just a second. But then he looked at me with this blank, stupid face, a face only a fishmonger could make. Oh well.

DID YOU KNOW? the interviewer asked Leonard.

Part of Leonard's talent was this ability to slip away for long stretches of time but to appear present to others in the room. He had used this skill to write pieces of his first book during some of the early jobs he'd had.

Excuse me? Leonard said. Did I know?

That you would all go on to be so successful? Could you feel it then?

Oh, he said. No, not in my case.

Bret had already been well-connected, Anna wrote pieces that were impossible to put down. And Hillary had always seemed like a writer to him, sassy and persistent, and she wrote about real people.

Whereas Leonard had dropped out. He didn't understand why he had to take so many classes that didn't interest him when he was an art major.

Bret and Anna had tried to pretend that this made Leonard more legitimate, like he wouldn't be cuckolded by academia. They seemed to like to picture him working in an automotive repair shop, learning street dialogue and incorporating those

rhythms into his fiction. But he already knew Brooklyn. He had wanted to know Harden, and even though he kept in touch with all of them for a few years and they kept up the illusion that he was somehow lucky, he was no longer part of Harden.

What advice would you give to young writers? the interviewer asked. This mandatory question usually signaled the interview was winding down.

Kill someone, Leonard said.

The young man laughed. That's a good one.

Leonard would throw that out on occasion, hoping someone would call him on it. He didn't know what he would say if an interviewer probed. But he wanted to be tested.

Leonard *knew*. Of course he knew, at some level, as even a child would know. But there was nothing real—just a coincidence and a strange feeling. One could not bring the loosest of circumstances to the police. *They were at the bar.* How convincing. But he was thankful there was nothing more convincing. Because he could not have told anyone anyway.

He placed it aside in his mind, like an unsavory meal he was finished with. But he could still see it in his periphery, and knowing it was there made his stomach turn.

And then Anna and Bret's books came out. He read all his friends' and teachers' work over the years. The Harden books he'd bought immediately, and read them in a quiet place, giving them greater attention. Bret wrote a new book every few years. Leonard didn't care much for his work, but he understood that it was important. He thought Bret's books were better in summary. Anna took her time. Her first book was a major bestseller that he could not stop reading, and he couldn't help but think that the main character bore some striking similarities to himself. He never thought he had made such an impression on her. As a writer, he should have known better. The character was surely a composite, and if his background and his gestures had crept in, it was nothing to read into. But another character in her book was surely Bret, and the place was Harden. Not Harden as Leonard had experienced it, but the college as it must have seemed to her.

And there was murder. In Anna's book, and in Bret's most

famous book, murder by blueboods beyond reproach and suspicion; in Bret's case, beyond guilt, and even motive.

The books had a confessional quality. In Bret's, the main character made callous references to his killing that everyone assumed were simply jokes. He badly lied to detectives who managed to excuse him.

And Anna had not written another book since. She had implied, right in the prologue, that she might not be able to write another story. The book seemed so blatantly confessional that he almost laughed. It was the only way he knew how to respond. There was a sick glee in learning that he had been right, dosed with equal amounts of guilt and fear.

Critics always assumed young novelists wrote books that were at least semi-autobiographical. Except when the subject was murder. No reviewer would suggest *that* part were true.

A few years later, Leonard's own book came out. It had been difficult to get published, and he had tried to keep his expectations low. He'd been told it was too clever, and too pastiche. The book did not go on to become a bestseller, but it quickly earned a literary sheen. Now he was suddenly the elite one. He rarely spoke with anyone from Harden except Hillary. But he still missed college, like he missed certain women who hadn't been good for him.

As his success grew, he was asked about Bret and Anna more often. He could protest that he was not one of them, but in his silence, he certainly was.

Several years later, after he had published three successful books, he and Anna were scheduled for panels on the same day at a literary festival in New York. He spotted her in the back of the room when he was speaking. The panel was about the influence of film on literature, and he'd been going on about film noir. He stopped talking when he saw her. She looked almost exactly the same, with the blunt haircut and the classic clothes. Her agelessness made him think that maybe she'd been a vampire all along.

She waited for him as he answered a few eager questions from straggling attendees who wanted to know how to find an agent or how to write a good query.

You're famous, she said to him.

Not like you.

Just not as rich as I am, she said.

They had dinner, and she still proved intimidating, ordering food he'd never heard of.

She had stopped smoking, and he was thankful for that, but without a cigarette in her hand, there was a creepiness to her composure. The cigarette had given her something to do, but because she was not a fidgeter, nothing had filled the void.

Anna found small ways to flatter him, mostly on the subject of his books, where he was weakest.

I'm not going to say I love them all, she said. Sometimes you try too hard.

But they're exciting, she continued. You're quite an omnivore. Really, you'll eat anything.

And you're a purist? he said.

Finicky. And you talk too much in interviews.

That's what interviews are for, he said.

Interviews are for headlines, Anna continued. You talk about what you ate for lunch. Every comic book you ever read.

You won't even say if you're married.

Why should I?

You're famous for being secretive.

Is that all I'm famous for?

That's not what I meant, he said.

No, it is. Instead of another book, I offer up the artifice.

I don't mean that.

You talk about TV shows, she said. You give dissertations.

Are you afraid of what I'll say? In Anna's book, talking too much had proved fatal. They'd killed the man with loose lips.

How's that? she said.

I'll confess my crush on you.

I'm sure you already have. Crush. That's a cute word.

Even though she no longer smoked she could still drink a good deal. She'd been a sickly child and her family had medicated her with liquor. She'd grown up sour and extremely tolerant of drink. She had already had twice as much as Leonard had, but he was drunk, and his retorts were frustratingly slow.

He tended to apologize too much when he reached his liquor limit, and he could feel it coming.

Had enough? she said.

Just the right amount, he said. She seemed to know what he meant.

This wasn't exactly as he'd pictured it—but he *had* pictured it, he wasn't above that—finally having made it, bedding the woman he'd wanted, presenting her with the irresistible allure of his major literary prize.

The lobby of the hotel was swanky, but he was half-afraid, following her upstairs, that the aesthetics of the room could change Anna's mind. He imagined she would be physically turned off by teal linens and plastic plants.

Fortunately, the room kept up the standard that the lobby had set. The bedding was modern, with tufted ivory squares and rich brown pillows. It was simple and inoffensive. You never knew what you would get in those places. He had actually stayed in more than one generic looking hotel room—all scalloped comforters and striped wallpaper—where he had noticed that the wall hangings were hung upside down. Once, he'd been lying in bed, feeling somehow off, before realizing an abstract palm tree was flipped around. On that occasion, he had tried to fix it, only to discover that the hooks on the frame were upside-down as well. He didn't bother to put it back up, leaving a faint rectangle on the wallpaper. The housekeeper who'd discovered it on the floor must have suspected a particularly wild night had transpired.

Anna took her time in the room, making herself another drink from the small bar. She sat in a chair in the corner and regarded him. He felt like a boy again, unsure of what to do with his hands. She posed herself dramatically, her legs crossed, her arms spread wide on either armrest, like it were a throne.

He knew nothing about her sexual history. At Harden, the students who didn't know Bret was gay assumed they slept together—and with Bret, it wouldn't be surprising if they had; and of course there had been talk of her and the professor, Hendricks, but there'd never been any real evidence of that. There'd been a boyfriend back then, too, but even he

had seemed oddly asexual, and she had referred to him in her acknowledgements only as her dear friend ever since. She never revealed personal information in interviews, except concerning her dog, with whom she would pose for photographs.

She was wearing a striped shirt, a black blazer with a mandarin collar and slacks with sharp pleats. Her entire outfit was like a chastity belt to Leonard, and although he knew she was no virgin, he couldn't help entertaining the illusion. A sexual purity that wasn't moral, merely superior, as though no one had been worth sleeping with all these years.

After she finished her drink, she started to unbutton her jacket. She didn't even look at him, but worked at each button unceremoniously, as though she'd been hired. He had wanted to undo the buttons. He almost wanted to reach over and stop her, but he knew that wouldn't work.

She took off all of her clothes and stood there, not smiling. Her body was as boyish as he'd ever imagined it, even though she was forty. It seemed wrong to see her like this, as though her head no longer matched her body but was detachable, something he'd popped onto a girl in a fantasy of his. He was used to undressing incrementally; he'd never understood getting naked all at once. But she stared at him as though it was what she expected, and for the first time in his adult life he removed all his clothes before sex.

Strangely, he did not feel he should kiss her on the mouth or on the neck or on her breasts, that all of it would feel contrived, god forbid, *romantic*. But barring that, he didn't know exactly what to do. She stared at him fiercely, as if that was the lovemaking itself, and it almost seemed to be so.

He felt self-conscious of his elbows and knees as he climbed onto the bed, like a marionette plopping on top of her. He was nervous before he entered her, and he could feel it in his fingers and toes the way he did when he was a teenager.

When he was inside her, it was not what he was expecting. It was like tearing something in a very satisfying way. Stupidly, he thought of The Sword in the Stone, of the sensation of pulling out the blade. The gallantry of the image embarrassed him, because it was not about that. But it was the pulling, the

satisfying pulling.

Afterwards, he felt a mixture of glee and nausea. He had corrupted this incorruptible thing, which was as wonderful and awful as that is.

Impossibly, Anna had one more drink after they had sex.

I shouldn't have stopped smoking, she said. I'd drink less.

She got back into bed with her bourbon, still naked, then said, I *am* going to smoke. Do you want to smoke?

Yeah, he said, even though he hadn't smoked in years.

Yes, she said. The word is *yes*. This time, she collected her striped shirt and put in on before climbing back into bed with her pack of Parliaments.

He had ruined her and he needed to ruin himself now, too. He wanted to say it like he wanted to throw up—the same caught feeling in his throat, the same need to get it over with.

You killed that boy, didn't you? he said.

Excuse me? Did you have to fuck me to ask me that? He had never heard her say fuck before.

Looks that way, he said. He was glad he was still a bit drunk and smoking, too, though he had already burned his throat on his first inhalation. He could not have had this conversation otherwise.

Always the detective, aren't you? she asked.

He was. He was the detective who could not crack the case. And even though you wouldn't find Leonard's books in the mystery section of a bookstore, there were sleuths in prominent roles. He had always told interviewers about his passion for Raymond Chandler. He had never said it was personal. But Bret and Anna were the confessors, and he was the gumshoe.

The inept detective, she said. The blunderer.

But he still gets his man.

Well, I didn't do it, she laughed.

But Bret did?

You should have come with us.

So I could participate?

He wouldn't have done it if you'd been there, she said. I'm not making an excuse. It's the fact of the matter. He could control his jealousy when you were there. I think he was so

conflicted, half wanting you, half owning me, he couldn't focus his aggression.

Did Bret hit on him? he said.

No, she said. God. You're not very good at this, are you? If Bret killed everyone who rebuffed him back then, we'd have nobody left. Is that really how you figured it? I would have given you more credit. No, the boy had one of those accents Bret couldn't stand. And a mustache, and a curl to his lip. A real Southern Gothic. You would have thought I was wearing a halter top, the way he sauntered up. We couldn't have looked less inviting. But maybe it was our clothes that attracted him. He said, What's with the suit? You a business lady or something? He seemed to like that idea. He bought me a drink. He'd asked the bartender what I was having, and he seemed to get a laugh out of a little woman drinking her bourbon neat. Bret started lying straightaway, like he liked to do, making up stories about who we were and why we were wearing those clothes. Televangelists, I think the story went.

I heard him do that one, Leonard said.

It was one of his favorites, she said. This boy knew we were lying. But he went along with it. He wanted me to dance with him. One of those pop metal songs was on. Do I look like I dance? I asked him. He got a little aggressive. Just innuendo, nothing more. But I could see Bret's face start to harden. You think you can just come and talk to people like us, Bret said to the boy. I don't know. The idea that this boy targeted me as a conquest made him feel dirty, I think. Like he was besmirching us by the very suggestion. Oh, I get it, the boy said. Lady's a dyke, is she? He breathed on me. And then he finally went back to his compatriot at the bar. But he didn't leave when his friend left. His friend went home with a girl and he stayed at the bar. I knew why we were hanging around. I was getting bored, but Bret kept pressing for one more drink. When the boy got up, Bret stood up. I didn't know what was about to happen, but I was excited to find out.

I didn't try to stop him, she continued. By the time I realized what was going to happen, I was in an odd shock, like a man I barely knew had proposed to me and I was horrified but

also momentarily pleased, unable to say no. Does that sound strange? He hit him on the head with a bottle he'd taken out of the bar. It was late by then, no one else was around. I don't know if he intended to kill him at first, but once he'd hit him, he seemed to like it. I was distracted by the brightness of the blood, how fake it looked. I just stood there. He kept hitting him. Then he kicked him in the head. We were near the car. We just picked him up between us like he was a drunken friend and brought him along in the car with us. I guess you know the rest, detective. That was in the papers.

Leonard listened to her telling it like it were just an extemporaneous story she crafted to amuse him. There was no emotion, and it felt very far away. He had to force himself back to the reality of it.

But the bartender knew who you two were, Leonard said. He must have seen him talking to you.

You couldn't see the booth from the bar, she said. But see, that's just it. The police work. It should have been obvious. We talked to him there, we left soon after, there was blood only two blocks from the bar. But he had already told us too much about himself. We knew he was running from away from his family in Kentucky. We knew he was in trouble. There were so many other places to look. Not at us. Not at Harden students.

Like your book, he said.

It wasn't killing him that changed me. That was so much easier to take than I had ever guessed. I didn't feel guilty so much as astonished. There were so few consequences, even inside of me. I think it made me an atheist.

I thought you were always an atheist.

That was just in class, she said. I was still Catholic. Somewhere inside.

Leonard could see it now, the way Bret and Anna had reworked the story in their fiction, the way they had dealt with it. She had romanticized it, turning it into part of a sacred ritual, her language almost ethereal, all beautiful woods and rushing wind, leaves underfoot and crisp snow. Bret had debased it, making it part of a string of totally motiveless killing, his words all gore, chainsaws and cannibalism, blue intestines and

mutilated breasts.

The real motive was simply not good enough.

Leonard had reworked the story in one of his novels, too, casting himself as an orphan indebted to a dangerous group that had brought them into their fold. A group he feared and loved but would never completely be a part of.

It's like this, she said. Everybody knew and nobody cares. You knew. And you still slept with me. You still had to consummate your success.

Leonard couldn't argue with that. But there was more to it. He wanted to see how far he could go, how detached he could become and still stand it. How like Bret and Anna he could become.

You could have told someone, she said. But then you wouldn't have been able to do this. Or did you think we'd kill you, too? She laughed.

It was not a crazy idea.

Why did you have to know? she said. Does it make things any different?

It did. What was it that one of the reviewers had said about her book? *Implicates the reader in a conspiracy.*

He was more than a reader. He had been at Harden. The narrator in Anna's novel hadn't killed anyone, either. But he had been deeply complicit. Leonard wanted to feel the full weight of that complicity. Without knowing, he could always compartmentalize it. He could tell himself that they were all novelists, and that they only knew one language—never fact, only fiction.

Ever since then, when the subject of Harden had come up in interviews, he was tempted. He offered up small truths. But he knew he would be reduced to a character in one of Bret or Anna's books. No one would take it seriously.

He looked up at the interviewer who was now packing up his things. Did I talk too much? he asked the man.

The young man slid his business card across the table and pushed back his chair.

I wish you had said more.

Benjamin S. Grossberg

The Space Traveler and Home

In my mind's the planet: spinning,
iridescent as mother of pearl,
worn vitreous and smooth by waves
of space. Because of what I know
about the layout of the universe, I know
I am always moving toward it—
whatever direction I might travel;
it is parallel to every vector, a sharp
left at every star. And because of that,
although I can't find the planet
on any chart, have no coordinates
to plot (no X, Y, or Z axes),
I am confident I am getting closer.
It's like staring at a mirror as hard
as possible, in an attempt to see
yourself (beyond the deadened look
of a space traveler staring in a mirror),
as if you could see into the dilation
of your own pupils. In the blackness
of mine, I would see my planet:
iridescent ball floating in starless
darkness, and I'd touch down there,
kneel on an iridescent beach.
But then I remember I'm in a bathroom,
that there's nothing in the mirror
but the deadened face: moving
toward home (that must be so) so fast
it's strange to think I'm standing still.

Philip Dacey

A Cheer for Thomas Eakins

"I have seen artists bore their friends to buy
their pictures but I had rather sell to my enemies."
—T. E.

Artists abuse their friends: "Buy my work, please!"
Don't they already have enough to do?
I'd rather sell to my enemies.

Think of all the peculiarities
our friends tolerate in us: we're a walking zoo.
Yet they're subjected to, "Love my latest, please!"

We should instead get down on our knees
before our friends and say thank you,
then go steal praise from our grudging enemies.

Otherwise, we lose our friends by degrees
each time we coo, "I'm sure you'll adore my new"
picture, poem, pot, the lot. And subtler pleas

for love—"I'm burning all my work"—well, geez,
who's fooled? Shame on us who turn friends into
an audience. For that, there are strangers, enemies.

Since art's part self-display, a vulgar tease—
we strut in skin-tight form that shows right through—
friends deserve better, and aren't hard to please:
just stick it (your work) to your enemies.

Gabriel Welsch

Safe

Admit what you've come to think necessary—
regular trash service, a murmured room, a band
hitting their notes but loose in the measure,
a morning for once just possibility,
and the evening prior a recollected charm,
dinner of pears and curls of parmesan,
bread and wine, the tumult of war
a faraway concern, banked as you are
in a country which keeps it atrocities
at a distance but fresh as television.

Maybe you think the morning
has it all over the evening,
darkness having its regrets,
the worry toward troubled
sleep and its visions, the cold climb
of the stairs, through the draft,
to the chill rumple of bed,
the slow hiss of sleep from another
room, the red glow of time burning.

And then you wake, to break
your promises, to lie to your wife,
to begrudge your children their time,
to hate your neighbor, your job,
your street, your house, your blood,
your god, to hate what you will never
understand—amid all you have,
the leathered hours of a worldly life—
why you, so fiercely, loathe the days'
brute turning, their countenance
calm how you can never be.

Darin Ciccotelli

Thor

The world stays imprisoned
by its own activity.
One wind to bedevil the sky, American flags,

chimneysmoke, cable, quavering vocal-bands of children.

Things bend to this wind forever.

A thorn's catch of denim drops.
Shagbark drops.
Above a gutter,
mosquitoes poise themselves, still feet
unwet with water.

All things genuflect to this wind,
poetic meters, months,
the longitudinal tension of girders, dice-play,
doppler-effected
vans mouthing *echo*, then *ichor*—

one wind
ambidextrous with sway

choking
the calla lilies

twanging
the harp of the pines.

One day,
winds tang and vacillate.

Three o'clock. 1982. Thunderstorms confine the boys
to their basement windows.
A flash.
Trees like bailiffs,
then entoptics,
then gone. Without knowing why,

I get my father's hammer.

(This room's sure-set plinths, now, right now, irradiate in the memory—
torn sofa, t.v.'s brown leash terminating into channel,
the hairdresser's swivel, trophies,
the geminis of golden frames,

jalousies
heavy with rain.)

Without knowing why,

I hammer
a pencil.
Hammer its middle. Hammer its head.

Then, I hammer ten pencils,
hammer box-perfect handfuls,

hammer diligent, hammer random, hammer loose-hands, hammer fast.

I peacock the floor
with indentation.

I confetti off the floor
with heads, leads, and crowns.

I hammer everything to the eraser,
then stop,

preserving their pink pill-box hats.

(I don't know why
I do this.)
Suddenly, footsteps.

I stash
this nest

inside the sofa. . . .

True autobiography links these deeds with their like,
archiving the wields
of the million-armed, the mental hammers.

Mothers did not sob. Nor did they reprimand.

Still, not inaugurating the clinician's distance,
they brooded through the black

on how far such outlawry could go,
how hard their sons could hammer
an unmanifest, unmalliable world.

So many objects—
gold claw-hammers, tin tack-hammers,

jackhammers splitting limestone,
arcades of whac-a-mole,
pyrite, jade, quartz

(yes, your very own rock-hammer,
small as a skate-key).

Hammers gleaming from the mind's velutinous box,
gems of the beautiful delusion.

Five o'clock. 1982. Another sunday get-together.
Seen from on high,

this driveway's dumb motorcade must seem effigial,

bodies inert

bodies
girdled with glass.

Thunderclap. Families shuttle through gates.
Fathers tip
above their daughter's heads
carnation-papered boxes,

each high as an offering,
each bled by the new effluvium.

Indoors, everyone nods off the rain's crassness.
Uncles chide children. Uncles' grins as white as spats.

But I, bibulously,
step out to the rain.

I sop
the rice and the water.

Whanging each sedan's doorhandle,
I am redeemed, then safe
in the rear seat's upholstery.
Suddenly,
quiet.

Droplets sled the newly-waxed car.

Droplets pool.

Droplets trail off into thinness, leaving
swans, hearts, and stars.

Then, droplets race.

Droplets, three by three, hie themselves down the water-pocked windshield.
I flip to my knees.

I shout the imaginary race—

Three to the front! Two coming on! Now it's one! One!

I color-comment the rain, chanting, chastizing,
(Now, right now,
flanked with champagne flutes or talk of horoscopes,
someone must be telling the story,
a rainy afternoon,
bicycling through municipal puddles,
and, in a driveway,

he sees this boy, alone, barking at the world
through automotive glass.)

I am potent in voice.

I, the oblation. I, the rain.

Identifier of ether. Judge of clouds and drops.

I hammer my place in this world,
then the world.

Tim Boswell

A Mercy: Toni Morrison.
Knopf, 2008.

When Toni Morrison accepted the Nobel Prize in 1993, she gave a speech that revealed, through symbol, metaphor, and fable, Morrison's view of the role of language and the inherent responsibilities of those who wield it. Language, she said, "can never live up to life once and for all. Nor should it. Language can never 'pin down' slavery, genocide, war… Its force, its felicity, is in its reach toward the ineffable."[1]

In Morrison's latest novel, *A Mercy*, she continues to masterfully craft language in her attempts to describe what cannot be described, and in the process brings her readers a step closer to understanding what can never be truly understood. As she has done in previous novels (most notably *Beloved*, arguably her best work), she focuses on the forces of hatred, racism, loss, narrow-mindedness, and the debilitating effects of despair, but also on the redemptive powers of love, hope, beauty, and the powerful bond between mother and child. None of these relationships is established simply; in Morrison's vision of the world—whether in the seventeenth century or the twentieth—there are no easy conclusions to be drawn.

A Mercy takes place in the late 17th century, when the slave trade is burgeoning in American colonies amidst political unrest, religious dissonance, and violent conflicts with the native population. In an echo—or perhaps a precursor—to Sethe's choice to kill her children in order to save them in *Beloved*, a mother gives up her young daughter, Florens, to be a slave, sending her to unknown evils to spare her the certain evils facing her if she stays. Black women of any age are subject to the whims of white men in this time and place, and the daughter's handful of years does not guard her from the wandering hands and eyes of the master; to Florens, however, her story is one of abandonment by a mother who chose her baby brother over

her. The trauma of this abandonment will haunt her throughout the story that she tells, shaping her reactions to the dangers she faces, and coloring her ideas of love, desire, and ownership.

Florens's voice is portrayed through dreamy, lilting, inventive language, as Morrison shapes her diction, tone, and grammar to the speaker; other voices join in through the novel, telling the stories of the lives connected to hers in this particular slice of time. We read of her mother, justifying her choice, longing for her daughter—the result of a group rape—and hoping her child learns what she can no longer tell her. There is the voice of Jacob Vaark, the trader who reluctantly accepts Florens in order to settle a debt; Lina, an African servant who has seen the devastation wreaked by smallpox before, and must face it again in this new world; Sorrow, a girl who spent her childhood at sea and survived a shipwreck, only to be all the more lost on land until she has a child of her own; and Rebekka, the wife of Jacob, who crossed an ocean for an arranged marriage, only to face a lonely life in the wilderness when her husband is stricken by the pox.

The novel is not long—167 pages—and to an extent, this weakens the reading experience. With multiple voices, each character has a limited space to speak, and the story ends just as emotional investment in these men and women begins to render their pain both convincing and profound. Still, Morrison utilizes a few specific details and brief flashes to strong effect; she is not interested in a sweeping historical treatment of 17th-century America, but rather in a searing, intimate glimpse into the lives of a few representative individuals. Their hopes, fears, and experiences lay the foundation for all of her other novels, revealing, if not the origins, then at least the early years of the vices and struggles that infuse all of her works, the dark kernel at the core of racism.

In some ways, then, *A Mercy* is nothing new—it is familiar Morrison fare, both beautiful and brutal. Even within what amounts to a prologue to novels such as *Beloved* or *The Bluest Eye*, she continues to shine as one of America's greatest living writers. On the other hand, that assessment minimizes the power of this novel, which functions not as a framing device

for other, more developed stories, but as one more attempt to convey the ineffable, to shine light on the dark places of our past and our present. In Morrison's acceptance speech, she told a fable of children entreating a wise old woman to use her language to find truth—"We know you can never do it properly—once and for all. Passion is never enough; neither is skill. But try." Morrison's newest work contains both passion and skill in abundance, but more importantly, it presents her latest effort to reveal, to guide, and to protect. As the children tell the old woman, "Language alone protects us from the scariness of things with no names." Some things can never be described; thankfully, we have the wisdom of those like Morrison, who will continue to try.

1. Morrison, Toni. "Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech." Legacies. 4th edition. Ed. Jan Zlotnik Schmidt, Lynne Crockett, and Carley Rees Bogarad. Boston: Wadsworth Cengage, 2009. 1330-1335.

Britta Coleman

Last Known Position: James Mathews.
University of North Texas Press, 2008.

Author James Mathews won the 2008 Katherine Ann Porter Prize for short fiction with this debut collection, *Last Known Position*. Mr. Mathews grew up on army bases, served in the U.S. Air Force, and has served on five combat deployments. Because of Mr. Mathew's military expertise and the title of the collection, readers might be tempted to classify *Last Known Position* as a military book. While *Last Known Position* contains a fair share of military themed stories, because of Mathews' writing and powers of observation, the book transcends easy categorization. Mathew's debut is more than a collection of stories with military themes: it's about characters struggling with vulnerability and trust, who dance on the verge of desperation with wit, humor, and humanity.

Mathews mines the rich fields of family, relationships, and yes, the microcosm that is the military to string together a collection that uses the terrifying and the ridiculous, the violent and the sublimely funny to speak to the larger human condition.

Several stories juxtapose the heroic with the absurd: as when in the title story, a pilot jogging through Argentina encounters a bewildered young boy whose horse—still alive—is propped in the upper branches of a nearby tree. The pilot, unwittingly embroiled in horse removal and sleight-of-hand from the locals, is no less admirable for his culpability. The collection has its share of memorable, quirky characters like the senile grandmother who, in defense of her dinner buffet spread, guns down unruly visitors with a water pistol. Even more likeable, and surprising, is Carl, the character in "Strong Arm" who, with his bombastic persuasion and cheerful violence, effectively rattles the bookish, celebrity-stalking Henry.

Perhaps it is Mathews' military training that allows for the

author's refreshing and sometimes irreverent handling of life and death: one short story is titled "Man Swallows Goldfish While Sleepwalking, Chokes to Death" and its pages chronicle one unlucky family's propensity towards spectacularly unusual deaths: including one particularly gruesome attempted suicide by rubber mallet.

Mathews has a penchant for placing animals in odd places, such as that dangling horse, whose name, ironically, is Aguila, or "Eagle." Other stories feature a cat named Pontoon, a might-just-be-real mystical lion who stalks a suburban neighborhood, ill-fated poodles named Roger and Tuffy, and even a second horse named Reveille who becomes a major character in the opening story, "Grenade." A coming-of-age tale with echoes of Stephen King's "The Body" and the power of childhood bonds, "Grenade" explores the terrible influence of friendship when mixed with boredom and easy access to weapons of destruction. Mathews creates a sense of unease from the first page, through the antagonist Trace Mullins whose eyes are gunpowder gray, and who wields enough wisdom, and power over his less bullish friends, to be dangerous. After a prank gone wrong, the wounded Reveille plaintively shadows the group, and becomes a symbol for lost innocence and misplaced glory.

While most of Mathews' stories treat absurdity, humor, and painful truths with confidence, a few fall short of the target. The pacing in "Seven Rifles at Dawn" lags when too many flashbacks to a late-night western cause a sleepless officer to slowly lose his grip on reality, and "Cannibals in the Basement" fails to find its footing after an intriguing start. These small misses are easily overlooked, however, given the collection's abundance of stronger selections. "Man Swallows Fish" overcomes its thin drawing of female characters to create a fresh, and laugh-out-loud take on family politics, and the aforementioned "Grenade," "Strong Arm," and the title story are all winners. The excellent last story, "Our Deepest Sympathy," provides a poignant finish to the collection, but it is the most experimental story, "The Fifth Week," that shines the most brilliantly. Told in the pluralistic "we" viewpoint, it chronicles

the violent pecking order of recruits in their fifth week of training. Funny, terrifying, and passionate, it's the type of story where you grab a friend and insist, "You have to read this." Which is, for any reader, the highest payable compliment.

William Grattan

A Fight in the Doctor's Office: Cary Holladay.

Miami University Press, 2009

Winner of the Miami University Press Novella contest, Cary Holladay's *A Fight in the Doctor's Office* is an interesting study of 22-year-old Jenny Hall Havener and her obsession with a 2-year-old deaf black boy. When the story begins, it is 1967, and Jenny is traveling through rural Virginia with her father and mother in their brown Lincoln Continental. This affluent white family is on a "a vacation of sorts," visiting a Hot Springs resort and other Virginia destinations while on the lookout for Jenny's husband, Spalding, a scientist who has fled the Halls' Capitol Hill townhouse. Married just three months, Jenny and Spalding had met at the Library of Congress, just the place, Jenny figured, for "finding a smart husband." The author makes it clear that Jenny has not married for love, but from a vague sense of boredom, since her friends have already begun to raise families.

While looking for an old historic hotel in the small town of Glen Allen, Jenny leaves the car and encounters the young black boy, Benjamin, and his great-grandmother outside a run-down "shack" on a country road. She learns that the great-grandmother, Hattie, cares for the boy with her husband, Woodrow. "He's the cutest baby I've seen in my whole life," coos Jenny, who hands the woman several folded bills and instructs her to buy the boy "something he needs."

Jenny is so smitten by Benjamin that she decides to remain in Glen Allen, abandoning her family and her search for Spalding. To the reader's surprise, her parents offer little resistance to her impulsive move. In fact, her father gives her the Continental ("We'll just take the train home and buy a new one") and, for housing, buys her a long-shuttered store, called BUY TRADE SELL, that used to deal in pianos, coffins and

carousel animals. Though comical, this may strike readers as too convenient and far-fetched, but we soon become captivated by Jenny's new mission, the rescue of Benjamin from his poor great-grandparents.

She will accomplish her mission by spending money on the family, lots of money. What the family needs, she believes, are a TV, the finest coffee and fresh milk, turkey and fresh vegetables. When Jenny fails to detect a telephone in the house, she vows to buy them a "princess phone." When she notices Woodrow hand-writing a note, Jenny tells herself that she will buy monogrammed stationery, a Cross pen, and a Smith-Corona typewriter. Of course she buys Benjamin scads of presents, many of which—a tricycle, a swing set, a puppy—Hattie refuses to accept. "This is too much extra," Hattie argues. "He a baby." Throughout the novella Jenny persists in her belief that material goods will improve the family's life and, in the end, win Benjamin's favor.

But Jenny's materialism is far from her only faulty thinking. By setting Jenny's sheltered existence against rural, small town Virginia, the author exposes all of the heroine's misconceptions. When it comes to blacks, Jenny is a stereotyper extraordinaire. Time and again, we see her draw the wrong conclusions about Hattie and Woodrow. She figures they must use an outhouse, too poor to afford a bathroom (their house does include one). She assumes that all blacks are regular church-goers: "They're supposed to spend their whole day worshipping, and Sunday nights too, plus Wednesday nights, singing hymns and calling out to Jesus, egging on their preacher as he gets worked up and wild." Inventing an entire life for Benjamin's absent mother, Jenny presumes that she must have abandoned her son, eager to leave confining small town life: "…in a flash Jenny perceives a fly-by-night father, a teenage mother laughing in a juke joint, in a low-cut red dress and gold earrings, a young woman ashamed of the wood stove and the decent countrified old people, hungry for high times and fortune." (Benjamin's mother is, in fact, dead).

When her imagination is not busy conjuring misconceptions about Hattie and her family, Jenny indulges in secret plots

to spirit Benjamin from their decrepit house. After discarding several plans, she schemes to remove Benjamin on the pretext of taking him, by herself, to a Richmond ear specialist who can diagnose and cure his deafness. But Hattie foils Jenny's plan, agreeing that Benjamin should see the doctor and announcing that she will take a day off from work (she cleans churches) to accompany them. This sets up the climactic fight of the book's title: "She (Jenny) lands a slap on Hattie's face, then a good hard punch on Hattie's arm. Hattie releases Jenny's hair but wrenches Benjamin away. Jenny screams his name as he slides out of her hold. She knots her fingers into his shirt, but Hattie is right there in her face, reeking of sweat and starch and rage, clawing at Jenny's hands, her voice a hiss…."

While the reader has been waiting for Jenny's comeuppance, it is hard not to feel empathy for her. We recognize that her feelings for Benjamin represent the first time she has felt true love. We may feel saddened by the outcome of the fight, but it is a sadness that turns to hope as Jenny resolves to become more independent.

At times, Holladay is heavy-handed in her story-telling. At one point, Jenny falls asleep in one of the coffins still housed in Buy Trade Sell, only to be rescued by a neighbor girl. Jenny observes her birthday on the day she falls for a local handyman and then pictures a life with him and Benjamin in Richmond. In the final chapter, an optician's diagnosis telegraphs to the reader that Jenny has not been "seeing" well.

Despite the minor flaws, Holladay, a Memphis-based writer with four previous books, delivers all the delights of the novella form: a stripped-down plot and sustained focus on one character, economical narrative, and taut and lyrical prose. She is masterful in handling point of view, employing a limited third person, except in the novella's the middle chapter, which is told from the perspective of the neighbor girl, who conveys to the reader the town's feelings about Jenny. The present-tense narration serves to accentuate Jenny's short-sightedness and need for quick gratification. All in all, *A Fight in the Doctor's Office* is a quirky novella that packs a wallop in its dramatic climax.

William Grattan

The Bible Salesman: Clyde Edgerton.
Back Bay Books, 2009.

When you read the title of Clyde Edgerton's latest comic novel, *The Bible Salesman*, it's logical to think of Flannery O'Connor's famous short story "Good Country People" and her salesman, Manley Pointer, who steals Hulga Hopewell's wooden leg after a barn-loft tryst.

But Edgerton's main character, twenty-year-old Henry Dampier, is not that kind of salesman. He is a con man of sorts. He sells Bibles that he has obtained for free under false pretenses. But, all in all, he's an innocent and naïve fellow. He's courteous to old women, chivalrous to the younger ones, and respectful of family members like his kind-hearted Aunt Dorie, who raised him on the teachings of the Baptist Church.

The novel is most poignant in its depiction of Henry's youth. Without indulging in sentimentality, the North Carolina-based author recounts the sadness and joy of a tight-knit family in a small Southern community. There's the death of Henry's father—he was struck by a piece of timber sticking out of a truck—and the ensuing abandonment by his mother, Libby. We watch as infant Henry, with his sister Caroline's help, almost drowns at a family gathering. On the lighter side, we see Henry learning to remove a woman's bra by practicing on his favorite male cousin, Carson. And we're introduced to quirky small-town characters like Mrs. Albright, an amateur ventriloquist with "talking cats," named Moses, Isaac, Judas, and Mary Magdalene.

After his mother leaves the family, Henry is sent to live with Dorie and her husband Jack, a ne'er-do-well, who likes to cook and fish, who chews tobacco *while* he smokes his trademark cigarillos. Jack is the kind of man who sleeps late on Sunday mornings, steals the occasional leather jacket, and, in one compelling scene, sneaks the family into an exclusive beach club, telling his nephew "'We're as good as any of these people.'"

Despite Jack's flaws, Henry holds deep affection for his uncle, whose humorous takes on life, happiness, and love teach him more than his Bible-quoting aunt. For mysterious reasons—he tells Henry "I've kinda got in over my head"—Jack leaves Henry and Dorie early one morning to pursue undisclosed opportunities in Fayetteville, and we feel the sadness of Henry's loss.

By the time Henry turns 20, it's clear that Jack and Dorie remain powerful influences in his life. He is still an avid reader of the Bible, which he sells door-to-door as he travels throughout the Southeast. His sales calls provide the novel with many poignant vignettes. Not only does he meet his eventual wife, Marleen Green—the scenes of their courtship are among the sweetest in recent memory—but Henry is able to play the good Samaritan. In one humorous scene, he calls on a woman who has just lost her fifteen-year-old cat, Bunny, which, she fears, is dead. Always helpful, Henry discovers that the cat has died after a run-in with a snake, the cat's head swollen to the size of "a cantaloupe." Afraid that the sight of the cat's disfigured head will disturb its distraught owner, Henry improvises and wraps the cat's head in his handkerchief, a "burial shroud" ("It's the way they bury all cats in England nowadays," he tells the owner). Then he buries Bunny in the woods behind the woman's house, inventing prayers and a special funeral ceremony. Before he leaves, he gives the woman two Bibles, free.

Henry is not the savviest businessmen. It's his lack of sophistication, and his desire to lead an exciting life, that make him vulnerable to a con man who offers a ride one day while Henry is out selling in western North Carolina. Preston Clearwater, a World War Two veteran, recognizes Henry as the type of earnest and hard-working young man who can help advance his criminal career. He recruits Henry as a driver, telling his new acquaintance that he is undercover for the FBI.

"'So you know J. Edgar Hoover—you're an actual G-man?'"

"'Oh yes. J. Edgar and I are pretty good buddies. I've shot pool with him, eat supper with him, but he don't let nobody know that he shoots pool, see. He's a Christian, like you…and me.'"

Impressed by Clearwater—he's confident and professional-seeming and he resembles Clark Gable—Henry agrees to work for him. He believes he is "serving God in a different way" by foiling car-theft rings when, in fact, he is now part of one himself. Henry is paid well for his work and for a long time he is oblivious to his new boss's true identify. As the novel progresses, Clearwater becomes greedier and more audacious in his exploits, and bit by bit, it dawns on Henry that his mentor is not a G-Man, after all. When the drama mounts and violence is threatened, Henry must find a way to extricate himself as an unwitting accomplice to crime, and then account for his own conduct.

The crime spree gives the novel its primary plot line, but it's far from the most interesting part. It's not always funny enough, nor dramatic enough. It lacks the authenticity that infuses Edgerton's account of Henry's youth and his courtship of Marlene. But over all, *The Bible Salesman* is an entertaining and moving novel by a storyteller whose prose is spare and vivid, whose ear for dialogue is perfect. Unlike many modern novels, Edgerton's work avoids the temptation to hold up his Bible-spouting characters to ridicule. His is a gentler sensibility, one marked by wisdom, affection and, above all, humor.

Contributors

Sally Ball is Associate Director of Four Way Books and an Assistant Professor at Arizona State University. Her collection of poetry, *Annus Mirabilis*, was published by Barrow Street Press in 2005. Her poems have recently appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Slate*, and *Yale Review*, among other publications.

Roy Bentley was awarded an IA fellowship in poetry by the Florida Division of Cultural Affairs last year, and he lives in both Florida and Iowa, where he is an adjunct professor of English at Loras College in Dubuque. He is a six-time winner of the Ohio Arts Council individual artist fellowship. A recent book of his (*The Trouble with a Short Horse in Montana*, 2006) won the White Pine poetry prize. He has published two other book-length collections—*Boy in a Boat* (University of Alabama, 1986) and *Any One Man* (Bottom Dog, 1992)—and won a Creative Writing Fellowship in Poetry from the NEA (2002). His poems have been published in *The Laurel Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Pleiades*, *Shenandoah*, and *Prairie Schooner,* among others. Recently, his work has appeared in *Sou'wester*, *North American Review*, *The Cortland Review*, *Drunken Boat*, *MARGIE* and *Cold Mountain Review*. His new book is called *The Burden of the White-hatted Man* and is in search of a publisher.

Lauren Berry's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Cream City Review*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, and *Whiskey Island*, among others. She received a BA from Florida State University and an MFA from the University Of Houston, where she served as poetry editor for *Gulf Coast*. This year she won the Inprint Verlaine Poetry Prize and accepted the Diane Middlebrook poetry fellowship at the University of Wisconsin. Her manuscript, *Mosquito Fever Speeches*, is a semi-finalist for Persea's Lexi Rudnitsky book prize.

Ralph Black teaches at SUNY Brockport and is Co-Director of the Brockport Writers Forum. He has placed poems in *Gettysburg Review, Massachusetts Review*, and *Southern Poetry Review*, and has published a book titled *Turning Over the Earth* (Milkweed Editions).

Tim Boswell

Arthur Brown is a Professor of English at University of Evansville. His collection, *The Mackerel at St. Ives*, was published by David Robert Books in 2008. His poems have appeared in *AGNI, Michigan Quarterly Review, Poetry, Southwest Review, The Malahat Review,* and *American Arts Quarterly*.

Christopher Buckley is a Guggenheim Fellow in poetry for 2007-2008. His most recent book is *And the Sea* from The Sheep Meadow press in New York. In 2008 his fifteenth book was published: *Modern History: Prose Poems 1987-2007* from Tupelo Press. Alcatrez Editions published B*ear Flag Republic: Prose Poems and Poetics from California*, which he edited with Gary Young. He is a Professor of Creative Writing at University of California Riverside.

Darin Ciccotelli has recently published poems in *Colorado Review, Denver Quarterly, Hayden's Ferry Review,* and *Spinning Jenny*, among other publications. He has received a James A. Michener Fellowship, an Inprint/C. Glen Cambor Fellowship, an inaugural Houston Writing Fellowship, and several Pushcart Prize nominations. For two years, he was the managing editor of *Gulf Coast: A Journal of Literature and Fine Art*. He currently teaches at the University of Houston.

Charlie Clark has had work published in *Forklift, OH; Louisville Review; Missouri Review; Pebble Lake Review;* and *Smartish Pace*. He was recently nominated for a Pushcart by *Low Rent Magazine*.

Charlie Clark has had work published in *Forklift, OH; Louisville Review; Missouri Review; Pebble Lake Review;* and *Smartish Pace*. He was recently nominated for a Pushcart by *Low Rent Magazine*.

Britta Coleman's debut novel, *Potter Springs*, was published by Warner Books (Hachette Publishing Group) and won the Lone Star Scribe Award from Barnes and Noble Booksellers. She teaches at the University of North Texas.**Peter Cooley** teaches creative writing at Tulane University in New Orleans. His eighth book of poetry, *Divine Margins*, appeared from Carnegie Mellon in January 2009. He has poems forthcoming in *Hotel Amerika, Boulevard,* and *Poetry East*.

Dana Curtis's first full-length collection of poetry, *The Body's Response to Famine*, won the Pavement Saw Press Transcontinental Poetry Prize. She has also published six chapbooks: *Antiviolet* (forthcoming from Pudding House Press), *Pyromythology* (Finishing Line Press), *Twilight Dogs* (Pudding House Press), *Incubus/Succubus* (West Town Press), *Dissolve* (Sarasota Poetry Theatre Press), and *Swingset Enthralled* (Talent House Press). Her work has appeared in *Quarterly West, Indiana Review, Colorado Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*. She has received grants from the Minnesota State Arts Board and the McKnight Foundation. She is the Editor-in-Chief of Elixir Press.

Philip Dacey is the author of ten full-length books of poems, the latest two being *Vertebrae Rosaries: 50 Sonnets* (Red Dragonfly Press, 2009) and *The New York Postcard Sonnets: A Midwesterner Moves to Manhattan* (Rain Mountain Press, 2007), as well as numerous chapbooks. His collection of poems about the painter Thomas Eakins, *The Mystery of Max Schmitt: Poems on the Life and Work of Thomas Eakins*, was published by Turning Point Books in 2004. His awards include three Pushcart Prizes and a Discovery Award from the New York YM-YWHA's Poetry Center.

Sharon Dolin is Writer-in-Residence at Eugene Lang College at The New School of Liberal Arts in New York. Her fourth collection of poetry, *Burn and Dodge*, was published by University of Pittsburgh Press in 2008 and won the AWP Donald Hall Prize in Poetry. Her poems have appeared in *Barrow Street, St. Ann's Review, Court Green*, and *The Laurel Review* and is forthcoming in *New American Writing, 5 a.m., The Southampton Review, Prairie Schooner*, and *The Antioch Review*. Her poems "Lament of Shovel and Bell (noon)" and "Psalm of the Flying Shell (4:30 a.m.)" are part of a sequence called "Of Hours," inspired by the paintings of Ellen Wiener.

Will Felts is a retired Naval Reservist and a retired public high school English teacher. He co-authored the novel *Spirits* under the pen name Saunders Newcomb.

Richard Foerster is an underemployed editor whose latest collection of poetry, *The Burning of Troy* (BOA Editions), was published in 2006. He has recently had work published in *Shenandoah, Gettysburg Review, 32 Poems, Texas Review,* and *Alimentum.*

Ben Grossberg is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Hartford. His published works include the books *Underwater Lengths in a Single Breath* (Ashland Poetry Press, 2007) and *Sweet Core Orchard* (University of Tampa, 2009) and the chapbook *The Auctioneer Bangs His Gavel* (Kent State, 2006). Other 'Space Traveler' poems recently appeared or are forthcoming in *The Journal, Green Mountains Review, Cincinnati Review, Hotel Amerika, North American Review* and *Natural Bridge.*

K. A. Hays holds the 2007-2010 Emerging Writer Fellowship at Bucknell's Stadler Center for Poetry. She is the author of Dear Apocalypse (Carnegie Mellon, 2009), and her poetry has appeared in Southern Review, Poetry Northwest, Beloit Poetry Journal, Missouri Review, and Iowa Review. Her work is forthcoming in The Best American Poetry 2009 and The Yale Anthology of Younger American Poetry.

Lisa Lewis is Director of the Creative Writing Program at Oklahoma State University. Her books include *The Unbeliever* (Brittingham Prize), *Silent Treatment* (National Poetry Series), Story Box (Poetry West, chapbook), *Burned House with Swimming Pool* (forthcoming, Dream Horse Press), and *Vivisect* (forthcoming, New Issues Press). New work of hers also appears or is forthcoming in *Kenyon Review, Seattle Review, Fence,* and *Rattle*.

Marylee MacDonald is a retired carpenter who went back to writing fiction after many years as a "how to" writer for magazines such as *Carpenter* and *Old-House Journal*. Her work has appeared in *New Delta Review, The Bellevue Literary Review, StoryQuarterly, Ruminate,* and *North Atlantic Review*.

Daiva Markelis's essay "The Lithuanian Dictionary of Depression" is from her forthcoming memoir *White Field, Black Sheep: A Lithuanian-American Life*, which will be published in fall 2010 by The University of Chicago Press. She is an Associate Professor of English at Eastern Illinois University.

Yona McDonough's American-born parents lived on a kibbutz in Israel from 1949 to 1958; she and her brother were both born there. She says: "Although I came to this country when I was an infant, Israel has always exerted a strong pull on me and I have been working on a collection of stories loosely based on my parents' experiences during those years; 'Capricorn Rising' is one of the stories in the collection." Her published works include the novels *Breaking the Bank*, *In Dahlia's Wake,* and *The Four Temperaments*, as well as the essay collections *All the Available Light: A Marilyn Monroe Reader* and *The Barbie Chronicles: A Living Doll Turns Forty.*

Michael C. Peterson holds degrees in English from Stanford University and UVA, and an MFA from the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. His work is recently published and forthcoming in *New American Writing, Gulf Coast, Fulcrum, Barrow Street*, and *American Letters & Commentary*. He works as a welder in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Tom Pierce's work has previously appeared in *Quarterly West*. When he is not writing, he enjoys spending time with his family and training for triathlons.

Joanna Rawson is author of the collections *Quarry* (Pitt Poetry Series, 1998) and *Unrest* (Graywolf Press, fall 2010).

Roger Reeves has been published in *Poetry, Gulf Coast, Sou'wester, Verse Daily, Best New Poets,* and *Indiana Review.*

Michael Isaac Shokrian has a solo practice as a civil lawyer. He was managing editor of a business daily paper in Oakland, California and a regular contributor to "*Shofar,*" a New York / California monthly dedicated to Iranian-Jewish life in the United States. He says he "stopped writing in '95 to enter law school" and he "started again in 2008 to stop from going crazy." He can "still play pretty good lead and rhythm guitar."

Amber Flora Thomas is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Her first collection of poetry, *Eye of Water: Poems*, won the 2004 Cave Canem Poetry Prize and was published by University of Pittsburgh Press in 2005. Her poetry has appeared in *Crab Orchard Review, Gulf Coast, Southern Poetry Review,* and *Bellingham Review,* among other publications. Her poem "After" is included in her second manuscript of poetry, *The Bite: Poems,* which was a finalist for the 2009 Green Rose Prize, as well as the 2009 May Swenson Poetry Award.

Julie Wade is a doctoral student and graduate teaching fellow in the Humanities Department at the University of Louisville. Her first collection of lyric essays, *Wishbone: A Memoir in Fractures*, is forthcoming from Colgate University Press in 2010. Her second collection of lyric essays, *In Lieu of Flowers*, is forthcoming from Sarabande Books in 2011. Her first poetry chapbook *Without* is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press in 2010 as part of the New Women's Voices Chapbook Series. She has also received the Chicago Literary Award in Poetry, the Gulf Coast Nonfiction Prize, the Oscar Wilde Poetry Prize, the Literal Latte Nonfiction Award, and the AWP Intro Journals Award in Nonfiction. She earned her MA in English at Western Washington University in 2003 and an MFA in Poetry at the University of Pittsburgh in 2006. She lives with Angie and their two cats in the Bluegrass State, their fourth state of residence and one of forty-two states they have visited.

David Wagoner

Gabriel Welsch is Vice President of Advancement and Marketing at Juniata College. His published books include *Dirt and All Its Dense Labor* (2006) and *An Eye Fluent in Gray* (chapbook, 2010), and his work has appeared in *Southern Review, Mid-American Review, West Branch, Chautauqua,* and *PANK*. He has a wife and two children.

Valerie Wohlfeld's 1994 book, *Thinking the World Visible*, won the Yale Younger Poets Prize. She has published in *New England Review, Antioch Review, Prairie Schooner, Ploughshares*, and elsewhere.

Melissa Yancy works as a non-profit fundraiser. Her work has appeared in *One Story, Barrelhouse, At Length, Crab Creek Review, The Journal, Narrow Books,* and *The MacGuffin*.

About the Artist

Robert McGowan's work as an artist is in numerous private, corporate, and public collections internationally, including among others: Bank of America, Bank of Korea, and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Smithsonian Institution. His images have appeared in literary journals in America and abroad, including *BRAND* (UK) and *Rome Review*. As a fiction writer, his short stories, frequently set in the art world, are published in numerous literary journals, including among others: *Chautauqua Literary Journal, Connecticut Review, Crucible, The Dos Passos Review, The Savage Kick (UK), Skive Magazine: the Short Story Quarterly (Australia), South Dakota Review*, and have been anthologized. He lives in Memphis.

Robert McGowan on the cover artwork: "The photographs in the Approaches series, from which this issue's front-cover image, Approaches # 8, is taken, are integral to a story called "Artifacts," about a fictional young photographer who makes intimately scaled black and white prints of ingresses and egresses, of steps, stairs, driveways, ramps, access lanes, and so on, these passages by which people enter and exit homes, stores, offices, or any other public or private place. These are of course transitional channels, the zones between one condition of being and another, between having presence within a place or distance from it. They're crossings, literally and metaphorically, to be traversed on the way elsewhere, like portals really, with uncertainty beyond. The back-cover image, Under Overpasses # 11, is from a series concentrated on the often murky environments beneath railroad and highway overpasses.

These are digital photographs from about 2007 or 2008 (I fear I'm a tad negligent in recording exact dates of execution), taken on walks through my midtown Memphis neighborhood."

2010: Three Contests, Three Genres

American Literary Review announces its 2010 contests: Short Fiction, Creative Nonfiction, and Poetry. The winner in each category will receive $1,000 and publication in our Spring 2011 issue.

For all Genres:

•Include a cover page with author's name, title(s), address, e-mail address and phone number. Do not include any identifying information on subsequent pages except for the title of the work(s).

•Enclose a $15.00 reading fee (includes subscription) and a SASE for contest results. Multiple entries are acceptable, but each entry must be accompanied by a reading fee. (Note: only the initial entry fee includes a subscription. Subsequent entry fees go to contest costs only and will not extend the subscription.)

Contest entries must be postmarked between June 1, 2010 and October 1, 2010. Entries submitted outside of this timeframe will be returned unread.

Guidelines for each category are as follows:

- Short Fiction: One work of fiction per entry ($15), limit 8,000 words per work.

- Creative Nonfiction: One work per entry fee ($15), limit 6,500 words per work.

- Poetry: Entry fee covers up to three poems (i.e. one to three poems would require an entry fee of $15; four to six poems would be $30, etc.)

Label entries according to contest genre and mail to the regular submission address of *American Literary Review*.

For example:

American Literary Review
Short Fiction Contest
P.O. Box 311307
University of North Texas
Denton, TX 76203-1307

Final judges for each category will be announced on *American Literary Review*'s website:

http://www.engl.unt.edu/alr