

fugue

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f u g u e

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Fiction submissions are accepted September 1 through March 1, poetry and nonfiction submissions are accepted September 1 through May 1. All material received outside this period will be returned unread. Please visit www.fuguejournal.org for submission guidelines. All contributors receive payment and two complimentary copies of the journal. Please send no more than five poems, two short-shorts, one story, or one essay at a time. Submissions in more than one genre should be sent separately. We will consider simultaneous submissions (submissions that have been sent concurrently to another journal), but we will not consider multiple submissions. All multiple submissions will be returned unread. Once you have submitted a piece to us, wait for a response on this piece before submitting again.

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11TH ANNUAL RON MCFARLAND PRIZE FOR
POETRY
JUDGED BY RODNEY JONES

WINNER: ANSEL ELKINS

Is there a way in a poem as entertaining as “Real Housewives” for a poet to trump irony and say the thing that is in one’s heart? If so, it is a dangerous notion and should be generally discouraged, or, at the very least, the ratio of enlightenment to entertainment must remain trifling. We dance with the ones that brung us. Chaucer and Boetheius should have at least taught us that, and American reality television displays its own version of that nearly diabolical moral governance. Elkins rides it like a mechanical bull, and her ally as she balances risk after risk, is an ever eventful language that is intricately woven, supremely inventive, and always surprising. In fact, if a significant part of our joy as readers is Elkins’ delight with her subject, a larger part is that she does not know exactly how this thing will end.

Perhaps this is because such mean-spirited housewives as Elkins portrays are sad shills of a potent and unremitting American shallowness that we all delight in witnessing, and it is never enough for a poet to merely poke fun at the hypocrites; the true poet has to own the sadness, too. Thus, the beautiful climax: “shoegasm,” a word that I have searched for all my life. Then Ansel Elkins can bring in the husband who hangs himself and the “bald knowledge of ...naked life.” Hey, but let’s not go to the altar over this. Our poet knows enough to touch the issue, but not to become engaged to it. These are real women, and Ansel Elkins does not miss the scintilla of guilt in the laughter. She is a poet that we are going to hear from.

ANSEL ELKINS

REAL HOUSEWIVES

Gossip is the last great oral tradition. —Grace Paley

The best gossip begins like kindling
ignited and fanned to flame.
Rising out of the ashes
of a divorce, her life in foreclosure,
the housewife must reauthor herself:
she unzips the old skin and begins anew
under the knife of a celebrity surgeon
reputed to be shrewd. Voila! She resurfaces
post-surgery with lips ballooned.
At a dinner party from hell, one wife
sidelines another wife: *Why were you alone*
with my husband? The night
is suddenly electric. Tragedy
is two women trapped within
the eternal return of the same
cocktail dress. The wives weave
felicitous texts upon a theme
of vaginaplasty
after the pageantry of the baby
bump, pregnant in heels.

Now there's talk
of the It Girl
whose boob job on live TV
went woefully awry. OMG,
the tête-à-tête of misaligned titties,
adventures in surgery
left her with a pair of unsynchronized swimmers.
The glitterati say the only thing worse
than being blogged about
is *not* being blogged about.
The wives fawn over the tawdry tweeted
snark, pleased to read
of the airing out of a mistress' dirty
string-thong bikini. *Ladies! We've enough
white wine to go around.* Between the sweet tinkling
of tall-stemmed, sugar-rimmed glasses
and a chorus of chitchatting ex-wives,
a villainista eagle eyes
her rival across a dinner table, deliciously
plotting, she tears into a bleeding tenderloin

with her bright teeth, encircles the Other Woman
in her sniper's crosshairs
and with *furor loquendi*
she Pearl Harbors her enemy:
You need to close your legs to married men.
A terrorista hurls a Molotov cocktail
in the shape of a pink martini
and emery boarded claws surface to air
with vengeance. There is girl-on-girl
action, there's a woman threatening to release
a night-vision sex tape to the paparazzi.
And now a close-up money shot
of a blonde: high-volume teased hair, hotpink
lipsticked lips agape upon
viewing the redhot, six-inch long
stiletto her rival unhooves
wielding it as a weapon.
Brava! Climax. Shoegasm. *Finish her!* shouts
one who obviously never heard of finishing school.
All the weeklies will moralize

how it's all fun and games
until someone's husband hangs
himself. But who can turn away
as each wife disrobes
bald knowledge of her naked life? *Look,*
her roots are showing. At home
the injured wife ices her wound with a bloody
mary to the rescue. She fronts the mirror,
touches up her blush, embalms her lips
to match the living
room walls, gunmetal
gray. Each day
adds a new pearl
to the necklace
of betrayals.
She stares into her mirrored face—a farce
of a cry pantomimed, a comedy
more Chaplinesque than burlesque—
she speaks into the mirror, which speaks
into the camera, and in turn to our TV:
I'm not here to make friends.

DAVID CAZDEN

MIDWEST SUITE

For R.S., 1953-2010

As I drive, each barn, cow,
bridge and silo

makes a wake of sound.
Prairie grass hums,

sheets of summer wheat
shimmer.

Then, settling pools, cisterns,
hay-bales, spools

of bailing wire all pass:
unwound from wooden shafts,

the wire gleams like a nerve,
knotted into fences, binding

the wheat in sheaves:
and in roadside furrows

they wait, as you must have,
to transform

to dust—to flour and husks—
in the harvest light.

And on an overpass to Des Moines,
I close the windows and imagine you

buying a tank of helium,
filling your lungs' balloons

until the string pulled from your hand.
You left without a note,

no words expanding
among the peaks and tones

of a landscape,
where each object passing

plucks the air around my car
—as if to exist

is simply to make sound,
to speak, or to be spoken for.

DYLAN MOUNTS

BOBBY SOLOMON FOUND HIMSELF THE
OWNER OF A LOCAL COMMUNITY LAWN
SERVICES ORGANIZATION

this was the year of 1976 and for the first time he was mowing
the lawn without shoes or socks—his lawn instead of his neighbor’s
—thinking and humming as cars passed

on the street and he’d turn and watch over the rhythm of the
engine never knowing they were there until they passed him
on the street. that night

in the shower his feet stained green and stayed green for two
and one half years—until november the year 1979—but on his lawn
in strips each step left grass

cut neatly in two laid out in piles across the yard where he walked.
below him between his feet were three birds broken and bleeding
in shards of beaks and feathers and shells

bleeding and broken and singing for the sky or else for him, singing
songs of thanksgiving and praise. they died in the night and bobby
solomon woke in the bathroom

in the morning sprawled fetal across the shower curtain and knew
the next time in the morning he had nothing more to sing. only
to scrub at his feet stained green

by the grass leaving prints and proofs of feet grown green for the
grass of a decade to grow. in the bathroom in the morning he smiled
in the mirror and the mirror smiled back

and he was grateful but knew the lawn services industry had grown
far
beyond the level of local community services. before bobby solomon
died
he told his wife to put his ashes

in a bottle and send them out to sea with a letter inside and a
picture for whoever found it to color however they wished and hang
on their refrigerator

next to the list of that week's groceries to buy. also he told her
in a letter left taped to the alarm clock by the bed he was very sorry
and please not to open the bathroom door

and please have uncle ted come over and help move her things.
inside
she found him cold in the bath bleeding and blue but still smiling
for the ceiling or else for her, smiling

like he did when he knew the job was done, blue and bleeding
blood
by the shower curtain strewn broken and blue on the floor.

11TH ANNUAL PROSE PRIZE
JUDGED BY PAM HOUSTON

WINNER: “THE WATCHER IN THE WOODS”
BY JOSIE SIGLER (FICTION)

This is the most ambitious of all the contest stories. I thought it came very close to accomplishing all it set out to do, and it handled backstory well and efficiently. I thought the writing—particularly the descriptions and the rhythms of the paragraphs—in the first half of the story was especially strong. I was both surprised and convinced by the ending, which is a satisfying combination for any story. This is one ending that will stay with me.

RUNNER-UP: “THE TRICKSTER SURFS THE
FLOODS”
BY NATANYA ANN PULLEY (ESSAY)

I chose this story partially due to the strength of its first line, which is one of the best first lines EVER and mostly because of its ambition. It is only trying to do one thing, but the thing it is trying to do is almost impossible, and it makes a pretty good run at it.

THE WATCHER IN THE WOODS

River pilots her rickety Honda over the ruts in the old logging road. She's high in the Klamaths, near the pass. Early June, and fog gathers in odd patches, obscures the downed saplings—one here, here. She swerves coming around the bend. Her headlights slice the night, splash against the gnarled trunks of madrones and fade back into the inky dark between spruces.

The shape rises fast before her. Hulking, hesitant, it seems a living thing lumbering over red dirt, shattered glass—but she's the one moving. She slams the brakes as her brain catches up, crashes into the reality of what she's looking at: the charred frame of her father's pickup.

Of course no one's removed it. Who would?

Living in Los Angeles, she's gotten used to the fast-moving cleanup following any accident—*Too fast, maybe*, she's sometimes thought. *Maybe we should set up shrines on these freeways like they do in the country where kids crash their cars on prom night and makeshift crosses blossom for months.*

She shoves the car door open, steps into the cool air, walks toward the truck. A tendril of warmth from her overtaxed engine catches her around the elbow, and she stops. She remembers this from her time in childhood spent here with Max, which was what she called her father, and he called her *darlin'*, *doll*, *sweet potato*: the currents of an evening breeze corkscrewing so you got a shiver up your back and a lukewarm breath on your neck at the same time. She sees herself from the outside, now, spotlit as she performs this unscripted act, a single player before an improbable prop. She wants to turn around, let herself out of the bargain she's struck. She wants to call Jake, her mother, anyone, just to say: *You won't believe this . . .* That would take the charge out of it.

But there's no cell service. This part of Oregon, the river for which her father named her and the mountains that cup the valley, is one of the last places in America where you can't get a signal. The few people who live here, River knows, live here for that reason. Max would not have wanted a cleanup crew on his road. Max would have taken comfort in the fact that the pickup would disintegrate alongside the rotting fir trees and deer carcasses left by mountain lions.

Just let it go back, her father always said when he caught River, who was president of her school's Recycling Club, tending to an empty cigarette pack.

River would put it down only to retrieve it later, drop it in the burn pile.

Her father thought the land could swallow anything and heal. Out here, it almost seems true. Perhaps that's why, over the years, Max retreated more and more to this homestead, which he'd won in a poker game when River was a baby. He had managed to hold onto the place with sheer belligerence against the Forest Service and an unrelenting trust in what he called *the old ways*.

The mosquitos are gathering, hurrying her. Their whining nearly obscures another gathering, the feeling of an audience she can't quite make out, a pressure to complete the plot, to follow the rules she's been learning since the day she got the call. Glass crunches under her feet—the officer said *caught on fire*, but it's clear the truck *exploded*. Wishing she hadn't realized this, she takes a final step forward. She rests her palm on the frame, feels the scaly rust that's come of fire and the sleety spring snows that've kept the road too muddy for her to pass until now.

It's real.

But time hangs itself again as her hand, without warning, pushes through, collapsing the wasted steel.

*

Her father liked to tell this story: he's twenty-three, a young fox. He starts the night in a bar in Medford drinking shots of Cuervo

with two women, one a redhead, one a brunette. The next thing he knows, he's waking up in the sand on Gold Beach with a blonde and a bottle of whiskey. It takes him all damned day to hitchhike home.

Sometimes, standing on the beach in Santa Monica, panting after the run up from Venice, at an exact point—the ferris wheel behind her, the bridge over the PCH to the right—River stares out at the Pacific and imagines Max waking up, encountering the blank panel of his night. Each time, she feels a jolt of fear for him. But he probably was not afraid, likely not even perplexed. He just did what needed doing next: he stuck out his thumb and got himself home.

That part of him lives in her, too, River thinks: she's taking her hand out of the truck and shrugging, isn't she? She's getting back in her own car and keeping on, right? She's descending into the valley, courageous and unworried and ready to be swallowed.

*

She pulls up in front of the cabin at midnight—she had meant to stay in a motel, to arrive the next morning, but as she had driven farther north, she felt the place calling to her, insisting that she come all the way. It's been three years since her last summer visit.

This had been her parents' arrangement: two weeks of each summer and every other Easter, as long as the roads were passable, she got to stay with Max. Her mother drove her halfway down from Portland, her father came halfway up. They exchanged River at a rest area, barely speaking.

Her mother's instructions—on ticks, poison oak, and sunscreen, things her mother knew little about since she rarely set foot off the pavement—were typed, bulleted, bolded. That was Mary.

Thanks, her father always said in his gruff voice. He folded the sheet of paper carefully—almost reverently—and tucked it in his pocket where it remained for the duration of River's time with him. Inevitably, River got bitten and burned and covered in rash, but she didn't care: Max taught her to swim, to fish, to catch lizards with a long piece of meadow grass made into a lasso.

Clamping a small flashlight between her teeth, River lets herself onto the screen porch and unlocks the front door, hauling her heavy duffel and the groceries, too. The scallions smell light and fresh against a musty smell—familiar, but she can't quite place it. Grease worn into the wood from her father's endless fried eggs in fatback? Some missed splatter of a drained buck's blood?

The door slams behind her.

She pauses, listening to the house shift—the scuffling of feet? Something breathing? Her heart leaps up, wraps around the sudden memory: as a child, before she went to sleep on the makeshift cot Max set up for her near his own bed, she always made him look out the door that led from the bedroom onto the weathered deck, sometimes even sent him to walk that pine-railed periphery like a sentry. She was convinced someone was out there. In the night, the Watcher in the woods might creep up to the door, slash the screen, and carry her off.

Naw, her dad would say. *We're the only two for miles.*

Right. She's imagining things. Seeing the truck crumble was weird, that's all. It's made her feel she could accidentally erase the very history she's come to preserve.

She takes a steady breath and steps forward. Her foot comes down on a screeching plank, sinking plank—can the floor actually be giving out beneath her? Collapsing? River recalls with a slow and perfect clarity even as she scrambles backward: here in her father's world, one strange event never precludes another. Her bags fall, the flashlight slips from her mouth. She fumbles for it, sending wild beams through the room—as the frenzied shaft dances over the ceiling she feels herself at another age looking up into the A-frame, watching constellations of dust, making stories for the knots in the wood. She catches the flashlight against her stomach and points it at the floor, enclosing a jagged hole about the size of a dinner plate in a smoother circle of light.

How did Max manage this one?

Holding the handle of her father's enormous wood stove for leverage, River kneels. The cabin was built half on the hillside, half up on stilts, so the rain could pass under. The smell—cloying, thick—seems to be coming from the hole. But there's nothing down there. A pair of loppers and a ream of chicken wire lying in the dirt. That's it. She sighs. She's starving. She gets up, sets the flashlight upright on the table, and opens the cupboards. They're stocked with whiskey, Pall Malls, and various hot sauces—not much else. She pours herself a shot and makes a turkey sandwich, which she slathers with the Happy Habanero that was her favorite as a kid. Made mostly of corn syrup, it's sweet, not hot, disappointing to her adult palate. Her father always laughed after he gave her a bite of his, River miming smoke coming out of her ears.

Smoke. He let her do that, too.

Now don't tell your mom, right? he would say as he waved the flame across the end of a cigarette and passed it to her. River believes this is why she isn't an addict—nothing was forbidden. She'll prove it by not having a cigarette her first night.

She's lifting the sandwich to her mouth when she hears it: the shimmering but definite sound of the chicken wire rubbing against itself. She forces herself to take a bite. She trains her eyes on the table as she chews. But there it is again, heavy footsteps, breathing, the creaking of the floorboards, the rasping sound of what's moving up through the hole.

She allows herself to turn and look. The bear's arm reaches clumsily along the floor, its claws extended toward her like the pistils of the yellow irises that bloom in her father's meadow all spring. River can see the beige snout pushing at the opening. She leaps up, knocking her chair over. She recognizes the smell—damp, doggyish. Once, when she was about four years old, she was running ahead of her father in the woods when a bear stepped out on the path in front of her. She screamed and Max scooped her up from behind. He held her high against his chest and whispered to her, alternately yelling at the bear, who ran off.

So now River shouts, remembering her father's advice: *Black bears ain't ferocious. They're more scared of you than you are of them.* She stamps her foot, but the bear's already retreated.

*

Her mother told her not to come. She could sell the property to the state without ever having to go there, Mary said, her voice on the phone nearly pleading. That was why her parents were married for only a year. Mary still doesn't understand that the difficulty of this place is worth the time spent, while the difficulty of a city rarely is. Though River *has* come to think of L.A. as another kind of wilderness—one in which her father's solutions can also be applied: you just have to think on your feet and use whatever you have lying around to fix any problem.

Now she needs to cover this hole.

She figures out just the thing: the winter door and cinder blocks her father had used to make her cot. She finds them on the screen porch and drags them into the house. She settles the door over the hole and weighs it down. Then she realizes she'll be sleeping in her father's bed.

River goes to the cupboard, takes out a pack of Pall Malls. She opens it. A lighter rests on the table. Something about its angle tells her it was one of the last things he touched. She can see his leathery hand dropping it casually there. She hesitates, but *don't build a shrine, now*, her mother said when she failed to convince River not to make the journey. River lights a cigarette.

As the smoke burns its way into her lungs, she thinks of the unknown blonde who woke up next to her father on the beach. Who was she? Does she even remember? River feels angry at this woman who's surely forgotten Max. What River would give to gather all such people—the patchwork participants of her father's life—in one room. Then she might be able to know his story as a whole. All she knows for certain is packaged in two-week slices, the rest imagined.

*

Sometimes River forgets. Then something will come along and make her remember. Once, on a Friday night picking out DVDs at Blockbuster, her hand running lightly over their spines, it caught her eye: *The Watcher in the Woods*. She pulled it from the shelf, clutched it, unbelieving.

Cheesy, Jake groaned.

River insisted, certain she would find something of herself in the film. But that watcher was formless, an alien shaft of light that kidnaps a young girl. Jake was snoring by the end. River sat up alone listening to the neighbors fighting, the sirens, aching to drive north, to run through her father's woods, sure they contained some evidence that could be held in her hand.

She broke up with Jake two days before she left. She didn't know how long she'd be gone, which didn't seem fair to him. They both agreed it wasn't working, anyway. No passion. Now she wishes he were here. But of course, Jake's a city boy. That was what her father called him, too—*How's that city boy of yours?* he would ask, chuckling as if he knew about the time River took Jake camping in Joshua Tree for a romantic getaway. Jake was so terrified of snakes and coyotes that he couldn't even get an erection. If he were here, she would be the one reassuring him.

She can't help it. She tells herself it's about the bear, not the Watcher. Before she lies down, she goes out onto the deck, shines the flashlight into the woods. Nothing but fir trees reaching up into the sky, swaying slightly in the wind, talking as they do: the whisper of needles, the popping deep in their trunks as they bend near to breaking. But most do not break. They are torn out by their roots.

River settles into the bed, turns her face into the pillow, inhaling her father's scent, which is musty, too. Sweat. Ash. Lava soap.

*

Where is she? With a rush of recognition, she sits up in the creaking bed. Light streams in over her bare thighs. Her feet brush against her father's spare boots lined up beneath the bed. His flannel shirts

hang neatly on the bar, their various degradations of color telling their age.

She drinks her coffee lazily, contemplating the radio phone. She figures out how to connect the battery pack and dial, calls the Forest Service and tells her story to the man who answers.

He gives a long, low whistle. Sounds like you got yourself a problem bear, he says.

I'll say, she replies.

We don't do them that far out anymore, the man says. You gotta call Trapper Dan—

The man gives River a phone number and wishes her luck. She dials it, and Trapper Dan answers. She tells her story again, feeling vaguely ridiculous, as if she's lying, embellishing.

You bet, Trapper Dan says. I can be there in a few hours. I think I know that place—end of that logging road before the old railway turnoff, right?

Right, River confirms.

She stands and stretches, sweat trickling down the back of her legs. She heads to the screen porch, fires up the propane fridge, and arranges her groceries on the racks. It was cold enough last night for wool blankets, and the day is already hot enough to turn the milk. The bear's musk seems to have lingered in the cabin's main room—maybe it's even stronger than it was last night. No need to add to it. She drags her duffel into the bedroom.

Done, she says to herself.

Wandering back through the cabin, she runs her hands lightly over his things: a battered book on the gold rush, a clay pipe head without a stem, the long rusted blade of a two-man saw her father found in the woods and draped over the cross-beams. Picking up a gnarled river tooth, she marvels again that the remains of a great spruce can fit in her palm, the weight of an apple, thanks to the water's restless churning—the way soft can wear away hard, given enough time.

What did Max do all day when she wasn't here?

She takes a second cup of coffee onto the deck, sits on the edge, legs dangling. A doe steps from the woods with her fawn. When the doe stops to tear up grass with her tongue, the fawn noses at her teats. They move together like this over the meadow, past her father's apple trees.

*

She's still sitting there in her T-shirt and underwear when she hears the truck rumbling toward the house. She runs inside and throws on a pair of shorts, pulls her hair into a pony-tail.

She opens the door before he can knock.

Hey, he says, uncurling his poised hand, which he then holds out to her. She takes it.

Because of the name, River was expecting a guy like her father, a grizzled beard and deeply lined forehead, someone the locals down on the river would tell stories about, another believer in the old ways. Her father introduced her to plenty such men over the years. But this guy is young, her age. His dark hair shines—recently washed—and he's dressed in a pair of hiking shorts and a Race for the Cure T-shirt, which makes him seem like some creature traveling from the future who's landed here accidentally. River introduces herself, trying to hide her surprise.

Let's see the damage, Dan says.

Together, they lift the winter door and set it aside. Dan bends and pulls at a small clump of frizzed fur that's caught on the edge of the broken floorboards, holds it up, and nods. He examines the area around the hole. Then he beckons River with his finger, and points at a series of grey-white lines on the black surface of the wood stove's door.

Claw marks, he says. Mind if I take a look inside?

River shrugs. It's not her wood stove. Go ahead, she says.

He squats and toggles the handle, pulls the door open. He holds his hand just inside, letting it float before the darkness. He's testing for embers, River realizes. Her throat tightens.

It hasn't been used in awhile, she says.

Trapper Dan roots around and pulls out what appears to be a small stick, but when he hands it to River, she realizes it's a bone.

That one's old, he says, but look at this.

River bends and looks deep inside to see a torn white plastic garbage bag spilling apple cores, salisbury steak wrappers, and more bones, fresher than the one she holds, gristle still clinging. She steps back.

They're always after anything even remotely edible, Dan says. You toss something like this in the stove and you won't smell it rotting. But a bear can smell it three miles out. Your bear probably wandered by, caught a whiff, and hasn't been able to stand himself since.

River nods, feeling responsible.

Dan offers to start a fire.

Sure, she says.

Once it's crackling, sending a nearly unbearable heat into the room, she sits staring into the flames. She draws her thumb over the edges of a break in the bone, that of some small animal her father had shot. But it's her father's bones she's feeling against her skin, remembering her shock at the small shards that survived not only the first fire, the accidental one, but the one that readied his remains. She's run her fingers through them now and then in the weeks he's been with her. The small silver urn is in the trunk of her car now, calling her to her task.

Now we'll set up a trap, Dan says, eyeing the hole. No sense risking he'll tear the place down.

Together they drag the enormous metal trap from the back of Dan's truck and onto the meadow's rise. He demonstrates how it works: when the bear, tempted by a marshmallow, enters the cage, the door slams shut and locks from the outside.

What then? River asks.

You'll call, and I'll come get him, Dan says. Then I'll dart him, tag him, and relocate him to a place more remote. If I can find a place more remote, that is, he laughs.

She laughs, too, and then asks: Will it hurt him?

He'll wake up a little confused, and his ear will be sore, but he'll be a whole lot better off. A bear who gets too used to humans and their food is a dead bear.

Dan pops a marshmallow into his mouth, holds out the Super-Puff bag, and smiles. She takes one. It's cushiony against her tongue. She licks the powder away, tasting the sharp salt of her upper lip. Dan wipes the sweat from his brow. His T-shirt is soaked with sweat in a V all the way to his waist. It's downright sweltering. They begin walking toward the house. River's looking forward to a dip in the river, a cold beer, an early evening nap. Her father's summer schedule.

She hooks her thumb at the trap. How long do you think it will take? she asks.

Anywhere from a few hours to a few days, Dan says. But I'm betting your bear is still hanging around. They're persistent if they're anything.

Because you could stay, she says boldly. And then she adds, I mean, I was about to go to the river. You could cool off, have a beer. Maybe it would save you a second trip.

They stop walking and he looks down at her. His eyes are hazel. Small bits of gold dance in them like the gold in the riverbed. Her father's property—or, she supposes, it's her property, now—is an old gold-mining claim. As a child she spent hours panning for tiny flakes she planned to have made into her wedding ring someday. Somewhere in the house there's a small vial that contains those dreams. Once, when she was about fifteen, her father held it up and said, You got about enough to fill a tooth, which is just fine by me. I'm in no hurry to marry you off.

She laughed, snatching the vial from him.

Sure, Dan says. Sure. That would be great.

*

They hike down the old path to the river. When they arrive, River bends down to touch her namesake. The water, unusually flat

and calm for this early in the season, swirls suddenly around her fingers, its swollen surface breaking against her skin. As if her own current has charged the Rogue, a sudden whitecap spurts over the submerged rocks twenty feet away.

You're the River, and I'm the Rogue, her dad would say, grinning at his own cleverness. River remembers how much she liked to think of them connected by those words: *Rogue River*.

Might be too high to swim, Dan says.

I know a place, she tells him, and leads him along the shore until they get to her father's swimming hole, a small shallow area surrounded by enormous rocks. This is where she learned to swim, her father's hands fanned beneath her in the water.

I don't have a suit, Dan says.

Neither do I, River says. Turn around.

He does.

The water is icy as it envelopes her. Once she's in, she shouts over the noisy froth, Your turn. I won't look.

She doesn't.

Okay, he shouts, and she turns around. He's already ducking, his whole body submerged. Then he breaks through the surface.

This is awesome, he says. Thank you.

No problem, she says.

He stands there for a minute, clearly unsure how to proceed.

So what do you do? he asks. I mean, for work?

Right now, River says, not much. She had been working as a research assistant at a small non-profit promoting urban gardens, but she quit the day she found out her father died.

Dan doesn't press for details. He simply floats his palms on the surface of the water.

Then he asks: What's with that truck up there on your road?

It was my dad's, River says. He died, she adds, and before she can stop it, a sob comes from her center as if it's a solid object she's coughing up. She presses her fists to her mouth. Dan looks to the distant ridges, at the long thin clouds streaking the edge of the sky.

Then, he moves toward her. He pats her shoulder with one hand, hiding his nakedness with the other.

*

The cage is still empty. They sit on the deck drinking beer. The late afternoon sun beats down. Cool beads form on the outside of the bottle River's holding, leaving her hand damp.

She's still telling Dan her father's story. It's coming out in fits and starts, what the officer told her, what she knows without having to be told: It was a hard winter. There was still snow on the pass in early April. Max might have gotten stuck. Or, he might have simply pulled to the side of the road to look at the moon. Then he lit a cigarette and fell asleep. Or, she tells Dan, Max was drunk, waiting to sober up, and he passed out. He dropped the cigarette, and the flames eventually found the leaky gas tank. Max called once a week, without fail, to tell River he loved her. When she didn't hear from him, she called her mother, who called the police.

By the time she's done, the sun is starting to fade, the clouds have moved in.

I'm so sorry, Dan says again, his hand loose on his beer, his eyes on the cage, the meadow, the corner of the deck.

Yeah, River says. I guess we can just be glad the whole damned forest didn't go up, right? She smiles, takes a sip, stands.

I guess, Dan says.

River is quiet, spent, and then, night falling around them, Dan's voice comes cracking like the rare firs that snap in half during windstorms and pitch their tops down at the Earth: My mom died last year, actually. Cancer, he says, pointing at his shirt. It—it took forever. By the end, all her love for life drained out. She couldn't do any of the things—anything, he concludes. It's more than he's said about himself all day.

She edges closer, puts her hand on his arm. He looks at her, holds out his hand. She takes it, thinking he'll say he has to go. Instead he says, Maybe I should stay, camp out on the floor.

Sure, she says. The bear's bound to come along.

And maybe you should have some company, he says, squeezing her hand.

She nods. She goes inside and makes sandwiches while Dan finds a piece of plywood in the shed and nails it over the hole in the floor. They eat in silence, enjoying the cool air sliding down the pines. River builds her old bed in the main room, covers it with wool blankets. Dan gets in, crosses his arms behind his head.

Sleep tight, she says.

She goes into her father's room and gets into his bed, turns on her side. She stays like this for an hour, maybe more. Her body is tense, clamped against itself, her ears straining toward any sign of the bear, any sign that Dan is awake, too. Exhausted, she finally sleeps.

*

She wakes to the sound of something crashing through the brush outside the house. She leaps from the bed, knocking her flashlight to the floor. She moves toward the screen door. The bear stands in the light of the full moon at the edge of the trees, his shoulders hunched. He's looking at her, too. Then he turns and runs.

Dan is at her side. Was that him? he asks.

Sure was, she says.

Dan rests his arm on the doorframe, leaning his face toward the screen, searching. His chest brushes against her arm, and then they're tumbling onto the bed, pulling at each other's clothes. Once they're down to skin, she rummages in the pocket of her bag for a condom. He tears the wrapper with his teeth. She wraps her body around his—a life raft, an oasis—but as he fills her, she remembers: Full moon. Cool night. It was her last official visit to her father's before she left for UCLA. She was standing in this very room, changing into her pajamas. As she arched her arms to take off her shirt, she sensed the Watcher, felt him at the edge of the woods just below the house. She turned slightly toward the screen door, her shirt clutched to her chest.

He stood with his palm resting on a tree, the cherry on his cigarette a quick red pain in the night.

River froze. Then, for reasons she still doesn't understand, she let her shirt fall to the floor. She stepped out of her shorts. She turned her body toward her father. In the movie, when the girl is rescued from the Watcher, she walks slowly forward, too, as she takes her blindfold off. River stood before the screen with her shoulders back, her head held high.

Max stared for a moment, taking a drag. Then he nodded, and turned to walk away.

Dan's stopped moving.

Are you okay? he asks.

And now he's sitting up, holding her in his lap, stroking her hair while she stares out into the darkness.

It's okay, he says.

She's listening for the trap. But the bear doesn't come back. Their noises have kept it at bay.

*

She wakes curled on top of this man she barely knows, who now knows her too well. He's sleeping half sitting up, his back against the wall, his head lolling to the side. His hands are resting gently fanned over her back and shoulders, protecting.

She extracts herself, stands at the bedside.

He wakes then with a start, grabbing at the space where's she been, as if he can save her from falling. Woah, he says. And then, Hey.

Hey, she says, covering her face with her hands.

He sits up, grabs her arm, tugs it gently. Please don't worry about it, he says. I had a nice time.

They drink coffee together on the deck. He has to go to work, he says, but promises he'll be back the next day.

You don't have to, she says.

You'll have a mighty hungry bear on your hands, he says. Then he grins, and punches her lightly on the arm.

She nods.

She walks him to his truck, kisses him on the forehead with her lips tightly pursed. She crosses her arms over her body as he drives away. Then she opens the trunk of her car, takes the urn into the house. She gets a bottle of whiskey from the cabinet.

*

She's on the deck drinking her first shot, running her fingers through her father again and again when she hears the metal door snap shut, the sound echoing through the canyon.

She turns to see the dark shape of a bear in the cage.

By the time she gets to the meadow, he's tugging at the door, making a terrible racket. She stands at a distance, not quite believing that the bars will keep him. The cage is almost the size of the Honda, but in it, he looks cramped. His fur is more cinnamon than black, so light at the tips it haloes his whole body. She moves closer. He stops, looks up at her with gleaming eyes. He makes a panicky lowing noise, a bawling she feels in her center, the sound of fear and hunger together. There is no word in the language for it, but River knows the feeling well. The bear tears frantically at the door, shaking the cage so hard that River can feel it in the soles of her feet.

God, what we'll endure for a little sweetness, she thinks, realizing what she must do.

She runs to the house to find the speckled blue tin mug that was hers as a child. She collects the marshmallows, which Dan's left, the whiskey, and her father. She returns to the bear, who's turning circles, helpless. River pours a slug of whiskey into the mug. She takes up a small pinch of her father's ashes. She drops them in. They dance briefly on the surface. Then they melt.

Whatever you do, don't go near it, Dan said.

But she's walking toward the bear, marshmallows in one hand, mug in the other. She's trembling. He swings a paw toward her, rattling the cage. She throws the marshmallows just outside it on the grass. He flexes his claws, reaches through the wires, and takes one, bringing it swiftly toward his mouth, his anger instantly forgotten. While he eats, she walks around and quickly slips the mug

between the wires on the other side. The marshmallows gone, he turns warily toward the cocktail. His nostrils flare as he sniffs it. And then—so much like a person—he uses his claws to tip it toward his mouth, his long tongue curling around the rim, licking the bottom. He shudders. Pants. He looks plaintively at her.

Make me another? her father would ask, tipping his glass at her.

So she repeats the process until the last round, closing time: the bear bends his sad head toward the mug and collapses, asleep. River, as barmistress, will be his last memory of this place, she thinks, just like the blonde is her father's memory of the coast.

She brings the bottle to her lips, then holds it up to the sky. There's a good breeze, and the glass mouth sings. She looks down into the cheap metal container in her hand, all that's left of a life. Gripping the urn's neck, she flings her father in a wild and beautiful arc. When she was small, Max used to throw her too, higher and higher, make her laugh until she cried. Some of the ashes rise on a tangling current and carry toward the apple trees. Some wash down right where she's standing. They hover in the long grass. Small white specks of bone rest in the bear's thick auburn fur. They cling to the mouth of the bottle. They're in the air she breathes. **f**

THE TRICKSTER SURFS THE FLOODS

I. The Inside of Animals

But the heart of the turkey is weak, I say to an innerself. My mom points to the turkey's heart and holds it under running water. She shows me how the water pumps through it. Her lips resting on the top of the heart as she blows. The tiny organ bulges and deflates. My mother says words to me that are complicated. Technical. She doesn't point to any feathers on the turkey; there aren't any. She just holds its heart, all slick and of no color that would match a crayon in my Crayola set. A red-brown-gray thing.

It is Thanksgiving, and it is all that trickster coyote's fault again. The coyote Mą'ii is not around, but he must have loped through my house in the middle of the night and changed the stories and changed the words and changed the decorations around me. The world my schoolteacher painted for me this week does not fit in my home. No Mayflower, no cornucopia, no pilgrims. Just my Navajo mother and the cold heart she holds out in front of me.

My younger brother is oblivious—he is all hands. Slapping counters, grabbing napkins, squeezing mashed potatoes through his little fists. My mom leaves the heart on the counter and walks over to my brother. She hovers down to his ear and points at the salt and pepper turkey set on the table. “Do you know how the turkey got its white tail?” she asks. It was the last to leave the Third World, and the froth of the rising water grabbed it. She says this and kisses his cheek. She says this and strokes his hair. She says these things to the little body and big soul that is new to us and raw. I think she must have said these things to me like that too. All soft lips and softer hands.

But the heart of the turkey is weak. The turkey would not leave the Third World to this world even as the water was rising up past its spur. The water says the Third World is too full, that the water monsters have claimed it for their own. The water monsters' baby has been taken by Mą'ii and hidden in his clothes. The water monsters made themselves big and flooded themselves and the area around them. So angry, the water is too loud to reason with; First Man and First Woman and all the animals must flee. The locust has the medicine from the Holy People. The medicine can save the First people and the animals. A reed is placed in the earth, and it grows and grows to the Fourth World. The creatures scramble to free themselves from the water monsters' anger, but the turkey stumbles inside himself. It is too long a journey, too hard a climb, too fast a move, too loud the rush behind him, too vast a nothingness to enter, too soft a place to leave. The turkey's heart is not the heart my mother animates for me. My mom's brown skin and black eyes unlike any of my friend's and neighbor's mothers. Unlike any of my teachers. My mother with the long guttural vowels she uses when others speak from high inside the mouth. My mother with these stories whispered in my ear, but she is always holding the insides of animals out for me to touch.

We eat the turkey. My mom has chopped its heart into smaller bits to add to the gravy. She tells us how the turkey has white tips on his feathers, and I push my report on the great ships in search of new land out of my mind. To make her proud, I ask her to pass the "maize" like we learned in school. But corn is called naadąą' in Navajo. There are two types of corn, male and female, but that is another story. As is the story of how the water monsters got their baby back, as is the story of the great expansion over the seas to the new rock. And no story I know tells of how the scared turkey that barely made it from the Third World landed on the platter in front of us, but it must be Mą'ii's fault. The trickster. The secreter. The maker of messes and slippery slopes and oopsadaisies.

At Thanksgiving, there are turkeys everywhere. The napkin holders. The plates. The salt and pepper shakers. The bits stuck between our teeth and the turkey in the words of my mom with its tail fan of white tips. My brother pats at his highchair tray and smiles at the turkey on the table. Mą'ii must not have gotten to him yet.

II. Mapping the Space between the Stars

I am seven and worrying the hem of my comforter threadbare with my thumb and forefinger. Mą'ii has done it again. That trickster coyote has grinned and gripped Black God's fawn skin pouch with his teeth. He held the corner of it and tugged tugged tugged and the pouch, which held the stars, burst open across the universe. The stars scattered and falling—some always falling—the Holy People gasp. Black God throws his maps away. His plan to sort the sky sinks and burns up as stars descend toward earth. The stars Black God placed don't dare move but shine brightly. And the stars the coyote Mą'ii freed lay about like jacks on the blacktop, forgotten.

From the center of my bed, where I curl up and stare out the window, I imagine Black God doesn't place the stars himself but asks a young boy to help. The boy carries the stars in his beeldléi and even though the weavings carefully hung around my mom's house are wool and made with black, brown and red threads, in my mind the child's blanket looks a lot like my green and yellow checkered comforter, the stars fuzzy and knotted like the purple threads tied throughout it. Always Mą'ii gets a hold of the boy's blanket and rips a hole in it. The stars fall into crevices in the heavens. They stay there, lost, forming a large gash of starlight only to be seen from below.

Not all stars fell and are falling. The ones Black God placed appear in the same position to us from below. This is why certain stars reappear or why they gather. This is why we can look at them and count on them. They tell us when to plant and harvest. When

to tell winter stories and when to tuck those stories away. When and where to travel. The story is meant to do these things for the children as they huddle up to their grandfather's words—as they sit under night skies and listen to the sheep blathering about the hay and the sandy walk up the mesa and the sheepdogs that close in on them.

For me, I think: Poor Star Boy. He searches for so long his eyes are black with little glints of starlight in them. He cries stardust. His hair must be messy and greasy with cosmos and when people see him they want to give him money and send him away at the same time. I get mad at Mą'ii—it is no coyote to me because I don't live near the coyotes in Dinéland Arizona like my mom did. I live near some mixed breeds and golden retrievers and a schnauzer on a street in Utah, a street that was once named "Hindenburg Lane" but was changed to "Mountain Vista Lane" when the neighbors congregated and decided the name was too gloomy. That was the end of that story; there was no warrior twin to defeat the name. There were no Holy People to talk to the congregation or to a smaller animal. They took a vote.

In Navajoland, the stars scatter and stay and the children learn agriculture, direction and seasonal activities. But I lay in bed, holding my comforter. I wonder how I would be able to carry it if it were full of stars, how can I carry it down the stairs? The thump thump thump of it against the stairs would wake my parents. They could hear me come back up without the heaviness of the night sky in it—no thump, but the whoosh of it along the hardwood. I try to find the words the boy might say to his parents when they don't see the stars in the sky and ask to see them in his blanket. I practice the words. Just in case I need to borrow them one day.

III. The Shipbuilder's Round-Up

The church books say it is not Mą'iithat brought about the flood, but that it was God himself. God is just one god in this story. He is

all of a god and there seems to be no one for him to talk to except to shout down to the rest of us. He is angry or perhaps just moody. It is unclear to me, and the church primary schoolteacher says the world was flooded from his anger. A man was to build a ship to hold two of each animal.

Two of each! I think. A great man. A man to bring the animals together. While the book talks of the building of the ship, I think of this Great Herder: Noah. How he must have had many tin cans of special rocks to rattle and only the best of herding dogs. How Mą'ii and any other coyote friends of his must have steered clear until the very end of the round up before sneaking onboard. What must Noah have said to the brachiosaurus and the triceratops to push them onto that ship? I think of the dinosaur footprints my father was always showing us—out in the desert, my father is his own storyteller. An archeology hobbyist, my dad would track down all the ruins and remnants of the early Indians and tell us their stories. His connection from his white, Western world to my mother's family: the stories of the moving sands and ghost tools. Between stories of early Indians grounding corn and sculpting arrowheads, he'd find dinosaur tracks and point to how it must have jumped from one formation to another, landed firmly in the mud and surged on, See the depth of the back part of the foot? He pushed off here. Those dinosaurs pushing off the ground onto the ramp with the Great Herder Noah jostling his tin can of magic rocks behind them. The sun cresting the mesa and the animals looking for water troughs and hay. How the Great Herder must have told many stories to the animals to keep them sleepy and learning while they sailed the Third World looking for a hole to the Fourth. Where was the little locust and his medicine bag? Where were the Holy People, and how did they secret to the locust the ways of luring the reed from the ground into the sky?

I draw pictures of great ships full of dinosaurs and sheep and my neighbor's schnauzer Sadie and my fish creeping up a reed to the Fourth World. Noah in his beaded headband, his satchel of

water and Concho belt. His boots dusty from mesa climbing and his songs full of his adventure as Great Herder. The water monsters and God angry and gnashing behind them. Mą'ii laughing and perhaps removing spots from leopards and drawing stripes on horses to keep himself busy.

IV. A Conflation of World, Water and Word

It is Mą'ii's fault. The way he gambles the gambler. The way he snakes the snake. All glitter and sass and up-the-sleeve magic. He's reached in my throat and pulled the words out. Mą'ii tries to teach the teacher. We come from a giant hill like an ant hill! I tell her. She is wrong, and the picture in our textbook of the flat and lined land is wrong. The tribes grouped and sprawled across the nation have no pictures, just names. I tell her it must be wrong. The Navajo are The Diné. We are The People. There are no humans that aren't a people, I say, so we must be all the people, including her. We came from a hole in the ground to the Fourth World. We came from a reed. A magical reed!

My friends agree with me. I'm right a lot of the time, remember? They tell her. Remember my award? My "Best Storyteller" award? I was on the playground telling the story of the squirrels. Not a story of all the squirrels or squirrels my mom knows. I tell a story that makes sense to my own self that is birthed from a truth of me—a history of me, I tell a story of a squirrel family and the lost squirrel that makes it home. I get an award. I am the "Best Storyteller" in our class. I know things. I remind my teacher of this. I tell the stories, and the story is the Navajos are The People—all the people—and we came from a world above a world!

Mą'ii must have taken my words. Must have taken her ears. Must have taken the phone and made the calls to my parents. Must have kept them in the room with my teacher and principal and me in the hall. Must have chopped up the long threads of language they were speaking into bits of laughter and sighs that sound like they are

smiling. The laughter like a giant water surging. I think the water monsters' baby must have been stolen again. And the sounds are the gurgling and flooding water coming from the principal's office. It will come from under the door; it will sweep through the hallway and out through the school. This world will be drowned and kept by monsters.

I must find the locust and must find the reed. I must find the Holy People and find the magic to get me free of it. They must have the answers to pull me out and away. Pull me up to them and then, if so then, I can find the Star Boy and tell him I know where the stars are! I remember them, and I can help with the bad dog. We can tie him up and scold him. He will be kept from always pulling at blankets and tearing at the fabrics that hold so many celestial truths and stories of the past and ways of seeing in the night.

When I get out of here, I think, when I get away from the whisperings of my mom with her blood-and-guts hands and from the pointing and figuring and investigating of my dad as he moves across the dunes and away from the flooding of all the strange things of teachers with raised eyebrows and the things with wet and swirling arms that must be angry and searching for ways of keeping me from rising into the next world, I can get my hands on that bad dog and make him sit or lay down or perhaps even to roll over. **f**

WHAT WE DO HERE

Mr. Billings is ninety-two and has a bruise on his forearm. Veins press against his translucent skin as if waiting to either burst or escape. He sits in an antique chair near the front door and hopes for some young blade to walk into the building thirsty for local history. Mr. Billings volunteers here, and has for years; he spends his afternoons greeting visitors at the South Wood County Historical Corporation's museum in Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin.

The old man is half-asleep. His chin rests on his chest, his legs are crossed, and his fingers are wrapped loosely around his cane. Pinned to the center of his pale yellow shirt is a nametag; plaid pants hover inches above his shoes. Dave Engel's *The Fat Memoirs*, a book in a local history series, sits in his lap. The book contains a segment on this very building, the mansion that banker Isaac Witter built in 1907. A black-and-white photograph of the museum, taken when it was the Witter home, dominates the page, and the three-story brick building emerges through the old-fashioned photo haze. The front porch sweeps across the elegant home, punctuated by thick white columns. The porte cochere, a flat roof that protected the Witters from the elements as they got into and out of horse-drawn carriages, is not in the frame.

Mr. Billings straightens his back, suddenly alert when the heavy front door creaks open and a middle-aged man enters the museum. "Oh, Canal Street," Mr. Billings says as the man writes his name and address in the guestbook. "That's over by the old canning factory, towards Biron, isn't it?" The man nods, surprised that Mr. Billings has placed his address. Mr. Billings continues. "I used to walk past there on my way to school, over by the tracks. You're right across

from the rooming house where all those railroad fellows used to stay. I believe it's a tavern now." He delivers a similar monologue to all the visitors with local addresses. Mr. Billings seems to know the details of everything that ever happened in this town. He's a living relic.

When the man disappears into the surveyor exhibit, Mr. Billings returns to his reading and idly rubs his bruise, a physical reminder that he and this house-turned-museum are slowly crumbling. Here, aging people and aging things are reminders that history moves further into the past with each day.

*

My boss, Karen, unrolls a blueprint on the table. I mentally impose a "You Are Here" marking on the drawing of the third floor ballroom. On paper, this room looks so simple—it's just a big, open rectangle. The brittle paper doesn't do justice to the high ceilings or the hardwood floor; the blueprint doesn't conjure images of ladies in fancy gowns twirling to live music. When I'm alone, I sometimes think I hear their dresses swish as they turn to descend the stairs.

When Karen lets go of the edges, the blueprint snaps back to the familiar, rolled position. She unrolls it again. I spread my arms as wide as I can and press my palms to the paper to keep it in place. This isn't an archival-safe procedure designed to preserve materials, but there isn't any better way to complete this task. The oils from my hands seep into the ninety-five-year-old paper, consuming the past even as we try to save it. Karen walks around the table and stacks old schoolbooks along the blueprint's edges, taking care to cover as little of the delicate paper as possible. Even this is unsafe. If we leave the books for too long, their acids will transfer to the blueprint and damage the floor plan of this majestic old building.

Karen hopes the books will erase the damage done to the blueprint during the years it spent coiled in a poster tube. If the page ever lays flat on its own, she'll move it to the map case. It should have been stored there all along, but nobody knew it was in the museum's collection. My coworkers and I often stumble across

things that the previous museum director left hidden in unlikely corners when she left the position a decade ago.

The blueprint could crack if it's left unattended for too long, or humid air might make the paper soggy. In an ideal world, the museum would have a climate-controlled storage area and we wouldn't worry about these things. Instead, we improvise with temperamental window air-conditioners. Karen will check on the blueprint often in the coming weeks to make sure it doesn't get damaged, pausing to assess it as she moves from one task the next.

Each summer is a race. Karen has a team of employees for only three months each year, and in that time my coworkers and I scramble through projects large and small: landscaping, cleaning basement storage areas, painting rooms in preparation for new exhibits, taking inventory, assembling and mailing a newsletter, processing artifact collections. Each September, Karen's summer assistants abandon her—we go back to school, sometimes mid-project, leaving Karen to clean up our messes and continue on, alone with Mr. Billings until Memorial Day.

Karen sometimes copes with the suffocating pressure of time closing in by ducking out when she thinks her teenage employees are too busy to notice her absence. She slips out the back door and crouches behind the peonies. Karen takes deep breaths and long drags from her Marlboros, then hurries inside and loses herself in the order of alphabetically filed paperwork.

My boss isn't the only one losing this battle; we all fight time in this old building. The entire third floor is packed with boxes to be sorted and artifacts to be catalogued. It'll be years before the disarray is ordered. And, in fact, the work will never *be* finished; it'll simply become more manageable. The museum will always receive new donations, which are both a blessing and a curse. There's nowhere to store the stuff, and the staff and budget are stretched too thin to properly care for it.

At the same time, we want to save all of this old junk from the landfill so others can learn from it. To us, it's not a crusty cookbook

with a broken spine and food stains; it's a fragment of a forgotten past, an invitation to read the recipes our grandmothers relied on. We can use a cookbook—or a handkerchief, a board game—to connect with the people who came before us and paved the way for our modern lives.

Once the blueprint is unrolled and secured beneath the schoolbooks, Karen and I leave the stuffy ballroom. We navigate a narrow space between wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling metal shelves that are stocked with hundreds of gray, archival-safe boxes. Fluorescent pink post-it notes, written in Karen's controlled cursive, serve as labels: Fashion Magazines, Early 20th Century; Religious Accessories; Nash Family Collection. Unfortunately, these post-its don't really tell us anything.

*

Jolene and I have been given a small collection to process. This is an honor, an acknowledgment that we are well versed in the museum's operations. We've been assigned to Women's Beauty Tools, which is—at this point—nothing more than four archival-safe boxes, and a few made of regular cardboard, all filled with random items loosely related to woman's timeless attempts at seduction. Our job is to bring order to this mess. We sort through the collection one item at a time, starting with the perfume bottles. Most still contain at least a third of their original contents.

We work in the sunroom, one of the museum's smallest spaces but also one of its most well lit. Jolene lifts the lid off a fragrant box and the sunroom immediately fills with the stench of rotten eau de toilette. We handle the glass bottles as we record their accession numbers and arrange them in a compartmentalized archival-safe box. Inevitably, traces of Citrus-something-or-another and Paris-something-else end up on our hands. The odor will linger for days.

Since I already smell terrible, I decide to sample the perfumes. Karen would not approve. She sometimes warns us about bacteria and the other health hazards old things can nurture, and reminds us to wash our hands after we touch artifacts, before eating, before

rubbing our eyes, before re-entering the modern world. There are often leftover suds in the office sink from Karen's frequent scrubbing, but I rarely wash after handling the artifacts.

"You don't want to do that," Jolene says when I announce my plan to test the perfume. "Do you know how long those chemicals have been stuck in those bottles, reacting with each other? You'll probably get cancer." I don't listen. I read the labels instead, searching for the least appealing scent. Jolene attempts to deter me even as I select a bottle of Eau-de-So-and-So, unscrew the lid, and place my finger over the opening. I tilt it, feel the cool liquid on my finger, and smear it on my neck.

At first, I just stink. I tease Jolene because she has to inhale the stench, too. We wrap a few more perfume bottles in archival-safe tissue paper. And then, suddenly, my skin burns. Jolene laughs as I run past Mr. Billings and into the bathroom. I frantically scrub my neck with a paper towel doused in icy water. The burning stops, but I've given myself a bruise from scrubbing so hard. And, I still stink.

A few days later, I express my desire to wear a clip-on hair bow I find in one of the boxes. Jolene tells me not to, and this time I listen.

*

I applied for the summer assistant job when I was encouraged by a friend who loved working at the museum. The pay is good and the schedule is flexible. If I can't work for a day because of a dentist appointment or for a week because of a family vacation, I don't even have to ask for time off. I just mark my projected absence on the office calendar, which hangs above a radiator that emerges from the scuffed hardwood floor like a monolith.

This is my third summer at the museum. I'm back for another season because work doesn't feel like work here. Most of my friends spend their summers bobbing their heads as they scan the local water park's wave pool for drowning victims. I'm paid a higher hourly wage to sort through boxes of old things and to appreciate an old man's stories.

At the end of each day I know I've ordered a sliver of chaos, saved something from history's trash heap. My coworkers and I envision this as our mission, an illusion we all cling to. We never stop to wonder who will benefit from our hard work or what we hope people will learn by reading explanatory placards and observing an artificially constructed history through a pane of Plexiglas. We assume that our work matters. What's the reward in scooping turds out of the kiddie pool? I don't know. That's why I do this instead.

Last summer, the local newspaper ran a feature article about the summer assistants in the Sunday edition. We answered a reporter's questions and smiled into the camera lens, excited to have our own lives documented, eager to slide into history's archives.

*

On Karen's rare days off, always planned weeks in advance, the summer assistants work unsupervised in the museum. She leaves a list of tasks on her desk and trusts that things will run smoothly in her absence. And they do, though not in a Karen-sanctioned way.

When Karen's gone, we complete forms or sort through boxes while watching Betty Boop cartoons in the Grimm Natwick exhibit; he was a local, and also Betty Boop's creator (a matter of debate, as Fleischer Studios claims Natwick wasn't the originator). Natwick's drawings line the walls of the gallery-style exhibit. The cartoons play in a loop, the sound muted, when the museum is open. With Karen gone, though, we let their repetitive music and obnoxious sound-effects echo through the building.

We bring cameras to work, too, and photograph one another wearing the less fragile items from the clothing collection: hats and shawls and jackets. Murray, the unofficial museum mascot—a mink stole, gutless but with glass eyes and a spring-loaded jaw—comes out of a carefully labeled, acid-free box that is stored on the third floor.

Stacy, who is in charge because she's worked here the longest, slides a hoop skirt over her uniform of khaki pants and a museum-issued polo shirt. She carefully drapes Murray over her shoulders,

pinning his soft tail between his teeth. Stacy spins so the skirt billows, and she smiles a wild smile. I snap a photo. A week later, I place the picture next to her purse, which sits on a shelf in the office. The photograph is face down so Karen will not see.

*

The Women's Beauty Tools are everywhere. Boxes stand in piles on the floor, loose artifacts cover the tabletop, and stacks of papers occupy empty chairs. As we sort through the items on the table, Jolene reads accession numbers and I record them. She examines her reflection in a handheld mirror before turning it over to search for the tiny, hidden number.

"Ummm," she says, holding the mirror at an angle so I can examine it. "Is this a thirteen or an eighteen?"

I take the mirror. My arm dips, my elbow hitting the table as I adjust to the unexpected weight. I study the number, hand printed on a small patch of white paint. This is the old way to label an artifact, a vestige of the former director. The new procedure is to write with archival-safe ink on archival-safe stickers that promise not to leave residue on items if removed. Only time will tell whether or not this claim is fact. "I think it's 76-18-2. What do you think?"

"I think it's thirteen," Jolene says. "The loops aren't closed, are they?"

"I can't tell," I say. "Crap. I guess we have to go check." Jolene and I trudge to the third floor for what feels like the eightieth time that day, to determine yet another illegible accession number.

The numbers are our only means of identifying the artifacts. Each number contains three parts, and each part offers a different piece of information. The first number—in this case, 76—tells us what year the item was acquired. The second number (the number we can't decipher) tells us who gave the item to the museum; this mirror was donated by either the thirteenth or the eighteenth person to make a contribution in 1976. The final number—the "two" in 76-18-2—means the mirror was the second item donated by this person in this year. Like the post-it notes on the third floor,

though, accession numbers are merely labels. They aren't diaries that divulge an artifact's secrets; they can't give us any real sense of an artifact's past.

In the ballroom, we open a file cabinet and remove a flimsy green binder containing the museum's handwritten accession records from the mid-1970s. If there was ever a fire, what little we know about the artifacts on our shelves would be lost as the green plastic melted and the paper was reduced to ash. Karen sometimes fantasizes about digitizing the museum's records, but I don't think it'll ever happen because there are too many sheets of paper and not enough time. Karen says that we keep records "the old-fashioned way," but to me that's just a euphemism for "stuck in the past." I flip through the binder in search of 76-18-2, but it doesn't exist.

"I told you the loops weren't closed," Jolene says. Item 76-13-2 is described as being a silver handheld mirror dating to the early 1900s. Mystery solved. We have a number to record; we can identify the artifact.

Unfortunately, this isn't always possible. When an artifact lacks an accession number, it's processed as though it's a new donation. We fill out the requisite paperwork, listing "FIC" as the donor. Most of the museum's FIC items, "Found in Collection," were discovered during a long and rudimentary sorting process that occurred in 1994, shortly after the former director left. This is how the collections were formed. All of the military items were boxed and stored together on the third floor, all of the Bibles, all of the Women's Beauty Tools. Now, nearly a decade later, we're slowly tidying these smaller messes. We label. We sort. We re-group. We verify. We remove pink post-its.

We create accession numbers, too. Some artifacts escaped detection in 1994. "Signe," Jolene says after scrutinizing a hair ribbon for an unusually long time, "Can you find a number on this?" I can't. The faded pink satin slides through my fingers, slippery and cool. We fill out an accession form and Karen signs it before adding it to the most recent green binder.

This ribbon officially exists now that Jolene and I have filled out the paperwork, and we'll always be linked to it in some small way. We have saved an artifact from anonymity and recorded a scrap of history. But as noble as we think that is, our interactions with the past also taint it. By cataloguing the ribbon and describing it from our modern viewpoint, we have imposed ourselves on the ribbon and its stories. We have transformed the ribbon from what it is into what we *think* it is, what we want it to be.

*

The museum's gift shop is located just off the entryway. It's the last thing visitors see before they leave. The tiny gift shop has a domed ceiling and is lined with dark, built-in bookshelves that house old-fashioned toys, books written by local authors, Christmas ornaments, and other miscellaneous items. Expensive glassware sits on the mantle, too high for children to break. This was the Witter family's music room.

The gift shop is usually Amy's post, but she's taken the day off so I'm filling in. If I lean out from behind the desk and peer through the over-sized doorway, I can see Mr. Billings sitting in his chair. My coworkers and I have all heard him tell stories about living across the street from the museum. On hot summer evenings, he and his wife sat on their balcony while their apartment shed the heat that had accumulated when Mrs. Billings cooked their supper. Across the street, Charlotte Witter, an accomplished musician, played the organ. She raised the windows and the heavy curtains blew in the breeze as music spilled into the street. Mrs. Witter practiced the hymns that she played for services at United Methodist Church, just three blocks away on the Wisconsin River's east bank. Mr. Billings and his wife, now deceased for more than ten years, held hands and listened. They could see the church steeple in the distance.

Mr. Billings always smiles when he recalls his first home, his wife, and his life as a "young blade." That smile makes my heart sink. I can't imagine living for almost a century, only to see my life

crumble into the hazy realm of “history.” I can’t fathom what it’s like to be a museum’s most treasured exhibit.

But when did his life become history? If the old man is still breathing, can he be an artifact? We say we believe in living history, in making the past come to life—but I don’t think Mr. Billings is what we have in mind. Instead, we attempt to reanimate the dead, putting their possessions on life support. We speak for the artifacts by labeling them, explaining them, and giving them a history, rather than letting the artifacts speak.

I sit in the little room where Charlotte Witter played her organ, and I wait for customers that may never come; people don’t often commemorate their visit with South Wood County Historical Corporation t-shirts, coffee mugs, or tote bags. Instead, they leave a few dollars in the donation box that stands on a wooden pedestal near the front door. I don’t like working in the gift shop, guarding the cash box all afternoon. The job is dull—I’d rather dig through boxes on the third floor, collecting dust under my fingernails.

I didn’t bring a book with me this morning because I didn’t know I’d have gift shop duty. I pass the time by writing trite, museum-themed poetry in a blue spiral notebook that my coworkers and I keep in the gift shop desk, unknown to Karen. The title, scrawled on the notebook’s front cover, is “1st Floor Therm. #2.” It’s a mystery, as is the handwriting. It’s like an artifact without an accession number; we have no idea where it came from or what it was used for, and there’s no way to find out. The pages, which were blank when we found it in the supply closet, are rapidly filling. I thumb through the notebook and read my co-workers’ boredom-inspired ramblings. The grandfather clock ticks, its pendulum swings.

One of the more interesting entries was composed by our youngest museum worker, who just finished her freshman year of high school. “Look around you,” Amy wrote. “What do you see? Or better yet, what sees you? Don’t turn around, because there are tiny people in the picture hanging on the wall. Maybe they’re watching

you. Do you really want to know? How many minutes are left until you can leave this little room? How many hours until those picture people are done staring at your back?"

She's on to something. As I sit behind the desk, I'm hypersensitive to the soft creaks and pops of a house settling. I hear Mr. Billings turn the page in his book, and a conversation drifts up from the basement's railroad exhibit. The ceiling squeaks as visitors pace the second floor.

A breeze ruffles the curtains, delivering the scent of the pink and white roses that flank the front porch. The tiny hairs on my arm stand at attention, but I'm not sure it's because the wind is cool. For a moment, I feel that I'm not alone.

*

The Women's Beauty Tools lie unattended in the sunroom because we have visitors. Jolene sits on the railroad bench in the basement, and I wait on the second floor. We've abandoned our collection to make ourselves available to the visitors, to answer their questions. It's also our responsibility to make sure they don't touch, break or steal the artifacts.

It's irritating to be pulled from the Beauty Tools mid-task because it will be difficult to return. It will be hard to remember which artifact a hastily scrawled number is paired with, hard to recall whether or not a number has been verified, hard to recall which box a recently-removed post-it once labeled. Jolene and I always spend a few minutes re-orienting ourselves when visitors leave, mentally adjusting from "don't touch!" to "hands-on." Supervising visitors feels menial compared to ordering a collection, and yet there would be no collections to organize if there were no visitors.

I station myself at the top of the second floor staircase, on a rectangular landing as big as my bedroom. The landing is illuminated both by a chandelier and by sunlight that filters in through a semi-circular window that is almost as tall as I am. Karen changes the landing exhibit every other summer; right now it's dedicated to Victorian funerals. Headless mannequins wearing

mourning dresses stand alert in glass cases, and on the wall behind me is a photograph of an old woman wearing a black funeral dress and a scowl. Her eyes are the kind of eyes that follow you around a room.

The old woman makes me uneasy. When my coworkers and I go through the building to turn on lights and raise window shades, we often discover her hanging askew, the top right corner of her frame lower than the left. Amy named our melancholy woman Clara, thinking perhaps she would stop misbehaving if she had an identity. It didn't work. Clara still tilts her frame. We still straighten it.

"Hi," I say as the visitors—a little boy, his mother, and his grandmother—enter the funeral exhibit. "If you have any questions, just let me know."

After studying the heavy black dresses, the mother approaches me. "Where do these go to?" She points to four closed doors in the narrow hallway that leads from the funeral exhibit to our research library, what had been the Witter boy's bedroom. One door conceals the staircase that leads to the ballroom, and light bulbs and office supplies are behind another.

I lead the visitors down the hallway. "This door goes to the servants' staircase," I say. This is not the same stairway that leads to the third floor—when this building was the Witter home, the servants' staircase connected the kitchen to the almost-hidden second floor corridor where we now stand, a way for the hired help to move through the house undetected. Though I'm not supposed to, I crack the door and musty stairway air spills into the hall. The visitors lean in to see the narrow pine steps, littered with old typewriters. Karen uses the space for storage; she stashes things anywhere she can.

The final door hides the elevator shaft. "When Mr. Witter got old he couldn't climb the stairs anymore so they installed an elevator," I say. The mother and grandmother take turns peering through the door's small, glass window. It's futile, though, since there's no light in the shaft. Still, the little boy demands a turn and

the mother holds him up. He smears his nose against the glass; I'll have to clean the streak when they leave.

The mother says, "Does it still work?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe." The elevator car rests permanently on the first floor, at the base of the servants' staircase. It doesn't look like a modern elevator; an accordion-style door folds over the opening. On the first floor, the elevator is concealed from the public by a false wall in the cranberry marsh exhibit, what was once the Witter kitchen. Now, the only way to reach it is by stepping over the typewriters.

I once stood beside the elevator while the other girls shut the door at the top of the stairs. Earlier that day, after once again adjusting Clara's frame, I had claimed that the museum's inherent creepiness didn't bother me. My coworkers responded by daring me to stand in the dark, alone at the foot of the unused servants' staircase. It was perhaps thirty seconds before I imagined Mr. Witter's ghost emerging from the elevator and placing its icy hand on the back of my neck.

I don't believe in ghosts. But in the museum, it's hard to think the past is really gone. We organize history here, preventing it from slipping away unannounced. Mr. Witter still wanders the halls, if only because we place him there every day in our varied versions of his stories.

*

Today is Mr. Billings's ninety-third birthday, and my coworkers and I are at the museum earlier than usual to prepare for his birthday party. Someone has baked a strawberry cake, his favorite, and we've hung a hand-made sign in the sunroom, a simple "Happy Birthday Mr. Billings!!!" written in crooked capital letters on a piece of poster board from the supply closet.

Mr. Billings arrives at his usual time. We see his sky-blue Pontiac pull into the lot, and we watch him slowly shuffle out of the driver's seat. No evidence of his bruise remains, and he steadies himself with his cane. As he hobbles across the parking lot toward the building's back door, we move from the office to the sunroom so we can greet him as he enters.

“Happy Birthday!”

Mr. Billings smiles when he sees the cake, the paper plates, the plastic forks, the mismatched napkins, the sign. He’s surprised, even though we did the same thing last year and the year before, and he must know we’ll plan to do the same thing next year.

The party only lasts long enough for us to sing “Happy Birthday” and eat a slice of cake. We have work to do. Karen goes to the office to process new donations, my fellow summer assistants and I scatter to our various projects, and Mr. Billings relocates to his chair by the front door.

My coworkers and I see Mr. Billings as linking life and history, though he doesn’t view himself that way. He always says he’s nothing special, just old enough to remember. He pages through Dave Engel’s local history books the way we page through our yearbooks, smiling, frowning, recollecting. Just as we peer out from the pages of our annuals, Mr. Billings sees himself in the history books—the author has interviewed him countless times, and now his memories are preserved in print.

Mr. Billings recalls the events that Karen tries so hard to recreate in structured exhibits with black-and-white signs, carefully chosen artifacts and photographs, framed newspaper articles blown up to quintuple size, all purposefully selected and arranged for effect.

The artifacts in the exhibits are on display only because someone donated them. It’s true they tell the shadow of a story and illuminate bits of experience, but these items are only pieces of a bigger conundrum. Viewing an exhibit is like viewing an outline, a jigsaw puzzle where only the outside pieces have been pressed together. The middle pieces hide in the memories of old men. In coffins.

Mr. Billings isn’t limited by the museum’s puzzle pieces—he doesn’t need our faux railroad station to know what trains meant to our community in the early twentieth century. He saw them every day, stopping at the paper mill to load and unload. His father worked for the railroad and his family lived near the tracks. Mr.

Billings spoke with railroad folk daily and spent time in the rooming house where conductors sometimes took their breakfasts. Unlike my coworkers and I, and even Karen, he heard the whistles, breathed billows of black smoke, and fell asleep to the low hum of window panes vibrating as the trains passed through.

*

Jolene and I begin the tedious work of verifying the accession numbers of more than a dozen nearly identical, old-fashioned curling irons that we've pulled from the Women's Beauty Tools. I'm no longer awed that these items pre-date electricity. I'm tired of climbing the stairs to verify scribbled numbers and I'm tired of going to the office to fill out accession forms.

I pick up a curling iron that's just like the rest, except that half of the handle is missing. Jolene and I don't know what to do with it. Already, the box is full though we still have three more curling irons to process. The special, artifact-friendly boxes are expensive. It would be silly to waste museum money, which there isn't a lot of, on a second box for only a few items, and it seems unwise to waste space on a broken, dime-a-dozen artifact. "Do you think she'll let us de-access it?"

"Maybe," Jolene says.

We catch Karen's attention when she emerges from the office.

"Hey Karen," I say, holding up the curling iron. "We have a ton of these, and this one's broken."

"We can't fit it into the box," Jolene says. Karen looks at the bulging box, and then at the curling irons still on the table.

"Should we de-access it?" The word feels awkward in my mouth because it's not one that gets used often.

"Is it an FIC?"

"No..." An item without a recorded history is always more likely to be discarded.

"I don't know, then," she says.

"Come on," I say. "What are we ever going to do with this thing? If we want to display an old curling iron, we've got plenty that are in better shape."

“Are you sure it’s not part of some other collection?”

“Yes.”

“What’s the number?”

“Karen,” I say, “we checked.” Still, I recite the accession number to prove that this broken curling iron doesn’t belong in the boxes upon boxes of items that we absolutely cannot discard because they were donated by the Meads or the Potters or the Farrishes or any one of a dozen other prominent local families.

Karen glances at the box of curling irons, and I can see that she’s mentally rearranging the third floor, de-accessing all of the crummy items to clear just a little bit of space for our more valuable junk.

Sometimes we destroy the past here. We can’t save everything, so we weave a selective history by impressing our values on each object we encounter. Every artifact on the third floor has been preserved because, instead of tossing it, someone consciously gave it a number, wrapped it in tissue paper, and placed it on a shelf. We decide which artifacts will be—for now, anyway—spared the landfill for the comfort of a gray archival safe box.

“Don’t forget to update the record,” Karen says.

*

Stacy and I stand on the porte cochere roof. I pull my long hair into a ponytail, an attempt to keep it off of my damp neck. I wipe sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand and peel my shirt away from my moist skin.

It’s ninety degrees in the shade today, and the sun is directly overhead. We’re doing the maintenance work that, for some reason—probably for a break from the daily routine—we’ve volunteered for. For the next week, we’ll remove a layer of moss, cobwebs, bat poop, and dirt from every inch of the building’s three-story exterior. Armed with a hose, a power washer, and an extension ladder, we take turns at the difficult but rewarding task of making the century-old building sparkle.

This is what we do here. We stand humbly before the forces of time and do what little we can to save what little we can.

Standing behind Stacy, I watch the mortar turn from green to gray. Chunks of moss fall from the shutters, landing on the driveway below, and stubborn cobwebs refuse to yield to the high-pressure stream of water that would burn my skin if I was unfortunate enough to get in its way.

I picture carriages passing below us, delivering rich ladies dressed to attend a dance in the Witter family's famed third-floor ballroom. I also picture drivers hitching horses to the post that still stands in the yard. But there are no carriages or drivers, just a damp spot on the pavement. Puddles collect on the flat roof and the drains clog with detritus.

Power washing is a two-person job. Operating the power washer is, on a smaller scale, like operating a fire hose. If Stacy dropped the power washer gun this instant, water would arc through the air as the gun thrashed about, bouncing on the rubber-coated roof. The machine demands that we tense against its vibrations, and our muscles quickly tire from aiming a strong, steady stream at row upon row of aging bricks. After a while, Stacy shouts that it's time to switch places. Her biceps need to recover, so it's my turn to attack the grime. No one here can remember who last cleaned these walls; maybe the slime has never been scrubbed from the columns and window sills. It's possible that some of this dirt dates to the day these bricks were laid.

I brace myself and pull the trigger. The machine hums, the water flows, and the ancient grime disappears. I know I have to be careful, though. If I stand too close to the porte cochere's knee-high railing, the spray will be too intense. I'll destroy the spongy, rotting wood, and splinters will flutter to the lawn below. (The brittle windows will not be as kind if they shatter.) This building is as delicate as Mr. Billings. It's made of bricks and nails rather than blood and bones, but it's just as fragile.

I take a step back. **f**

ANNE SWITZER

OCTOBER

We are moving
into winter. The old me
is a missing person.
Things have gone
from disordered
to filthy. This is the month
my mother died.
The plant I bought
to remember her by
is fighting to survive.

Hugo went to Mexico
began new love affairs
and brought me back
a cup of shells and
a jade stone.
It was as though
he had handed me my
heart. Emerald green and
rough-edged.
I placed it beside the
dying plant.

Sleep is the only
call I answer.
The waking hours
have browned and curled
and fallen away.

Nothing can stop
October or the winter
that follows.
But everything passes,
fleetinglly remembered,
like photos from someone
else's lifetime.
Sister Marysia promised:
"Serenity will come."
It didn't.
But there was April.

ANNE SWITZER

THE DEEP PART

1. Phantoms

Alita sat too close
held my hand
smelled of
piss & desperation.
Fingers waxy-yellow
nails blackened.
She painted
jigsaw masterpieces.
Spoke to phantoms
from an earlier lifetime:
“You never thought
I’d make it
but I made it alright.
I made it!”

2. Americans

My psychiatrist
was Nigerian
& mistrustful as
any of us.
He had strange ways.
Wrote, “FALSE BELIEFS,”
in tiny print
on a yellow note pad
like a meaningful secret.

Caught him
reading through
my things
usually on Mondays.
He offered
no apologies.
Leroy,
who thought
he was a Kennedy,
warned me, “Watch out
for that doctor,
he’ll strap you down
for good.”
He never did
strap me down.
But we spent
entire sessions
discussing why
Americans
wouldn’t fry up
a horse.

3. Faith

Hugo finally came for me.
We took the F train
back to Brooklyn.
Months & months

I hung around
the apartment
like a damp rag
unspooning myself,
finding air at the
edge of the bed.
“You’re not there really,”
he said to me.
Days upon days
I avoided his eyes—
the sting of
his faith in me—
believing
I might have
learned
to wrangle the chaos.
He didn’t see.
The deep part,
it was over my head.

4. Tomorrow
I move in slow motion
boxing books
& postcards
crowds of poems
my collection of
damp lies.
I walk heels-down-hard

through compromises
I regret making.
One tomorrow
very soon
I will abandon
this life.
Already I feel
like a reckless
rumor.

ANNE SWITZER

MORNINGS

Mornings
he drags a
dull razor
over his scalp.
My razor.
Coffee.
New York Times.
Diner.
Smoking.
Chain smoking
two packs
Marlboro Reds.
Coffee
& more gut melting
coffee.
Then I take Hugo
his drum set
drum key
bongos
whistles
bells
sticks
& cymbals to the
pseudo-Bohemian
hang-out on the
gloomy West Side.
No windows
sticky porn shops

Harleys out front
West Side.
Drop him off
pick him up
night after night
after night.
Drumming.
Drumming.
Sex.
Sleep.
Mornings.

MICHAEL DERRICK HUDSON

FEELING SORRY FOR MYSELF WHILE WATCHING THE OLYMPICS

Such beautiful louts, most of them. Seventeen hours a day

or whatever it is, their childhood swapped
for half a pristine minute. Like livestock prodded from

one air-conditioned barn to the next, the tracksuit lunatics

have them clocked and weighed, hydrated
and calorie-counted, zipped into shimmering polymers...

Half of them choke. Major in Phys Ed. Get to be coach.

I hate the Olympics. The Norwegian trainers yammering
in Norwegian. All that math only

to beat the Swedes. Skull fractures. You-can-do-it shoe

commercials bracketing some loser's
mawkish backstory. Another Chinese gymnast's birthday

fudged. The money. The urinalyses and
trumpet blasts. But I'm wrong, of course. I'll never want

one single thing this much. I'll never get to be so beautiful.

HAZZARD COUNTY, GA

We boys got in the habit of showcasing our evolving vocabulary when we gathered on Friday nights at Leon Puckett's house to watch *The Dukes of Hazzard* and talk dirty to Daisy Duke. We believed our language should reflect our new status as full-grown men. After all, we had recently passed the eighth-grade Sex Ed unit mandated by the state of Georgia, and we had perused the veritable library of smut circulating among our dingy fingers. We had taken our respective turns with Leon's telescope, ogling my next-door neighbor Janie's open window for a glimpse of her celestial body. So: Friday night meant Waylon Jennings singing "Good Ol' Boys" and our suburban posse crowding around Leon's color TV to spend a primetime hour in Hazzard County, Georgia, which showed up nowhere on a map but most certainly occupied a vivid place in our imaginations. It meant one of us—usually our host, Leon himself, because he was officially a high schooler and therefore more worldly than the rest of us—crawling on his hands and knees close enough to fog the screen with his noxious breath and telling Daisy, in no uncertain terms, what he'd like to do to her. "Listen up, baby," he'd say. "Lemme lay you across the hood of the General Lee and make you do a Rebel Yell."

Of course Leon spoke for all of us. Though he had a poster of Farrah Fawcett on his wall—yes, *that* poster—it was Catherine Bach—aka Daisy Duke—who had become the latest celluloid vixen to stoke our fantasies and trigger a burning sensation in our loins. She seemed fit to maintain this position for a good long while. She was a Southern girl, after all, and could never seem to find a steady beau, bless her heart, which made our ignoble crowd believe we actually had a chance.

During the boring parts of an episode, when Bo and Luke Duke drove the General Lee like a bucking Bronco through the red clay backroads of Hazzard, infuriating Boss Hogg and eluding Roscoe P. Coltrane yet again, we ignored the show entirely. Unless, of course, Cooter Davenport made an appearance. Cooter provided us ample opportunity to laud the show's writers for naming a character after a woman's vagina. Otherwise, we killed time by raiding Leon's refrigerator or inflicting bodily injury on one another.

We had no acceptable and socially-approved outlet for this sexual energy tripping through our veins, so we waylaid each other with pillows, thumped each others' ears, and made lewd references to each others' moms, this time incorporating words from our Sex Ed unit like *hymen*, *vulva*, and *clitoris*. We could identify these features on a textbook diagram, but we did not know anything about them otherwise. Only Leon Puckett even claimed firsthand knowledge. We compiled a notebook containing frank and lurid assessments of every girl in eighth-grade. We ranked each according to the criteria—all anatomical, of course—we thought constituted feminine pulchritude. We exhibited no interest in personality, disposition, or character, because the girls ignored us, generally, and hoarded their intangible qualities to themselves.

Among our questionable outfit, I was the designated poet. I would like to think this appointment had something to do with my facility with words; more likely, it resulted from the fact I was the only one passing Language Arts. Anyway, one Friday night Leon paid me a dollar to improvise some verse about Bobby Martin's mother. Her name was Joan. The finished product would win me no awards, but I do remember feeling particularly proud of the concluding couplet rhyming *Joan* and *moan*.

But when Daisy Duke graced the screen in those cut-off denim shorts and that plaid shirt tied to reveal her blessed navel, we put aside all distractions. We paid rapt attention. We each felt the strange stirring in our Fruit-of-the-Looms and hid our tender hearts and our sincere devotion from one another by vowing publicly to spoil Daisy's considerable virtue.

Here's the upshot: These were just the rules we played by. Everybody knew them tacitly. Daisy was there to be ogled, groped, and manhandled. But to profess any sort of love for her—or for any of the more pedestrian varieties of female such as the eighth-graders who actually occupied our same orbit—would have generated grave suspicion of whether your wood was wet, or if you had any wood at all.

Which meant I kept my love for Daisy a secret. I suspect I wasn't alone in my hunger for love—in my private desire to put all bluster and bravado aside and just *talk* to Daisy. Surely the other boys also imagined themselves taking a window table at the Boar's Nest and asking Daisy to sing for them—because as dedicated viewers, we all knew what Daisy really wanted was to be a singer, and for somebody to listen to her song. But if there were others, we didn't commiserate. It was against the code. A violation of some kind of primal pact we'd made with each other.

So when Leon Puckett crawled toward Daisy with his tongue all adrip, I egged him on, too. I had no choice but to believe that I alone, of all the boys in the world, had begun to comprehend an insight burning hot within the dim wattage of my pubescent brain. An insight that, if I'd had words for it, would have gone something like this: Bodacious as she was, Daisy Duke possessed, right beneath that lovely swell of cleavage, something unlikely and wholly unexpected—a beating heart.

*

In June, the school year ended, and *The Dukes of Hazzard* went into summer reruns. By this time, hoarding my love for Daisy had convinced me something was wrong with me—that I lacked the callousness essential to adolescent boyhood. This, along with hours spent alone in the bathroom inspecting my nether regions to determine whether I was developing in an *age-appropriate* manner, persuaded me to journey to our local public library in search of answers to all the questions I believed Mr. Harding's Sex Ed unit had deprived me of. In those days, they told us the public library

was our ultimate resource, our portal to new worlds of information. Dewey Decimal was our friend. Reading was *fundamental*.

Once I began my search, the card catalog fulfilled my research needs, and almost instantly I was in possession of the call number for a book named, concisely enough, *Boys and Sex*. The mere title of this manual promised answers to all the questions I had failed to ask Mr. Harding during his drab lectures summarizing the procreative process. My questions would have borne little relation to the logistics, to what went where and how, because Mr. Harding had done his duty with the science of it all. What I really wanted to know resided nowhere in his glut of facts. Which led me to a conviction that, had I uttered it aloud, would have shamed my evangelical Christian parents—who taught me better than to speak blasphemy and are hereby absolved of all responsibility for my reciting it here: Securing this book felt like a quest for salvation.

I scrawled the call number on a strip of paper and commenced my search. I followed Dewey Decimal to the 600s, where I made a troubling discovery: *Boys and Sex* was absent from the shelf. Hoping only to blame some careless misarranging, I scoured the section, running my index finger along the spine of each and every volume. Then I checked all surrounding shelves. Surely my book was somewhere among these towering stacks. I explored with the single-minded compulsion of a boy driven by his glands. If there was a stray piece of lint, I discovered it. But the book was nowhere to be found. Which, of course, led me to the obvious conclusion: Some other sex-ignorant boy had pilfered *Boys and Sex*.

Consequently: Here's where the ominous music starts to play.

I approached the librarian at the reference desk. She was filling out some paperwork. Her blue hair gave her a bearing of experience, of immeasurable knowledge, as though at some point in her distinguished career she had laid hands on every book ever written. She was a calm presence, with a patient, sincere manner about her. Clearly a credit to her profession, she seemed to take deep personal satisfaction in helping those seeking her assistance. She could not

know that the child skulking toward her desk was desperate to learn the methods of desire. She did not know that this boy before her, wearing a Braves cap, a knock-off Izod polo with the alligator replaced by an absurd looking *dragon*, and Trax sneakers, was willing to risk all claims to decency and his relationship with Jesus Christ in exchange for information regarding a missing book.

I cleared my throat. "Excuse me, ma'am."

The librarian glanced up from her paperwork, peered at me over the half-moons of her bifocals. She smiled pleasantly. She asked me how I was today.

I told her I was good.

"How can I help you, young man?"

I peered over my shoulder, performed a quick reconnaissance of the area. "Do you have a book called *Boys and Sex*?" I whispered.

"Have you checked the card catalog?" she asked. Her volume sounded a little too loud for my comfort.

"Yes ma'am. I checked the shelf. It's missing."

"Perhaps it's been checked out," she said.

As the librarian began sifting through her files, I considered that other boy for a moment—the one who now possessed the book. I imagined him sitting on the floor in his room, somewhere in the basement recesses of a nearby split-level, his legs crossed Indian style, his pulse skipping through his blood, *Boys and Sex* weighing heavily in his palms. I pictured the boy cocking his ear, listening for footsteps outside his closed door, ready to shove the book under his bed at even the slightest suggestion of another human being loitering near the top of the stairs. I felt a great comradeship with that boy. I wished the two of us could lie side-by-side, shoulder-to-shoulder, on that bedroom floor, poring over the pages of *Boys and Sex*. I wished we could compare notes; that we could ask each other all the questions we had been so very afraid to ask Mr. Harding; that we could fill in the missing facts in each other's understanding; that we could know, when I went home, that our secret would be between us. I wished that we didn't have to go at this pursuit alone—that learning the mysteries of sex was not such lonely work.

As the librarian continued consulting her records, I again cased my surroundings, suspicious that someone who knew me might be lurking in the vicinity. The air conditioner hummed, a low pleasant drone—but a bead of sweat trickled down my ribcage. I pretended to investigate the periodical section. I skimmed the pages of *Sports Illustrated*, feigning to study it when in fact I wouldn't have been able to recall a single word just moments later. I even peeked outside the window to assure myself that my mother, who had agreed to wait in the car studying her upcoming Sunday school lesson while I picked up a *Hardy Boys* or two, was still preoccupied.

"Young man!" I heard. The librarian summoned me to the circulation desk. I approached her hopefully. "Yes," she reported. Her face held an expression of sorrow and regret. She seemed apologetic that she had to break such news to me. "It's been checked out, I'm afraid."

I could not raise my head. Something approximating despair was rising inside me, clogging my chest. I felt my face flush, my eyes go glassy. My lower lip might have been trembling. "How long will it be out?" I asked. "When is it due?"

"It was just checked out," she responded. "It's not due for almost three weeks."

The world's axis seemed to be grinding to a halt, leaving me perpetually thirteen, ignorant and confused. Three weeks seemed an eternity. She might as well be telling me to come back when I turned twenty-one. I tried not to blame the librarian, but who knew somebody's *grandmother* could be the bearer of such bad news?

"Would you like to put a hold on it?" she suggested. "Would you like to reserve it?"

I said yes. "Yes," I said. "I'd really appreciate it."

"Splendid," she said. She clasped her hands together. She swelled with satisfaction at having performed her job admirably. She was allowing information to reach the masses. Surely moments like these were why she had entered such a noble profession in the first place. She jotted a notation in her perfect librarian script. "Is this for school or for personal interest?" she asked.

With this question, her voice seemed to take on a new tone. It lost its melody and dropped an octave. I heard compassion, or maybe pity. Standing there—yes, in the *summer* of 1982—I felt like this old woman was able to see through me; that she knew me in a way that maybe nobody else did. She seemed to understand something basic and fundamental about me. Her eyes held me in such a way that convinced me she wanted to place a grandmotherly hand atop mine and assure me that everything was going to be okay—that she wanted to give me a chance to tell her what kind of boy I was. She maybe saw me as the kind of boy who next Friday night, instead of joining my ignoble crowd at Leon Puckett’s house to watch *The Dukes of Hazzard*, would stay home, in my own bedroom, with my black and white TV tuned to the show. Maybe I would wait through the car chases, the schemes of Boss Hogg, the stuttering of Roscoe P. Coltrane, for the welcome sight of Daisy Mae Duke on the screen. Maybe when she appeared, all made up in her short-shorts and high heels, with sheen in her hair and a smile on her lips, maybe I would pull my chair closer to the screen as though I were making myself at home at the Boar’s Nest. Daisy would bring me a glass of milk, with a wink and a smile, before taking the stage to sing, and then I’d settle in and listen to her song.

But far as I knew, there was no room in this world for that kind of boy. I was thirteen. I’d passed Sex Ed. My dad was a Baptist deacon, my mom a Sunday school teacher. So when the librarian asked whether this book was for school or for personal interest, at first I stood there blinking stupidly, recognizing this moment as the logical culmination of my life so far, before finally answering the only way I knew how.

“School,” I said. f

JULIE JUDKINS

FAN LETTERS

I.

Sitting in my high school library,
I looked into your bead black eyes
printed on a yellowed page.

The photograph was overexposed,
as if you were already receding
when the shutter snapped.

But your eyes remained,
hard and burning like February's coal,
giving meaning to the anchor in my chest.

II.

Did you know they've made you into a paper doll?
That they sell your image next to cash registers in bookshops?

Loneliness (noun)

What occurs when someone carefully trims your outline with
scissors, lovingly dresses you in one of five outfits, and shows you to
their friends

but cannot quote your poems.

III.

I read the one about your baby crying to a man I wanted to love.
This was over the phone. After I finished, there was a silence,
nothing but the sound of air between continents –

Finally, he scoffed and said,
“That’s woman’s stuff. Besides,
I already saw her movie on the plane.”

IV.

If I had anywhere to send these letters, you’d be 79. But instead
you’ve been dead for longer than you lived. So much life
turned to negative space.

Was it really inevitable?
I need to know.

Please circle your response to the following statement:

*There is no such thing as too late
but there is too early.*

Yes

No

QUIÉN ES MÁS MACHO?

It's 2003, and P has been living in Oaxaca a little over a year. He's twenty-seven, large and ungainly, his body out-of-kilter, right shoulder higher than the left, the right ear, even the eye, an asymmetry he exaggerates in self-regard. He stands barely six feet, 190 pounds, but this Mexican sojourn has put both his size and ungainliness in relief: by and large, Oaxacans are short and thickly built or short and thinly built – either way, short – and when he walks among them, stands at the front of the classroom, hulking and plodding, he can feel the weight of their stares. Their ancestors regarded the Spanish as gods, their firearms and horses, the metal armor, surrendered before them without a fight – these their descendants are more sophisticated: Oaxaca is a major tourist center, they're used to the sight of towering foreigners, and by comparison this overgrown mid-American Jew of Polish/Israeli extraction impresses little upon them. Still they watch him, and in watching make him self-conscious, nervously so.

P teaches (he *gives classes*) in the private language academies, English and French, adult and teen. The classes only last a few months, which is to say he's taught the same material several times, can run it through with hardly any preparation – even with private students, it occupies no more than 25 hours a week, the rest of his time consecrated to his Magnum Opus, a convoluted piece of navel-gazing that will, he's convinced, launch his Career.

Before coming south, P lived in New York, and if he's repaired to this remote corner of Mexico, a sleepy colonial town with its lovely cathedrals and Zócalo, wonderful food, the cobbled streets, blessedly mild weather, it's because he needed a break from the cosmopolitan rush. Mostly he needed a break from the poverty: in

New York he had no money, lived on peanut butter, free showings, readings with complimentary wine, free concerts. In Oaxaca, by contrast, he goes out to bars, dancing, can on occasion even swing dinner at one of the finer tourist restaurants.

He's joined in this by a motley crew, most of them British, on occasion Australian or Irish, a few Americans, Canadians. They go to movies together, party together, the bartenders greet them by name, and while they can be grating, even suffocating, they're often easier to be around than the Oaxacans, who rarely know where to begin. For all its charms, Oaxaca's a small town: until construction of the airport, the only way into or out of the city was by bus, the largest proximate city Puebla. Books are expensive, and the constraints of large, single-income families are such that, for most, travel is no option. Thus the world arrives at great distance, even the names, *Tailandia* and *Dinamarca*, they hum with mutual estrangement and mystery. There are exceptions to this, of course, students of ecology, biologists, readers of Borges and Calvino, Fuentes, but only enough to prove the rule.

P grew up in the Midwest, and the provincialism suits him — the Oaxacans are warm and welcoming in private: his students invite him for birthdays or special occasions, Mexican independence, a quinceañera, baptisms, weddings. At these festivals, he sits to the side with a cup of beer while small children play cops and robbers, bumping against his legs and toppling back to the floor in laughter. The houses where these events take place are inscrutable from without: the common theme is a brick facade with a heavy wooden door, concealing — inside is crafted beauty, an open courtyard, mosaic tiles.

The house where P rents a room is built on the same model — more properly jerry-built — its moldings plaster and tiling concrete, nested with ants and not unknown to scorpions — but the room is spacious and rent is only 800 pesos a month, at the current conversion about 80 dollars. There are two shared bathrooms and five bedrooms, about half of them occupied at any one point in

time – the owners have invested in similar houses throughout the country, and it's a distant cousin studying business at the local university, Ysrael, who has the room upstairs, caretaker and landlord both.

Ysrael is tall for a Mexican, a good 5'10", with an even, rounded face, and a warm, relaxed manner. He and P are about the same age, and there's sprung between them a cautious friendship. In the evenings they'll sit in the kitchen over a *caguama*, the big liter bottles of beer, have long talks, history and politics, family. Ysrael's parents are divorced, like P's, his father has had children with four different women, the latest a girl of nineteen – she's just given birth to twins.

This is Mexico, after all, and a real man's expected to hump anything that moves, Ysrael no exception. He's even gone to whores, and the Oaxacan whores are all in their forties, fat and unappealing. Ysrael's greater luck is to live in this tourist town where, for the younger men of middle-, upper-class, those that speak a little English and aren't too hard on the eyes, there's a steady supply of *gringa* tourists in search of a swarthy Latin paramour.

That being said, P and Ysrael are presently on the outs: a couple weeks ago they were out for drinks, ran into people P knew from work, among them Callie, a British girl of twenty-two. She'd be nothing in the States, even England, but she has blond hair and blue eyes, a decent figure, and true to his nature, Ysrael homed in like a shark after blood. P, in his corner, watched with mounting concern – when Ysrael got up for the bathroom, he seized the opportunity: leaning in, he told Callie to watch herself. Ysrael's engaged.

There's no lie in this. Olga studies marketing with Ysrael at the university, and they've been together three years – she seems like a nice girl, though P can't be sure: he's never exchanged more than five words with her, greets her when she goes up to Ysrael's room then greets her again when she comes back down. The good Oaxacan woman saves herself for marriage: there's some greater logic here, the women holding themselves pure while the men go

to whores, even transvestites, but P stands without — it's beyond his ken.

Nor can Ysrael understand why P would ruin his thing with Callie. P's tried explaining: that Callie is no cheap thrill *gringa* — she's a respected colleague, and if something went wrong, he'd be responsible. Ysrael refuses to hear this — in large part because Callie is a cheap thrill *gringa*: since coming from Leeds to Oaxaca five months ago, she's been inundated with attention, has gone from man to man announcing her post-coital delight only to collapse in tears when it all falls apart. No surprise, then, that upon receiving a discreet warning from a disinterested colleague, she doesn't politely break things off — *noooo*. When Ysrael returns to table, she proceeds to publicly lay into him, thus ruining the night for everyone — ruining too the calm home life of her disinterested colleague.

Ysrael's a *macho*, after all, and in his eyes, far from home, the protections of family, the only thing the *güera inglesa* could be good for is fucking. That Callie likely sees it in the same way is depressing, and, anyways, adds little to P's attempts at explanation.

He's none to talk — it's years since he experienced an attraction more than physical. He's been out with a couple girls in Oaxaca, friends of students, friends of friends, but there's rarely much to talk about — the most he's managed to make it last is a dinner or two, a night of dancing, after which he hasn't bothered to call. All to say that he too plays out his sexual energies on *gringa* tourists: he stays away from the Spring Breakers — they're too young, drunk, and intentionally stupid — but there was a thing with a Polish girl living in London, and he bedded down one night with a girl from Lyon. They met in a club: she was short with short-cut dark hair — otherwise he can barely remember what she looked like, barely even remembers their night together, knows only that their love-making was groping and sloppy, over quick besides.

Be that as it may, since what happened with Callie a tense silence has sprung up in the house. As if to underscore their new distance, Ysrael's begun spending his evenings with another lodger,

Stefan, a thirty-something Austrian with wavy, graying hair; he's tall and wiry with a thin, skeletal frame — in the mornings when he goes to the shared shower, he exposes a Chinese dragon that curls up his back, the knobs of his spine protruding like jeweled encrustations. He keeps a small local practice as an herbalist, having spent the last ten years in and out of Mexico, and he speaks a flawless Spanish, all but kissing the words. He's been in the house about three months now, and whenever P tries to talk to him, he looks past P's shoulders, to the left and right, as if in consort with P's demons, his guardian angels, a neglect P attributes to communal guilt, what Stefan's forebears did to P's. P doesn't hold him responsible. God visits the sins of the fathers upon the sons, to the third and even the fourth generation. So it is written.

Besides, P's not so poor in companionship that he can't bear the loss. One of his private students, Tamy, they've been together almost his entire time in Mexico. Their encounter was random, and in keeping with random encounters, randomly lasting: they met in the Zócalo, she approached and struck up a conversation. Later she'd tell him that he looked interesting, private and lonely, intense. Tamy is square and dark, with the short-cut hair of a tomboy and a rapid-fire tongue, and for about a year now they've been meeting twice a week. Her English is decent, and their talk is general, often political.

Insofar as P can understand it — and often he cannot — the political situation in Oaxaca is farcical when not tragic. Local government is corrupt and despised — every organ of information is opaque, down to the newspapers, which write about a politics divorced of policy — and conspiracy theories abound: that the governor is a pedophile, a cocaine-addict, that the state Congress holds a yearly orgy in Huatulco. Distance gives rise to imagination — so, too, in medieval times, did the commoners believe any foul thing of their nobles, *droit du seigneur*, the drinking of blood.

Things come to a head when gunmen attack the governor's convoy, the whole city's shut down, helicopters scar the skies —

burdened with firearms twice their size, black-clad police people in the intersections, and rumor spreads: that this was no hit, the governor manufactured it in the hopes of improving his national profile before the upcoming Presidential elections. This is so far-fetched as to be ludicrous, at least until federal prosecutors open a formal inquiry, and ballistics evidence proves that the governor's windshield was shot out from within.

Tamy is a rumor-junky — she has a private law practice, friends who work in politics — and when she goes into detail, her eyes narrow, a vein in her forehead starts to throb. She's thirty-five and single, most comfortable in jeans and a sweat-shirt, has a small community of gay friends and, like P, Ysrael, keeps an eye out for eligible tourists.

They meet for lunch, at times late, after work, for a drink. She knows all the bars, has even taken him to a couple gay bars to satisfy his curiosity. Oaxaca may be conservative, even by Mexican standards — the sexual revolution never quite hit, the pill is all but unknown — but homosexuality is a common feature of isthmus life, and there's a fair-sized local community, even some local festivals, encouraged no doubt by the cosmopolitan influx.

In any case, it's Friday evening, and P has done with his teaching, his writing, has gone up to the roof with a cup of coffee for a glimpse of the setting sun — the sky is hovering in some indeterminate violet hue when the pattering of Tamy's VW bug draws his eyes to the street.

He goes down to let her in. Framed in the doorway, she takes off her sunglasses and laughs: *"Tás listo ya?"*

They had coffee yesterday, she knows he has no plans. People from work are meeting at one of the salsa clubs outside the city, but the club is a scene, and he isn't in the mood — besides, he's starting to tire of the people from work, as he's starting to tire of the whole damn town — he misses New York. Tamy wins him over with the prospect of dinner. They go to a small place near the Zócalo, the food is cheap and good.

They're joined by Tamy's friend Luís, he works in City Hall. Luís is well-dressed, with starched white shirts and pressed jeans, an air of passive tolerance, sophistication. He's also one of the most closeted gay men P has ever known. He, too, is engaged — his fiancée's a pharmacist, she works downtown, and when he gets drunk, half-laughing, half-crying, he likes to talk about all the babies they will have. He accompanies Tamy to the gay bars, for her protection, he says, but often jumps ship before the night is up. His type is strong, quiet and surly, aggressive, at least as closeted — on more than one occasion he's shown up with a black eye, a sore shoulder: he falls a lot, he says — and laughs.

That said, tonight they're in good spirits. Gubernatorial elections are coming, and the opposition appears united. The three of them get good and liquored, are starting to very much enjoy the night when Luís suggests they move on to a club, one P's never heard of. He asks what kind of music they play.

Tamy brings a balled fist to her open palm and says: *'Pues, no es un club de música. Es un sex cloob. Entiendes? Hacen estriptis...'*

She proceeds to mimic a stripper twisting her bra off in drunken burlesque, twirling it by one finger overhead. P doubles over — they've come out of the restaurant, are on the lit open avenues of the city-center, and, laughing, Luís pulls her hand down: *'Tás looooca? Cálmate, ya.'*

P's heard that there are strip clubs in the southern reaches of town, but he's never been — largely because he's never found the right company. People at work he wouldn't feel comfortable with, and he wouldn't want to go with Ysrael. Tamy and Luís are, by contrast, the perfect escorts.

They get in Tamy's bug and head south. The city extends in all directions, diverse, ramshackle suburbs radiating from the center like an oil spill. P's never been in this part of town, and without Tamy and Luís to accompany him, probably never would. The side streets are crowded with cars, and when they do find parking, they have to walk a good five minutes before they arrive. From the

outside it's non-descript, wide and low, an unmarked door on a street-corner – for 50 pesos, they get entry and drink-tickets.

Inside it's overwhelmingly dark, a raised, lit platform, like a boxing ring, down to the four stripper's poles, one at each corner. The tables are organized in ascending circles, with the inner rings already full, room for a hundred or so. P's no connoisseur, but this place is like nothing he's ever seen. For one thing, it's equal opportunity. Nearly half the patrons are women, their presence the cause or effect of the even mix of hosts and hostesses, scantily-clad, circulating for drink orders. Then, too, there's no faux-elegance – the chairs and tables are cheap and wooden, sloppily painted, low to the ground besides.

Half-an-hour in, the lights dim and the show begins in earnest: four women followed by four men, they come to the stage in costumes and strip in choreographed sets. The women are short and fine-boned, the men short and muscled, the only appeal in any of them their frank nudity.

When they're done, the stage goes black. Smoke spewed from machines begins to swirl in laser light. The star attraction, Xochitl, comes to the stage in a full feathered headdress, suede cuffs about her arms, to the tune of flutes and distant drums begins to sway. She's short and lithe with ashen skin, long black hair – she steps to the drumming rhythms, keeps time with a pair of maracas, begins to wriggle out of her dress, lets it slip halfway down her breasts then stops and begins again. There's no tease in this: when the dress comes off, but for the headdress, the cuffs on her arms, she's naked, ashen skin exposed, the only color a long scar that runs from her side to her stomach, pink and braided thick. She holds the maracas, begins to grate, grind.

P is watching, watching and narrating, watching. He briefly wonders when it was he pulled away – everything occurs at a distance, like a story he tells, will tell. It's an old trick.

The lights come on: Tamy gets up for a fresh round.

'*Qué dices?*' asks Luís, leaning in. '*Te gustó?*'

P's a little drunk – he's entered the phase of enjoying being drunk. He tries to rouse himself into the moment. Did he like it? Sure. Why not? Lu s hiccups, giggles drunkenly, then rises in turn.

After a few minutes, Tamy comes back with fresh bottles.
'Where's Lu s?'

Says P, starting up from his drunkenness, 'I think he went to the bathroom.'

She takes this with a roll of the shoulders and a sigh. '*Ay dios.*' She shakes her head: 'He didn't go to the bathroom.'

'Where did he go then?'

'They have back rooms here,' she says. 'Booths. Private dances.' She shakes her head and sighs: '*Ustedes los machos y su desmadre...*'

It dawns on P then that this statement is meant to include him. He laughs. 'So I'm a macho?'

'*Pues claro,*' says Tamy. 'You're a man aren't you? Well, all men are machos. And all machos are pitiful.'

'Pitiful?'

'The only thing they think about is where to stick it, the faster the better...'

Lu s hobbles back to the table. Even in the dark, he looks shabby, hanging his head – he looks defeated. Says Tamy: '*Qu  pas , don Lu s?*'

Lu s starts to cry. Tamy throws some money on the table then gets up, reaches an arm about him, escorts him out – P has no choice but to follow behind.

On the dusty sidewalk, Tamy holds Lu s by the side as he throws up. He takes gulps of air, mutters fast and low, P can't follow.

'Ya,' says Tamy, standing him up against the wall and wiping his mouth clean. '*Ya. Vamos.*'

On the way to the car they cross a beer stand and get some bottled water. Tamy helps Lu s into the back of her bug, where he curls up and passes out. She and P get in from the front.

'What happened?'

‘Well,’ says Tamy, pulling her seat-belt on. She’s been careful in her drinking, is sober enough now to drive them home. ‘Luís went to the back room. I always tell him not to go, but he doesn’t listen. He went to the back room, and he found one of the strippers, he paid for a dance. He tried to pay for a blowjob. But the guy wouldn’t give him a blowjob. The stripper said he wasn’t a fag. He said Luís could pay to give a blowjob, but not to get one.’

‘And Luís paid?’

‘Pues, ya te dije,’ she says, ‘es un pinche macho.’

The rest of the ride is conducted in silence. Tamy drops P off at home, wishes him a good night. P looks in at Luís through the window. ‘Will he be okay?’

‘Him?’ says Tamy. ‘He’ll sleep like ten hours tonight – don’t worry, tomorrow he’ll be fine.’

They make plans for breakfast on Sunday, late, then wave their good-byes. P brings his key to the heavy wooden door and steps inside.

It’s nearly two in the morning, but there’s a light in the kitchen: Ysrael and Stefan are there at table, sharing a *caguama*. Ysrael wears a half-open shirt, sleeves rolled to the elbow, Stefan is slouched in the chair across – he wears a striped button-up, it emphasizes his skinniness, his length. His hair, his eyes, all look greasy and dull. It’s impossible to know how long they’ve been sitting there – judging by the state of drunkenness, a few hours at least.

‘*Qué pasó?*’ says Ysrael. He invites P to join them.

P tries to beg them off – he’s tired, he’s drunk – to no effect.

Says Ysrael: ‘*No seas así, güey. Ven, tomate algo.*’ In doing this, he’s inviting P back into his circle – refusing him now would be insult to injury.

P shrugs, plucks a glass from the cupboard, and pours some beer. Ysrael asks where he’s come from. Stefan stares drunkenly. P can’t remember the name of the club – he tries to describe it, trips through his Spanish, drunkenly.

He’s being moderately successful when Stefan starts up from his drink. To P’s angels, he says: ‘*No me gustan cosas así.*’

P stiffens. He's never taken Stefan for a prude.

'Not the thing itself,' Stefan continues. 'Just being there watching. The stripping. I don't like things done halfway.'

'*Órale*,' says Ysrael.

'Especially here,' Stefan continues. 'Where it's so easy.'

'Easy?' says P.

'You can get it whenever you want.' Then, to P's demons: 'This one girl – did I tell you the story?' But Stefan has never told any stories, not that P can remember. 'I met her in the Llano,' he says. 'She was, I don't know, fifteen, sixteen. School uniform. Reading a book on a park-bench. Almost like she was waiting for me.'

'What was her name?'

Stefan stifles a belch, shifts to the angels, asks what it matters.

'To give an idea.'

He shakes his head. 'I don't remember. But... to give an idea. She had long black hair and skin the color of copper, young and smooth...'

'*Basta de esta mierda*,' Ysrael cuts in. 'Just tell the damn story.'

Stefan pours himself another cup. 'We sat a while on the bench talking,' he says. 'After an hour, maybe more, I told her I had to go home. I had a room in Reforma, and I took her up on my bicycle – she sat on the handlebars.'

'All the way?' says P. Reforma is in the hills above the center – it's a long rise.

Stefan shrugs. 'I was in good shape. Besides – you know how it is. This girl sitting on your handlebars, you have your arms around her hips, she screams every time you hit a bump...'

And P: 'Nice...'

'Yes... We got up to the house where I was staying. I took her up to my room, and we started kissing. I started taking her clothes off...'

Stefan closes his eyes, reliving the moment.

Says Ysrael: '*Y entonces?*'

'*Entonces?*' Stefan sighs. He says something that P misses, must have misunderstood – after all, this conversation comes at a double

remove, from Stefan's German to his Spanish, from P's Spanish back to his English, not to mention all the beer for sieve – much is lost in translation.

'Cómo?' says P. '*La violaste?*'

'Sí,' Stefan confirms. 'I raped her. She took off her clothes. Then she says no. But I didn't stop. I couldn't.'

'She was just playing,' says Ysrael. 'She went to the room with you, didn't she? She took her clothes off?'

'Maybe,' says Stefan. He eyes the demons, drunkenly. 'I didn't stop.'

P surveys the both of them: 'Why would you tell me this?' he asks. 'Why would you tell anyone?'

Stefan's eyes are hollow and searching, their light reflected, from without. 'If I can't tell it,' Stefan says, 'then how can I explain it?' He shakes his head. 'I see you there in your room with your computer at night. Maybe one day you can write it.'

'You expect me to write this?'

'Sure. Maybe you can explain it. Understand it.'

'Why me?'

Stefan shakes his head, falters: 'Because I can't.' He tips back the last of his beer then gathers himself forward, wishes them a good night.

P and Ysrael sit a few more minutes in silence. 'Y tú?' says P. '*Qué opinas?*'

'Yo?...' Ysrael shrugs: '*Como dicen. Mejor chingar que ser chingao.*'

P shakes his head, then gets up to put his glass in the sink. He goes back to his room and changes for bed. The beer has long been working on him – he passes out as soon as his head hits the pillow.

At quarter to five he wakes for the bathroom, drinks some water then goes back to bed – for all the good it'll do. This often happens with alcohol – he wakes early, wakes for good. Another forty-five minutes, and he gives in to it.

Lying in bed he imagines going back to the club, asking a lap dance of Xochitl, running his hands along her bare ashen body,

his finger along the pink long braids of her scar. It doesn't get him anywhere. He went to a Turkish whore in Amsterdam once, it all happened too quick — he didn't have time to get over his nerves, enjoy it, and he can't imagine taking his pleasure in some grimy backroom.

His imagination turns to Stefan instead — the girl. He has to name her. María Belén? Luz? Carmen? — how many names can they have for the same woman? — and it comes to him: Lupita. He's seen these girls in the Llano, he imagines her, Lupita, sitting on a park-bench, the trim figure with the long hair, glasses, a thin gold chain at her neck, legs bobby-socked white. He *sees* her.

After a few minutes he gets up from bed and turns on the computer, starts to write: the large family, a modest house in the suburbs, spotty electricity, her only abundances food and free time, gleaning the world from clips on TV. She puts unicorn stickers on her notebooks, eats tamarind-flavored candy, goes to the Llano in the afternoons to sit and talk with friends.

He takes her out to the Llano, seating her alone on a park bench. Then he comes by foreign and pale, with his thin long limbs, the dragon crawling up his back. He stands up over her, enlivens her with energy and interest, deposits her on his handlebars, bikes her up to Reforma, his arms close about her. He takes her up in that room and kisses her. For a moment he makes her dream of a larger world. Is it Thailand? Denmark?

He wants to write it. To make sense of it. But she refuses him. He has to force it. Force her. This is his calling: a hand-me-down machismo — his own.

It's full-on morning when he's done. P goes to the kitchen and fixes himself a cup of coffee, he takes it strong with milk, no sugar. From the kitchen he proceeds to the courtyard and climbs to the roof, clouds breaking on the close-distant hills, fragile flint and light.

What was explained? Understood? He lifts the cup to his lips and tilts it back, but the milk has turned. A sour brew. **f**

JEFF TIGCHELAAR

I'D LIKE TO MAKE THIS RING INTO A BULLET,
SHE SAID

She stared at it awhile, then took it off
and stared some more.
She rolled it between her forefinger and thumb.
All I'd said was "How's Paul?"
Now I stared, too. Dumb.

She put it back on.
She took it back off.
She looked at me and popped it in her mouth.

JEFF TIGCHELAAR

HIS THIRSTIER YEARS

were spent. And that's about it.
Like dollar bills. Like dimes.
There were times

he slept on the ground.
There were times not
worth the telling.

One year there was a wife.
One night there was a fight.
Or was it the other way around.

SET THE RAY TO JERRY

I found myself floating in a pool at midnight in a strip-mall resort in Orlando, Florida. What was I doing there? Spitting water. Digging on mass spectrometry. And mass spectroscopy.

I didn't know the difference between these two things, or even what they were in the first place, but that week there were a bunch of people in Florida who did, and my career depended on them. Preeminent scientists. They'd gathered in Orlando for the annual meeting of the American Mass Spectrometry Society. Back in New York, there were quotas to meet and deadlines fast approaching. I worked at a publishing house that specialized in textbooks and research monographs. The universities who bought our packages were demanding more product, and we were behind on both.

My boss had pulled me aside before I'd left and spelled it out for me: Thirty books. If I could sign thirty books in Florida, he'd make me an editor. After two years of laboring as an assistant, brewing coffee, stapling pages, nursing paper cuts and blinding myself on the holy light of the copier, it all came down to this: Orlando.

The water was the color of cool mercury. What do they call it - quicksilver? It had enough chlorine to burn my eyes. There used to be a town in California called Quicksilver. One of the scientists had told me that. I wonder what happened to it. It was gone now. At least, I couldn't find it on a map. At what point does a dead town get removed from the map? Orlando was in no danger. It was a balmy 78, and the hollow sound of laughing drunks died on the air. Every once in awhile, the inebriated would walk past the pool on the way back to their hotel rooms. Horny college students, girls and boys giggling and holding hands. The very incarnation of youth and life. They didn't notice me in the pool. I sank down to my burning eyes and pretended I was an alligator.

I'd thought the alcohol would help me float for some reason, but my stomach was like the hull of the Titanic. The hotel stood steady, divided into identical windows and identical balconies. Like Orlando. If you took all the bleak little strip mall towns next to all the highways in all of America and sewed them into a giant patchwork quilt, it might look something like Orlando. There were no lights in the pool, since it was after ten and I technically wasn't supposed to be there. The first day had already passed, and I hadn't signed a single book.

Thirty books. Twenty eight monographs, two textbooks. Twenty two textbooks and eight monographs. Fifteen textbooks and fifteen monographs. Thirty books.

My best friend Jerry's dad was dead.

*

Someone we both knew had called me. I didn't recognize the number. At first I thought it was diabetes. His father was a fat fuck, and I always thought his health problems would do him in. But it turns out he shot himself in the mouth.

My best friend was flying home from Seoul, where he had settled down with a wife I had never met but had heard a lot about. I had visions of my own plane crashing to make up for something or other, and I drank so much before the flight that I almost pissed myself when the pilot stumbled into a pocket of creamy turbulence. Lumps in the atmospheric yogurt.

"I'm not religious," said the pilot's crackling voice over the plane's intercom, "but if you look to the left, you can see the fingers of God fumbling with the plane like he was about to stub out a cigarette."

Death was in the palm trees; it was in the complimentary soap; it was in the towels, in the rental car, in the gift shops. Death was everywhere, and I had books to sign. My boss gave me the company credit card to entertain the scientists with, but I was using it to buy booze. I've been keeping the receipts as though I'm going to turn them in for reimbursement when I'm done.

The scientists were taking pictures of themselves next to palm trees. They were mostly men, largely bearded, and they had the sort of faces that were kind because they weren't sophisticated enough to be otherwise. Some booth was giving out multicolored beanies with cartoonish propellers, and a few of the scientists were wearing them around. Who came up with that idea, I wondered, and how could his wife bear to have sex with him? That was the kind of thing I thought while I talked to the scientists.

"The book will describe some of the emerging applications of MALDI-TOF mass spec, with an emphasis on the characterization of synthetic polymers. Of course there will be a review of some of its original applications in biomolecule analysis as well."

The man had actually twirled the tips of his moustache into two sharp points with wax. He looked like he might just have had it in him to be the next Jeffrey Dahmer.

"That sounds like a good topic," I said, pretending to scribble down thoughts on a notepad. *Hearts, stars, and horseshoes, clovers and blue moons.* "Tell me more."

Dahmer told me about his topic. He knew all the lingo: he spit out science like a rapper spits out street slang. "Mass spec." "It's SERR with two R's, not SER with one." *Pots of gold, and rainbows,*—

"...and tasty red balloons. The light shows a dual harmonic vibration only in certain types of crystal, and the presence of these vibrations allows us to confirm its growth in complex matrices like soil..."

I actually fell asleep talking to one guy. He was nice about it: he shook me awake and tried to laugh it off. The scientists were too polite to ask me about the alcohol on my breath, but I'm not an idiot. Just because something isn't said doesn't mean it wasn't communicated.

I put my arm boozily around Dahmer's shoulder and pointed straight down to the earth. "What would it take to get you to agree to a book right here, right now?"

Dahmer seemed shaken up. He probably didn't like being touched. "Could I just take your card and then I'll maybe call you when the semester winds down?"

Another one slipped through my fingers. God damn it, Dahmer. I needed that one.

*

As soon as it got dark, it was back to the pool for me. Nobody honked. They just drove by, sounding like a fleet of far-off vacuum cleaners. If I dunked my head in the water and floated, arms and legs bobbing weightlessly below the water's surface, I could forget I had ever left my mother's womb. That's when I could get to wondering without the fear.

Mainly I wondered about what kind of man I was. Was there a measuring device for that? Had the scientists come up with one? Was there a market for it?

If you judged by my actions alone, you might have thought me good. I was helpful and moderately tempered, skillful at listening without interrupting; I rarely lobbied for my own interests; people mostly ignored me, or vaguely liked me if they didn't. Almost everyone seemed to have the impression that I was a good person. But wasn't this general opinion the result of laziness and disinterest on the parts of others, and cowardice on my own part? I was afraid of ruthlessly promoting my own interest because, on the verge of an evil or selfish act, I felt an intense rush of vertigo. I was afraid of the consequences. If you scraped off a sample of my insides and put it under a microscope, I feel certain the test results would come out bad. My days were stuffed with fantasies of petty vengeance. I despised absolutely everyone, and I lusted after women shamelessly and pathetically, a dog licking his chops below a dinner table. I had a rapist's character tempered by the conquering will of a kicked puppy.

So, then, this: was I a good man, or a bad man?

The only conclusion I could come to was that I was incapable of becoming a human being. I was incapable of shielding myself from

an inhuman inner life. I was incapable of good, and also evil. I was a purely neutral action, a mound of packed sand on a beach, the black waves washing overhead, allowed to pass, unhindered.

And so, considering how much of a non-factor I was turning out to be in the universe, it didn't really make sense—did it?—that I would be so deathly afraid of dying.

By the third day of the conference, I still had not called my best friend. He was undoubtedly back in San Francisco by now. I tried to imagine what it was like to have your dad rub himself out, but instead I kept imaging what the moments before my own suicide might be like. I wondered if there was a note. I tried to imagine what it would be like having his dad as a dad.

His dad had greasy black hair, and was always lounging around my friend's house in sweatpants and enormous t-shirts that covered his body like fat black parachutes. The shirts had cartoons on them - Loony Tunes, Daffy Duck, Porky Pig. Snoopy and Woodstock. Negative cheerfulness. And also concerts that he must have gone to in another lifetime - Led Zeppelin, Frank Zappa. The ghosts of meals past: spilled hot sauce, a dab of grease, enchiladas verdes con pollos.

One of my most vivid memories of his dad came from when we were very young. My friend and I sneaked onto his computer, an old IBM 286 with a 28.8 kbps modem, to work on a project for school. When we opened an image editor, some prehistoric ancestor of Microsoft Paint, a picture of a naked woman greeted us. She had blue eyes, pomegranate lips, blonde hair but none on her privates. Her thumb and forefinger were spread out in a V shape down there. As we were ogling, more with curiosity than with fledgling bumps of lust, his dad walked in and caught us. I'd never seen the fat man exert so much energy. His face got red and puffy like a charging hippo's, and he chased us out the back door. I think he was crying. We were halfway down the street and totally gassed before we stopped.

“Don’t worry about it,” my best friend said. “I’ve seen that a thousand times.”

I had never heard of such a thing. Possibly I’ve spent the greater portion of energy in my life trying to make sure that I did not turn out like that. I have only succeeded in the least important ways.

The fourth day I didn’t go to the conference. I still hadn’t signed any books, but I was drunk on bloody marys by nine and canceled all my appointments with my company Blackberry. My boss called, and I made the mistake of picking up the phone.

“Everyone’s counting on you,” he said.

Everyone? I thought.

“Rope us some good titles.”

“Yee-haw,” I said. I threw my Blackberry into a hotel fountain, panicked, and frantically tried to scoop it out with my hands.

I wanted to go back in the pool, but there were families splashing around in it, and I didn’t want to get in trouble for anything. So I took a walk.

I never wanted to publish textbooks. I thought I would publish fiction, but one thing followed another, and here I was. The last thing the world needed was another fiction publisher; the scientists had a corner on the printed word. They were the ones affecting lives: extending them, bettering them, making them more comfortable and dignified. Making Lipitor, inventing Botox. Smashing large hadrons for the good of humanity. I’d be no good at fiction, anyway. I used to like reading books, but if I try to read nowadays, there’s some kind of web, or maybe a membrane of sorts that gets stuck between my eyes and the page. I can see the words and I understand what they mean on a case by case basis, but when the time comes to put them together the processing speed isn’t what it used to be. I don’t think this is a ‘me’ problem: I think maybe it’s like this for everyone.

I’ve noticed that people deal with despair differently. Some become lawyers; others fill their ears with webs of noise. Some beat

the shit out of themselves in ways I'd never have thought of. My brother buried himself in an electronic crypt. He's a glazed donut with a joy stick and only pops his head out of his virtual worlds to converse when the real world summons him. I think he knows some secret that I've been seeking half my life. When I ask him about it, he just tells me to cheer up.

It turned dark, and I went back to the pool. About half an hour later, the pool guy started to sweep his net through the water, collecting fronds that had fallen from the palm trees, and kamikaze insects. He'd made half a sweep before he saw me.

"Hey, man. I've gotta clean the pool. You gotta get out for awhile."

I sank down to my eyes and tried to be an alligator. Then I got out, because if I didn't he might call the manager.

Maybe I should go to law school or something.

The conference was coming to an end, and there was very little chance I'd get to keep my job when I went back to Manhattan. I couldn't show anyone my notes, because they were sparse and illegible, even to me. I hadn't written down contact information, thinking that I would easily be able to find it later. Unsurprisingly, not a single scientist had offered to write a book for me.

On the other hand, I had an enormous manila envelope stuffed with credit card receipts.

It turned out to have been fine to skip the day before, as most of the scientists had taken the day off to visit Disney World. I could tell because of all the Disney paraphernalia littering the bags and booths at the conference. Foremost were classic Mickey ears, followed by Goofy hats, Donald beaks, Pluto tails. And t-shirts. They were all wearing cartoon t-shirts.

I packed up my things, left the empty bottles and sweaty sheets strewn about in my hotel room, and went to check out. By the pool, an old woman was listening to a radio, her skin bright red and pocked with dark brown freckles. I recognized the song, but it

took me a moment to think of it. It was a song that we'd listened to in high school. He used to have this mix tape he'd put in the deck when we went into the city. I remember this song because it appeared twice, I think because his name was in the title. We were idiots, but at least our feelings still ran deep. They'd been lopped off or left stunted somewhere in the meantime. Where had they gone?

It was day five without his dad in the world.

Let roar these fears...

I handed the clerk my room key and the company card. She swiped it and frowned.

"It's declined."

Pure as light poured to your eyes...

"Can you try it again?"

She gave me an indulgent smile and went through the motions. But you can tell when a card's dead. It just feels that way.

"I'm sorry. Do you have another card?"

"I'll have to make a call to my company," I said. "Do you have a phone?"

Suck you like the sap from a tree...

"There are payphones in the lobby," she said, and gestured past the reception room and restaurants. I thanked her and, taking my bags, walked to the phones.

I took a deep breath to steady my hands. The black plastic of the receiver was cool to the touch and smelled like cleaning chemicals. Like a solid version of the water in the pool at midnight.

Honey from the dew, from the bumblebees, yeah yeah.

I dialed the number. It rang three times, then clicked. I could hear breathing on the other side of the line.

"Hello?"

"Hello. Jerry?" **f**

CONTRIBUTORS

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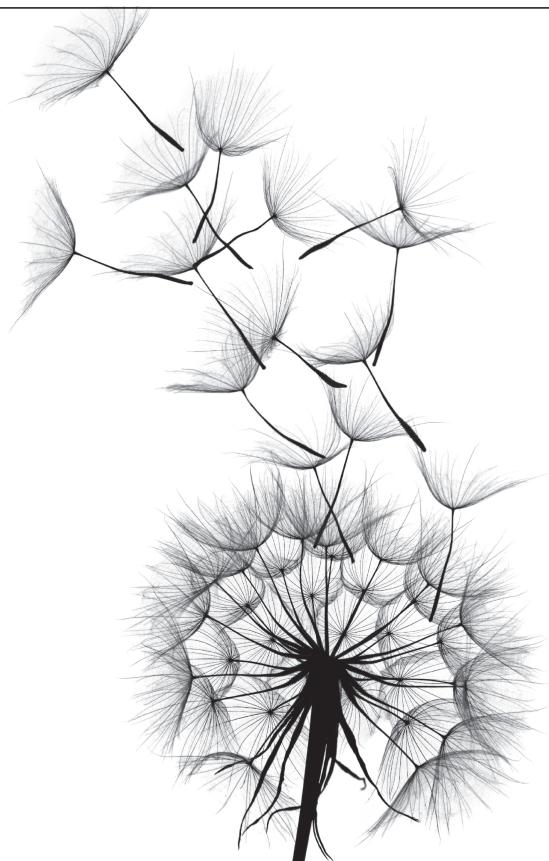
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