



fugue

Issue 47

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ABOUT THE ISSUE

These writings catalogue chaos—the big and little deaths—and the place of After.

Once, I took a class on apocalyptic literature. We defined “apocalypse” loosely, as any event which forces one to confront and fundamentally reform their—and, most frighteningly, not-their—self. In this way a large asteroid hitting the earth is, predictably, apocalyptic. So is menstruation, rape, losing your job, cleaning up a drug addiction, watching your daughter take a selfie wearing her mother’s necklace. In this way apocalypses happen every day, ubiquitously.

You will become a corpse. So will I. That is perhaps the most absolute ubiquity I can think of. I’m not telling you something you don’t know, but what these writers have shown are well-rendered moments when we get dangerously, wrecklessly, magnificently close to our own corpse-ness, which is to say powerlessness, and what that proximity does to someone as they live, past such an encounter.

I think of the Hero’s Journey, or monomyth, which Joseph Campbell defined as a common pattern in storytelling in different cultures throughout history: “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.”

However, writers in this issue turn monomyth on its head. What their speakers and protagonists experience isn’t often “fabulous,” and I wouldn’t call the outcome of their experiences a “win,” and yet they do come out the other side imbued with powers, powers of intense interiority and imagination and observation and synesthesia.

But what I love most about this issue is each writer's willingness to linger in the moments *after* the apocalypse, after the Hero returns home from the fight, defeated and living with him or herself and the knowledge of a place far better than this meatcase of a gravity-prone, frictionful body. And the reseeking of that place.

This issue makes me consider deeply recent cultural fixations on zombies; the rise of video games, especially RPGs and fantasies; of Isaac walking home from the pyre with his father after nearly being sacrificed and thinking, *He was willing to cut my throat, and God asked him to. What now?*

—Eric Greenwell

BRADLEY HARRISON

DEATH CANOE

I'm long gone down to the land of space.
Where the solar loom weaves absolutes.
I'm a slaughterhouse, babe. I have nothing left
in me. But two lead pipes and a black hole
of ants and the Shah of Psoriasis, sing along
long gone after church bells gone on,
sing long on lawn gun lo song gone so long.
This is a quiet place. The murmuring dog
in her sleep. The problem of good. White noise
against morning. Storm matter scattered the edges
of knowing somebody loves you. Somebody near
just might love you—touch her shoulder
like stain. Dear Belief: go away.
Your kerygma is too much to care to carry.
Somebody carry me still I am boy. I am boy-child
in search of the only balloon. I was a man
is not alone kind of man before the train
blew my hat off Nebraska—so many spaces
the problem of God. Fallible forms these
gnawed fingers. I want a place to love me
like an anchor. Like anger. I want the courage
to stand into faith without feathers, without
an escape hatch under the rug.
I want to be buried in a bear hug.
I want the bears to miss me when I'm gone.

13TH ANNUAL RON MCFARLAND PRIZE FOR
POETRY

JUDGED BY CATE MARVIN

WINNER: “WEREGILD”
BY JUDD HESS

I love a mystery, and I adore deadliness in intent. This poem provides both, sorting through its victims, identifying them without naming them. It offers up prophecy, and, more importantly, refuses to play the good guy. This is a scary, serious poem, latent in its lyrical devastation, the clues it places and revisits. It’s a poet’s poem, as it makes of the page a burial ground, marking the grave’s fresh earth with its unique headstone. Stately, its lines are wrought hard to carry the bearing of a speaker who moves, certainly, toward its reader with heavy intent. “Weregild” represents what I seek most in poetry: to be moved, startled, and warned.

— Cate Marvin

JUDD HESS

WEREGILD

1.

Vacancy is the great weapon, the debt
of a thousand winds, the multiplier of stories
that circle like the unborn and the dead.

Take nothing. Lead no trail of tongues
into the woods. Let them open a thousand trees
with rough back-hacks. I have planted the stolen name far away in
winter.

2.

This is how I slew my parents
and left them seemingly animate in their house all these years
with my brothers and sister leaving oblations and napsacking
birthrights

that steal. Nothing leaves the house.
The obliged mind is always tethered:
the long tongue always wags the blood price.

3.

The window frost makes the shape of a bearded man,
cunning, loose of his outlawry. I am not in any window.
I have made even the sills my siege towers.

Of the self-exiled, of the saboteurs of children,
draugr is my title, and crown prince. I am now neither.
This is my payment: six pieces. Six is the number of the dead.

4.

For one, an alchemist, fire is left on the doorstep.
Arson to him can be worked into a bauble in a box.
Thus, two uneasy people lie in a bed but only one dreams,

sniffing vignettes for the name to wake the sleeper.
I stand in the dark and three companions quest for me.
They are not alike. They call brother. We are not alike.

5.

After us, a woman in black sings to four winds
she clutches in a bag. They attack like those blackbirds
that perch and caw. There were once five charms, the spell goes,

and successive suns beyond the steeple
eaten by the idea of a dragon singing to its own tail.
On the sixth day the wizened, each alone in a small house,

6.

heard whisper that I spoke like a poet between the trees
stories out of their order. They ordered acorns
opened, sniffing out symbols of themselves.

They still think there is a blood price
nothing pays. Some wind blows again perpendicular to the window.
It is of no use. I have planted the stolen name far away in winter.

FUGUE PROSE PRIZE

JUDGED BY KEVIN CANTY
COMMENTS BY ERIC GREENWELL

WINNER: “THE GREAT SIWASH SHOE WAR”
BY MARK BAUMGARTNER

When I think of the proceeding story, I think of some cluster of particles that, while seemingly haphazard and unwieldy, are never loosed from the writer’s control. It’s like what physicists project about when planets collide: gravity will actually rip them to pieces before they ever make contact. Baumgartner’s opening—a little girl, Cecil, with more aggression and frustration than skin trying to derail a train with a manhole cover—asks us to consider what happens when huge forces grate against each other. Mass and momentum, it’s all there. And among the bits and bodies flung pell-mell and whirling around in this story, Baumgartner addresses subtly and perhaps not so subtly serious cultural issues (forces in and of themselves acting on one another): poverty, social inequality, pride, ego, and the displacement of Native Americans. We’re forced to confront bizarre, destructive, nonsense things people do when they live in a place impoverished, guilt-ridden, and lacking opportunity. I’ll leave you with this: Cecil’s actions are nonsensical, but very logical, and there’s a chaos in that, perhaps more unsettling than just chaos. It’s hard to pull off without losing control of everything and sounding absurd. I imagine that’s why Kevin Canty picked Baumgartner’s story, among many other reasons.

—Eric Greenwell

MARK BAUMGARTNER

THE GREAT SIWASH SHOE WAR

Cecilia had a mean streak, like a thin vein of iron running straight down her spine. Once, when we were kids, she tried to derail a train. It started in June during a summer of layoffs and disarray. Fathers stayed home and watched Donahue on the couch; displaced children roamed the streets in hastily armed gangs until well after curfew. The neighborhood simmered with war. We shot each other with pellet guns at pointblank range, we slept with Radio Shack walkie-talkies beneath our pillows and issued vague, ominous threats to our enemies at the top of every hour. By August we were sick of each other and the heat and the constant threat of violence.

One evening we were down by the railroad tracks, guys and girls, playing this game where we'd try and shoot each other's clothes out with squirt guns filled with watered down bleach and bloody red dye. Things were devolving toward violence when a skinny ghost of a girl appeared. She was dragging something huge and unwieldy behind her. A trail of displaced gravel bent back into the darkness and at its head stood Cecilia, hip cocked and skinny limbs straining. A manhole cover lay at her feet like an iron puncture wound straight into the center of the earth. When she bent down you could see the backs of her long white thighs and three concentric welts on her ass cheek, as might be left by the seat of a plastic kiddie chair or the head of a mother's hairbrush, swung hard. We watched her come up. She had on her new school clothes, white t-shirt and plaid skirt. She glowed in the darkness, and no one moved. Bleach leaked from the plastic squirt gun and stung the calluses on my fingers. A train was coming, I could feel it through the soles of my feet. I

shut off my headphones and waited. Every kid in the neighborhood was standing there, pointing a loaded plastic gun at someone else, watching Ceci struggle against a bottomless iron hole.

She gave it a final wrenching heave, but too late. It got caught up on the berm as the Chief flashed by, blaring its horn, five minutes early. The train was here and gone, and she abandoned the manhole cover there in the dusty gravel. It's back up in the weeds now, but still there, rusting peacefully. There are places in the world where they'd put you in a home for something like that, but not Siwash, and not Cecilia. She glowed like a burning coil. We were all a little in love with her after that. Growing up in a small town you see the world through a fish-eyed lens, and your own life seems like a dream. Not Cecilia. She was real somehow, solid.

Every day in the summer of nineteen-eighty-eight was bright and impossibly blue, and every day was Wednesday. I remember this because I'd just gotten a new state-of-the-art clock radio for my birthday, and I had it set to play a track off my new Def Leppard cassette tape when it went off in the morning. The album was *Hysteria*, and I played one song per day, every morning. When it got to the seventh track, "Gods of War," it was Sunday so I rewound the tape and went to church.

Wednesday was "Animal." That's the song I hear whenever someone says "nineteen-eighty-eight," or I read it somewhere, or see it on a penny or a quarter. I was twelve years old that July, and about to enter the sixth grade. There had been a series of incidental layoffs around town, and we were all stuck with our fathers for the long haul, and no one went inside a house for three months except to eat or piss or sleep. Everyone was smeared with grime and happy until they were miserable. The night was alive with the flash and pop of leftover bottle rockets fired indiscriminately at the street or into houses. The neighborhood crackled with the sounds of battle. There was too much fun and too much misery, and it was clear something had to give.

One Wednesday night in July, I was sitting in bed, telling jokes into my walkie-talkie. The walkie-talkie was our official mode of communication; everyone in a two block radius had one. They didn't work well indoors, but with the window open you could always pick up something. Eleven pm was a popular time for chatter and eavesdropping, insults and confessions. I was bored and trying to raise Randy or Ceci or whoever was around, when an unfamiliar voice broke in, an interloper, covered in static and vaguely terrifying. The voice was distorted beyond recognition with a shimmery vibrato. It was like the voice was whispering through a plastic funnel or a metal tube, a voice somewhere between Cookie Monster and Tim Curry from the movie *It*. Whoever it was, they were close by.

The opening was a misprision of the sign posted at the Siwash train station, and would be known by everyone in town by the end of the week.

—*Welcome to Siwash. Your dreams will die here.*

“Hello? Tiffany? Who is this?” asked Laura, my next door neighbor.

There was a burst of static and a garbled voice, followed by a long squawk from the orange Morse code button.

—*We have your shoes. Await instructions.*

It was just some kid taking the piss, having fun. Shoes—who the hell cares? I figured that was it.

Then in the morning everyone's shoes were gone. They were stolen from front stoops and back patios and unlocked garages. Nike and Reebok, Chuck Taylors and Samba Classics. Tennis shoes and school shoes, most of them nine-months used. The Siwash Register reported nearly one hundred pairs of shoes went missing between the hours of eleven and six. It was summer and dusty and a little bit muddy, and no one kept their shoes inside under lock and key.

The next day there was a meeting of the two great factions in the neighborhood, the cool kids and the uncool, out where the power cut crossed the railroad tracks. Ceci did most of the talking for us misfits. The older kids were led by a vicious towheaded, spike-

haired mongrel, Ray Berry. There were a whole lot of barefoot kids standing in the lot, shouting. Ray was angriest of all. He was two years older than I was, a student at the far off junior high, and a budding basketball prodigy. He had the nicest shoes I'd ever seen, a pair of Nike Air Jordan's worth well over a c-note. Ray claimed his father said if he didn't have shoes on his feet by dinner he was going to get beat. Threats were made. Nothing was agreed upon except that if the shoes weren't returned there was going to be trouble.

At eleven pm that night we were all still barefoot and shoeless. I climbed into bed and tuned in, awaiting instructions.

—*Welcome to Siwash*, said the voice at precisely eleven-twenty-three. A murmur of collective terror buzzed down the frequency, and no one made a sound until the voice was through. The great Siwash shoe war had begun.

Our corner of town was split into four quadrants by train tracks running east-west, and a power cut running north-south. By order of the shoe bandit no one was allowed in the cut or down by the tracks, no shoes were allowed anywhere. A week without any infractions and the shoes would be returned.

It was as simple as it was silly, except that it was impossible. Everyone has an extra pair of shoes lying around. After a day or so everyone donned the nasty old sneaks hiding in their closet—two sizes too small, swamped with river water, bottoms cragged with chewing gum—and headed down to the Neutral Zone, as it would soon be known, the main thoroughfare of the neighborhood where the tracks and the power cut met. The rules, to be understood as rules, had to be tested. At first nothing happened. There was no angry transmission that night, the shoes stayed missing. The next morning Ray Barry's Air Jordans turned up, incinerated, melted to the soles. A one-hundred and twenty dollar pair of shoes, gone, at the whim of the shoe bandit. The tongues were ripped out and nailed to a board at the north end of the cut with a single word spray-painted underneath. *Penalty*.

I was standing there when he found them. His face went purple, veins bulged. From that moment anyone who had shoes was an enemy and a suspect in the eyes of Ray Barry.

Beatings were administered, interrogations. The rumor was Ray had two pair of shoes stolen that night. The second being another pair of Jordans, a newer model, a prototype his father had brought back from out East at great difficulty and expense, a sort that wasn't even available in Illinois yet, a pair of shoes so sophisticated they required a special pump to inflate. That morning Ray Barry and his cohorts chased me the entire length of Brooke St. I was wearing a ratty pair of Reebok high tops I'd buried in the basement because the left was caked in dog shit. They were too expensive to throw out, and too naff to clean. I was caught at the end of a cul-de-sac, and only because my brown left foot was twice as heavy as the right. They asked questions I had no answers to, administered an atomic wedgie that separated the waistband from my briefs, and finished by stuffing the sneakers down a nearby storm sewer. Ray and his friends had a picket running north and south along the power lines. No one crossed the Neutral Zone; everyone went barefoot. Ray wanted his damn shoes.

Some morning later, a Wednesday I guess, Ceci and I sat with our backs against the fender of the Ford Falcon rusting alongside my garage. The car was sitting there for the kind of superstitious, sentimental reasons you might expect. Midwesterners hang onto their machines for the same reason Jews don't get tattoos—a car, like the body, is the shell of the human soul. The summer so far had two modes: scorch and rain, and their emissaries, dust and mud.

Today was scorch, and a fine, clay-like haze hung over everything. It was barely eleven but the red thermometer on my mother's kitchen window had already rounded ninety. The soles of our bare feet were black with baked grime. I had my headphones, but they were shut off. I never needed them when Ceci was around. Across Ceci's knobby knees was balanced my favorite book, *Our Universe*, one of those giant National Geographic tomes dedicated

to mapping out everything in the universe in microscopic detail. I know, even still, the specific gravity of Jupiter's liquid atmosphere and the length of a day on Venus.

I was a quiet but loyal friend, and Ceci always seemed disproportionately fascinated by everything I had to say. I opened my mouth for more than a sentence at a run and she looked at me like a favorite pet or trusted stuffed animal suddenly found a voice. I told everyone she was my girlfriend, but only when she wasn't around. Ceci mostly talked about boys. Older boys, cute boys. I listened and advised. Today she was oddly quiet, so I told her about Lagrange points. A Lagrange point is a point between two large mutually orbiting objects where a third object can remain perfectly stationary, held on both sides by an equitable share of gravitational pull. A fixed waypoint amidst the spinning chaos of the solar system, ideal for observation or some other risky, unlikely venture. I waxed poetic about hydrogen engines and high-orbit platforms, but Ceci wasn't having any of it. She was edgy and disinterested. She watched the gun metal sky, and I admired the flecks of dust caught in the sweat on her tan arms.

"It's also a song by ZZ Top," I said. "'La Grange.' Uh huh, huh, huh."

Ceci laughed and clapped her hands. "Do it again."

"Uh huh, huh, huh."

"ZZ Top has a song about outer space?"

"Actually, I think it's about pussy." I had recently added "pussy" to my repertoire of things I sometimes said around Ceci. If I said it with just the right tinge of knowing disinterest I could sometimes get a rise out of her, a snorted laugh or a slap on the shoulder. Only sometimes. I was batting about .167 for the summer.

"There it is," Ceci snorted. "Pussy. I knew it. I was waiting for it."

"What's so funny about pussy?"

"It's just funny. It's like sitting in a desert next to the same dumb rock for a thousand years and suddenly the rock decides to speak and all the rock has to say is 'pussy.'"

“Pussy.”

“That’s all. After like a thousand years. Think about it.”

Lately not even boys or vulgarity interested her, just shoes, who stole them and why. It was demented, she said, a glow on her face I hadn’t seen before. We concocted all sorts of elaborate scenarios. Our bandit was a heel out for fame and his own amusement, a modern-day Robin Hood spreading hope and shoes to those less fortunate, a terrorist bent on sowing fear and confusion—a black hat villain, lurking, listening. The shoe bandit himself hadn’t been particularly forthcoming. The instructions were vague, more like ground rules for a game of capture the flag than codified demands. That night on the walkie-talkie the voice spoke quickly in a fake, raspy, disinterested voice, as though reading from a cue card. Ceci was obsessed; there was nothing else she wanted to talk about.

The conversation was about to turn inexorably in that direction when my friend Randy came sprinting around the corner. Umbro shorts, Rude Dog t-shirt, no shoes. I felt interrupted. He’d mentioned Ceci a few times in casual conversation, and she him. I didn’t have any hard evidence, but I was pretty sure they’d been spending time alone together.

“Que pasa, Rando,” I said.

“What?” he said.

“Que pasa.”

Something passed between him and Ceci, and I was pretty sure it was at my expense. I felt something bright and hot in my throat, and smiled. “What brings you to the right side of the tracks?” I asked.

“I saw Slee Sheldon creeping between the houses down the street.” He looked at Ceci not me as he spoke.

“Why would we care about Slee Sheldon?” I said.

“He hangs out with Ray’s little brother. He might know something.”

“That mongoloid doesn’t know his own name.”

“He hangs around. Maybe he heard something.”

No one said anything.

“Also, he’s wearing shoes.”

“Shoes?” said Ceci. She hopped up, dumping my book in the dirt. “Where?”

Randy pointed down the street, and Ceci was gone. I never saw her move so fast. Randy followed. They went down the backyard, so I went down the front. I was faster than both of them, and I knew about where Slee Sheldon would emerge from the cut. Slee was short for Sleestak, his nickname. None of us knew the origin of the name, only that there had been a Sleestak in the neighborhood as far back as anyone could remember. It was passed down generation to generation, and he was the latest in a long line to hold the name. I sprinted across the driveway and along the front porch, hurdled bushes, dodged under heat-whispered trees. I found him shambling down a side yard. I hit him full-tilt, a blurry white arrow from nowhere. He screamed; he didn’t know what hit him. We rolled into a pile of old firewood at the corner of a house. I had him pinned at the shoulders with my knees when Randy and Ceci came up.

“You’re going to answer us a few questions now, Slee,” said Ceci. She pulled a dirty pointed stick from the pile.

“I’ll tell you anything,” he answered, and started to cry.

Ceci didn’t seem to have any questions though, and Slee wouldn’t stop screaming. She made two black marks on each of his cheeks, then poked him generally around his fat belly where his shirt rode up. When we were finished, we yanked off his sneakers, tied the laces together, and lobbed them on the roof of a neighbor’s house. Slee ran all the way down to the cut, piebald and sweating like a plucked turkey.

“Well, that was productive,” said Randy.

“It’s an object lesson,” I said, echoing a favorite phrase of Cecilia’s mother.

“That’s exactly what it is.” Cecilia tossed her stick on the roof with the shoes.

What the lesson was, or the object, no one could really say. Ceci knew something about the missing shoes, I was certain of it. Maybe she even had them herself. The question was why.

That spring I'd duped my father into buying me an electric guitar. The layoffs had already started, but I was relentless. One afternoon he'd come home from the pawnshop with a knock-off Strat and a fifteen watt amp. I showed up to school after spring break with my fingers a bloody mangled mess. My teacher sent me to the nurse, convinced someone had held my hand over the burner of an electric stove. I told the nurse I messed up my hand learning bar chords, that the F chord in particular was giving me trouble. She wasn't having any of it. She kept asking about my parents and drugs and violence, and I kept playing guitar in the empty air, contorting my fingers in illustration.

I was sitting on the couch playing Atari when County Services showed up. My father answered their questions politely, still rubbing sleep from his eyes, and explained in a calm, articulate, even debonair voice that his son was a dedicated musician and possibly fucking retarded. My mother couldn't stop sniggering. She'd spent the month of April telling me that if I wasn't careful my hand would fall off and the County would put me in a home, and now it had happened, and it was all just too perfect.

I thought if I played something I might exonerate us all. So I plugged in there in the hallway, wearing boxer shorts and my B.A. Baracus bathrobe. I played the only bit I knew, a bit which I'd rehearsed ad nauseum all spring—the first seven notes of Guns 'n Roses' "Sweet Child O' Mine." I winced through it four or five times, my left hand a pink lump. When I looked up again, the folks from County Services were gone. A few days later my dad brought the guitar back to the shop and traded it in on an electric bass. I made it a point to complain some, but secretly I was glad. It's Duff McKagan's bass line that makes the song move anyway, listen and see.

My father expected me to work through the summer to help pay down the bass. I figured he had some chores lined up. One afternoon we were sitting in the basement, trying to figure out Duff's tunings. You could always tell the fortunes of the Fingers' household by the beer in the fridge. Budweiser when things were good, Busch when things were rough. Michelob if someone died or was getting hitched. He tuned and retuned the bass, wiping foam from his lip. He was drinking a can of something called Natural Light. I could see it was a raw deal by the way he winced every time he took a sip. He was getting frustrated.

"Well, it's not in E. We know that much for certain." He'd tried E three times already.

I rewound the tape again, pressed play.

"Jesus Christ, Russell. I know the damn song already. It's etched into my brain." I stopped the tape.

It didn't take long to discover the nature of my summer employment. A UPS guy showed up hauling a box bigger than I was. Inside the box was a giant red machine. It was covered in black nozzles, vents and ominous control panels. It looked awful.

"We need to keep a little money coming in," said my father. "This summer we're going to be chimneysweeps."

"Chimneysweeps?"

"Chimneysweeps."

By the time my mom got home that evening, we had the machine set up and the chimney taken apart. The way we worked was this. My father disappeared with a black hose into the black nook of the chimney. I stood at the controls, legs crossed and swaying slightly to the rhythm of whatever I had playing on my headphones. It was my job to change out the sooty filters. There were two filters, and you had to change them at the right time, in the right order. It was dodgy business. Blinking red indicator lights, a hum and a hiss. There was a fine, dusty black silt over everything. "Don't trust the lights," said my father, and I didn't, not one bit. The vacuum came with instructions, a tip sheet on how to drum

up business, and, my favorite part, two top hats. The idea was you dressed like old-time chimneysweeps to look the part. I practiced with the top hat while my father worked. I bounced it off my arm and onto my stringy head. I posed in the clock mirror like Marc Bolan on the cover of *The Slider*. That was the only decent music they had at the county library, T. Rex and ZZ Top.

My mom's Chevelle pulled in the drive, and we froze in the headlights like criminals in our own den. She was pissed.

"We'll get some business around town," said my father, as he reassembled the flue. "It'll be good."

"From who? From where? Half the houses around here were built without chimneys. The other half I won't have you bothering with this machine."

"There's plenty of chimneys. The Schnellings. The Magruders."

"That's exactly it. That's exactly what I'm asking you not to do."

"It'll be good."

The practice run was a success. There was some collateral mess, but mostly we kept it isolated to the drop cloths. We packed everything in for transport.

Ceci had elaborate plans—she couldn't let the shoes go. Extreme measures were required. We didn't know where to find ski masks, so we poked holes in knit caps. It was too hot to wear them, so we kept them tucked in our shorts. During the day I helped my father clean Siwash's chimneys, and in the afternoons we'd go fishing. At night I snuck about with Ceci and Randy, investigating the missing shoes.

We started with the sewers that ran under the highway. The sewers were a major thoroughfare, but back in the far recesses they forked and twisted—a perfect place to hide stolen goods. We had flashlights and faux-leather notebooks to document our findings. When the sewers came up empty, we started snooping around people's garages and back sheds. No shoes, but we found lots of power tools and a few unlit fireworks. We ranged as far as the city pool. Randy jimmied the latch on a rotten window frame, and Ceci

was impressed. Not to be outdone, I knew where the lifeguards kept the key for the vending machines. We liberated armfuls of off-brand soda and no-name snacks. “Provisions,” Ceci called them. We stockpiled it all in the sewer with the fireworks and power tools.

“We’re going to need a fence,” said Ceci.

I told her there was a fence all around the pool. There were fences all over.

They laughed at me, and I didn’t like the way Ceci was hanging on Randy’s sleeve. “I know a guy,” he said. “We’ll invite him out.”

The next morning I was no good for chimneysweeping; I was dead to the world. Dad wouldn’t let me off the hook.

“Rise and shine, buster,” he said, and there was coffee and bacon, so I rose.

We’d tapped most of the east side of town. There was nothing but sparkling clean chimneys as far as the eye could see. We were insistent, and we came cheap. The secret, however, was me. I had the top hat and a vinyl tux jacket, complete with tails, which had once been part of a Dracula costume. The jacket was about an inch too narrow through the chest, but my father pronounced it perfect. I wasn’t allowed to wear it when Mom was around. I had a pair of old dress shoes, scuffed to the soles, which I kept carefully hidden under the front seat when not in use. Whenever a door opened, I gave whoever was standing there a smart little bow and a flip of the cap. Men were immediately suspicious, and my father took over. Women swooned. Without fail; it was uncanny. Sometimes I’d ad-lib with a cockney, “What-ho, gov’nor,” or some such, but mostly it wasn’t necessary. The key was not to seem too abject.

“Keep it light,” he would say as we were going up the walk. “Make it look like something.” A little wink-and-nudge, and the outfit did the rest.

My father was an engineer, and a professional. He had no love for chimneys. Out of all the do-it-yourself starter businesses he could have picked—it didn’t make any sense. It was the performance that sold him, I think. The top hats. He quit playing jazz when I

was little, so I never got to see him do it for real. I like to think I got some glimpse into how he must have been in those days. Some pretty housewife would answer the door, and you could almost see the lights come up. A little shimmy as he set the hook, a tiny delay, just enough to make it seem live. He'd push me forward a little by the shoulder, a nudge, as if to say, *This bit's yours, take it from here*, and I was on. There was joy in his heart that summer. He was free.

But that Wednesday we couldn't get any takers. Not even a nibble. We cruised up and down streets, but the town was cashed. It was almost six and close to dinner time. We were headed back home when my father pulled us up to the curb in front of the Magruder's house. This was the last place in the world I wanted to be in a top hat and vinyl jacket. Cecilia lived here, and her sisters, each of them tall and gorgeous and a different species of blonde with porcelain skin in varying shades of pale. Ceci's father used the girls sometimes in his television spots for his Buick dealership downtown.

"Oh, no," I said. "You promised Mom."

"This is the money. Suit up."

He rapped twice, and the door swung inward. It was ninety degrees outside—I was baking in my suit—but it was balmy in the foyer as October. There was a smell like cinnamon and cider, and Caroline Magruder's lips brushed the corner of my mouth. She was still in her slip, and her yellow hair was twisted in a soft, white towel. She dripped on me the tiniest bit.

"Mr. Fingers," she said, and kissed my father the same.

I was aware of movement behind her, daughters, a whole bevy. The oldest was a freshman in college, the youngest was Cecilia. They swarmed me, poking and prodding. Their hands were on the jacket, the hat, in my hair. I mean, they *shrieked*. I thought maybe I forgot to zip my fly. I was terrified.

"Oh my God, look at Russell," they keened. "He's adorable."

My father leaned against the jamb and smiled; Cecilia stood at the corner of the curio cabinet, scowling.

Caroline invited us in. She poured us two tall glasses of icy lemonade—the cinnamon cider smell was from her shampoo. My father waited until the second turn of the hallway to announce his business. We had a clean line of sight on the fireplace. It was a gritty mess. My father asked for twice what we normally made, and Caroline accepted without blinking. She was taking the girls to Peoria, they'd be out of our hair in a few minutes. We set up the equipment. I tried to catch Ceci's eye, but she wasn't having it. On her way out the door she said something smart about the minstrel show in her living room, and Caroline dragged her by the arm to the car. Dad was halfway into the chimney, scoping out the damage. He didn't hear.

A stutter and a roar, and the work began in earnest. I thought my father was pulling a fast one, asking for so much money, but it was clear now we were going to have to earn it. The flue was jammed half-shut with creosote resin. A clogged flue is a prime cause of chimney fires, said the sales manual. We were providing a valuable service. We were saving lives. Ceci could just eat crow.

My father scraped and sucked. I stood swaying on the soft shag carpet. I wasn't supposed to listen to music while we worked. I'd discovered a neat trick in Ms. Horn's math class, however. I could hide my Walkman in the deep pockets of my slacks and run the wires to the headphones up my sleeve. I swayed along to the Leps, and watched the pictures on the wall. They were spectacular. Posed shots and family outings, proms and weddings, shots of the girls in the tub, in the pool. I kept one eye on the blinking red lights and my hand on the humming vacuum. At the corner of the stairway to the second floor there was a shot of Ceci in the bathtub, taken only a few years before, when she was maybe a little too old to be quite decent. I needed a closer look. My lizard peanut brain led me to the stairs, and around the corner. There were more pictures here, Caroline as a girl, photos of her wedding and honeymoon. The fascination wasn't puerile, I don't think, not really. I didn't have much of a family, just my parents. I was lonely, and curious.

The mechanics of a large family were a mystery. I wasn't peeping so much as dreaming myself into the shots. I was there at Ceci's First Communion, and Caroline's. I was in the tub, in the pool. It wasn't Foreman marrying Caroline, but me marrying Cecilia. The kids on the wall were our own, a line of perfect giggling cake-smearing blondes. I could see it clear as anything. I followed the pictures up into darkness. The only light was a slant of sun from the window in Ceci's room. The pictures were older up here, gray-scale accounts that went back to the founding of the town. Although Caroline was from parts south, there had been Magruders here as long as there had been a Siwash. I was there too, dim as the sky and the people and the trees.

There was dark on the walls, dark in the air itself, and a smell like fall and wood smoke. I started to run.

I took the stairs three at a time. A sooty haze hung in the air, and behind that a bank of red lights winking like an insect eye. There was still time. I yanked a panel, intending to change out the filters. Something awful escaped—a twisting black dust devil floating in the updraft from the vacuum. I flipped a switch, thinking I could somehow reverse the airflow and suck it all back inside. The machine coughed and shuddered, and the dust devil atomized into a million tiny fragments. It was in the couch, the picture frames, the light fixtures. My father crawled out of the fireplace. He pulled off his mask, made a black bubble with his gum. He was black head to foot.

“Well, shit,” he said, and shut off the power. He walked from one end of the living room to the other. He made as if to start cleaning the mess, but there was too much of it. “I’ll be outside. We’ll get someone to clean this mess. Tell Caroline.” He closed the door quietly behind him.

I scrubbed for a while. I started high and worked my way low. I didn't even make a dent. Music still blared from my headphones. Def Leppard—I was onto the weird back half of the cassette now,

songs I'd never heard before. I sat on the stairs, beneath the best of the photos, and dozed until I heard the bolt turn.

Later, I found my father out back by the train tracks, sitting beneath a stunted willow. It was full dark now, and I knew he was there only by the ebb and glow of his cigarette. Caroline was speechless. It was better than any squeaky tub picture, watching the veins bulge on her perfect hands and neck. The girls all stood around the vacuum keening in a frantic key. Ceci chased me all the way down the side of the house. She pulled my collar so hard the seams popped. "Oh, Russell, it's wonderful," she said. "It's the greatest thing ever."

I didn't know what to say to my father. Sometimes you just have to let the machine go until the dirt and muck runs clear. "I love you, Dad," I shouted, because it was the funniest thing I could think to say. He raised his arms in the air, ghostly shadows, and the tip of his cigarette quivered as he laughed. You could hear it all the way down the tracks.

The thievery continued into August under Ceci's direction. We started in on cars. We crept down empty streets at night, testing doors. If it was unlocked, we stripped it clean. Jackets, sunglasses, cassette tapes. We hid it all in a drainpipe under the highway. Ceci was meticulous. We only stole from the nicest cars. People who were better off than we were, those at the top of the food chain, the ones who were running the town into its current mess. We were principled thieves, claimed Ceci. Watching her work was pure joy, humming Samantha Fox songs, jimmying locks with a bent coat hanger—which never worked. Thanks to us there was a curfew now, and patrol cars cruised the streets at all hours. We were careful though, and fast. The idea was to sell it all, but I had a thing about the cassette tapes. I kept the ones I liked, and destroyed the rest. Ceci was angry, but I didn't want to hear about it. No Simple Red or Wilson Phillips tapes could be allowed to survive and contaminate unwitting folks' record collections. "I have principles too," I said.

The fence Randy invited out was a new kid in the neighborhood, Paul Francisco. He was well-dressed and soft-spoken, and, I thought, a little bit prissy. He was shoeless like the rest of us, although he'd developed a pretty interesting innovation involving socks. He had two pairs of gym socks, the kind with colored stripes, one pair for each foot. On the soles of his feet he'd applied globules of rubber cement for traction. Everyone called him Francis.

We couldn't coax him into the sewer, try as we might. He wouldn't go.

"It's just rainwater," said Randy.

Francis looked into the drainpipe, the trees, the sky. "My father says 'Siwash' is an old Illini word for a dirty Indian. The story goes, when the first settlers arrived here, they asked the Illini where they were. The Illini pointed at the filthy white people and said, 'Siwash.' They liked it so much they kept it as the name of the town. I'm not crawling in that Christ-loving sewer. That wasn't part of the deal."

We carried the loot out to him, armload by armload. We stacked it on a patch of brown grass. Ceci and Francis dickered over the price. They settled on twenty dollars. Francis wouldn't take the power tools, because he couldn't move them. He couldn't move any of it, of course; he was just a kid with twenty dollars to burn. He was lonelier than I was. I guess he figured maybe he could impress us.

We were arguing how to move the stuff when there was a rustle in the bushes overhead. There were kids up there, voices. At first I blamed it on Francis, but later I was convinced it was Randy who blabbed. He had a big mouth; he was indiscreet. We'd been found out. There were kids everywhere. The first wave swarmed into the ditch, and everyone started to run. Randy led Ceci by the elbow in one direction, and I went another. I ran the length of the neighborhood, trying to lose the pursuit, then button-hooked back towards my house.

Randy and Ceci were sitting in the back of the Ford Falcon, all chummy. It was infuriating. I opened the door of the car. "Get out."

They got out.

“Quit lurking around Cecilia,” I said.

“What for? You’d think she was your girlfriend.” He was laughing at me. All I talked about that summer was Cecilia.

“If so, it’s news to me,” said Ceci. Only it wasn’t, I could see by the look on her face. I’d told everyone in the neighborhood she was my girlfriend, except her. She was using Randy to make me jealous—even my tiny lizard brain knew it. She wanted me to say something. It was easier to cuss at Randy.

“Fuck you,” I said, and shoved him.

“This is stupid,” said Cecilia.

I shoved Randy again.

Ceci walked to the edge of the yard, jumped the fence. “You’re crazy. Both of you.”

We waited until she was gone to begin in earnest. I don’t remember who threw the first punch, but it was probably me. We swung at each other a few times, and I caught him under the chin maybe harder than I intended. There was a loud crack. He went down on one knee, spat blood. His eyes and face burned blank and red, and next I knew I was on the ground. He ground my face into the grass, and we rolled and flailed like dirty fucking children. “Alright,” I said, but he didn’t hear. He worked his way up, and just kept dropping his knee on the side of my head, again and again, until everything turned a vibrating shade of electric white.

When he was through I crawled up underneath the back end of the Ford. Angry kids were pouring into the yard now, bent on revenge. They carried sticks and clubs; Ray Berry had a set of nun chucks he’d improvised out of two blocks of wood and a wallet chain. I couldn’t see Randy. I wished him luck.

Randy showed up at my back door a few days later. Francis and I were hanging out in the basement. We were spending a lot of time together, since no one else would talk to us. Randy had a fat lip; I had a heart-shaped bruise on the side of my head. He stood there, squeezing the bill on his Cardinals’ cap and looking at the ground.

Ceci was out in the yard, twisting on the swing. We spoke through the screen door.

“Ceci says you’re starting a band,” he said.

“What of it?” There was no band, just a bass guitar I didn’t know how to play. I had no idea what he was talking about.

“Maybe I can help.”

“Help with what?”

“The band. I can sing, a little.”

“The hell you can.”

“Ceci says I’m alright.” He looked nervously into the yard.

“Listen, she’s not speaking to either of us until we make up. She won’t be happy unless we fake it for a while. An hour, that’s all.”

I watched her on the swing. She screwed herself up tight and let fly, legs splayed out in the air. She spun in long erratic arcs, using her feet to keep from hitting the trunk of the tree. I didn’t know what to say.

“One hour.” I unlatched the screen and let him in.

Other things happened that August. If there are holes in the record, gaps in logic or sense, it’s because pieces have been lost. I remember long afternoons laying out by Ceci’s pool. I remember the long drive home from Wrigley Field after the Cubs were eliminated from playoff contention. The shoes stayed missing. There was a final battle out where the power cut crossed the tracks. Squirt guns filled with bleach and bloody red dye; Ceci dragging an iron manhole cover down to the tracks. There was a band, eventually—a strange, inchoate thing that made no sense to anyone but us. On the first of September a deal was signed somewhere deep within the halls of power and everyone’s father went back to work. Soon kids would be back in school.

For me though, the summer ended with a knock on my window early one Wednesday morning. The sun was just coming up over a neighbor’s rooftop. Ceci led me down pink streets to her house. We walked down the long wall in her side yard to the train tracks.

“I want to show you something,” she said. “I want you to see it first.”

I splayed my toes in the dewy grass and watched as the sun topped the high trees in the east. There was a burst of pink light, and I saw what she wanted me to see. There were shoes everywhere, hundreds of them. Shoes in the power lines, in the trees, shoes on the rooftops. Some with the laces tied together, others were just scattered pell-mell. It was like a giant shoe bomb had been detonated in the center of town. It would take days to get them all down. By midday half the neighborhood would be out searching for their shoes.

“You had them all along. Why?”

Ceci pulled a little battery-operated fan from her pocket. Her father gave them away that summer to anyone who test drove a Buick. She spoke into the whirring blades, voice low and metallic.

—Welcome to Siwash. Your dreams will thrive here.

“It’s beautiful,” I said, because it was. It was spectacular, all those shoes—the sheer pointlessness of it all. It was the most human thing I’d ever seen.

“Now there will be peace,” she said. For a time there was. **f**

TANA JEAN WELCH

TANGLEWOOD

Forever I want to revel
in the kinetic clarity brought by real
 stars and trees and summer nights
 in Massachusetts,

blankets peopling the lawn at Tanglewood.

The exact night, our last night
four years ago when the sky put on
its nightshirt and Yo-Yo Ma's cello
 fondled the air, tickled the pines
 with the notes of Dvorák—

the heat of your hand, and the moment
 so much about the moment I never
 once thought about my dead father
or money owed, or how I used to own
 an ice chest named Roberta,

or my freshman year of college
spent masturbating in the library bathroom.

Maybe it's true that everyone's past
 sounds slightly better
when set to the music of a favorite rock epic,

 but if each existence comes down
 to birth, sex, and death,
 then I'll take the middle:

the hour before the ritual comes to completion,
the flash before

the elder tribesmen knock
down the upright beams and the great log roof
crashes upon the copulating couple.

Whatever happens *before*

the dead bodies are pulled out, roasted and eaten.

TANA JEAN WELCH

SHE TOOK THE GUN

She took the gun
and walked
to the reservoir behind the stitched line
of tract homes.

She always knew the pearl-handled revolver
was under her mother's bed,
could sometimes hear
it breathing
on the nights she couldn't sleep.

Stepping out of the shadows
of hackberry, red oak,
she arrived at the water's edge and found
no clouds in the reflection.
Blank sky, no shield,
nothing between her and the blue universe,
the loud sun, but
blood is never brightness

and today
there was blood on her underwear
for the first time
and the girl knew
she wouldn't tell her mother,
not now, maybe never. Because her mother
would say it was *something*

and the girl knew it was nothing,
felt like nothing,
just like the gun in her hand
wasn't heavy or cold.

Just like shooting into the water
felt like nothing

until
two fish rose to the surface,
mouths gaping open
like children singing in the midnight choir,
paper wings wired
to their backs, or like children burning
in a furnace, stomachs bloated
and empty.

SARAH SOUSA

SISTERS; 1980s

Sometimes they're Cabbage Patch plastic,
sometimes figurine porcelain, Shirley Temples and cherry
nail polish on New Years' Eve. Always awake
when the ball drops. Sometimes there's three,
sometimes two when the mother one decides
to be mother, clean house: dust and wash the floors
on hands and knees, the rag and dragged pail behind her.
When she lights the potpourri burner
they know what that means. Alone,
the sisters eat all the groceries, the carbs
they call starches, grow into their swear words,
one fat and quiet, the little one mouthy.
They develop their neuroses with help
from the mother's boyfriend, the smug vice
principal who's drawing the line
between them and *college material*,
the father, his girlfriend: always his girlfriend.
Not late to the game, she created the game.
Sometimes they're Cyndi Lauper,
sometimes Cindy Crawford, the glittery stickers
in the sticker collection, the scented:
Aqua Net, Aussie, Baby Soft.
They've been watching Three's Company
since they were seven, General Hospital since eight
and though one is four years older,
in the apartment alone after school,
they're the same age. They both know
what it means when creepy Mr. Roper makes eyes

at Jack and poses his hands like birds.
They know that Luke was Laura's rapist. Everyone does.
Woman-raised, and like certain dogs, they don't trust men.
They carry the key for the bolt lock.
They let themselves in.

CLEARCUT

The first time I saw the clearcut I cried out. It was that stand of trees down on the washboard road, where a strip of National Forest cut across ranch property; where the gravel bent sideways suddenly and everything went dark and quiet, ribbons of sunlight holding dust like a smoke. In rainless July, I'd crossed down through the hot fields of sage and taken refuge here with my journal. Now trunks lay atop one another, sectioned by chainsaw, the smallest and most unwieldy left behind. Light glared into the clearing. The straight stumps, with their yellow faces, seemed exposed.

I would steal the wood, I knew that right away. This was deep Wyoming autumn. This was four days after my rape. On the ranch, willows the color of blood stood silently beside ponds. Sun slipped through columns of silver cloud. The river slowed to a rasp. At dawn I could smell the sharp tang of frost, winter gathering its strength. I slipped into the clearing early mornings with a small axe and stripped the branches, naked and reaching, from the bark of the trees. I grunted, hauled rounds half my size into the hatchback of my Subaru, wore leather gloves and let my forearms turn red with splinters and chafes. I knew I must be quick. When I drove home to empty, I set the rounds rolling down the hill. I let them crash in the gnarled growth behind my cabin. Or I went inside and lay on the carpet in my muddy boots and wept.

As I worked I cursed the man who cut the trees, under my breath. "Don't you know to take the deads," I said, all this wood green, all this wood needing to season, to dry out, before it would be good burning. There were enough beetle-killed pines in this state to keep us warm a hundred winters, I said angrily to myself, why

take what is alive, why take this stand. The man who cut the trees rented the cabin up the hill and across the road from mine, with a tired blonde woman and three scrappy kids. I heard them yelling sometimes. The man wore Wranglers and a bad mustache, and his dog, slinking and shuddering, sometimes came to my porch to beg scraps.

At first I was careful; later, reckless, not even waiting until his truck was gone for the day. Once he passed me out in the clearing and I sweetly lifted a fist of twigs, “Just gathering tinder,” I said, pointing to the plastic bin on the side of the road, and I wasn’t lying if you ignored the word “just.” He nodded, narrowed his eyes at me. No doubt he had a permit; they were easy to get. He told me the big trees had knocked the little ones, gotten caught, and that’s why there were so many skinnys. Right, you bastard, I thought. My hands trembled. The whole area was feet-deep in branches, limb upon limb, like slick bones when you walked. Snapping underfoot. A sudden stretch of pale sky above.

I would take anything, wrist-thick, even smaller. I feared winter. I piled and stacked. And I belonged to the slag-heap, salvaging the bodies of trees. I soothed their limbs, I sang to them, I spread my fingers across their smooth stumps, one after the other. Why this stand, I whispered fiercely, when a hundred miles of forest lump gnarled around us, why this sweet one, why this virgin, you don’t own it. Take what has been touched already, I pleaded, take gently, be careful, not this. Not like this. And at night I lay with my own ruined body, and said the same things. **f**

NOMENCLATURE

Idaho high desert. Boise foothills. The first time I married, I did not change my name. We had been together so long we thought something needed to change, and getting married seemed like the simplest remedy. It was too late to change my mind. At dawn that day in October I paced my mother's herb garden, fingers brushing the rosemary. *What am I doing?* But I did it anyway. I wouldn't be the kind of girl who called off a wedding, not with the location and catering ready, the hundred out-of-town guests, the money my parents had spent. I wouldn't be responsible for that kind of shakeup. I preserved the peace as best I could, and I kept my name.

*

frith, n.1. Etymology: Common Germanic: Old English *frīðu*, *friodū*, *freoðu*... *Obs. exc. Hist.* Peace; freedom from molestation, protection; safety, security. †to make frith (*Obs.*) = to make peace

Clearwater River. Blue Mountains. Waha. Alturas. Sawtooth Mountains. My father has always been a hunter and fisherman. Escaping to the woods with his yellow lab must have been his way of staying sane in a house filled with so many females, a wife and four daughters. He always returned smiling, even when empty-handed, the smiles broader and mood more expansive when accompanied by whatever game would become our dinner. Usually this meant small birds or fish – quail, grouse, chukar, pheasant; trout, steelhead, bass. We posed for pictures: a chuckling, blonde-haired preschooler cradling a limp-headed chukar like a prize; a toddler lying on the floor next

to a steelhead to compare length. Sometimes we would join his excursions, and then the picture might show a smiling little girl holding a fishing pole and a stringer full of fat rainbow trout.

We all loved an escape, whether this meant a day trip up the Clearwater to the wide bend where the blackberry brambles grew and the sand stretched into the shallows, or a weekend camping by the clear waters of Alturas Lake, high in the Sawtooths, where my father's family had spent summer vacations each year since my grandmother was a girl. Sometimes the older two of us sisters would go out for the day with our father while our mother stayed at home with the younger two. These trips tended to be quieter, with more space for wandering alone with one's thoughts. The peace brought on by time in the woods was more apparent then, and I understood, I think, even as a child, why my father sought this out, why this mattered. Once, as a teenager, I went with him to a business conference for a few days, on our way to a weekend of high-mountain hiking that would be too strenuous for the rest of the family. In one of those air-conditioned conference sessions we took a personality test together, a simple test that grouped people by kind. We came up with the same result: white. Our defining characteristic, both father and daughter: peace.

frith, n.2. Pronunciation: /friθ/ Forms: OE (ge)fyrhðe, fyr(h)ð, ME *friht*, *fryht*, ME *freth*, 18 Kent. *fright* (-wood, 15 *fryth(e)*, ME-*frith*. With uncertain meaning, denoting a wood of some kind, or wooded country collectively, esp. in poet. phrases associated with fell, field.

North Central Idaho. I pull the battered blue book from the shelf again. The corners are softened, paper edges blooming to fuzz. The spine is cracked, the rough, flexible cover scuffed. *Peterson's Field Guide to Birds of Western North America*. Inside, the slick pages smell of ink and adhesive, each one offering up brilliantly colored renderings of birds – songbirds, raptors, owls, gulls. At six years old this is my favorite book in the house. I have looked at each of its

pages a hundred times over, studying subtleties of color, shape, and trajectory of flight. There is also a field guide to Rocky Mountain wildflowers in a matching sky blue cover, and a guide to trees papered in white. My mother packs these books and carries them with us on each family camping trip, each hike. In my memory she is always reading, whether in a chair at home, oblivious to the noise of four daughters capering around her, or sitting on a rock on a riverbank. Her pack must have been heavy with those three field guides and whatever novel or meditation she was reading at the time. *Lolo Pass. Bitterroot Mountains. Red River.* My mother stops along trail edges beneath ponderosa pine to point out flowers, Indian paintbrush, butter and eggs, bachelor's button, elephant head, kitten toes, bear grass, penstemon.

*

She liked seeing, learning, and naming things.

—A.S. Byatt, *Ragnarok: The End of the Gods*

Salish Sea. Orcas Island. Whatcom County. Hardscrabble Falls. When I hike with my daughter, I point out and name for her every plant I know. When I don't know names, I point out parts – look at the shape of this leaf, this petal, look how this stamen curves so delicately. See this maidenhair fern? See how the shape of its fronds is so different than the sword fern over there? Look, here, beneath the leaflets, do you see the spores? This plant must be in the rose family, see how the flower looks like a tiny wild rose, and also like blooming blackberries?

We have our own field guide to birds, the Sibley, a gift from my mother. Mina reads it as intently as I read the old blue Peterson's. She wants to know whether the birds that most capture her imagination can be found here, in our yard and garden on a corner lot in the city, or if we could find them nearby in the forests or on the beaches surrounding Bellingham. At home, black-capped

chickadees and Oregon juncos feed on last summer's sunflowers still standing in the garden; pine siskins *schree*, tiny bushtits flit together from one hiding place to the next. I have lived many places, each with its own selection of common birds – spotted towhee, varied thrush, chestnut-backed chickadee, cedar waxwing, Anna's hummingbird, western tanager, downy woodpecker, red-winged blackbird, dusky flycatcher, winter wren.

*

Fowles in the Frith
(Middle English Lyric)

*Fowles in the frith,
The fisshes in the flood,
And I mon wax wood
Much sorwe I walke with
For beste of boon and blood.*

North Central Idaho. Lochsa River. Water burbles over stones in the shallows. My sisters and I, barefoot, balance precariously on slick river rock. Nearby, our father fishes for cutthroat trout. We sift through pebbles of varying yellows and browns, speckled, smooth. Look closely enough and you'll find them, the tiny tubular homes constructed of sand and the smallest stones, cases for aquatic insect larvae living in this river. We collect the empty ones, marvels of architecture, delicate safe havens too easily crushed by curious girlish fingers. I remember this suddenly, thirty years later, but can't remember the name of the insect that makes these wonders. I send my father a message, asking the question. *Caddisfly*, he replies.

Lewiston. Confluence of the Snake and Clearwater Rivers. House finches have nested in the blue spruce outside our front door. Perfectly conical and just too big for a Christmas tree, its dusky blue needles

pinpoint sharp, the spruce makes an ideal nesting place. Our father lifts us to his shoulders to peer between the branches. First, a clutch of pale, speckled eggs. Later, hungry hatchling mouths held aloft and peeping, waiting for the morsels of food that never seem to satiate them.

*

I lament the loss of names. It's as if the elimination of species all over the world is coincidental with a loss of vocabulary. It is a kind of voluntary silencing, a desire not to remember or know.

—Patrick Lane, *What the Stones Remember*

Mountainsides erode and riverbeds meander and deepen; names, too, change over time and distance. Mount Baker was once *Koma Kulshan*; the Clearwater River was once *Koos-koos-kai-kai*. Systems of oronomy and hydronomy replace more ancient tongues. We bestow names *upon* - by general agreement - and create the illusion of their permanence. The old names echo, they persist; new names will follow. The chickadee cares not what I call it, but continues to buzz and flit. Like the mountains and the rivers and the chickadees, we each are named. The girl standing in the wide ess of the river carries names bestowed and handed down, and only later might she choose for herself. She might choose to keep these names. She might choose another name, a name that reflects — where she has been and what she wishes to become.

*

Spiegel der; Spiegels, Spiegel. (a) mirror.

(b) (*Wasserspiegel*) (fig.) (*Konzentration*) level.

Mount Baker. Whatcom Creek. Bellingham Bay. When I marry again, there are no doubts. We gather our families and the two children

and set off one August afternoon on a whale watching boat called the Viking Star. We marry afloat somewhere in Chuckanut Bay. This time I change my name, and for me it is this, more than any ceremony or certificate, that connects me to my husband. I like this new name, like the idea of it, the idea of reflection, inward and outward, reflection that creates a self, that first recognition of separateness, the understanding of the bounds of the body, what is the self and what is not, where the self touches another self.

On the first warm days of our infant son's first springtime, I carry him about the yard and garden, showing and naming for him all the things we see. Tree. Bird. Leaf. Flower. His delicate fingers stretch to touch the softness of petals, the roughness of bark. A year later Emerson moves about of his own will and begins to direct the shape of his sounds, his first words nouns, names: kitty, dog, Dada. Eyes, teeth. I mirror his sounds back to him, and it fills me with such wonder to watch him as he learns, through naming, who he is and where he belongs. I whisper to him about the birch tree as the wind sways its weeping branches, about the crows that swoop along their habitual trajectories from roof to wire to cherry tree, about the pea seeds we plant so early this spring, about the garden soil he scoops with a cup, about the earthworm he clasps in a dimpled fist to carry with him as he wanders the yard, his small space in this world. **f**

CHLOE ANNE CAMPBELL

BLUE LAKE AND CONSTANCE, SOUTH ISLAND

a maori water burial

A lake of blue and bone, clear and eddying
around pieces that we let slip
into the water, leaving circles like stoneskips
as he sinks. Smooth and white-places
where he'd gotten old, boiled
and burned clean, left in the past shore.

They have no place here,
where he is made into something bare and holy,
added to a glinting pile under two hundred feet
of water, older than god. Every dawn
the river rolls off its bed and gives itself

to make new. Nosedeeep, I sink into the clear dark
with his ribcage, long shin bones, to find what lives after
everything has run off, has creaked
and found its answers at lakebottom.

There are fish. They nip at the bones.
I want to lend my fingertips, wait to see
what bites. How can I be pure as a jawbone in sand?

FLAMINGO MOTEL

You wouldn't believe this flight to Spokane. Pasco to Spokane. That's 50 miles. They have a plane for 50 mile flights. I'd have driven it, except I'd been Bangkok - Tokyo - San Fran - Pasco, and I'd been drinking. I'd still have driven it, if I'd wanted to, but I hadn't. 50 miles. The plane was a dildo you sat on. I guess you sit on every dildo, but still. It was insulting to board this thing. I'm not even tall. I'm respectably tall, I'm 6'1", but boarding this plane I was bent at the waist, like I was kowtowing, and I don't kowtow, even when returning from Asia. Where was my seat, the stewardess wanted to know. I don't know, maybe it was one of the six seats in the airplane. There was one other passenger. Maybe I was sitting where they weren't. Christ, I hate people. I hate how they think. 50 miles, pure turbulence, and no booze.

No one knew I was coming. Mom, Dad, Jen. They didn't know. This was a surprise. A month earlier my employer, Anders Stern, had restructured and flushed my pussy with severance pay. Six months' salary, no questions asked. It's not like getting fired, if that's what you're thinking. Banks restructure. It happens. Fired's when your boss at State Farm Altoona rolls back his JCPenney sleeves and asks you to join him in his corkboard cubicle. Restructured is taking your severance pay and blowing tits in Ko Chang for a month. That was me. Now I'd tacked on this visit home. Why? I don't know why. Why'd you go to public college? That was you who did that, not me.

I got not a cab in Spokane, but a car, a black Lincoln with a black guy driving it, because cabs aren't found in backwater places like Spokane and because I ride Lincolns when I go places, not cabs, even in places where cabs are plentiful, like in New York City, where

I live. The driver was Lonnie. He was professional. The whole way to Coeur d'Alene, where my family lives, he maintained a dignified air. And he was a good sport when I got out of the car, saw my folks' house, and got back in. "Go," I said.

It was after midnight. Everything in the car was black, including Lonnie but excepting Lonnie's white eyes, which shone in the rearview. He eased down the block, "Where to?"

"I need accommodations."

"That's arrangeable," he said.

There actually is one acceptable hotel in Coeur d'Alene, but Jen, my sister, works in the lobby. Lonnie brought me instead to a travesty on Sherman Avenue with an actual glowing vacancy sign and pink trim which couldn't possibly have been called but was called anyway Flamingo Motel. Not *The* Flamingo Motel. Flamingo Motel. A motel for flamingos.

Why didn't I knock at my parents' door? I was tired, I'd been in Thailand. They'd be there tomorrow.

I was bringing cinnamon rolls for breakfast. That was the plan. My dad loves cinnamon rolls. He was a teacher before he retired, but what he needed was a teacher to teach him cinnamon rolls are dog shit. When that didn't happen, he spent his whole life loving cinnamon rolls. Now we have to feed him cinnamon rolls till he dies.

My phone informed me there was a bakery just for cinnamon rolls on Government Way. The name of the place was Stop, Drop, Cinnamon Roll. When the woman on the phone said, "Stop, Drop, Cinnamon Roll, can I help you?" I wanted to shoot myself. Flamingo Motel, now this. Are the people inventing these businesses not hoping for money? Is their aim to dodge capital? Your business is a joke you made up. Unless it's funny when your business dies, and your family eats dog shit off the sidewalk, stop telling jokes. Come up with something real, like Anders Stern Capital Management.

I ordered twenty fresh buns. I hoped my dad wouldn't be disappointed when I only brought twenty buns for him to eat.

I told Lonnie to meet me at Stop, Drop, Cinnamon Roll. I would've met him at Flamingo Motel, except I'd spent the night in Flamingo Motel, which meant I'd thrown my back out on the Chinese torture robot they called a mattress, and suffered seizures from the pink walls. If I didn't walk around and lower my systolic blood pressure I was going to hang myself.

It was sunny out, and already hot, though not Thailand hot. The heat in Thailand melts your pants off for fellatio. This just was hot. The sun was a yellow circle. I walked up the street. In a minute, I'd have twenty cinnamon rolls for my dad's face, except what I realized, walking down Sherman, was it was eight AM, and no way at eight AM was my dad not already at Stop, Drop, Cinnamon Roll stuffing his face. It was a bakery for cinnamon rolls. Where else would he be? He'd be there, in prison, or dead, and in any case there was no reason to go. Plus I couldn't keep walking. My spine was a dick in my back. I'd bring the cinnamon rolls for lunch, I decided, which dad wouldn't object to. I called Lonnie and told him to drive around.

Good luck getting a drink at eight AM on a Wednesday in Coeur d'Alene, except the world, it turns out, is comprised entirely of goods and services into which money at any time can be converted, provided you have enough of it, and I always do. At Sherman and 5th is the Steam Engine Saloon. The owner was on the sidewalk receiving a shipment. I said, "Where on the y-axis does cash received intersect your willingness to serve me Hayman's gin, right now?" He didn't understand, but I produced bills, which he understood fine. By eight-ten, I was on the Steam Engine patio with cold Bombay (he hadn't heard of Hayman's, which about stroked me out). I was roped off from the sidewalk, just me, while the citizens of Idaho, a hundred miles from the nation of Canada, walked back and forth briskly, like it mattered.

I saw her before she saw me, which was lucky. It gave me time to get back under the awning, in the shadows. She was up the sidewalk, peering in shop windows. I crept back for my gin, then withdrew once more to the awning. It was Jamie, no doubt, because no one I'd ever met stood like Jamie, with her weight on her heels, rocked back like she'd seen something in the sky, or was remembering something, even when she just was looking in windows. Jamie LePond. We'd had a thing, and I guess a long thing, though a decade out even long things were down to one or two recollections, as if everything had happened in an hour, at a photo booth. Good thing I'd seen her first. We might've conversed, which of course would've aneurismed me. Whatever she saw in the window, she got bored and kept walking. When she passed the Steam Engine, I was on a knee, tying my shoe.

Stop, Drop, Cinnamon Roll still was open, but I'd ordered the rolls four hours ago, and they would be stale, or dry. They'd be whatever cinnamon rolls get when they get even shittier than they were to begin with, and my dad wears JCPenney jeans but don't feed him substandard breakfast cake. I still was at Steam Engine, but they were open now and I was surrounded by waterbrains discussing Ford F-350s. I called down to SDCR, talking loud enough I drowned out the whole patio, which was a favor to everyone. I said, "It's me. I'd ordered the rolls."

It was the same jolly bitch. She laughed, "Well all's we do is rolls. I'd say your description applies to everyone!"

"Oh God Christ," I said.

"Do you have a name?"

"I ordered the biggest one, the biggest order. The crate of cinnamon rolls. I didn't come get it. That's how you know who I am. The crate of cinnamon rolls on your table that no one has come through your door to claim, those are mine, that's the customer you're addressing, fuck me."

"David?" she said.

I wanted to die, “Oh my God, can we get to the purpose of my call? Yes, David. I’m David. What’s your name? What’s your pet’s name? Do you like Ford F-350s? I didn’t pick up my rolls. But this isn’t an apology. You’ve been remunerated via debit card for that purchase, so whether I pick them up is no concern of yours. They aren’t your property. This call concerns a second order. I want thirty cinnamon rolls. I’ll get them later. How long will that take?”

“You sound agitated,” she said.

Everything that was wrong with her saying that logjammed my brain and I couldn’t speak. I pounded the table, which neighboring customers didn’t like but which the Steam Engine proprietor could say nothing about because his scruples were mine now, bought and paid for.

The lady said, “We’ll make ten. Add those to your twenty.”

“Absolutely unacceptable.”

“What?”

I collected myself, “Those are dry.”

“Dry? These are fresh buns!”

“Throw them away. I own them. Discard them.”

“You want thirty out of the oven? You know our baker’s gone home, this could take...”

I hung up. It was hang up or die. There wouldn’t be cinnamon rolls after all, but my mom loved Olive Garden. I’d bring Olive Garden for dinner. Meanwhile, I stepped over the sidewalk chain and started down Sherman. I ate at a taco truck, then called Lonnie. I didn’t need transportation, I needed air conditioning and shade. I sat in the car while we idled at the curb, popping around on my phone, then told him keep the meter running and got out.

According to public records accessible via mobile devices, Jamie LePond once more was Jamie LePond, after being Jamie Frederick. She managed a thrift store on 4th Avenue and owned a bungalow worth \$152,643. I started up 4th. I noticed Lonnie following me, his car inching along while traffic zoomed past. I waved him away and he turned down another street.

4th Avenue has thrift stores everywhere, all of them with wrist-cutter names like Thrifting Gears and Threadly Force, and all of them dog shit. The name of Jamie's was Good, Bad, Snuggly. It was a house under a tree with furniture and clothes in the yard. Waterbrains were in evidence, trying on hats and drooling. I'll never be mistaken for a waterbrain, not so long as I'm living, breathing, and on the scent of maximized fiscal utility, but for the moment they covered me. I slipped through the yard, inspecting old boots and vintage milk cans.

Jamie was inside, I assumed. I'd have to go in there. But then she appeared on the porch with a hippie in flowing skirts. They admired an armoire. I slipped behind another armoire, in the yard, and watched them through the cupboard hinges.

You're thinking I felt something, some love or nostalgia, because the college you attended emphasized easy conclusions. But let me educate you. To the cultivated, there's an interest in lives not lived. Understand? An *interest*. We're not talking puppy dog shit. I have an aquarium at home with heterochromus cichlids, Neptune groupers, and yes, a peppermint angelfish. It's in the wall in my condominium because I can afford it, and because marine life fascinates me. Sentiment's not an issue. If someone, using the Masai spear on my wall, stabbed the tank so the fish poured out and died I wouldn't care except for the angelfish, which cost \$35,000, though nor would I care about the angelfish because 35k is insignificant. Understand? Jamie LePond was entertainment.

The hippie couldn't afford the armoire. Anyone could see that. They went inside, and after a while I followed.

It was like a gypsy wagon in there. Silky things and beads drooped from the ceiling. It was musty and dark, and what couldn't have been yet certainly was Cat Stevens' "Moonshadow" played through speakers which themselves were vintage items, fat and wooden with dog shit sound. Jamie's responsibilities, from what I could see from my rack of polyester trench coats, were primarily clerical. Behind the counter was a room with a computer. She stayed

back there, or came out and tapped numbers at the register. Phones rang, and through “Moonshadow” or “Peace Train” or “Rubylove” (she played the whole album—I believe it’s *Tea for the Tillerman*, or *Teaser and the Firecat*), I heard her voice. “Good, Bad, Snuggly?” she said. I’d not remembered I remembered Jamie’s voice, but definitely I did. She was a redhead and talked like one, with that just detectable yet persistent rasp.

Though not all clerical. Customers needed help with Levi’s and scarves and sewing machines, and she emerged from the counter to assist them. Their questions were inane. They couldn’t find price tags, or wanted instructions for lubricating the bobbin case. Questions answered, Jamie returned to the counter. She tapped keys at the register, or went in the back room.

Olive Garden was north of town, out in the wastes, and even on Wednesday was crowded. I’d ordered ahead, but couldn’t say the names of their entrees. “Food,” I’d said, “just food. For five people. Ten.”

“Make up your mind,” the kid had said.

I’d nearly eaten my phone. “Seven entrees. Put it in boxes. Okay, I’ve hit the limit of talking to you. Take down my debit card information.”

I’d gotten through that, but now was in Olive Garden with waterbrains drooling on my shoes and was ready to nail my belt to a fake Tuscan roof beam and swing like a wind chime. The hostess had empty, zoo animal eyes and couldn’t understand my words. “Food,” I said. “Food, food. I ordered...on the phone. Your colleagues are making it or it’s made already. Your function is bringing it here.”

“This is dine-in or to go?” she said, and something popped in my eye. It was leave Olive Garden or deacease from the Earth. Luckily, Lonnie had the common touch. I waited in the car while he got the food, then we drove to my parents’ house.

The food had been ready while we'd navigated the hostess's brain, though, and was cool and seeping through the cardboard. Plus the food was in cardboard, for Christ's sake, and stank like dog shit. I peeled the foil off one of the entrees. It looked like pig guts. I rolled down the window and got my face in the air, but that didn't help.

"You good?" Lonnie said.

We'd reached my parents' block. "Turn around."

"You're the boss." He flipped around.

"You want this? You don't want this shit. Pull over."

He did, and I threw the food in a dumpster.

Back at Flamingo Motel, I ate Tums and pretzels and drank Heineken from the gas station. To even out, I popped a Celebrix and called Lane Bergman from Trinity Group. Lane and I went to Kellogg together, which is Kellogg School of Management, which you probably think is a training program for shift supervisors at cereal factories.

"Berg," I said.

"My man."

"How closely do you follow me? You follow me."

"I know this and that."

"You follow me. Be honest."

"I'm aware you got axed."

"Please."

"No?"

"One seventy-five for cleaning out my desk? Axe me any day, if that's getting axed."

"They made you clean your desk?"

"Fuck no. Okay, this is boring. What've you got?"

"For you?"

"Come on, say it, say it, say it."

Berg sighed. He likes flirting around and not saying meaningful shit, which is why he won't rise over VP, though he doesn't know

that yet. “For you, we’re looking at junior portfolio management. But there’s a spot.”

“Junior? Fuck you.”

“You were a junior at Anders!”

“I had acne as a kid, that doesn’t mean I want more!” (Of course this was rhetorical, I never had acne.)

“You want the interview or not?”

I uncapped a Celebrex and tapped it in my Heineken. “Yeah, give me the interview.” That really was why I’d called, just to get my name on the books. I wouldn’t work at Trinity. I wouldn’t even interview there, not really. Trinity’s dog shit. Where I’m working next is Gillman Shaw. The Gillman interview already was on the books, but nothing had happened in a while so I’d decided to waste Berg’s time.

I needed to acclimate, was what I needed. You couldn’t hit Coeur d’Alene and see your family right away. The pressures needed to equalize. It was like scuba diving in St. Maarten or flying into La Paz, Bolivia at 12,000 feet, both of which I’ve done.

I ate breakfast at a place up Sherman. It was dog shit, but to acclimate I needed exposure to dog shit things. Beyond that, all I needed was time. I sat on the patio, sipping what they called a Bloody Mary.

After breakfast, I walked down Mullan, which is a little street with big trees. It was early, the sun just singeing the trees while these cheap, screw-on-your-hose sprinkler heads hissed water on dinky lawns. Some kid had parked her bike on top of a sprinkler, so all the sprinkler watered was her pedals, which was idiotic because bikes and cheap sprinkler heads are ambulatory devices, either of which is perfectly effective when ambulated clear of the other, and perfectly dog shit when not, yet there they were. The thing in my eye was popping again. I kept walking, breathing the air. There were no cars in the street. The \$152,643 bungalow was a blue box at the corner of Mullan and 17th.

Across the street was a house either abandoned or occupied by derelicts, the shrubs overgrown and yard high with weeds. I slipped through the weeds, the dew staining my Cucinelli flat-fronts, which luckily were my old Cucinellis, but which even if they were my new ones weren't irreplaceable for a man of my means. I parted the bushes and watched. A back door opened and slammed shut, and an old dog, a Wirehaired Vizsla, nosed out and peed in the yard. I hadn't remembered Jamie had a Vizsla, but this was it, this was the dog. Herb. Herb was a puppy when I'd known him, and had ruined most of my shoes, though the shoes I'd worn then had deserved eating by a Vizsla. His pee was difficult. Nothing came, and eventually he couldn't keep his leg up. He squatted there. Then he walked down the fence and plopped in the grass.

Nothing happened, so I doubled down Mullan and cut back through the alley. From the garage, or what in Jamie's neighborhood passed for a garage, I saw into the kitchen. She sat at the table with a box of cereal, generic brand, and a book balanced against a milk carton. She hunched at her bowl, shoveling Toasted O's and turning pages. I couldn't make out the pattern of her pajamas, though she definitely wore pajamas, and they had a pattern. Tweety Bird flying curlicues up her legs and stomach, was what it looked like. Her hair was insane, little flaps and wings of it sticking every direction, but wasn't unclean like some insane hair. It looked freshly washed and brushed, then pinned all these insane directions.

The next window over was her bedroom. A lamp was on. I saw her bed with its scattered pillows, and behind that an armoire no doubt purchased, at an embarrassing employee discount, from Good, Bad, Snuggly. Hung over the armoire were dresses and jeans, and farther back, on the walls, I made out secondhand knickknacks, paper balloons and things. To make their tastes seem thoughtful, rather than impoverished, the poor sometimes tack trash to their walls, but the paper balloons had a nice effect. They caught the light. So that was how it went. Jamie woke in the bedroom, then went in the kitchen to read.

A car appeared up the alley. To make it seem I lived there, I inspected the garage's siding, as if later, after a day at the jobsite, I'd make repairs and drink malt liquor in the yard. But as was obvious to anyone, I didn't and couldn't live there. I wore Cucinellis. Even the soggiest waterbrain differentiates Cucinellis from the pants he himself can afford, even stained Cucinellis, to say nothing of the intrinsic qualities that set me apart organically, Cucinellis or no. Plus the garage had no siding to speak of. I jumped the fence, leaving a scrap of Cucinelli where anyone could see it, and ran down the side of the building.

When the car had passed, I peeked around at the house. Jamie still was at the table, but as I watched she dropped the spoon in her bowl and stood. The bowl went in the sink. She took the cereal box and milk, the paperback tipping over, and put them away. It was eight o'clock, according to my Breguet Classique (the yellow gold with up-shaded crocodile band)—time for work. She poured grounds in her coffeemaker, and filled the carafe with water from the tap. I mentioned my fishes, my aquarium. The gay man, Leonard, who advises my aquarium decisions, always has emphasized context, *context*. Aquarium accouterments, the flora and coral beds, aren't—and Leonard says the word with such gay man disdain—*decorative*. They're your comprehension of the fish. They're what endow the fish, and its habits (he likes to parse the word *habit-at*, but it's strained rhetoric and when he deploys it I ignore him), with meaning. And so watching Jamie, I knew to watch not Jamie alone, but the blue hut she moved through, one window to the next, and her dewy yard with its clothesline and patio furniture, the sun in the trees, the cars now moving up the street, the neighbor's sprinkler wetting my pant cuff. That was Jamie's context, her aquarium, and there she was, swimming in it. As with any aquarium, it was closed off, and yet a complete world unto itself, whole and safe. I mention this not because it's important, but because you attended a land grant university and probably think I was getting emotional, watching my ex move through her life, watching the space of that life

surround her. But look: I felt nothing watching Jamie that I don't feel most mornings watching Clementine, my peppermint angelfish, peck motes off her Mushroom Coral, and when I'm bored of that I go to the office to manage nine-figure accounts.

She went in the bathroom, so I ran around the house for a better vantage. When a car appeared at the corner, I stopped running and knelt, studying the grass. The car drove on. Perhaps the most profitable thing you learn about lesser minds is they defer automatically to anyone engrossed in detail. I knelt some more, playing it safe, and was about to move again when Herb came around the house. He knew I was there but didn't know where I was, the poor bastard. He sniffed the air, trustful and sleepy like all blind things, though I'm not sure he smelled much either, old as he was. He was crust and joints. Still, he knew I was there. What seemed at first just natural instability, a kind of rickety swaying, actually was his wagging tail. He whined softly. "Herbert," I whispered, though I might have shouted it through a bullhorn. He just stood there, swaying and whining. I went over and he licked my hand. He tried to stand his paws on me, by which means he'd ruined several of my suits, years ago, but couldn't lift his feet.

That side of the house was exposed to the intersection. Herb was a credential, standing there with me, but to that credential I added the garden hose. I screwed off the sprinkler head, and gave the spigot a turn. Spraying the eave, back and forth (no one hoses his house, and yet no activity is less conspicuous), I side-stepped, step by step, toward the bathroom window. I heard the patter of shower water, fully distinct from the hose water, then heard her voice. She wasn't singing so much as mumbling a song, or murmuring. Under that was the click of things—a snapped shampoo cap, or dropped razor, the shower curtain slipping down the rod. I was under the window. So she wouldn't hear it, I trained the hose wide of the house. The water arced through the sun.

I could see in, if just barely. The curtain was no more than gauze. And close as I was, I felt the steam wafting out. It dampened

my skin, then evaporated into the day. On the steam was the scent of soap and some fruity conditioner, and more generally the scent of entering a bathroom while a woman showers there, knowing some warm and slippery thing waits in the fog. Softening my focus, I saw the form of her on the curtain, her arms raised and face upturned. I watched till she killed the water, at which point I sat under the window and listened while she dried her hair.

One less profitable thing you learn about lesser minds is they demand explanations for phenomena they've observed, while refusing to entertain the possibility they've observed those phenomena incorrectly, which of course they have. My sister, for a job, stands in a hotel lobby wearing a pantsuit. By all indications, she realizes this about herself. Yet her confidence in her own deductive powers remains unshaken.

The carelessness was my fault. While acclimating to Idaho, I should've been more deliberate about staying out of sight. The only place I could stay out of sight was Flamingo Motel, was the problem, and if I spent another hour in that pink shop of horrors I ran the risk of staying all the way out of sight forever, in that I'd smash the mirror and use a glass shard to cut ruts in my ulnar and radial arteries. Instead, I took some Heinekens under the tree by the sidewalk. There was a picnic table there. It was chained to the trunk of the tree, which was enough to go back inside and dig for those arteries, but I hung on. I was drinking my Heinekens when Jen walked by.

"Oh my God," she said.

"Oh, shit."

"Are you here? Are you fucking here again?"

"Jennifer, keep walking."

"How long have you been here?"

The recipe for a stroke is dealing with someone drawing false conclusion after false conclusion, hopping one to the next like a frog on lily pads, until they've lost touch entirely with their original,

waterbrained assumption, the error of which they'd have to understand before they understood anything.

"What's this, what're you doing?" she said.

I was twitching. When each of your nerves leaps to correct a separate, untenable idiocy, you twitch.

"Look," she looked down the street, as if I were the one requiring patience. "You gonna see Mom and Dad?"

"Listen..."

"Yes or no?"

"The world doesn't revolve around any one simplistic event. That's the first thing you should learn."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh my God."

"It's all a travesty with you. Everything. Look, Mom and Dad. Are you going to see them?"

"If what you need to comprehend the world..."

"This is ridiculous."

"Jen, if what you need is the declaration that some single event will transpire..."

"Can you hurry this up?"

Her mind, her rodent mind would not be still. "Yes. Okay, yes. Is that what you need? Or no, if you need that."

"Bet you don't," she said.

"That's fine, too."

"Are you okay?"

"Holy shit," I said.

"You're right, forget it. Look, see mom and dad. Okay, I'm late." She started off, but then stopped and looked at Flamingo Motel, "Are you staying here?" Then she said, "You know what, forget it. Look, take care of yourself. Jesus." As she walked up the street, I heard her say, "Can't believe you're fucking here."

Not again would I make the mistake of being recognized. I'm not one of these people who make mistakes repeatedly, like a lab

hamster always sucking the electrified water spout. I don't make mistakes, and when I do I make them once and thereafter am correctly wired. Lonnie drove me to JCPenney. I couldn't go in, of course, but gave him my debit card so he could go in for me and purchase shitty clothes.

He crossed the parking lot, a large black man in his black suit, then came back and knuckled the window. I lowered it, "What?"

"How you doin on size?"

It wasn't a difficult question. "Forty-one with fifteen collar, slim. Thirty/thirty-three, medium rise, snug lap."

He laughed.

"What?"

"You a medium. How bout kicks, 8 wide?"

"That's not funny."

When he was through laughing, I told him my real size. He walked off, twirling his keys.

The clothes he selected reflected the tastes of his culture, though poor people the nation over had adopted those tastes, so as a disguise it was effective. In addition to the jeans and shirt (he'd said emphatically I was a medium, yet returned with 36/36 Dickies and a 2XL Rocawear tee), he purchased a Pirates hat, embarrassing sunglasses, and vintage Reebok pumps. He stood in the parking lot of Flamingo Motel while I went in the room and changed. When I emerged, I of course looked like dog shit. But Lonnie, sipping his coffee, nodded appreciatively.

"Yeah?"

"You a steely motherfucker."

According to my phone, Good, Bad, Snuggly closed at seven, and so at six Lonnie dropped me across the street, at Ron's Lounge. He drove off, though I had the feeling he was nearby somewhere, maybe around the corner. Ron's was dog shit. My chair on the patio, the chair and table both, rocked like canoes. I was motion sick. But the costume worked. People treated me like trash, which is to say as

their equal. And I could see across to Good, Bad, Snuggly. Most of the big stuff, the armoires and dressers, had been taken inside.

At six-thirty, a Nissan parked at the curb and two women in what looked like bank attire (by which I mean the attire you'd wear to your job at the Kroger branch of Wells Fargo, and not your job at Goldman or Credit Suisse, for which you'd wear immaculate virgin wool) got out and went in. They weren't shoppers. They'd ignored the milk cans. A few minutes later, they emerged with Jamie and helped her carry stuff in. At six-forty five, which is the time at which unscrupulous employees close a shop that closes at seven, the three of them came onto the porch. I realized only then they would drive somewhere, and I'd lose them (imagine enjoying, while sipping a cocktail, the lazy tilt and dart of your own peppermint angelfish, and then realizing in two seconds it would vanish), but they started out on foot.

I didn't see what money I left on the table, but I don't carry bills insufficient to a Ron's Lounge tab. I stepped over the chain. Jamie and her friends moved down one side of the street, laughing at things and talking with their hands, while I moved down the other, maybe half a block behind. It was warm out, with the kind of low sun that's something gathering, not something dissipating, a Ko Chang sun simmering on the Gulf of Siam.

They ate at Tacos de Fuego. My seat at the bar was near enough I heard their conversation, and the crunch of their chips. When they ordered margaritas I ordered one myself, though they specified no tequila and asked for theirs blended, which Rocawear or not simply isn't the caste I belong to. Still, we enjoyed a drink. I was at their table, more or less, except with my back turned.

"Man I'm needing this," Jamie said.

"Yeah?" said her friend.

"This hasn't been my week. You get those weeks?"

"There's other kinds?"

They laughed like baboons. They laughed loud enough I managed to say, at nearly full volume, "*Play Teaser and the Firecat.*"

“Is this related to, uh...?” her friend asked.

“No.”

“Liar.”

“It isn’t,” she said. “I’m done with him.”

“Well, but there’s done with him and done with him.”

“I’ve just been on edge. I don’t know. Tonight, though. We’re getting after it.”

“That’s right.”

I heard glasses clink.

“Bet you call him, though.”

“I won’t call him!”

“Not saying you want to call him. There’s just...pressures. People need people.”

“I’m looking forward, bitch.”

“Oh, I know. It’s just midnight rolls around...”

“Eat your chips,” Jamie said, and they laughed.

“Eat your chips, bitch,” I said.

Their food came, Jamie’s fajitas hissing like, and about as appetizing as, a pit of snakes. I paid, and crossed the street to a coffee shop. Dusk was falling, the air heavy and blue. Whilst drinking dog shit espresso, I watched them in the bright window of Tacos de Fuego. My phone buzzed. It was Gabe Muntz, my guy at Gillman. *Hit me tomorrow*, the message said. *Got something for you*. Who in that shitty place would’ve suspected Reebok pumps was about to be Senior Strategic Analyst at a top-three equities group? Well, they couldn’t see what was in front of them. That’s why they were miserable. Dinner was over, Jamie and her friends collecting purses. I followed them down the street.

The bar they chose, if economic actors in such narrow markets can be said to choose anything, was Chirps on Sherman. I had to be careful. Each next place I accompanied them magnified my profile. I may’ve been, by all appearances, just another derelict with grand ideas about his inclusion in Afroculture, but I would be the same derelict they’d been seeing all night, if I weren’t careful. Luckily,

Chirps is a lightless den of misery, upholstered in dark velvet that further drains the light, the floor plan of which resembles the floor plan of a regular bar that's suffered an earthquake, everything being one step up, two steps down, around a blind corner. It's like a network of velvet rat tunnels. Also that night there were plenty of (nothing discourages the analogy's extension) rats. Budweiser in hand, because the costume had to be thorough, I dissolved in the crowd. Walking my laps, or sitting on stray stools, thumbing my phone, I was a thread of the cloth in which Jamie and her friends swaddled themselves. I stood down the bar while they ordered shots. "Washington Apples!" one of the friends shouted.

The room was noisy, but she'd shouted like she and the bartender were on the flight deck of a warship. "Talk louder!" he shouted.

"Oh, Mr. Sensitive! Sensitive ears!"

He produced a martini shaker, "Washington Apples?"

The friend looked at Jamie and the other one. "I don't want that. What do we want?"

"Let's get after it," Jamie said. She nodded down the bar, where some people were hunched at a glass toilet bowl, sucking from a bouquet of straws. "We want that."

"I can't give you that," the bartender said.

She looked at him. Then she leaned on the counter. It was a flirty pose, a coquettish pose, her chest perhaps swelling from her top (I couldn't see), though working in Finance you encounter any number of what those of us who aren't gesture collectors call gesture collectors, these timid hearts who think banking amounts to convincing people they're a banker, and so at every opportunity strike some preposterous caricature of banking, like being impatient with waiters or squinting when they smoke, all the while oblivious to the fact they look nothing like the real deal, like yours truly, who's impatient with waiters because they disgust him, and who squints when he smokes because that's the look you get when you close in on cash—and fact was, she wasn't convincing. She'd seen some

picture of flirtatiousness in *Us Weekly*. “You can’t give me that?” she said.

“You’d die,” he said.

“Why don’t you give it to me. See if you kill me.”

He walked down the bar, right past me, and took down a toilet bowl. She eased off the counter.

“Fucking ho train,” her friend said.

“What?”

“Showing your tits for a drink.”

“I didn’t show my tits.”

“You wanted to.”

The guy came back with their bowl. She set her arms on the bar, and her chest on her arms. Watching him, she sucked her straw. That was more compelling. My guess was the straw was coextensive with the line of her cleavage, which must’ve produced a clever effect. But the perceptive eye, by which I mean my own, detects all evidence of gesture collection, no matter how compelling, and knows the falseness behind it. She offered the bartender a straw, but it was obvious just from her offer’s uncertainty he would decline. He moved up the bar, mixed other drinks. The toilet finished, they ordered beers from the other bartender and walked off.

They played darts with some bottom feeders dressed like me, almost precisely like me, except my shit was fresh. Near the darts was a pinball machine, so that for a handful of quarters I preserved my line of sight. The machine was the low-rise kind I assume is in the price range of Chirps, which meant, at my respectable height, I saw over the top to the darts game. Behind the shades Lonnie’d purchased (believe it or not, wearing dark shades in that dark bar wasn’t conspicuous), I could stare directly at them. My lenses danced with the seizure lights of pinball. I watched six Idahoans entertain themselves.

Jamie didn’t like the bottom feeders. Anyone could see that. But she liked something, or wanted something, just as Clementine sometimes wants something and zooms aimlessly through the kelp.

One of the guys was awful, just this muscle-bound, dog shit person. They all were that way, but this one guy in particular. Throwing a dart was his full range of motion. Yet he rubbed on her, and she let it stand. Then she rubbed back. They must've won a game, because he lifted her, her arms in the air, and when he put her down his hands remained on her sides.

Out of quarters, I went to the bar and ordered a toilet bowl. Okay, I wasn't out of quarters. Not even in trifling situations do I run short on cash. I just needed a break, and booze. Your deductive powers, purchased with in-state tuition, tell you I was jealous, but let's get something clear. Of one thing and one thing alone do I get jealous, and that's every dollar bill on this dog shit earth not yet sequestered in my personal accounts. Got it? I needed a break because waterbrains having waterbrain fun depresses me, and because I needed liquor. I sucked down all the toilet bowl I could, then shoved it away, some extra straws rattling out, and went to the jukebox to play Cat Stevens. When she heard it, she broke free from donkeyman and sang her heart into a beer bottle. She looked to see who'd played the song, but I was back at the pinball machine.

She had to send donkeyman away or go home with him, and in the end she chose wisely. He was leaving, his meathead friends slapping thumbs on phones that in their hands looked no bigger than nine volt batteries, sending messages no doubt devoid of punctuation and using, interchangeably, *there* and *their*, *your* and *you're*, and in the end compensating for their omitted punctuation with endless snakes of exclamation points. Donkeyman pleaded with her, his hands open as if to prove he had no weapon. I could hear his voice, and the whining tone of it, but luckily couldn't make out his words. What a shotgun-chewing proposition that would've been, hearing some ogre's best rhetoric on the matter of bashing Jamie's guts. I imagine his buffet line pleas for more gravy and additional chicken nuggets were similarly insistent. In any case, she withheld. The three of them walked off like circus bears. I couldn't help

myself. When they passed I dropped my phone in their path and stooped to pick it up. “Excuse me, sorry. Circusbearsaywhat. Sorry.”

“What?” the guy said.

“Nothing. Hey, have a good one. You, too. Hey...” I shook their hands as they passed.

Alone, Jamie and her friends dropped in a booth and sipped beers. They weren’t talking. Then one of them saw someone across the bar. She ran to him. The other went to the bathroom. Jamie sat with her beer, watching the air the way a person watches her reflection in any convenient surface, yet there was no surface, just air. She took out her phone. For a moment she studied it, not doing anything, just considering it, turning it in her hand. Finally she tapped out a message. I moved to a nearby table and watched her over the napkin holder. She tapped another message.

Her friend returned, and the phone went in her purse, but not quickly enough. “James...” the friend said. I was close enough to hear words.

“What?”

“Jamie LePond...”

Whatever she’d wanted, she seemed to want it less now, or have less expectation of it. She was annoyed, “Sit down.”

The friend did not sit down. “Did you?”

“Sit down already.”

“God, you’re unbelievable.”

Jamie drew a breath, the long breath of someone who’s been through this before. She pushed back her hair.

“Listen, you said...”

“I texted him. That’s what happened. Would you deal with it, please?”

Her friend lifted her hands. She’d had enough.

“Fine, then. Go. Do something. So long as you shut up.”

The friend walked off.

Where she was sitting, Jamie couldn’t see me. I was off to the side. But nothing happened—she did nothing and I did nothing—

so that there opened between us the kind of stillness you feel on airplanes, and you especially probably feel on airplanes, in coach, with that stranger jammed next to you. You don't look at each other, but that doesn't matter. There the two of you are, with empty hands and hours of flight time ahead. It's like you should do something, you and this other person, like a pocket of time has opened just for that purpose. It's not a feeling I like, I feel trapped, and so I crossed the bar and did what I do on airplanes, which is order vodka.

The guy must've been nearby, maybe at Steam Engine. Or else he'd been in another of the rat tunnels. He just was there suddenly. He was lousy, with dumb clothes and dumb spectacles, but not lousy like the circus bears. He just was average lousy, the kind that's available anywhere, like the soap in municipal restrooms, though in some ways that's the worst kind. Her texting him notwithstanding, Jamie obviously agreed. After no more than a drink, she was through with him. He explained something, his hands flapping over the table, and even from thirty feet off, in a dark room, you could see her vacant expression. I thought she'd stick it out. She'd brought him there, after all, and at the expense of her friends. But when the waitress came by she opened her purse and paid. The guy stood with her, but she waved him down. Her head was shaking. Her friends still were there. They were at the bar, laughing it up with some waterbrains. But Jamie walked past them, and past me, and left.

I caught up to her on Mullan, maybe half a mile from her place. I walked even with her, she on her side of the street and me on mine, her heels clicking, then dropped back and watched at a distance. She walked streetlamp to streetlamp. It was a nice effect, those lamps, not unlike the Bridgelux LEDs Clementine swims under, though my Bridgelux frame (customized) could buy twenty blocks of municipal lighting. In the rhythm of walking it was like I swam with her, like the glass less divided than enclosed us, she and I in some warm space, though I'll remind you such feelings aren't uncommon to the owner of elegant fish.

She opened the gate and walked in her house. One by one, the lights came on. Herb didn't jump on her. From where I stood in the street, I could see he just sniffed her hand, his body swaying. She kicked her shoes through the room. By then, I was in the yard. It was a small house, but with the lights on, at night, it looked big enough for something, I don't know what. Something more could fit there. She was on the sofa, her phone out. As earlier, she less used the phone than considered it, turning it in her hand. Then, deliberately, she tossed it. It hit the window like a bird.

Something clearly was over. An act had concluded. And yet also...I don't know. Also it was early. Not early in the evening (it actually was late), but early in the weekend, or in the summer. I don't know. There was an earliness, and though she'd thrown her phone it still was there, on the floor. There she was on the sofa. Someone could call, or ring the doorbell. I could ring the doorbell. There we'd be, Jamie and I, in her house.

I had my phone out, texting Lonnie, but then looked up the block and saw him. The Lincoln was at the curb, its clearance lights on, exhaust pooling beneath it. I stepped over the fence, and he pulled into the street.

"We doing Flamingo?" he said. We were driving, his eyes sleepy in the rearview. I'd been thinking Flamingo, but had an idea. It was late, maybe one-thirty. If I saw them now, it'd be easy. The door would be unlocked. I'd go in the bedroom. Them sleepy, me drunk, we'd slip into conversation like old people, which they literally were, slipping into a bath. I didn't even have to say it. Lonnie had turned up 15th. We passed out of downtown into the shabbier homes, the ranchers and split-levels.

He slowed when we came to it, slowed nearly to a stop, but I didn't have to say it then, either. We eased by, the windows dark and lawn overgrown, then accelerated.

I had clothes at Flamingo, clothes and some money, but Lonnie turned the other way and got on the interstate. Sixty, seventy, eighty, we flew towards Spokane, towards the airport, not a headlamp in

sight. It was hours till dawn, but the sun in New York would've climbed over Brooklyn. Manhattan would have its face in it, its beautiful face. I called Muntz. He didn't answer, so I called again. "Mm?" he mumbled. He was asleep. "Muntz. Tell me about the future." **f**

BRIANNA NOLL

THE HEART IS NO SHAPESHIFTER

月澄むや狐こはがる児の供

—Bashō

clear moon, / a boy afraid of foxes / walked home by his lover

—trans. Jane Hirshfield

He feared not the *kitsune*
so much as the *kitsunetsuki*—
the one possessed by the fox
spirit, the beautiful woman
wearing a giant pearl ring
glowing with fox-fire.
The road home was long
and trailed through the mist
country. In its true state,
the fox spirit is androgynous,
its fur white or pure gold. It enters
the body of a woman under
her fingernails. Its only trace
is in her nine-tailed shadow.
Despite the moon, this shadow
would be swallowed by the mist.
He asked his lover to walk him.
He never thought she might
already be possessed, that she
might bear him fox-children
imbued with their own
brand of magic, that she might
bargain for her soul compressed

into that fiery pearl—
a negotiation, or a taming.
How easily he forgot
he met her on this same road,
her voice made faint like gongs
in the thin light of dawn.
She is both woman and fox.
She carries the weight of centuries
in each of her nine tails.
He will learn and admire this,
his fear lifting like mist.
There can be no doubt:
Japanese fairy tales end,
medetashi, medetashi—
so blissful, so blissful.

GREG JENSEN

PEARL BY PEARL

Moon, dare me to be
flat broke and some change.
I touched your blade in a fever
and went back to the woods
where I ran to hide
your bitemarks in my flesh.
I covered them with radio waves
to prevent infection.

For years I made no sense.
I heard your rain overhead
make voices out of my voices
until I was nothing but puddles.

Your ivory jaw hangs in the trees,
but I must come back to myself,
like a runaway engine
returning to a throbbing idle.

The wound in my chest
poured out through wine stained teeth,
which you carefully removed,
pearl by pearl.

Instead of music I get to play
with my nerve to live
near your chorus
of stabbing motions.

ENGELE, ENGELE, FLIEG

We're somewhere between Utah and Colorado. The peaks are covered in snow. The heavens are pink. If I were on the ground, I'd be admiring the sky.

I used to drive down there. Right there. I watched the sun set orange behind the mesas and spooned my dog in the back of my truck, and I couldn't wait to be off the road. Now I wish I were back on the road— except that I don't. I just wish it were two and a half years ago— before his diagnosis, before he ran out of options, before I was racing back across the country, suspended between two banks of clouds, wishing time had frozen on a different moment.

33,100 feet.

I know what I'm facing. Tears are falling— welling and falling and finding lines that weren't there when I was born. Everyone probably thinks I'm sick— sick like the woman in front of me, who keeps sneezing. "A-CHOOOO," as if it's an event.

34,436 feet.

Lights are coming on down there. We've passed into night and patterns stretch across the inky earth, like melted pennies.

We're over Denver. He took me there; I think I was seventeen. We drove to the mountains in a convertible and fed deer in the wild and hurtled down a grassy ski slope in summer toboggans. He wanted to win, as usual, and he crashed. He came walking up the hill, laughing and bleeding.

35,106 feet.

Soon we'll be over Oklahoma City. We drove there when I was eighteen. Nine-hundred miles in one day. My sister's dog was in the cab with us and most of my life stacked behind us in boxes. The bombing had happened and we walked around the chain link fence

memorial and looked at all the flowers and photos and notes that survivors had posted.

Holding at 35,106 feet.

And we're not actually going to go over Oklahoma City; we're far north of it and Wichita is lit up like a motherboard.

We also drove through Kansas once. I was nineteen and felt like I was being dragged back to go to college in Georgia. We stopped at the welcome center for free coffee and brochures. It's the state of superlatives: largest rubber band ball, etc. *Ad astra per aspera* is the motto. "To the stars through difficulties."

36,240 feet.

The woman in front of me is coughing and blowing her nose. If she gets me sick, I can't go near him, and I may never forgive her for that.

We've just crossed into Arkansas. He grew a beard in the nineties, because he was protesting Bill Clinton. He used to drink coffee and vote left. Then he gave up caffeine and turned right.

37,352 feet.

Someone slams their overhead bin and it sounds like a gun. An ice cube melts in my mouth. A movement from Vivaldi's "Concerto No. 2 in G Minor" plays. He always blasted *Four Seasons* on Saturdays to wake my sister and me up. No sleeping in.

He let me sleep the first time I flew. I was six and he was taking me to meet his family in Germany and he stood up all night so that I could stretch out on our two seats. He was wearing a light blue suit. He has always worn a suit to fly.

I'm wearing my lucky boots. I have had them for fifteen years, ever since he came to visit me when I was living in Wyoming. He had brought me birthday money from my grandfather, so we went to the nearest big city and he helped me pick out a simple brown pair. I have had them patched a few times, last year with leather from his favorite town on the California coast. They are splitting again, this time I think irreparably.

I sigh. My ragged breath forms a big vapor cloud on the pane. It disappears.

I never used to cry in public. When I lived in Barcelona, I would see people openly sobbing in the streets. He came to visit me there and we took a ferry to the island of Formentera. There was a girl beside us weeping, because the waves were so high and the boat was being thrown from side to side in such a violent way. He told her it was going to be okay.

The woman in front of me won't quit sneezing. I have formed a pathological awareness of her. Someone nearby has farted. I didn't used to be allowed to say that word; I had to say *toot*. Who tooted?

I breathe into my wet, balled-up napkin. It smells like the bruschetta sauce that I could not stomach an hour ago.

36,955 feet.

In a drawer somewhere there is a photo of me, still six and seated in front of him. We're poised at the top of the log flume at an amusement park and he is smiling but my mouth is wide open in anguish; I had screamed to turn around and he had yelled for them to stop the ride but they would not. We plunged over the edge together.

35,769 feet.

The captain asks the flight attendants to prepare the cabin for arrival. People are waking up; they're laughing; they're excited. The woman in front of me still sneezes. The farther still farts. My napkin is worn out.

20,819 feet.

My ears pop. My seatbelt pushes against my lap.

17,822 feet.

We're hurtling down through blackness, the lights of the plane illuminating sheets of water as they break and freeze into tiny pellets.

3,412 feet. Less than a mile.

The half-mile event became my speciality when I ran track. Eight-hundred meters. I was fourteen when I set the county record. Everyone expected this girl from one of the rivaling high schools to

win but I kept a steady pace, exactly as he had taught me to do, and just when she thought she had it, I kicked in my reserves and passed her, before she could react. I crossed the finish line and kept going, all the way up the bleachers and into his arms. For years, he would update me that my record still held, just as he would also read me weather reports for all the places where I had ever lived.

3,000 feet.

The landscape is blurry. It looks like a bush covered in tiny webs that are dappled with dew. A nurse once compared his tumor to a spider spinning a home all over his brain.

1,100 feet.

Landing gear is grinding into place. There's that tipping feeling when the engines slow down for final approach. The runway is laid out like strings of Christmas lights.

My sister and I still talk about the year he refused to decorate at all. I must have been eleven; she was about fifteen, and just the two of us trimmed the tree and climbed on the roof and stapled the wreaths against the house. Our mother was horrified.

It must be inches now.

We hover for a few seconds, the wheels waiting to find their tarmac. They hit; they stick. The wing flaps struggle against the wind. Hangars come into focus. We begin to taxi towards the gate.

Before I remember much else, I remember walking beside him, no taller than his legs. Someone else was on my other side and they each took one of my arms and began running. Suddenly I was off the ground, sailing and suspended, my wrists pulling out and my stomach tickling.

Engele, Engele, flieg! "Angel, Angel, fly!"

They put me down. I begged them to do it again. **f**

BRAD JOHNSON

DAUGHTER TAKING A SELFIE

Whenever I believe in individuality
I'm confronted by my grandfather's captain photo
from the '43 Michigan football team hanging
in my office. His face is my face: extended
forehead, lips swollen as if stung, the nose appearing
broken but, despite playing in leather helmets
lacking facemasks, never was.

Whenever I consider any iconoclasm
unique, I recall my ancestor expelled
from Oxford for presenting anti-Catholic
dissertations or the one who abandoned
his Royal Navy post, turned pirate
and died of syphilis in the Caribbean.

When I collect my daughter from school
she asks to see my phone so she can take
another selfie wearing her mother's necklace
which all her fellow classmates loved.

When I ask about her day she says they watched
a jungle video and her teacher asked
Wouldn't it be fun to be a monkey?
which caused her arm to rise almost, she claims,
by instinct and submit to her kindergarten class:
We were all monkeys once.

And we live in the South, only miles away
from the Creation Museum where a girl farms
beside a velociraptor in one of the exhibits
as if history's a thing happening all at once.

MEG SCOTT COPSES

STONE BENCH

It's the idea of a bench that matters
as we drive the kids through the morning neighborhood,
its darkness a kind of promise,
something held from us for our own good.

And like the birds we cannot see—don't listen for anymore—
we nurture our distance from St. Francis and his outstretched arm,
and from the garden statue of a girl-child,
her twirling dress stuck in stone.

If we look at all, we want to weep—our eyes
breathing steam from the coffee someone handed us
in the commercial of ourselves on the way out the door,
I could sit there forever, we think

I could just be

And the call of it, so seductive,
that we misunderstand it entirely,
our eyes glassy with new love, our ballet hands
articulated toward all the other people we might have been.

But there in the luxury of stopping entirely
of sighing, like Frost in his snowy woods—
as squirrels crawl and birds land—
we want, also, to turn.

We want to see ourselves looking back,
from inside the car with its bubbled glass.
We want to follow that color—marble eyed—
driving into the center of its day.

We can almost hear the kidsongs,
can almost move with the trapped music,
grey hand of a girl in a garden
and her almost spinning dress.

THE FATHERS

The men got drunk two nights before the wedding. It was a large party—both bride and groom were from large Midwestern families—and because the groom hadn't wanted strippers their entertainment was limited to drinking, cigarettes, and the bride's brother's one-hitter, shaped and painted like a cigarette, which he filled a few times and offered around but smoked mostly himself.

They met at a pool hall on a strip of Milwaukee Avenue crowded with music clubs, martini bars, taco shacks. With brunch restaurants that tomorrow morning would be as mobbed as the nightspots were now. It was the kind of neighborhood people complained about but needed for occasions like these, because through a mild inebriation its colors and motion could blunt past and future and transfix a man in the present. The streets were jammed with taxis and slick with a light summer rain. Young women getting out of the taxis cried out, shielded their heads, and laughed.

When the rain had stopped, the bride's brother Michael walked half a block from the pool hall to smoke in the alley. He was twenty-seven years old and had a young daughter by his girlfriend, but when he was out in the city he felt free from them, which did not mean he didn't adore them. The alley's pale bricks, blue dumpsters, and slatted wooden porches were gleamingly familiar tonight. They gave him the good feeling of being from a place, this place, part of it.

"Give me your money," a man said, approaching from the sidewalk, and for a watery moment Michael didn't recognize his half-brother.

"What's up," he said then. They hugged, Michael holding the one-hitter away so it wouldn't burn Patrick's shirt.

“Did you go in yet?” Patrick asked.

“We’ve been there a little while. You want this?”

“No, thanks.”

“Oh, right.” Michael tapped out the one-hitter on the wall behind him and put it in the pocket of his jeans.

Together, they walked out to the sidewalk. They had different fathers but looked very much alike. Patrick was six months from turning twenty-one, and when he went in the pool hall he showed Michael’s old driver’s license as ID.

The groom’s father and brother and friends stood loosely grouped toward the back of the large, dark room. Each held a pool cue and a pint of beer, as if these items had been handed out as props, but no one had begun a game. Before joining them, Michael and Patrick went to the bar, which was mostly empty, and Michael ordered nine shots of whiskey.

“Is Mike Katsaros coming?” Patrick asked as they waited.

“I thought he was,” Michael said.

Mike Katsaros was their mother’s boyfriend. They always used his full name because both Michael’s and Patrick’s fathers were also named Mike.

“What about your dad?” Patrick asked.

“He is definitely.”

“Is that going to be weird? Those two together?”

“No.” Michael handed the bartender two twenty-dollar bills.

“And if it is, I’m sure they’ll keep it to themselves.”

Patrick’s father had not been invited to the wedding. The bride was an anxious woman, and she’d overthought the decision not to invite him, then overexplained the decision to Patrick. It was a matter of numbers, first of all, of costs, and besides there would already be tension between her own divorced parents. It was not at all that she had bad feelings toward her ex-stepfather, she said, but Patrick knew she was just saying that.

“Here, I have money,” he said as Michael took the tray of small glasses.

“Forget it. Get the next one.”

By now the groom’s father had put quarters into the pool table and was racking the balls too precisely, turning each so its number faced up.

“That nine ball looks a little crooked, Dad,” the groom’s brother said.

“Jeez, and look at the twelve,” the groom said.

“My motto,” their father said with mock ceremony, “is excellence in all things.”

“Except golf,” the brother said.

“Except golf.” And the men laughed insincerely but hopefully, and when Michael came around with shots they were relieved.

“A toast,” the groom’s father began. “Oh, no, wait, there’s Mike K.”

The bride’s mother’s boyfriend was crossing the room, waving hello. He was twelve years younger than the bride’s mother, and those of the men who had not met him were curious how he’d look, though careful not to stare.

“How’s it going,” he said as he joined them. “Oh, we’re toasting.”

“Someone get Mike K a shot,” the groom’s father said. He took out his wallet and seemed almost panicked about making sure Mike was included.

“Don’t worry about me,” Mike said.

“Dad, relax,” the groom’s brother said. “Michael’s getting him one.”

It was Patrick, not Michael, who’d gone to the bar, but no one corrected this.

“Here, Mike,” the groom’s father said, “take mine.”

“You know, I’m okay,” Mike said. “I’m not really a shot guy.”

But no one allowed this. Patrick came back with a whiskey of a color slightly different from the others.

“What’d you get?” Michael asked.

“Scotch.”

Michael pretended to be impressed.

“What? I didn’t know what to get.”

“That’s the good stuff, Michael,” the groom’s brother said.

“So this one’s actually Patrick,” Mike K said. “Though I can see why you guessed Michael. In this family, those are the best odds.”

“Exactly,” the groom’s father said. “It’s got to be Mike or Michael. Except in the very odd case of Patrick here, whose parents really thought outside the box.” Then he laughed and looked around to make sure this was all right.

“Sorry about that,” the groom’s brother said.

“No problem,” Patrick said. “It’s the big joke with us.”

“All right, people,” the father said. “I thought we were having a toast.”

The men lifted their glasses, angling away from the pool table so they wouldn’t spill on the felt. In the light from the high hanging lamp the glasses and liquor looked emblematic, like an advertisement, and as the groom’s father began to speak, Mike K took a photo with his cell phone.

“A toast,” he said, “To my son, Brian, who I’m so proud of, and to his beautiful almost-wife, Janie. And to our families getting to know each other, which has been awesome. And to all of Brian’s good friends over the years, especially his brother, because I think of these boys as not just brothers but friends too. And Michael and Patrick, you guys are all brothers now, which you’ll see from being married because I really feel that way about my brothers-in-law too—”

“Short and sweet, Dad,” Brian’s brother said. “My arm’s falling asleep.”

His father laughed. “You’ll soon see I am known throughout the land for my gift of the gab, as they say in North Dakota. But really I just want to say I love my boys so much and I love Janie, and I hope we all have a great night tonight.”

“Cheers,” Michael said.

The rest of the men murmured cheers after him, clinked and drank. Then they set the glasses on the tray again, and Brian’s

brother chalked his hands and took a clean first shot to begin the game of pool. One of Brian's friends put quarters in another table, and in the dull rumble of balls pouring out, Michael felt the first stage of melt in the night, a sort of fluidity between separate objects, and a sheen, contiguous with the glasses and liquor and the lacquered wood rails around the tables. He looked appreciatively at these men, his family now in a way. He looked at his half-brother, whose face was startlingly adult, though his hairstyle and clothes were still a college kid's. This part was good, after all the waste and worry that came with a wedding. The bringing together, the arranging of all these separate pieces into a whole that made its own kind of sense, for a few days at least.

"How's your dad?" he asked Patrick when they went out again for a cigarette. The traffic on Milwaukee was at full saturation, with packs of girls in bright skirts shouting to each other from either side, trotting between cars to cross. Down the block the blue-line train clattered out of the station.

"He's good," Patrick said. "I mean, like always. Working a lot."

"Drinking scotch."

"Actually he's been cutting down." Patrick looked at the tip of his cigarette, which was burning unevenly.

"No, I just figured—."

"That's why I ordered it. Yeah."

Michael stepped back to let a group of women pass. "Excuse us," he said.

Patrick nodded politely at the women. "How's Lucy?" he asked.

Michael held up a finger, held his cigarette in his mouth, and reached for his cell phone. He tapped the screen a few times, then turned it so Patrick could see a photo of Lucy, almost two years old, splashing wildly in a plastic swimming pool.

"God, she looks like Meg." Patrick leaned to look but didn't touch the phone. "She's cute," he said.

"She's obsessed with water," Michael said, turning the phone to look at it again.

“So now is everyone asking if you’re going to get married?”

Michael didn’t answer that. “Check it out,” he said abruptly, and keeping his cigarette in his mouth crossed the sidewalk, stepped off the curb, and opened the door of an idling taxi.

“What took you so long?” he asked, leaning in.

In the taxi, Michael’s father was signing a credit card receipt against the vinyl seatback. Patrick flicked his unfinished cigarette into the street, briefly anxious about being seen smoking, though as soon as he did this he felt embarrassed. Mike Conlon was not his father, no authority over him, and look—Michael smoked in front of him. Patrick envied his brother, his casualness, his ease. Still he was glad not to be smoking when Mike Conlon climbed out of the taxi. Much of his life, Patrick had seen the man at a distance, through windows and doors. Sometimes Patrick had opened the front door for him and they’d waited together in the front entry of Patrick’s mother’s house, on the red Oriental rug that Conlon once said was technically his. “It goddamn well isn’t your rug,” Patrick’s mother had said, but Conlon had looked at Patrick and pointed at the rug and nodded. “Just get out,” his mother had said then, “you can wait in the car.” Patrick, though wordless through the exchange—he had been six, seven years old—had felt his mother’s bitterness, and hurt for Mike Conlon, and heard in his head his own voice saying, *Stay*.

“Patrick,” Conlon said to him now, coming close, folding a handshake into a half-embrace.

“Good to see you,” Patrick said.

“Man, I am—” Conlon began. “Linda and I had dinner with—.” Some names Patrick didn’t know. “And man, we got into the wine.”

Michael laughed. “Perfect.”

“I’m fine now, though,” he said. “But about an hour ago I was feeling—but how’s, what’s going on in there? Is the party already over?”

Patrick followed them in, keeping a few steps behind, watching. For no reason at all, his heart had begun to pound, and he went only a few more yards with them, watching as Michael showed his

father the phone picture of Lucy. Conlon held the phone away farsightedly and smiled. Patrick's tongue felt dry. He tried to tell them he was going to the bathroom but knew he hadn't been heard.

He passed the groom's father coming out of the men's room, and nodded an awkward hello. There was no one else in there, which was lucky. Patrick went into the stall and stood away from the toilet, which frothed with blue cleaning product. It made no sense that this was happening; he had not smoked pot in months. With his back to the toilet, he opened his wallet and pulled out a strip of foil-backed pill blisters. So far he'd used them only twice. Now, he pushed a third pill through the foil and tipped it from his palm to his mouth.

Out by the sinks again, he felt the likelihood of someone walking in, felt certain they would—and they could, it didn't matter. The psychiatrist had said it was common as aspirin. But no one came into the bathroom. At the mirror he saw no sign that his heart was pounding, though he still felt it and heard it. This is how I look to them, he thought, turning slightly to look at one side of his face, then the other. A lot like Michael, but no, like himself. He looked like himself.

The pool hall seemed darker now. Across the room the men were hard to tell apart, except in the light over the pool table, into which the groom's father now leaned to shoot. The hall was filling up, blurring with unfamiliar men, women too, but more men. Drifting among them Patrick felt separate, unseen. He saw Michael leaning into the bar, two fingers extended and lightly clasping a folded bill, which immediately got the bartender's attention—not the money, but Michael, his lax command of himself. Men noticed it too, not just women.

A few steps behind his son, Mike Conlon stood gazing vaguely at a baseball game on the high mounted television. He was shorter than Michael, something Patrick hadn't noticed until now. He'd always been bald, and now his head was shaved perfectly smooth. He was old but still seemed in good physical shape. Patrick remembered

that when they were kids, Conlon had often come straight from the gym when he picked up Michael and Janie, still wearing a t-shirt and shorts. Had he meant to impress their mother, to show her he was still athletic? She had been the one to leave. She'd fallen in love with Patrick's father, though that had lasted only a few years. What had she given up in Mike Conlon? Patrick felt he might understand the man better, if—something. If something, but what? Conlon's arms were crossed, his mouth slightly open, and his eyes lifted to the television, strangely wistful. Then the game cut to commercial and Conlon seemed about to turn his head, so Patrick looked away.

Back at the pool tables, Michael handed Patrick a beer. "That's from my dad," he said. Mike Conlon had gone over to say hello to the groom.

"Dude, he is wasted," Michael added.

"Who, Brian?" Patrick asked.

"My dad."

"You think? He seemed okay to me."

"I mean, he's fine, he's just wasted," Michael said. "Look at him."

At the other end of the pool table, Conlon was gesturing toward Brian with his full pint glass. Beer slopped over the rim onto his sleeve, and Brian stepped back, laughing. Conlon widened his arms, frowned at his hand, cursed. Then he grinned at Brian, and holding out his dripping hand as if it were wounded, headed back toward the bar.

Seeing Michael and Patrick looking, Brian came over to join them.

"Did he spill on you?" Michael asked.

"He's hilarious," Brian said. He seemed fairly drunk himself.

From the other side of the room, Brian's father suddenly cried, "Yeah, baby!" Then he cocked his pool cue at his shoulder like a rifle and pretended to shoot.

"Sore winner," Brian's brother called through a cupped hand.

"Nobody likes 'em," Brian called back.

Brian's father leaned back on his heels, now playing the cue like an electric guitar.

"Good," Michael said. "He's having a good time."

"So, you're getting married," Patrick said to Brian. "Are you nervous?"

"I seriously don't even know anymore." Brian pushed his hair back with his palm. "I'm in some kind of protective cloud. Like all I can think about are small things, like who's picking up my grandma at the airport. I'm not even thinking about the wedding."

"Good," Michael said. "That sounds good to me."

"I mean, of course I'm thinking about it, but."

"No, I get it."

"What about you?" Brian asked, "Is all this making you think— Or that's a stupid question."

Michael shook his head. "She's talking about it. I'm saying not yet."

"Sorry—."

"No, no." Michael took a long sip of beer. When he finished, he said, "It's a legitimate question."

Brian poked with his straw at the ice in his cocktail glass, then moved the straw aside and drank what was left. "What about you, Patrick," he asked. "Are you scoping out the bridesmaids?"

"The bridesmaids are old," Patrick said.

Brian and Michael laughed.

"Maureen used to be hot," Michael said. "I haven't seen her for a while."

"No, they're hot, I'm just saying—."

"Maureen's still hot," Brian said, "not to be—."

"Totally," Michael said.

At the other pool table they were racking a new game, and Mike Katsaros was pointing around, taking drink orders. He'd cuffed the sleeves of his lawyerly dress shirt and his hair was coming slightly out of shape. He grinned hazily as he headed toward Patrick.

“Who needs something?” he asked. “Guys, the groom’s standing here with an empty glass.”

“My bad,” Michael said, “what was it, gin?”

“I’ll get it,” Katsaros said. “I was just kidding.”

He glanced toward the bar then, and though the change in his expression was subtle and brief, all three of the boys noticed. Each found a way to see what he was looking at, though none made it obvious.

“So, gin?” he said, turning back.

“Here,” Brian said, “let me give you some cash.”

“Put your money away.” Katsaros said. “Michael?” he said.

“Patrick? You’re sticking with beer?”

They watched him walk toward Mike Conlon, who was returning from the bar with a wad of white paper napkins in one hand, a beer in the other. As they passed, Mike Katsaros nodded and held up his hand in a motionless wave, and Mike Conlon lifted his elbows, looked at his full hands, and smiled helplessly. Then Conlon looked at the boys and raised his eyebrows and shoulders in a big theatrical gesture, beer tipping diagonal and nearly spilling again.

“Was that okay?” he asked, coming over.

“What?” Michael asked.

“Is this weird for you, Brian?” Behind his glasses, Conlon’s eyes were shimmery, lids heavy.

“What, hanging out with you guys?” Brian asked.

“No, I mean just all these people from all these different times in your life,” he said. “Is it kind of poignant? I mean not poignant but is it—God, am I being—am I just sappy?”

“Kind of,” Michael said.

“No, I know what you mean,” Brian said. “It’s intense, it’s—yeah, I don’t know.”

Michael had pulled out his phone. “Hey, I’ll be right back,” he said, and headed toward the door.

“I don’t remember if I even had a bachelor party,” Mike Conlon was saying. “Or is this the bachelor party? Is this just like the dads get-together?”

“This is it,” Brian said, chuckling. “Yeah, I didn’t do the whole, you know. Traditional.”

“It’s nice that you wanted your dad here. He’s great. He’s a great guy.”

“Oh, thanks. I’ll tell him you said that.”

“Tell him I said that.”

Then Mike Conlon trained his eyes on something unseen and seemed to withdraw into his own smile. There was a long pause, filled with the noise of the bar, during which Patrick sensed faint lines connecting himself, his brother-in-law, his brother’s father, a little triangle of charged space, into which you might’ve tossed an object and the object might float. Conlon was still holding the pile of napkins down at his side, a blank, flimsy hand of cards.

“But it’s not like you guys had a bad childhood, right?” Conlon said suddenly, looking up at Patrick. “Lots of people loved you. It wasn’t like with my dad—you know about my dad, right?”

“Sort of,” Patrick said, though he didn’t. But he wanted to know. He liked this conversation, wished for it to continue.

“Oh, my dad was,” he said. “You know this, don’t you, Brian?”

“Janie kind of told me,” Brian said, gently but without being too serious. He folded his arms and leaned slightly forward, as if to hear better, or to keep Conlon from having to speak louder.

“All right, so you know.” Conlon raised his glass but didn’t drink, just held it near his chin and said nothing. Patrick waited. He resisted an impulse to look over at Brian, feeling that to do so would be like disrupting a coin in perfect spin, a plain disk turned briefly into an uncanny sphere. Conlon moved his glass away from his chin and looked at it as if recognizing it for the first time. Then he searched around for a place to set it down.

“Don’t let me get sappy,” he said, turning back. “I need to save that for the wedding. So are you excited, Brian?”

"I am." Brian laughed a little. Briefly he glanced at Patrick, with an expression of lighthearted confusion.

"Is it kind of weird though? All these people. I'm just thinking it might be—."

"Hey," Brian said, because Mike Katsaros was standing near them now, three drinks bunched in his hands in cloverleaf formation.

"Sorry to interrupt," Katsaros said. "Just handing these over."

They took the drinks and thanked him. Visibly stiffened, with a huge but close-lipped smile, Conlon stepped backward and dropped his head as if listening to a far-off sermon.

"This was supposed to be Michael's," Katsaros said. "Did you see where he went?"

Conlon looked up, raised his brows, and shook his head solemnly.

"I bet outside," Patrick said. "I bet he's on the phone with Meg."

"Okay, well make sure he gets it. I've got a few more to pick up at the bar. Mike, you want anything?"

After a pause, Brian added, "Mike?"

"Oh, me?" Conlon looked like he'd been startled awake. "Oh, no, no, no. Sorry, I didn't realize."

Katsaros looked at Conlon. It was an expression Patrick had seen before, one Katsaros made when Patrick's mother was, as she often was, moody and demanding. It was an utterly neutral expression, its only trace of emotion a mild, attentive curiosity.

"Well, if anyone needs anything," Katsaros said, turning to Patrick. "You've got money?"

"Yeah, I'm good."

"Okay, well let me know," he said, and before he walked away reached out to tap Patrick lightly on the arm. This was unlike him, and there was something sad about it.

Conlon watched him leave, craning so blatantly that it was like he wanted Katsaros to turn and see him.

“I’m sorry, but it still kind of freaks me out,” Conlon said. “He’s not still in his thirties, is he?”

“No, he’s like forty what?” Brian said, looking at Patrick. “Forty-three?”

“Something like that,” Patrick said.

“I mean, seriously. Why would a guy that age—” Conlon picked up his beer again. “It’s not like he needs her money. He’s got money, right?”

“Yeah, who knows,” Brian said. “Hey, so how’s Linda?”

“I’m sorry,” Conlon said.

“No, no.”

“Patrick, am I being an ass?” he asked. “You’re—Brian’s not used to all this, is he?”

Brian chuckled. “Mike, don’t worry about it.”

“Hey, who said you could call me Mike?”

Conlon now seemed close to falling asleep on his feet. The glass in his hand was sliding downward in tiny increments, and Patrick prepared himself for it to plummet and smash, knowing that no one, himself included, would try to stop this from happening.

“So,” Brian started to say, but then his brother was shouting his name. Across the room a couple of Brian’s friends stood near their semi-abandoned game of pool, chatting with a dark-haired, dimpled cocktail waitress. Patrick saw that Michael was back there also, grinning and nodding as he listened to Brian’s father, who was half-telling, half-acting a story that seemed to involve ogres or bears.

“I better go over there,” Brian said.

“I’ll go too,” Conlon said, brightening suddenly. “Tell me your dad’s name again.”

As Patrick followed them, carrying Michael’s full beer, he saw that his own glass was close to empty, that he’d been drinking faster than he thought. But he felt fine. He felt good. His pace across the bar floor, weaving between chairs and pillars and people, was frictionless but controlled so that though just ahead of him Conlon kept stopping, they didn’t collide. He didn’t mind how

drunk Conlon was. Really, he kind of liked it. To ask again about Conlon's father, that strange ancestor, not family but not completely unconnected to Patrick, would be tactless. But he wanted to know more. He felt he could map their lives, as in the front flap of a book of myths, could set all the complexities of marriage and parentage in a forked geometric diagram, if he knew enough.

"Remember that, Brian?" Brian's father called.

Brian was standing awkwardly with the cocktail waitress while his brother took his picture.

"He doesn't hear me," his father said.

"This is yours," Patrick said, handing Michael his beer.

Michael held out his hand for the glass. "Don, have you met my dad?" he asked.

Having put the two fathers in conversation, Michael separated himself by a few steps, pulled out his phone, and tapped the screen.

"Jesus mother fuck," he said, and then glanced at Brian's father to make sure he hadn't heard. "Look at this." He showed Patrick the phone. "Can you read that?"

Patrick read the screen, a sprawling, rancorous text message riddled with typos. "Is she okay?" he asked.

"She's fine, she's just sitting home boozing while the baby's in bed, getting all worked up for no fucking reason. Sorry." Michael took the phone back, closed the message. "This isn't your problem."

"That's annoying," Patrick said.

"Story of my life." Michael set his beer on the edge of the pool table and began to rearrange his pockets, taking out his cigarettes, putting away his phone. "So what's been going on over there?" he asked. "Is he about to pass out?"

"Nah, he's okay."

Michael turned his head and for a long moment looked at his father, though his hands kept moving, knocking then twisting a cigarette from his flattened soft pack. Conlon was nodding along to what Brian's father was telling him, squinting and listing slightly forward, as if his upper body had become too heavy. But then

Conlon said something, and both men laughed. They were fine. Michael put the cigarette behind his ear.

“You can have that beer,” he said.

As Michael walked away, Meg’s language expanded in his head, competing with his almost perfect certainty that he’d done nothing wrong. The tamest bachelor party in kingdom come and she—ha, kingdom come, his mother’s old phrase. The filthiest jeans in kingdom come, or the longest radio song, when mornings on the way to elementary school he’d made her listen to the hip-hop station. He’d write that to Meg—tamest bachelor—but no, he wouldn’t write back at all. It was better not to give attention.

It was full night out, and along the sidewalk ropes had been put up around some of the doors, penning the waiting crowds, the long-legged women, younger than the ones from earlier in the night, and more made up. Michael leaned against the pool hall’s windows. He felt himself being seen as he lit his cigarette and took out his phone to seem occupied. He opened Meg’s message again and, hardly reading, smiled at it affectionately, pretending it contained a compliment, tender, understood only between two. He laughed a little as he scrolled, as a carefree young man should in the thronged summer streets of a large American city, two-thousand-ten. Tapped *reply*, pecked out the letters *I love you*, and sent.

The door swung open and Mike Katsaros emerged, holding it open for Brian’s blinking father.

“I think we’ve overdone it a little,” Katsaros said when he saw Michael. “You know where we could get something to eat?”

Brian’s father peered up at the sign above the pool hall. “This is where we just were,” he said.

“Flash Taco,” Michael said, gesturing toward the end of the street. “Kitty corner from the el.” In his pocket, his phone pulsed.

“Great,” Brian’s father said. “That’s great. That’s really good.”

“See you tomorrow,” Katsaros said. He curved his arm to pat Michael on the shoulder, but Michael took it as a hug and leaned over, holding his cigarette away, and for a second the two men stood

side-by-side as if posed for a photograph. By the time they untangled their arms Michael understood that Katsaros had not meant to hug him—they never did this—and he went a little lightheaded with embarrassment he didn't express.

"Okay," Katsaros said. Brian's father had started down the sidewalk. "I better—."

"Yep," Michael said, taking out his phone again.

He had a message, not from Meg but Patrick: *You outside?* Mild guilt, he'd left his father in there grinding the gears of his psyche, stalling in fifty-year-old memory. His sister was this way too, a bad sentimental drunk; he'd had to chase her around bars a few nights over the years before she quit altogether. *Yeah*, he sent Patrick. Not just sentimental, either. Angry sometimes. Once she'd cursed out a whole table of her friends, old friends—but stop. She was fine now, had found this Brian, who seemed like a good guy.

Through the door now came two men, strangers, mid-conversation, heading down the street the opposite direction from the el. They were a few years older than Michael and something about them suggested success. It was in the way they spoke to each other, collegial, comfortable, with the sense that they understood each other cleanly. As their broad shirtbacks were absorbed into the scene, Michael had an urge to follow them, to be towed somewhere he knew no one, but where he'd be received. His phone pulsed in his hand. Meg.

You're an asshole.

Now the door swung open on his father, newly animated, talking fluently, Patrick following.

"Just whack, whack, whack," his father said, "And I had to like—." He bent his knees slightly and covered his head with his arms. "Just shield myself till it finally quit."

The bouncer asked them to move from where they were, blocking the door.

"Sorry, sorry," his father said.

"How's everything going?" Michael asked.

“Good,” Patrick said, “we’re talking about the nuns.”

“You remember my Sister Joseph story,” Michael’s father said. “Holy Spirit, third grade. You remember me talking about Suzy Maugham.”

Michael gave Patrick a cigarette. “Probably,” he said. “Hey, where’s Linda? Where are you staying tonight?”

“Can I have one of those?”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, I used to smoke.” His father smiled at him dreamily.

“You don’t know me, do you? You think I’m just some old man.”

Michael laughed. “Not at all,” he said.

“You’ll see,” his father said. “It happens to everyone. Inside your head you feel about twenty-one.” He accepted the cigarette Michael held out for him and arranged it gingerly between two fingers. “And you know no one else sees that, and you don’t even see it in the mirror anymore, and I tell you what. It freaks you out.”

Michael flicked his lighter and his father leaned toward the long flame. He had trouble getting it lit at first, and then when he got a mouthful of smoke he let it all out immediately, without inhaling.

“When did you get married?” Patrick asked. “I mean how old were you?”

“Twenty-one,” he said. “Think about that. I was basically your age. When I was Michael’s age I had two kids.”

“Trippy,” Michael said, but not quite mockingly. His phone went off again.

“Hey, don’t do that,” his father said. “Be here. Talk to us.”

“Can’t,” Michael said, opening the message. Another long screen from Meg, this time a sort of apology. *It scares me that I said something like that to some I love more than life or even my own child.*

“It’s Meg,” Patrick said.

“Oh.” Michael’s father looked at his son with a brief, pained expression, then fell quiet, gazed out into the street.

“Same old bull shhhark,” Michael said, putting the phone away, smiling lightly. “She’s fine.”

“Your mother was the same way,” his father said, sipping at his cigarette like a straw. “Both your mother. You know what I’m talking about too, Patrick.”

“Bitches be crazy,” Michael said.

“No, I’m serious.” His father turned his head to see who was behind him. Only strangers, only the bouncer. “I wouldn’t say it to Brian,” he said, turning back, “but marriage isn’t—.” He shook his head. “It’s nothing like you think.”

“I know,” Michael said, not joking now. He felt a sudden gentleness toward his father, and let pass the impulse to say something else crass about marriage, his mother, Meg. He did know, he wanted to tell his father, he knew. It was nothing like you think.

“And the kids,” his father said, looking at them searchingly.

“Do you think,” Patrick began.

“It’ll hurt you is all I’m saying. You recover, you have to, but it will. What, Patrick?” he asked. “What were you saying?”

“I was just asking,” Patrick said. “I mean, I know the story, about how you and my mom split up and everything.”

Mike Conlon nodded his head solemnly. The cigarette burned in his loose hand, forgotten.

“And I just wondered. If there was any way you were actually my dad.”

Michael’s throat tightened, but he gave no outward sign of this. He watched his father, who lifted his lowered head and smiled sadly, but also with something opposite sadness. There was this good thing about the man. He could look straight on at a moment like this.

“Patrick, I would be honored,” he said. “To have you as my son—that would have been—I would be honored.”

Patrick listened, his expression unchanging.

“From what I know,” Conlon went on, “from what was going on at that time, I’m pretty sure your father is your father.”

“I mean, I guess I knew that,” Patrick said. “But just cause of everything that happened, I just wondered.”

“I used to think about it,” Conlon said. “I used to wonder, but I guess I knew—.”

“No, I know.”

For a moment, all three were quiet, and stood banked against the wall, out of the stream of passing strangers. An urge came over Michael to put his arm around his brother, who looked shyly at the ground, who turned his cigarette to see that it was still burning, flicked at the filter end, smiled a little, raised it to his lips. He could have. Could have embraced his brother, slid out on the drunken unfurling of feeling, but if he did this strangeness still would follow, and *it* was what was really happening—how could he say—it was their strangeness to each other—all of them—his father sleeping with eyes open behind his glasses, crying laughing with them dry—his father smoking delicately, squinting, the cigarette perfectly centered in the o of his lips. Without deciding to, Michael put a hand on both their shoulders.

“Let’s go in,” he said. “I’m going to buy us all a drink.”

Nods and eyes raised, then dropped again.

“Us three,” he added.

He came in upset, Michael’s stepmother told him later. Slurring badly, saying he’d been in a fight. But with the lights on she saw that he was unharmed, his shirt untucked but clean. A young guy, half his age, he’d said, and he’d won, he’d kicked his ass. Had anything happened, Linda asked. Not that he knew of, Michael said. They’d put him in a cab around one, definitely drunk but not at all angry. He was so angry, Linda said. He kept talking about beating someone up, and she kept asking him, who, who? And then he—Michael, he started crying. She’d never seen him like that in her life, he was crying so hard, and he wouldn’t say why. Finally she just put him to bed.

Michael didn’t know. They’d had one last drink, Patrick’s choice, Irish whiskey, and then went back to swim among the tables with the laughing brothers and friends and strangers. Mike Conlon was given the camera to take a picture of Brian with his brother

and Patrick and Michael, four in a row, glasses raised. He should be getting back, he said after that. They took him outside, and Michael hailed the cab himself and told and retold the cabbie the hotel cross streets. He'd made sure his father had enough to pay.

Soon after that the rest of the party got hungry and shoved off for the fog-lights of Flash Taco. But Michael and Patrick stayed out shooting pool and were kings of the table for some time before they were back on the blue-lit sidewalk smoking, then back in Michael's dark apartment, trying not to wake the baby. They'd made it home some way, though that last hour was gone from his memory. But everyone had made it home. **f**

AMANDA FULLER

A PRAYER THAT WILL BE ANSWERED

Grant me the constant dying of this life.

Grant me the opaque bridges
connecting the days which remain.

Grant me the immense smallness
in words
(when our shared home is breath).

Grant me the vastness of this microscopic life
eroded by timecards, laundromats, hospital lines,
by the debased magnificence of the unique in everything.

The earth tears us away from ourselves—
and it is to this amorphous stillness,
silence, that I bind
my missing, my language,
motherless and heavy or vibrant or broken.

Grant me thorns.

JUNE MELBY

THE MOON

Something had happened to the moon. It had slipped from its contented orbit, and like a lonely child who slides across the car seat towards his mother late at night, the moon was inching closer to earth. “Sure looks big tonight,” we said on Monday evening, and then again on Tuesday. “The moon is demonstrating an unusual sight,” said the local weatherman, posed in front of a classroom of schoolchildren camped out on their playground in order to better enjoy the phenomenon. “The moon hovers at an unprecedented height above the earth tonight,” said the NBC news anchor one week later, right before a story about a carcinogenic chemical now found in breast milk. “While providing quite a sight to behold—and just look at these submitted photos—unless the moon returns to its orbit, scientists report that we may soon be seeing devastating tides and flooding beginning as early as next Friday.”

We stood together on the porch. The moon was as large as the roof of our new house and appeared not part of the sky, but instead, part of our backyard, as if the previous owner had mounted it in the corner the way someone might install a fountain or an elaborately carved bird house. Blue. White. With my eyes I traced the rims of the visible craters like you might do with your fingers around the edges of a wineglass. I wondered where it was that the astronauts had landed, and how many days would pass before we would glimpse the flag they had left there. Sea of tranquility, I remember they called it. And it was coming to us. All we had to do was wait. And wait we did. Sleeping less and less as the light at night became nearly as bright as that of the day.

CONTRIBUTORS

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