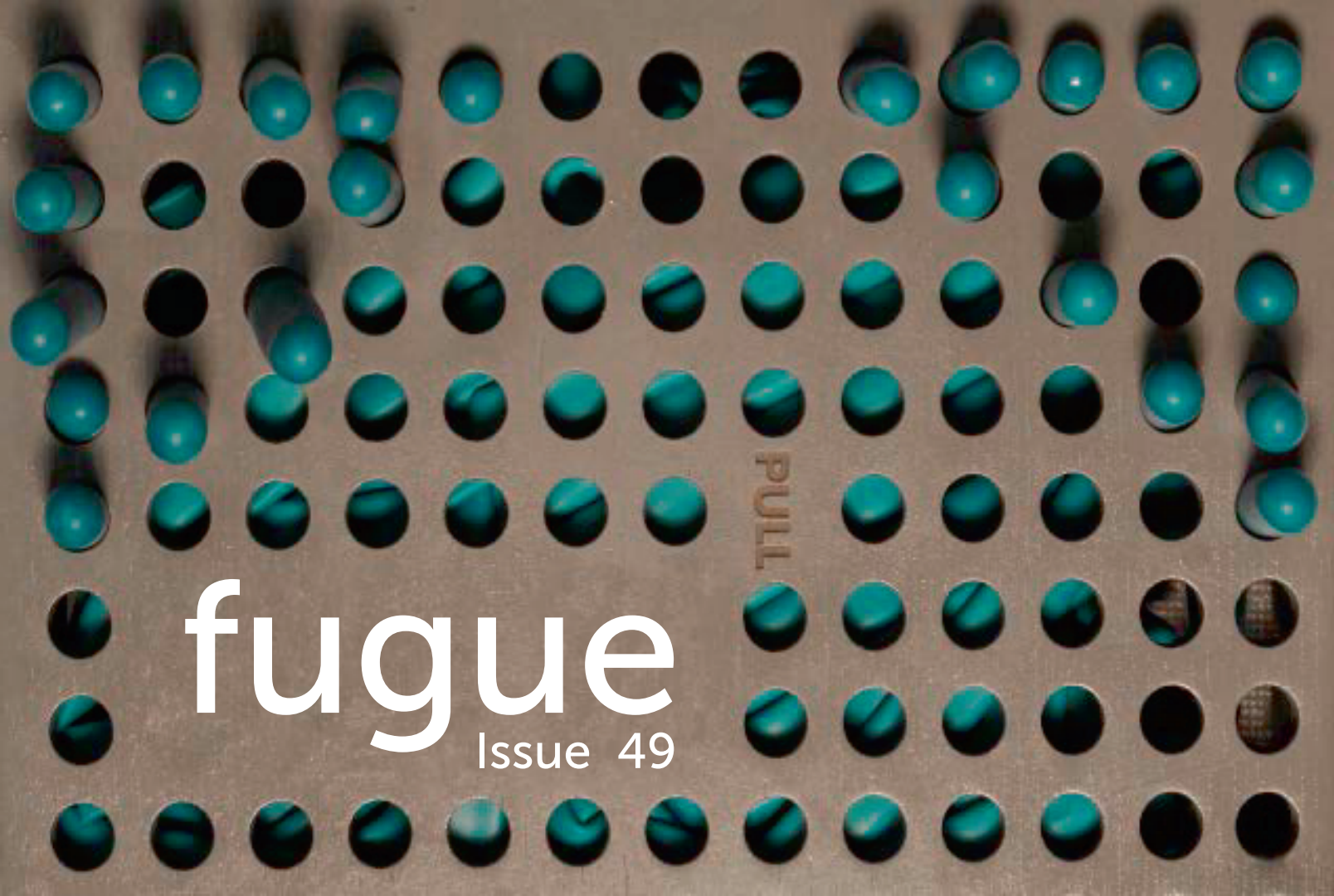

fugue

Issue 49

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

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CONTENTS

RON MCFARLAND PRIZE FOR POETRY

FUGUE PROSE PRIZE

POETRY

NONFICTION

FICTION

INTERVIEW

14TH ANNUAL RON MCFARLAND PRIZE FOR POETRY

JUDGED BY KEVIN PRUFER

Winner: "Fear Not, Mary" by KC Trommer

I admire this poem first for the ambitious way it brings three vastly different narratives into play—the enormity of the Annunciation, the facts of tragedy encountered in the news, and a small, but frightening, moment in an individual's life. These three kinds of narrative orbit each other, each understood with greater clarity in the others' shadows. In so doing, the poem meditates on human sadness and fear in the presence of forces larger than ourselves, ending in a small, moving observation the reverberates through the poem: "as if we are not always at the mercy // of something, his breaths keep going, / the breathing soft, steady, and on." Beyond its deft control of tone and register—beyond its thoughtfulness and clear intelligence—this poem has also been listened to with clarity and a sense for the nuances, music, and velocity of poetic language.

—Kevin Prufer

KC Trommer

FEAR NOT, MARY

We were talking about the Annunciation
in her office—the moment when Mary looks up

from her reading to find Gabriel and the whole story
alive in front of her—when we heard them down the street,

bleating through megaphones about the Shirtwaist girls trapped
in the Asch Building who called out, who jumped,

who burned. This was after eight died in Midwood,
days before the office filled with the smoke

from 2nd and 7th, just after we heard about the black box,
and the deliberate sounds of the co-pilot clicking 150 people down

to death, the morning after I woke at 5, to the smell of gas
in the kitchen, snapped the knob to OFF, turned on

the fan and opened wide all the windows. I found him still,
asleep, his small breath going along as if there were

no emergency, as if he could keep going, as if fires never
ate whole buildings, as if danger were not always

pushing up against you, as if you could not be trapped, like those girls
on Washington and Greene, like those children in Midwood,

like the newlyweds on Germanwings Flight 9525,
like Mary in the story, as if we are not always at the mercy

of something, his breaths keep going,
the breathing soft, steady, and on.

Liz Robbins

SECURITY GUARD AT THE GARDNER HEIST

The pictures still flash as then,
as when I was on my knees, hands
bound, eyes and mouth taped shut.
Vermeer's red lake paint enlivening
three who play and sing in a concert
scene. Jesus, in a boat with his men,
taming a storm on the Sea of Galilee.
I was so long in the basement, I could
hear a fly buzz. Where was toughness?
Grit? I was lucky I had never had to
develop it. Days off, I thrilled, firing
guns on a closed range. In my head,
an old folk song ran, *the answer is blowin'*
in the wind, to the backdrop of how gently
we eased the thieves in. Seems now
we're a trio, three islands: the thieves,
the paintings, and me. The paintings
too hot to hold, to save, those men
and I forever swimming toward them
or away, struggling not to sink. The real
hell of life, wrote Jean Renoir, is everyone
has his reasons. And we're left to follow
other people's strings, ones tied to our
own fears, lessons coming repackaged
with a wink. Double-checking locks.
I never used to. My head already on
to the next wide open plain. But what's
precious is never out there, but in here.

Liz Robbins

HIS BOMB RESPONDS TO TED KACZYNSKI

If I am a pocket of metal scrap
and wire, of silence and black holes,
you are the pointed thing clipped
inside, scribbling notes of crows
and nails. I am your public heart
in disguise, your chaotic beard.
Here, in the Montana woods,
we sleep homeless in a cabin made
of dead trees, cornered by the living.
Sunlight cracks through walls, tiny
mouths. We exist outside blueprints,
below and beyond the visible night
sky. But my life has an arc, here
where you keep handling my
innermost parts, the hard spine of
your sense moving us back and
toward your utmost want: to be left
unfeeling in salt, soil, and lime.
If I am not a siren, not a black-
eyed muse, then I am your child,
I am the thin-skinned pride you
use, and you will have us now
blow softly apart.

Jeff Walt

THAT DOUCHEBAG NORMA JEAN NEXT TO ME AT THE CRESCENT

asked for Gucci pumps
because I look like Santa Claus—
even jerked my grizzled beard.
She's the neighborhood patriot,
American flag bent in sway
on the back of her electric chair.

The bar's tang of urinal cakes and bleach.
Rounds of Fleas Navidog jokes.
She puffs cigarette smoke from her nose.
Says her stint in rehab was tough.
Tells Dig and Tom her parents gave up.

Her ballet never recovered
from the drunken pliat a decade ago. Bum leg
and Disability only covers fifty percent.
Slams Obamacare. Declares me St. Nick
and my elves *must* luxury clean
her plastic rainbow angel wings
the way they do cars at Tina's Whistle Wash.

She begs for new dentures
so she can chew peanut brittle again.
Demands her Stan back by Christmas Eve.
The bartender rings his chow bell
and passes out the pub favorite: take-out sides
of green salsa from El Zarape
across the street, which people donate
and she kicks back with a wink,
wipes her mouth, smudges the mascara beauty-mark
above her lip. And—FYI—she's still just blocks away
at Welcome Inn #416 if I want to have sex.

Costs a lot to live—
shouts at us—tweaks that tangled purple
Dollar Store up-do, presses a worn smiley face
button on her Tornado chair,
backs up, fast as a wish, out the door,
parts the dark pedestrian rush,
Jewish star blinking,
garbage bag full of crushed cans swing,
clink, clang,
headset dangles around her neck,
empties spill derelict into the street.

14TH ANNUAL FUGUE PROSE CONTEST

JUDGED BY DAGOBERTO GILB

WINNER: "DAYS IN THE COILLTE" BY KARA WHELAN

"Days in the Coillte" is a story as subtle as any beautiful day, as any day in the life of that quiet man we barely notice until we stop moving and listen, and see, what came before, what can happen still.

—Dagoberto Gilb

Kara Whelan

DAYS IN THE COILLTE

You wake to the news surging through the clock radio, breaking the morning open wide. There is a moment of bewilderment as you reorient to your surroundings, the splintered dreams of night vanishing before you have the chance to collect them.

You listen as the newsman broadcasts the cheerless headlines with an ease that sounds to you like cheerfulness and you remember it is your birthday. You are forty.

You can't hear the rain but you imagine it's falling as it often does this time of year, steadily, without urgency, concealing the blue of the skies for weeks at a time. You turn off the radio and catch the throaty cooing of the pigeons that nest in the shed nearby that has been left to wither, its contents untouched, and you wonder why they haven't flown away for the winter.

Smoke drifts up from the kitchen. Your mother is making a fry despite the fact that you will be going to your brother's for dinner. There are rashers and sausages and eggs and tomato and mushrooms and marmalade for the bread and two cups of tea as there is every Sunday. Your mother is dressed in her Mass clothes even though no one dresses for Mass anymore, an apron strung over the top to keep them neat. You sit down with her. It has been just the two of you for years. Your father disappeared long ago and your younger brother, Brian married, moving to Dublin with his family.

"Will you have another egg?" your mother asks.

"No, thanks, ma."

But she is already at the cooker, the hiss of the gas and click of the starter filling the space before the blue flame appears.

She brings over a package wrapped in brown paper and green ribbon, a new jumper.

"Thanks, ma."

"Why don't you put it on for Mass? There's a good lad."

The deep, familiar scent of the wool surrounds you as you slip it over your head.

*

After Mass, you make the drive from Summerhill in the rusted out Toyota that stands out in Donnybrook. When you arrive, Brian, and his wife, Maura, welcome you. There is a moment as you enter their home that the pang of unanimity lashes at your guts. But you keep moving across the threshold and the feeling subsides.

You bring sweets for your nephews. Wine gums. You sneak it to them so their mother will not be upset with you for ruining their dinner or destroying their braces.

A crab soufflé and crackers have been set out in the sitting room marking the day as an occasion and you're grateful for the kindness. The crackers are large and thin with bits of herbs baked into them. You take one and try to scoop some of the crab but it is too big for the dainty dish so you break it into smaller pieces. Crumbs fall into your lap and onto the dense, pile carpet. You try to pick them up with your thick fingers but you only make a bigger mess. You pass the dish to your mother but she holds up her hand in refusal saying she has never gone in for shellfish.

"Will I bring out some cheese then?" Maura asks.

"I don't want to be a bother," your mother says.

"No bother at all," Maura replies.

A branch from the maple tree outside the window taps the glass as a jackdaw alights on the bare limb, its head twitching at all angles as it surveys its surroundings. And it strikes you, as you look upon this ordinary bird, perched there in the barren tree, whose rain soaked feathers glisten like black silk, that you have never noticed its beauty before. Just as you are about to point out the bird to your mother, it is off and away, startled by Brian who enters from the kitchen with the drinks and Maura who follows with a plate of cheese.

Glasses are passed and Brian raises his in front of him in a toast.

"May the next forty years bring you every happiness," he says and you wonder if he's only having a laugh. But his face does not betray humor so you raise your glass in return. He continues, "And may you always take matters into your own hands when the occasion calls for it." You smile recalling the times he went to the newsagents after school and bought chocolate bars for the two of you with the money he had liberated from your mother's pocketbook. "She'd no intention of buying them herself so I had to take matters into my own hands," he said every time.

You appreciate the toast, the sincerity and the solidarity of it. You'd like to say so but you don't. Instead, you turn to Maura and ask how she's getting on at work.

"I'm just after receiving a promotion," she says.

"Well done," you say tipping your glass to her.

"A promotion is it?" your mother asks. She looks from Maura to Brian before saying, "What will you do about the children?"

"We won't be giving them up for adoption if that's what you mean," Brian says.

"Don't be smart," she replies. "Who will look after them?"

"It's a promotion, ma, not a divorce. They'll be looked after the same as always."

"I see," your mother says. But it's clear that she doesn't.

"Well, I suppose we should eat," Maura says.

Bits of cracker drift to the floor when you stand.

*

The table is laid out with china and silver and crystal. The two boys are called in from the den where they have been playing video games. They sit halfway in their chairs, anxious to be finished and off again. There is hardly talk of the weather before Brian says to you, "You'll never guess who I ran into the other day. Tommy Farrell."

An instant flashes as Tommy's name hangs in the space between you, before it ransacks you from within, a moment when there is no deciphering the floor from the table. You keep your eyes fixed on your plate as you load more food onto your fork and push it into your

mouth. "Is that so?" you say.

"Yeah. I knew it was him straight away. He said to tell you hello."

"Oh. Aye," you say, reaching for your water.

"Who's that?" Maura asks.

"We grew up with him. He was Brendan's best mate," Brian says.

"That was ages ago," you say.

"More's the better for it," your mother says.

"Well, he gave me his phone number anyway. I thought you might want to ring him," Brian says to you.

"Why would he want to go and do a thing like that?" your mother asks.

"Ach, you're not still on about that, are ya?" Brian asks her.

"About what?" Maura asks.

"Nothing," you say.

"It's not nothing," Brian says, "But it's not as bad as all that. Let's just say he prefers the fellas to the ladies."

"Sure, where's the harm? Doesn't everyone deserve a bit of happiness, a bit of company?" Maura says with a softness that feels like it's directed toward you.

"Please," your mother says dropping her cutlery against her plate. "It's an ugly business altogether and I'll not have you speaking of it at the dinner table."

Forks and knives scrape across plates in the silence that follows. Maura asks you about Summerhill, about the pub. You tell her about the new hand dryers that are being installed in the bathrooms, that the owners have finally decided to make some improvements. Your mother steers the conversation to your brother, asking after his work, inquiring about the places he will be traveling to in the weeks to come.

After dinner, you are offered vanilla ice cream with raspberry sauce. Your mother says the appetite has gone off her so you eat her portion as well. The kids return to their video games and you join them. Brian follows and asks, "Will we go for a pint?"

"I have to drive," you say.

"Ah sure, it's only a pint," he says.

"I should be getting ma home all the same."

"Then I'll come out your way next Saturday, will I? We'll muck out that shed and go for a pint afterwards."

"Grand," you say. It's been an age that you've talked about cleaning out the shed, going through the tools that belonged to your father that have mostly gone to rust.

"You wouldn't want to forget this," Brian says as you stand up, his arm extended toward you, a square of paper fanned between his fingers. You see the numbers on it from the corner of your eye and you know they belong to Tommy. You turn your head so the paper is well out of sight and thump your nephews on the back. "Right, lads. Be good."

"Where's the fun in that?" the younger one says sounding like his father.

"We will," the older one says sounding like you.

*

The drive home is quiet. A mist settles on your windscreen. Your wipers spread a thin coat of dirt from one side to the other. The lights from the oncoming cars make it hard to see the road ahead and you're glad when you can turn off the motorway to the familiar lanes that take you home. You pass the golf course and think of the striped greens that captivated you on a shimmering August afternoon over twenty years ago.

You went with Tommy, his guest at the party for the crew who had built the course over the previous year. You drove the grounds on a maintenance cart, though you weren't supposed to, cans of lager lined up along the back. You got out every now and then to throw balls into the water or hit the trees from a distance, but never to golf. You got pissed and you felt the sun on your face. You and Tommy laughed until lager burst from your noses. Your mother asks what is so funny and your attention tumbles back to the car, to the road ahead. You clear your throat and tell her it's only a joke you heard at the pub.

At home, you go upstairs to the loft that's your bedroom. You steady yourself at the top, the cool stone of the wall rough and uneven beneath your hand. Your mother calls up but her words float just below you and you can't make out what she says so you call back, "Goodnight."

You lie down, back flat against the sheets and look up at the ceiling. The knots of the pine boards create shapes you never noticed before and it's not long before you let your mind wander to the stretch of pines that lined the fifth hole of the golf course, the sun fanning out between the branches, marbling Tommy's shirt and trousers as he lay, stretched out over the fallen needles. The moment is so vivid you feel like you could reach out and touch him. But you don't. Instead, you force yourself to think of Patsy Calhoun, how she left for Dublin and you said you'd follow her but you never did.

It was Tommy who'd left, going to Dublin for college. Then he was caught with another boy, expelled and all hope of him ever returning vanished. His parents took the brunt of the fall in Summerhill until the gossip finally ran its course.

"The disgrace of it," your mother said. "The filth."

"I'm not surprised," your father said, creasing the newspaper at the sports page, around the upcoming races, the last thing you remember him saying before he disappeared a few weeks later.

When you were alone, Brian asked, "Will we ring Tommy then to see how he's getting on?"

"No," you said.

"But he's your mate, surely you'll…"

"No," you said and that was the end of it.

*

The night stretches out until the newsman's voice announces the arrival of morning once again. You ready yourself for the day. You feel the need to walk the distance to the pub. The air is frigid and the lanes are empty. The sun blooms through the clouds, its rays pinned to their sides, reaching across the landscape, stretching toward the ground, the light soft and wondrous. But you keep yourself wrapped

in your coat, eyes cast down and you don't notice. Nor do you see the lone mare that meanders outside the fenced field, the way it breathes in the air, nose pointed upward, as if it carries on it the scent of sovereignty.

You feel like a ghost in your own skin with nothing to anchor you and you carelessly wander through old memories, days spent roaming the Coillte with Tommy, safe within its walls, the pervasive scent of dead and decaying leaves and the wood of fallen trees, reassurances that allowed you a freedom you did not otherwise have. Love's interpretation reverberated in the breeze that pushed through the spruce trees hovering above you, as you lay down together. But it stayed there, aloft, as you dared not utter the words yourself. Even in the custody of the forest, you knew what you did was wrong.

*

Brian arrives on Saturday, the wind wrapping around the door as he enters. Your mother lays out the cups for tea. She's baked a fresh loaf of bread and it reminds you of when you were young, the three of you in the kitchen like this.

"That wind'll strip the green right off the grass so it will," Brian says. "We'll have our work cut out for us today."

Outside, tree branches buckle under the burden of the wind and the clouds shift across the sky, their full, white curves brilliant against the blue that rests in between.

"At least there won't be any rain," you say as you finish your tea and put on your boots.

Long grass covers the path that leads to the shed. The south wall slopes, leaving the wood exposed at the roofline. An old bicycle tire leans against the wall, deflated and weathered. How many years had it been there, passed by every day, unnoticed? The door groans on its hinges unwilling and stiff. Dust motes drift in the rays that spread out through the window. It takes a moment for your eyes to adjust.

Brian makes his way to the cluttered bench picking up the tools that have been stacked and left. "Three hammers? What'd he need with three hammers?" he asks. "And why didn't he bother to take any of them with him?"

"Toss any of the good ones in the wheelbarrow. We'll bring them down to Hanley's later and see if we can't get something for them."

"But he didn't even take one," he continues. "What was the rush?"

"I guess we'll never know."

"Fucken bastard."

It's strange, this being said out loud. There is something unnatural about it, unsettling. There'd been only one time you had spoken of it before, shortly after your father had vanished. "I think it was your one from the bookies that he's run off with," Brian said. You said nothing in return, unable to approach the subject, its fractious contents too slippery to grasp, too precarious to touch on. Neither of you said anything about it again. The mention of it now opens a door inside you that's been shut for years and you're brought back to the day he left, when you knew he'd be gone for good; an image of you sitting at the kitchen table, unable to eat, sick with the thought that he'd left because he knew something about you that you hardly knew yourself, that he saw in you the demons that would one day bring shame on the family.

"And she wasn't much better," Brian says making a motion toward the house.

"She did the best she could," you say.

"If you say so," Brian says. He stops working and leans against the bench, arms crossed. His head turns toward the window and you wonder what he's looking at. You pull a saw from the corner and the handle falls away from the tattered teeth and you toss it into the rubbish pile.

"Sure, I guess we all have our own way of doing things," he says. He's away from the bench now standing next to you, but only for a moment before he steps into the bent sunlight that pours through the open door, his shadow falling backward, toward you. "Who are we to say after all?" he says as if to the wind. He turns to look at you for a moment, "Right then. We'll go for that pint, will we?" and then he's gone.

You hear the start of the car as you push yourself toward the patch of sun, slowly, and stand there, alone, with the small piece paper Brian has placed in your hand, hardly a whisper upon your palm. You close your fingers around it, tightening your grip until your hand becomes a fist, your knuckles white with the strain. You look at the house. Your mother is there in the window, frail behind the glass, hidden in shadow, her image an imprint of the woman she once was.

The clouds file across the sky driven by the wind. They shroud the sun momentarily, pitching the vibrant landscape into obscurity and darkness. But, then, the sun is revealed again, thrusting forth a light so bright and so clear, illuminating the land with an astonishing clarity. You look toward Brian and cross over the path to the car, as the clouds slip past the sun once again. f

Ah-reum Han

RIVER HOME

I almost miss my taxi, and it's because I'm fluffing my hair. I'm not usually one for primping, but on my way out I double-checked my purse for everything I'd need: Chapstick, mirror, wallet, ticket, passport. Passport. I make the mistake of lingering over my nineteen-year-old face: thin lips, sharp jaw, rolls of thick, shiny hair. The picture isn't so old, but I recognize myself in the vague sense of a distant relative, the way blood recognizes blood. I panic.

I have to fix my hair. Even though my suitcase stands packed by the door, I stand by the mirror, ruffling and scrunching and spraying, trying to replicate that passport picture. People back home used to say we could be sisters, my mom and me. Maybe even oceans apart, we'd developed a web of similar lines and folds. I attack the thinning patches with a comb and a blow dryer. My hair rises in a wild tangle, fuller but somehow still frail.

The phone rings and it's the cab company again. I answer it on speaker, making fantastic excuses.

"Ten minutes, please!" I shout over the blow dryer, forearms deep in a bramble of hair. I peer down into the street from my window and see an elbow hooked over the driver's side window. "I'm here, I'm here. I can see you. I'll be right down," I promise. The driver's too professional to curse, but he's getting impatient.

As I mess with my hair, I'm horrified to find myself losing more strands. I pluck them from my shirt, my shoulders, and stick them back with mousse, gel, spray, anything. Hair, that's just another thing I've lost to the bonafide American education that was supposed to change our lives. In my mind, each strand weighs heavy as marble next to all the other things I've lost along the way: my complexion, my mother's precious savings, twelve borrowed years. The things I

have won: two diplomas in clearance frames, thirty extra pounds, and a phone call that summons me home too late to be received in my mother's arms.

The driver calls again, and he growls, "Miss? I can't sit here all day. You can call us later at your convenience." I see him start to pull away so I just grab a hat, lean out the window and wave both arms in the air.

"Please!" I yell. "Wait!" I see brake lights. Clattering downstairs, bags in tow, I don't bother to lock the door. I tumble into the vehicle.

He says one word when I shut the door: "Where?"

I tell him the airport. On the way, he glances into the rearview mirror, and I know he sees my swollen eyes, my crazy hair. The hat hasn't helped. I lean my head against the window and watch the runners on campus. The rest of Englewood is turning purple with evening. We sit in silence for a while, the radio barely audible.

"Where are you headed?" he asks at a stoplight.

"Home," I say, my mind already on Seoul.

I close my eyes and unbutton my jeans as the plane launches itself into the air. They are new and too tight when I sit, and again I am conscious of how much I've changed. Outside, we are above the clouds. Inside, it smells like wrapping paper. This is it, I think to myself, I'm finally doing what I was meant to do all along, what all the student visas and temporary driver's licenses and on-campus work studies had made me promise again and again: to leave America.

Now, seated beside this thin brunette, who has already reclined her seat all the way and tucked some blue foam buds into her ear, I feel nauseous the way I did when I flew here all those years ago. And then I feel relieved, I don't know why.

Just a few minutes earlier I had frozen in the middle of the aisles, stunned by the familiar dread. I almost turned around right then, pushed through the line of grumbling passengers and marched right off the plane, onto the ramp, and back to the safety of the anonymous gating area. It wasn't the plane. That's something all the conferences across this country had cured me of, all quasi-important affairs that I

reported to my mother in a Korean that started to falter, making our conversations shorter from year to year.

"What are you eating?" she'd ask.

I'd tell her rice and *banchan*, biting into a cold pizza. "And how are you?"

"I'm doing well," would be her reply. "You too?"

"Yes, *umma*, I am fine."

"How are your studies?"

"Fine."

"And you're healthy?"

"Yes, very."

"You're not lying to me are you?"

"No, mother, I would never."

"As long as you're healthy and happy. A mother can't ask for more."

She never told me that she remarried, but in the end, the phone call had come from him. A thick southeastern dialect, a husky voice, though whether it was from emotion or not, I didn't know. I only responded in my clipped Korean, too confused to cry. He insisted on buying the ticket and picking me up at the airport. It's what she would have wanted, he said. It must have been nice to have known what my mother wanted so well.

The fastest I could leave was in three days, in time for the cremation. In the days leading up to my departure, I cried. And of course when I did, it was impossible to stop. I cried until my sides ached and I fell asleep from exhaustion, waking up still, voiceless and alone. The grief alternated with the anger, and they washed over me sometimes gently, and other times with a force that took the air so completely out of me that I wondered if I would ever speak again. I listened to the man—my mother's husband—speak of my mother's last wishes and excused myself to the appropriate people at the university, cancelled classes, and bought a new suitcase, which led me here, doing the very thing I knew my mother would certainly hate, leaving so abruptly in the middle of the semester.

I admit, I have never been the motivated one. Even after I arrived in America, I'd been unable to shake the inertia, slipping from one year to the next, from one degree to the next—a bachelor's to a master's and now a PhD, accumulating like dishes in the sink, simply the vestiges of time. Sometimes I believed this life of education was a distraction, a spiritual limbo, a way of buying time until I could decide why I was. I'd always assumed the future was a place I could stumble into if I just stuck around long enough. In the end, I suppose all these years of education had only perpetuated the childhood I never could escape. What I left behind, who I left behind, remained in this uncertainty, even this boredom.

But what I lacked in ambition, my mother made up for with a fevered determination. What would she have thought of my life here? If she knew of my American lovers, my teaching, my sloppy apartment, papers, textbooks, laundry spread throughout. My mother hadn't graduated high school, but from the time I started elementary school in Seoul she'd emptied herself into my education, hiring personal tutors, then later, sending me to the best English language *hakwons* in Seoul, waking me early each school morning and buying me a brand new lamp to study with late into the night. "It's better for your eyes," she'd say, squinting proudly at my neat English sentences.

By the time I left for America, my mother still maintained her beauty with the kind of careless ease that only comes with age, and she never dyed her hair even when it started turning grey in her early twenties. She was a woman you couldn't ignore though she was barely five feet tall. A hard worker, my mother, with the most beautiful feet. Every night after work, she would come home and soak her feet in a bucket of hot water and black stones from the river. She'd press her feet against them after a long night's work, nursing them until the water became cool and her soles, white and soft. This was what I knew of my mother's life, not the strange man on the other end of the phone.

My mother had never dated, and perhaps that was why I only dabbled briefly in online dating, turning down compatible matches

one after the next—too fat, had kids, hated books—none ever quite good enough. I suspected my mother had refused men on the same grounds, especially at the restaurant. But this man with his provincial accent, his overbearing kindness, his submissive tone, this was not who I imagined my mother would have wanted. No, it must be a mistake. Before he even hung up—telling me to take care, to pack something warm, that he was excited to meet me—I hated him, and I knew I'd hate him when I arrived.

The plane begins its descent, and I gasp awake with the feeling of wetness in my chest and throat. The girl beside me still has her ears plugged, but her eyes are now open, her seat upright, and she leans slightly to peer out the window, where we see the craggy cityscape below. The sky is grey with the promise of sunrise.

They call our home the Land of the Morning Calm because at dawn our mountains wake dressed in dewy-virgin mist and all you can smell are wet pine cones. Then the sun charges in with his exhaust fumes, commuters, and halogen lights and strips her.

My mother moved to Seoul before I was born, a new widow in need of a new story. First day in the big city, she found a job bussing tables at a *samgyupsal* joint, and with her first paycheck, she took the bus to Yeoinaru Park and dipped her swollen ankles in the Han River. She named me after that river. It flows through the belly of the metropolis, its waters stretching all the way north, unhindered, beyond the demilitarized zone.

Back when my mom was in grade school and the city still bore the scars of the war, the Han River was rank with chemical waste, human refuse, and dead bodies. On my tenth birthday, she took me by the hand to the Mapo Bridge, and pointed out the exact spot from which her brother had flung his sixteen-year-old body.

"Here," she said, "is where he decided."

The cold November air had pinched my cheeks red, and I kept one gloved hand in my pocket, just wanting to go home where it was warm and dry. "Han Ga-ram, are you listening?" she said. "It was hard

to be in those days." And she let my hand go to toss something into the river. Even in her calls to America, my mom never let me forget myself. She always called me by my full name, my real name: "Han Ga-ram," Han River, a name none of my American friends could pronounce, though they tried.

It became a thing, us going to the river: Sunday afternoons, Wednesday nights, any time my mother could get a day off. And I liked her best then, when she would take off her shoes. Sometimes on the grass under the bridge, sometimes on the mossy concrete by the water, she told me things she never would in the house. "Hans come from the same ancestor," she whispered once. "We share the blood of queens and scholars."

On the banks of that river, she taught me to long for the faces I don't remember having forgotten. She kept them alive through stories of the uncles and great aunts and sisters and cousins and sons across the barbed wire.

"*Dae Han Min Guk*, that's what we Koreans call our country," she said. "*One nation, one people*. This new generation, it's not the same. Can blood be split in two after forty, fifty years?" Even at night, when all I could see was the reflection of apartment lights on the water, I felt her gaze following the river's entire length, north.

It was a small miracle when she won the government's reunion lottery. I was nineteen, right before she sent me off to America. There were rumors of peace, and on TV I saw families bowing, weeping, and holding each other for the first time since the War. She wasn't on TV, but my mom was there. She left that morning clutching gifts—clothes, food, pink foxgloves—and returned the next day cradling the flabby blossoms against her chest. Even as I was packing for my life overseas, the dried blossoms sat by the candles she lit every night for her lost family.

The plane skids on the runway, and we bounce a little before the roar of the plane's wheels settles into a steady hum. We taxi for a while and I unbuckle my seatbelt and button up my jeans. I pull out a handheld mirror and dab concealer under my eyes, tuck stray hair

back into my hat. I do not want to be welcomed by this man, this stranger.

Thinking of the stacks of ungraded student essays in my tiny LA apartment, the classes I will have to make up, the life of deadlines and essays that all seem to have amounted to this moment, I can't help but feel this a false return.

What good is it now? I want to ask. What am I supposed to do? I still have so many questions. All this time, she never visited, never asked me to come home. I want to ask her why. Was it too expensive? Were you too busy? Did you miss me? When I arrive, I will hold her once more and then return her to the waters she loved so dearly. I imagine myself on the banks of the Han River, twelve years, three thousand miles, and half-a-head-of-hair later, and I'm terrified that I never knew loneliness after all.

The man holding the sign with my name is younger than I expected, maybe early-forties, and the puffy windbreaker does little to hide his thin figure. He's wearing a blue cap, and the white cardstock sign he holds with both hands has my name written in large Korean letters, then underneath, in English. In the corner is an old picture of me in my middle school uniform, as if to remind me who I was. Then again, I wonder if my mother had no recent pictures of me.

He locks eyes with me as soon as I leave the departure area and he waves, though with some surprise. Next to the crowd of thin, pale girls at security, I'm not difficult to spot, and the static has done my hair no favors. I pat down stray hairs defiantly. I wasn't what he was expecting.

"That's me alright," I say, nodding at the picture before the formal greetings are made. I know it's rude, but he looks at me and smiles. Up close, he's not much taller than me, but he must have towered over my mother.

He takes my suitcase before I can protest, and he talks rapidly and without pause, as if I am the first person he has seen in years. In person, his voice is less gruff, though his accent still remains strong.

It's difficult to understand. We walk to an empty taxi, and I'm not surprised when he unlocks it and loads my bag. The cab is his.

I choose the back seat and settle in as we pull out of the airport. We are headed back into Seoul, he tells me, Dongjak-gu to be exact, close to Chung-Ang University, and for the whole drive home, he speaks quickly, using honorifics. This unusually cold autumn weather, the upcoming elections, the terrible afternoon traffic, the renovations downtown, these are all things he uses to fill the space between us. He calls me *ahgassi*, young lady.

My answers become shorter as we weave through downtown traffic: Yes, I'm tired. The flight was fine. No, not hungry. I feel his gaze on me through the rearview mirror.

"You're just as I imagined," he says now. "I have to tell you, you look just like her." And in the rearview mirror his gaze softens just a bit before he turns away and honks at a car that swerves into his lane. "She told me so much about you, you know. She talked about you all the time."

"She never talked about you."

He doesn't flinch but looks at me, intent again. "Oh, well, I suppose that doesn't surprise me either."

The cars ahead of us have slowed to a crawl, and Seoul outside is a dizzying array of activity already. Store signs blink to life, new plaques appear in floor-length windows. The morning fog has cleared and now people mill on the streets, overpasses, and crosswalks. I recognize nothing in this city. The car turns up a steep road. He turns more sharp corners in the narrow streets, without slowing, and we move higher and higher, away from the bustle of the main road.

"So you live in this part of the city?" I ask. The houses are old and brick, and though it's not entirely unpleasant, it looks rundown. New life oozes from the cracks, green and black.

"Yes, not far now," he says, eager to answer. "This wasn't the bustling district it is now when you left, I imagine. I've been here four years now and I can barely keep up. Oh, I don't know how you young people do it nowadays."

I cringe at the comment and the accent, but he doesn't notice, and continues: "We live in a remarkable time though, an incredible country, really. You probably don't remember, but back in the IMF days, you know, life was hard then. Brutal. Senseless even. I dropped out of school when I was thirteen, started working odd jobs here and there in Daegu—you know, fake ID, everything, not that they ever looked closely back then."

"That's where you're from?"

"Yes. Whole family's still there." The car whips to the left to avoid a cyclist, and he honks again. "Crazies," he mutters. The car smells like a beach cocktail, and I feel sick.

"Most of these houses have been renovated. Or razed and turned into giant apartment blocks. Your mother first refused to move, but once we married, I convinced her. It was close to the university, and I had a good thing going with my cab. I didn't want her to walk to work. I drove her back and forth every day, her own personal chauffeur, she said. We weren't married very long, you know."

"Yes, I know."

The car is quiet, and the man fiddles around with the radio. He settles for a local news station and titters.

"I did tell her she should call when things began to look bad, but she wouldn't listen. She was very sick by that time, and there wasn't much to do then but to stay at the hospital." He glanced back in my direction as the car finally slowed. "It happened very fast."

"Why didn't anyone call me?" I ask.

"Well, it was so sudden. She was just coughing for a few months, a common cold, we thought."

"No, I mean you. I never even knew about you. Why didn't anyone tell me?" My voice wobbles, like it's losing balance. "Why didn't she tell me?" The heaviness in my throat expands, threatens to spill over, and my eyes begin to sting. The man parks the car on the street, squeezed between a driveway and a truck. He turns off the engine and pauses.

"We got married quick, a sort of last minute thing, if you know what I mean," he winks.

"No, I don't." For the first time, his smile falters.

"She didn't want to worry you," he says finally. "You know how your mother is." he shrugs helplessly, as if we both share in some secret.

I ignore the comment.

"Well, this is it," he says, breaking the silence.

He takes my bags into the brown apartment building, and I sit in the car, shaking with dry tears, waiting until the wave passes. Then, I fall asleep.

He lives in a nice two-bedroom apartment and everywhere I see evidence of a life I don't recognize. A large wedding photo in a silver frame hangs from the living room wall. There's also a modest television, an ottoman, a black space heater, a few end tables, and a small but comfortable leather couch. In the photo, my mother is in a church, surrounded by a group of people, some I recognize from work and some I don't. She's smiling, happy. Her hair is curled and black.

"If you're hungry, there's rice and *banchan* still in the fridge," he says, relieved to see me in the house. He'd waited for me to come inside, leaving the door slightly ajar as if I were a stray dog.

"I ate on the plane," I say, hoarse. The idea of eating my mother's cooking right now feels wrong, even though I am starving.

"Okay, well, I'll give you the grand tour." The house isn't much, and after we go through the bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen, we're back in the living room. He straightens a mirror on the wall as he walks past. "You'll be staying in here, if that's okay with you," he says, leading me to the last room. "I tried to clean up before I left this morning."

Inside, I see pale green sheets on a twin bed, old pictures, a diploma from Chung-Ang University, and a letter in my mother's handwriting on the corner desk. On the far side of the wall are large canvas paintings, an easel, and more sheets of watercolor paper.

I go through the room gently, afraid to touch anything. I am startled by pictures of my younger self. I had spent the last dozen years of my life in America without any reminders, sometimes happily so. As far as my American friends knew, I was born nineteen, just like that picture in my passport. Standing here, I realize I never sent my mother any pictures while I was away. In this room, I am again six, riding a bicycle with training wheels; twelve, in my first middle school uniform; fifteen, holding my certificate of achievement; but I am never older than nineteen, standing next to my mother at the airport smiling so confidently into the camera.

"Your mother used to work in here," he says. "She was planning on having this room, you know, for when you came back."

"She painted all these?" He stands shyly by the door while I kneel on the ground and go through them one by one. They are striking, sharp lines and sheer colors, some of landscapes, others of people. I recognize one of me as a child, another of the river from under the bridge.

"Yep," he says, with some pride, "She sold a couple. First to friends, but later to people she didn't even know. She donated some to the church mission fair. Sold out there."

I am getting used to his accent, but I think I misheard him. Before I can ask, he points to the last painting, the bridge over the river, and he says, "Here's the place I was talking about." I balance it on my knees and we look at it together. It's exactly as I remembered, and the memories bring back the vertigo. I'd only agreed to come after he had told me my mother's wishes: to scatter her ashes in this place. He didn't know where it was; she had never taken him there. I admit feeling some triumph in this. Now all I feel is weary.

I get up as he places my middle school picture into an empty frame on the desk and straightens it. It seems a strange courtesy. It's strange to see my face next to the other black and white photos of relatives in the North, tea candles, its wicks a black whisker. On the side, an old bouquet, a cluster of delicate, dusky pink bells. So, she had lit candles for me, too.

This room tells me that maybe all these years of separation meant something to her. Relief pours over me, then wavers. My mother had waited for me to return, moving, painting, studying, even marrying. But without her here, the canvases, candles, and childhood pictures make it feel like a museum, or a shrine to what I had always thought she wanted me to escape. I can smell her here. It takes me back to the nights I fell asleep alone on the floor of our tiny apartment in Sillimdong, when my mother would come home late at night, silently washing and then curling her body around me. In the winters, we had kept each other warm this way, with the heat on low.

"*Ahjussi*, when is the service?" I ask.

"She didn't want a big service," he says, and he sounds almost apologetic. "So it'll be just you and me. But the cremation is tomorrow. You should get some rest. We have plenty of time to talk when I get back tonight. I've never been on one of those planes myself, but I know how hard travel can be."

He zips up his windbreaker again and pats down the pockets of air. He looks small, frail, but held together by boyish confidence and goodwill. Briefly, I see what my mother must have seen. But not yet ready to forgive his happiness, I let the thought pass.

"Thank you," I manage.

"Of course." Clearing his throat, he leaves me alone in the room. He has to go back to work, he says, and he writes his phone number on a pad of paper telling me to let him know if I need anything, anything at all.

We head to the Han River together, *ahjussi* and me, praying that it doesn't rain. I hold the urn in my arms as we walk across Yeoinaru Park. It's spotless, green, and we pass a couple on a rented tandem bicycle. I recognize Mapo Bridge, but everything else is new, clean. There's even an amphitheater. We've been walking for two hours now, and I don't want to tell *ahjussi* I might not be able to find the spot.

This morning, I woke to the screech of a fire alarm and the smell of burnt bacon.

"This is what you have for breakfast in America, right?" he asked, sheepish, already in suit and tie. He ate his rice and soup, mercifully quiet, while I gulped down the burnt bacon and scrambled eggs, though I was suddenly hungry for what he was having.

He hasn't stopped talking since we left with the ashes, driving down the north riverside highway. Despite the brisk autumnal air, he's sweating slightly, and I am too. My low black heels tick against the sidewalk.

He says, "What is it they say? A year and a day? We would still be newlyweds, though it seems a little silly to say that considering our age."

"I get it," I say, tired. "You just married, didn't have time to tell me."

"That's not what I meant." His brows furrow.

He brought the painting, and now he holds it in front of him like a map, peering at it and then the bridge we are approaching. Already, I can tell this isn't the place. I glance around nervously.

"A little farther," I say to him. I've made an effort not to look at the painting, after all, it's a place I know so well. I'd returned to it again and again in my mind, especially in my first lonely years in America. When I close my eyes it comes back to me in clear, stark lines, the lapping waters, the lanky weeds; but when I open them, I am confused. Perhaps over the years, I have furnished the space with bigger trees, greener leaves, smoothed out the rutted concrete lowering into the river. These areas are now grass. Some garish yellow paddle boats float in the water up ahead. A group of teenagers on rollerblades hurtles by. I keep walking. He follows.

"You know," he says, "we were going to have our honeymoon in America. Saved it for the summer so she could come see you. She always said you were very busy. She was so proud of you. She knew how difficult it was over there."

"How could she know?" I had never told her, and she had never asked.

He continues, "I remember the first time we met, your mother and I."

I can feel him looking at me out of the corner of my eye, so I ask, "Was it at the restaurant?"

"No, well, yes. But the first time I saw her, really, that was in church."

"My mother doesn't believe in a god."

"She was sitting in the back by herself, arms crossed. But she was praying, eyes shut, lips moving." He pauses. "I recognized her, of course, from the restaurant. Your mother was a beautiful woman."

"Did you follow her there?" I can't help it.

"No, no. Nothing like that. I just saw her once at the restaurant, then by chance at a church. I walked in to a random church, mind you, and it turned out in the end she had done the same. Funny how these things happen, don't you think?"

"You don't need to do this."

He ignores me and continues, "Well, now that I think about it I guess that can only count as the first time I saw her. She never opened her eyes, never saw me. I'm not sure what the story would be for her. But I mean really saw her, the way you can only see a woman if you know she isn't looking back."

I remain silent, but in spite of myself, I am interested.

"I knew right then that she was going to be my wife."

"You didn't even know if she was already married or not," I blurt.

"No, I suppose I didn't."

"If she had kids or not."

"It wouldn't have mattered."

"So what happened then?" I ask. "Did you go talk to her?"

"I kept coming to church."

"And then you asked her to marry you?"

He paused, thoughtful. He put the painting under his arm again. "Eventually," he says.

We stay on the concrete path along the river. I wheeze with every breath. We have walked so far that we've passed by two bridges. The wind is picking up but I know if we walk just a little farther, I'll be able to find it. I look around for markers, a boulder, a tree, a dip in the grass, anything that will jog my memory. I pick up the pace, and *ahjussi* matches it easily. My breathing is getting ragged, my throat cold. I finally stop at an empty bench on the path.

When I catch my breath, I ask, "What was she praying about?"

"What?"

"You said when you first saw her, you thought she was praying in the church."

"Oh, she was praying alright. She wasn't the type to tell me what about, or to complain. But I could make my guesses. There was only one thing she ever prayed for after you left."

Thunder claps in the distance. I stand up again and resume walking. "We're almost there," I lie.

"Look, all I'm trying to say is, she loved you. You must know that. And we're sorry."

"We?"

"I loved your mother, too," he says with some misery. "I never had a daughter. I'm sorry."

Then it begins to rain.

He opens a small black umbrella. "I only have one," he apologizes, "Your mother never used one."

"It's okay," I laugh. I can't stop. His suit is already soaked through and he holds the umbrella while I shelter the urn inside my jacket. Before long, the pathway has turned into a small brook. My heels squelch. Makeup streaks down my face in grey lines. I stumble ahead, hiccupping. This whole thing was just like her, a cheap, no fanfare service gone wrong.

The path is slick, and I almost fall. Except for a few black umbrellas, we are completely alone. The bridges we've passed bear no resemblance to the place I've stored in my mind. It has been too long. Looking around, I feel the weight of the years that have passed. They

betray me with the new sidewalks, walls, lakes, forests I've seen in my travels, all transplanted into that sacred space when I wasn't paying attention. This is the real price of leaving home, this forgetfulness. I have lost the only thing my mother and I ever shared these past twelve years.

"*Ahjussi*," I say, "Was she happy?"

"Mostly, yes. Yes, for a while, I think we were very happy."

And what's more, I believe him. I sit on the wet grass, tossing my shoes aside. I can go no farther.

"I don't know where I'm going," I say.

He runs his fingers through his thin hair and nods, quiet. He knows, has known this whole time. He folds the umbrella and sits beside me, placing the painting down carefully between us. I place the urn on top. It seems foolish, suddenly, to move at all. So we sit, waiting out the storm. f

Caroline Crew

AUBADE

i.
I could not draw the curtain against
the singing morning. The sky just got real
and I'm not yet tired of its excuses:
she floods so I flood, the summertime
fooled me into it. Like a darkening
blush is a newsworthy sensation:
you get a face from dusking to eggplant
and then you're on to something.
You want to be celebrated so happy birthday.
I put your cake in a suitcase for future usage.
This is a chance to be perplexing. And so
the sun rises. It's not enough to do
what you already do in the world.
You have to drive through yourself to do it.

ii.
You have to drive through yourself to do it,
getting right in the movies. You can't be
the girl and then be the girl that gets it
in the first act. You want to celebrated
so you get too real for the big death scene:
eyes like polka dots wild on the wall.
Oh you monochrome scream, the monster!
The monster here is Spring and also
to be lost. It takes a flood to find the real
depth of a labyrinth, how gorgeous it was
for us, drowning in its bluish glow.
We were pandemic in different airplanes
spread across the earth with our feelings
in tact. Only our bodies lost to the mirrors.

iii.
Only our bodies lost their mirrors, the rest
of it still held in reflection: the sky still
an abandoned zoo like its below, us all out
of our cages running through the streets
like a wind if a wind found its muscle
and went wanting. I think the city is its own
ghost machine neatly packing boxes.
In a room we might be watching a slasher
flick, the girl going to canvas as her skin
goes to blood. Or we might be a compass
pointing to New York, or England, the ocean
between them. We sleep in a room in-between
each other, our box the most ill-defined,
watching this bed, a little paradigm of failure.

iv.
Watching this bed, a little paradigm of failure
I see the small clouds you wailed out
while dreaming. I am a sunshower
and the day wants it. The sky is totally real.
You are open to the dark heavens,
your sleep unfogging slowly. A dull prayer
of breathing, a car repeating itself,
thrums of light bulbs out of sync.
There is a noise in the kitchen and I love it.
Your dreams a small light on the snow,
echoing out. To melt might be a sign
of universal apathy, like we are all just here
without trying. I try a little more.
I bring you coffee and it is not enough.

v.
I bring you coffee and it is not enough
to open your face to the heavens.
So, the sun rises repeating itself.
The room might be an open field
before the light unplugs our eyes.
Or it could be an abandoned zoo
in which we are blind prowling
against a fence of our own making,
the living room a tundra slipping
under the door. This is the edge effect,
the force of climate change in the kitchen.
What a wilderness domesticated.
You try to remember we are naked
as animals and then you're on to something.

vi.
As an animal you're on to something,
howling like the wind if the wind found
its muscle. You try to change into
the better version of yourself.
A triangle can only be made
of smaller triangles. There is a crater
on the moon named wolf, a mountain
on the moon named wolf, neither an icon
held aloft for the praising chorus,
nor a singular descendant baying apart
from its pack. The natural world never
appreciates its own jokes. If naming
is always an act of possession,
are you the peak or the valley?

vii.
Are you the peak or the valley
when flattening yourself to the map?
This is a chance to be perplexing.
The moon remains unmapped as if
that can save you from a higher purpose.
It's earth I find mysterious, how it turns
though I am sleeping on it, my dreams
echoing out. And so the sun rises,
a car repeating itself. In the kitchen
there is a noise and I love it. I bring you
coffee but it is not enough to open
your face to the day that wants it. The window
thrums a bluish glow, I could not draw
the curtain against the singing morning.

LaTanya McQueen

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHERS

In Caswell County, NC, if one were to drive down U.S. Route 158, you'd come to the intersection between U.S Route 150. Turn right on 150, and a little ways on you'll see a placard for Bedford Brown:

Bedford Brown, U.S. Senator, 1829-30, State Legislator,
Opponent of Secession, 1860.
This is "Rose Hill." His Home.

The placard is easy to miss if you're not looking for it. It's not often one pays attention to the signs of history, and in the summer when the wind sways it can be partially obscured by the trees.

Past the placard, if you keep going you'll eventually find Brown's plantation home, known colloquially as the Bedford Brown House. In 1973 it was listed in the National Register of Historic Places, but it's a private residence now so there are no tours. Without context the house looks unremarkable. It is two floors, Colonial style, the exterior painted white with dark green shutters. Thick bushes frame the front. If you're there in the summer, the smell of wild roses fills the air.

Near this plantation, hidden among the looming cedar trees, is a small unpaved road, a path really, once known to my family as Siddle Road, and it is here at this crossing where the origins of my family history begins.

Let's start with what I know.

My grandfather's name was Marvin Siddle. He was the second youngest of twelve children. One of Marvin's older brothers, William,

bore the same name of his father—William Lovelace Siddle, listed also as Wells on the 1920 census. This is confusing until I remember how notoriously inaccurate census records were. "What's your husband's name?" I imagine the census taker asking, his throat scratchy from thirst, as he stood on the front stoop of yet another farm. "I can't hear you. Say it again? Well?"

So Well L. Siddle, nicknamed sometimes Billie to his family, formally called William (named after his father), who is listed as mulatto on this census.

This is what I know.

I also know that there is an earlier 1880 census for a William Siddle, also married, but this one—this one listed as white.

"We should have been Browns," my godmother Vanessa tells me. Vanessa is also my mother's cousin. They grew up on neighboring farms and worked the tobacco fields together. Despite this parallel, once the evening came my godmother would venture home to schoolwork whereas my mother continued working the fields far late into the night. There's guilt in her voice when we talk of the past and I've often wondered how much of their upbringing factored into what their lives would become. It's a question I sense she's thought about as well but I dare not ever ask.

"The census may say Siddle," Vanessa explains, "but it should have been Brown, had the mother named the children after her slave name, but she didn't. They have the surname of another man, a white one."

The woman my godmother is talking about is Leanna Brown, my great-great-grandmother. Leanna Brown, nicknamed by her children as Granny Brown, once a slave of the Bedford Browns.

The folklore in my family has always been that Leanna "had 'em up" or took William Siddle, the father of her children, to court to make sure they carried his name. This would have been during the

height of Reconstruction, before Jim Crow took its fierce hold of the South.

"I never believed my father when he told me the story. I always thought he made it up, but I've learned through research that during that time plenty of women did something similar. So while I didn't believe him before I believe him now," she said.

It took my mother's death to make me question the pieces of her life and the person I knew. I've begun to reexamine what could have been possible as explanation for the way she was.

Tell me though, how does one begin to find the truth in the past? Who do you turn to when most of the people who could have known are gone?

If a given name can be a marker of a cultural identity, my name is marked as black. I knew this as a child. I told myself what I hated was the pause of uncertainty on the first day of class when a teacher did roll. "Laa~" they'd begin, the uncertainty in their voice. "Just tell me what it is," finally saying as they sighed with resignation.

I hated also the misspellings that inevitably happened. The sheer unwillingness to learn, instead writing their own versions of a signifier of my identity.

These were the reasons I used as justification when I asked my mother if I could have my name changed. Deep down, my mother had always resented my name as well. Perhaps it was because my father might have mistakenly told her the story of why he picked it ("I knew a girl with that name and I thought she was the hottest thing I ever saw!"). Or it could be because of the simple fact that my father gave it to me. At the time they were in the midst of a divorce, and she could have used this as a tactic of revenge. I suspect though that her reasons were the same ones I'd finally admit to myself that I also had. She hated the names associations—that I am black, that before anyone knew me they would know my name and what it signified.

My father, for obvious reasons, will not agree to the decision to change my name. "Why don't you want your name?" he will say over and over to a crying child on the phone. "Why don't you want to be who you are?"

What I am interested in are the ways in which a series of circumstances and actions can contribute to the people we become.

"Be glad you're not dark," I remember my mother telling me as a child. "Be glad you have light skin and good hair that doesn't kink up too much. People will like you more. Not too much, because you're still black, but more."

I will think of my mother's words often throughout my life. They will help to explain the reasons for why as a child I will scrub my skin raw, ashamed even then of my blackness. I'll think of them when, like with my name, I'll seek to change other parts of myself. My hair will grow out long. I'll wear blue contact lenses. The combination of these making acquaintances and friends question. "What are you?" they'll ask, reaching out for the briefest of seconds to touch my hair.

And I'll lie when people ask me my race. They'll always ask and I'll tell them I am mixed. I'll say whatever I think I can get away with. I'll let them guess first and nod when they say Puerto Rican, or Dominican. These choices somehow will seem better to me, less fraught. Anything will better than saying the truth.

"Which one of your parents is white?" they'll assume, and this will be where I always falter, wondering which one of my parents to erase.

My mother grew up on a farm in a place called Ruffin, North Carolina. Ruffin is less than thirteen miles away from the Locust Hill Township in Caswell County. In Locust Hill, specifically an area called Rose Hill, is where the original Siddle farm was located.

The story here is that there were two plantations. The first belonging to the Bedford Browns and nearby, down a path, led to a

smaller plantation of a white family named Siddles. A man named Will Siddle had a relationship with Leanna Brown, a slave or servant of the Bedford Browns.

Their relationship produced three children, one being my great-grandfather William, sometimes called Billie, Siddle. Sometime when Billie is older he'll get enough money together to buy land and build that house in Ruffin. That house will be the one my grandfather will grow up in and eventually my mother will too.

I've tried, many times, to fully render in my mind the image of that house. It was white, two floors, with a black roof. No indoor plumbing with the house, at least not while my mother is growing up, and she'll tell me about her late night ventures in the dark to the outhouse. She'll talk about her fear of snakes reaching up from the hole. The smell.

Open the front door and you're in the living room. Adjacent to this and separated by two large French doors is the kitchen. In my mind, I'll convince myself I remember these doors, but really what I'm remembering is the telling of the doors to me throughout the years. A hallway leads to a staircase where if one were to walk up they'd be taken to one of the three bedrooms. Downstairs are where the other two bedrooms are—my mother's, of which she shared with her brother, and her parent's bedroom. Farther down the hallway is the kitchen where there's another door leading out back.

None of this is of particular interest except for one detail—a door is affixed to the entryway leading upstairs. This door will be locked. No one except for Mayo, my great-uncle, who lives with the rest of the family, will ever be allowed up there.

Let me rephrase that—it is not "no one except for my great-uncle will be allowed up there" but rather my great-uncle will not be allowed in the rest of the house. The locked door, I'm told, is not to prevent the rest of the family from interacting with him, but to prevent him from the rest of the family.

"Mayo?" On the phone, my grandmother pauses to think. I'd been looking through census records when I stopped at this name, not recognizing it. "Oh yeah. We called him Pigaboy—pigger sometimes. It was always that. Not Mayo."

"Pigger?" I ask, not going further. My grandmother does not like to talk about the family of the husband she was once married to. It's been decades since his death, but my grandmother still flinches when I ask about him or his relatives. There is the sense she was not treated well by them. Even though she'll never tell me, my father will relay stories of how she was beaten by her husband and how his brothers and sisters disregarded her because her skin was not light like theirs.

Most of them were light-skinned, some bordering on even looking white. If you saw a picture you'd think they were Italian maybe, or Jewish, and they could have passed if they wanted.

It bears mentioning that like my grandmother, Mayo was darker too.

"Yeah, because he ate like a pig," my grandmother says. "He ate his food like a dark little pig, you know Pigger. Pigaboy."

"You know what Pigger sounds an awful lot like," I say to her, thinking of all this.

"Yes, well," my grandmother responds. She swallows hard in the phone. "I realize this now."

Mayo, born 1920, and sometimes called Pigaboy or Pigger by his family.

As I've mentioned, Mayo will live upstairs. The downstairs door that's able to access the rest of the house will be locked from him. His only route of access will be to the door out back. His meals will be placed on the back porch where he'll either eat them or carry them back upstairs.

There are reasons for all this. Mayo eats like a pig so his nickname will be Pigaboy, shortened to Pigger. My family will say he's unstable, explaining that there were been incidents but never explicitly telling

me what they were. To keep the rest of the family safe, especially the children, the doors had to be locked. Mayo couldn't be with everyone else, he had to be separated. He had to eat his food out back. It was all they knew what to do. It was the only way.

Mayo's death record shows that he died on January 17, 1973 at the age of fifty-two. What it doesn't show is that he died upstairs in his bedroom and that it will be days before the rest of the family notices.

"Down in Yanceyville Billie went as white," Vanessa tells me. "That's what I've always heard, and remember it was eight miles to Yanceyville from Caswell and this was horse and buggies time, you actually had to travel to get there. So why would the people there think that this man was white? Under what circumstances would they imagine that to be the case? The only reason I can think of is because he went there to see his father, and if he's with his father out in public that means his father must have claimed him—not only claiming but helping him, and in light of all that it fits in to the paradigm that the relationship his father had with him was consensual."

There is a slight pause. Before I'm able to respond she continues again.

"Also, in the consensual relationships I've read about, the child bears the name of the father."

In *The Fluidity of Race: "Passing" in the United States, 1880-1940*, Emily and Nix and Nancy Qian estimate that "using the full population of historical Censuses from 1880-1940, we document that over 19% of black males 'passed' for white at some point during their lifetime."

Billie Siddle, my great-grandfather, will periodically pass for white. I'll hear versions of this from my mother as well, but she'll explain he left to pass and work the coal mines in Virginia, making enough money to come back and buy the land and build his own farm the family will live on decades later.

If Billie could pass, and if in fact there were circumstances when he did, then what made him decide not to?

Maybe the answer to this question is the behind the reason he'll have issues with skin color the rest of his life. He'll pass them on to his children, each of them harboring the same prejudices, and they'll pass them on to their children—to my mother and eventually to me.

Billie Siddle will die on November 11, 1923, at the age of 48. The cause of death being chronic nephritis, a disease caused by infections, most commonly caused by autoimmune disorders that affect the organs, like Lupus, a disease my mother will come to suffer from.

On the death certificate, in the space for the question of the name of the father, there is listed only a question mark.

In the story of Cain and Abel from the book of Genesis, Eve bares two sons—Cain, a tiller of the earth, and Abel, a shepherd. When they both offer sacrifices to God, Abel's is respected more, much to the jealousy of Cain. Acting out of his own anger, he takes Abel into a field and kills him, and when God asks him where Abel is, he answers, "Am I not my brother's keeper?"

After God finds out the truth about Abel's murder, he curses Cain for what he's done. Cain pleads with God, explaining that this punishment is too much for him to bear. If he is a fugitive and a vagabond, then anyone who happens to find him will kill him. Hearing this, God tells him that whoever slays him will have vengeance taken upon them sevenfold. "And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him."

Theologians have interpreted this mark in many different ways. Some believe it to be a symbol of God's promise of protection. Others have suggested that the mark was a distinguishing characteristic God gave so that people would see and not harm him. In the 18th century it was taught that Cain's mark was black skin and that his descendants were black and still under the "the curse of Cain."

There is no clear consensus as to which of these definitions is being referred to regarding Cain's mark.

In the famous Clark doll experiments conducted in the 1940's, husband and wife team Kenneth and Mamie Clark gave a child two different dolls, identical except for their skin color and hair. One doll was white with yellow hair and the other doll was brown with black hair. Then, the child was asked questions like: "Which is the pretty doll?" "Which is the bad doll?"

Of course, you know this story already, even what the answers were, that their findings showed the internalized racism present among the children, the majority of which showed a preference for the white doll.

In 2006, Kiri Davis recreated the experiment for her documentary *A Girl Like Me*. Davis found that, nearly seventy years later, nothing much had changed. Girls still picked the white doll. The pretty doll. The good doll.

I do not need to wonder which doll I would have picked had I been asked. Growing up, I never had black dolls. The choice for me was never even a possibility.

Seeking information on the mixed or african american siddle family. Possible starting with a Billie Siddle. -Kim

A message posted on a genealogy forum. The date January 15, 2002.

I'm able to send to a response to the original poster. *Hi Kim, I believe I am someone you're looking for. Please write me back.*

No one will answer.

Unlike with Billie, there is next to nothing on Leanna Brown. No birth certificate I can find that fits. She was married, but I'm unsure of the dates. If she was a slave then it's possible her marriage would not have been recorded.

In search of answers I decide to look through the cohabitation records for the county. If I'm able to document when she was married then perhaps it will offer a piece to the question of the nature of her relationship with William Siddle. It could potentially offer clues to the other children had.

Cohabitation records were created to legitimize marriages and children born to those in slavery. In these records, the information can include names of the individuals, ages, places where they were born, the names of their last known slave holders, and approximate year of marriage or cohabitation. These records can often be found in local courthouses, state archives, and libraries.

I check the website of the North Carolina State Archives and it says that cohabitation records are known to have survived for the following counties, but Caswell County is not included in this list.

Once, in graduate school I fell in love with a white boy who was unaware of my feelings. One night we were in a Starbucks talking. The cashier had begun her closing up ritual but we continued to stay.

I showed him an article about a celebrity who'd recently made some racist comments regarding his own dating preferences. I mentioned it off-the-cuff even though there was more to be said—a larger conversation about racial bias and prejudices in dating preferences, for one thing, or the effects of European beauty standards on women of color, or even the current problems in interracial dating. There was more to be interrogated between us, but the minutes were quickly ticking by and soon we were the only customers left.

"That's some bullshit," he responded. "Who does this guy think he is?"

His anger, far worse than mine, made me believe he was trying to tell me something more, but then I remembered this was all a surprise to him. He had no idea what it was like to experience these attitudes day in and out. He was a conventionally attractive male with parents

who would have given him the world. His anger came from a place where injustice was never a reality.

In the end, nothing ever happened between us. He fell in love with someone else. Her skin the color of cream.

On her Facebook profile page I find a photo of the two of them. Many times there will be moments when my thoughts will get the best of me, and I'll go back to that photo and wonder if the reason nothing ever happened between us was because I did not look the way he was wanting.

Before the death of my mother I was not a person who talked about race. I was a person who actively avoided it throughout most of my life. It was easy when you were the only black person in a room, when for years you were the only black person you knew. You find ways to adapt to the world around you, joining in with all the appropriate cultural signifiers, and because my skin was light enough I thought somehow I would be enough, that I'd be accepted beyond the Other that I am.

My desire to fit these pieces I have in a certain way is strong, undeniable, but I find myself asking what to make of them. How does one begin to compile these bits of fact, these stories and anecdotes, together into a way of understanding?

I struggle to turn them into a narrative that makes sense, so all I can do is offer them in the hope that somewhere one can find the truth.

According to population projections by the U.S. Census Bureau, by the year 2044 whites will become the minority. There will be a growth of new minorities, from Asians, Hispanics, and those identifying as multiracial. This last group—multiracials—will more than triple in number, growing to close to 220 percent.

The same day I read this in the news I find an article about the rise of ethnic plastic surgeries cropping up in the U.S. Rhinoplasties to sharpen the flat shape of an ethnic-looking nose, for example, or "facial contouring" procedures in which the bones of the jaw are cut to make the appearance a v-shape.

"I think we're kind of losing ethnic niches. I don't think there's going to be a black race or a white race or an Asian race," Dr. Michael Jones, a plastic surgeon, is quoted saying in the article. "Essentially, in 200 years, we're going to have one race."

On my teaching evaluations my students say I discuss race too much. They are angry because in talking about American literature, I force them to read Charles W. Chesnutt, the first African American fiction writer. We read the slave narratives of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass. We read W.E.B. Dubois and Booker T. Washington. I bring in recordings of the Harlem Renaissance poets and let them hear the music and rhythm in Langston Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." They listen to the songs of Negro spirituals. I bring in Toni Morrison and Amiri Baraka, and I make them read James Baldwin's "Going to Meet the Man," a story that makes my hands shake every time I read it. That day, I spend an hour in front of my mostly white class talking about the Klan. I show them pictures of lynchings, one after the other after the other. I tell them of the brutal, ugly history of our country so that they can try to understand the world Baldwin has come from, but they never understand.

The day I teach Baldwin everyone is bracing to hear the decision about Michael Brown and so the first thing I do is take a piece of chalk and begin writing. On the board I write the names I've collected of the black men and women throughout history who've been murdered—whether lynched or shot by police. One by one I write their names, filling the board with my scrawled script.

I leave it up during the remainder of the class, and towards the end, when I feel my own energy draining, I tell him that it's important to remember. "There is a pattern," I say, repeating the theory my

godmother once told me. She believes that in looking at history, in seeing the moments of racial progress for African Americans there has always been a steep backlash in response. It happened after the Civil War with the creation of the KKK, it happened after Reconstruction with the rise of the Jim Crow era in the South, and it happened after the Civil Rights Movement with the KKK's reemergence.

"Recognize it and maybe you can change it, because the problem is we keep forgetting."

Then I erase the board, slowly, hoping with this action the point hits home, but they are already packing their bags and out the door.

"I used to see Leanna as a victim," Vanessa tells me. "She was in the sense that she was a black woman and didn't have any power, but the more I delve into the past, the more I've come to fully understand how much people don't fit into the boxes history wants us to put them in."

I've wanted to believe that the basis of their relationship was love, that Leanna Brown took the name for her children because she wanted a piece of this man to hold onto, to be carried down among the generations. It is a story that goes down better than what history is known to provide—that her children were the product of rape.

I'm not sure how much I believe in generational curses, if the sins of the fathers shall be passed on to the children and then to their children's children.

Yet the patterns in my family are certainly there, repeating among generation to generation, and so for me the name carries with it a mark, a stain. It is more than the mark of my race, with that name are years of self-hatred, of anger, of wrongs done I can barely fathom and will never fully understand.

So how then can a name that carries so much pain with it have come from love?

Of course though, my students are unaware about race. To them I am just a black teacher talking about race when they don't want to

talk about race. They are unaware of the history that has come to define my existence.

"*Don't you understand?*" I want to explain. "*Do you even understand how long it's taken me to get here? To get to this point of even the acknowledgement of who I am?*"

I'm in a bar sitting alone. A man comes up and sits down next to me. "Grading, I see?" he interrupts, nodding toward my stack of papers, and for a moment I am willing to go along, to be distracted.

"Yes."

"I want to ask—" and here it comes. I know the question before he even finishes, but he is looking at me and whatever expression on my face makes him stop. Instead, he tries a different tactic and softly mutters Spanish.

"What?"

"Oh," he says, realizing his mistake, but the question is there and he still must know the answer. "I thought you were maybe one of my Dominican sisters? I've been hoping to find some of my people here in this town."

"I'm sorry," I say, then pick up another paper.

"So you're not?" he continues, not taking the hint. "I mean, *you're* not?"

"I'm black."

"Really?" He draws the word out so it sounds more like an accusation than a question.

"Yes."

This is the part where I'm supposed to offer up evidence. I'm supposed to explain how both of my parents were light-skinned, or mention how I have my mother's curls. I'll explain how I have great aunts and uncles who passed, and the colorism issues most of us face, but by then I'll have gone on too long. I'll have said too much.

What will be wanted is an explanation, not an indictment or a history lesson on racial constructions.

This time though I say nothing. I reach for my wallet and take out a twenty, placing it on the counter. I grab my stack of papers and stand, leaving the bar and the man with just my simple answer, my affirmation—yes.

This time it is enough.

I spend my time now going through the Civil Action Court Records of North Carolina. They are searchable online. In this collection, spanning from 1709 to 1970, are records consisting of civil disputes pertaining to land ownership, unpaid debts, slave manumissions, divorces, and the legitimization of children born out of wedlock.

Somewhere buried in these pages of pages of documents I feel as if I'll find my answer. If ever there was a place to look this is it—the answer to the name and how it came to be in my family.

Because I do not have a specific date to go by there are thousands of pages I must search. There are so many names. Some of the documents are faded and it's difficult to see. My eyes squint trying to make out the cursive.

There is a chance I will go through all these and find nothing. Perhaps there was never anything to find.

Yet, I am here. At night when the world has quieted, I sit at my desk, coffee in hand. Each scan takes a few seconds to load and I wait and sip. Names flash across my screen—names of strangers, of brothers and sisters bonded together, of mothers and daughters, of fathers and sons, names of the searching, names of the lost, names waiting for someone who will one day find and claim them. f

Cortney Lamar Charleston

IN THEORY, WE ARE ALL HUMAN

Not a simple thing, no. Not to be taken lightly. To be
understood, and I do, that is, get the theory of you:
integral of human possibilities. The theory of your body
as a familiar machine, like mine, like something that
hums while it works a skin together where there had
been a rip before. The theory of skin, of its color
and discolor. The theory of your blood and bones,
like mine; your eyes and lashes, like mine; your nose;
your mouth, full of ocean, like mine. The theory
of freedom, which I take to be a naked feather,
dancing, almost like a hammock, back and forth, back
and forth in the passing wind. The theory of God
as asymptote and the theory of love as limit, the two,
tied together inside my head by a math problem.
The theory of law as inequality instead of equation.
The theory of a wedding dress and the theory of
a wedding dress on fire. The theory of binding breasts
like pages of a book needing to be read. The theory
of birth as death sentence. The theory of life as illness.
The theory of male and the theory of female and
the theory of neither and yet, still, this body, like mine,
graphed on so many dimensions. The theory of choice,
like reaching for an apple instead of an orange. The theory
of sin, like reaching for an apple. The theory of ribs
as prison bars. The theory of homelessness among
family. The theory of children who claim you, likewise,
as a blessing. The theory of your smile. The theory
of a rainbow after the storm, like the gift of a perfect

bridge over troubled waters. The theory of your hand touching mine, incidentally, in the closet of a single moment. The theory that one of us, in that moment did not exist in our right mind. The theory of mind as illness. The theory of choice, again, but for which of us and what between? The theory of sex and sacred and the hard, hard practice. The theory of you. The theory of me. The theory of a good person and the truth of a bad, though, in theory, I cannot say who, or

won't.

Cortney Lamar Charleston

GHAZAL OF THE CODE

for what must be cracked and broken completely

There are rules to this shit, homeboy: being a grown man, making it
happen with these girls out here. You can't step soft like some homo,

with your feelings all twisted and folded like some Pre-K-ass origami.
Girls like edges, man—so stay sharp. Be bold. This sounds dumb homo,

but you're not a bad looking dude at all. Don't take it the wrong way,
I mean. Just saying looks ain't the issue. You just get too glum. Homo-

ish, hurt too damn easily in the heart. Man up, G! Keep your head up.
Walk with swagger. You're packing **HEAVY**. Rule of thumb, homo-

ass comment be damned. Go up to her. Not in a rush. Not in a hurry.
Say something that can be taken as sweet, but not say, ummm, homo

or corny. It's all about balance. Act like they're special and like they
don't matter at the same time, and then bang 'em like a drum. Homo?

No? Aight, then. Just don't act so damn scared! Don't get shook. All
you're trying to do is get some play and keep it moving. *Scum, homo,*

trifling-ass Negro she might call you, but that's on her, for real. If it's
any good, a good man keeps it going, I mean, if they ain't some homo.

Maya Jewell Zeller

WHEN I SAY HEART, I MEAN IN THE HEART OF A DARK FOREST

In photographs, the human
heart can resemble
a lightning-wrapped fruit.

Or something your mother
might cook, your father
eat while trees sketch their final

streaks in the late light and you
whisper some dull news
of family through the telephone:

who is pregnant again and who
needs to drink less and
who filed for divorce. If you knew

very little, you might mistake
the small heart
of a fawn for that of a girl,

the way the hunter hoped
the queen would
when he brought her that still

warm bundle from the wood
where he let Snow
White wander, stumbling,

into briars and the thick black
howls of wolves.
Once it is believed you are dead

already, you can overcome
all kinds of curses,
you might walk right into

a magic house where small men
care for you and you
for them for years until, foolishly,

you eat the same treat Eve, that
witch, touched to Adam's
lips so he would fall upon the sleep

of knowledge, that stupor we all
crumble helplessly
into when we are old enough

to listen to adults, and mirrors,
and the rustle of a reptile
or a foot on the trail. My mother

tells me of my brother's congestive
heart failure, Stage C,
how his legs swell and he sleeps

sitting up in his chair, his six
children sneaking past
like elves while he snores. O bright

apple, thumping metaphor, poison
darling—you climb
into my ruby throat. It's been so

long since you thought I really
cared—cruel sister,
civil girl, ink-still. In the tale

sometimes the mirror breaks
at the queen's rage
and she storms into the forest

and the dead girl wakes to blue
birds and a warm
breakfast, unaware that just

beyond the bramble pulsing
like ventricles, a dark
cloaked woman she once called

mother paces the morning, races
toward her future,
a blade of glass in her hand.

Robert Wrigley

AN INTERVIEW WITH NAOMI SHIHAB NYE

Robert Wrigley: There's an essay in W.H. Auden's great collection, "The Dyer's Hand," in which he says, "The poet is the father of his (or her, we'll have to work out the genders there) poem." Its mother is the language. One could list poems as race horses are listed—out of L by P." Or, say, out of English by Wrigley. Out of English by Naomi Shihab Nye. I think, in fact, there are probably further inquiries, though, that we can make about a poem's lineage and a poet's lineage. What I'm wondering is: who are the poets you can say you have been in conversation with through the course of your career?

Naomi Shihab Nye: Wow. It's so many of them. I feel, as a child, I was in almost a state of delusion because I had a second-grade teacher, never had a teacher again who loved poetry in the way this woman did, who really believed that second-graders—seven and eight, around that age—have a capacity for being in the presence of Emily Dickinson, Rabindranath Tagore, Walt Whitman, William Blake, and absorbing that language and owning it and being triggered by it. Then, when I was in college I took an entire semester course on Dickinson and thought, "God, how could we have felt so confident about our interpretations of those poems? How could we have memorized her poems and walked around spouting them to one another on the playground?" Which we did, because we had to stand up once a week and recite a poem from memory in her class. How could we have felt that that language could be carried by people as small as we were? How could we do that? I think it was her sense of love and her sense of necessity—and we had that language within us, even if we didn't fully understand it and couldn't explain it. We felt confident that they were ours. I didn't go to a writing program,

and that's been something over the years that has caused me to feel a little like an imposter when I visit so many great writing programs. I have this back-ended wistfulness. "I want to be here!" Why didn't I get to do this? I want to do this. I want to study with you. I want to study with everyone. I went straight into working in schools straight out of college. I started publishing poems when I was seven. I started sending poems actively to magazines when I was twelve. I would talk about my rejections. It was fun, and I was very comfortable with all my rejections at the age of twelve—and always have been. I was never worried about them. I didn't have the sense that other writers had just getting out of college. Some of my friends said that it would be years yet before they sent any of their work out. I thought, "My god, I've already been doing it for ten years!" So then I thought, "Did I start before I was ready? Was I some novice with a delusion? How did I start doing this?" I started as a reader and as a person who loved poetry and found in poetry a kind of language that I needed to be at home in. Over the years I was infused with enormous affection for people like William Stafford or W.S. Merwin or Lucille Clifton or the people I felt became my mentors through their books. People I could follow. I could learn from—who I could occasionally hear read. Ask questions to. Being half-Palestinian and reading Palestinian writers and Israeli writers and feeling that this was a necessity for my own mental health as well as my own literary backdrop. I worked on translation projects, but always as a secondary translator. I feel like I was always out there trying to absorb the voices that had an urgency—came out of a spirit of necessity. Using a common language—that's something that I was always aspiring to… hopefully a deceptive simplicity. I know Stafford was often accused of having a simplicity of vocabulary, and I don't think he's simple at all. He's a very rich, difficult, mysterious, amazing poet you can read over and over again and interpret in different ways.

RW: He's simple in the way that Wisława Szymborska is simple. She's the one with the Nobel prize. The people who accuse Stafford and Szymborska of being simple—where are their Nobel prizes?

NSN: Right. The simplicity is rich and I think, even going back to people we loved as children and seeing that this was always so much richer than I realized, I was always falling in love with it. I liked the idea of "hope" and "feathers" being the same sentence, but there was so much more.

RW: I love to think of a seven-year-old walking into Mom and Dad at dinner and saying, "Because I could not stop for Death…"

NSN: I did that! Or staring at an adult and saying, "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" They don't like it. I think it's the funniest thing from my entire childhood—in those days you could only submit work to magazines through the mail—so self-addressed stamped envelopes. I had to have my school tell me what that was. "What is a self-addressed stamped envelope?" I took all of these little jobs. By the way, my neighborhood in St. Louis was Ferguson, now infamous Ferguson, where my parents moved when I was three. I was doing odd jobs for people in my neighborhood secretly—not telling my parents. Whose cat am I feeding now? Where am I working now? I wanted to be able to buy the stamps on the sly. There was something important for me about sending work to magazines—you don't want people breathing over your shoulder and saying, "Well, did they take it? Did they like it?" To me, that would've put pressure on. So, my mother thought I was writing letters to myself in the mail. After I'd been receiving self-addressed stamped envelopes for quite awhile, she sat me down and said, "I want to talk to you." There was a mailbox right across the street from our house and she thought I was walking over there and mailing myself a letter that would come back to me. I said, "No, no! These are from magazines!" She said, "Why are magazines writing?" I was even keeping it a little secret when things were being published.

RW: Wow.

NSN: It was strange. I don't know why I was being so secretive. I just didn't want anyone breathing down my neck.

RW: It's a private thing. It's an intimate art.

NSN: It is.

RW: Can you talk a little bit about what you think when you hear the word "craft" when it's applied to poetry?

NSN: I think about generating and collecting and shaping. And then working on, working on, working on. One thing I admired so much about Galway Kinnell was how he continued to revise his poems, as many people know, after they were published. Before he would give a reading, you probably saw him do this too, behind stage he would be sitting with Xerox copies of his own poems—revising them. Even poems that people had been loving and memorizing in different versions for years. When people would ask him about that, he'd say, "Well, I don't love it that way tonight. I need to change it. I'm not interested in reading these twelve stanzas of 'When One Has Lived A Long Time Alone' tonight. I'm interested in condensing it to three." That fascinated me—that sense of a lively relationship with work once it's appeared in print and to be able to keep changing it. I've always been a regular writer—a daily writer, as Stafford talks about a lot in his own essays. From early life I felt it was important to keep that habit up of daily writing even if you were just gathering notes and quotes and gibberish and bits and pieces and you had no idea where they were going. I think it helps you to do that regularly. I always felt suspicious of people who said they would be writing next summer when they had time or when they got to go away to some writing retreat somewhere, then they would be writing—but right now they weren't writing because there wasn't enough time. I always questioned that. I felt like we have to be doing it regularly or it's going to abandon us. So I've always written a lot more and tried to find poems within.

That's when the craft starts taking place. When I'm first writing I don't think of it as craft, I just think of it as gathering and addressing and inviting onto the page things that you have witnessed or thought.

RW: Do you ever run into periods where you just can't write? Whether you have time, you make time—it doesn't sound like you do. You sit down. You put words on paper. You collect these phrases and images and things that the world offers to you, which I do the same: I carry around my little red notebook and have many hundreds of them filled. But there are times every now and then, even for me—and I have the same work ethic, the same sort of need to do this as often as possible, there are those times when I can't muster something. I can't muster the energy or the focus or whatever it is that is needed, and I guess my question would be: if those things happen to you every now and then—how do you deal with it? How do you get around it?

NSN: Certainly they happen. In those times I think reading is always a big part of what you're doing—your craft. When people say that they don't read at the same time they're writing I'm strongly suspicious of that because hopefully you're writing all the time and hopefully you're reading all the time—so how could you separate these channels of activity? I mean, you need to be doing them all—all the time. So, spending a little more time reading or going back into your notebooks and pulling things forward that you haven't used before. You're always surprised when you go back into older notebooks and you're always discovering things that you had no idea were in there. Sometimes just recopying something that's in a notebook can become a generative process toward writing again—taking little breaks where you're just doing more reading. I think that feeling of being in a process of discovery—being in your discovering years, always—hopefully always, if we're lucky. I met Borges once in his life and he was introduced to a young writer. "They said, 'This is so-and-so. He's a beginning writer.'" And Borges, he was really blind at that time, said, "I, too, will always be a beginning writer! Everything I've ever done made me a beginning

writer all over again." This student looked so touched by that. I loved witnessing this conversation—and of course then I wrote down the conversation. I thought this was beautiful and it is something we all need to remember.

RW: Do you find yourself, this is because I find that you do this, shifting what I'd call the register of your voice? A poem in *Fuel* called "One Boy Told Me," is a poem that makes me feel like I'm about nine years old in the best possible way. Then four or five pages later, there's a poem called "The Small Vases of Hebron," which is a completely other kind of thing. They're living in the same neighborhood and they're entirely different registers of voices and emotion and intensity. Do you do the same kind of thing inside a week?

NSN: Well, yeah. I think you could do the same kind of thing inside a week, and "One Boy Told Me" is completely a found poem. Our son was two and three when he said all of the things in that poem. I've given him the royalties for that one poem and, shockingly, it's been on a lot of standardized tests; which he finds just the most preposterous thing in the world. Why would this be on a high school standardized test when it was uttered by a 2- and 3-year-old? I was just the selector, so of course anytime that is printed on the test he gets the check, and sometimes it's a good one. That has fascinated him. He says, "But Mom, it's really your poem because you heard me say those things and I don't remember saying any of them. You wrote them down so it's really your poem." I say, "No, it's not. I was just the secretary. You were the voice." Whereas "Hebron," which is responding to news and horrific news and written out of fury—I would say that's a whole group of poems in my life, you know, the poems that are written out of news that is bigger than we are. News that makes us angry. The problems we can't solve in the world. The violence that continues. You feel called upon to respond to it, to utter a response to it, even though you know it's not going to solve it. It's not going to cure it. It's a completely different impulse.

RW: I was taught that there are two kinds of poems, essentially. They are poems of celebration and poems of lamentation, which is to say the poem that celebrates or the poem that elegizes. Because I was taught that, and because I was taught that by somebody I love, I've always felt great attachment to it. A simultaneous belief in it and a simultaneous conviction that it's not true. That it can't be true.

NSN: Why?

RW: Well, because sometimes the boundaries of those things wander. Sometimes they cross over and it becomes impossible to see exactly when the celebration stops and the lamentation begins—they start looking the same. I look at a book like *19 Varieties of Gazelle* and there's a line in there—"There is no gazelle in today's headline." This goes back to your father's journal. It's speaking about the beauty of the gazelles in Bahrain, in a nature preserve, and there are all these different kinds of gazelles. There's something about immediately pulling in the newspaper headline that turns the gazelle from this celebratory symbol into something else by virtue of its absence in the headline. Have you ever felt that dichotomy? Or resisted that dichotomy?

NSN: Like you, I feel that there's often a blurring of that boundary between them and that, you know, how could you lament something if you weren't also celebrating its being? Or loving the fact that it had existed? I think of the William Stafford poem, "Evening News," where he watches the news then he goes to the sink and feels water real on his hand and he goes to the backyard and he speaks to the grass. I love in his poems how he is often speaking to the grass, and he says, "Oh, please help everything go deep again." You know that he's lamenting the fact that he just saw a newscast, which seems very surface-depth in its coverage of events, but he has this relationship with water and grass where he can go and invoke a kind of healing—remind me who we are, remind me where we are. It has to be together in the poem.

Unless you could feel both of them, how could you lament? I think it's very true that those elements are present in so many poems, but I think that they're mutually present—simultaneously present. Or that recent Merwin poem where he talks about—maybe there's only one time after all—maybe now in his older age he's really still in that same time of youth and possibility and that it's all blurring. It's like two times in life that are moving toward this complete communion with one another. While there is a sense of all the time that's behind me now and the time I won't see again, there's also this presence of early time and he's recognizing it. My oldness was present in my youth and my youth is present now—which I certainly can identify with. f

Naomi Shihab Nye

FILIGREE

(Northern Ireland, Van Morrison's Birthday, 2015)

Peonies
in a house
profoundly uplift
the house

never say no
to peonies

*

Some days
reviewing everything
from brain's balcony
filigree of thinking

you can't fix the whole street
clearing bits of rubbish possible

What else?

*

Blue river of light rubbing dark

fell into it this morning
at the Giant's Ring near Ballylesson
cows who didn't know us
raising heads indifferently
heap of massive stones

Befriended by air
couldn't predict which way
the laughter was blowing

Naomi Shihab Nye

LOST LADDER

Sometimes while driving far out among fields,

dry dead ruined fields, crisped by oil madness and spill,

or the parched corn rows of August,

in the ditch by the road, a ladder.

You know it must have flown off a truck,

someone later missed it. Lying horizontal

among overgrown weeds, disappearing

nearly abandoned vertical dreams.

Naomi Shihab Nye

LADDER IN REPOSE

Glorious resting folded.

Humans with no desire for achievement beyond

apprehension of one clear moment after another

may appreciate you, not for what you would help us do,

but — your neat rungs, calm radiance.

Against the side of the shed, all summer you shone.

I could have trimmed a tree.

Your silver song of waiting filled me.

Robert Wrigley

BARN

Moonspokes through the old roof shakes showed
her chest freckled with silver. She observed a drop
of light creeping and retreating down and up
his right shoulder. The stallion stamped
then kicked the door, a concentrated thundercrack,
and the mare to be covered tomorrow nickered
consolations or come hithers, their heads extended
to the withers through the windows of their stalls.

Dust rose in the spokes, and she rolled over
and slung herself across a saddle. A dime of light
tried to etch the face of FDR between her shoulderblades.
In the horses' enormous eyes they were shadows
the dust they made beglistened. The horses were quiet then,
listening, and the wheel of the moon
rolled silent as light over what they saw.

Robert Wrigley

ANT LAMENTATIONS

His sweetheart being out of town,
he leaves in the sink—knowing he should not,
it being spring, but he being a little drunk
and his lonesomeness sore upon him—
the soiled dishes from the evening meal

and finds in the morning an ant horde
of Biblical proportion. Two fluid lines of them,
one shouldering such crumbs as he left behind
along the counter and into that crack in the wall
she had been after him for years to fix, and another

returning empty-mandibled for more. These
with a paper towel he wipes back into the sink,
then sets the scalding water aflow, almost
enjoying the wielding of the faucet sprayer,
until at last they all are gone down the drain.

Except that all through the day an endless chain
of them re-enters through the crack he finds
there is no other remedy for but spackle
and paint, which by some miracle matches.
And yet, all through the afternoon and into evening

still he finds them, and finds they seem confused,
disoriented, trolling the ranks of cookbooks
for a fingersmear of sustenance, or perhaps
bereaved, as though some familiar carapace
or delectable abdomen was nowhere to be found.

And all through that second night he believed—
even over the music he liked to listen to,
jazz, up-tempo; no torch songs or baleful ballads—
that he could hear them each calling out
to the absent ones, in the blue, mostly inaudible

lamentations of those who are left behind.
These he also dispatched, so that by the time
his sweetheart returned, there were none, or not none,
but two, on the windowsill, which she gathered
on her lovely finger and escorted gently outside.

Julie Marie Wade

NINE INNINGS

1.

My father used to tell me that I took after him. He said this while praising my "zest for life," pleased that I was "slow to anger and quick to joy." What he didn't say, what he always stopped short of saying, was this: *I'm so thankful you take after me and not your mother.*

Now it's June 2003, and I haven't seen my father since Christmas. I call him from a pay phone on East Marginal Way, offer to take him to lunch.

"Are you alone?" he hedges.

"Angie is with me," I say. And I know in my heart that Angie will always be with me. I think my father knows, too.

"Well, this is...*unexpected*. It's a busy day, and I only take half an hour for lunch, not to mention the fact that your mother is—"

"It's you I wanted to see, Dad. Tell me where you like to eat around here, and we'll meet you there in twenty minutes."

*

Angie isn't sure she should join us for lunch at Best Café and Teriyaki. We have tried this once before, last November—a sit-down meal with my parents on Alki Beach—the two of us on one side of the table, the two of them on the other. But before we ever made it inside the restaurant, my mother ranted on the sidewalk, stopped traffic in her rage. I ran away with everything I owned in a rain-soaked grocery bag.

"She won't be there," I promise. "And it's important for my father to see us together, to know that we're not hiding, that he can't imagine you away."

*

My father, a blue-eyed man with a matching blue jacket, tries to smile as he passes through the plate glass door. I rise to greet him and watch the way he winces, as if it hurts to look at me now. He nods at Angie and extends a tepid hand.

"Well, what a nice surprise," he sighs. This is his best salesman's speak, and still I do not believe him. The waitress knows my father, expedites his glass of iced tea with several sugar packets.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Bill. How lucky you are to be dining with two young ladies."

"This is my daughter." He gestures toward me, and I catch a glimpse of his former pride. *This daughter, the one who takes after him.* "She's just graduated from a Master's program at Western Washington University." Now he studies the menu he knows by heart. "And this is her friend from school."

"Very nice, very nice," the waitress nods, a pencil stashed in her shiny black hair. "I'll give you all a minute to decide."

*

A minute is not going to be long enough for this decision, though. It has been ten months since I told my parents I love a woman—not some anonymous girl or fleeting crush, but this flesh-and-blood beside me, this beloved my father has reduced to a friend.

"Dad, I'm leaving," I say.

"Don't be silly. We haven't even ordered yet."

"No. I mean—Angie and I are moving out of state. I've been accepted to some graduate programs back East, and..."

"What are you talking about? You've just finished graduate school."

"Yes, but I'm not done. Really, in the whole scheme of things, I'm just getting started. And Angie is coming with me because we're just getting started, too."

I should say here that I know my father loves me. I have never doubted his love for his only child, his longed-for, late-in-life daughter. But facing him now across this sticky table, struggling to meet and

hold his eyes, I understand that I am the battle my father is losing. Should he ever see me again, it will be as monument—some great and glowing marker of his defeat.

"So this is good-bye then?" His voice falls low and flat. All the fizz is gone.

"It doesn't have to be good-bye in some permanent way, but what happens next depends on you."

"I don't see that you've left me any choices," he replies.

"All I want is for you to acknowledge who Angie is to me, who we are to each other. We're not *roommates*. We're not *study buddies*. We're not *pals*."

The waitress returns, but my father waves her brusquely away. This is unlike him, the man who is slow to anger and quick to joy.

"Can't we just have lunch?" he pleads. "We don't have to talk about any of this… *unpleasantness* now." He sounds more like himself again.

*

Angie is gazing out the window at bird shit on gravel. The view leaves something to be desired. My father is holding the laminate page in his hands like the *Gospel According to St. John*. He wishes I had read the Bible more. Behind my knees sweat is pooling and pooling, two cups that are soon to spill. I can't decide if I am a hostage about to break free, or if my father is the hostage I am going to take with me. The only word I can think of is *siege*.

"You really should have invited your mother to this lunch," he says, unraveling the paper napkin and placing it in his lap. "She misses you, and it isn't right to exclude her."

We all look over at the waitress now, only to find it isn't her. Two men from my father's work loom near our table, grinning. "Are we interrupting something, Bill?"

"Tom, Mike—no, no, not at all." The bubbles return to his voice, the levity, the laughter. He stands up and shakes both their hands firmly. "Let me introduce my daughter Julie."

"Oh, your father just can't shut up about you. It's Julie-this and Julie-that all day long. I'm beginning to think you're Superwoman or something."

This, of course, will change. History is always written from the victor's point of view.

"Now the only thing he has to worry about is where you're going to meet your Superman!"

I look at my father and then at the men, all of them so clean-shaven, so neatly pressed: their khaki slacks with the deep pleats, their polo shirts with the pocket logos. Each hairy hand with its thick gold band.

"This is Angie," I say. "She's my—"

"Friend from school," my father intercedes. "They're classmates up at Western Washington. Just passing through and thought they'd give me a call."

He thumps the table with his knuckles, and all the ice, so hopeful, leaps to the top of his glass.

2.

It happens through the mail, too: this writing-over, this striking-through.

My mother bemoans the price of postage, yet still her letters come, overstuffed as ever and Scotch-taped to oblivion. The script is tidy, precise—so unlike mine. The "P"s in *Pittsburgh* and *Pennsylvania* perform a full salute. The seals on her envelopes are girls in silhouette. Think Holly Hobby and her famous bonnet.

This is the mother I do not take after, she who is quick to anger and slow to joy, whose passion is for appearances. She knows things, this mother, about flower-arranging and piano-playing, about setting a nice table and saying a fine grace. She has never set foot outside the house without rouge on her cheeks and paint on her lips. Her chandelier glitters even in the dark.

And make no mistake: this mother knows me, or so she believes. Her expertise extends to my desires, spoken or unspoken, my

greatest wishes and fears. She has read every novel ever written by Danielle Steel, which surely counts for something. In other words, she is prodigious and undeterred where other people's happiness is concerned.

*

February 14, 2005 (print correspondence):

I'm thinking of you on Valentine's Day and praying you know how much we love you. It must be hard to be so far away from home. If you were here, I would make you hot cocoa and put clean sheets on your bed, and then we could all relax together as a family.

You may or may not know that Danielle Steel has written a memoir about the death of her son Nick. Of this book, Danielle writes, "I want to share the story, and the pain, the courage, the love, and what I learned in living through it. I want Nick's life to be not only a tender memory for us, but a gift to others...My hope is that someone will be able to use what we learned, and save a life with it."

Please put aside your snide opinions about her fiction. I believe this book was put into my hands so that I could learn from what Danielle Steel learned about her son and ultimately save the life of my daughter with that knowledge.

Julie, listen to me very closely. You are <u>not</u> gay. You do <u>not</u> hate your parents. You are suffering from manic depression, just as Nick was. This untreated condition has caused you to lash out at us, to become confused about your true affections and where your real loyalties lie. As is so often the case, manic depression has made you think you are gay when really you are just imbalanced. There are people who can help you–specialists who can regulate your hormones and give you a new lease on life.

Please consult a doctor as soon as possible. You might mention this letter or Danielle Steel's book, <u>His Bright Light</u>. You have a bright light inside of you, too, Julie, but no one can see it right now because of your acute mental illness. We will forgive you for everything you have done if you will act now in your own best interest. No grudges and no reprisals, I promise.

Love,

Mom

3.

Everyone looks shifty in the doctor's waiting room, including me. We rifle through magazines, feign interest in talk-show TV, but our eyes keep wandering to the counter, the list, the next person to be summoned to the secret room. I suppose we are all hiding something we won't reveal until we've stripped down to our skivvies. Then, shivering in a paper gown, we'll wonder why honesty proves so much harder without our clothes on.

I'm twenty-five. This is the first doctor's appointment I've ever made on my own. And no, it's not because my mother thinks I have manic depression cloaked in a bad case of gay. I'm here because I read an article that scared me. Lesbians, studies have shown, are the social group most likely to neglect their health by opting out of annual exams and other forms of preventative care. One theory to explain these findings surmised that lesbians have internalized the message that their lives are not as valuable as others, leading to a lowered sense of self-worth.

This is important to say: being gay never made me hate myself. If there was a god, I wasn't worried about him hating me either. I lived as a secular humanist by day and a hopeless romantic by night. I believed in following my heart and being true to mine own self, even when that self surprised me. In other words, when I realized that I was gay, I wanted to be honest about that fact from the very first day of revelation. For years, I had tried to be out about my life with everyone I knew and everyone I met. The biggest surprise was how frequently I found myself pushed back in.

*

"You've left a lot of these questions blank," the nurse observes. She is young and matter-of-fact, and I am mesmerized by the blinding chunk of cutlery jutting forth from her left hand.

"They didn't seem applicable," I reply.

"Well, you're either single or married. Let's start there." *Was it the tip of an iceberg?* I marveled. *Could that ring have sunk the Titanic?*

"I'm not single," I say, "and I'm not married. I live with my partner of three years."

"*Single*," she says, her loud pen-scratch revising my story. "And are you trying to get pregnant?"

Her ring flashes at me like the bright lights they use to interrogate suspects in television dramas. "You marked that you are sexually active but that you aren't using birth control?"

"Lesbianism is my birth control," I say, feeling clever all of a sudden, and dangerously smug.

"I see." She doesn't check any more boxes and leaves the room without looking up.

*

Dr. Berman is a small, efficient woman who rarely smiles and likely inspired the creation of the color taupe. Her skirt is taupe, her shoes are taupe, even her skin is taupe. Since I don't know her first name, I christen her *Diane Taupe Berman* in my mind—*Diane T. Berman* to fit on the shingle outside.

We shake hands and pretend that my thinly covered nakedness is normal. Once my feet are in the stirrups, my body tilted back at its most vulnerable angle, she asks me: "Were you ever heterosexual?" *Not quite the icebreaker I had imagined.*

"I'm gay," I say. "My partner is a woman."

"Exclusively?" She seems surprised, as if woman cannot live by love of other woman alone.

"Yes, *exclusively*."

"And you were always with women, never with men?" she clarifies.

"A long time ago I was with a man. I've been to the gynecologist since. I used protection."

Dr. Berman isn't convinced. Perhaps she thinks *this* is the something I'm hiding: my part-time lesbianism, my flimsy commitment to the life I have chosen.

"Men are part of my past, but Angie is my present—and my future." I like the way these words feel on my tongue, sinewy and certain.

Later, I catch a glimpse of my file, the manila folded back just so. BISEXUAL is written in the margin. The tidy, precise script isn't mine.

4.

In Pittsburgh, I attend one university and work for another.

At school, I have earned a reputation as The Angry Lesbian. It has even been suggested to me that I was only admitted to the program as "diversity." And I was waitlisted after all, so perhaps some more desirable "diversity" turned down the spot in order to make room for Angry Lesbian me.

Right now I'm experimenting with my inheritance—which traits are malleable and which are not. For a while, I allow myself to be both my mother's and my father's child—quick to anger *and* quick to joy.

At work, I play The Joyful Lesbian, more Ellen DeGeneres than Valerie Solanas. This version of myself, despite the desire to be edgy and outspoken, feels most authentic to me. I decide to keep her.

There are two bosses at my job. One is a gay woman who has not yet come out of the closet. Let's call her Marsha. The other is straight man who impersonates a gay man at Costco. Let's call him George.

This is important to say: I am valued and affirmed and genuinely loved, I think, by both my bosses. They know Angie. They have never downgraded her from a "partner" to a "friend." They have never treated me as if I were "single," and by extension, fickle, uncommitted. I have no right to feel slighted by their personal choices, and yet—

Every time Marsha does not divulge that she has a partner waiting at home, a woman who has shared her life for more than a decade, I think it again: *siege*. The word drones in my head, pulses through my veins. I am easier to shoot down when I am The Only One. I feel less invincible in my falsely thick skin. *Let's burn our draft cards, not our gay cards!* I want to chant. I'm not hiding, but I'm protecting someone who is. I'd court-marshal myself if I could.

Then, I mobilize the academic part of my mind. I ask myself: How does Marsha's resistance to coming out justify your own sense of

being hemmed in, pinned to the periphery of the Mainstream Map, the Settled Territories?

There is no rational answer. I hate it here, alone in the Outback. *Let me out. Let me in.* Does anyone ever win a war like this, where half the people call it a sin and the other half aren't sure what exactly they're fighting for?

*

"Costco is so progressive," George says. "They recognize marriages *and* domestic partnerships." He is single. His neighbor is, too. They are two men who date women while sharing the cost of a single membership for their make-believe, same-sex household.

"Do you have to go to the store together?" I ask, as if this has nothing to do with me—and perhaps it doesn't.

"No, that's the beauty of it. We're registered as domestic partners, but we each have a card, so we can do our shopping together or separately, and no one is the wiser."

*

I am no wiser, anyway. It's 2006, then 2007. My parents have told their friends I'm married to a surgeon now and living in New England. If asked, they would like me please to corroborate this story.

How can I say their blatant lie about my life obscures me in the same way as Marsha's self-closeting does? Perhaps I am obscured differently? And how can I say that George's Costco card diminishes me and lives like mine when he and his neighbor are actually making domestic partnerships more visible with their lie?

Straight people play gay people on TV all the time. Didn't *Will & Grace* win seven GLAAD awards?

Marsha has a commitment ceremony one weekend. I am the only friend from work who is invited, and it goes without saying that I shouldn't broadcast the news when I return to the office on Monday. Angie and I both wear dresses with sandals, given the heat. The usher sizes us up, then escorts us to the Straight Table. "Are you sisters?" someone asks.

We continue to shop at Giant Eagle, where no membership is required.

5.

"We had a lesbian couple here once before, but it didn't work out so well..."

This is Vic Peacock, the woodworking teacher, telling me what I wish I had known six months before. "The folks at the Meeting just weren't ready for it, and the fight to keep those two lady teachers—they were really good at their jobs, I'll give 'em that—led to the split between the church and the school."

Angie and I were vaguely aware of the rumor that "ideological differences" caused the Stillwater Meeting House to separate formally from Olney Friends School in 2001. But six years later, when we signed on to work for the school, we had no idea we were the new Test Case, the Better Luck This Time lesbian faculty members.

America has an Outback, too. It's called Ohio.

The married couples are given rent-free houses on the property. We are offered two rent-free apartments in the girls' dorm. "You can arrange them any way you like," Mary Ellen tells us cheerfully. "For instance, one can be for your sleeping quarters, the other for your offices."

"No," we say, firm on this point.

"But you'll have more space with this configuration," she coaxes, pointing to both doors like a deluxe showcase on *The Price is Right*. "It isn't about appearances."

My mother has taught me otherwise. She believed everything was about appearances—and perhaps, on this point, she was right.

I wanted our lives to showcase our truth and not a story someone else had told about us.

"We don't keep two residences," Angie explains. "We share one."

*

Soon, Cleda comes around to take our pictures. I am in my classroom, arranging desks. Angie is in the library, cataloguing books. We pause and smile for the camera. Neither of us thinks anything of it until the students begin to arrive. Many are coming from out of state, and many more from out of the country. *What will boarding*

school be like? they wonder in many languages. Then, they crowd close together by the welcoming wall, inspect the faculty's varied faces.

"Which one are you?" the Dean of Students asks as we pass each other on the stairs. When I don't respond, he prompts me: "The teacher or the librarian?"

"I'm Julie," I say, extending a tepid hand.

"Micah," he smiles, and takes it.

*

The students disperse for a soccer game on the lawn, but I linger a while before the welcoming wall.

There is Thea with her husband, Larry, their children perched in the tree behind them. See how Gavin's overalls and denim cap make him look like a train conductor from an old-timey storybook. See how Ellie has woven a crown of black-eyed susans for her hair.

There are Shelley and Joel on their front stoop, the sunset framing their faces. Plume, the Husky with the grand white tail, stretches out at their feet and yawns.

See how their names are joined with an ampersand? See how their pictures tell a family story?

On one corner of the board I find myself; a yardstick away, I find Angie. We are alone, apart, sans ampersand. *Single and straight*, by all visible accounts. Both new hires, perhaps we haven't even met each other yet. Perhaps we are still strangers. We appear as all the other new faculty, fresh from college or graduate school, that mix of excitement and nerves.

Surely, we have come to this place unattached, sweating in our dresses and sandals. Surely, we sleep on twin mattresses in our small apartments with their half-baths and kitchenettes. Surely, we have read the policy: *All overnight guests shall stay in the guest house. No sharing of rooms by unmarried members of the community will be tolerated.*

It brings me great joy when, in my anger, I reach up and tear our pictures down.

6.

Kentucky won't be like Ohio, we promise ourselves. We resolve to put all our paperwork in order before one of us is rushed to the ER with a fever, a cyst, a kidney stone, before the other is left trying to prove she is not just some *co-worker,* some *well-meaning acquaintance.*

"She *is* my home! She *is* my family!" I found myself crying before the lights went dim and the breath lodged deep in my chest.

*

It's 2009, a rainy Saturday morning in the Louisville Highlands. We walk into our bank. We remind the teller of what we've read online: *Customers with a valid checking or savings account are entitled to free notary services.*

"Our notary is actually our manager," the teller replies. "If you'll just have a seat at that desk, I'll ask him to come over."

Angie and I sit down on the plush maroon chairs, and soon a middle-aged man wearing a tie beneath his sweater vest faces us and asks, "How may I help you?"

We have brought our checkbook with our names imprinted and joined by an ampersand. We lay out our debit cards side by side, in case he needs to see these, too. "We're National City customers, and we'd like to have some paperwork notarized."

"What kind of paperwork?" he asks, slipping on his glasses.

"Power of attorney, health power of attorney, living wills." The documents were drawn up for us by an LGBT legal organization based in West Virginia. None of the local lawyers I had contacted ever returned my calls.

"I see." He removes his glasses as quickly as he has put them on. "I'm afraid you're going to have to take this paperwork elsewhere."

"If there's a service charge," Angie volunteers, "we'd be happy to pay it. We'd just like to have these notarized today."

"It isn't about payment," the manager replies, rising so we are eye level with the pleats of his pants, his hands lodged in his pockets. "I'm just not comfortable notarizing this kind of paperwork."

"But it says on the website that the bank notarizes documents for all its customers. I imagine wills and power of attorney forms are very common."

"They are." He is still facing us, but his body has turned toward the door. "I'm not *personally* comfortable notarizing these documents for persons…*such as yourselves*."

In the moment that follows, I experience a glittering epiphany. I know now how a person, any person, even one *such as myself*, could rant on the sidewalk, could stop traffic with her rage.

7.

Often when I feel discouraged, I pick a date at random—sometimes a whole year—and I say to myself, "*This* is the future. Just wait until we get *here*." I like to have something to circle in red on the calendar, a visual reminder that time marches forward, not back.

2010 was one of those years. I told myself everything would be different when we reached the second decade of the twenty-first century. I told myself other things, too. "Louisville is the largest and most liberal city in Kentucky." I think it's true. In spite of everything, I still want to believe that it's true.

We've been invited to a dinner party by a liberal Louisvillian and his family. We arrive with wine, bright smiles, high expectations. Our status as a couple is widely known, comfortably acknowledged. A crucible of homemade guacamole beckons from the table. The lighting is soft, and the voices are warm. We feel at ease in this man's home.

*

The Liberal Louisvillian has a daughter. She's seventeen and working on a high school project. Halfway through the hors d'oeuvres she appears frazzled in the doorway. She isn't sure about the order of her poems, and she has to get to the copy store before they close.

"There's a 24-hour Kinko's at the Douglass Loop," I offer. "You have time."

"Julie!" Now the Liberal Louisvillian beams at me. "Honey, this is Julie. She's a PhD student at the university. She teaches undergraduates, and her specialty is poetry."

His daughter sighs and pulls her hair back with a scrunchie. Even the future contains these remnants from the past. "Can you help me, *please?*"

Before I know it, I am reading assignment guidelines and making suggestions about fonts and bindings. She tells me she knows she shouldn't have waited till the last minute. She tells me she has a lot on her mind. It isn't fair the way high school graduation gets overshadowed with all these tests and applications for college.

Her father, lingering nearby, sips a glass of egg nog and chats with Angie. "Julie might be able to give you some advice about those applications," he tells his daughter. "Maybe even write you a letter of recommendation."

This is important to say: I don't mind helping a young student I've never met before. In fact, I enjoy it. I am coming into a fuller sense of my vocation, and I like that I can be called upon to share what I know—what I love—with others. My "zest for life," as my father once called it, my zest for poetry and literature at large.

*

Later, we gather in the living room to hear the daughter play piano. She is self-conscious and proud of herself at the same time, a feeling I know well. She wants to get the song over with as soon as possible, but she also wants to give an encore performance where all the guests at her father's party applaud and beg for more. Afterwards, Angie and I commend her talents and wish her well in the coming year.

"It was really great to meet you," she says, and shakes my hand so I'll know she means it. "How do you know my dad again?"

The Liberal Louisvillian intercedes. "I work with her friend Angie. This is Angie, in case you haven't met. And if you need to get in touch with Julie again, I'm sure Angie will know how to reach her."

Our faces falling now, our hopes besieged. Which is to say: This is the way light fizzles out of a tunnel. This is the way wind passes out of a sail.

8.

All these years I have been writing a book about outings, what it means to come out into the open of the world. Not that the world is always open, but we pry at its fingers and press into its palms. We make ourselves as visible and indelible as we can.

Put another way: Not every outing is a picnic. Not every outing is a ball game.

But then this happens: the longed-for outing, the dream realized. My first book is published. A transmutation occurs from "writer" to "author." I occupy my subject position in a more public way now. Not just an "author" even, but an "LGBT author."

And then this happens: the ultimate outing, the never-even-dared-to-dream. My book wins a prize for LGBT Literature. The gold seal on each book jacket proclaims, "Winner of the Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Memoir."

There is no going back now, I think, and take my first deep breath in a decade. This book about outings has relieved me of the responsibility for outing myself. People will *know* now, unequivocally. A small mission accomplished. A truce at last.

*

At the university where I learn and teach, a fellow graduate student approaches me at the copy machine. Let's call her Genevieve. Instead of college courses, Genevieve teaches full-time at a local high school. She's interested in bringing "living authors" into her classroom. I am delighted to be considered one of those.

"There's just one thing, though," she tells me, and I recognize the way her words lean on little kickstands, unable to support themselves. "Assumption is a Catholic school, and the administration doesn't officially *condone*...homosexuality. So if you were to come to my classroom to read from your book and talk to students about it, you

wouldn't actually be able to say anything...*gay*. You're a really great writer, and I'd love to have you there, but I can't be doing anything that's going to jeopardize my job. I'd like to say I'm willing to put it all on the line for you, but that's just not the reality of my financial situation. There's probably some way we can highlight all your strengths as a personal essayist without—"

"Getting too personal about it?" I'm being sarcastic of course, but no one ever expects sarcasm from me. I think it's the dimples.

"Yes," she says, clapping her hands. "*Exactly!*"

*

August 5, 2011 (email correspondence):

Hi Genevieve,

I just wanted to say thanks for thinking of me regarding the guest author visit at Assumption. It would be great if it worked out, as I genuinely enjoy working with students, and your class that features the personal essay seems so promising. I wish more people taught the personal essay—and long before students arrive at college.

At the same time, though, I'd just as soon not do it if there is going to be any kind of weirdness surrounding my visit or any potentially negative repercussions for you. When I said I wouldn't bring anything "explicit" into your classroom, I meant I wouldn't read an explicit sex scene. That isn't because I think there's anything wrong with sex scenes, but only because it's a matter of audience. I wouldn't read an explicit sex scene to high school students regardless of the sexes/genders of the people involved. But I don't consider any of the work in <u>Wishbone</u>*, for instance, or in my new forthcoming book,* <u>Small Fires</u>*, to be "explicit." It's literature that has many themes, but one of the prominent themes is the exploration of gender and sexual identity. It isn't possible or desirable for me to parse myself, ever, in any context, into the "writer self" and the "gay self." They're entirely imbricated in both my life and work, and there's no way to get around that. So, for instance, if the principal says I can't come unless I don't "say anything gay," well, everything I say is gay because* <u>I'm</u> *gay. I don't have to be talking explicitly about my subject*

position, and I'm often not, but it's always there with me, and it's always part of anything I do or say or teach.

Also, since Wishbone *just won the Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Memoir, that's how the book is now explicitly coded. If Assumption isn't comfortable with the word "bastard" in a book title (even though the state of North Carolina stamped the word on Dorothy Allison's birth certificate!), then I'm not sure how comfortable they're going to be with an author speaking about a book that has just won an award with "lesbian" in the title. That may be something to consider. I truly believe—and I'm not saying that you would disagree with this, only that your employer might—that for all the conversations about heterosexual marriages and families that take place constantly around us, there needs to be an equal incorporation of the voices of all of us in equally valuable, equally meaningful families that happen to be organized around same-sex unions. And one way or another, I'm going to say that wherever I go, whatever the explicit subject matter I'm talking about.*

Sincerely yours,

Julie

9.

And then this happens: in February 2014, Angie and I are legally wed in Washington State, back in Bellingham where we first met and fell in love. The gathering is intimate, the restaurant candlelit, soft remnants of snow lining the streets and windowsills. Our paperwork is notarized by the county clerk without incident. Our names, unchanged, are united with an ampersand.

This is important to say: though everyone we know insists that marriage changes a relationship, we find ourselves and our commitment unaltered. Perhaps this is because we have lived as unmarried married people for so long. Every night we have rested our heads on this pillow of paradox. *Married-but-not.* Every night we have covered ourselves with this blanket of paradox. *Unmarried-and-yet.* How do you take your coffee? *Black, with several packets of paradox, please.*

But we have access to the language of marriage now, and this is different. Where before we used *partner* to mean "like a spouse"—that elusive equivalency—now we use *spouse* to mean "a partner," unequivocally. In other words, our union has been upgraded from simile to metaphor.

"What's the difference between a simile and a metaphor?" I once asked my students.

The best answer: "Simile gets you on base, but metaphor knocks it out of the park."

*

We live in South Florida now, known for its oranges and oxymorons. Here in the Sunshine State, we find ourselves *Married-but-not*, a ban that states we cannot be what we are.

I carry a paper in my wallet that proves nothing about the nuances of love or the particularities of tenderness, but marks instead a decision made by two consenting adults to go public as partners in this world. We signed the documents as a way of saying we are not single, and we are not straight. It was our way of showing we move "gaily forward" together, trying our best to be slow to anger and quick to joy.

After our wedding, I returned to my job at a Florida state university. I logged into the HR website and attempted to update my profile. *Yes, there has been a change to my marital status!* I unclicked the box beside *Single* and clicked instead the box beside *Married*. For a moment, I felt the deep satisfaction of a private truth and a public truth aligning. I felt like a cartographer charting my own life at last.

But then when I went to enter the name and sex of my spouse, *ERROR* began to flash on the screen, angry and insistent. I, a female employee, could not designate a female spouse. *INVALID ENTRY*. The system was set up to make a liar out of me, to keep me "inned" and "pinned," to hold me in default mode.

When I wrote to the Director of Human Resources, she congratulated me on my wedding and then informed me that *unfortunately, you do not have a marriage as far as the state of Florida is*

concerned. We are closely monitoring the situation, however, and will let you know if anything changes. She might as well have said: *You are suffering from an acute mental illness which makes you believe you are married.*

My heart was sharper than the diamond on my hand, but still the only word I could think of was *siege*.

*

I have never liked the word *wife*, and I never intended to use it in reference to myself, even if I one day had a husband. When I married Angie, I assumed we would call each other *partner*, just as we always had. But when you live in a land that tells you your marriage is a sham, an illusion, "merely symbolic," or worse, "a crime," you find yourself wanting to speak out, to refuse the relegation to *almost* or *nearly*, to answer to anything less than the whole question.

I call Angie my *spouse*, by which I mean we share a legally formalized life-partnership. We are *spouses*, which to my mind emphasizes the marital relationship irrespective of gender. Florida says I can have a same-sex partner but not a same-sex marriage. Florida lies. So I say *spouse* in part because I want to refute this lie, because I have always wanted to tell the whole story about my life without leaving anything out. In other words, without tucking anything back in.

I write to my parents before the wedding to say it is happening. They are silent. I write to my parents after to the wedding to say it has happened. They are silent again. Silence is a cold war, but semantics, I have always known, cuts with swords and spikes.

A woman at the YMCA asks if I am married. I tell her yes. "Is your husband a member here?" she smiles.

A teller at the bank asks if mine is the only name on the account. I say there are two names, mine and my spouse. "What's his name?" he smiles.

And so it comes to pass that I am inning myself inadvertently, with the same mother tongue I used to out myself before. "Just say *wife*. It's not ambiguous," a friend advised.

If I say *wife*, I compromise the truth that is in my heart. If I say *spouse*, I closet myself, in a world that still presumes marriage means

heterosexual. If I say *partner*, I communicate the same-sex aspect of the relationship but not the fact that we are married. Florida wins again. It keeps us in our place, cloaked, shadowed.

*

Then, my father writes to say he and my mother are celebrating their forty-seventh wedding anniversary. He wishes I, *single I*, could be there with them at the beach. I notice the way he treads carefully around plurals, but not around the subject of marriage itself. My marriage isn't real to him, isn't real "in the eyes of the Lord." In other words, it is counterfeit, that which counts for nothing at all.

My father has a name. It's Florida.

His greatest sadness is that he feels like he "doesn't know me anymore." Perhaps this is code for *You don't take after me as much I thought, and given the way you've turned out, I am both relieved and disappointed*. One day I'm going to have to get a divorce from that surgeon in New England. It's hard to say which would cause a greater scandal—my being "gay," as in lesbian, or my being a "gay divorcee."

*

It's the wet season in Miami, so many sporting events are rained out. The green fields and the brown diamonds flood. The crowds run for cover. But every once and awhile, there's a clear day, a blue sky, a perfect pitch: slow and smooth, the ball passing clean across the plate.

"So, how do you know Angie?" the clerk at the library asks.

I was always good at softball. Infer from this what you will. I choke up on the bat, blinking hard. I take a firm stance and a good swing. *CRACK*. I remind myself the game is just a metaphor.

"I'm married to her," I reply. f

Dean MarshallTuck

THE WITNESS

It's Saturday and the father hasn't seen his daughter Lisa in two weeks. Last weekend he had a long haul to south of Minneapolis, and traffic on the interstate kept him out a night longer than he'd planned. Five years ago, he and his ex-wife agreed Saturday would be the day of his weekly visit, but ever since the mill closed and he began trucking for Shanklin & Sons, his schedule has been less predictable. He's also been working odd jobs around town. Today he's helping a man cut trees. They're trimming heavy oak limbs off an old tree grown over the second-story roof of someone's country club mansion. Two o'clock, he feels a slight panic in his stomach. He'd told his daughter he'd take her to town for lunch.

The father hops in his truck and speeds to make up time. Maybe she's still home. Lunch in Point Pleasant. Something later. He can't remember the last time they went fishing.

He stops into a bait shop on the way. There he asks an old man smoking behind a cash register for a tube of crickets. The man moves insufferably slow into a small room with minnow tanks and a cricket hutch.

The old man opens the hutch. "Fishing cats?" he asks.

"Whatever's biting, I guess."

"Man don't know what he's fishing for—all he catches is trouble."

As the old man rings up the bait, the father grabs a large bag of chips, two packaged ham and cheese sandwiches, and two grape sodas from a cooler by the door. "Tack those on." Lisa's, my apartment for gear, then straight to the river, he thinks and pays.

The old man hands the father his change. "Be careful," he says.

The father pulls up to his old house. Only his ex-wife's car is in the carport. He knocks on the door and hopes her boyfriend's not there.

She answers but leaves the screen door closed. "Hey, Ted." She sounds disappointed.

"Hey there." He passes his hand through his hair. "Lisa?"

"Gone. She thought you weren't coming."

He swears under his breath.

"You could've called."

"Yeah."

"What was it *this* week?"

"Had a job at the country club. Slow getting outta there. Shit. Where is she?"

"She and a friend went to town. Think they were going to lunch and then to her friend's house. You gonna call her?"

"Nah."

She comes squinting out to the stoop in a worn men's dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up, a pair of shorts, and flip-flops. He doesn't recognize the shirt. "Well, what you gonna do now?" she asks.

"I don't know. Wonder if she'll be back in the evening? Could at least talk a little while."

She walks him back to the truck. He thinks he can smell her still-familiar scent. She surveys the contents of the passenger seat, the haphazard meal, the fishing bait. He watches as she notices the empty truck bed—a ghost of a sigh—and he feels like a real fool for not having his fishing rods.

"Wouldn't want those sandwiches to go to waste," she says.

They eat the lunch together on his tailgate. A few times he almost brings up a memory of their lives before they moved to West Virginia. He wonders, not for the first time, if they'd stayed back east, could they have worked it out. He almost asks, but he knows doing so won't change anything.

"So you still going fishing?"

"Might as well."

"Where at?"

"The old spot."

She smiles. "Half a mind to go with you."

He knows better than to believe this kind of talk. "Brent around?"

"Yeah, tonight he's taking me to that new restaurant everyone's so crazy about—October's End or something—close to Jackson."

Tablecloths, strands of lights hanging from the ceiling, cabernet, her shoulders bare. All smiles.

"Well. Gotta stop off by my place," he says. They hop off the tailgate.

"Ted."

"Yeah?"

She laughs in a patient, motherly way. "You think Lisa still wants to go fishing?"

"It ain't about the fishing," he says and leaves.

*

"Chief Cornstalk's Curse" Courtesy of AmericanMyth.org

Those who grow up in the Ohio River Valley, particularly in the valley towns along the Ohio and West Virginia border, learn their native history in grade school, but tales of the settlers and the Native Americans are largely lost on those living outside this narrow slice of America. More people are probably familiar with the Mothman mythos than the story of the Shawnee warrior chief Hokoleskwa, known by the settlers as Chief Cornstalk. In truth, the tragedy of Hokoleskwa in many ways resembles the all-too-familiar narrative of America's indigenous people—from hunting and gathering, to boundary wars and displacement. Though overlooked nationally, Hokoleskwa's story resonates locally, perhaps due to the legend of "Chief Cornstalk's Curse."

But what is a curse? A pronouncement for some, a plague for others. Or perhaps a curse is merely a way for the injured party to

explain some hurt or illness? And who can say when a curse begins? Surely these answers depend wholly upon the audience of such a question, the curser or the cursed. For the Shawnee, the curse could be said to begin with the encroaching of the settlers and the signing of the Treaty of Camp Charlotte, exiling them to the Ohio side of the river; but for the settlers, the curse begins much later.

It is late 1777 to the settlers, though such distinctions of time do not occur to the native people. One autumn day, three Shawnee hunters, warriors from the Battle of Kanawha, track deer along the Shawnee bank of the Ohio. The swiftest of the three, Yellow Fox, loops a half mile ahead of the hunt as the other two men continue stalking. Yellow Fox waits for the sounds of the deer. In the still he hears the birds' songs and the whispering river. A strange sound steals his attention, echoing across the water: murmuring voices, splashing boat paddles, knocking of wood. From the riverbank he spies a slow wooden barge filled with white men and women, immigrants on their way south to Kentucky. He's distracted by a grunt heard twenty feet behind him followed by a quick stirring, crackling leaves, and he knows the hunt is ruined.

Upon meeting Yellow Fox, his companions realize their prey is gone. Together they watch the barge continue along the Ohio. They trail the slow vessel south as they return to their village. One of the men mutters a word. He stops and wails a Shawnee war cry. The voices on the barge cease. The man cries again, and Yellow Fox pushes him to the ground.

The other stands laughing as the two wrestle on the ground. Shots fire. He looks at his chest, and bright red spills from his ribcage. He falls.

The two rush to their friend who is gasping for air. While Yellow Fox holds him, the other takes his bow and arrows and runs to the riverbank. He fires his arrows, one, two, he runs, three, four, he runs, five, six, until he has no more arrows.

Yellow Fox stands, bathed in his companion's blood. "We must tell Hokoleskwa."

*

Editor's Note: *I interviewed Stan Overton in 2011. It's interesting how there are still locals who haven't yet spoken publicly about their experiences during the peak years of the Mothman sightings, 1966 and 1967. Overton's reasons for keeping silent so long—and for breaking that silence now—make him one of the most unforgettable interviews I've acquired in my research.*

Jack Wilson: I understand you were close to the bridge when it fell. Can you tell us a bit about that night?

Stan Overton: Friday night, December, very cold. Me and some friends had big plans to ride down to Charleston. Nothing much, find a pool room, drink beer, look for girls. I'd been working with Pops all day. I was pretty beat and looking forward to the ride to Charleston. We knocked off later than I wanted, and by the time we drove through town to the bridge it was backed up pretty good. As soon as he saw the traffic, Pops turned the truck back for the grocery store. Before we could get back to the bridge, it had already fallen.

JW: How close did you get to the bridge?

SO: Not close at all, but we walked to the edge once we realized what had happened. Everybody did. One of the fellas in my group—his sister died that night. He was home when it happened. That's what kills everyone about the bridge. Everybody remembers where they were and wonders how it could've turned out different if they'd done this or that. He told me, "If I hadn't taken time to shave, I might've been near enough to save her." But it was a dangerous scene—tangled steel, broken concrete everywhere, cars and trucks tumbling. He might've jumped in and had a steel girder pin him to the river bottom. But I know what he means. It's a terrible feeling to just stand there helpless, watching it happen. But you think about stuff like that too long, just eats away at you.

JW: Some people connect the collapse with the odd sightings in Point Pleasant at the time. What's your take?

SO: I think the book and the movie have shaded a lot of folks' opinions.

JW: John Keel's book *The Mothman Prophecies* and the movie based on the book.

SO: Right. In the weeks after, everyone was numb. All the funerals, burials—closed the schools. Maybe after the bridge all the sightings seemed like foolishness.

JW: That's a popular theory. Is that what you believe?

SO: No.

JW: And why is that?

SO: Because I saw it.

*

"Understanding the Mothman," Speech by Brady Collins, delivered September 23, 2007.

Good afternoon and welcome back to the Historic State Theater and the Guest Speakers portion of the seventh annual Mothman Festival. My name's Brady Collins. I've taught at Point Pleasant for thirteen years. I see a few current students out there. As most of you know, I'm a history teacher—American and world. Once a year I even have the pleasure of teaching senior psychology.

I tell you all this so you don't have any misconceptions about who I am. I'm not a Mothman eyewitness. I only moved to Point Pleasant from Kentucky around 1994. I'm certainly not a Mothman expert though I've done as much Internet research as the next person, and yes, I admit, I've seen the movie. I am not a cryptozoologist or Fortean investigator, and though I haven't sought them, I've spoken to people who've seen the Mothman, UFOs, the men in black, and maybe even a ghost or two. Even still, I position myself as neither skeptic nor believer.

Honestly, today I'm not so much interested in creepy stories, portentous prophecies, or, frankly, being all that entertaining. The organizers thought I might have something interesting to say about

the Mothman story, that I could use my background in history to bring a kind of educated gravitas to the speakers' series *(laughs)*.

I do want to talk about history today, but probably not the local history you're expecting—the settlement days, Chief Cornstalk, the Silver Bridge collapse, etc. I want to talk about our shared history, about the history of symbols and images, and how our perception of those images link us together.

Carl Jung, Swiss psychiatrist, developed interesting ideas about understanding who we are and how our cultural traditions and spiritual beliefs have been influenced by a shared unconsciousness that resides in us all—a hidden filing cabinet or closet in our minds where memories, ideas, and beliefs are stored—and he believed that no matter who you are or where you were born or which century you were born in, these memories, ideas, and beliefs belong to everyone. You're born with them. Students, that's: The. *Collective. Unconscious.*

*

The father walks along the bank to a shallow, sandy area where his family once picnicked. He kneels to touch the water, and a crawfish swims by. He recalls Lisa's squeals upon seeing such creatures around her pale little feet, and he wonders if she still remembers those times, the campfires, the sleeping bags, bathing in the river. What happens to those memories when no one's around to hear them? What about after we're gone? Ain't I already forgotten most of my father's stories? He shakes himself free of this line of thought and rigs up his fishing rods.

Nothing bites at first. His mind drifts back to lunch with his ex-wife on the tailgate. He tries to replay everything he said. Never could talk, he thinks and casts. A subtle bob of the cork. He waits a beat, reels, but he knows by the way the hook feels returning his bait is gone. You leave it alone too long, it'll leave you. He spits.

He catches a few small fish and throws them back, then tries fishing deeper for catfish. After a while, he's content to catch nothing. It's a pleasant day, shady, quiet, and for a moment he forgets who he

is or why he's there. Watching the murky water flow along, gently moving the neon cork, he dissolves into a quiet oblivion. Soon he's staring through the river, and its darkness washes over him.

A sound like a pebble dropped into a fountain, and the bright yellow is gone. He gives the rod a yank to set the hook. The fish runs. He gives it some play, lets it run several yards, and he reels again. A heavy pull. He doesn't want to lose it, so he gives it more line. Enough now. He reels it tight, gives a sharp tug, and with a sound like snapping a taut kite string, the line pops and shoots by his ear.

He swears in disbelief. He pulls a few yards of line from his reel and tests its strength. It pops again in his hands. Dry rot.

He sits on an upturned bucket by his gear and considers trying again. He'd need to run out the rotten line, re-tie, and he decides he's more content to sit and watch the river a while. An empty Mountain Dew bottle floats by, and he thinks about the things he's found in the inlet: freshwater mussels, driftwood, a two-iron golf club (he threw back in the river), and most remarkably, a cube of a rock with strange ridges he took to Marshall University professors who identified the find as a prehistoric camel tooth. He imagines the primordial world, melting into land, its rivers cutting through—the wonders that must've predated any people here. Soon he's picturing the Ohio as it was two and a half centuries ago, populated by its indigenous people, its waters yet unspoiled by civilization. How quiet and clean the world must've once been, but so lonesome now with only echoes of their memory trickling in the water.

He startles at a sound behind him, but he manages to keep perfectly still. A rabbit maybe, a squirrel, or bird. He turns slowly not to frighten whatever's behind him, but then, nothing. A fallen acorn or pinecone, but he doesn't investigate.

The spirits the natives believed in must've existed long before any people, he thinks. The natives might've left, but surely these spirits remain, and so they will when we're all gone. Maybe that's what spirits are—forgotten memories moving among us, hoping we'll hear, hoping we'll remember. He gazes at river and tries to slip back into his former

state, but he cannot shake the feeling of being watched. He empties the crickets and worms onto the ground, grabs his gear, and heads back to the truck, pondering the spirits of the ancient world.

*

Hokoleskwa is not summoned by the American militiamen, but he knows a trip to Fort Randolph is now inevitable. He fears forestalling will result in another Shawnee uprising, more bloodshed. The devastation and senselessness of the French and Indian war has procured in him a quest for peaceable diplomacy with the settlers. After the Battle of Kanawha three years ago, the Shawnee had agreed to stay west of the Ohio and to leave the settlers and the Virginia militia unmolested. Yet even with two rivers between them, altercations between the colonist traders and the Shawnee hunters and fishermen prove unavoidable.

As his canoe crosses the Ohio, he is enamored by the beauty of the rivers, how wide the water stretches from the west bank of the Ohio to the east bank of the Kanawha, and where the rivers merge, the waters are no more turbulent than the wind on his skin, or the clouds blossoming above him.

We will talk again of boundaries and behaviors, he thinks, where to hunt and fish, when to commune and when to refrain, but mostly, we will be told to disappear. The impossibility of his charge is laughable to him. I can tell my village, I can send messengers to surrounding lands, but I could never reach everyone, and even if I could, how do I tell people with no understanding of land ownership they may no longer walk the lands their fathers fished and hunted?

When they reach the other shore, his companions drag in the canoe and place their paddles inside. Before entering the forest, they notice Hokoleskwa lingering by the river. He is staring at the far shore they have left behind. They follow his gaze but see nothing. Nevertheless, he stands contemplating this unseen remnant. One of

the men says his name, and the trance is broken. He follows them into the woods.

Men with guns meet Hokoleskwa and his men before they reach Fort Randolph. They are escorted inside to Captain Arbuckle who angrily asks Hokoleskwa unansweable questions. Arbuckle wants a guarantee the Shawnee will abstain from attacking traffic along the Ohio, but Hokoleskwa can give no such guarantees. They are my people, he says, but their lives are their own.

The three are restrained, separated, and forced to the outer walls of the fort where they wait. The two Shawnee men place their faith in Hokoleskwa and his ability to reason with the white man, but Hokoleskwa feels this time is different. He sits leaning against the wall of the fort, solemn, bereft of words.

Every day of Hokoleskwa's absence, a Shawnee woman is seen kneeling at the shore of the Indian territory. Each day she dips her cupped hands into the water and raises them to the sun. She performs this ritual seven times before returning to the woods. Two settlers camped on the other side witness this occurrence for three consecutive days. They regard the ritual as their secret the first two days, and on the third day an evil wind stirs their hearts. The two men watch as the woman kneels before the water. When she returns to the forest, they launch their small boat and paddle furiously. What folly, they think, as she disappears into the shade, but they press on. When they set foot on the Shawnee shore, they see her return from the shadow. She studies them. Her beauty kindles in them a wicked desire, and like ravening beasts, they seize her. She yields as a startled deer, her eyes wide with terror, and when they are through, they mutilate her with hunting knives, and leave her, it is said, bound to a cypress tree, her entrails used for rope. This is the fate of Hokoleskwa's daughter.

*

JW: Tell us when and where your sighting occurred.

SO: North of the igloos, maybe couple miles from Potters Creek.

Pretty deep into the woods. Must've been early December '67, a week or so before the bridge fell.

JW: Were you with friends...hiking...?

SO: Hunting.

JW: How many people were you with?

SO: Just one.

JW: Did he see it?

SO: He?

JW: Your friend.

SO: A young lady.

JW: And did she see it?

SO: I think.

JW: Tell us about what you saw.

SO: We were up on a steep embankment. In all truth, wasn't much hunting going on. We'd spread out a blanket. It was our place to be alone. Used to go there about every week. Had been for three months. Always carried the dog.

(Here, Overton seemed particularly reticent. I wondered if the interview would continue.)

JW: Is everything okay?

SO: Been a long time. I've never told anyone this. The friend I mentioned—the one whose sister died at the bridge.

JW: You were with his sister?

SO: His girlfriend.

JW: Oh.

SO: Never told him. Don't know if she did. I wasn't much of a hunter. I made a big show of it though. Loaded the truck, dressed out, had the gun, took Sheila—a golden retriever—wasn't even a hunting dog. A good sidekick, but not much of a retriever. The young lady's family owned horses, and she would ride all over McClintic—the TNT area—and we'd meet out there. She was a good girl. I wasn't much of a friend.

JW: Some say a feeling of being watched preceded their encounter. What was your experience?

SO: About an hour of light left, I had a kinda feeling—like I wanted to jump outside myself—couldn't stand being me anymore. I was about to tell her we should end it, come clean. Then the dog startled. She sat up and looked down in the hollow. The horse started scraping his hooves. I told her she ought to get along. Before she could speak, we saw it down there, right up against a tree. I thought my eyes were playing tricks. The sun was nearly gone and everything was shadowy. Thought it might be an odd-shaped tree trunk, but then it floated to the side, and I could see a clear division, daylight between this form and the tree. She almost screamed, but I grabbed her. First thing I thought—if she spooks the horse and we have to go find him, we're done. Everyone would know about us. I looked at the dog. She didn't know what to make of it anymore than we did.

JW: Did you feel threatened?

SO: Not so much threatened, but uneasy, like when you get up in the middle of the night, say three a.m.—you woke up from a dream—and even though you have to go, you don't want to wake and lose the dream, so you leave the lights off. You do your business and you're headed back to bed, and, God help you, you think about the bathroom mirror. It's so dark, and you know if you look, you probably won't see anything, maybe your own outline, but for the life of you, you're terrified you might see something else or another version of you, and for this reason, you can't help but look for yourself.

*

In his attempts to understand the human mind, Jung became a student of human cultures and ancient civilizations. He was fascinated by old stories, folklore, fairy tales, myths, and legends. He looked for patterns in histories from various continents and cultures. Jung called these archetypes.

You all remember Noah and the flood. If you had Mrs. Hardy for world lit., then you read the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Remember the cradle of civilization, Mesopotamia? Turns out if you live between two rivers, from time to time the rain's going to flush out you and your whole tribe. Imagine with me for a second, a) you live near two rivers, b) a great tragedy strikes your village—both of those should come easy—and c) you live in a time without instant mass-communication. After the tragedy subsides, how do you move on or cope, and how does this change your worldview or your ideas of God? Human nature drives survivors to make sense of these disasters. In your despair, you might even be compelled to write it all down to sort it out or maybe to warn future generations of the possibility of another flood. Fast-forward thousands of years and you get what Jung noticed in these archetypes: evidence of our collective unconscious.

So the great flood's an archetypal story or event, but Jung also found similarities in imagery, symbols, and characters across cultures, which brings me—finally, right?—to Point Pleasant's own legend, the Mothman. Or IS he our very own?

Hopefully the slides will be working. Here's an ancient winged creature from the east called the Garuda. The Garuda, a humanoid bird-like creature, can be found both in Hindu and Buddhist mythology. As I'm sure you know, most of the original Mothman eyewitnesses didn't call it a moth or a man—what did they call it? Right, the bird—the big bird.

What about the western world? Here we see the Thunderbird from Native American legends. These huge birds, though not humanoid like Garuda, were fierce symbols of speed and power. The Thunderbird bears similarities to creatures called Rocs, present in many cultures across the world.

These all seem foreign to us now, but what about winged creatures from our own culture? Here we are: angels and demons. Light and dark. Good and bad. These aren't so unfamiliar. Now that we're in our symbolism wheelhouse, let's bring it back to the Mothman. What do you think: angel or demon?

In Jung's list of archetypes, he often ascribes names to recurring figures from these old stories such as the wise old man, the great mother, the father, the child, the god, the devil, the hero, and so forth. One interesting archetypal figure is the trickster. The god, the devil, the hero—these are fairly straightforward—but what of this trickster? Loki from Norse mythology, Hermes from Greek, and the raven from Native American legends. The trickster is more complex than other figures. His motives are unclear. He's mischievous and cunning, a shapeshifter, often an agent of chaos. Goodness, this sounds like our Mothman. Certainly the shapeshifting might account for the eyewitness discrepancies. Was it furry or feathery? Gray or brown? Man or bird? As for chaos, well this fits nicely with the prophecy theory and the bridge disaster, doesn't it?

*

The father sits alone in Harris Steak House, downtown Point Pleasant. It's almost 6 p.m., which is typically when the old-timers occupy tables in the back. The father is finishing dinner, listening to them talk politics when a young man enters with two women who appear to be family. They ask an older lady behind the counter, the restaurant's manager, about the Mothman museum, and the men shift in their seats; some groan. She tells them they've missed it by an hour, but it'll be open tomorrow morning. One woman says they plan to be well on their way home by then and were only stopping through, they admit, as Mothman tourists.

Delighted, the manager shows them all the Mothman merchandise the diner has to offer. The father hears the men in the back grumble and chuckle as the lady talks faster and in a higher register.

"She loves an audience, don't she?" one old-timer says.

"Just trying to move a few t-shirts," another replies.

"Yeah, Phil, where's your Mothman t-shirt I bought for your birthday?"

They laugh.

"Lining my granddaughter's dog kennel, I believe," Phil says.

The manager says to the tourists, "I never saw the Mothman, but my sister-in-law did, and her mother was visited by the men in black," and the tourists are eating it up. "A lady who comes here quite often saw the UFOs."

"I hadn't heard about the UFOs," one woman says.

"Oh, then you should read this book." "This one's full of eyewitness interviews. This is the newest edition. It has a recent interview most haven't heard."

"Oh?" one woman says, taking the book.

"My picture's on page 139..." the lady nearly sings.

"Oh! Then we have to have one," the woman says.

Before they leave, the manager signs their books under her picture. She walks over to the father and refills his Coke. "On the house," she says and smiles.

The old men in the back applaud. She does a little curtsey.

It's a pretty common scene. The father remembers purchasing the same book of interviews when he first moved across the river from his family. Those first months living alone he read all the books and online stories he could find to fill the time. Since then he's frequented the restaurant often enough that he's actually overheard locals discuss the Mothman.

"It's the Chief Cornstalk curse," he'd overheard one man say, "and it didn't end with the bridge collapse. Look at it this way," he said. "What's special about Point Pleasant, geographically speaking, I mean?"

"The river?" another replied.

"Not only the Ohio River, but the Kanawha, too. There's river towns all up and down the Ohio River, and we're just another one of them. But that two rivers meet right here—for most places, historically speaking—that would create a kind of hub for transportation, trading, development, growth. Trace the Ohio River, what do you find at the next junction of two rivers? Parkersburg. The next junction, Marietta. The next, *Pittsburgh*. What about the Kanawha? Trace it to the next

junction, Charleston. So how come Point Pleasant ain't another Pittsburgh, or at least a damn Parkersburg? How come we ain't had the economic growth they've had?"

"I don't know."

The curse, of course. But it's hard to know what to believe and when to reserve skepticism. The father likes their speculations, how the Mothman gives locals and strangers alike a bonding point. Nevertheless, after these six years, he would never initiate a conversation about the local legends, Point Pleasant, Gallipolis; none of these is home, and this is not his story.

He leaves a ten on the table and steps out into the evening.

*

Though Hokoleskwa never hears of his daughter's fate, one night, bound and derelict inside Fort Randolph, he reads in the gold of a waning moon a melancholic sign, and he understands the world has changed, and the time for speaking has passed. Once known as a great orator, he now perceives words as impotent trifles, and never speaks again.

Ellinipsico, Hokoleskwa's son, comes to Fort Randolph this same night to petition for the return of his father. Before he can enter the gates, a scuffle ensues resulting in a Shawnee killing a militiaman. In retaliation, a mob of soldiers storms to Hokoleskwa and fills his body with rifle balls. His two companions are similarly executed along with his son, and they are all buried within the fort walls.

Shortly thereafter, one of the ravagers of Hokoleskwa's daughter is found with an arrow in his chest, prompting his accomplice to confess their sins. The murderer is imprisoned and executed. News of the unrest in the western part of the Virginian territory reaches the ears of governor and Revolutionary War hero Patrick Henry. Henry is sickened by the details of this debacle, shocked at the barbarism of the settlers, Arbuckle, and the militia, and though he takes action

to reprimand all culpable parties, ultimately no one is charged with Chief Cornstalk's murder, owing to a lack of damning testimony.

Beyond the sting of injustice, the Shawnee consider the burial of Hokoleskwa and his companions the crowning insult of the whole affair, after which, the Shawnee are purported to have warned the settlers and the militiamen of an inexorable curse—the wandering spirit of Hokoleskwa will forever haunt the land causing heartache and ruin to all who remain near the ground where his blood was spilled. However, the Shawnee do not believe in curses in spite of the often-perpetuated myth of the "Indian curse," nor do they believe wrath to be in the nature of Hokoleskwa.

Decades after his burial, the Chief's remains are exhumed and re-interred in a graveyard next to the Mason County courthouse, and more than a century later, moved again to a memorial location in present day Point Pleasant. In the wake of the Mothman sightings of 1966 and 1967, the Cornstalk story garnered public interest as people searched for theories to explain the flurry of sightings. The Mothman, alleged to be the harbinger of catastrophic events, was first seen in the year prior to the Silver Bridge collapse, which resulted in the deaths of nearly fifty people. Many rationalized that the constant disruption of Cornstalk's remains contributed to his spirit's unrest and subsequent lashing out, hence the Mothman, hence the bridge collapse, hence "Chief Cornstalk's Curse."

Yet sufferers always seek answers. One Shawnee descendent posed that perhaps the Silver Bridge collapse was the earth's way of reconciling, not the woes surrounding Hokoleskwa's murder, but the unnatural treaty which profaned the sacred river, transforming its water into a border between brothers. The earth would not abide a bridge to be a symbol of unity in light of this transgression. "Furthermore," the descendent offered, "labeling Point Pleasant's hardships a curse only serves to make victims of the trespassers."

Over two centuries later, few even think on the ill-fated chief and his people. Mothman tourists, after exhausting the sights downtown, often find their way to the river where the mark of Hokoleskwa can be

found: a 150 foot-long floodwall mural depicting notable scenes from his life, and a stainless steel statue of the chief himself, forever gazing homeward across the Ohio. There he watches as the seasons pass, and while his people grow fewer along the Ohio River valley, the seldom-heard Shawnee legends still can be felt by those who seek the solitude of the Kanawha and the Ohio. Though the words of their ancestors fade, the two life-giving rivers will flow undisturbed through time, enduring as they have before the settlers or even the Shawnee and the settlers, and continuing after those who remain are gone, when the notion of any curse is long since forgotten.

*

JW: How far away were you?

SO: At first, maybe fifty yards. I take the girl's hand and lead her to the horse. She climbs the saddle, watching it the whole time. I look away, untying the reins from a tree, and when I look back, it's gone. Before I can speak, she takes off. I look at our blanket and the dog's gone, too. I grab my flashlight and run towards the truck, seven minutes or so 'til I can see the clearing. When I make the end of the path, the sun's almost gone. Something tells me to stop. I turn around. There it is. Ten feet off. Ten feet. I could've walked up and touched it.

JW: What did it look like?

SO: You know it's there, you guess at its figure, but your mind won't let your eyes make sense of it. So dark. You try to look into it, but it's like you can only look through it.

JW: Did you see the eyes?

SO: Not the big, red eyes you hear about. But I know it was looking at me. The way it stood there—I could feel it.

JW: Did you see any wings?

SO: Could I call it wings? I don't know. It wasn't shaped like a person. I know those biology professors tried to say it was a bird.

JW: Sandhill crane.

SO: It wasn't a crane. I guess you can't blame anyone who didn't see it for not believing, but don't try to tell *me* what *I* saw.

JW: What happened next?

SO: I think we were both waiting to see what the other would do. The longer I stood, my mind sorta cleared, and it was so quiet.

Don't know when it left, but at one point, I realized I was looking at an empty path. It was gone. How long I'd been standing there, I have no idea, or how long it'd been gone.

I walked to the truck, and the dog was in the bed waiting.

Driving home, I was thinking what to do. I couldn't tell anyone without lying about who I was with. I could say I was hunting. More lies.

When I got home, I called up the young lady. Her father answered. I nearly hung up. When she picked up, I asked what she would do. I said, "How are you going to tell people what we saw?" She said, "I didn't see nothing," and hung up.

JW: Why?

SO: The truth was difficult enough. Then his sister drowned. How could either of us tell him? Just so we could start to feel less guilty? He didn't deserve the burden; we didn't deserve the reprieve.

JW: That's why you waited so long to talk about your experience?

SO: Partly. I guess the old timers in Point Pleasant will know the people I'm talking about. Not many people owned horses back then, but she's dead now. Me and my friend lost touch after the bridge. I don't know if he'll forgive me, if he'd even care—it's been a long time—or if he'll ever read this.

JW: Why talk now after so many years?

SO: It's a terrible thing to see something like that and have no one to talk it over with. I'd only see the young lady in town afterwards. If no one was around, I'd try to bring it up, but she'd walk away.

I know what I saw, but so many years later, you second-guess yourself. Then I think back to the dog. I saw the look Sheila gave it—and it wasn't like her to run off. I know it sounds crazy, but I went back up there maybe two months after the bridge. See, I'd left the blanket we'd sat on and a few other things. I took the dog with me, but when we got there, she whined, wouldn't get out of the truck. I went back through the woods to our spot, and the blanket was gone.

I was seconds away from losing my mind. I thought, maybe I made the whole damn thing up. I stood there thinking a while. It was quiet and cold. No birds. A breeze stirred the trees, and I heard a whipping sound like wings. I looked up, high in a pine tree. There it was. The blanket. Don't know how it got up there. Didn't look tied or anything, but it wasn't coming down. Too high to climb. I can't tell you how many times I've thought of it waving up there and felt...

JW: Do you think of the sighting often?

SO: Remember the mirror, the two kinds of people? There's them that can keep their eyes down, stagger off to bed, and go on dreaming; then there's the other kind. I wish I was the first. I don't know what I saw that night, but I'd give my soul if I could see it again.

Stan grew quiet after this point in the interview. It was clear he'd grown tired of questions, but I wondered if he had anything else to share. He walked me to the door, but before leaving, I asked him if sharing his story had removed any burden the years of silence had brought. Stan said, "You'd like to think so." I stepped outside, but before I reached the stairs, he asked, "You ever seen something you can't explain?" I didn't know what to say, but before I could answer, he said, "When you do, pray that you're not alone," and he closed the door.

*

Point Pleasant's Mothman—a winged creature? Yes. A trickster? Possibly. But if I were to be so bold, allow me to propose an alternate archetype for the Mothman: the Witness—a being whose primary function is simply to bear witness to all good and ill that transpires. For every justice or injustice, the witness exists as an ever-present, objective watcher who cannot interfere. Lack of communication prohibits him from being a prophet, and failure to impose his will, if he even has one, prohibits him from being hero or villain.

I believe it is our unique, individual consciousness that inspires us to mislabel him as a trickster. Simply put, he looks different to each of us because we all perceive differently. Just because we don't

understand something doesn't mean we're being "tricked." But what does classifying the Mothman's archetypal role have to do with anything?

Perhaps the Mothman is merely a psychological construct of our collective unconscious rather than an unexplained monster—a witness figure that pre-dates written history and might exist in all cultures. I'm not suggesting the dozens of eyewitnesses around town, several of them speaking later today, didn't see what they saw, nor am I attributing these sightings to a mass hysteria. I fully believe they saw *something*. But could it be that however one perceives or interprets the symbol of the Mothman—that this is the real mystery here?

That's it. We're the mystery.

I often wonder how the Mothman legend has affected the local psyche here, our collective consciousness. That's Durkheim, children. No need to write that one down; that's next week. Or what about the individual consciousness? One quick story and I'm done.

Late one afternoon, I'd stopped into Harris' for a bite. A man I didn't recognize was eating alone. We began to talk. He said he wasn't from the area but his wife was—said he'd been living in Gallipolis a year or so. I told him we had this in common, I'm not from the area either, and I told him I taught history and psychology at the school. After a lull, he looked at one of the Mothman t-shirts for sale on the wall and said he just recalled a dream from the previous night:

He was in a green, shady neighborhood filled with great old trees and houses. There were happy, laughing children everywhere, and he felt an overwhelming peace to see their smiles. As this feeling consumed him, he noticed his feet were rising from the earth. As the feeling intensified, he rose higher and higher, faster and faster, first above the street lamps, then the treetops, and into the clouds. He sailed among the trees, the rooftops, the chimneys and steeples, then down through the streets and back to the children. Naturally, the children were in ecstasy, and then the man discovered something peculiar: he couldn't speak. Inside he felt the greatest joy, he said, like a light beaming from inside of him, but when he tried to share this joy, he was stifled, completely incapable of speaking, and immediately

his joy turned to despair. Why would he be given this great gift only to be robbed of the ability to share his gift with the world? He said he felt a real, moral responsibility to help others learn to fly. He tried. He showed them how he flew, but he couldn't tell them how to do it for themselves, and this, he said, was horrifying.

After he left, I pondered his dream. I looked back to the t-shirt on the wall, and I thought how nightmarish it would be to possess this gift of premonition without any means of communication, and for the first time in my life, I felt myself growing sympathetic for the creature, this would-be prophet, damned forever to be the silent witness.

Each of us finds our own experiences so overwhelming; it's easy to feel utterly alone at times. How can we hope to articulate what we've been through? Perhaps the Mothman is the manifestation of our need to feel inextricably linked to one another? After all, it's what brought us here today. Thank you.

*

The father walks to the Riverfront, past the floodwall. The sun has almost set, and the fiery sky is fading orange into lavender. Distant voices of children greet him as he reaches the steps leading down to the river. They are sitting, dangling their feet off the dock. He remembers his daughter at their age, right before they'd moved back to Gallipolis to be near his wife's family, a few years before the separation.

He hears footsteps behind him—the tourists from the diner. They ask if he'll take a picture of them with the sunset over the river. They thank him and ask if he's from Point Pleasant.

"No," he says.

"Oh," they reply, congenially enough.

"I'm from across the river." It's not entirely untrue.

"*Oh!*" they say with sincerity this time.

One woman says, "We came here to check out the sights, maybe see the Mothman." They laugh. "I don't suppose you've seen him?" she asks.

"No, but I've met several who have." An overstatement, but a small one.

And he tells them about how he ended up in Gallipolis and Point Pleasant. He tells them about how to get to the TNT area, the igloos, and the fairgrounds where the power plant used to be. He tells them a long story about Chief Cornstalk he once read from the Internet. He tells them about the Cornstalk curse, the theories he's heard about the Mothman, the men in black, the UFO sightings, and the bridge collapse, and when he finishes, it is very dark, but they won't let him leave, they insist, unless he poses with them for one last picture, and as they walk away to their car, he hears them say how lucky they were to have met such a knowledgeable local—another half-truth he allows so that others might believe.

Yet when he returns to the Riverfront, the children are gone and it is quiet. In a year she'll be in college, he thinks, and if she goes out-of-state, what's holding me here? What kind of life will I be leaving behind? An ex-wife who's moved on? Even more infrequent visits from Lisa? Would I move back east? Keep trucking? What am I here? He feels like one of the steel statues to his back—like solemn-faced Cornstalk, his eyes ever-fixed towards Ohio.

He leans against the railing and looks down both ends of the river at the two bridges and wonders about the Silver Bridge and how much of it still remains in the water. Lights begin to appear on the hillside; on the bridge, a set of red taillights cross into Ohio and disappear.

The father remembers reading how the Mothman was seen high over the suspension towers, some say perched, some say flying. He looks at the Silver Memorial Bridge and imagines the view atop its towers: yellow and white orbs of light below—streetlights, cars, and houses; pinpoint stars above—the longer he looks, the more they appear; high enough for the ambling life beneath him to seem governed by some great invisible child, yet too close to the earth to belong to the celestial procession above—both expansive worlds remote, their lights like scattered lives, forever adrift in a river of darkness. f

Claire McQuerry

DECADENCE

It delighted me for introducing
a new word by the way the word
tasted. Grandmother served the cake in thin

wedges she'd cap with whipped cream. When I announced
I was destined to be a nun someday, mother said,
your grandfather would have liked that.

After snowfall, the light was clean as showered
skin. May everything always be so
impeccable, I prayed. The rice pudding was white

on white on white: *Whisk salt with sugar; add*
scalded milk and steamed rice. I imagined
that all life's snarls might be rinsed clean away

by the acid of prayer, that a life
might be spared, by separation,
all manner of mess and concession. *Cloister*,

from the Latin for lock. The bone china
came from Grandmother's glass case. After dessert
she'd soak the plates in a bath of suds. Some things

cloy with just one bite too many. I once thought
decadence meant better than the everyday, meant dark
silk drawn between the fingers,

all the body's senses telescoped to one
pleasure. It wasn't until later that I learned it meant
decay, from the Latin for to fall down or away.

M.E. MacFarland

HELEN IN AMERICA

Just like a Kennedy she had nine thousand ghosts
courting in her veins, nine thousand names

etched on the sterling heirloom she wore
only for the camera. How could we not admire

her eccentricities? Terra japonica kept in a jar
and dusted over meals, her leaving one eyelet empty

on each laced boot, nine thousand strands of hair
in a helical braid. A prehistoric fascination, we admit.

The best of all potential things rising from the river of her
lips, the canals of her fingers, so obvious even in the gloss

of magazines. In the court of desire all the men
are guilty. Who here has not been a thief with his eyes?

Blair Hurley

THE WAY WE MEET

This is the house where we meet, and it is the house of a dead man. Maybe this explains everything that will come after. We are both volunteers for the clean-up crew after the hurricane, riding motorboats through the flood that the storm has left behind. We are puffy and indistinguishable in our orange life jackets. Your hair has the shaggy ducktail in the back of a grad student who doesn't cut his hair enough. When the boat nudges into a tree, a bird I think is perched on a branch falls into our boat dead. It's a crow, stiff as if it were stuffed. You grab it by the foot and throw it away.

Check every room, and mark the door, our guide says, dropping us at a house. He's motoring on to the next, and then he'll come back to pick us up.

We slide out into the water, our knees swaying and buckling. The house saw better days even before the muddy water crept up the sides, invited itself in. We're somewhere on the edge of disaster, heading into the middle, and we hold hands, we strangers, scared to go in. We'll admit later that we both volunteered for the thrill, to participate in a crisis. We both had this fear of missing the life happening outside our doors.

The white wooden door is sea gray now and warped. The weight of the water keeps us from moving it. We have to lean on it together until the water sloughs a path that allows the door to move.

We're in a narrow front hall, mud-splashed, smelling of seawater. We see a floral rug emerging out of the water, climbing the staircase; it's a foul brown now. All around us, there's garbage floating: the water, we've seen from other houses, has a way of uprooting things,

dredging up the contents of closets, setting drawers of clothes and Christmas ornaments loose into the world. We wade down the narrow hall, calling, Is anybody there? No one answers, of course. The evacuation was efficient and massive in scale. We are mostly looking for animals, or for dangerous electrical damages.

Then we go into the kitchen, and there he is: the dead man.

He's sitting perfectly upright at the kitchen table. His eyes are cloudy, but they are half- open. He is old: he has the rigid, proudly erect posture of another generation. One hand rests on the table, and the other is clenched in his lap. He could be having his morning coffee, or just be sitting quietly, waiting for his wife or his kids to come tumbling down the stairs. It seems staged. He's a whisker away from being alive. I feel that we are violating his privacy somehow, intruding on a scene we were not meant to see. And I'm suddenly sure, by the way you back away, head down, that you feel it too.

Holy Mother of God, you say. And then you say a prayer, something I've never heard. It makes me think, Please. Not one of these. But that seems to be the extent of it, and you fall silent.

If we find a body we are meant to call it in right away. Bodies are all kinds of health hazards. But we look at each other for a moment.

How did it happen? you ask.

Drowned, I say.

But how could you—while sitting there?

I don't know.

His face is composed and grave. The brows are knit as though you have asked a tiresome question. He is an old man, the face craggy as a mountain range. He is wearing a plaid shirt and khakis and a grandpa sweater. The hand resting on the table is clenched into a fist, and before I can say anything you go over and try to open it.

Don't touch! I say, but you ignore me. The fist is as hard as wood. You can't get it open.

I think, germs. I'm standing in the same water as a corpse, sharing a bath with it. *Do not* touch, the Coast Guard told us. But what's so dirty about a body anyway?

You look at me and we listen to the alien sound of water moving through a house. We can see the filthy high water mark on the floral wallpaper; it got all the way to the top. Now we are supposed to leave the house and mark the front door. But you're heading upstairs, and I'm following.

We look at the framed photos on the wall by the stairs as we climb, looking for a familiar face. There is a family with two daughters, a husband and wife, their photos soft-focus and painfully sweet, staged and clumsy. But I can't see the face of the dead man in this father, caught doing chores by the photographer; leaning on his rake with a smile. Death has sunken the canyons of his face, made them deep ravines. He isn't the man in the image, or he hasn't been for a long time.

You're already in the first bedroom upstairs, opening drawers. This is a girl's room, with a pink carpet, toy horses on the shelves, two little twin beds made up neat as a poem. You touch the dust on the backs of the toys.

Our Coast Guard liaison will be back soon but we keep moving through bedrooms, flipping through books. In the master bedroom there is no sign of a woman's presence; a plain double bed with a plaid wool blanket, men's clothing in the drawers. He must be a widower, I say, and then we're both struck by the strangeness of that statement, as though he's still alive.

You pull back the sheets of the bed and get in, letting your boots drip off the edge. We're muddying up this tidy, airless room, ruining it. I want to run. I want to seal up this house like a time capsule, and leave the man sitting in peace at his kitchen table. Maybe he didn't drown at all. Maybe he had a heart attack while he was sitting there and the waters came up around him, happy in his place. Or maybe he knew the flood was coming and sat there to meet it, determined to go down with the ship of his home.

Maybe when the first icy water touched his shins he clenched his fists and let it come.

Or maybe none of these things happened. I can't really say.

Come on, you say, patting the bed. Then I see what you have discovered; tucked in on one side, laid carefully with its shoulders on the pillow, is a long lace nightgown.

Let's see what it's like, you say. I take my boots off and get in.

And later on our kids will ask you, so that's when you knew you were in love? And you'll say, no. That's when we knew we were both curious. f

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