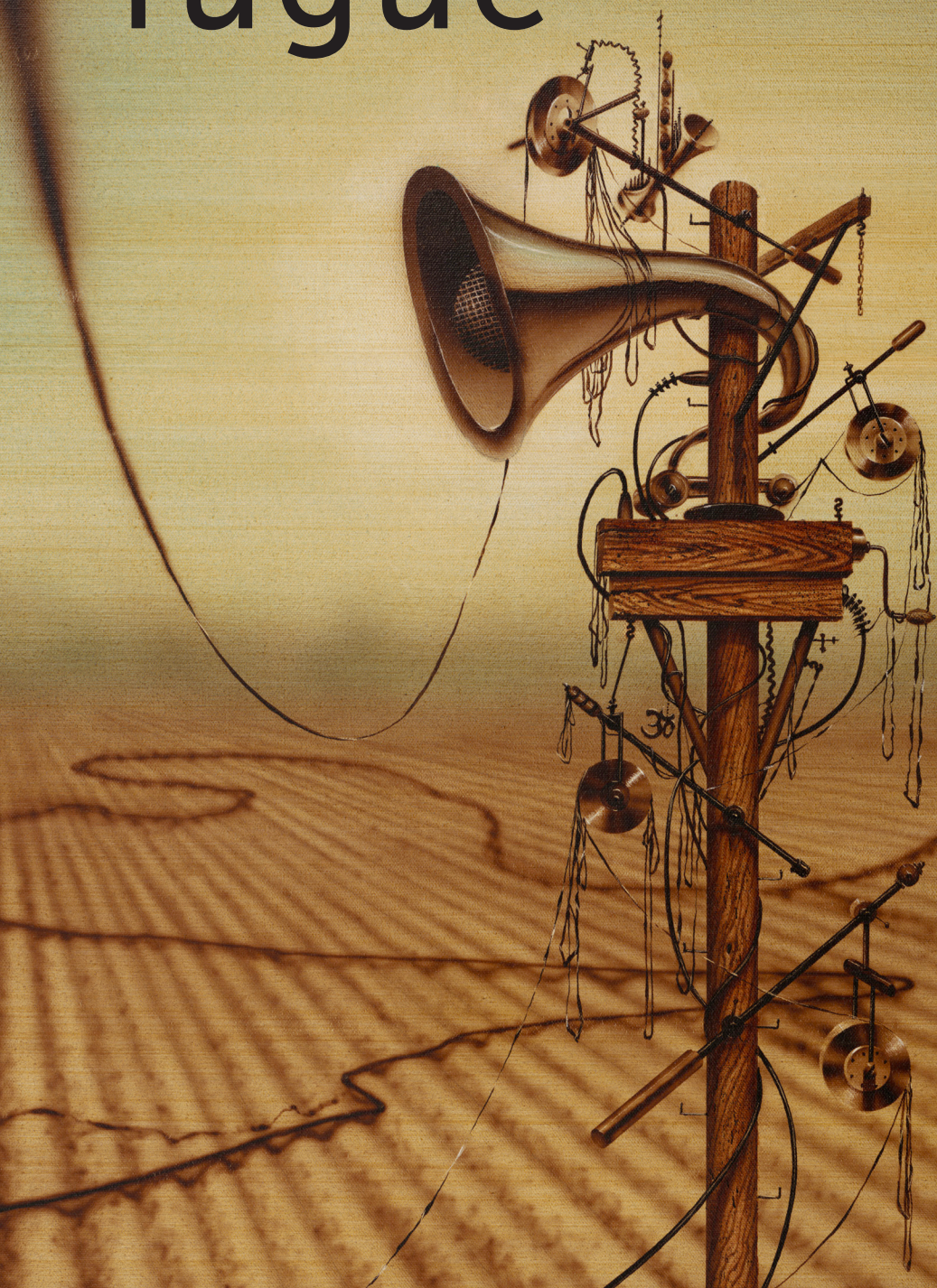


fugue⁵³



f u g u e

Issue 53

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Fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and visual media submissions are accepted September 1 through May 1. All material received outside this period will be returned unread. 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 welcome simultaneous submissions under the condition that if accepted elsewhere we are immediately notified. Once you have submitted a piece to us, please wait for a response on that piece before submitting again.

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In loving memory of Jason Mastaler

15TH ANNUAL RON McFARLAND PRIZE
FOR POETRY

JUDGED BY TRACI BRIMHALL

WINNER: "JUNO" BY MALLORY IMLER POWELL

"In Mallory Imler Powell's 'Juno,' my synapses and valves gallop at the same speed, keeping pace with each new meaning the poem unfolds or reaches back into itself to find. I love the startling accuracy of Imler Powell's images paired with the poem's historical engagement and intellectual rigor. She crafts something that has not only the ripe texture of those sweet ovaries of summer, but makes a beauty that's only fathomable from the most painstaking intimacies."

—Traci Brimhall

MALLORY IMLER POWELL

JUNO

woman (n): a dessert made of strawberries

e.g. woman full of vital force superfluous form
here the fertile field of mine fallow

obscene (v): to tweeze each seed from sweet

e.g. ink and fruit such bloody scenes

strawberries may cause neurological deterioration
cancer metabolic disorders developmental disabilities
reproductive difficulty divorce

canon (n): the curated burden of history

e.g. I can't will myself to children
and so we separately

transcendence (n): how do you summarize our silence

transgression (n): when the gun gets hold of my ovaries

transcend the canon enter

the future (n): what do we need now

separately

without obscene reminders
you may stop remembering me

future (v): when will you taste like a long time ago
feel like stale sugar on unripe fruit

transgression means

the nature of aversion is separation
which means I future the future

wherein a black bag a cat across my path
wherein I count each smoke spot each blackened cervix

we must each imagine a better future (n):
the life we want

e.g. the good grease
of a cervix-shaped onion ring

the aversive future strobes overhead, strawberry
red as the blood of the broken sonnet
my ex-husband loved

he said
mother (v): the possibility by which you heal yourself

sitting with a peacock armed with a cannon
wearing a goatskin cloak
I mother the future

but don't want to make more
of molecules rusted in this useless transgression
red as strawberries

e.g. have I transgressed the future's vital force
as transgression have I favored the taste a woman

automatic response (n):
I don't enjoy being human

when I'm done surviving
this thicket of myself
whisper in my ear it's not real

call me
populona (n): the proper name for a woman who loses
the bride's girdle

or a sovereign protectress, inevitable and necessary
outgrowth of fecundity

or a woman peopled by epithets

reflection (n): a non-mother woman for whom I sacrifice

 a lamb or white sow

i.e. can we let each other want

 what we want

i.e. don't you love the obscene scent

 of a burnt match, lighting the canon

i.e. have you ever seen a woman

 extract each seed from a strawberry
 and plant them in herself

15TH ANNUAL FUGUE PRIZE
FOR PROSE

JUDGED BY EDAN LEPUCKI

WINNER: "SOME WHALES HAVE HEARTS THE SIZE OF VOLKSWAGEN
BEETLES" BY EMILY MYRICK

"Emily Myrick's 'Some Whales Have Hearts the Size of Volkswagen Beetles' offers us the elegant, simple structure of one scene: a woman coming upon beached whales and the group of people trying to save them, to send them back into the water. This story is startling not only in its distinct, sensual imagery, but also, in what we don't know about our heroine. I love how the story mentions one particularly frightening moment in her past, and brings it back at the end.

It's beautiful, surprising, and moving."

—Edan Lepucki

SOME WHALES HAVE HEARTS THE SIZE OF
VOLKSWAGEN BEETLES

From afar they look like black tents. She is running, an everyday ritual. And then the tents and the small crowd that surround them, an invasion of her quiet beach, makes her slow herself.

Up close, they resemble rain-soaked garbage bags and are smaller than she thought a whale could be—only twice the length, she estimates, of her own body. When she thinks *boy scouts* and not *whale saviors*, she tries to skirt the group, veering left over a dune and into a ditch of powder-soft sand and arrowgrass. She stumbles but continues until her pink tennis shoes fill with sand and, finding no other reasonable exit, crawls her way back to the beach. As she scales another dune, she comes face to face with the slick skin and vacant eyes of a once mythic creature, which now seems so ordinary, blinking back at her with no recognition like any animal might—a squirrel or a dove.

All around her whales weep in high-pitched chirps and sputters. There's also the sound of water lapping against the shore or falling from buckets onto bodies. Some, like her, watch from the edges of the scene with disbelieving faces. The people she saw from down the beach, the not-boy scouts, wear wetsuits or reflective vests or some wear regular clothes, but all of them work with immediacy. They pour water onto the heaving black mounds; they dig troughs that carry water inland. They wrap whales in saturated bed sheets. They walk into the water to encourage the rest of the pod to turn around and abandon the already beached. They whisper and sing lullabies or hymns, and one woman with long black hair and a silver medicine wheel

pendant around her neck sings something that sounds like a whale song. Everyone stops to listen. In the woman's song she hears an ancient knowledge, a kind of communion. Jealousy washes across her.

An older man bears toward her and hands her a bucket. He wears a lab coat. "Wanna help?" He asks. When she stands stupefied, he gestures at the ocean and continues. "Head into the water, fill her up. Find one that's not yet getting attention and douse 'em."

There are more than twenty, she counts, and many with no people. "I wouldn't know...I've never done anything like this." She stumbles over a protestation, but the man is already walking away, waving his hand in the air as if to tell her she has no choice.

She wades in and submerges her bucket. The water is heavy, sloshing onto the beach as she makes her way to a lonely calf. Its tail slaps in slow repetitions against the sand, as if it could lift off, swim home through the air.

She is afraid of the whale but tries not to be. She tells herself, *remember your bravest moment and reach beyond it*, but she draws a blank. Later, after a glass of wine and a shower, the phantom of the ocean's rhythm still trapped inside her body, she will think of the time she blew a tire going ninety on the freeway. She was speeding her way back to Atlanta, her father having just had his first of several heart attacks. The car wrenched toward the median and then away, the back end heaving itself forward, compelled by physics or other forces she couldn't name, before she managed to slow and steady it, finally pulling over to the shoulder.

At first, she drizzles the seawater across its body, beginning at the tail. She empties a whole bucket that way, and then another, gaining more confidence in her work each time. She goes back for a third bucket and splashes it quickly across the whale, feeling now that quantity is more important. Then a fourth bucket

and a fifth. The whale expels bursts of air and water from its blowhole and slaps its tail in response. Her arms begin to tire.

After another bucket and another, she notices an old gash near the dorsal fin. A scar almost the length of her forearm and thick as a quarter. And then another near the tail but small and arched like a bite mark. She reaches to trace them with a single finger and finds the skin smooth as a chalkboard.

Her students would never believe that she has touched a whale. She teaches third grade, and in the middle of the year, the class begins a unit on mammals. Whales are among her students' favorites because they field trip every year to the aquarium and walk through a tunnel made of glass that holds thousands of gallons of seawater and two beluga whales. They've called the whales molding clay and marshmallows and clouds, their white, lumpy bodies casting shadows across the children as they move silently above them. It is an exquisite kind of inversion that even the children are aware of as they move, also silently, beneath them.

She's developed multiple lessons on sea life, but no days are as stirring as the one on whales. One year, she carried two spools of craft paper to the gym, unrolled them across the waxed and shining floor and drew the shape of a blue whale, true to size. It took over an hour just to complete the outline. The following day, the class took the finished product, too big to unroll in the classroom, outside to the blacktop. After they unfolded the drawing, she beckoned the children to stand on top to see whether the entire class could fit inside. In the outline, she had sketched its heart in the shape of a car, having read that the heart of a blue whale could grow as big as a Volkswagen Beetle. She pointed out the car-heart in the drawing and asked the four children closest to stand inside. *See how big?* she said. Unable to believe it herself.

There are things she has learned about whales she will never tell her students: Tilikum, a trained orca that performed

at the Victoria Sealand, killed three humans while in captivity. Some whales hunt sea lions, dolphins, or even sea turtles. She once watched a video of two whales tossing the lifeless body of a penguin between them as if they played a game.

She reaches for her bucket and walks toward the ocean's foamy edge. She notices, as several already have, the dark, nebulous masses creeping closer to the shore as the tide begins to retreat. Many are abandoning their buckets and wading in. The spectators begin to disrobe, losing jackets and shoes, and lower themselves into the water. They lock arms in a human chain, an artificial barrier, which she too joins, still in her tennis shoes and running clothes. She weaves her arm through the bent arm of the woman next to her, then bends her other arm so that her neighbor can do the same. The woman who knows the whale song still sings somewhere up the chain. The whales' bodies crash against her legs, their undersides careening against the ocean floor. She is nearly chest deep and wobbling, but she digs her feet into the sand and steadies herself against her neighbors.

She has learned enough about whales to captivate eight year olds, but there are limits to her knowledge. There are some things, though, even the scientists don't know. For instance, why whales beach themselves. Frightened by a cargo barge, disoriented by sonar, riddled with disease. The studies are inconclusive. Due to their pod mentality, they assume many whales simply follow other members ashore out of loyalty. Often, the drive to beach is so strong they will drag their bodies ashore even after humans have returned them to sea.

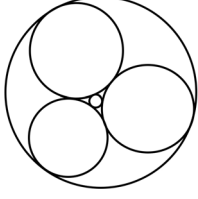
Behind them, the voice of the man in the lab coat says there's a crane coming in from the aquarium with a sling that can lift and return the whales to sea. It will arrive soon, he says. Everyone in the chain cheers except her. Instead, she concentrates on the whale in front of her as it again knocks against her body, requesting admission. She feels his immense weight, even in the near weightlessness of water, and imagines he calls

out to the bodies on the shore in a pitch and cadence she can't hear. She hopes her body, made buoyant and tentative in the perpetual gesture of the ocean, might be enough to hold him.

She knows his heart isn't as big as a car, that his whole body might fit inside her Honda, but she imagines him like the drawing sprawled across the blacktop anyway. The beating muscle in his chest like pistons firing, automatic as a machine, barreling down an interstate at ninety, cavalier and inconsolable, the wreck inevitable. ¶

POEM FOLLOWING DESCARTES' THEOREM

Descartes' theorem states that for every four kissing, or mutually tangent circles, the radii of the circles satisfy a certain quadratic equation. By solving this equation, one can construct a fourth circle tangent to three original circles.



I wish this were a hotel with my grandmother's painting
on the wall, but of course my father doesn't remember
it or where it went, or that a perky bouquet is all it depicts—
the flowers together as if tied while they were still rooted
to earth though actually they dangle in air as if no one has ever held
them except someone invisible, someone with no fingerprints,
and my grandmother could be fingerless because I don't remember
her except a story my dad tells me of how in her last years
smoke and speech and a kiss slithered out of a hole in her throat.

My father has changed the subject to how he should
have killed himself after his first wife left. I say
my preferred fantasy is stones in my pockets,

a river so sure of where it is going that it would take me like you do when we enact my fantasy of being bound and blindfolded in the kitchen because there's

so much that can't be controlled in a kitchen, and I'd like you to control what happens to me in a kitchen. This morning you said you heard me cry, *baby*, as if scared

and *baby, baby, baby* was all I could say when giving birth to our son, and I was talking to you, and the baby, and god a little bit too, and it works because god is kind of a baby.

But this morning you heard it and you almost called me to see if I was ok. I wonder why this stray voice of mine was talking to you, baby, and what she needed to tell you

when you've already assured me that it's me you can't save. In a story I tell my son, he saves a stone from having to be just a stone, with a kiss, of course and it's a whole shapeshifting

world which completely ignores physics except that once you change, you're not allowed to remember anything sane that happened to you in your previous shape. He accepts this because he sees me forget where we're going and also the names of parts of my body, which he points to like one of those pioneer statues that always wants a new place to claim. It couldn't be my grandmother's painting, her roses were uncomfortably dark, as if they'd lived through too many gazers' ideas of how red a rose should be.

Perhaps my dad doesn't remember that without his second wife I'd have no life to walk into the river should I want to, and this man who sired me, who tells me what tomorrow he will forget, now dares tell me to stop, just like my son who has conditions upon any story, wherein he demands always to only tell him a story in which we all could really live.

VANDAL

I didn't understand
why my father told me
he was not proud

that I had written
the word *light*
on the lamp in my room.

Light now in curtains,
through branches shifting
as cars pass us, light not in his

eyes, silver with glaucoma.
It covers them like forgetting.
Light in other people's homes,

and through the crib slats
where my son lies, watching us.
I didn't tell my father, not then

nor now, that I also wrote
on the bed, the chair, and radio.
Every item in my childhood room,

now gone, once had
a secret name. As reason for
calling me vandal at the time, he said,
a child owns nothing.

I was proud. I can't
explain it. As I learned
to write, it seemed

strange to me
to reserve it for paper,
where it did not seem like

it could survive.
I say to my son now,
what do you see?

Yellow light pencils
through the window, as the sun
is slowly covered by a far hill

where it is already night.
As the light goes, it passes on
my son's hands. They close as if
we could keep it.

NAOMI FALK

ECHOLOCATION

I only operate above the waterlines, plunging in from above like a bird, expecting to see something or feel something in return.

The lighthouse on Point No Point on the eastern side of the peninsula in Washington State casts a sharp blade of light across the Sound, and on the opposite side, from Mukilteo, where I stand at the top of a hill in my neighborhood, I can see it blink.

Humans throw themselves onto, into the sea. Consider a message in a bottle or a fisherman releasing her line only to catch kelp or draw in a clean hook, bait stolen from the steel curvature like meat from a bone. Unrepaired docks reach out and disappear into the fog. Lost sailors have someone looking out the bedroom window, awaiting a return even with the lurking sense of certainty that no one will be coming home. The ocean does more than consume those who are lost. Their remains will disperse, will travel with the velocity of the tides trapped in their lunar cycles. They will go profoundly further than a body rotting in solid ground. Of course, sailors were once afloat and hoping to retrieve something or come ashore on a distant land—the thwarted hope to gain riches from an ocean voyage.

I can think of times I've stood near the Point No Point lighthouse, gazing to where I stand now. When the tide goes out over there, I follow it. In the mornings, looking down on the remnants of the ocean now plastered to the sand, devoid of their freedom to move underwater, I'm surprised to see a starfish. Are they returning now? The reversal of a decaying climate

or an anomaly? They can only survive a little while outside the water, like scuba divers can only survive a little while in it.

And, although they cast out to sea vertically, divers don't usually get to the bottom of things. The ocean floor is nearly all unexplored as I write this. Microbes living eight-thousand feet below the sand are similar to the ones in forest soil, and it could feel like their lives have nothing to do with us, but they show us where we've been, where we are now, that the world is knowable.

When I walk near Point No Point, I wear shoes so I don't get a hook caught in my foot. I'm also worried about a fisher casting back his line and hooking into my skull. Best to go here when it's empty. There is a pile of ten small fish heads that I stop to examine—herring. Bait. The amputations aren't clean, in fact the flesh on one is torn off all the way to the edge of the eye.

Fish were the first beings with moveable jaws, and I remember the first time I caught one. The hook pierced the side of its mouth. My dad pulled it out and put the fish, slightly bloodied, back in the water, too young to keep. A brilliant streak of full carnelian trailed and dissipated as the fish escaped far away from me in a lake in Okanogan, past my reach and probably further than I would be able to swim.

Flailing, waterlogging in these dark heavy waters would, momentarily, abstract my memory of standing on the ground, arms slicing currents where the rhythm of the tide existed uninterrupted before. ¶

AVIA TADMOR

HYMN WITH SECOND STILLBORN

after Lucie Brock-Broido

When I come back to this world
in ten thousand years, I'll be riding a goat
and smelling of vodka and lemons. My dress
of thistle, mud-spattered, torn; I will fall
as Sarai on her knees, carve mother Mary
from rat bone. This is the body.

These are the pews. My children
who never lived, their voices rise from the river
and cling to the altar like tar. This is the body
and how it fails you, years
before you can leave it. The body is like that, twice
it will fail you. I will not always be beautiful.

LEMONS FROM LEVANT

I

If I carry my father with me, it is not
the smell of Lebanese cedar
in the tall of my temples, or my hair
thick as sheep-wool
against the shearer's blade. It is not
the two veins that run down my forearms, blue
as asps the length
of Pratt and Hidekkel but vaster
than chance, than will,
then emptying
into whatever I'm writing, even now
as I say this from the terrible blankness
of winter. What is the downward motion
to which all things give in?
Because Lord, you have made the seasons
turn sepia, made the salmon
float back toward the gulf
with their onion eyes and their bellies
up-turned and gleaming
like pink confetti. And because when I say it,
I say it from rivers
in exile. The last good lemon
descending now from its original leaf.
Say you have made it so, Lord,
that you meant it. That there are riches
in ruin. Say it. They lied to you.

II

As when I knelt for a man
and he grabbed my hair
like a bridle, my wool
thrown elsewhere, moon-lit
bone, and how there were always other bones
in the back of my throat
to take in or abandon
when he grunted *Avia, Avia*
my name, which he mistook for relief
from the cold, for a home
one builds for only one season
and because I was lost
in this alphabet, frantic
I scoured the letters—
the last telegraph to be sent
before a city surrenders,
the soldiers frozen in various positions
each twisted on his own sword—
when I could no longer
carve my own name
because in English there is no letter for god
and because in exile
some forms of knowledge live longer
with no sound.

III

What is it to have a Semitic god
attached to the end of your name
like the tail of a mare, whipping
with protest at every step she takes
through the tall, blonde grass?
You will not ask what it means
to be here, you only know
you have not come this far
to wear the torn shoes of the dead
and stand in a thin-wool coat
in the rain, squinting at various house numbers
and that you, like the mare
will kneel forward some day
in the tall strange grass
or like Ruth in the yellow fields
of Moav, like that, yes, you will kneel
for a stranger, you will kneel to be known.

BIOGRAPHIES

I. SIMON CONSTANTINE ANGELOS

The oldest should've been named Constantine. That was the tradition. Son = grandfather. But the name was so long and the boy was so small. Christened "Simon Constantine Angelos," the boy preferred Sigh. It was the sound his mother repeated for twenty years, like a leaking trachea.

When Simon's first brother, Viktor, was brought home from the hospital, Simon pointed at the usurper and asked: "When's it going back?" But it was Viktor, at the age of one-and-a-half, who returned his brother to the hospital, launching a toy from his crib like a plastic mortar, landing a headshot: four stitches and a bald spot.

Over the next twenty years, the projectiles would evolve: balls, BB's, words.

When his second brother, Luke, was born, Simon dangled his hands over his youngest brother's mouth and let him suck on his knuckles like pacifiers. Luke followed his brother everywhere. For a teething toy, Simon won a shadow.

Twenty six years later, Luke would call Simon and confess to helping their father ingest a lethal dose of secobarbital.

The first time Simon saw his mother cry was in a parking lot. Simon asked if he could have lasagna for dinner. His mother responded by pulling their minivan into an empty parking lot and clubbing the steering wheel with her fists. Simon was

eight, Viktor six, Luke five. The boys tightened their seatbelts. It all came out: obscenities, tears, hatred of being a housewife—cook, maid, taxi—driving her sons to school, to the YMCA, to McDonalds, to karate, to the driveways of other housewives. After five minutes, Simon’s mother fell silent. She adjusted the rearview mirror. Her face was red and soft and wet. She said, “Boys, your father is sick.”

Months later, on a mild summer evening in 1995, Simon’s father herded his three sons to the end of a pier overlooking a purple sunset and the Chesapeake Bay. Simon’s father was missing a testicle, energy, and hair. He recited Jesus’ parable of the lost sheep: a story of a shepherd who abandons ninety nine sheep to go looking for a single wayward sheep. Simon understood perfectly. He became an atheist. *To endanger ninety nine sheep for one sheep!*

Simon excelled at math. He found comfort in numbers. In their transparency. The way zero resembles a porthole inviting skeptics to inspect its emptiness. The way an eighty percent survival rate safeguards eight out of ten fathers from dying of stage-two testicular cancer.

Simon researched the logistics of chemotherapy: reclining chair, IV, premeds, meds, respite, repeat. He knew the odds, wagered his heart, and won.

Within a year, his father’s cancer was in complete remission.

When he was fourteen, Simon was woken by his father on a Saturday at two in the morning. His father, a nephrologist, was on call and on his way to the hospital to evaluate a patient for emergency dialysis. He invited his son to tag along, to see his old man in action, to bond over renal failure. Simon squinted at his father’s salt-and-pepper hair. It had grown back

thicker and blacker. Groggy, Simon declined. His father

never renewed the offer. Simon never stopped wondering what he would have seen and heard that night among linoleum, disinfectant, and his father.

After his first year at George Washington University, Simon told his mother his plan for the future: “I want to be a unicorn.” His mother sighed. Simon explained how data scientists are called unicorns because a single person excelling in coding, data mining, visualization, and communication doesn’t exist. They talked that summer—mother and son—real conversations. About girls. About relationships. About his mother’s first job in twenty years, teaching world history to ninth graders. About his mother’s project to write a biography on Cleopatra. For the first time in his life, Simon didn’t see his mother; he saw the woman in those pictures, the one with green eyes, all spry and brilliant.

Seven years after that summer, Simon would become a unicorn for the World Bank. Eighteen years after that summer, his mother would delete a file titled “Cleopatra: A Life.”

At thirty years old, Simon was married and had a child on the way. He received a phone call from his father, who asked if Simon could take his mother for the weekend, so his father could prepare an anniversary surprise. Scant details were provided. Something about turning the house into a jungle, a wonder.

“Like that old king,” Simon’s father said, “who imported all those plants for his wife in Babylon.”

“The hanging gardens?”

“Sure.”

On the phone, Simon’s father sounded punch-drunk, sleep-deprived, even though he had retired months ago, a move which surprised his three sons, who all thought their father would die with a stethoscope around his neck.

“Your mother will take to this like a moth to the flame.”

“Take to what?”

“Tell her Natalie thinks the baby is coming out this weekend.”

“Natalie’s not due for another month.”

Simon’s father pretended not to hear.

“Dad, it’s a three hour drive to Alexandria. Don’t you think it’s a little cruel?” He waited for his son to do his calculations.

White lie + mother boarding + miffed wife < mother’s surprise + father’s gratitude + romantic do-gooding.

“Okay,” Simon said, “I’ll think of something.”

“My man—my main man.”

That weekend, Luke called Simon from their parents’ house. “Luke?”

“Yeah.”

“You called me...”

“Yeah.”

“What’s up?”

“Yeah.”

Luke confessed two secrets: (1) How their father had been diagnosed with Lewy body dementia; (2) How Luke had helped their father, minutes earlier, commit suicide. Luke’s voice was flat and colorless and prompted, like a shadow.

On the morning of the funeral, Simon left his wife, his unborn child, his mother, and his embalmed father in search of Luke. Luke had been missing for a week. Simon did a ten hour round trip, driving to Luke’s apartment in Baltimore and then back to Virginia. No Luke. Simon had ninety nine missed calls on his cell phone. Before quitting, he decided to pursue one final hunch. As the sun sunk in the horizon, Simon drove to Yorktown and walked to the end of a public pier that jutted into the Chesapeake. He recognized the figure sitting alone, feet dangling over the edge. Simon hurried, heart racing. He knelt

down and draped his arm around Luke's shoulders, reenacting a story he never believed in.



II. VIKTOR CONSTANTINE ANGELOS

Viktor was named after his great grandfather, a boy who trekked from Sparta to Ellis Island to Manhattan and who sold *The New York Examiner* for a nickel on the corner of Eighth Avenue and Fourteenth Street. This experience led to an undying hatred of the cold and to the boy's visiting Penn Station—his life savings in his hands—and asking: “How far south will this take me?” The answer was Norfolk, Virginia, which is where the boy and his descendants propagated and prospered.

The first story that Viktor's mother always told about her son was how Viktor, as a toddler, drew a line in the sand of Virginia Beach and forbid the waves from trespassing. The waves disobeyed. Viktor redoubled his efforts. An hour passed, the tide waned, and Viktor was left thinking he could repel the ocean.

When Viktor lined the entrance to his parents' bedroom with miniature cars, forbidding his father from crossing during “rush-hour,” his father—face all twisted and corked and purple—lifted his son into the air until Viktor's head was grazing the ceiling and his six year old eyes were dripping tears. His father set Viktor down and said, “I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry...”

Months later, Viktor's father took his three sons to the end of a public pier. Among fishing lines and young couples and squawking ospreys, he told a parable. Viktor, a visual learner, pictured his father's words: “sheep,” “lost,” “shepherd,” “re-joyce.” Viktor was so impressed that he shared the parable with

his kindergarten classmates. He repeated the parable so many times that his teacher had a meeting with Viktor's mother and used words like "proselytize" and "secular."

At age eight, Viktor discovered the connection between the ham sandwich in his lunch pail and the pig in *Charlotte's Web*. He became a vegetarian. "It's not right!" he objected, to his mother's dismay. She blamed her husband. Her husband had a moral tic. He used the word "right" like he had a quota to fill: "It's only *right*"; "That's the *right* way to do it"; "*Right!*" The word sunk into each of his sons like a rock into a well, sounding three distinct echoes.

By junior high, Viktor was smoking American Spirits, reading Thoreau, and writing letters to congressmen. His father planted a sign in the yard that read "Beware of Viktor." His mother took the sign down after Viktor lost a fight to Simon over the legitimacy of the Iraq War: Simon saw the war as prudent; Viktor as rape. Viktor's left iris was bruised permanently, changing colors from brown to gray.

Viktor hated visiting his father's mother, his *yiayia*. She had Lewy body dementia: her limbs were locked, her face puffy, her mind void. Worse were the hallucinations. Viktor's *yiayia* would perk up, remote control in her hand, convinced there was a girl outside who was screaming, holding a balloon, and floating uncontrollably into the atmosphere. Viktor would watch as his father and his grandfather struggled to calm the woman who used to bake them *galaktoboureko* and drag them to Saint Sophia's at midnight for the Easter Vigil. They would hold the old woman's hands and talk sweetly, in baby-talk, to an imposter.

His senior year of high school, Viktor saw his mother sitting on the couch alone, taking notes, eating popcorn, and watching

Cecil B. DeMille's *Ten Commandments*.

"Mom?"

"Research."

"I thought you were writing about Cleopatra."

"I still need to know."

"Know what?"

"Egypt, like the back of my hand."

"You realize this shit's fiction..."

Viktor's mother paused the movie. She squinted and smiled at her son. She said, "Vik, what do you know about Ramses?"

"He was a pharaoh..."

"Ramses had fifty sons."

"Poor fuck."

"One day, he put one of his sons on top of an unfinished obelisk."

"Punishment?"

"To make sure his workers lifted the obelisk with care."

"Sounds reckless. Kid live?"

"Some parents have children to spare."

Viktor joined his mother on the couch. Mother and son, they mocked the movie: how all the Egyptians had 1950's haircuts; how Charlton Heston followed the dolly tracks of a cameraman up Mount Sinai. They ate popcorn and chitchatted about the Beatles, Vietnam, Woodstock, and Watergate. After 220 minutes and an intermission, Viktor wished the movie was longer.

When Viktor's younger brother, Luke, was mugged—a gun nudged into his spine, a hand on his shoulder—Viktor drove down from Richmond the next morning, skipping his American History final at Virginia Commonwealth University. He hugged his brother and said, "Fucker, never leave my sight again."

It was Viktor though who left, enrolling in the Peace Corps

and serving in Grenada for two years and then in Uganda after a three year hiatus. Viktor's mid-twenties were spent stationed in his parents' basement and bagging groceries at Trader Joe's.

In Uganda, at twenty eight years old, Viktor had just finished helping with the installation of a cement pit latrine when he received a Skype call from his father. His father asked about his son's latest exploits. Viktor told a story about constructing a wall of beehives to ward off elephants from eating crops.

His father said, "Promise me something."

"Promise you what?"

"It's just a promise."

"I know how this goes. It's a trope."

His father's face was puffy and dull. Deadpan.

"Okay, sure," Viktor said, "I *promise*... Now what did I promise?"

"My man—my main man."

"Dad?"

"Remember, you promised."

Viktor, like his brothers, missed his father's funeral. He flew back a week too late, full of disbelief, anger, grief, and jealousy. He was jealous his father confided in Luke.

After exiting the airport terminal, Viktor punched his younger brother in the face. They spent that night inside a waiting room: Simon whispering on his phone to his wife, "No, yes, together, fine;" Luke to his right, his nose bloody, swollen, and bent; Viktor to his left, his brown and gray eyes tracing black lines on the floor.

It would be five years before Viktor spoke to Luke.

•

III. LUKE CONSTANTINE ANGELOS

The same obstetrician who delivered Simon and Viktor, also delivered Luke. A slimy newborn in his hands, the doctor announced: “My first trilogy...”

Luke developed an early fascination with arthropods. At four years old, he found so many beetles in the backyard that he couldn’t fit them all in his hands. He carried the rest in his mouth.

Luke’s father developed pulmonary toxicity two months after his treatment began. Luke would enter his parents’ bedroom, a stuffed duck in his hands, and watch the closed bathroom door, listening to his father’s phlegmatic gasping.

Upon opening the door, his father would find his youngest son sitting on the bedroom carpet, chewing on a plush duck, moaning like a dog.

The day Luke’s father recited the parable of the lost sheep, Luke stood before the Chesapeake Bay, watching a white buoy bobbing in the distance. Luke wondered if the sheep was really lost. Luke had been “found” before. Under the sink. In Simon’s closet. Down the street. He knew the difference between exploring and lost. If he was a few years older, he would have wondered: *what would’ve been lost if Columbus’ mother had “found” her son?*

The Halloween when Simon dressed up as an evil scientist and Viktor masqueraded as an escaped convict, Luke was a duck.

“A rabid duck?” “A mutant duck?” “Howard the Duck?”

“No,” Luke answered, “a duck.”

In junior high, Luke went for a bicycle ride without telling his mother. He was grounded for two weeks.

“You *never* leave this house without saying goodbye! Do you hear me? Are you smiling? Are you stupid?”

“No.”

“So why is it so hard to remember *one* fucking rule? We have *one* rule in this house...”

“Sorry.”

“*Never*, never leave without saying goodbye.”

Luke shared his father’s appreciation of sitting outside and doing nothing.

In the summer, his father would take Luke and kneel before the cypress tree. He would rub the miniature stumps and say, “If you ever write a botanical mystery novel, use this. The cypress produces these. They’re called ‘knees.’ No one knows their function.”

In the fall, Luke’s father would point at the ginkgo tree and its yellow leaves and say, “Brontosaurus ate ginkgo leaves.”

In the winter, his father would admire the lack of mosquitos and snakes and pollen and say, “We get the earth to ourselves.”

In the spring, his father would always tell the same story: of when he was an intern and there was a patient, a little girl with chest complications, and he told the parents of this little girl not to worry because they were in good hands, the best hands—the hands of the specialist who wrote the book on this particular procedure—but the girl died on the operating table, and the family came with smiles and balloons, and Luke’s father turned around, walked the other way, and let someone else tell them what he knew.

“It wasn’t right; it wasn’t right; it wasn’t right...”

Luke was a senior in high school when he was mugged in

the parking lot of a movie theater. He was grabbed from behind. He never saw the man's face. Luke was told to count to 500. He was told that if he moved an inch before reaching 500, he would be shot into Swiss cheese. So Luke counted and thought about predators, National Geographic specials, and how he had once cried because a mother lion stumbled and missed a gazelle.

The summer before graduating from college, Luke was at home, volunteering at the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, when he went out with his mother on an impromptu dinner. Over pasta and red wine, Luke's mother announced that she had finished the third chapter of her biography on Cleopatra. Luke asked for details. His mother described how the chapter ended with Caesar being murdered and poor Cleopatra, twenty five years old, stuck in Rome with Caesar's baby, knowing full well she would share Caesar's fate if she didn't "hightail it out of Dodge."

"Rome."

"You get the meaning." Luke's mother buttered bread. "You know what I wonder?"

"What's that?"

"Did Cleopatra think, in that moment: *How fitting... Here I am, just like the goddess Isis, fleeing for my life, a husband murdered, a small child to protect.*"

"Only one way to find out."

"What?"

Luke described how, as a kid, he used to understand things through imitation. If he wanted to know what the ginkgo tree was thinking, he would simply stand on his toes, hands over his head, wrists bent, and whisper, "Ginkgo, ginkgo, ginkgo..."

His mother shook her head. "So, all I need to do is buy a wig, a white satin dress, and a gold cobra headdress, and I'll have my answer?"

Luke shook his head and repeated his mother's sentence, verbatim. She sipped her wine.

He sipped her wine.

Luke was twenty seven years old and studying entomology in graduate school at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County when his father called him and said, “Luke?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m your father.”

Luke put away his work, sliding a tray of tobacco hornworms in a refrigerator. Luke’s father asked about how to get rid of the slugs in the garden without pesticides. Luke suggested spraying the plants with oil and dusting them with bacteria—“BT powder... It’s at Home Depot.”

“My man—my main man.”

Luke knew that voice. It was the voice he imagined Catholics using inside confessionals. The sound of chatty guilt. It was the voice his father used whenever he told the story of the little girl with chest complications.

“Luke, I need a favor.”

“Shoot.”

“Come down this weekend.”

“I’m not sure I can do this weekend. What about—”

“*This* weekend.”

“Okay...”

“I need your help.”

“With what?”

“Killing myself.”

On the fifth anniversary of their father’s death, Luke was finally acknowledged by Viktor.

“Fucker?”

“Yeah.”

Over the phone, they set a date to meet on the boardwalk of Virginia Beach. Luke had dropped out of graduate school. He was working at a plant nursery in Carrboro, North Caro-

lina. Viktor had just earned his J.D. and was working as a local immigration attorney. The two walked on the boardwalk, past strollers, palm trees, and a statue of Poseidon. They listened to the static sound of waves folding into the sand.

Viktor said, “It wasn’t your decision to make.”

“No.”

“It was ours—all of us—it should have been all of us, there, together.”

“Yeah.”

“What did he say?”

“Sorry.”

“It was a fuck you—a fuck you to all of us.”

“He said Judy Garland overdosed on secobarbital.”

“That’s it?”

“He said he was having hallucinations. Like *Yiyia*.”

“Who else have you killed?”

“Caterpillars.”

Luke waited for his brother to forgive him. But every word of Viktor’s was like a line in the sand. Luke feared the tide would never come in. The brothers shook hands and parted ways, as stiff as they arrived.



IV. GEORGE DEMO ANGELOS

Before fathering three sons—Simon, Viktor, and Luke Angelos—George too was a son, his mother’s favorite, an honor he earned with an intact birthday cake. George was twelve years old when he and his older brother bought an angel food cake with fluffy pink icing for their mother’s birthday, using money earned washing dishes at the family restaurant. On the way home from the bakery, George’s bicycle hit a pothole, and he dropped the cake. His brother stopped, opened the white box, and cobbled the cake back together. He gave George a thumbs

up, but George felt sick, a cramping of the stomach, a protest from within.

“It’s not right...”

George pedaled to his uncle’s shop, got a loan, and bought a new cake.

George hated learning Greek. His mother forced her children, twice a week, to sit inside a classroom within the yellow dome of Saint Sophia’s and learn how to pronounce velar fricatives and how to dance the *kalamantiano*. George, an assimilationist, would smuggle Milk Duds into the classroom and daydream about drumming for Elvis.

George graduated summa cum laude and was awarded a scholarship to Duke University. After his freshman year, the tuition rose. George called his father. His father worked two jobs: a waiter at the family restaurant; a sales representative at Sears.

His father answered, “George?” his voice hoarse from shouting orders of *souvlaki* into the kitchen, his intonation robotic from repeating, “This Whirlpool is fully automatic, top-to-bottom action, seven cycles—ma’am, what’s not to love?”

George asked for money and wept.

George was an intern at the University of Alabama when he met his wife, Katherine Dockery. She was in the library, reading Herodotus. George saw the slender woman with auburn hair and green eyes. His heart melted. He read the spine of Katherine’s book, felt confident, and played up his Greek ancestry. Katherine inspected the young man standing over her, leaning on a bookshelf: bronze skin, black hair, thick-rimmed glasses. She said her roommate was single.

A month later, George ended his first date with Katherine at her apartment, making out, and listening to Beatles records.

“You love the Beatles too?”

“I do.”

They thought it was so curious. Such a coincidence. Like Jefferson and Adams both dying on Independence Day.

George knew he was supposed to name his firstborn son, “Constantine.” He imagined the name on a roster: loud, ungainly, stretching to the right margin of the page, sticking out like an ethnic sore thumb. So he compromised. George traded one first name for three middle names.

It wasn’t the lump on his left testicle but the unrelenting lower back pain that first alerted George that something was wrong. A diagnosis followed. Then chemo, fatigue, nausea, vomiting, despair. At first, George would keep his wife up at night, saying he didn’t want to die, he didn’t want to die, he didn’t want to die. But he rehearsed the moment so many times that his death became just another day on the calendar, like an unobserved holiday. He told himself: “Life is nothing to cling to.” They were lines he could never fully unlearn.

The day George stood at the end of a pier with his three little sons, he felt dizzy, absurd, panic. *Give your sons something to remember you by. Teach them something. Say something. Insert lesson. Story.* George told the parable of the lost sheep because the word was already there—“lost”—on the tip of his tongue.

The four of them—father and sons—would revisit that pier, years later, George’s boys now gangly and in their teens. George would feel a shudder of gratitude in that moment. It would stay with him for the rest of his life—portable, accessible—like a picture in his wallet.

When George was fifty nine years old, his mother was diagnosed with Lewy body dementia. Her decline was rapid. The next year, when he took his mother out to lunch, she unrolled her napkin, draped it over her lap, and smiled at George's collared shirt, tie, and beeper.

She said, "*O, ti kalo pathee...*"

He said, "Mom?"

She said, "Your mother must be proud."

George's hallucinations began the year before he retired. The first involved a bear. George looked outside his bedroom window and saw a grizzly bear. He called the police.

"Where?" his wife said, "Where?"

George pointed at the cypress tree.

"Where? Behind the tree? In the tree?"

"What tree? Jesus, *there, there!*"

The police came and filed a report. No tracks, no bear. More hallucinations followed. George would see the television glowing pink and rattling; or his own reflection in the bathroom mirror but thirty years too young; or his dead mother, in the kitchen, eating cereal. He knew they weren't real. He didn't tell his wife. The hallucinations were predictable, as if scheduled. They occurred at night. George would start the day off, sharp as a tack, but after ten hours of office work and hospital runs, he would drive home, dull and uncertain, mind in a fog.

More symptoms followed. Sleep deprivation. Rigidity. Forgetfulness. For George, it was too familiar. He knew the progression. The neurologist confirmed his suspicion. George kept the information from his wife. He told her they were still looking for an accurate diagnosis.

She said, "George, whatever it is, we'll fight it together."

He said, "Kat"—he was the only person who could call her

Kat—"Fine, yes, together."

A week before George retired, one of his patients attempted suicide with a machete. The patient passed out after severing his hypopharynx. For two years, every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, the patient had said his pleasantries, sat down, and had his blood filtered with electrolytes, bicarbonate, and purified water. Now, the patient was in surgery, and there were complications, a blood transfusion, scarring, infection. It wasn't the violence that disgusted George; it was the failure.

Luke, it had to be Luke. Luke was slow when it came to judgment.

Luke, it's 1999, you're a jury member on the trial of Jack Kevorkian; he's been charged with second degree murder for helping 130 patients commit suicide. Is he guilty; is it a crime?

George sometimes wondered if his son's hesitation wasn't already a judgment.

The weekend of his suicide, George ordered a cleaning service on Friday. On Saturday, he arranged a stack of folders on the kitchen table, next to an article in *The Wall Street Journal* titled "Twenty Five Documents You Need Before You Die." Included with these documents were letters to each of his family members. Viktor's letter ended: "Promise to forgive me." There was also floral baskets scattered throughout the house: lilies, orchids, tulips.

Luke arrived after a five hour drive, eyes red, body dehydrated from coffee and neglect.

George gave the whole speech again, but Luke only heard fragments: "dignity," "burden," "secret," "sorry," "right." George tried to make it interesting. He held up a pill and said, "Judy Garland overdosed on secobarbital." Father and son—they wore latex gloves and scraped white powder from 100 cap-

sules with toothpicks, mixing the contents with a homemade syrup of honey, NyQuil, and coconut oil, until the cocktail was capable of being swallowed. Logistically, Luke wasn't necessary, but George didn't want to die alone.

Luke held his father's hand as he drifted out of consciousness and stopped breathing in his own bed, on his own terms. Afterwards, Luke lay down on the carpet of his parents' bedroom, closed his eyes, held his breath, and whispered his father's name.



V. KATHERINE ROSE DOCKERY

Katherine Dockery grew up on a cattle farm outside Tuscaloosa, Alabama. By eight, she had been chased by a rooster, kicked by a cow, cut by barbed wire, and belted by her father. The possibility of Katherine settling down in Tuscaloosa was lower than lions lying down with lambs.

Katherine sought refuge at the public library. She would find an empty runway between bookshelves and pace up and down with an open book in her hands, eager to dissolve into the flux of other lives. She preferred her characters stranger-than-fiction. Peter the Great. Catherine the Great. Alexander the Great. Greatness was a given.

When Katherine was sixteen, her only brother died in a motorcycle accident. The last exchange between the siblings was: "Fuck up;" "Horseshit." Katherine's brother stormed out of their parents' house and died of blunt force trauma on I-20. After that, Katherine never ended a conversation without saying goodbye.

Katherine was twenty-one when she agreed to go on a date

with her future husband. He was persistent. She was curious, belatedly. They saw *Jaws* in the theater, beside an elderly patron on oxygen. Every time the theme music played, they heard the labored sound of breathing. Katherine leaned her head on George's chest and listened to the busy thumping of his heart.

Depression followed the news of her third pregnancy. Katherine pictured her body as a pair of lungs, swelling and deflating indefinitely. She was afraid her body would never stop breathing. Her only hope was that this time it would be a little girl.

When George was sick, Katherine would stroke her husband's smooth scalp and read aloud from a biography titled *Churchill: The Last Lion*. She quoted lines ending in "Never, never, never..."

One night, she closed the book and said, "Don't you dare leave me alone with our sons."

Teaching ninth graders was tougher than Katherine imagined. When she asked her first class, "Roughly, when do we think Cleopatra was alive?" a student in the front row confidently raised his hand and said, "Who's Cleopatra?"

But each September, the sweep of that 5000-year epic—pre-history to present—would swell in Katherine's heart, spilling over to one or two unsuspecting fourteen-year-olds.

On a rainy spring evening in 2012, Katherine drove George, Simon, and Luke to the Dulles International Airport. They parked, entered the airport, and unrolled identical signs: "VICTORY!" Viktor had been away for two years in Grenada, but now, reunited, the family was going to celebrate at a sushi place called Eddy Hill's.

"Forget the name," said Simon, "this place is legit. Ask Natalie."

They teased Simon about his new girlfriend: "Ask Natalie,

ask Natalie, ask Natalie...”

Viktor told stories about the Peace Corps, about living in a house without a number, on a street without a name; about sitting in a classroom, 2000 miles from home, playing a twelve string guitar, and singing the alphabet song.

The conversation drifted to movies and then to heroes and then to Batman. Katherine listened as the four men in her life took stances—“That’s right!” “Right!”—on the ethics of Batman’s relationship with his arch-nemesis, the Joker. Simon thought it was obvious that Batman should kill the Joker. Viktor thought not. Luke was undecided. George wondered if murdering the Joker was a form of suicide. Katherine laughed.

“What?” they said, “what?”

She said, “How did I end up with you people?!” Viktor said, “Ain’t karma a bitch.”

They speculated on what Katherine did in a previous life to deserve eating sushi with them at a place called Eddy Hill’s. Luke wondered if she had been, once upon a time, Cleopatra.

The night after her husband’s funeral, Katherine couldn’t sleep. She sat at her desk, lights off, the white screen of her computer glowing like a headlight. She opened a file titled “Cleopatra: A Life.”

George and her sons often teased Katherine: “So, uh, how long was Cleopatra’s life?” Katherine had been writing her biography, off and on, for twelve years.

Katherine would say: “The point of a life isn’t to finish it.”

Viktor would say: “Unfinished lives don’t get read.”

The morning after her husband’s funeral, Katherine finished chapter twelve. Mark Antony had just returned from the east and was celebrating a small triumph. Cleopatra was thirty five years old, queen of Egypt, and mother of two gods and one goddess. Katherine sighed. She knew it wouldn’t last. The pomp. The unity. The high. But she couldn’t stop thinking how

it all depended on where you ended the story. How a life became unrecognizable depending on where you placed the period.

Katherine liked Cleopatra there, right there, wearing crushed malachite and pig fat on her eyes, holding a scepter in one hand, an ankh in the other, dressed up as Isis, and feasting with her family. She liked all five of them there, exactly there, full of bluff and bluster. Before the bluffs were called.

Katherine saved the file. She would never write chapter thirteen. A new depression would set in, full of “what if’s” and “what for’s” and “what now’s.”

Five years after her husband’s death, Katherine received a phone call from Simon. Her oldest son was now in the habit of calling his mother twice a week. Parenting questions.

Marriage questions. Life questions. Besides, the calls gave Simon an excuse to put his daughter on speakerphone. The sound of her granddaughter, to Katherine, was like audible serotonin.

Simon told his mother that he had heard from Luke. “How did it go?”

“He said the meeting with Vik didn’t go well.”

“Stubborn...”

“Vik?”

“All of you.”

Simon then told his mother about a dream. He said he dreamt they were all there— Simon, Viktor, Luke, and Katherine—all at the end of a pier, lying on their backs, hands on their stomachs, eyes closed, and holding their breath. “None of us knew the other one was there... I think we were in comas. Four comas.”

“Simon...”

“And then we heard a footstep. The footstep was coming closer and closer, until it was almost kicking us in the ears. There was a shadow standing over us. We all sat up and in-

haled simultaneously, like four deep-sea divers emerging from the ocean.”

“What, what did he say?”

“Dad was singing.”

“Oh.” Katherine smiled. She wiped her eyes. “Singing what?”

“The Beatles.”

“... Eleanor Rigby?”

“Hello, Goodbye.” ff

JIM DANIELS

WILD DOGS WAITING

You hear them through the trees,
the first scrape of bad music

just to let you know they know.
One narrow road, two dogs

gathered in an angry mess.
You can turn around

and walk miles out of your way
or you can do what you do,

telling soft lies to steady
yourself, to steady suspicious

muzzles and drool. Keep on
against the bared-teeth

snarl. You, the guilty one
convicted by fear. Or by all

you've done. What
we've all done, right?

No more stones to cast.
How could you leave,

your hands gripping
their own sweat?

Idiot. The dogs don't speak
your tongue. Close,

no chance to lose yourself
now. God is not watching.

God is not barking.
God leaves you

on that flat road to hell
or just the empty country

of dead November fields.
Recite the names of the dead

or just all those you've—yes—
fucked over, and was it

worth it? Not a matter
of penance. The dogs

close the gap, the letters
of your name blurring

till the screen goes black.
But the dogs. The dogs

whisper to the dead.

MACEO J. WHITAKER

ESCHATOLOGY

Juliet and Ophelia share a blunt—
these boys ain't worth it. Whip

that dagger into yon river. Huff.
Burn another. Ash on bluegrass

or ankles or air. The liquor store
stays open 24/7. Go be immortal.

Half my friends are downright Shakespearean—not because of their language or wit or because they
ramble in the park every summer with quills and balding heads, but because they

concluded themselves. Act V: bridges and bullets and powders. Pills, hoses, rope.

Aren't we all failed entertainers?
Blurry flops. Madame Psychosis.

Good times kill, till we're headless
infinities. A toast to petulance.

To each scumbag ghost.
To each hilarious tragedy.

The funny thing about resurrection—zombie or Zen—is the explaining. Consider a cast or sling. Crutches. The story becomes everyone's, each inflicted convalescent a veritable bard. Now imagine the paperwork to explain dying, returning. Like staying at a dinner party far too long. Next time, kill me better.

DEREK ANNIS

LAZY SUNDAY

on the porch across the street
a woman dressed in a blue
bathrobe and cigarette smoke
deals herself another ace

It's a wide kind of day
its limbs spill over the edges
of the loveseat as it sleeps
with its mouth open like space
between a thrown brick
and the window open like the field

in which they found the little
bones this day like rosebuds
soaked in lighter fluid like
a kid in a striped shirt on a red bike
helmetless standing up on the seat
a kid who has knowledge of peach

schnapps menthol cigarettes the barn
fire of '92 a kid whose mother
circles the living room in a cloud
of sound clinking ice on glass
a mother who sleeps in arm's
reach of the TV her boyfriend will fuck
you up Tony mother who scrubs

her feet with a stone mother
who sits on the porch playing
solitaire on a day like today a day
like antifreeze dripping on the driveway
a day like a woman with lit cigarette a son
who climbs the tree down the street throws
rocks at trucks a day like a dog
tonguing the puddle in the driveway

M.D. MYERS

EVICTION NOTICE

Let the floors gnaw holes
 in your shoes;
 I'll plug
them with my fingers.
Let me bathe the grapefruit-
 red of your blisters;
 I'll worship
the beautiful stumps
where your ugly hands
 used to be.
 You have a home—
why should you have
everything else?
 In this fantasy
 I am cobbling
some forgiveness
to shake
 over your
 fetal hunch—
but truthfully
anger marbles me
 knowing you are still
 erect.
You made a wife
of me. Lot's nameless
 bride. Who
 wouldn't turn to watch
the home be

burned out of them?

Be a regular Christian
martyr. Now they had
it made—just to kneel
in the dust of a coliseum floor
and be assured an eternal place.

Look to them
on your way home.

If
the only apologetic act
you can commit
is to be in pain
then
be in pain.

MARK WAGENAAR

NOCTURNE WITH VANISHINGS

Bloodrush, this mosquito swarm
out of the boxwoods & cedars—

calligraphy of *like-our-lives-depend-on-it*
upon the air. I know, I don't have

much, aside from a few grand
I owe the IRS, but I'm glad

I can keep one eye on them
& one on the little one,

our little one, all 20 months of her,
all twenty-something pounds,

glad someone else's taking down
tail numbers, so we can track

where someone has taken the
rendered (let's call

this rendition *extraordinary*).

We're in the habit of
vanishing, of vanishing (

did you know the hooded man
in the helicopter knew it was

Mogadishu by the smell of the sea

?) people, like our lives
depend upon it. Is there anyone

out there without
a question for the resurrected

or the disappeared? Where
are you, let's start there,

with our own plenty, with this half-
eaten seed-bell (hope

for cardinal, settle for bluejay)
hanging like a half-

moon of need, or with the first
blossoms in the crab apple

like the current-shredded pages
of Scripture from a church

in thirty feet of water, *He*
has set eternity in our hearts—

eternity, where shall we start
if not in this backyard,

if not with your name,
little one, upon my lips,

as I call you over
like my life depends upon it.

JILL MCELLOWNEY

SHARED BELIEF

If a horse kicks hard enough it can start a fire
and I have arrived at the dark part of my truth:
when arson looked profitable.

We burned an entire stable to the ground.

I know, I know.
I've been cast as this victim, but—

Check the medicine cabinet.

It's called the compounds that make up narcotics shift over time,
become something they're not—

from the horses I learned this blunt force trauma.

You said burning to death feels like the flu
kicking you in the chest from the inside out.
Fire converts to fire
the thing it burns and
each day is a door I plunge out of
on fire—

I want something I love to eat me alive.

I study myself in the mirror after I read my fortune in an apple—
another nosebleed in my future,
cardiac arrhythmia,
accident,
accident.

“Make it look like an accident—”

like something
an animal would do.

TORTOISE META STONE

That he was once not *he* slipped from his mind: a healed blister. But she didn't know, and flicked her black mascara-laden lashes into a wink so many times it was obvious that she did know, how could she not? *He* is he, just not he who was assigned so at birth. Some might say it was wishful thinking, but that wouldn't really be true. He just forgot, that's all. He forgot he was exactly who he is, but disguised as someone disguised as someone else. Or maybe he forgot he wasn't wearing a disguise tonight. Later, he decided it was some combination of the two.

Her name was Tanya and his, this time, Alex. This time he had been Alex for a long time. This time it was really like he had always been Alex. Maybe that was the problem. Tanya latched onto him early. She saw him across the bar and made a more direct than it sounds 'z' through all the tables and bar lines. Close by she spoke ostentatiously to whoever would listen. She examined him sidelong but didn't make eye connection. She liked his stature, the way he looked both skinny and full. He didn't slouch at all and seemed not totally committed to his surroundings, as if he might leave at any moment. She briefly wondered if he was gay or (happily) partnered. For far longer than was reasonable in her experience, Alex didn't notice her at all. He was there for a co-worker's birthday and he planned to go home early and catch up on the latest *Q* comics from Planet Serial.

The bar was roaring loud, the conversations perfunctory. His co-workers liked to talk about people, about cousins and boyfriends—people Alex had never met and didn't care to.

He was only there for the purpose of being known. This was a chance to be someone other than the “new” guy. It was a chance for a little camaraderie amongst coworkers, even if it meant hanging out with a bunch of muggles. It didn’t matter if they had nothing in common. People from all walks of life, Alex thought, can always find something to laugh about. Alex wore a t-shirt and jeans, old favorites that happened to be clean and not completely wrinkled. It still felt like a treat to wear t-shirts without a sports bra or binding. It was like getting away with something really sweet, like finding a low-traffic shortcut home through the congested city. Or more substantial: going a day without anyone making obtuse comments and subtle yet insipid inquiries about his genitals or “gear.” Little things like this delighted Alex every day now. He expected nothing from the night, content that he was able to go out nonchalantly. It wasn’t just that he “passed” now, it was the feeling of meeting the world on his own terms, less doublespeak internal dialogue to wade through about who was noticing what and when he would come out and to whom. It was no longer necessary to constantly go between worlds, no more being chased from the sky into the river, from the river to the shore of what a body isn’t: static. He could leave it to the birds and snakes now. He carried his world with him, a tortoise; the choice of which world he entered was a deliberate and private matter. A tortoise has two worlds: the world outside and the world inside, and no one asks a turtle to give up either. A turtle also embodies two forms: a creature enacted by the needs of its flesh, and a stone—an object resulting from the geological ages, coolly unaffected and numb to the eons of rubble.

The co-worker with the birthday was a 30’s-ish woman named Heidi who reminded him simultaneously of Miss Piggy and Katharine Hepburn. Froufrou queens. No one knew how old she was turning because she insisted on not telling anyone, as if being 30-something was a shameful secret worthy of public

speculation or gossip. Alex ignored this hyperbolism. He stood, hands in jean pockets, and listened to his coworkers chirping on, trying to pry it out of her. They roughly formed a circle, some sitting in chairs, others standing around all holding beers and quieter side conversations. It was a typical game of “How old do you think I am?” and fatuous, practically scripted responses of “Oh, you can’t be more than 25...!” When it was Alex’s turn, he shrugged, and guessed a probably on-the-money, “36!” He had always been the king of casually declining to play certain games that he wanted no part of—was this really a game to honor the birthday girl? Or merely a self-deprecating ritual that women of a certain age engage in rather than actually celebrating surviving another year? He wasn’t here to make best friends. No, he merely wanted his existence recognized. He didn’t care if people liked him, but he did want to be around enough to be *known*. Heidi looked hilariously appalled and quickly turned to the next person, at which point Alex, insouciant, did too. That person was Tanya.

A glance in Tanya’s direction was rewarded with an immediate handshake and “Nice to meetcha.” Alex turned to the side to order himself an IPA called “The Pope.” Admittedly distracted by her enthusiasm, he missed the part about the 9% alcohol content. No big deal, they were so pricey he only had a few. Tanya had teeth that didn’t match her face. The white veneers sat in straight rows behind thin, pink, glossed lips that often made their way around long white filtered cigarettes, the skinny kind made for a woman’s small round mouth like hers, made to accompany beige pocketbooks and the monogrammed lighters of men in suits. An aesthetic not common for women Tanya’s age. Later, among the other self-blaming stories Alex told himself about that night, he realized it was a sign he should have noted. Any woman who smokes ladies’ cigarettes is bound to be a certain order of high maintenance. Why hadn’t he taken the hint?

At the very beginning Tanya seemed fun. Her curls bounced

into her eyes and around her face when she laughed, which was a lot. It was a conversation about exes—*What’s the weirdest thing your ex used to do? What would you love to tell or warn her current boyfriend about?* Being fresh out of a relationship had gotten her to thinking about these oddities. She desperately wanted to tell her ex’s new girlfriend about the time he shat in the shower, or that hey, watch out, he won’t eat you out, ever. “But I just can’t! Those aren’t the kinds of things we chicks can share,” Tanya griped. “Well she’ll figure out that second thing pretty quickly,” Alex said without thinking. “Really? I’d be surprised if she found out before the six-month mark. Girls don’t usually ask for that kind of thing very early. Seems like it’s kind of a vulnerable thing...” Reflecting on the act of eating pussy, Tanya scrunched her nose and took a swig of her gin and tonic. Alex thought about this for a moment, about his exes of all sexes. If he’d ever flinched for a moment about it, or if they had. He couldn’t remember, and the fact that he hadn’t let the past two ex’s go down on him wasn’t exactly relevant. If anything, the giving and receiving of oral sex was an exciting thing to Alex, vulnerable, yes, but totally worth it for any long term relationship. This was obviously a conversation assuming mainstream binary gender perceptions, and while he didn’t consider himself a part of that schema, he was fluent in it and wasn’t up for teaching someone a whole new language tonight. He was very aware that there are many girls brought up to think of their skin like a vinyl floor—dump some chemicals down those pores and it will smell, feel, taste better than human. The enterprise of spending time and money to sensually please men through his appearance in order to compete with females was never a great ambition for Alex. All those Covergirl commercials, those petty teenage magazines filled with pages hacking up tips on what eyeshadow will get you that raise after you suck his cock fell flat on shag carpet covered in books on self-actualization. If anything they were cut up into pieces and pasted on card-

board for a women's studies class assignment on the male gaze and depictions of the submissive female found in marketing for teenage girls.

"It *is* a vulnerable thing. I mean I guess I can see how girls might not just discuss it with other girls—not like guys and blow jobs, right?" he finally replied, satisfied he'd found common ground. Later he wondered what would have happened had he tried to convey that complexity of realms and bodies; to take her hand gently down that path through the brush of holly and laurel to open sea and maybe even to the caverns beneath where the mud never ends. Yet he just wanted to be a boy in the world; the shape shifting, the fey. All this could be skipped over for once tonight. The rocks and their inhabitants would exist far beyond human civilization, and further still from the patter of casual bar conversations among strangers.

A couple beers in, Tanya started getting very flirtatious. The arm squeezing and hair touching phase had begun. Alex watched it happen in slow motion. He savored it some. She was cute and simple and playful. It was fun to feel wanted. She was sort of like eating a late night bowl of macaroni and cheese—not great for the diet, certainly no contender for a daily staple. A delicious little indulgence that was both fulfilling and cheesy. Alex found himself imagining her tight curls springing as she rode him, but he knew he didn't really want that kind of thing tonight or even any time soon. His life lay open to him like a roadmap and he didn't want to get stuck in small towns like Tanya on the way. On the other hand, what's a pit stop? He liked it when she touched him, it was maternal, it was sexy. If only he could melt right there into her macaroni-shaped hair; a bowl, a bed.

Tanya did want to ride him, and as the night played on she became more and more sure. Boys in bars were occasional fun distractions for Tanya. They were almost always sluts, almost always hard and ready. The thing about sluts is the word insinu-

ates there is another way to be, a way that is somehow more honorable. In the world of women, there are sluts and there are virgins, but no one applies that black and white standard to guys. For Tanya, men were always easy, especially the single kind in bars; any enterprising female can be sure to get what she wants. Tanya didn't think twice about it: if there were hot men just waiting to fuck her with almost no effort on her part, why not play with them occasionally? She knew the game and how to work it. It's in every romantic comedy, every movie with a hint of a heteronormative love story. The parts are well defined: boy meets girl or vice versa, but if *he* wants *her*—no matter how incompatible or dismal their world, they will end up romantically involved together. In Tanya's world, seduction was something women needed and men wasted. In gendered America, and other countries too, men in bars are like cattle in the fields: they need no coaxing to eat grass and fart, no coaxing to stare at her pretty teeth, grunting their way into her bed. Perhaps this is why turning the entitlement around, for Tanya, was so much fun; so clever in her world of slender cigarettes and boys bucking for attention.

Drunk, raving, and screaming obscenities: her tiny mouth and pink lips were capable of much. Tanya had imagined a different sensation when she groped for a handshake as they made out against the brick exterior of the bar. Her entitlement was crushing and misplaced. Impassioned by her soft lips and little tongue that sensually found his for quite a while, Alex forgot he wasn't packing. It was just as well, really. Yet the force from the violent rejection left him reeling. It felt jolting like a car wreck. One minute you're listening to Debussy on the way to work and the next you're shaking from the adrenaline of a three-car pile-up—and that third car that hit you was your non-existent dick.

I was cock blocked by my own non-cock, Alex thought numbly and wanted to laugh, as if the joke were on her. It wasn't just that he had been pronounced odious after a random make-out session outside a bar with a cute girl, it was the incredulity. She didn't know. He forgot there was anything she needed to know, or really, that there was something to know at all. In the convenience store pink lip gloss taste of their kiss and the comfort food of her touch, he had blurred himself, the edges forgotten. Yet this was merely a kiss, not a date, not sex. Thoughts of Angela Zapata* inundated him on the way home.

As soon as he got to his house, and the room with the narrow bit of rug before the bed, he slumped into a tight ball and held himself there. On his shag carpet he rocked and began to sob, a little at first and then the uncontrollable kind, fists clenched so tight their fingernails bit into their palms. The position was not unfamiliar to Alex. As a young queer he discovered one can endure many a trial if they are willing to weep, to tremble, to harden and soften, and harden again.

"I want to be as a stone," he said to himself out loud and imagined himself all around unyielding; his feet, back and hands all solid and still, so very still. He would bear it out now, lest he leave it to fester and infect him later with the leftover fear from that tart's rejection.

After a few minutes of embodying this kind of tortoise, he relaxed his tensed lumbar and thigh muscles. His face was wet and he felt a chill, which reminded him of stones from the mountain snowmelt waters of the Uncompahgre River. His groin felt wet too and he knew why but he put off thinking about it further. He realized he was a very wet stone now. *A wet stone, what is it good for?* he asked himself, truly curious now. After a little pondering he soon found his answer, a reply from his depths: sharpening blades. "Whose blade am I sharpening now?" he inquired tersely into the open darkness of his small room. His mind groped for the entities that might be doing

this to him. *My skull wasn't bashed in with a fire extinguisher*, thinking of Angela, again rolling her story over in his mind. A woman who met a man and then met her death when he found her out just three days later. He hadn't known her personally but Alex thought of her often—this time with the clear vision of her, as a person absolutely opening herself to love. While the last scintilla of faith and trust in the flakey business of human love dwindled for Alex, especially after tonight, another kind of affinity was taking hold. Alex wondered if it is really possible to shiver off the trauma of two decades plus living sideways on a rock of non-level footing, together with all the things we animals encounter in this world, and if it is, would it be a life worth living? And how does one get by without getting dull? Or why bother? The world is an entropic and chaotic place to be alive as any form.

These thoughts confused him but somehow made sense subconsciously, the way dreams are fathomable where they would be too incongruous for waking life. Shivering on the carpet and wet from tears of anger and monthly blood he repeated part of an oath written for himself and burned in the customary way some seasons ago: *Defile me not, O world of deleterious impulse and conceit—neither words of ignorance, nor of brash candor can a stone they change. By the adamantine stone a blade is honed. We will Transect, we will Transform...*

Again, he forgave the birds their talons; his shell, the Sun. ¶

* *Angela Zapata was an eighteen-year-old Colorado woman who was murdered in 2008 by her date after the man discovered she was transgender. Her killer was the first person in America to be convicted for a hate crime against a transgendered person.*

GIANT RIVER OTTERS ON THE MAT

Master Fenster does not drink so she does not understand how strange it is for us to meet for an activity on a Friday night at not-the-bar. She doesn't preach about it, too much, although she does say, "I never drank, I never put myself in that situation, so I don't know." She begins with a story. "I know a woman, put her drink down on the bar. Came back from the bathroom to finish it. Ended up on some guy's couch the next morning. She remembers nothing except that her clothes were not on her right when she woke up." She tells us to take our drinks to the dance floor and, if we put our drinks down for just one second, to throw it out. "You don't want to get ruffioed." We don't laugh that she adds the extra 'o.' No one's going to laugh at her. She's a third-degree black belt. She doesn't drink. "Ruffioed" is close enough.

Giant river otters (*Pteronura brasiliensis*) are also known as river wolves. Like wolves, they live in large, complex social groups. And like wolves, they sometimes mark their territories and communicate by howling. Found mostly in the Amazon basin (the otters in the gallery were photographed in Peru) and Brazilian Pantanal, giant otters can grow to nearly 6 feet in length and are the largest otter species on the planet.

My kids take taekwondo from Master Fenster. Twice a week for an hour and a half, I sit on a hard wooden bench and watch my kids learn how to kick through the board so the board breaks

clean in half. My five year old breaks it with his foot. I've met wood before. I have a hard time breaking wood with a saw.

Master Fenster offers free women's self-defense every three months. When the date nears, she points to we mothers sitting on the bench and asks, "Are you coming?" "Are you coming?" "Are you coming?" Eventually, she breaks each of us down. So, "Yes," I say. "I am coming," even though, on Friday nights, I'm usually looking forward to a glass of wine, not learning how to kick people in the teeth.

I arrive that night, early. Some men with black belts are sparring. I stand at the edge of the mat, trying to look like I belong there. I don't. I look at my toenails. They are painted blue. The first sign of difference: no black belt. The second sign of difference: painted toenails. No men are allowed at the training tonight. I wonder if we should overlap at all. I wish they'd go. I want a clearer line between offense and defense.

Otters have unique social structures among the Mustelidae family, even among carnivores in general. Most mustelids show sexual segregation to some degree, with females in a set area, usually determined by food availability, and males following the females, often establishing territories within female areas. Female otters segregate themselves when they give birth.

The first question she asks us, as we sit on the same hard wooden benches where I sit every Tuesday and Thursday is "What do you know about self defense?" The group of us, four other taekwondo mothers, four Navajo women, and two really quiet women sit there silently. Finally, I say, "I know the episode of *Friends* where Ross dresses up in the foam suit and Rachel kicks him a lot."

"Sadly. No foam suit guy tonight." She introduces us to

Bob, her plastic kicking dummy. He only has a head and a chest but seems smushy and kickable as Ross Geller.

They don't say this on the *Friends* episode but Master Fenster does: "I call this self-defense but let's call it what it really is. Rape defense."

Sharp intakes of breath. Even though no of us had been to a self-defense class before, it felt like we all knew what would come next. "What happened to you? Why are you here?"

Master Fenster did not ask that. Instead, she gave us numbers that probably described us, without us having to come forward to say it ourselves. "One in three women are sexually assaulted. 80% of those assaults are acquaintance rape."

I had just finished Jon Krakauer's book, *Missoula*, about football players raping university students. I knew the 80% number. I thought the one in three number was actually one in four, but, knowing what I know, knowing myself, looking at the faces in the room, one in three. Probably.

In addition to being huge, giant river otters also have a (relatively) huge vocabulary. Adults communicate using an array of 22 sounds, researchers report today in *PLoS ONE*. Otter pups are born making noise, and generate an additional 11 sounds. Scientists suspect the animals' vocal complexity reflects the complexity of giant river otters' social structure, which includes multigenerational family groups of more than a dozen individuals.

"I imagine if you're here, you've run into some kind of trouble. I raised three kids. I got out." Now, she says, "I don't go on dates, rarely. If I do go on a date, I say, I'll bring my friend along. If he has a problem with that then there's probably a problem with him."

She told another story about when she was pregnant with her first child and her car broke down on the highway. Someone pulled over. Said he'd take her to the gas station.

"No thanks. Just please call the police for me when you get there. He was pissed off! He called me some choice words I won't repeat here. I'm sorry. If there's a problem with me, pregnant out to here, not wanting to get in the car with you then you're the problem."

A new group of women showed up. They were late. They'd missed the part about rape. They looked dressed for a club but took a wrong turn and ended up in a self-defense class.

"Take off your shoes. Join us." No one says no to Master Fenster. Shoes come off. The women in tight black pants and sequined shirts sensed they should find a place in the circle.

"Welcome. We're teaching rape defense. The first defense. Assume you need to be defensive."

The would-be-club goers weren't shy. One woman quoted Oprah, "Never become point B," she said.

"Never put yourself in the second scene of the crime," Master Fenster translated. "Don't let yourself get duct-taped and thrown in the trunk. But, if you are duct-taped and in the trunk, kick out the brake light. Wave at other drivers. They'll stop. No one expects a hand coming out of the back of the car."

Master Fenster didn't let us linger long to imagine ourselves tied up in the back of a trunk, trying to knock out a brake light. What if our feet were tied, too? Why didn't we take that girlfriend with us on that blind date?

"OK, everybody up!" First thing to learn is your yell. You have to yell. Don't say *no*. Everyone thinks that's to stop a man from raping you. Which it is. But studies show, if you scream *no*, no one will stop to help. No one wants to get involved in that. And if you scream *fire*, people just start running away. You want to scream *stop*. It's natural to stop when people say *stop*. Maybe even your perpetrator will stop if you yell *stop*. We say,

Bah Hoh! in Taekwondo practice. It works a lot like *stop*. One night driving home from California, I was getting gas in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night. My three kids were in the car. I got out of the car and saw a guy across the parking lot, pretty far away. When I came back from the bathroom, he was right in front of me. He did not have good intentions for me. I got even closer to him and yelled *Bah Hoh!* as loud as my diaphragm could yell it. He said, ‘OK, lady. Sorry, lady’ and walked away.

When Master Fenster said, *Bah Hoh*, we all jumped. We had all been so quiet, listening to the quiet stories. Now we had to get some work done.

“Practice. Say *no* from your stomachs like I say *Bah Hoh!*”

I tighten my stomach muscles. I yell *no*, loud and deep. It hurts my throat. The sound of each of us in harmony makes it feel like the windows could blow. They won’t, but it feels possible.

Bark! Bark! Whiiiiine.

Growl.

Screeeeam?

Growl.

Hah!

Snort. Snort. Snort.

If you spoke giant river otter, the interaction above would translate into something roughly like this:

Hi there! Nice fish. Want.

No.

Pleeeeeeease can I have some?

No.

Hey-o. Looks who’s over there!

Caiman. Caiman. Caiman.

We sit back down on the wooden benches or on the floor. This is not going to be a full on work out, I realize. This is not exercise. This is therapy. Or maybe bookclub where our books are our stories of being accosted by men. A woman tells another story. “I know the woman who was thrown into the trunk. She got out and ran and ran and ran.”

“Always run if you can.” Master Fenster says. “I am a warrior but a peaceful warrior. I won’t come at you if you don’t come at me. But if you come at me,” she makes gun-fingers in the air, “I will come at you. I was walking with my four dogs in the forest. The dogs left to go check out another hiker’s dog. As soon as my dogs left me, the hiker got close. Too close. And then he lunged for me.” Master Fenster stops talking, kicks forward, leaps in the air, rolls onto her back. “He was down. I was back up, calling my dogs. I kicked but then I ran. People who are too nice to you in the forest, we do a lot of hiking around here, the forests aren’t necessarily safe. Take someone with you.”

I always hike alone. I used to take my dog but she got old and then she died. Maybe I will get a new dog. Maybe I will learn some high kicks.

We stop talking and stand up.

In a circle that, during the kids’ classes, she calls “Ring of Fire,” here she calls “The Blue Square.” To me she says, “Don’t fold your arms. Your attacker will break them like kindling.” To another woman whose hands are interlinked behind her back, Fenster says, “That is possibly the most defenseless position I’ve ever seen.” She pushes her on the shoulder. The woman nearly falls over. “Women are nice. They are push-overs. Literally. They hold their arms. That’s not defense. For defense, you need to use your arms. They need to be ready.” Outside the world of my Facebook and the academy, people still generalize, essentialize about women. It’s hard to deny, as we all stand around, already knock-overable, that we’ve been trained to be just that.

Though a family of giant otters can bring down a caiman, the alligator-like reptiles do (infrequently) prey on otters. In fact, they're about the only thing that does. A family of giant otters is pretty much indestructible, so it's a good thing they're happy just eating fish.

"Tonight, you will yell." And we will try to knock attackers over. At least in our minds, which, Master Master Fenster says, is the first stop.

"Put your wrists together, widen your hands. This is called *the open flower move*. It sounds dainty. It is not."

Master Fenster tells us to scream "stop" as we extend our arm forward in a punch. "Really hit it. Go through the person, to the other side."

She shows us how to hit our attacker's chin with our palm. We learn how to keep our finger open. Bent back like catapults, after the chin-hit, spring the fingers forward, gouge the eyes. One younger woman says "Ew," but I kind of like the idea of eyeballs on my fingers like olives.

Master Fenster assures us this can get us out of most situations. "They don't expect it."

She has us sit down. "You know that creepy guy? The one at the grocery store's entrance? He just gives you the creeps. Don't ignore that feeling. Be the woman who looks him in the eye, not the one who looks down on the ground. Don't be so busy with your phone and your keys that it's easy to take you down."

One of the women who hadn't said anything yet tells us a story she heard. "She was just walking through the parking lot and there he was. He pushed her in the car. Her kid was in the backseat. He pulled the baby's car seat out, left it in the parking spot and drove away with her, leaving the baby behind."

"You don't want to be that woman," Master Master Fenster said. "You want to be the one who looks like they would put up

a fight. Who will put up a fight.”

“OK. Everybody up!”

The next moves are meant to disarm them, to stun them enough. “Don’t try to kick them in the groin. At least not at fist. They’re expecting that. Eyes first. Then groin. Then run.”

She teaches us an additional move for groin kicking. “Get close to the them. Pretend you’re acquiescing. Without space between you, they can’t move you around. They can’t grab you well. You grab them by their shoulders. It gives you fulcrum. Then shoulder grab. Knee to the groin. Everybody try it on Bob.” Bob, our plastic version of foam-suited Ross. It’s scary to think that you have to get closer to your perpetrator in order to get away. We take turns, making an ever-tighter circle of women, grabbing Bob by the shoulder and kneeling him in the balls.

We break apart, not quite sweaty from our work but kind of energized for a Friday night. Kind of like clubbing but without any men or beer. We sit back down to talk some more.

Learning the language of these Amazonian river wolves meant studying five families of wild otters in Peru and three captive otter families kept in German zoos. Scientists recorded the otters’ different vocalizations and the contexts in which those sounds emerged. Then they compared the ways in which the wild and captive otters communicated with one another. Ultimately, the team classified and described 22 different adult otter noises, which is a few more than previous researchers had found. Some of the sounds, like the warning sound *Hah!*, are made by all age groups. Snorts are also an alert, and scientists think information about the severity of an approaching threat is encoded in the duration

and number of snorts. Barking and humming noises can be greetings, or signals that the group is changing direction and going to hunt somewhere else. And then there are the mating calls, the begging calls, the simple greetings, and more.

“I know someone who was attacked in an elevator. She was just going up to her hotel room.” Master Fenster told us, “They want to get you separated, outside of the group. I was on my way up to my hotel room once. The elevator door opened. There were two guys inside. I said, ‘I’ll wait for the next one.’ They looked surprised. Mad even. I said to them, ‘The society we live in does not allow me to get in the elevator with you.’ You don’t want to be the one they attack.”

I raise my hand. “It seems, too, that the more of us who know how to do this, the less likely these men will attack. If just the ten of us fight back, that signifies that maybe more of us will. And if a hundred of us know how to fight back, then maybe it suggests even more. So for each one of us who knows taekwondo, or even this self-defense, we’re sending out a signal that maybe women aren’t such easy targets.” Leave it to me to use the word signifies. I apologize.

“What if we’re on the ground?” I ask. “Do these moves still work?”

“They do. I’ll show you.”

Master Fenster lay on her back. “Sit over me.” I worry that I smell sweaty but I do it anyway, sit over her hips. I’ve seen rape scenes on TV. I’ve read them in books. I’ve tussled on the floor. I know how to straddle a woman’s hips like a man might.

“Lean toward me.”

I lean. She comes at me full force with the open-flower. I know from watching my kids act out being the bad guy not to move. She’ll stop before she knocks me unconscious. She does. But her hands get close enough that I can see how this could

indeed work.

I jump up. She jumps up. Reenactments can bring up weird emotions.

In general, scientists suspect that animals with more complex social structures have more complex vocabularies. Among otter species, this seems to be true. Mostly solitary otters, such as the neotropical and Eurasian otters, have vocal repertoires with fewer than 10 sounds. Semi-social otters, such as the Cape clawless otter, have a few more. The sea otters found off the coast of California make about 10 distinct vocalizations. And the giant river otters, with their complicated social lives—seriously, they have all the drama—make the most noises.

By the end of the night, each of us has told some dramatic story. Master Fenster has told several. Some have dramatized stories that might have been their own, disguised as stories told by friends. There's something horrifying about everyone in the room having a story about being attacked. There is also something entirely unifying about it—your nightmare story is no longer yours alone. It doesn't set you apart. It brings you together. Now, banded together, I picture us walking the streets of Flagstaff, arm and arm. Would-be perpetrators avoid us. They can hear us saying *stop* as we come down the streets like a river. ¶

ERIN KAE

ANATOMY OF DISINTEGRATING GRAVE, 1992

Half-child in my womb does not make me sick. She worries
of rhubarb—makes me crave poison leaves,
wants to teethe the stalks raw. Half-child
& I dream of her grandmother. See her ghost
holding fists of dirt in the shower or sewing
baby clothes on the toilet. Half-child brings hands
to my belly: growing lemon-sized planet. We obsess over exits;
smear neon across my breasts. I ask her favorite color,
& she always answers *ghost*. Half-child wants out.
Of order. Of our dreams. Of me. So she dives; I bitter.
Scrub the shower, the toilet of every ghost—every leaf
that drew breath or smelled sweet in that place.

REGRET

Paper lanterns rustled against the railing
like wasps performing their evening devotions,
the cold fireplace exhaling a faint dark smell.

If the dice had been bells when I rolled them

If water and the sound of voices
laughing in another language

we could have gone and introduced ourselves
with signs and gifts: fruit, or soft bread
shaped like blossoms.

But the game
was over so soon. And we didn't begin another.
We folded up our favorite sayings
and everyone departed.

What would I do
with the silver light I still had on my palms?
By morning it would be gone.

WHEN I SIT AND WHEN I STAND,

when I wake and when I fall asleep
I am thinking of it, it is a slight
pressure on the stomach, the length of a
finger, it is the sudden ambiguous
movement, as if from a field of zinnias
a kingfisher shot out of view before
the eye could register it, it might not
have been a kingfisher, I might have
just imagined it, it could happen
at any moment, I might have
already missed it, it might not
even exist, except in thinking
about it, which I never do,
except when I sit and when I stand,
when I wake and before I fall
asleep, when I go out along the road,
when the chain comes off my bike
and I yank it from the gears
and lift the rear tire and guide
it back on, when I wipe my hands
of grease, when I run along the river,
when I get home with my dirt-streaked
legs, while I am grinding coffee, while
I am waiting for it to boil, while I am
selecting clothes pins for the socks
and snapping them to the line, which will
break sooner rather than later, and I
say, *this too will happen sooner*

rather than later, the laundry line
has been repaired with plastic twine,
with ribbons from boxes of chocolate,
when I set the table, when I remove
the plates, when the water is running
from the tap, while waiting for it to
grow hot. Otherwise, I am perfectly
still inside my breath, which I send out
into the world, which always comes back to me.

HOLLIE DUGAS

AND THESE ARE MY DAMAGES:

a madness enough
for the two of us.
I hear emotions, not words,
bruises curdling
on the surface of others.
Reality has squeezed itself
from ordinary objects,
from me, and how do you get
the juice back inside a wild peach?
I have acquired a taste
for imagined things, returning home
to deify old notes, arrange trinkets
by their impossible meanings
on an altar, exercising
ceramic poise. I can't stop
counting the empty spaces
since the last time we spoke.
I wrap them like little barren
reasons in a yellow handkerchief
and offer them back to you.

HOME COMING

Fell into a bad state of mind after two years in L.A. I still hadn't found my father, and my job writing product descriptions for an office supply catalog had become untenable. I felt like a rat who'd gnawed his way into a garbage bag and taken up residence.

Of course there were drugs involved. Everyone in L.A. has a forged script for benzos or OxyContin. I swallowed all the colors of the rainbow, stole random pill bottles from my friends' medicine cabinets until I no longer had friends. My ears rang constantly. My weeks were riddled with holes. I tore up my eviction notices and flushed them down the toilet.

I began wandering the streets in broad daylight dressed like a pirate, swinging a plastic sword at pigeons. Even the homeless schizophrenics gave me a wide berth. I still scanned every face, hoping to see my father. Scary thought: what if I'd seen him but not recognized him? It had been seven years. Those days I barely recognized myself.

One evening I found myself on Hollywood Boulevard, dry-heaving next to a fire hydrant. A street preacher bellowed doom through a megaphone. I stumbled down the sidewalk and took a cell phone picture with Marilyn Monroe and Elvis. When I walked away without paying, Marilyn called me a faggot. The sunset looked like a bloody scrape across the sky. This is the end, I thought. I've suffered enough.

Spent the next hour thinking of how to kill myself. Decided to jump in front of a subway car. I called my mom and sobbed into her answering machine, then made my way to the nearest hub.

On the metro wall, I found a leaflet advertising a chess club meeting. My father had taught me chess. I ripped away the leaflet, went home, and slept for fourteen hours.

The next night, I headed to the address in West Hollywood. Six burly Eastern European men greeted me coldly. I embarrassed myself with blunders and shortsighted strategy. The men were impatient and unsympathetic. When they saw my weakened state of mind, they turned cruel.

They set up chess puzzles where I had to find checkmate in three or four moves. “This one is very easy,” one of them said in a thick, frigid accent. “A dog could find the solution.” When I failed, they subjected me to indignities: broke an egg in my hair, shaved an eyebrow, wrote insults on my forehead in medium point permanent Sharpie: “BLUNDERER.” “PAWN.” I was too defeated to resist.

They released me around midnight. I wandered up a jogging trail into a park. A pack of feral dogs trotted past, eyeing me with pity. Fell asleep next to a withered shrub.

I woke up with the sun on my face and my father holding me in his arms. He licked his fingers and wiped the insults from my forehead, ran his hands through my hair to clean away the egg. But then the haze cleared and it wasn’t my father. It was a homeless man with an erection.

In a sticky McDonald’s booth, I listened to a message my mom had left the night before: “Your dad is gone forever, Jimmy. Come home.”

That afternoon, I pawned all my belongings for \$150 and got on a Greyhound heading for Kansas. As the city gave way to desert, I scrolled through pictures on my phone. Stopped at the pic with Elvis and Marilyn. Elvis’s tan, those lines on his brow, the hair curling from the deep V of his jacket—all so familiar. Could it be my dad? His eyes were hidden behind shades. I put the phone away and reclined my seat. I had to let it go.

My father had vanished when I was in eighth grade. His only contact came a month later in the form of a postcard from L.A. on which he'd scribbled two sentences: "I am alive. Do not try to find me." Ever since, that's all I'd wanted to do. I had to know why he left. There must have been a good reason—the witness protection program, a hitman on his trail, some dark and mysterious past catching up with him. Why else would a man abandon his son? I wanted to move to L.A. when I turned 18, but my mom bribed me with a new car to wait until graduation. That car was long gone now.

Two hours out of L.A., the toilet backed up. It overflowed and sloshed around the rear of the bus. The driver said we'd have to put up with it until Vegas. A man in a Che Guevara shirt walked up and down the aisle spraying Lysol. Chemical fog settled over us. Babies howled.

In Vegas, a young black man with a mustache and glasses got on and sat next to me. He was a pharmacist, he said. Did I like pills?

I nodded.

One day there will be a pill for everything, he explained. Even for racism. Was I a racist? I shook my head.

That was good, he said. But if I was, in the future I could just take a pill for it.

"You know what?" he said. "I like you." He pulled out a bag of small red capsules. "Usually these go for ten a pop, but I'll give you two for free."

I woke up with sandpaper eyelids somewhere in Utah, the pharmacist gone along with my phone and wallet. In an act of mercy, he'd tucked my ID down the front of my pants. The bus was still 20 hours from Kansas. I curled in a fetal position on the seat and buried my face in the blue upholstery.

At a rest stop outside Denver, an old Mexican woman gave me a tangerine. Tears poured from my eyes. "Bless you, abuela,"

I said. I ate one slice of tangerine every hour as the bus zigzagged down from the Rockies and rattled east onto the Great Plains.

The wheat fields we passed were just rows of small green shoots. I'd forgotten it was fall. I felt sick with shame at the sight of those fields. I was coming home in disgrace.

Haskerville was too small for a bus stop, so the Greyhound dropped me off twenty miles east in Pratt. I walked down to the KFC and borrowed a teenager's phone to call my mom.

She started crying when she saw me.

"Oh, Jimmy," she said, pulling me into her arms.

She bought me a bucket of chicken, and I tore into it while she drove. I was so hungry that I didn't notice at first that she was still sobbing.

"What's wrong?" I said, and then I looked up at the road. "Mom, where are we going?"

"I'm taking you to Dr. Jenkins." She shook her head miserably. "I knew it. I knew you'd go to L.A. and get AIDS."

"I don't have AIDS," I said. "Can we please just go home?"

"That bastard. That evil bastard." She sobbed one more time and then set her jaw and glared out the windshield.

I managed to convince her to postpone my doctor's visit, and soon we were speeding fifteen miles over the limit on the two-lane highway toward Haskerville. We barreled past a few semis, but otherwise the road was empty. Cows grazed in dewy fields.

A strange feeling, crossing those railroad tracks into Haskerville for the first time in two years. On Main Street, jack-o'-lanterns grinned from the post office windows. Oil slicks curled in pools of rainwater in parking spaces outside the hardware store. Nothing moved.

A pickup passed in front of us at an unmarked intersection, and Mom waved. The driver waved back. Like travelers meeting in the wilderness compelled to greet each other, everyone waves at everyone in Haskerville.

Mom pulled into our driveway. The paint on the house was chipping, the gutters stuffed with leaves. Inside, she paused in the foyer.

“Aren’t you going to say anything?” she said.

“About what?”

“About what? I’ve lost twenty pounds!” She held out her arms and spun in a circle.

“You look great, Mom.”

“Thanks. I’m on a new diet.”

I wandered through the house. Same as it ever was: portraits of the last three Republican presidents over the couch, painting of Jesus over the TV, smell of cornbread from the kitchen. Cat fur clung to every surface.

“Where’s Pogo?” I asked.

“He’s around somewhere.” Mom set a plate of cornbread at my old place at the table. “Have a seat.”

I was at the sideboard, flipping through a stack of mail. When Mom saw me, her voice grew stern. “Jimmy, come sit down.” But by then I’d already found the postcard.

From Miami.

From my dad.

James,

Hello my son! I’ve thought of you fondly over the years. I trust you’ve grown into a man in my absence. I’m writing now with wondrous news: I have achieved a state of transcendent bliss! Come experience it with me. Miami is a paradise. You will live joyfully here.

I await.

Frank

Below his name he'd scrawled an address.

"It came last week," Mom said with a sigh. "I was going to show you."

I excused myself to the bathroom. Swung open the medicine cabinet and all the drawers. Only Tylenol and laxatives. Took four Tylenol just to swallow something. Passed by the kitchen and mumbled that I needed to lie down.

My bedroom hadn't changed—posters of *The Big Lebowski*, Red Hot Chili Peppers, and Kobe Bryant hung on the walls. I stood in front of my closet door and stared at my reflection in the full-length mirror.

Miami. While I'd been prowling around L.A., showing my dad's photo in bars and making prolonged eye contact with every middle-aged man I saw, he'd been on the opposite end of the continent, achieving his bliss.

Anger boiled in my gut. I'd only gone to L.A. because of his first postcard, and I came away with nothing to show for it but a pill habit and a shaved eyebrow that made me look like I'd joined a cult. And now he'd sent another postcard and expected me to go chasing after him again?

But this time I had an address. And best of all, he'd invited me. He was waiting for me. And anyway, what was I going to do in Haskerville?

I stepped away from the mirror and collapsed on my bed. I'd go to Miami, I decided. I just needed to get my hands on a few hundred dollars and I'd be back on that Greyhound, moving forward again instead of retreating into the past.

I waited until after Mom had wished me goodnight and shuffled down the hallway to her bedroom. Gave it another forty minutes, then grabbed a flashlight and made my way to the spare room that used to be my dad's office. On the top shelf of the closet, behind a box of Christmas ornaments, I knew there was a pickle jar where Mom kept her emergency cash. Should be enough to get me to Miami with a few hot meals along the way.

I pushed aside my dad's old suit jackets, stood on my tiptoes to take down the ornaments, and reached up for the jar.

Nothing. I cursed quietly and shined my light around the closet. Dusty board games, photo albums, and Dad's high school yearbook, but no money. I stepped back and scanned the room. The computer desk? I rifled through all the drawers but came up empty.

Next I searched the laundry room and the kitchen pantry. I was grinding my teeth in frustration by the time I got to the hallway closet by the bathroom. Nothing but a hundred towels. Why did one woman need so many fucking towels?

"Jimmy? What are you doing?"

I looked up to see Mom standing in the hallway. A nightlight on the wall revealed a look of sleepy concern. Makeup washed away, bags under her eyes.

"Nothing, Mom. Couldn't sleep."

"Are you looking for something?"

I stared at her dumbly, trying to think of a lie. With the weight she'd lost, she looked so small and vulnerable standing there in her loose nightgown and poofy slippers.

After a few seconds, I said, "I was looking for Pogo."

"Pogo?" She frowned. "I don't think he's in the closet."

I closed the door. "Sorry, Mom. Just missing him, I guess. Let's go back to bed."

"I'm sure he'll turn up," she said, still frowning. She gave me a long look, then slowly padded back to her bedroom. She left her door open a crack.

I leaned against the wall and closed my eyes. My heart was racing, and I was filled with guilt that made me want to puke but wouldn't stop me, I knew, from trying to find that money.

The next morning, cars started lining up outside. Word had spread of my return. Old ladies brought over casseroles

like there'd been a death in the family. Haskerville ladies will jump at any chance to bake a casserole. Their hugs smelled like church.

After the ladies left, my old buddy Big Rick Rollins showed up. He'd gotten married right after high school. He sat on the couch next to his wife, who gazed up at the painting of Jesus as she burped their baby.

Big Rick looked me over. "Lookin' good, Hodges," he said. "Been enjoying L.A.?"

I just shrugged. In high school, Big Rick had been forced by the circumstances of his enormous girth into playing center on the football team, but his true passion had been cruising the streets of Haskerville or Pratt in his van, trying to pick up girls. When that failed, he'd pick me up instead and we'd drive around listening to nu-metal and talking about professional wrestling. He'd always been a belligerent bastard. Now, though, he sat there smiling pleasantly and patting his wife's knee.

"So you're, like, a writer out there?" he said.

"I wrote about staplers." My mind was slipping ahead to Miami. I wondered how big my dad's pool was.

"You in town for homecoming?"

"Huh?"

"It's tomorrow night," Mom said.

Like any school, Haskerville High had a homecoming every fall, but I'd never heard of graduates who lived out of the area actually coming home for the game. There was a king and queen and a closely chaperoned dance, and that was all. I'd always hated it—the seriousness of the ceremony, the king and queen acting like beating out fifteen classmates in a popularity contest was a great life achievement. I would not be attending homecoming.

As I started to answer, Rick's baby giggled, burped, and threw up between the cushions.

“Ho boy!” Rick said with a laugh. He pulled out a tote bag. “Don’t worry, I’ve got some wipes in my daddy purse.”

After the visitors left, Mom drove me around town to point out all the thrilling updates I’d missed. They’d paved four more streets since I’d left, bringing the total up to six, although the road in front of our house was still gravel. The Henderson house out on Sycamore had burned down under mysterious circumstances, the family relocated to Oklahoma. The retirement center had purchased a ping-pong table that was free for public use on weekends.

“And right there,” Mom said, pointing out a small trailer behind the retirement center, “is my new office.”

She must have told me her plan at some point while I was in L.A., but the information hadn’t registered. Still, I wasn’t surprised. Mom’s boundless entrepreneurial spirit and lack of business acumen had resulted in a trail of failed ventures around Haskerville. Over the years, she’d left a clothing boutique, wedding planning service, bakery, and pet grooming business in her ruinous wake.

“What’s this one?” I asked.

“A travel agency.”

I groaned. “Mom, you know the internet exists, right?”

“People prefer a human touch. Anyway, I have a partner this time. Ron Bronson.”

“*Ron Bronson?*” I couldn’t believe it. “The sex offender?”

“Those charges were dismissed, you know that. Ron’s a good man. It’s not right the way people talk.”

“He exposed himself to some Girl Scouts, Mom. Don’t tell me you’re...”

“He was changing out of his jogging shorts when they happened to walk by.”

“In his front yard? That guy’s a pervert.”

“He’s a good man, Jimmy. He treats me well.”

“Treats you—oh Jesus.” I gripped my head with both hands. “I’m going to vomit. I’m not joking, pull over.”

Mom kept driving. Her voice was steady. “I want you to meet him tomorrow. I was thinking we could go to the game together.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Just come to the game with us. Be civil. I think you’ll like him if you give him a chance.”

How could I tell her no? The seven years since my dad left had been rough for her, too. A few dubious boyfriends had come and gone. She was still technically married, which made dating difficult in a conservative small town.

“If he’s wearing a trench coat I’m leaving,” I said.

The next night I pulled on a hoodie, took a swig of Malibu rum I’d found in the fridge, and walked with Mom the six blocks down to the football field.

Ron Bronson met us by the ticket booth. Early fifties with a black goatee, a stud earring, and a bulky Kansas City Chiefs Starter jacket. I managed to shake his hand without gagging.

“What’s up with your eyebrow?” he said.

We sat at the top of the bleachers. The band played fight songs while the players warmed up. Mom gave me twenty bucks for snacks. She and Ron shared a bucket of popcorn, and I had nachos and a licorice rope. Ron had brought a blanket. As he and mom snuggled under it, he gave me a knowing grin.

The Hornets were playing the Willow Creek Muskrats, a program that hadn’t had a winning season in recorded history and was always invited to other teams’ homecomings. On the kickoff, the Muskrats’ return man took the ball up the sideline and was leveled by a vicious helmet-to-helmet blow. Ron hooted and pumped his fist.

“You never played, did you, Jim?” he asked me.

“I played JV freshman year. Dislocated my shoulder.”

“It’s not for everyone. I played fullback in college.”

“Don’t brag, Ron,” Mom said.

“JUCO?” I asked.

“Fort Hays State, bud. NCAA.” He winked. I wondered if anyone had ever been choked to death with a licorice rope.

On Haskerville’s first possession, the quarterback dropped back for a pass but was sacked by a blitzing defender. The crowd groaned.

“Damn,” I said. “They really *exposed* our offensive line there.” Mom glanced up at me. Ron shifted uncomfortably.

By the end of the first quarter the Hornets were down fourteen to zip. Coach Oberman, my old history teacher, stomped around the sideline with a clipboard, yelling in players’ faces. The cheerleaders formed a wobbly pyramid as the band kicked into high gear.

Ron leaned in and whispered something to my mom. She giggled. I could see her slapping away his hand under the blanket.

I stood up. “I’m going to buy some Girl Scout cookies. You want some, Ron?”

Ron grunted, and Mom gave me a venomous look. It felt good to be an asshole. I’d spent the last two years feeling like a urinal cake.

I headed out through the ticket booth just as the second quarter was starting. I couldn’t take any more.

On my way out, I ran into a kid I used to tutor when I was a senior and he was a sixth grader. Still scrawny and awkward, but now with acne. I was about to pretend I didn’t recognize him when a memory struck me. I asked if he remembered me, and he nodded vaguely.

“You had ADD, right?” I said.

“Yeah.” He scrunched his brow.

“You still taking pills?”

“Sometimes.”

“Ritalin? Adderall?”

He fished around in his backpack and came up with two orange tablets of generic Adderall. I was so filled with affection that I almost kissed his forehead. I gripped his shoulders as he blinked at me uncomfortably.

“You’re a good young man,” I said. “How did you do in your English class?”

“I got a D,” he said, and headed for the ticket booth.

I walked over to the cars parked in front of the school and crushed the tablets with my ID on the trunk of a Ford Probe. Snorted the powder with a dollar bill. Floodlights burst on behind my eyeballs.

I wandered away from the school, the sound of the crowd fading behind me. The whole town was at the game. I walked down the middle of an empty gravel street past yards full of skeletons and ghouls. Pumpkins on porches, a gossamer ghost hanging from a tree.

The Adderall gave the world a vibrant shimmer. I felt like I could see each particle of air. As I walked along in this elevated state, the tangled knot of my life seemed to unfurl. I was going to be okay. I’d find the money, book it to Miami, and live joyfully with my dad. It was all so simple. I almost started skipping.

And then a van came around the corner and nearly killed me. I lunged off the road and scraped my elbow on the sidewalk. The van skidded to a stop. Kid Rock blared from the lowered windows. Then the music dropped away and a voice called out.

“Hodges?”

I rolled over with a groan and looked up. Big Rick’s head jutted from the van window. I crawled to my feet.

“What the fuck, man?” Rick said. “Why were you in the middle of the road?”

I approached the window. Rick's eyes were watery and red. "Well," he said, "are you just gonna stare at me like a weirdo or are you gonna get in?"

I got in. Rick was three beers into a twelve pack of Coors. I cracked one open and turned to look in the back of the van. A strapped-in child seat, the floor strewn with baby paraphernalia: a rattle, a pacifier, a stuffed gorilla.

"I know, I know," Rick said. "The Fuck Wagon is just a daddy van now." He polished off a Coors and tossed it over his shoulder. "Chug that," he said, nodding at my beer. "You gotta catch up."

I drained it, threw it on the floor, and grabbed another. "Where's Tammy?" I asked. "And the little guy?"

"Corbin," he said. "They're at the game." He let out a tremendous belch.

"Everything cool?" I asked.

"Yeah." He paused. "No. Fuck, man, I don't know." He was quiet for a minute, then continued: "Seeing you again this morning got me thinking. You got out of here, moved to L.A., and I just stuck around. I feel like my whole life now is wiping up puke and going to high school football games."

The van started drifting off the road, but he jerked the wheel to straighten it out. I pulled on my seatbelt.

"Anyway, enough of that shit," Rick said. "Tell me about L.A. You bangin' a bunch of actresses?"

"Nah, nothing like that."

"Shit, no wonder." He took a swig of beer. "You look like a cat someone tried to drown." For a while we just drove around drinking and listening to music. I finished my second Coors and cracked open another. With the Adderall in my blood, the sound made me shiver with pleasure. A breeze from the lowered windows tousled my hair. The night was crisp and luminous.

A few beers later, Rick turned down the music. "You went to L.A. to see your dad, right. How'd that go?"

“He’s doing good,” I said, hoping to end the topic.

“I know it was rough on you, him leaving and all,” Rick said. “I get why he did it, though. I kind of wanna peace the fuck out, too.”

On the street by the baseball diamond, a pair of headlights rounded a corner and shot through our windshield. A police car. I slumped low in my seat.

“It’s cool, man,” Rick said. “Tammy’s cousin’s a cop.” He stuck his hand out the window. The officer returned the wave as he rolled past.

“That was Chip Mullins,” Rick said. “I heard that bastard got a BJ from Pastor Ted’s wife.”

I was still thinking about what he’d said about my dad. “You shouldn’t joke about that,” I said.

“Seriously, man. I heard it from Garrett Ross. Mullins pulled her over out by the cemetery—”

“I mean about leaving your family,” I said. “That’s messed up.”

Rick snorted. “Says the single guy free to roam the country.”

“What about Corbin?” I said. “You want him to feel abandoned and unworthy all his life?”

“Of course not,” Rick said. “But I’m starting to feel like a worm that got its tail smushed on the sidewalk. I can squirm all I want, but I ain’t goin’ nowhere.” He spat out the window. “Seriously, man, thinking about another decade in Haskerville makes me wanna kill myself.”

We drove by the diamond, and I stared out at the muddy infield. The sharp-edged giddiness from the Adderall and alcohol began to shift into a queasy clarity.

“I tried to kill myself,” I said quietly.

Rick started to laugh but then stopped when he saw I wasn’t joking. He pulled the van over and put it in park. “What the fuck? When?”

“A few days ago.”

He gave me a bewildered look and then sighed and shook his head. “Shit, Hodges...”

We sat there for a minute without talking. In the distance we could see the lights from the football field and hear the rise and fall of the announcer’s voice.

I felt the weight of those words. Until that moment it hadn’t seemed real that I’d been seconds away from death. Chilling thought: I was only here now because some deranged old man had taped a chess club flyer to the subway wall.

A cheer went up from the field. The announcer yelled, cars honked. The Hornets must have scored.

“I think I’d better head home,” I said. “My mom will be back soon. Don’t want to freak her out if I’m not there.”

“You sure, man?”

I nodded and unbuckled my seatbelt.

“No, no, I’ll give you a lift,” Rick said.

“Nah, I’ll walk. It’s like five blocks.” I stuck out my hand. “Good to see you, Rick.”

He crushed my fingers in his grip. “Call me tomorrow, man. You can come over for dinner. We’ll have tacos.”

I put my hood up as the van pulled away. The game still hadn’t finished, but more cheers and honking came from the field. I was wired and wobbly, hyper aware of my unsteady condition. The edges of my vision bristled with sparks.

When I got home I let myself in. No one in Haskerville locks their doors. Made my way to my bedroom. The Chili Peppers and other posters loomed over me: reminders of my old obsession with L.A. I tore them down and stuffed them in a trashcan next to my bed. Stood there another minute staring at the bare white walls. Then I walked over to my mom’s bedroom and creaked open her door.

Unmade bed, clothes tossed on the floor, slight musty smell. On her dresser were three framed photos of me—as a baby, a grade-schooler, and a high-school senior. No pictures of Dad.

On her nightstand was a days-of-the-week pill container. Two whites and a pink for each day.

Found the bottles in the nightstand drawer: diet pills and antidepressants. I hadn't known. Swallowed one of each, pocketed a few more, then walked over to the closet.

Dresses, shoes, a box of toys from when I was a kid. No money. A desolate feeling as I left my mom's room. I stood in the hallway, the house silent around me, the weight of disappointment and years of lonely memories pressing down.

Just then, a scruffy orange ball leapt out of the shadows and pounced on my shoe. Pogo.

He batted at my laces and rubbed his face against my ankle, purring madly. I bent down and scratched his head.

"Where've you been hiding, fleabag?" I said. He looked up at me imploringly.

"You want a treat? All right, let's go."

He followed me into the kitchen. When I opened the top cabinet, he jumped up on the counter, swishing his tail. I pushed aside his bag of food and grabbed a box of bacon treats.

"Here you go, buddy," I said, opening the box. But then I stopped and stared inside.

It was filled with wads of cash: rubber-banded rolls of tens and twenties. I took one out and counted it. One-eighty. All in all, probably over a grand.

My hands shaking, I stuffed four rolls in my pockets. Then I closed the box and shoved it back in the cabinet. Pogo meowed. I stepped away from the counter, my mind swirling with excitement and shame and chemicals.

And then I noticed a breeze. I turned around. The door from the kitchen to the backyard was open, cool air wafting in. I hadn't noticed it before. I stepped up to the screen door and peered into the backyard.

Out there in the darkness my mom was lying on our old trampoline. The bottle of Malibu sat beside her. She must have

been there the whole time I'd been home. I stepped outside and pulled the door closed.

"You came home early," I said. As I got closer I could see mascara streaked down her cheeks.

"Ron and I had a fight," she said.

I sat on the edge of the trampoline. Picked up the bottle of rum and swirled it around. She'd made a nice dent. I took a big gulp.

"He's going to leave me," she said.

"Good riddance."

"Everyone leaves me. Your dad left me. You left me. Darrell and Allen. And now even Ron Bronson. And he's a fucking sex offender." She gave a bitter laugh. I stared down between my feet at the un-mowed grass.

"Your dad didn't even mention me in the postcard. You noticed that, right?" I didn't answer. To be honest, I hadn't thought about it.

"He's a selfish man, Jimmy. Always was. Even in the bedroom."

"Jesus, Mom." I closed my eyes. Lightning bolts flashed on the backs of my eyelids.

"It's true. He only ever cared about himself."

We were quiet for a few minutes. The game was over now, and a few cars passed in front of the house, tires crunching on gravel. I took another gulp of rum.

Mom looked up at me. "I just don't want you ruining your life chasing after someone who's incapable of caring about you."

I thought about the postcard. "He cares."

"No, Jimmy," she said gently. "I don't think he does."

It was getting cold. I stuffed my hands in the front pocket of my hoodie. Two rolls of cash were there. I squeezed them tight.

"I don't want you to go," Mom said.

"I think I have to."

"I know." She took a deep breath. "But I wish you'd stay."

In the distance, the football field lights shut off. I'd always hated that moment, the way the town fell into darkness and silence after a game ended and everyone had gone home. For a few minutes it felt like the loneliest place in the world.

Mom hiccupped. "Oof. Got the spins."

I did too. And the booze had gone through me. I stood up.

"Gotta pee," I said. I zigzagged through the yard back to the house. After I used the bathroom I went over to the sideboard and picked up the postcard. The word MIAMI was written in big bubble letters, each letter containing one of the city's iconic scenes. Palm trees, sandy white beaches, neon signs. It looked, I realized, a lot like L.A. I flipped the card over and read my father's words again.

Pogo came over and rubbed against my leg. I stood there and stared at the postcard. Then I set it down and headed back outside to the trampoline.

"Scoot over," I said.

I lay down next to my mom. Neither of us said anything for a while. We just lay there side by side, watching the world spin. ¶



PHOTOGRAPHED ON LOCH LOMOND, SCOTLAND. BOTTLED IN SCOTLAND. BLENDED SCOTCH WHISKY. 86 PROOF. IMPORTED BY "21" BRANDS, INC., N.Y.C.

The barley, the peat, the barrels, the water, the geese and the "nose" that make Ballantine's the true and good-tasting Scotch.

MOST IN NEED OF: a glass eye to match the one tossed to me years ago like a bone. Through it I follow myself into the hole of myself, where my heart dust may be briefly lit by dispersing sunlight.



Never heavy. Never limply-light. Always the true and good-tasting Scotch.

**So you think
you're good
at the sink?**

**THEN TEST THIS BETTER WAY
TO CLEAN POTS AND PANS**



ALL YOU NEED —

**BUY YOU ME
A DIRTY MARTINI.
ASSUME WE'RE
ALIVE HERE.**



**HERE'S ALL YOU DO —
THREE TOWNS OVER
IS HOW FAR
WE HAVE TO GO —
TO BE NUTS
& UNKNOWN.**

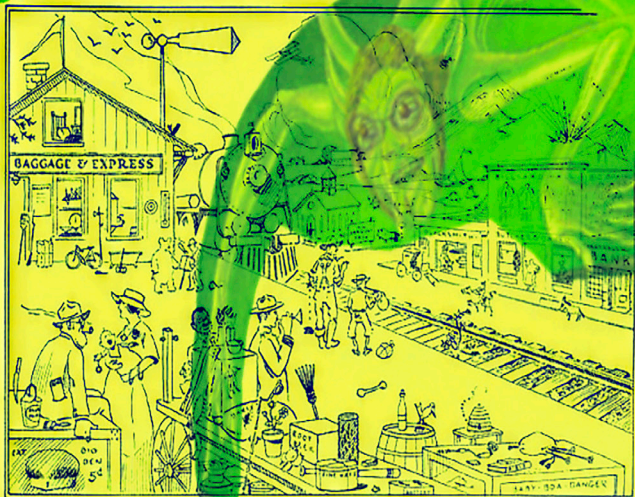
**IT CAN'T STAY THE
NEW CENTURY LONG.
HAILSTONES
TAMP IT
DOWN.**



**GET IT!
IF WE'RE
NOT SNORING,
WE'RE NOT SLEEPING.**



if you think you can spell
try this one **\$500.00**
in cash prizes



Test Your
Skill

Win a Cash
Prize

How Many Objects in This Picture Begin With the Letter "B"?

HOVER HERE

FIRST TO BE THE BEE
BESIDE ONESELF. THEN TO
UTTERLY INHABIT
BUTTERFLY.

AND IN SUCH SUNBREAKS
TO RID THEE OF THYSELF,
STOPPED ON THE WAY
TO DISTANT NECTAR.

Send Lists to Household Spelling Bee, Capper Bldg., Topeka, Kan.

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