

THE
SUSQUEHANNA
REVIEW 2011/2012

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UPON FINDING AN ABANDONED COPY OF A LIT MAG IN THE STRATOSPHERE, DEAR READER

You find the literary magazine plastered between the Continental Airlines catalogue and the illustrated instructions for how to survive a water-landing. It's your last flight from home to college this year. The seven-year-old on your left is blasting Disney pop music, and somewhere in the plane a baby is crying, so you're desperate for a distraction, for the escape of a story. You skip the Table of Contents and dig into the first piece, a prose poem. You read, "The strangest thing happened yesterday when she was far away from home. She forgot how to fly," and you're suddenly very aware of the space between you and the earth. Between you and the kitchen where your mother is watching for her lottery numbers and making your younger siblings eggplant parmesan. Between you and your boyfriend, who is already back at school. You flip through the magazine, and your thumb catches on a dog-eared page. You find yourself mesmerized by the lines: "I record everything./ Slitting the skin of time,/ I leave a place where I can crawl into remembrance." It makes you want to slow time down, to freeze it if you can.

Outside, through the map of fingerprints on the airplane window, you can see the straight lines of highways and cornfields 10,000 feet below. The snow-covered land is golden against the setting sun. You read the sentence, "The land is still healing from the winter," and the lines on the ground remind you of creases in your palm, or cracks in a frozen lake. You read on: "I envy you,/ the north;/ the disillusionment/ of fractal sea-ice;/ kaleidoscopic cracks/ and creases/ against the face of/ permafrost." You are flying east, but you wonder what it would be like to change course, to soar across the Arctic circle, to see the tracks of polar bears on ice, the path of whales migrating across the ocean. You see, "Each type of whale/ has a unique mating call. Two scientists/ tracked a call for twenty years/ and never heard another like it." You press your forehead against the glass and watch the ghost of a city pass below you.

A flight attendant is walking the aisles now, handing out trays of microwaved

airplane food and single-serving packets of peanuts. She passes you a container of chicken and rice that burns your palms until you set it on your lap. You decide you need to read something funny. Wielding a fork in one hand and the magazine in the other, you press the pages open with your pinky and thumb. The story about a deity on earth makes you laugh, a messy laugh that sprays chunks of dry chicken over your plate. “The God of my father has lived in my house for the past week or so, pattering around in my bathrobe and my favorite pair of slippers, leaving His silvery beard hairs in my bathroom sink.” You think of your father, how since you started college his brown hair has turned gray at the scalp. You lean back into the seat, feeling the vibrations of the plane move through your spine, and read a poem that starts, “I am stealing plastic forks from the cafeteria so I can build myself a new girlfriend who will make you jealous & not be anything like you.” You wonder if you could collect enough forks from your college cafeteria to build a helicopter, or a ship, or a time machine.

In the aisle in front of you, an elderly couple adjusts their seats back into your knees. You think, “They looked like a pair of old trees, leaning against one another for support, roots and branches entangled. I remembered that old statistic that men who are widowers die ten years earlier on average.” You wonder if you could count the wrinkles on the man’s head, like a tree stump, to figure out his age. This couple, their closeness, makes you think about your boyfriend. The last time you saw him, he was a moving picture in a box on your laptop screen. You think about the last time you saw him for real, before Christmas break. How you feared the distance. How, the night before you flew home, you and your friends “pushed the night away from us with brave, fiery sips.” Whispers of careful, careful, careful.

The sky goes dark outside the window, the earth a grid of lights below you like algae blooms in August. You switch on the light above the seat and peel through the magazine. You think about the world you are leaving. “Your mother’s hands have become spotted purple and red from chemo, warm, rotten tomatoes, wrinkled and burnt from the sun.” You think about home-cooked meals. Mornings tucked under the midnight blue comforter, grateful for solitude. Your mother, hands wet and wrinkled from the sink, left prints like wings on the back of your shirt when you left. You hugged your siblings. Cheekbone nudged cheekbone. You also think about the world you are returning to. All-nighters studying for Chemistry exams, cheap beer. You live in an apartment with friends. Because you are poor and in college, your food is cheap and your furniture is sparse. You keep the heat low and burn sandalwood candles.

The pilot announces that you are nearing your destination. The plane banks as it nears Harrisburg, and it's like you read: "The inertia of his tight turns makes you feel as though you're tumbling around inside of a dryer, safe and warm and disoriented." You descend into a strip of fog, and everything turns to gray. You look through it, rubbing your breath from the glass, looking for markers, for lights. Gradually, grey, amorphous shapes solidify into hard black lines and clean white space. You recognize the Susquehanna River and the sharp angles of the capital building in the glow of the city. You think about how somewhere in that city, your friends are waiting, passing under amber cones of light on sidewalks. Miles away, your mother is putting on crusty lipstick, and your father is chasing foxes from the backyard. They whisper, "Everything you say has been written and said by another." You let the magazine fall shut in your lap. The wheels touch the ground.

David + Dana

Dana and David
Our Head Editors

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**Visit www.susquehannareview.com for more art by Stephen Pacuk and honorable mentions*

McLane Nagy

THE LOW PLACE

There was a time when she could be a stone for hours. She could be dirt packed against the roots of a tree or a sheet of moss draped on some ancient boulder. She could be any animal she chose, leaping through brush as a whitetail deer or skittering along the smallest of branches as a gray squirrel. Often her body would become part of the tree itself and listen to the water flowing up from her roots into the tips of her leaves, the soft ticker of ants in her hair. She did all of this without trying very hard, because she thought that was just how people were before they had to worry about growing up. Surely everyone knew how to be a stone by the crick or a salamander in the mud? Sometimes, when she could feel herself stretching, she hid in herself with a heart like a hummingbird. She promised she would never forget how to, even if everyone else did. But the strangest thing happened yesterday when she was far away from home. She forgot how to fly.

Andrew Boryga

THE NUMBERS

The 4 train roars by dropping bird shit and raindrops on cars honking for lanes underneath the L. Packs of boys and girls walk on the sidewalk, speaking loud, gesturing each word and smiling after each sentence. Brown men sell packs of cheap socks and glitzy bracelets and watches on the corners. Brown women sell churros, pastellios and mountainous piraguas in small plastic cups. Joel smacks a faded blue handball against the mustard brick walls scrawled with graffiti. He notices me and gives the ball a big smack, ricocheting it off the wall and on to a parked Honda Civic. The whining alarm blares, and he laughs like a hyena, thrusting dirty fingers to the sky to catch the ball as it bounces off the windshield.

“Yo, Marc. Let’s play some.”

“Can’t. Gotta watch my sisters.”

He shrugs and gives the ball another smack. He’s an only child; he does what he wants.

Upstairs, I throw pepperoni pizza Hot Pockets in the microwave. The girls never eat unless I feed them, and if they don’t eat, Moms gets mad at me. Krystal’s heavy-ass book bag slams on the floor of the bedroom we share and she starts coloring in one of the books Moms got her for Christmas—the ones with ponies and shit. Joy stares out the thin black bars of the window in the living room, pressing her face between the spaces.

“Joy, let’s eat. Come on.”

I grab her by the waist and she squirms as I move her toward the couch, reaching for the window like it’s a floaty in the deep end of the pool. When Moms isn’t home I watch Joy eat, especially if the food is hot. She never notices when things are hot and always burns the insides of her mouth. She’s seven, like Krystal, but I treat her like a baby. She’s different. Moms said the doctor told her that when Joy was born, she was going to be different. She always reminds us of this.

Joy finishes the Hot Pocket and goes back to the window. I join her, leaning my elbows in between the pipes of the rusted radiator beneath it. From the fourth floor we see a lot of the neighborhood—the yellow, red, and brown buildings that look like mine, the telephone wires with scuffed Nikes

dangling by dirty brown laces, the gum-stained train station platform with huddles of Bronx Science kids headed back downtown, and the crooked sign on the gas station with the prices Moms hates. Joel's still downstairs, smacking the ball.

"Stop hitting like a bitch!"

"B-b-bitch. Bitch, bitch."

Joy mimics me when I curse. It's pretty funny, even Moms thinks so.

"How about you stop talking shit from the window and come downstairs?"

"Can't."

"One game, come on."

Cable box says 4:30. Moms gets in around 5:30. I'm good for a quick game or two. Joy's zoned out, focusing on something far away, past telephone wires and buildings, and Krystal's flat on her stomach in the room detailing the purple tail of a pony.

"Krys, I'm going downstairs for a bit. Make sure Joy doesn't get in any trouble, and don't answer the door for nobody. I'm taking my keys."

She nods without looking up and I run out the door and down four flights of narrow stairs. I take a big whiff of the air outside, the kind of air that lets you know school will be over soon and days of stickball, manhunt, and busting open pumps are around the corner.

"Finally. I was tired of playing alone like a loser."

Joel smacks the ball against the mustard wall and I return it. It makes a tok sound as it bounces back to him. He smacks it harder, too hard for me to return, and it flies over my head. *Tok, return, tok, return, tok, return.*

We play for a long time, longer than I realize, because right as I'm about to give the ball another smack I hear a familiar clack of heels from the far end of the sidewalk. Moms. She walks like a runway model, and in some ways looks like one too—that's what my friends tell me. She wears tight jeans and short dresses with flowers that show off her legs, and I guess she does have pretty big tits—but damn, all my friends go crazy over her. Today she wears huge shades that block out her eyes and a tight brown leather jacket that isn't real leather but looks just like it. She takes off the shades when she notices me and her runway face softens into a smile. I give her a kiss on the cheek. Joel gives her one too and smirks at me.

"What are you doing outside? Where are your sisters?"

"I was going to the bodega for a honey bun and then I saw Joel. I was just saying what's up, I'm going right back upstairs."

"Okay. Hurry up, go run and get it. I'll wait for you."

"It's okay. Don't want it anymore."

I give Joel a pound and walk with Moms into the building. The clack of her heels echo through the lobby.

“Sonia!”

Avni, the Albanian landlord. His office is next to the elevator. When he’s in, he leaves his door wide open and scopes out everyone who comes in the building. Moms curses under her breath and peeks her head into his office.

“Hey, Avni. How are you?”

He asks her to step inside and close the door. She tells me to press the button for the elevator because it’s only going to take a minute. That’s bullshit though. I stick my ear to the door and even though I can’t hear much, it seems like Avni’s doing a lot of the talking. When it’s over, Moms bursts out the office. Her runway face is back on.

“Come on, Marc. Let’s go.”

“What did Avni want?”

“Nothing. What day is it today?”

“Tuesday.”

“Remind me to check my numbers later.”

“Okay.”

Moms plays the numbers everyday. On Tuesday and Friday it’s Mega Millions, Monday and Thursday, Powerball, and every day in between, Take 5, Win 4 or Pick 10. Most times she plays at work, during her breaks. Sometimes she makes me play for her. She gives me numbers, usually ones she gets from this lady Lydia at her job who’s supposedly some guru, and makes me go down to the bodega and play them. All the adults play the numbers. I don’t get it. I guess it’s fun for them; it doesn’t make sense to me. They spend so much money for nothing. Nobody ever wins. But everyone plays. It’s all over the neighborhood. The machines are in every bodega and the streets are full of crumpled losing yellow and red papers and cards scratched out with quarters. Then there’s that stupid billboard on the Major Deegan we pass every time we drive to Titi Jessica’s apartment in the barrio. The one with a picture of a white guy in a nice suit and the catchphrase: *Hey, you never know*. I wonder why they chose a white guy since the only people I know who play the numbers are brown.

“How much is the jackpot?”

“I don’t know. Hopefully like five hundred million dollars. Imagine?”

Moms smiles when she talks about jackpots. We get out the elevator and she jams the key into the lock.

“Damn, what the fuck is that smell! Oh my god. Did you clean Maxwell’s litter?”

“No I didn’t. He’s not my cat. Why should I clean his litter?”

“Ay, don’t give me that today, Marc. Just do it. I hate coming home from fucking work to a house that smells like cat shit.”

Fuckin’ Maxwell. He hears the yelling and walks out the room with his stubby tail in the air, all dainty like he’s a prince instead of a fat-ass orange cat we inherited

after Mrs. Gutierrez in 4C croaked. Nobody likes him but Krystal. I grab a plastic bag from the closet and head to the bathroom to deal with the cat shit. Maxwell follows but I slam the door in his face before he can make it inside. I'm scooping out a big clump of cat shit when I hear Moms scream.

"Coño, look at this floor! Joy, what the fuck! Look at this shit."

I peek in the living room. The floor, made of faded wood Moms gets insecure about and mops all the time, is carved up with deep trenches in a corner near the window. Joy found something sharp. She has a problem stopping herself from doing shit. Sometimes she bounces a ball for hours, repeats the same word over and over again, or unties and reties her shoes—just for the hell of it. I tiptoe into the other room without Moms noticing.

"What happened? I told you to watch Joy."

Krystal looks up from her coloring book, her glasses leaning to one side.

"What? I did watch her. She started bothering me so I gave her paper and a pen. She was just drawing here next to me."

"Yeah, well, she obviously left and fucked up the floor in the living room. Mom is flipping out."

"Stop cursing."

"Shut up."

Moms' heels clack toward the room. I try to think of a story to go along with what I said earlier. She bursts in holding Joy by the hand.

"Who gave her this shit?"

She waves a blue pen in the air. The tip's blunted and ink runs down the sides. Krystal and I stare at her.

"Come on, don't give me this shit. I'm too tired. Who gave her it?"

She looks at Krystal and the coloring book and the colorful pens spread out on her bed.

"Krystal, did you give this to her?"

Krystal looks at Joy, then Moms.

"Yeah but only because she was bothering me, Ma. I was trying to color and she kept bothering me and Marc wasn't here so I just gave it to her. I didn't know she was -"

"Marc only went down for five minutes. How could she do all that in five minutes?"

"No. He was down there for like an hour playing stupid handball."

"Shit, Krys, you're such a fucking tattletale."

Moms' small hand winds back and smacks me in the back of my head, right in the center.

"Watch your mouth! I'm the only person allowed to curse in this house. Why did you lie to me? You told me you were saying hi to Joel. Why did you lie?"

She winds up and smacks me again.

"Ow, Ma. Come on, stop."

“Answer me. You know you have to watch your sisters, especially Joy. You know she does this shit all the time.”

I look down at Joy. She’s bawling with her hands over her ears.

“I wanted to play. I never get to play because I always have to watch them. It’s not fair. Joel gets to do whatever he wants, he plays all—”

“Joel doesn’t have little sisters, Marc! You do. Watching them is your job.”

“But I don’t want to.”

“Listen, I don’t want to deal with this shit right now, Okay? I have to figure out what the fuck I’m going to do with that floor.”

She pushes Joy toward me.

“The three of you stay in here until dinner’s ready because you’re all giving me a headache.”

She throws the pen in the garbage and slams the door. Her heels clack toward the kitchen. Joy’s still crying and moves toward me with her hands out. I push her away and knock Krystal’s coloring book to the floor on the way to my bed.

“Hey!”

“Shut up, snitch.”

Joy follows me and stands at the foot of my bed crying softly. She takes big breaths in between sobs that make her small shoulders jump up and down. She puts her hands out like she wants me to hug her.

“Pick her up, Marc, you know she stops when you’re nice to her.”

“Shit. Fine.”

I pull her on my bed and we lean against the beige wall it’s pushed up against. I rest her small head on my chest. Her curly brown hair is matted and I comb my fingers through it. She likes when I do that.

After an hour, I decide to get back on Moms’ good side. I don’t like her being mad at me too long. I close the door to the room and leave the girls inside. The smell of yellow rice and soft kidney beans consume the apartment. Moms is a good cook, the best. She cooks most nights too, which is nice. Grandma taught her how to cook when she was really little in Puerto Rico, and around the time she was my age she was cooking pernil, pollo gesau and tostones for the whole family. I creep slowly toward the kitchen, stopping at the bang of a pot or pan. She’s on the phone. I know because she’s talking loud and using a lot of Spanish. I stop in the entrance to the kitchen and stare. She has on the same clothes from work. She washes dishes and stops to stir beans every now and then.

I don’t say anything. I just watch her cook and listen. She’s talking to Elsie, her best friend. That’s the only person she speaks so loud with, except for Grandma, but when she speaks to Grandma she *only* speaks Spanish. She talks about her job. She’s a social worker at a nearby hospital for AIDS patients. She takes care of people’s

problems and listens to their stories everyday. A lot of her patients are friends, and when they die she gets sad for days. She tells Elsie about her day, about how hard it is. About how stressed she is when she leaves work. Tells her about Maxwell, Joy, and the living room floor. How does Moms do all the shit she does? All my friends want to grow up, move out, and be big. Me too. But sometimes being a kid isn't so bad. She hangs up, drops the phone on the window ledge, and reaches in her back pocket for cigarettes. She turns to face the window and notices me in the doorway.

"Dinner's almost ready. Go back to the room and let me smoke this."

She never smokes around me. I don't like it. I hate the smell of cigarettes. Moms doesn't smoke much though, only when she's *really* stressed out.

"It's okay, Ma. I don't mind this time. Can I stay?"

She shrugs and lights her cigarette. She takes long drags, tapping ashes out the window. I wait a few drags before breaking the silence.

"Are you mad at me, Ma?"

"No, Papi. I'm not mad at you."

"I'm sorry anyway. I should've stayed to watch Joy. Just that I wanted to hang out. I never get to. I didn't think she would do anything."

"I know. Come here."

She gives me a hug, squishing my head into her chest.

"I'm just tired, you know. I need your help. It's only me here. I have too much stuff to worry about. You, the girls, Joy, the cat. Avni's giving me shit now. It's a lot. I need you to be a big boy."

"I know."

Dinner's ready and I help Moms set up our small table. It's shaped like a half moon, but when I move it off the wall and flip up the other half it turns into a full circle. It's still small. When the girls were younger, Moms would sit Joy on her lap so all four of us could fit. Now, she lets us sit around it and she sits next to us on a small blue step stool. Moms serves the rice and beans and sets aside a little plate for herself. She sits next to Joy to make sure she's okay eating. The four of us eat quietly. Krystal reads. She reads at the table a lot. Moms doesn't seem to be mad anymore. I remind her about the numbers so she can smile.

"We have to watch the drawing. What time is it?"

"Like eight."

"Yolanda draws at nine. The last jackpot was sixty-eight million and nobody hit. It has to be more than that now."

Krystal looks up from her book. She doesn't talk much, but the numbers get her talking. I stay out of these conversations. But sometimes I play along so I don't ruin the fun. Moms gets real happy whenever she talks about the numbers and all the things she's going to do with the money. First, she's going to give a million dollars

each to Grandma and Titi Jessica, and then deposit another million for Tio Jonsue to have when he gets out prison. Then she's going to donate a few million to charity, something for AIDS so her friends stop dying. Then she's going to buy a lot of clothes and shoes, mostly shoes. She wants a pair of white ballerina shoes we saw in a Macy's window one time. She had a pair just like them in Puerto Rico. Finally, she's going to buy *the* house.

The house is always part of the plan. Other things change from time to time, but never the house. As far back as I remember, Moms has wanted it. It's in Riverdale, the nice, Jewish part of the Bronx, and I don't know when or how Moms discovered it, but she's known about it forever. Whenever we're anywhere near Riverdale she makes an excuse to drive by. Riverdale streets are really clean and empty and everyone drives a nice car. Huge houses sit on every corner and all of them are beautiful mansions, the kind you see on TV. They have long curvy driveways made of nice colored bricks, not like the mustard ones on our building, and big patches of grass in the summer and spring. Nice green grass too, the kind they have on golf courses. Funny thing is, the house isn't even the nicest one in Riverdale. It's small. But that's what Moms wants. She doesn't want to be bothered cleaning a huge house; small is perfect. It's two stories, with a pink stone driveway and a garage with a white door. It's built of bricks in different shades of red and brown, the kind of bricks that surround a chimney in movies where an old man reads by the fire. Two big trees stand in front. Moms says she'll pay someone to build Krystal a tree house so she can read and draw up in it. In the fall, the leaves from the trees turn the color of apples and scatter in the lawn. Moms won't clean them up right away though; she'll leave them there for a while. They look so pretty.

We finish dinner and go into the living room and turn the TV on to channel seven. I put Joy on my lap and sit next to Moms and Krystal. Yolanda Vega comes on. She's a pretty brown Puerto Rican lady with a nice smile, and before she draws the balls every night she introduces herself. *Hello my name is Yoooooolanda Vega.* She sounds like an opera singer with a Spanish accent. It's my favorite part. Moms clutches her yellow and red ticket, looking straight at the screen.

"What are your numbers, Ma?"

"21, 34, 56, 31, and 2."

There's a big blue machine next to Yolanda filled with small white balls. She switches it on and balls fly in all types of directions, banging against the sides of the plastic bubble. The bubble's connected to a tube that sucks balls out of the air and into little squares the camera focuses on as each one arrives. The tube sucks the first ball.

The first number is...31.

"Ok, looking good. Come on, Yolanda baby."

The second number is 54.

"Shit."

The third number is 12.

The fourth number is 42.

“Shit. Shit.”

And the final number is 23. Thank you for playing the New York City Lotto. See you next time. This is Yoooooolanda Vega, signing off.

That’s it. Nothing won. You need at least three numbers to win any money. Krystal looks up at Moms.

“Did we win anything, Ma? We got a number.”

Moms crumples the ticket and stands.

“No, baby. Nothing today. Hopefully nobody else hit so I can play Thursday.”

She’s still wearing her clothes, and flings off her beige shirt and unhooks her bra strap.

“I’m going to lie down. Krystal, get ready for bed, and take your sister with you. Marc, come to the room so I can give you money. I want you to go downstairs and play the Take 5 for me.”

I follow and watch as she digs in her purse for money. She has a few scrunched singles mixed in with the Chap Stick, band aids, make-up, and past due bills she keeps in there. She pulls out one and hands it to me.

“Here you go. I can’t think of any numbers right now. You pick them for me, okay? Just pick five and give it to the guy. He’ll tell you if you win anything.”

“I know, Ma. You act like I haven’t done this before.”

She kisses my forehead.

“Go, and come back quick because you need to get to bed too.”

In my room, I dig around for sweats. Krystal reads and pets Maxwell. Joy strokes the cheap cotton of her pink sheets. I search for sneakers but spot my chancletas first and stick my feet in them. I close the door and peek into Moms’ room. She’s fast asleep on her bed, still wearing her jeans. She looks tired, worn. But I know tomorrow she’ll look like a runway model again. I flick off the lights and shut the door.

It’s dark outside but still warm. The lamppost at the end of the block lights up the bodega’s beat-up awning and the fragile viejos who hang out in front of it. I make my way past them and inside. The bell on the door jingles as I push it open, bachata music blares from a small boom box in the back. Always sounds like a party in the bodega. The counter is in the back of the store, past racks of chips, cookies, and all kinds of sweets in bright green and yellow wrappers, past racks of Goya sauces and spices and past racks of paper towels and detergents. I walk up to the man at the counter, the Dominican who’s always there. The one that dances when he thinks no one’s in the store. I pull out the scrunched bill and drop it on the counter.

“Take five.”

“Take five. Okay.”

The big blue lotto machine sits next to the register, the different games neatly stacked into separate compartments waiting to be played. People spend so much money on those stupid papers, just because they could maybe change their life—or

at least make them believe that.

“Hold up. Never mind.”

I walk to the sweets and snatch a honey bun covered in rich white frosting and take it to the counter.

“I’m gonna take this instead.”

He nods, I walk out. I wind through the viejos and walk slowly to my building. Sitting on the chipped stoop, I unwrap my honey bun. I chew slowly, letting heavy chunks of frosting melt in my mouth before moving to the next bite. As I eat I watch cars go by and listen to the echo of thumping sounds each time one drives over a manhole. When I’m all done, I crumble up the wrapper and throw it to the ground.

Mary Hood

MAN AS TOWN

I.

I record everything.
Slitting the skin of time,
I leave a place where I can crawl into remembrance
and touch your photograph face.

I live in the film reel of my mind.
The plot is never the same.
The winter birds are flying a different direction every time,
but you—
oh you are always dragging me south,
holding me in every child's swing,
dropping me in a church bell
heavy with the miscarriage of summer.
You push your dry mouth into my ear—
woman, woman.

II.

Where are you?
I lie on my bed,
small and curled, a snail,
a woman in mourning
fogging the church's window
with her wolf's snout.

Outside the train cries.
Do you ride that near and distant sound?
You were always the ever passing,
the hitch, hitch,
solemn cargo of early morning.

Matthew MacFarland

VESPERS

Driving east toward Richmond,
the sky rolls with hues of flame
waning like the elm that recedes in the mirror.
Driving blind in the glare of a sun
in her death throes.
But no, don't
say death—how could you
when she disappears

only for a night?
Maybe it's right that 5:30,
not-day and not-night,
should be in November, the time of ghosts,
rear-view reflections, apparitions
shining their headlights like memories, like thresholds

to the million passed dash marks.
In the dream, she was ghostly. Explain me.
In the dream, she was
the color of chalk, the color of paint
on asphalt. In the mirror,
she was the color reserved for kindling
fire. Miles behind and speeding away,
she was a hue gone down to embers.

Salma Warshanna

THE LANDSCAPES WITHIN

The train rumbled along, stapling the Welsh countryside. Rows of hedges cut through the green carpet of land, fields stretching for acres in both directions and valleys dipping and rolling toward a fading horizon. The sky rose upward into a wide, blue canvas. Hundreds of chiseled clouds piled into mountainous formations, sitting on the horizon as if they had risen from the ground and watched over the land for centuries. Full and voluminous, they drifted with an air of majesty. These were the landscapes I had only before seen in Victorian paintings.

I was on my way to Pembrokeshire in the southwest. My friend Beth, who traveled Europe with me in high school as a student ambassador, had distant relatives in Wales. When her father found out I was studying abroad there, he rang his Guyanese cousin Derek and asked if the family could take care of me for a weekend. They eagerly agreed. I was warmly welcomed into a small house tucked away in a row of town-homes, a huddle of white specks on a sloping, grassy hill that overlooked the coast. We could see the ferry that traveled the dark, misty sea to Ireland and back.

Derek's wife, Arabella, was born English and raised in Wales. She had shoulder-length, straight hair and a small, thin frame. I could still see the girl in her. As soon as Arabella asked her four-year-old daughter Ffion to show me where I would be sleeping, Ffion took my hand and led me up the stairs. The little girl's beige complexion reminded me how smoothly creamy brown and fair white mix on a paint palette. Half her bedroom space was taken up by bunk beds. She pointed to the top bunk and said, "Tiss is *my* bed," then pointed to the one below and said, "Tiss is your bed." As soon as I put my backpack down, her small fingers grasped my hand again, and we walked across the hall to the bathroom.

"*Tiss* towel is fo your *fice*, and *tiss* towel is fo your *hands*," she instructed.

"Thank you, Ffion," I said smiling down at her. As I washed my hands to get ready for lunch, I noticed that the bar of soap had the word 'simple' etched into it—a value that I could sense grounded the family the way support beams kept their town-home upright. There was something comforting about that bar of soap, letting me know that here, at the top of this green Welsh hill, my mind would unwind and be at ease. It was a weekend with a family that wasn't splintered like my own in Maryland, where the closest my parents came to

communicating was through lawyers or e-mail. The Goodwins were simple.

While I stood fixing my hair, Ffion lingered by the sink, chin barely reaching the rim, and told me how to wear my headband and where the bobby pins should go. We went downstairs, where her brothers, Kaleb and Zachariah, were playing in the small garden behind their home. Kaleb was three years older than his sister. While I ate lunch right beside him, he asked his mother a series of questions about me. “Who is she? Why is she here? Is she going to play with us? Where will she sleep?”

Zachariah, the two year old, stuck by Arabella’s leg and stared at me with intense, honey-golden eyes that were streaked with green. Later that afternoon, he became more comfortable with my presence. I heard him babbling as the family, strapped into the van, zigzagged down the hill through small neighborhoods and towns, and drove through fields of matted chaff. Derek and Arabella, fans of the outdoors, were taking me to see the coast, where the land was still healing from the winter. Long dry grass was brushed to the side like a dog’s furry coat. Trees stood brown and bare, and a cold breeze slid between them. The sky disappeared when we walked through tunnels made by crisscrossed and overlapped branches. Light sprinkled down between the sprouting leaves and fell in glimmers on the dirt path. Inside, it smelled like blooming spring flowers. The path opened up again to a wide space of brown trees, dark water, and pale sky.

Zachariah constantly ran ahead as fast as his short legs could take him. After every burst of meters, he would stop, turn, and yell, “Pa-PAA!” and wait for his father to catch-up. His solid stance assured you he wasn’t the kind of toddler who would get knocked down easily, but rather the one who knocked other toddlers down. Once Zachariah grew tired, he held his father’s hand tightly, and they followed the dirt path together. Watching them from a few strides behind, I could not remember the last time I had taken a walk with my father, which brought to mind how our relationship felt as bare as the leafless branches reaching out to me.

I remembered the last conversation I had with my father over Skype. He was a moving picture in a box on my laptop screen, sitting in his rolling black office chair. His potbelly pushed through his blue scrubs and dental assistants crossed back and forth in the corridor outside. I was in my dorm room in Wales and I told him about my plans to go to Egypt. I had not been there in nine years. I wanted to see my family and rediscover another side of my identity, not to mention a ticket from the United Kingdom was half as expensive as a ticket from the United States.

“What? Why do you want to go there?” His question left his mouth slightly open and his eyebrows and forehead furrowed. I knew he wouldn’t approve. He himself had not returned to Alexandria, his birthplace, in over twenty years, until his youngest sister married and invited him to her wedding. I wondered

what Derek's first reaction would be when Zachariah one day inquired about visiting Guyana, where his second language would become the first he must use, where he might find a place in his heart for distant family and a foreign culture. I think Derek would be pleased.

The father walked slowly, a tall staff taking steps with him. It was a gift he received from a tribesman back when he worked for UNICEF in Kenya. He told me about how the Germans and Englishmen vacationed in the quaint homes lining the estuary where we walked. Such homes were too expensive for the Welsh families. Derek's Guyanese accent had been softened by living in Wales for eight years. His syllables moved steadily, but were shortened by a tongue trained in another language. His father-in-law's favorite word to hear Derek say was, "T'irty-t'ree."

In the Goodwin kitchen, I had noticed a wooden carving of the number thirty-three displayed above the wall cabinets. When I asked about it, Derek chuckled. "Arabella's fat'er made it. He gave it to me as a wedding gift." To me, the affectionate joke was the father-in-law's token of acceptance; while its home in the kitchen, where the family spent much of their time, was the son-in-law's silent embrace of their relationship. With a hint of envy, I admired the bond they shared.

We stopped when we reached the water's edge. Arabella sat on the rocks to keep watch over the children as they discarded their shoes and pants. As we walked, we let the mud squish between our toes. Seagulls flapped overhead. Kaleb's soft, brown hair shone in the sun as he crouched and searched for tiny, lifeless crabs in the water. Whether it was because we were in mid-April or outside midday, the wide gap in land had been reduced to thinning strips of water and large, shallow puddles. I was standing in the middle of the estuary, pants rolled up to my knees, before the water reached my ankles and the loose mud made each step heavier.

Ffion and Zachariah preferred to waddle around the rocks and collect smooth stones. I left the squealing children to walk with Derek to see the beach, the source of the flooding water. I wanted to learn about who he was to understand why, of all the people in Wales, I had crossed paths with him. Even though, technically, I had journeyed here because of a mutual friend, I felt there was a metaphysical reason for our meeting - I was meant to be here this weekend because there was something important I needed to learn from Derek and his life. So I asked the question that cast the widest net. "How did you come to live here?"

I wasn't aware of the conversation I had begun until I heard his answer. He had another family in America. He and his first wife had married young and moved away from Guyana together, but he left her after his two children were in their mid-twenties. "What were we going to do when t'ey moved out? We had no'ting to talk about," he said in a matter-of-fact tone.

I shared a few lines about how my parents were separated. “My father decided that my mother just wasn’t who he wanted, she never really was, and he was going to leave,” I said. Describing what my father had done felt like I was paraphrasing Derek’s story. I paused between sentences and wrung my words dry before I spoke them, exhausting my efforts to remove the spite that normally seeped through the narration. I glanced often at his face for signs of offense. We rounded a tall sand dune and the air began to taste like salt. The soft mud turned to hundreds of prickling pebbles that hurt to walk on barefoot.

“I don’t t’ink my daughter will ever forgive me.” His voice was flat as the sea ahead. I assumed it was his oldest daughter who, like me, probably caught her mother when her life’s foundation crumbled beneath her, who listened to her mother cry herself to sleep, and filtered the anger that saturated the empty spaces of their home. I didn’t say that one day his daughter would understand his decision and love him again with the unconditional warmth of a child. Neither did I tell him that he was selfish for the pain he must have caused and the years of therapy he had sentenced his children to. I couldn’t predict the future of my own relationship with my father. My respect for Derek teetered on a reflexive judgment of whether or not he was to blame for the collapse of his first marriage. What was fair or unfair of me to think? He didn’t look or sound or act like my father, but he made similar decisions, and I didn’t know how to feel. I couldn’t understand how a man could ignite pain in one family and nurture love in another. His family wasn’t as simple as I had expected.

“I don’t think I can forgive my dad either,” I finally replied. The sandy shore came as a relief, but the still water was shockingly cold. He smiled. I could tell he was at peace. I must have seemed so young to him.

“You know, parents have feelings. We have a life we want to live as well. Children forget t’at. Sometimes we have to make decisions for ourselves.”

He told me about his work as a reflexologist. The field teaches that the sole of the foot is a reflection of all the body’s glands and organs. By applying pressure to a certain section of the foot, pain and tension in the head, back, abdomen, or anywhere else can be treated. Patients also came to him for Reiki, another option of alternative medicine, where he transferred healing energy, or ki, through his palms to their body. As we walked back to Arabella, who was safeguarding Kaleb’s empty crab shells and Zachariah’s pebbles, Derek told me the four rules he lives by, counting them on his thick fingers and pausing between each one. “Always be honest, always do your best, never make assumptions, and don’t take *anyt’ing* personal.”

A week after my visit, I received a phone call. Arabella’s soft-spoken voice

lifted with surprise. “We found your Thank You card in the mail today! It’s so lovely. We want to frame it!” she had said. She invited me to come spend another weekend with them at the end of April, this time in a manor they had rented for a yearly reunion with two other families. We rode there together in their van, whose curved shape and ocean blue color must have looked like a whale coasting between hedges at least seven feet tall. The last family vacation I had gone on with both my parents had been at least three or four years earlier. I sat in the middle seats with Ffion, while Kaleb and Zachariah were in the back. My heart nearly melted when Ffion said, “I missed you too much!” and held onto my hand for most of the road trip.

The earth was quilted with squares of bursting yellows and lively greens. The one-lane road wound for miles before it expanded with a lay-by, where a few feet of one wall curved outward so that cars traveling in opposite directions could pass each other. We had to stop at four or five graveled spaces to let others around us. “T’ere is a lot of traffic today,” Derek joked.

The manor was in the middle of Brecon Beacons, the Welsh National Park, surrounded by rolling fields of grass, age-old mountains and hidden valleys. It was longer than it was tall, and it took us at least twenty minutes to explore the two floors. We would eat meals on a long banquet table that stood on a rustic stone floor, and hardly use the den or living room when a constant stream of conversations kept us seated long after tea. After we found all sixteen beds, we chose rooms, considering what would be best for the other two couples and their children.

Nina and Henry, both English, arrived with their nearly two-year-old daughter Poppy a few hours later. The mother, well into her second pregnancy, was tall and had a loud, hearty laugh. Her husband was quiet. Kaleb, Zachariah, Ffion, and Poppy pulled on their rain boots and went tramping outside to play. Not too long after, Poppy waddled back into the kitchen red-faced, lip curled under and eyes watering. She whimpered over to her father.

“What’s wrong, Poppy dear?” he crouched down and asked. She held out her hands to reveal mud smears, which Henry also found on her poppy-red jacket.

“She doesn’t like to get dirty,” he explained to the rest of us. Henry used a damp paper towel to wipe away the dirt. “There you are! All cleaned up.” She sniffled, examining both sides of her hands. “I think it’s time for your nap, Poppy.” Her father carried her out of the room as she rested her small head on his shoulder. I couldn’t help but think about how my father never acted like Henry - crouching down to see from our perspective or lifting us up gently to look on from his.

The third family came the next day. Like Arabella and Derek, Katy and Babush’s marriage crossed continents. Babush’s dark, Eritrean skin made his teeth sparkle white. He was tall and thin, with a short afro. Katy’s hair flowed

blonde to her pale shoulders. Her blue eyes wrinkled at the corners when she smiled. Their children, Ben and Hannah, had long eyelashes and cinnamon skin.

The day after Katy and Babush arrived, one of the few activities all thirteen of us did together was a long walk through the valleys of the Brecon Beacons. The children picked and counted handfuls of yellow dandelions. Hannah, chubby legs dangling from a child carrier backpack, had two tiny fistfuls of flowers that bobbed with every step her mother took. I talked to Katy about my plans to go to Egypt when I finished my studies in Wales. She had done much traveling herself, mostly for humanitarian work. Years before she settled into motherhood and a desk job in the education department of Save the Children Africa, she met Babush somewhere in Sudan. “Go on, share your life story with her,” she prompted him. “She’ll appreciate it.”

“Oh I don’t know. It’s too long,” he said with a quiet laugh. He looked ahead at the sweep of land and finally agreed. Here, where the Earth was itself—expansive, generous, lofty—it seemed we had space to talk about things we hardly had room to feel most of the time.

He and I walked ahead of everyone while he gave me a panoramic view of his past and present. Both his parents passed away when he was young, leaving behind more children than I could count on one hand. They lived in a poverty-stricken village, where his oldest brother, in a constant state of anger, drank too much. Somehow, Babush pursued an education. In his early twenties, he had three choices: join the army of a corrupt government, go to jail for refusing the former, or escape from Eritrea. He journeyed from his country to Sudan on foot. I don’t remember what he did there, but at some point he met Katy, and now they lived in London. He pursued a career in nursing, but when discrimination kept him from passing his final practical he became a stay-at-home dad. I commented on how connected all the fathers—Derek, Henry, Babush—appeared to be with their children. He reminded me that he was abnormal in the scheme of his culture.

“Back home, if I told them how I take care of my children and help my wife with the household, they would laugh. They wouldn’t even consider me a man. When I came here, I had to learn a new culture. I had to learn new rules of what’s okay and what isn’t. But not everyone can do that. It isn’t easy.”

I talked about my own father and his inability to have conversations with my siblings and me. For a moment, I remembered Henry and Poppy and gazed behind us. She was a red spot bouncing through a valley of green, followed closely by her father.

“I can understand,” responded Babush, puncturing my ego. How could he say that? He didn’t even know my father. “You can’t blame him if it’s all he knows. When I was young, adults and children didn’t even eat in the same room, let alone on the same table.”

But this had to be different. I thought about how, whenever I asked my father to tell me what I was like when I was a child, his eyes, accustomed to finding problems in a patient's narrow mouth, scanned the wide ceiling for an answer. One large hand supported his head, his nails nibbled down by habit and stress. His heavily lashed eyelids blinked slowly and deliberately, cheeks pulled out slightly to reveal small, off-colored teeth. The line of his bite resembled a cosine curve from nights of jaw grinding.

After minutes of sifting through a mesh of memories, he looked back to me and answered, "You were annoying." A chuckle vibrated through his weighty belly, which was supported from below by a smooth leather belt. In no time, his full attention was realigned with the nightly news, the restaurant menu, or the highway ahead of him.

I asked him every few months to see if his answer would change, if he would remember a scene that he could describe and we could laugh about together, or if he could at least tell me why that one adjective had stuck with him after all those years. Nothing changed. I started asking him about Egypt, about his own childhood, his parents and siblings. To my dismay he had even less to share.

I used to laugh along, until my parents became separated. Since then, maintaining an undisturbed relationship with both my mother and father had been like tip-toeing through a field of thin, pointy needles, as numerous and feral as grass. Success of a conversation was suddenly based on how long I could remain impartial to both sides. Topics had to be calculated and words expertly picked. I continued to ask him about his past for the sake of having something neutral to talk about. But the sad excuse for a conversation always began and ended the same way—disappointing. Staring off at the green mountaintops that surrounded us on our afternoon walk, I realized I couldn't remember the last time I asked my father about life in Egypt.

Babush's talk about Eritrea reminded me of Egypt and my father's disapproval of me going. "What? Why do you want to go there?" His question reverberated in my mind. When he had stared at my face, out-of-focus on the screen, I had said, "Because this is the closest I've been to Egypt in nine years, and it's probably the closest I'll be for a long time. I want to see my family. I want to see Egypt." He shook his head, his nose flared and his lips pulled in tightly, the way they always did when he was angry. Because he stared at my picture on the screen rather than the camera, I didn't feel like he was looking at me. "There is nothing to see there. You're right next to Europe. Visit countries there."

I gazed into the tiny black camera. From his vantage, I was looking straight at him. "I've already been around England and Wales, and to Spain, Amsterdam, France, Italy, Greece. I'm going to Egypt."

It was the place my parents emigrated from when they were my own age.

Going back to Egypt would be like going for a warm swim after a long, dry winter. Not going would be like restricting myself to pools of culture I found spotting America, and never visiting the ocean.

He didn't understand that I wanted to go not only to understand myself, but to understand him. He was a permanent fixture in my mind, one whom I expected to illuminate our family history for me, and shed some light on who I am now and what lay ahead. He was a part of me.

"It's really a waste of time. Unnecessary." A dental assistant peeked into his office, told him he had a patient waiting, and the screen went blank.

My mind wandered back to Babush strolling beside me. "Would you go back to Eritrea?" He stared up at the glassy blue sky, as if he was looking back in time.

"Only to see some of my family," he replied. I wondered what risks he would be taking to go back, while my father, who was free to go back, had not gone. Family was at the center of Babush's memories. What did my father see in the Alexandrian landscape of his past that deemed the memories of place and people "unnecessary"? I thought about my father walking out of his dental practice at the end of his workday. Did he remember his first car, a red Fiat, and how his brother-in-law taught him to drive it? As he prepared his dinner, did he think about how he learned to cook with my grandmother after school in their cramped Alexandrian apartment? His story was lost to me, perhaps lost to even himself.

When we turned around, the group was far behind, ready to return to the manor for dinner. Everyone helped set the long, elegant table that stood on stone slabs. Where the kitchen and dining area ended, irregular wooden planks began. They were far enough apart that the children were able to drop *Jenga* blocks in between them when they were bored. I found Babush on his knees in the den, reaching down into the floor to retrieve them. Beneath the blocks hid a shiny one-pound coin. He stuck a chewed wad of gum at the end of a wooden spoon, and pulled out the money. It was a trick normally used to steal that he had learned as a kid. Babush laughed, examining his prize. "You never know how you will use the skills you learn when you're young."

For my part, I was determined to visit Egypt and keep its landscapes within me. Until then, I would hold onto the places where fathers opened their pasts and laid them out like the valleys of the Brecon Beacons with their still dark water, and I would keep the shore's pebbles beneath my feet and the nuzzle of yellow dandelions on my hands. I would remember Wales for the open skies, a sweeping backdrop that embraced our vast feelings with a boundless blue.

Antonia Farzan

SHORE DINNER

July brings seaweed, and the satisfaction
of bursting the swollen sac of a mermaid's purse.
Strands of eelgrass lash to my legs
as I crawl out to the far buoy at mid-day.

In the cabana shower, with its tidebars of sand,
and bunches of bladderwrack clogging the drain,
I leave my swimsuit peeled and turned out,
clots of red tide sticking to the nylon.

The algal bloom flowers into August,
lifts levels of noxious nitrogen wastewater,
pollutes beds of scallops and oysters
in the brackish water around Buzzards Bay.

In the Kickemuit, quahoggers stand knee-deep
at low tide, feet treading the sand bottom,
feeling for littlenecks and cherrystones
to drag up with a long-tined bullrake.

They rinse off their haul, and hollow out a sandpit
to cook the shucked clams on searing hot stones,
smothered with a tarp and surrounded by bloated rockweed
which bursts in the heat, generating steam.

Sarah Groves

THE GOD OF MY FATHER

The God of my father has lived in my house for the past week or so, puttering around in my bathrobe and my favorite pair of slippers, leaving His silvery beard hairs in my bathroom sink.

He showed up a few days after the funeral. I had seen Him there, looking very presentable in a black suit and a black yarmulke, which smothered the halo on His head. He had said a few words over the coffin as we threw in our handfuls of dirt, and walking away down the hill I had asked Him how He was feeling about, you know, everything.

“Oh, I’m going to be fine,” He’d said dolefully.

“I haven’t seen you in a long time,” I said, hoping that He wouldn’t ask me why.

“I’m sure you’re very busy,” He said, hitching Himself along on his cane. He was so shaky on His feet that He looked almost transparent.

“Not too busy for you,” I said. “Why don’t you come and have dinner with me while I’m in town?”

“To be honest,” He said, “I promised my sister I would eat with her. But you are very generous.”

“I didn’t know you had a sister,” I said.

“She lives on the North side,” He said. “Little railroad house on Boyd. Green house, pink flamingos. You know it?”

We talked a little longer, about some of the cousins who were having a reception, and then we went our separate ways. I remembered telling Him that were He ever traveling my way, He should know that I had a pullout bed He could stay on, and He said, in some casual way, that He might take me up on that.

I didn’t expect it when, while making myself breakfast the following week, someone rang my doorbell. Going to the peephole, I saw that it was Him.

He was dressed much more casually, and His hair looked like it hadn’t been washed in days. His beard had little pieces of egg caught in it, and even His halo had acquired a dingy greenish hue. I thought about pretending I wasn’t home, but then I remembered that He was omniscient and cracked open the door.

“Is this a good time for you?” He asked.

“Of course,” I said, and invited Him inside.

He came in and sat down at my little kitchen table. I was living in a townhouse at the time, sort-of with this girl that I was sort-of dating, and there was a folded pile of her laundry on a chair by the door. He sniffed when he saw it, but didn’t say anything. He followed me into the kitchen where He refused three pieces of toast, two different preparations of eggs, and the last of my bacon. As He finished the last bite and wiped the crumbs from his beard, He told me that my father’s lawyer said that He had no right to my father’s house, which had been left to my older sister with whom I did not speak. Apparently my father had made no plans for where his God should go in the event of his death.

“I am an old, old man,” He said to me. “And now I know that I have nowhere to go.”

“I suppose he assumed you could handle yourself,” I said, hoping I sounded complimentary and not callous.

He sighed and stared out the kitchen window at the street.

“You can stay with me,” I said. “For a while.”

He turned to look at me.

“I couldn’t do that,” he said. “I couldn’t impose.”

Impulsively, I grabbed Him by the forefinger. He seemed surprised.

“Please,” I said. “My home is yours. Your family and mine go way back.”

I found myself trying to explain this to Maria when she came by on Sunday night and found the God of my father sitting at the coffee table watching a hockey game on TV. He had been upset the night before because it was His first Sabbath without my father, and He said that He felt lonely and had cried, big tears dripping down His lined face. In all the commotion I had forgotten that Maria was supposed to come over and hadn’t tidied up from making Him some dinner (more eggs, always eggs) or shaved or put on a nice shirt.

She said she understood the idea of having company over, but that she didn’t get why it should have to interfere with our evening. She took me aside and told me that she was worried I’d get sucked into something I wasn’t prepared to deal with.

“You’re Catholic,” I said. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“I think that you’re letting him get awfully comfortable,” she said. “And I thought you were an atheist.”

“Look, I met your gods,” I said.

“Just *one*,” she said, her voice creeping up from a whisper. “I don’t understand why I have to explain this to you over and over.”

“Anyway,” I said, “isn’t He a part of yours too? Can’t you just be cool with Him?”

“Do you hang out with all of me?” she said. “Or just with my cleavage?”

I stumbled through an explanation, but she ended up leaving. The God of my father watched her go.

“She’s trouble,” He said. “You’re better off without her.”

I went to bed early. He cranked up the TV until it was hard for me to sleep. I tossed and turned, thinking about going down and giving Him a piece of my mind, but then I remembered that He'd had a hard week and felt guilty about being upset.

When I came down the next morning He was curled up in a nest of takeout boxes and empty beer cans with my mom's crocheted afghan draped over Him. My kitchen smelled like burnt meat, and I could see the light on my answering machine blinking. My bank card was overdrawn. I looked in the oven and saw that there was black sticky goo melted over the wire racks.

"What's going on in here?" I asked.

He sat up, looking groggy.

"I helped myself to some burnt offerings," He said. "The Greek place up the road does a two-for-one special if you're a senior citizen. Don't worry, I know you would have done it if you'd remembered."

I felt the rage starting to boil up in me.

"You sleep in pretty late for a Monday," he said, looking at the clock on the wall, and I realized that I was an hour late for work. I ran around showering and hunting for clothes. As I left, I saw Him hunting through the fridge.

"That was a bad idea," my mother said when I called her up on Wednesday. She lived in California. Sitting at my desk on my lunch break, I hunched forward and smothered the receiver with my hand as I said, "So what do I do?"

"Well, I don't know." I could hear her tapping her nails on the counter. She was seventy but still got plastic fingernails glued over her own, in bright Miami colors that she said made her feel young. "I mean, you know that He's the reason your father and I split up."

"What?" I said.

"You have no idea what it was like to live with Him," she said. "So disrespectful to me. Nothing I could cook was any good. He gave me leprosy once when I got mad at your dad for looking at another woman. I spent thirty days in the hospital."

"I thought you were getting your appendix out," I said.

"For thirty days? Honey, that's a Biblical number." I could hear her starting the blender in the background. When it turned off I could hear her new husband, Matt, singing badly in the shower. "We had to tell you something, though. I didn't want you thinking that we were unstable. I thought you'd figured it out by now."

"Gee," I said. "Thanks."

"But you need to take control of your own life, honey," she said. "And you need to open up and talk about things. How's your relationship?"

"I don't want to talk about it," I said.

"Well," she said. "Small steps. God first, I guess."

When I came home that evening, the God of my father was carrying a suitcase toward the door.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“I’m leaving,” He said.

I knelt down and unzipped the suitcase. It was empty. I looked up at Him.

“This was a ploy?” I asked. He shrugged.

“You have no shame,” I said. “You are just ballsy. Did you really give my mother leprosy?”

He pulled a face. “She said she wouldn’t talk to you about that.”

“It’s important,” I said. “Look, I can’t believe the way you treat people! You have this way of making people feel bad about not wanting you around.” I paused for breath, holding up a finger to stop Him from speaking. “Maria knows how to deal with people like you. She knows how to keep you at a friendly distance. Well, I can’t do that.” I pointed toward the door. “Get out.”

He started packing the suitcase, genuinely this time. In went some burnt toast and a robe, a pair of wooden sandals and a leftover, untouched six-pack of beer. He zipped it up and walked out the door, casting me a baleful look as He crossed the threshold and disappeared.

“Good for you,” my mother said when I called her later. “He was a noose around your father’s neck. He always asked me why you never came home on breaks.”

“This is how you do it,” Maria said, the next Saturday in bed, tearing open a condom wrapper. “You can’t let them get too close or they permeate every aspect of your life. Once a week is plenty.” She kissed me. “Come on, big guy. I have to get up early tomorrow morning.”

Lying beside her that night, I thought about my father, the last time that I’d seen him. It was when I graduated from college. My mother had flown out to throw me a party in a restaurant and the pair of them, my father and his god, stood apart from the main body of guests. Everyone else was moving to congratulate me but I was watching them. They looked like a pair of old trees, leaning against one another for support, roots and branches entangled. I remembered that old statistic that men who are widowers die ten years earlier on average.

My father looked up at me then, with a smile on his face. I glanced at his God, wondering if He knew how many commandments I had violated in the past four years, not to even speak of kosher. But He was gazing at me indulgently, and I got the sense that as long as my father had Him by the elbow, steadying His shaking limbs, He would smile, too.

RJ Ingram

THE GIRL WITHOUT HANDS

The girl without hands collects pinecones and thimbles for her nurse to box in glass reliquaries, and on Sundays the girl without hands recites aphorisms for her mother to inscribe on wheels and tops, then spin on the kitchen table. They land on sprites of thought. Tomorrow our aria will be taught to a stagehand one might say, or some lyric of love comparing daughters to flowers. Her father builds the oak toys in the garage.

The girl without hands sits on her four-poster and looks at her pinecone museum, sixty-eight boxes of brown seedlings, and forty-nine glass jars full of glittering thimbles, and six stacks of heavy leather books, all in her closed library.

Mary Hood

YELLOW FLOWERS

He came up,
an oily fish.

He decided to breathe
on land.

He called me
my grandmother's name.

The light in the flailing branches
has made him fearless.

He takes the bird
and pulls out every feather.

By the old oven, the ground
is cold,

smells of ginger.
I cannot feel

my bones breaking.
Inside of me

there is a small animal
with weathered fur. He reaches

in to cage it
hands strong.

It hangs
its tail. He takes

my grandmother's name.
He takes the bird and breaks

its wings.
I am a hole

in the ground
where animals run

to hide. I am half undressed,
waving a flag, too damp

to touch.
Sometimes there is a wail—

a horn
flying over distances.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT AND OTHER THINGS

Dal Chawal

The yellow light of the kitchen makes my mother's face look sad and ordinary. The lines, perched above her eyebrows and at the sides of her mouth, are not real and are only there on nights like these. Tuesdays or Wednesdays, the days she works late and doesn't have time to cook. The days she calls my father on the phone while he's still at work.

I have a patient who is going to die, she says. There is nothing I can do about it, either. Yes, yes, I know, she says. I know I do this to help people—but every day? Then there is a pause while my father offers something he thinks will make her feel better but never really does. She hangs up the phone and life goes on.

Yesterday's *dal*—lentils—on the stove for five minutes and some chopped tomatoes later, I am sitting at the dining table, frowning at my plate like many seven year olds do when they know they're about to eat something unhealthy, dry. She pours the slimy yellow stuff over a lump of *chawal*—rice—and it runs along the sides of the plate, stopping only when it reaches the edges. It is now trapped and so am I.

I hate *dal chawal* more than you can ever imagine. I always wonder why I can't eat normal food like all my friends. You know, normal food. Like pizza and pasta and mashed potatoes.

Please don't frown at your plate, *Beta*, she says. She stares down at the table, her forehead resting in the ridge between her thumb and index finger.

Will I have to eat *dal chawal* everyday for the rest of my life? Why don't you ever make me anything good?

No, *Beta*. But *dal* makes you strong. It is full of protein and if you ever want to grow, you'll have to keep eating it. The lines above her eyebrows flicker up and down and her eyes don't move. They look heavy, or maybe stuck.

I bring the first bite to my mouth, the same hot, thick smell, the same gritty, powdery taste. I take a deep breath and swallow, each bite like a boulder in my stomach.

I look up at my mother and she is now standing up, looking out the

window. She shuts her eyes and lets out a deep breath, one I sort of feel like she's been holding in for a while. She turns to me and smiles.

Eat your food, *Beta*. It's not so bad. It could be worse, you know.

Eggplant Parmesan

Carrabba's is the type of place you go to when you're desperate for some forced family time. The waitresses, the children's coloring books, the free bread, they are all devices of some sort to make you bond in some way with your family. Today I am upset with my parents because it is the summer and I want to be with friends. You never spend time with us, they say. If you don't come to dinner, you can't go out tonight. I'm the only seventeen year old I know who still has a curfew. I'm the only seventeen year old I know whose parents force her to hang out with them even though it's obvious that no one actually enjoys it.

I'm sitting with my arms crossed staring at my mother as she looks at the menu. It annoys me that she takes so long to order. The waitress has come back three times, and my mother still can't decide. It's a tie between the Ravioli and the Eggplant Parmesan. She always ends up choosing the Eggplant Parmesan, anyway. It's far more interesting and adventurous, she says.

What's wrong with you, Pritha? If only I had a penny for every time my mother asked me this question since the time I turned thirteen.

Nothing. Can we just decide what we're going to get? I already know what I want, and it's the same as what I always get—just like you always get Eggplant Parmesan after considering every other thing on the menu that I know you don't actually want.

What's the harm in wanting to try new stuff, *Beta*? If I have the choice, I'm going to take advantage of it. Before you know it, you'll be old and your teeth will fall out and you won't have that liberty anymore.

Why would I have to worry about getting old? You're the one who's forty-four, aren't you?

Don't talk to your mother like that, my father chimes in. I look away and into my lap because I want to end the conversation. I want to end this dinner, the stupid free bread and the dull children's menu crayons.

My mother orders Eggplant Parmesan—our food arrives. Surprise. I stuff pasta into my mouth while my mother talks about politics at work. A man who took the promotion that she deserved, a patient with a rare problem, her new interns. Oh, wow, this Eggplant Parmesan is even better than last time, she adds, somewhere in the middle of all of it. Then she asks me about my day when she notices that I haven't said anything in a while.

Fine, I say. It was fine. Stop asking me that every few minutes. I finish

the last few bites of my pasta, dropping my fork into the plate loudly to signal to everyone that I am done and am ready to leave.

Dinner ends soon after that, and I finally make it to my friend's house. Get drunk, get high. Party for no reason at all. Wake up to my mother sitting at the edge of my bed, smiling in that still, fixed way that almost doesn't even look like a smile if you look hard enough.

I have cancer, she says. I got the results this morning.

In that moment I don't cry or blink or say a thing. It isn't like in the movies, a dramatic exit or a theatrical gasp. All that's there, right then, is me in a body that I'm sure is mine, the clock in the background, and her face. Solid, square, and sure.

The Californian Sandwich

Imagine you're driving home, a Californian sandwich from Flying Star sitting in your passenger seat, and you're tired because it's been four months since the last time you closed your eyes. Your mother's hands have become spotted purple and red from chemo, warm, rotten tomatoes, wrinkled and burnt from the sun. She never wants to eat because it makes her sick. She doesn't get out of bed because it hurts. Today she rolled over towards you as you sat next to her bed and said, Californian. *Beta*, can you get me a Californian? So you leave, get into your car, and now you're on your way back with the sandwich. You wonder how long she'll be able to keep it down for. The portabella mushrooms, the avocado, the Swiss cheese. All these things that you know she won't be able to digest. You know she knows it, too. But how do you say no to your mother—a woman whose once-plump, once-round face is now yellow and hollow? How do you say, no more, Mummy? No more food with colors, with fiber. Nothing spicy, nothing with taste.

You can't, you see. You can't say anything because your mother is sick and sad and even though she tells you it will all be okay, that it will all be fine and we'll get through it, you know that deep down that she's just as afraid as you are, and maybe even more.

So what do you do? You sit there, next to your sick mother, and you let her eat her sandwich. You let her eat it and enjoy it and smile when she's finished.

Halwa

I wake up to the first Saturday morning I've been home since college. The first Saturday morning I've been home since my mother's tests came out clean. It's early, and I hear the loud clanking of pots and pans in that familiar rhythm of bangs and clinks that I'd recognize anywhere. The house rattles

as someone slams a door somewhere in some room, and it is alive, awake. A hot, sweet smell drifts through the house, the air maple-syrup flavored and spicy. My mother is in the kitchen preparing something that I know isn't *dal chawal*. It's something sweet and different and fun. I'm not in the kitchen yet, but I know she's smiling, her cheeks probably red and glistening from the kitchen heat.

I know what she is making, too, but I don't want to admit it to myself before I know for sure. I creep into the kitchen, and I peek into the pot to see what she is making. *Halwa*, I notice—a sweet dish made from semolina flour, butter, sugar. All the things in the world that taste good. The things that children love and never stop loving even when they're grown up like me.

Pritha, she says, and I know she has sensed my presence the way mothers do.

It's *Diwali* today. Do you remember what that is, she mumbles, still facing the stove.

It's like Indian New Years. Today symbolizes the triumph of good over evil. Do you remember? The god—Lord *Rama*—was banished for fourteen years and today we celebrate his return. That's why I'm making *halwa*, she says, answering the question that is written all over my face.

You're supposed to spread light throughout the house all day, she continues. You light a row of lamps through the house and it, well, it spreads the light through the dark. That's the whole symbolism, you know? She tells me this same thing every year, and usually I interrupt her and tell her, I know, Mummy, I know. But this time I don't.

She turns around to look at me, and I notice that she is wearing her hair down for the first time since I can remember. For a moment she looks like the same girl in her pictures from the seventies. Soft, simple.

She sets a bowl of *halwa* on the table for me, grains of caramel-colored, buttered flour glistening from the sunlight leaking through the kitchen window. I sit in front of it for what feels like a long time; it's still hot. My father appears behind my mother and wraps his arms around her waist. She bats him off in that playful way that I know is just her pretending to be annoyed.

I love you, *Artu*, he says, and he kisses her on the cheek. It's been twenty years of marriage and she still blushes, still, for a moment, the girl with the soft, red cheeks from the pictures.

I sink my spoon into the bowl and bring a bite close to my mouth. I hold it there for a second, feeling the warmth push against my lips. I smell that smell again as close to me as I can get it. The warm flour, the butter, the sugar. The smell that I will remember years after I'm out of the house, away, grown up and old, alone and afraid in the dark.

Patrycja Humienik

IN THIS OPUS OF CACAO, OF HONEY

your spangled eye unbinds
the perianth: calyx & corolla yield a dance

less boogie more like blues with
zest of tango: cheekbone nudging cheekbone,
hand pressed against dewy back, footwork
a zephyr but it's no foxtrot, and less
Twist... think Charleston, think Mashed Potato
"Got my mojo workin'"

science, though immaculately mustached,
did not does not hypothesize
the rate at which (once nail-biting) mouths
—lips calyxes, tongue ellipsis—adhere, cleave
the stamen, the stigma, glue
the stamen, the stigma
with pollen's lip-lock our

opus of cacao, of honey

less salsa, more rumba

lips calyxes, tongue ellipsis: whorl amok lost concentrics
zephyr spun into a tempest

Jeanne Troy

OCTOPUS

Sleep a little longer—maybe
cling to figments, venous cobalt
tendrils. Descend; sleep among the
debris, threshold of
collapse, where something
lurks without a name.

Yours is a short-lived mimicry,
somehow enduring—cold eon
of memory. Are you lonely?
You, who tease me with
the remnants of a
world before the world.

And I crave the ink; the sultry
flavor; deception and fiction,
deep-sea Gemini. Tell me your
stories? Maritime
myths, like fears—witnessed,
manipulated.

Three-hearted Kraken, disregard
my dusky queries. Now and then
I am unafraid; abyssal
sensations, drowning?
Nautical mirage?
You are my harbor.

You crept through the keyhole in my
eye—tangled, drifting; Pacific
dreams. And tomorrow I'll find you
at the bottom of
this teacup; it was
meant to keep my soul.

INTERVIEW WITH LYDIA DAVIS

Award-winning short story writer, novelist, and translator, Lydia Davis speaks with us about writing on trains, old journals rediscovered by strangers, and the joy of translation. She is the author of one novel, *The End of the Story*, and seven story collections. Her book, *Varieties of Disturbance: Stories*, was a finalist for the 2007 National Book Award.

MELISSA GOODICH: How much of your writing starts from a truth and how much from a fabrication?

LYDIA DAVIS: It usually starts pretty completely from a truth, and then I'll fabricate as necessary as I go along. You know, whatever needs adjustment to fit the shape of the story. To change freely. So, a very comfortable position.

MELISSA: Do you think there's something different you can get from writing it as fiction instead of nonfiction even though it starts from a truth so often?

LYDIA: Definitely. If I imagine writing all of what I do as sort of memoir, sort of personal confessional, it would lock it in a straight jacket. It wouldn't have the freedom. This way I can go wherever I want with it and also get the distance from it that I need. I wouldn't have the same distance.

DAVID JOSEPH: What's the best story that you've ever read?

LYDIA: Best is always too difficult because there are different bests in different moods. That's a tough one because sometimes I'll read a paragraph and think that's one of the best paragraphs I've ever read. (Looking at bookcase) I'm staring at Flannery O'Connor and she's one of the writers I keep returning to. Especially since I teach, and when you teach you're always looking for good examples of excellence. So I often take a first paragraph of a Flannery O'Connor story, to teach excellence in doing several things at once, like dialogue and characterization and description and economy. And a lot of beginnings of Grace Paley stories. I look a lot at beginnings because those are first impressions, and they strike you most freshly. I guess one of the best—see I won't be able to remember the title—is an Isaak Babel story from the *Red Cavalry* of a woman talking about her father. There it's easy to see the whole, so I can say it's one of the best. Though I can't say the *best*.

MELISSA: There are a lot of mothers in your short story collections, and so it makes me wonder about your mother, and I'm curious if she's more like the mother in *The Meeting*, where she meets the president and wants her mother to defend her, stand up for her, or more like the mother in *Varieties of Disturbance*, in that title story? Or neither, if these are just fabricated mothers?

LYDIA: They take off from my mother, my poor mother. (Laughs) But again they exaggerate. Even a story like that, even if they were based completely in fact, they would misrepresent that person, because you're not telling other incidents or moments, or nicer moments. I think she's both those mothers. She's the one who would stand up to anybody, the president of anything and assert her own correctness, defend her daughter. So she's all of those things, and more besides, that I don't bring out now but might bring out in future stories. It's all unfair in a way, and one sided, whatever is based on a real person. You'd have to write an awfully long book to be fair, to get all the sides of somebody. But I guess what I wanted, what amused me and what I wanted to bring out, was how we still have that child inside us. You know, we're very grown up, but then at moments of difficulty we still want our mother.

MELISSA: It reminded me of my mother, too. I'm curious if people you write about read it and recognize themselves and if they are pleased or displeased?

LYDIA: I've had different reactions. Usually I show the story to the person if it seems very close and recognizable to make sure that they are okay with it. And most people are, even if they have mixed feelings. They may think, *Oh, she got a side of me I don't like so much*. But they're so pleased to be caught in print. One friend said it made her feel like her life was more real, or more solid, or more enduring to see it in print. But it's not always, it's sometimes tricky. Sometimes I should fabricate more, like reverse genders or give people different identities.

DAVID: In *Varieties of Disturbance*, you have the recurring fly. Is there a reason for that or did that just come organically?

LYDIA: I would say it came organically. I certainly didn't say, *Okay, I want flies in seven stories and then we'll put a fly on the cover*. Flies just occurred when they occurred, you know, if I was interested, if they happened to come up in a situation or if I was just writing about a fly. And then, if the story is good enough to keep then I keep it and it goes in the collection. And the fly was the design person's idea. I think she had come up with a pretty boring cover first, just a picture of two women talking and cats under the table with two women talking over tea or something. We all said we weren't so crazy about that. Then my editor said, "Why don't you just try a straight typeface cover?" And so she just did type face, but then she put a very realistic fly on it, which was just brilliant. It was only then that I actually looked at the stories and said, "My goodness, there are like seven." I said, "Yes, flies occur in one or two but I didn't realize how many."

MELISSA: One of the stories we looked at a lot was "We Miss You," with the fifth grade letters to their friend. And I love that story. I love that words are curled on their sides,

and we get personality from hesitant letters going all the way up to the top of the page. And we all looked at handwriting and tried to make emotional sense from it. So I'm curious what your handwriting is like. Is it neat? Is it ambitious?

LYDIA: (Laughs) It depends very, very, very much on my mood and my state of mind. I love handwriting, I love writing by hand. I love the whole act of it. Sometimes it's very neat, if I'm feeling very neat and organized. In fact, sometimes I can tell that that's how I'm feeling from my handwriting.

ALL: (Laugh)

LYDIA: And then other days it's very sloppy if I'm in a hurry. But, a woman who moved into a house I lived in found an old journal of mine. It slipped down behind something, and she sent it back to me. And without reading it she said, she glanced at it enough to say she was impressed by how neat my handwriting was. I had never thought of myself as having neat handwriting, but that's given me a whole new image of myself. Now I think, *Oh, I'm someone with neat handwriting.* And it's amazing what that does. I always think of that in terms of teaching little children, because if you praise them for something that they barely do well, it makes them want to do it so much better.

DAVID: Do you have any special writing regimens? You say you like handwriting, I'm assuming, over just typing on a computer, but do you eat or drink while you write? Is there music? Are the lights on or off, indoors or outdoors?

LYDIA: Definitely there would never be music. I find music extremely distracting, because I always listen to it, because I've been a musician at times in my life. That's a big word for it. I've played the violin and I've played piano, so I'm always listening. When I'm writing I hear what I'm writing in my head. I don't read it out loud, but I hear it. So if I have music on it makes it totally impossible.

I guess usually I'm in my study, and I like to go in with something hot. I realize that's a comfort thing, but it's an anchoring thing that I really like to go in with a cup of tea or coffee. It helps me get started. And I do write at the computer, but only when I've gotten going by hand writing usually. It depends what the project is. But I can write other places. I like public transportation a lot. I can write very well on trains and buses if it's just quiet enough. You know, I carry earplugs. I find it a really good place to think and write.

DAVID: I realized that sometimes I'll reread something that I've written and I'll feel almost irritated by my own voice or by just some tick I might have in my writing. Do you ever get that feeling when reading over something that you've written? And how do you challenge yourself to move outside of your comfort zone?

LYDIA: Well, I don't get irritated by what I've written. I'm trying to remember if I used to. Out of my comfort zone? Well I usually like to stay in my comfort zone. Some people write very rough drafts that they know aren't good and that they're going to come back to. I don't do that. I really don't go on to the next sentence unless the first one is pretty

good, and I'm pretty happy with it. But that doesn't mean I stop, really labor over each sentence. It's just that I quickly make enough changes to keep going at a certain speed. But I don't ever really write something that I think is awful and think, *Well I'll come back later*. It would get in my head and mess me up and make me too uncomfortable. So maybe that's sort of answering what you're saying, that I don't even put it down. I wouldn't be embarrassed to have someone read the rough draft. They'd see that it was a little rough like, *Oh she repeated this several times*, or, *This sentence doesn't go very well from that one*. But it would be basically be pretty good.

MELISSA: So do you do several short stories a day or do you have longer projects in mind? I'm curious more about this writing you do on a daily basis, just because we're at a younger age where we're starting to try and figure out our own routines. Do you have a goal, or do you just sit down and start writing and you're like, *Well this paragraph is kind of lovely. I think I'll just work with it until it's a short short that fits on a page?* Or how do you know?

LYDIA: At the time I started writing these short shorts, I did have a regimen. I did have a sort of schedule. I said, "You have to write two of these a day," because I was blocked on a longer story. I was just sort of tired and burned out with it. So I said, "Okay, two of these a day and it doesn't matter how ridiculous they are. Just start somewhere." At that time, I'd taken one writing workshop and my head wasn't filled with jargon, like, you know, prompts. The word prompt wouldn't come in for decades. But, a sentence would just occur to me, like: Last night my aunt burned to death. It would just be out of nowhere and I would just make myself go on with it, to sort of bypass this thing of waiting for a good idea, waiting for inspiration, and waiting until you think you can legitimately write something. So I would just say, "It doesn't really matter if it's wonderful or not. You just have to produce two a day."

And that got me going. But now, I don't. Now I'm working on the longer project. I keep a notebook going very actively, so that's an enormous help. Like traveling on the train coming here, I'll write down something that the guy behind me says or something. Or I'll write down what the guy next to me is doing on the train. So I write these down with no purpose in mind, but later I might very well come back to them and see, *Well this could make a good one line story as long as it had a title*. Or another thing I'm doing is I have a couple ongoing stories that consist of just one-line entries that could go on forever. So I'll think of another line. One is things that make me uncomfortable. Or something like: the bridge of my nose is too dry. The point of these is they're just tiny things that bother me. And so I'll think of another one.

That's sort of the ongoing work that happens around a larger project. I don't know for younger writers setting out. I would definitely suggest to make quotas or demands on yourself: *I have to keep a notebook, and I have put in five entries a day*. Or, *I have to write one short short every day*. Because I think you do have to force yourself a bit, and I do force myself if I find I'm not doing enough. I say, "Okay you have to go in there at nine o'clock and you have to start working on this." I think some forcing is definitely involved.

It's really a reciprocal relationship. The more you write down, then the sharper you get at being on the alert for things to write down. And the more alert you are, the more you write down. So you have to get that going.

MELISSA: I'm curious how this is different from translation for you. It's hard for me to even comprehend the idea of knowing two languages fully. We're supposed to study language in high school, and we're supposed to study a year and a half here at Susquehanna University. What's it like knowing two languages fully and what's your style for translation, and how is that work different from producing fiction of your own?

LYDIA: I do think writers have an obligation to try and introduce people to writers that they may not know, and one way is through translation. I would encourage you, even if you don't have much of the other language, to try and translate anyway. Like maybe once in your career translate one thing, just to set the bar low. Say, is your language Spanish? So just find a little prose poem in Spanish that you really like or that you've even read in translation, because if you have that much Spanish you have enough. All you need are the basics and a dictionary and then a friend you know. And since you're a writer, the main skill necessary in translation is the writing, not the language.

DAVID: Who are some authors you admire?

LYDIA: Well, I've mentioned Flannery O'Connor, Isaac Babel, and Grace Paley. Early on I was learning from Becca Nabokov, but I read a lot of Thomas Hardy, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, James Joyce. And contemporary writers. I've enjoyed Deborah Eisenberg a lot. I read the poetry of Rae Armantrout a lot. She's a friend, so we exchange work, and I read a lot of her work in progress. John Ashbery. I like the poet Bernadette Mayer. I don't know if you know her. New York school, sort of a Frank O'Hara descendent.

MELISSA: Since you often write such short pieces, I'm curious what you think a short short can accomplish that no other form can? And how is it different from a poem? You're friends with Rae Armantrout, and I wonder how you guys inform and help each other.

LYDIA: I don't know. I don't usually think in terms of what something can accomplish. I certainly don't before I write it. And I also think of a continuum. I prefer to think of a long continuum that starts with one piece, *Finnegan's Wake*, something long. Long and complex. And just goes down through simpler shorter novels and traditional short stories to stranger short stories and then to short shorts and then to prose poems and then to single line poems and then broken line poems. And somewhere in there you have the narrative poems, like the "Midnight Ride of Paul Revere". So they're really overlapping and overlapping in what they accomplish. After all, "Midnight Ride of Paul Revere" is a story, so it's very narrative, where a Rae Armantrout poem is not very narrative, but it's still a poem just because it has broken lines. And some of the time it doesn't have broken lines, but it's still a poem.

Obviously a short short doesn't get you caught up in it. If you're reading a realistic novel, or say you're reading the *Liar's Club* by Mary Karr, you get caught up in the

story and you forget where you are and you're transported somewhere else. And that's a very pleasant, nice, and probably helpful experience. You're taken out of yourself. The short short doesn't really take you out of yourself, because it's not long enough. It creates an illusion of another place and person, but for not long enough for you to live in another place. So it's really just taking you in and out. It's more suggestive. It plants ideas in your mind and gets you started thinking in another way, which is what a very short narrative can do. I mean, one even shorter than a short short. I've had people say that with my one or two line pieces they would read them and then create a whole story themselves. A whole story would be evoked in their minds, sort of their own imagination. So I guess you could sum up by saying the short shorts give more activity to the reader. I don't know exactly what the reader's activity is reading *War and Peace*. You're still active, actively imagining what you're reading. But you're not doing as much invention and creation of your own as you are with a short short.

DAVID: On the same subject of short shorts, how do you know when one is complete? How do you know that it wouldn't be better with more of your words as opposed to the readers' outside imagining?

LYDIA: That's a hard one to answer, because I do just know most of the time. Some of the time, I write too much, a little too much, and cut back. I'm not usually in the situation of thinking I need more. It's usually that I have too much and need less. And sometimes it's just like one sentence too many, or just a phrase, a couple words that are too many. I think probably the safest way is to write a little too much and then cut back rather than to think, *I need to add more*. That way you can see more clearly that *Okay I've said what I want to say and then some*. So just cut back the "then some." You want to be as economical as possible. I was thinking of a single line I wrote down the other day. We all sort of act according to our self-image, to some extent. And following from that I just thought, *I'm just not the sort of person who eats Girl Scout cookies*. Now if I added another sentence it would begin to lose its impact. If I said, *They're too rich, and I don't like buying from Girl Scouts. It's too American*. If you started adding after that you would lose that first impact.

MELISSA: There's a moment in one of your stories. I think it's "The Thyroid Diary" where I think a woman is talking to the nurse, and she's afraid of getting lost in the jungle, about what she would do without her medication. For some reason I think this is an absurd and yet very common thing to be afraid of. So, if you were lost in the jungle what would you be most afraid to be without or what do you think would happen?

LYDIA: Well, she reassured me, of course this is based on reality, that I would be fine without my medication. I take one other pill, and I would be fine without that, too. I don't know if the jungle would have clean water or not. Maybe I'd be most worried about the insects, actually. Lost in the jungle. I don't know, the usual, I mean nothing surprising: water, food, and the insects because it could be really bad, getting stung, and it could get infected and all sorts of things. I don't know if there are still savages.

DAVID: I'm thinking of your story "Happiest Memory". You base a lot of things on experience. So what is your happiest memory? Do you have one that is bookmarked?

LYDIA: That's a tough one, because I like to think of your happiest memory being someone else's. Maybe when my kids were young. There are a lot of happy memories connected with babies and children. But family moments, I guess, would be the happiest memories of that sort that feed you.

MELISSA: I'm curious what your favorite formal experiments have been and where you got the ideas for them. I'm thinking about "The 5th Grade Handwriting, Grammar Questions," and the story that had the footnotes in it, where a girl's reading a book, and the piece where you write with hiccups. Where did these ideas come from?

LYDIA: First you have to be very open to anything happening. If you're not open, you just say, "I'm just going to write another story in my sequence of stories about a little town," which is okay too. But if you're open to anything happening, then you'll pick up ideas from everywhere. The hiccups happened because I'd written the story the way it was, but my computer actually malfunctioned and started introducing spaces randomly in the text. And I actually liked it, because I felt the story the way it was needed one more complication. So I let that happen and then engineered it, changed it the way I wanted it to be and then gave it the title "With Hiccups" and also ended it with the woman saying, "Excuse me." So that was sort of an accident that I kept. The footnotes, strangely, were my editor's idea, because I had two versions of that story. The clipped version and the expanded version, and I said to him, "I don't really know that we want them both in the collection side by side." And he said, "Why don't you put one as a footnote to the other?" Usually I don't have other people suggest things, but that was a good idea. It took a lot of work readjusting and adjusting and deciding where to put the footnotes and how to do it, but that was his idea. Other times, it's found texts that will suggest the story. One of my favorites is an alternate bio that I'm working on, and I just keep adding to it. It's called "Who I Am", and it consists of mistakes people have made about me, so a build up of an alternate life composed of the different mistakes people have made about me. Different birth date, different names.

MELISSA: My very last question is about Margaret Atwood. She writes very provocative things about grammar that remind me of you, where you talk about the subjunctive or "Grammar Questions", which is so moving because it's doing something with language that is a little unusual or not explored in a fiction setting. So I'm curious what you would think about this section from Margaret Atwood's *Year of the Flood*. It goes:

Glen used to say the reason you can't really imagine yourself being dead was that as soon as you say, 'I'll be dead' you've said the word 'I' and so you're still alive inside the sentence. And that's how people got the idea of immortality of the soul. It was a consequence of grammar. And so was God, because as soon as there's a past tense, there has to be a past before the past and you keep going back in time until you get to 'I don't know.' And that's what God is.

LYDIA: Well that's an interesting 'I.' But I don't know if I have any other reaction, because it's so complicated. I would probably immediately disagree about God or

something. But it would take a while. So your last question leaves me speechless. I haven't read a lot of Margaret Atwood. I probably should. I always meant to read at least *A Handmaid's Tale*, but I haven't yet gotten around to it.

MELISSA: Maybe you can speak to what fascinates you about grammar. We had a little debate in our class after reading *Grammar Questions* about whether grammar is a cold thing or not. Which isn't necessarily a bad thing. I tend to think about it as a mechanical thing. How interesting that you can produce emotionality from "he is living in Vernon hall" or "he is dying in Vernon hall." And what is the correct way to articulate such an emotionally painful thing? You don't even know for sure when a person ceases to be a person anymore. And how interesting to do that through something that isn't 'look at him coughing a lot.'

LYDIA: Grammar itself is just a tool. It's cold in itself, but what does is amazingly powerful, because if you take out a comma or put one in, you can change the whole way the sentence feels and what it conveys. I believe in mastering grammar completely, which is happening less and less. But not so you can be correct, but just so you can use your tool really well. So you know what you're doing, and then you can be incorrect, just slightly incorrect to suggest something, or really incorrect. Again, some sentences I copied down on the train.

I think a lot about dialogue, because that's something that students don't do very well almost consistently. They're terrible at dialogue. They're too correct, actually, in dialogue. So these very annoying guys got on the train, it wasn't their fault, they had been having a good time somewhere, and they were just loud. They were in their forties. And one guy put his jacket on top of someone else's and the other guy said, "That's my only springtime jacket that fits." And see, that's a little incorrect. He started, "That's my only springtime jacket," but it's the use of 'springtime' which isn't what I would have said. Maybe, 'my only spring jacket.' But then he added 'that fits.' So it's not correct, but it's very colloquial, very understandable. Later he was laughing a lot and he said 'Hahaha, duuuuude, hahaha.' And again, that would be very good in the story but you have to write the way people talk. 'Hahaha, duuuuude, hahaha' and nothing else. It's not a cold thing to know that that was grammatically incorrect. You just know what you're doing: *Okay, I want him to sound like a normal human being, so it's going to be a little incorrect.*

MELISSA: So do you recommend we all sit down somewhere in public and listen?

LYDIA: Absolutely. It's another thing I have my students do. They have to go and copy down verbatim. It has to be verbatim or it's no good. I think dialogue is hard. You have to study good dialogue and then listen to people. Because it's never quite what you expect.

DAVID: I'm curious about your distinction between fiction and poetry. Because I noticed *Varieties of Disturbances* is labeled as stories, but some of the pieces in it were published as poetry in journals. Do you have distinctions in your own mind or do you disregard them entirely?

LYDIA: I certainly disregard them when I sit down to write something. I don't worry about what it is. I prefer just to call everything a story, because that's how I started and that's where it comes from. I never thought of myself as a poet, and I think I would have a very different training if I really were a bona-fide poet, even though some of the things I write end up being pretty close to poems. But most of my reading was in fiction rather than most of it being in poetry, and I was always trying to master certain fictional forms rather than poetic forms. Then what comes out is somewhere on the continuum, and I don't care. If it has a little bit of narrative that's my excuse that it's a sort of story.

Emily Banks

CONCEPTION

Ann Marie was a nymphomaniac, at least that's what Cissy told my mom and Joan, and Cissy was crazy but sometimes she knew things nobody else did, and it was true Ann Marie wore her skirts a little tight, and there was that old man on the park bench, and the curtains of her dorm room window left open while she took off her clothes. Ann Marie, the little girl who kneeled in glass to prove her love for Jesus, all grown up, confessed, years later, to why she married Bill, that moment of indiscretion that grew and grew into the baby that died, and Brett said Bill found her rocking it, already blue, asking why it wasn't waking up. She must have thought Jesus was punishing her for not loving Him enough. As if He wasn't conceived in that same second, like Ann Marie was, decades before, when my grandma ran into the sailor who'd hitchhiked to New York for her—he was staying at the flophouse, she bought him a toothbrush and let him come inside. My mother always told me to be careful, the women in her family are so fertile—so fertile, and so easy to convince of one last drink or one more slice of cake while it's still moist, this race of women unable to say no to that extra scoop of ice cream, dripping with cool sweetness, uncontainable in its cone, to staying one more hour, kicking off your shoes, moving one inch closer, then one more. We were conceived—how else could we have been? No scientist would mix this kind of blood—not in Planned Parenthood clinics or honeymoon hotel rooms, but in that half-light that comes at the birth of morning when Jesus is still sleeping, with all those whispers of Careful, careful, careful growing full of breath and less insistent.

WISHING YOU WEREN'T HERE

I was sitting in the dining room alone, slouched in my chair, staring down at a game of Sudoku on my cell phone. I studied the empty boxes of the unfinished grid, trying to find where a three went. The TV in front of me displayed the Sacramento Kings' commitment to embarrassment.

"With all due respect, Cousins," I muttered, "dribbling the ball off your foot should not be your 'go-to' move." I heard the heavy hum of the automatic garage door, and then the back door creaked open.

"Hi, Kabir," Lucy called as she entered.

She owns the house, and I've been renting one of her daughter's old rooms for almost a year.

"Hi, Luce," I said, turning my head from my cell phone. I returned to the puzzle, scanning the empty rows and columns.

"Have you met Kirk?" she asked, passing by me on her way to the kitchen.

Only three times, I thought and tried to mentally correct her way of announcing company. I quickly had to conclude the impossibility of the task since "Kirk is here!" or "Now entering, coworker and good friend, Kirk!" wouldn't be any less contrived.

"Yeah," I said and noticed Kirk finally emerge from the garage.

There are experiences in life that should occur as frequently as possible: sex, roller coasters, and ice cream. Others, like chicken pox and Kirk, should remain a one-time affair. Unfortunately, there is still no treatment available to combat a case of Kirk.

The first time I met him, after ceremonially shaking hands inside the house, our paths crossed outside. He was studying the red warning sticker on the bin for yard waste.

"Yard waste ONLY," he read aloud, sounding amused. He looked up as I approached.

I tried making polite conversation. He gave me a blank look, as though he were auditioning for the role of Helen Keller, and walked past me toward the house.

The second time I met him, I was returning home from another nine mind-numbing hours of legal secretarial work. They were sitting at the dining table eating pasta.

“Have you met Kirk?”

“Yeah,” I said, fighting back an urge to tilt my head and ask, “Are you fucking serious?”

I stood before them, wearing my backpack, baggy sweat pants, hoody, and my baseball cap sitting crooked above an unshaven face. I looked down at Kirk, took note of his dark, slim fitting jeans, his tucked in dress shirt with the sharply rolled sleeves. His mustache and connected goatee were neatly trimmed into a soft square. I offered him my hand to shake. He quickly scanned my outfit and looked down at my hand. There was a slight raise of his eyebrows and a faint smirk on his face, a judgment suggesting I was nouveau blue-collar, before finally offering the strength of his thick, soft hand. As I headed upstairs to my room, I thought about what a huge prick he was. The movie *Boogie Nights* popped into my head, and I muttered, “Kirk Diggler.”

“Have you met Kabir?” Lucy asked Kirk, as they stood in the adjacent kitchen, preparing steaks to be grilled. I took a break from Sudoku and looked up in time to see the Kings miss a three pointer.

“Yeah, a couple times,” Kirk said, almost chuckling.

I wondered if Lucy had forgotten, or if this was a moment of willful dementia. Neither seemed likely, so I was left to assume she had run out of conversation.

“Want some champagne?” Kirk asked, one hand held the base of the bottle, the other was working off the foil from the top. At just under six feet tall, and easily over two hundred pounds, his voice doesn’t belong to him. It’s too high for his wide girth. Though firmly male, it lacks confidence, giving him a boyish quality that conflicts with his body, just like how the softness of his hands conceals their crushing strength.

“The seven years is over, so we’re celebrating,” Lucy said, standing by the back door.

“Hmmm?” I asked, turning in my chair.

“The science textbook project we were working on is done.”

I sensed the satisfaction and relief in both her voice and face.

“We finished and no one else wanted to celebrate.” Her voice was light and bemused, “Can you believe it?”

Absolutely. I thought about her “business cards” stuck between the glass plates and wood frames of many family photos lining the wall of the second floor hallway. A small photo in the corner of the card shows her with a flattened smile and folded arms next to handwritten-style font advising:

Why?? Because I am the mom!!

Lucy

“No one else wanted to celebrate,” Kirk said from the kitchen. I turned toward him as he finished his thought. “I guess that leaves it up to us.”

I shrugged. “I guess so,” I said and dropped my head, returning to the puzzle. As I thought about her and Kirk, I reflected on my recent dating debacle and realized I was jealous.

A week prior, I was hugging Sarah in the campus parking lot on the last day of the semester. She looked a bit silly in her oversized black plastic poncho, the hood covered most of her forehead and threatened to overtake her eyes. It was barely sprinkling. We pulled away from the hug and I saw anticipation in her face as she lingered close to me. She expected a kiss, I didn’t comply. It had been about four days since we started dating, and we still hadn’t even kissed. Yet I ignored that warning sign.

“Are you coming to Big Spoon tonight?” she asked. There was going to be a fundraiser at the local frozen yogurt shop.

“Oh yeah, for sure,” I said, though I wasn’t looking forward to cold mouthfuls of yogurt in December.

A couple hours later she texted, “Wishing u were here...” and I couldn’t help wishing I was attracted to her.

“What was your ex-wife’s name?” I heard Lucy ask Kirk. They stood across from each other where the kitchen counter juts out tooth-like from the wall.

“Kathy,” Kirk replied, and I heard the call-and-response of lips gently smacking as they each sipped their champagne.

I remembered her affirming some talk show host’s mandate that people should have sex three times a week. I wondered if she and Kirk were overachievers.

After finally forcing myself to go to Big Spoon, I sat through twenty uncomfortable minutes of strained conversation. We left the shop and wandered outside along the walkway.

“So,” Sarah said. “I wanted to talk to you.”

We lingered in front of the large, darkened windows of a nearby vacant suite. I leaned against one of the wide square columns of the strip mall. “Yeah, what’s up?”

“I feel like we’re stuck in the friend vibe.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said, feeling a wave of relief. “To be honest, I’m not head over heels about you.” Not until those words left my mouth did I understand how mean and unnecessary they sounded. But she seemed unaffected and didn’t miss a beat, saying she just wanted something temporary because she’d be leaving for graduate school soon.

“I can have a physical relationship and then just turn it off,” she laughed. “It’s great to be a girl.” She noticed my look of confusion and chuckled. “Did I just fuck your mind?”

I nodded, but I wasn’t sure if the comment warranted a post-coital cigarette

or made me feel fucked and abandoned in a fetal position.

She moved a few steps closer toward her car then turned back toward me. “I have dirty thoughts.”

I looked into her creamy brown face and her dark eyes, searching for a trace of this lust, but I only found the words “innocuous” and “sanitary.”

“I’m hard up, and you’re cute,” she said and sat down behind the steering wheel. “Think about it, Kabir.” She shut the door and quickly zipped out of the parking lot, her black car disappearing into the night.

A couple hours after I got home from Big Spoon, I got an email from Sarah. It was titled, “Well, Shit,” and she explained her embarrassment over what she had said, insisting that she’s a “good girl.” She ended with, “Sorry the vibe between us wasn’t working out.” I guess she wanted to feel like she was the one officially ending the relationship.

“Want some chicken?” Kirk playfully asked Lucy’s dog, Taffy, a fluffy fifteen-year-old black and white terrier. He looked down at Taffy with his hands on his knees and repeated the question, sounding like a father suggesting Disneyland to a child. Lucy was busy chopping up microwaved chicken for Taffy, rocking a crescent-shaped knife back and forth in a shallow wooden bowl.

I snuck longer glimpses of Kirk. He looked as awkward, going back and forth between laying a hand on the edge of the black marble counter and stuffing it into his pocket. I felt bad for him. It reminded me of my first time being in Lucy’s house, a few years before I had moved in. I remembered sitting at the candlelit table, enjoying my plate of salmon and glass of red wine, when she told me she found me attractive. My penis surged with excitement, while the rest of me remained fully aware of the regret and mild repulsion I’d feel in the morning when I rolled over and lay eyes on her worn and puffy face.

“How about some of this?” Kirk asked me with a smile. I looked up from my puzzle and saw the bottle of tequila he was cradling by his thigh.

“No, thank you, I don’t drink tequila anymore,” I said, frowning as I recalled my final tequila experience that began with ten shots in an hour and ended in a vomiting hangover. “If you had whisky, I’d join you.”

“Whisky doesn’t pass through my lips,” Lucy cut in. “That was my mother’s poison.”

Sarah said she didn’t drink. “It makes me depressed.” I remembered the cost benefit analysis I did on the drive home from Big Spoon. I needed to get laid, and she was a willing participant, a win-win situation at face value. But I couldn’t ignore that she was too fast. Not sexually, her straightforward style was refreshing. She didn’t seem able to enjoy the moment or the concept of “nice and slow.”

I remembered her only visit when she petted Lucy’s rabbit. Her hands were quick and jerky as they passed over Bailey’s head and back. I couldn’t

imagine being in bed with her was much different.

Later we sat on my bed and I made a huge mistake. I read her some of my poetry. She had eagerly made the request earlier that day, but I was the one who offered it as an option when she was visiting. Afterwards she said, in a dreamy voice, “I can see you reading in a café and people snapping their fingers and going, ‘Yeah, man.’” I wanted to choke her, and while her face took on a wonderful hue of scarlet I would calmly explain why reconstruction of the cliché Beat scene should be punishable by death. I did neither. Small consolation, but it was probably the best decision I had made in a while.

Lucy and Kirk briefly debated over which of her glasses were suitable for tequila shots.

“How about sake glasses!” she suggested in a high-pitched voice that made her sound like a benevolent dictator. The love child of Mickey Mouse and Mussolini. I hunched over my beer and nachos and fed my face. They moved their party to the dining room and finally left me alone.

A while later I heard him start dropping the F-bomb.

“Fuck it,” he said. I could only catch snippets of conversation, but it was clearly work-related.

I didn’t like the way he said “fuck.” It had an unpleasant edge beyond the disruptive jolt of the word itself. He sounded defensive, and I imagined it was in response to his awkwardness in the kitchen earlier and Lucy’s dredging of his ex-wife. She definitely divorced him, I decided. There was no way Kirk, in his insecure boyishness, ended things. He wasn’t like Lucy who did nearly all the paperwork to finalize her divorce a few years back.

A few days later Lucy and I crossed paths in the kitchen.

“I hope I’m not prying,” I said. “But are you and Kirk dating?”

“He’s gay.”

“I guess that’s a no.” I said. I mentioned hearing them talk about his ex-wife.

“Yeah, they were married for ten years.”

She told me he helped raise Kathy’s kids, and in exchange she put him on her health insurance policy. I was fascinated. I had no idea marriage could be symbiotic. Then I realized we each brought home someone we didn’t sleep with, except Lucy brought home an openly gay man, whereas I couldn’t picture myself in bed with Sarah without skeptically shaking my head.

A week after the yogurt shop incident, weakened by loneliness, I texted Sarah, “Forgive me if this sounds strange, but I miss you.” After pressing, “send,” I immediately panicked. If she replied with any variation of “I miss you, too. Let’s get together,” I would’ve been forced to reap the fruits of my folly. She texted back almost instantly, “merry xmas kabir.” I tucked myself under my midnight blue comforter, grateful for my solitude.

Ellene G. Mobbs

WE WALK THROUGH THE BRICK-RED NIGHT

and crows crowd the tops of trees as leaves
wing beats darkened against the glow of dust and atmosphere
the ghosts of the city below

huddled in curves of black bone
feather-warmth, cresting at the height of the bare spine
we lean with wonder

HERE IT IS

I am stealing plastic forks from the cafeteria so I can build myself a new girlfriend who will make you jealous & not be anything like you.

I have been stealing plastic forks every day.

I am smart, so this idea will probably not make any sense to you at first. It will require a previous understanding of all the uses of an infinite number of power tools, something I know all about, because my dad keeps all of his power tools in the shed, & I go in there all the time.

I go in the shed all the time because my dad has so many power tools, & this is where I first thought to build myself a new girlfriend, out of an easily-renewable resource: plastic forks from the cafeteria.

Plastic forks from the cafeteria are an easily renewable resource because the lunch ladies stock them every day, & I can steal some when they stock them. Every day.

When the lunch ladies stock the plastic forks I walk up & take them. Easy. Shove them in my pockets.

Holding plastic forks gave me the idea. As much as my arm was in control of the fork, how much food went into my mouth at any one time, couldn't I be in control of the girl? Why not build one? A new girlfriend would be incredible. My new girlfriend.

My new girlfriend would be incredible.

My new girlfriend with incredible eyes, blue as the bed sheets that I sleep in every night, before I ever steal any plastic forks. I will never change her eyes, not like my bed sheets when they are dirty & not blue.

My new girlfriend with an incredible bust. We're talking "C" cup or higher. I might sometimes change that.

My new girlfriend, however I want her to be, will always be my new girlfriend.

My new girlfriend will be remote-controlled, & she will never say no.

She will never say no because she is remote controlled, & I will never program her to say no.

Programs can make you forget things. Remember, sometimes. Regiment.

If you ever do happen to meet my new girlfriend somewhere, she will have been programmed to act like a bitch to you & kick you or maybe punch you hard in the arm for me, because it's not okay for me to hit a girl, even if she's my ex like you. So you were warned.

I hope you meet her somewhere.

I hope you meet her, & I hope her programming comes through.

TRIM DOCTOR

In the summer of my senior year, the lawnmower guy asked me for pot. This man, we all called him Dr. Trim, and he mowed our lawn once a week, always on Tuesdays, always at noon. He lived two blocks away and rode his lawnmower to my house and back, as if he were cutting the asphalt. He had his own business named “Trim Doctor.”

He was this old Polack with a big, sloped nose. There was a bump in the center of it and the halves didn’t quite connect. He had an accent, too, but he tried to hide it. His white hair—the hair he still had left—fell to about the end of his neck, but the rest of his head was bare. It wasn’t a smooth bald but more rough, like the bark of a tree, wrinkled and dry. I wondered if I could count the lines on the top of his head like the rings of an oak stump and find his age. I didn’t think he was blind, but you could have convinced me otherwise. There wasn’t a time I can remember, in the three or so years he cut our grass, that he didn’t run something over. He killed wiffleballs and let them sit there on the lawn, a slit down the middle. His hands, on the steering wheel, shook more than the machine, and I didn’t think it would be long—I used to tell Chico—before he’d make an unfortunate turn.

Chico, he was my friend. The only friend I had, really. His name was Gary Walters, but in high school, everyone started calling him Chico. I guess people liked the nickname. I had told him once that he looked like a Mexican because he had been able to grow stubble on his face in the ninth grade. His skin was a little darker than most people’s, too, because his father’s father had been a Native American. Chico came to my house every day in the summer. On Tuesdays, he and I used to watch Trim from my living room window—watched the way he’d move, back and forth, in perfect horizontal lines across the front yard.

Trim worked alone and I think that’s because he wanted it that way. He had hired help in years past, but he fired them all within a couple of months.

We’d say hello to him every now and then. Give him a nod, maybe even a half-hearted wave. It was two years, maybe even two and a half, before we ever had a conversation with him. It wasn’t until then, either, that we decided to start dealing drugs.

If you ask me now, I don’t think I could tell you why I didn’t hear the

machine turn off that day in late June. In the past, we had always heard it the second he left the grass—the second he took the lawnmower over the curb and onto the street to go home.

The doorbell rang twice: one ring and then another, without much of a break in between. Chico and I were at the kitchen table, staring at the stove and wondering what we were going to do with the rest of the day.

“Who the fuck could this be?” I kicked my feet against the floor and let my chair slide.

“Probably a Jehovah’s Witness,” Chico said. “If it’s a fat black lady, don’t answer the door.”

“Screw that.”

“Yeah. I’d rather it be some asshole with a gun.”

“Maybe we’re wrong,” I said. “Maybe it’s someone nice.”

“A nice stranger on a Tuesday afternoon,” Chico said. “Probably.”

“I was only saying. Maybe it’s a Boy Scout. I could go for some of that popcorn.”

“Girl Scout,” Chico refuted. He took out his wallet from his pocket and began to count some bills. “Get me a couple of peanut butter cookies if it’s a mom and her daughter.”

“Fuck off.”

I walked to the door on my tiptoes, so the Boy Scout-serial killer-Jehovah’s Witness wouldn’t hear I was coming. Chico stayed where he was, still in his chair. My family had a peephole, but my father hadn’t cleaned it since we bought the house when I was born. Eighteen years ago. Through the dirt, I could make out the shape of a man, holding something long in his hands. I thought it could be a gun, but I opened the door anyway.

When I had finally unlocked the thing, I found Trim standing there. He had moved in the time it took me to undo the lock. His back was against the handrail of the steps, and he had put the weed-whacker next to him too. Both were still, Trim and the weed-whacker, as if they were statues in the summer breeze. His right leg was folded over his left, and his hands were in his pockets so I couldn’t see his shaking fingers.

“You Little Sis?” He stuck out his right hand. “I’m Steve Polawski. I mow your grass, case you didn’t notice. Been out here so long thought the doorbell didn’t work or something.”

“I know who you are.” I moved my hand towards his. “Sorry about the wait. My friend and I just thought you were a rapist.”

My father used to tell me you could tell a lot from a person’s handshake. Trim, though, he tried to give me a high-five instead. When his hand neared mine, an inch or two away, he formed the shape of a fist, but I wasn’t quick enough to react. His fist hit my palm, the two of us together forming that cliché “ready-to-fight” gesture: the fist on the palm, making that slapping sound.

“Didn’t think you were much for handshakes, Little Sis. Could have sworn

handshakes went out a long time ago, when everybody else's manners did, too."

"Sorry, man. I'm not that cool."

He didn't make any indication of wanting to come inside. Instead, he just stood there, his hands back in his pockets. "Well, that doesn't matter. Your parents home?"

"No," I said. "They work on weekdays. Like yourself."

"Yes. Well, of course. I knew that already."

"My dad said not to talk to you, you know. Said you were 'a creepy little prick' and that I should just let you talk to the grass."

"Did he now?"

"Yeah, he hates everyone," I said. "Did you want something, Mr. Polawski?"

"Actually, Little Sis, I wanted to talk to you." He looked away, his eyes fixed on a small, wet spot on the concrete porch. Sweat dripped from his forehead to the tip of his nose like smelly water forced down a river's current. A waterfall of perspiration.

"Call me Sal," I said. "Only my dad likes that nickname."

My last name is Sisselman. Everyone, smart as they all are, thought it was funny to chop off some letters and call my dad Sis. They called me Little Sis.

"Sorry. Of course, of course." He wiped his face with the back of his hand and brushed the sweat onto his pant leg. "Not so little, Sal. Guess it doesn't really make any sense."

"I'm six-foot-two." I rubbed my fingers across my shaved head. I had cut it short because I wanted to be in the army one day. I wanted to see if the look suited me. "Now what is it you want?"

"Right, right. I was just curious if you might be able to help me with something."

"With what?"

"You see, I'm a sixty-six-year-old man. Doctors tell me I got all sorts of problems. Shit with my heart, shit with my lungs, shit with my liver—"

"All kinds of shit."

"Right, Sal. All kinds of shit." His voice faded away in the breeze, and, with these last words, he turned his head away from the door, back to the ground.

"So what do you want?" I asked again. I wondered what Chico was doing. Probably laughing to himself, his face buried in his arms. "Toilet paper?"

"Pot."

"Excuse me?"

"I mean weed. Is that what you call it now?"

"You want weed?"

"Yes. I want marijuana."

Chico came to the door. He stopped behind me and tapped my shoulder with a couple of fingers. He was shorter than me but not by much.

"What's taking so long?" He spotted Trim then. Chico stood to the side of me, and the two of us were blocking the entire doorway. A wall to the inside.

"The lawnmower guy is asking me for pot," I told him.

“Steve Polawski.” Trim put his right hand out again as he did with me. Chico looked at the gesture but decided against it.

He turned back to me, speaking in much more than a whisper. “What? Well, tell him we don’t have any pot. And that he should get the fuck out of here.”

“I mean I guess we *could* get him some,” I said.

“Are you serious? This isn’t the pot library, Sal.”

“It could be. Hey, we could be a shelter: ‘Helping the Need in Search of Weed.’ See it even rhymes. We’re poets.”

I didn’t really know why, but I wanted to help the old man. Best I could. He seemed so serene, so in place, mowing the grass. His mower was like his horse and he was the jockey. In my adult life, I told some people that line, and they laughed at me. It wasn’t so funny to me.

“You want to get arrested giving pot to an old man?” Chico asked.

“We’re not going to get arrested. We’re just going to do something nice for the elderly.”

“We’re not helping this bastard get across the street.”

Trim didn’t say anything while we talked to each other. He couldn’t have had much to say. He might have been sorry he said anything at all.

“We’re helping him with something,” I said. “Look, it might be fun corrupting the older generation.”

“What’s he going to do? Come here every week and ring the bell like he’s trick-or-treating for pot?”

“It’s my house. I don’t even know why I’m asking you.”

“Fuck you.”

“You always say there’s nothing to do. Well, something-to-do just rang the bell.”

“Do whatever you want.”

“I will,” I said. I waved at Trim, motioning him to come. “Let’s go inside.”

“This is stupid, Sal. Stupider than stupid.”

I ignored Chico. I turned around and let my shoulder hit his arm as I walked inside. I brought Trim through the living room and into the kitchen. Chico stood behind us. I knew he thought Trim was going to try to steal something. I didn’t think he would. I didn’t think he’d wheel out my family’s old piano. Or steal my mother’s Hallmark Hummels. I figured we were pretty safe.

The kitchen was small, and the table was in the center. The stove and refrigerator were toward the back, and they took up about half the room. The walls were white, but they weren’t supposed to be. My father had told my mother he was going to repaint everything one day.

Chico, Trim, and I all sat down at the table, and I didn’t know who was going to talk first.

Trim decided to break the silence. “If it’s too much trouble, don’t worry about it, guys. I was only asking.”

“You’ve never smoked pot before?” Chico asked. He was to my right. We were

both across from Trim.

“Never really had the time.”

“With a profession like yours you got all the time in the world,” I said. “You’re telling me you ride around on a lawnmower all day and don’t smoke pot.”

“We’re not conducting an interview here. Are we going to give him it or not?”

“When do you want it by?” I asked, crossing my hands and leaning forward, my weight on the table, as if I were listening with intent.

“I don’t know. As soon as possible.”

“How much?”

“However much it takes.”

“We’re going to charge more than normal, though. There aren’t any senior discounts here,” I said.

“Son, I’d be offended if you didn’t.”

“Ring the bell next Tuesday after you’re done.”

“Can you keep your mouth shut?” Chico’s eyes hadn’t left Trim. He studied him as if he were going to do something. I knew neither of them would do anything.

“Don’t worry, really. I don’t have anybody to open my mouth to.”

I walked Trim out of the house and closed the door behind him.

The next Tuesday Trim rang the bell as he was supposed to. Chico had gotten pot from some dealer we knew from high school. We called the kid Trump because he thought he was a businessman and carried all his shit around in a briefcase.

“Do we need guns now?” Chico had asked me.

“Guns? What do you think we’re doing, cooking meth?”

“I was just asking.”

“We’re giving weed to the landscaper, not bringing drugs across the border. Nothing’s going to happen.”

We both went to the door this time, and Trim was standing there in the same place: his back and the weed-whacker against the railing. Dirt had settled all over his white t-shirt, as if it didn’t know where to land. He wore his job across his chest.

“Take the work boots off.” I pointed at his shoes. “My mom bitched about all the dirt last time.”

Trim kicked his shoes off without untying them. He picked up the two boots and placed them on our welcome mat outside.

“Come to the kitchen,” I said.

He followed Chico and me to the table.

“We got what you wanted,” Chico said after we had all sat down. He pulled out a Ziploc bag. All the weed had gathered in one corner in a single clump.

“Thing looks like a green piece of shit,” Trim said. “I only need that much to get high?”

“You’ll have a good time with that,” I said. “You can have a couple of good times with that stuff.”

Chico handed Trim the Ziploc, and he grabbed the plastic bag so slowly it seemed as if it stood there still in the air, floating across the table. Trim looked at the plant from about five different angles. He pinched at the corner where the weed had gathered and then smelled his fingers.

“Now what do I do?”

Chico and I looked at each other. We laughed, but I didn’t want to.

“Smoke it,” I said. “I’m sure you know that.”

“Of course I do. I just mean—”

“Mean what?”

“I mean how. How do I smoke it? I’m not one of those old folks who rolls his own cigarettes.”

“You can’t roll a joint,” Chico said. “Man, you really are new at this.”

“I have a bowl,” I said.

“What?” Chico stared at me. He pulled my head up to his own and put my ear close to his mouth. “Do you have any idea what you’re doing?”

I ignored Chico and pushed him away. I looked at Trim, and he seemed to smile. I wasn’t quite sure if he did. He seemed to want to smile but didn’t quite know how. Or didn’t want to. I caught a quick sight of his teeth when I stared at him. I noticed he was missing one towards the back. He had this habit. He always rolled his tongue and poked it against his cheek. I imagined that’s what he was feeling: the empty space in his teeth. And what it would be like—or what it had been like—with the tooth not missing.

“I have a bowl, Polawski,” I said, avoiding Chico’s eyes. “We can smoke with you this once if you want.”

“We?” Chico asked. “We’re not doing shit.”

“Shut up.”

“I’m not smoking with Grandpa. No way.”

“How about I pay for all of it and you guys come with me? Not many times you get shit for free, boys.”

Chico wanted to say something, but he didn’t. I don’t know now what he would have said, or how he would have said it. I knew then, at that moment, because of something I could never begin to explain, I wanted nothing more than to smoke weed with this old man. I told people about Trim when we were older, and nobody could understand. Nobody would even try.

I nodded. “I got this place behind the doghouse.”

“You’re in the doghouse now,” Chico said. “Your wife ever tell you that one, Polawski?”

“Never had one.”

“Never had one?” I asked. “Most people are on the second by sixty. You’re moving at a slow place. A real slow pace.”

“I had a girl once,” Trim said.

“And?”

“Just never had the time,” he said. “I mean, we fucked, but I just never had the time to make her my wife. She’s dead now.”

My dog had died, too. Three years ago. He had walked to the dog-house, climbed inside, and fell asleep for good. My mom had him cremated, but I’m not sure what she did with the ashes.

The sky was indecisive that day. I looked up and saw clouds coming across the perfect blue, as if they were soldiers marching across a battlefield. The sun was there, then not, then there again. I saw Trim hitting his cheek with his tongue. In my backyard, we were leaning against the doghouse. We used to put my dog inside this cage when we’d go away for a while. Sort of like a little zoo. The neighbors could watch the black Lab shit and eat through a chain-link fence.

“This thing’s like a tomb,” I said. “My dog died in here.”

“Good to know,” Chico replied. He had this routine of flicking his nose when he was bored. He’d take his thumb and index finger and squeeze the tip over and over again. “Are we going to smoke weed, or what?”

Trim took the bag out of his pocket and tossed it on my lap. I was at the one end, Chico at the other. Trim, he was in the middle. I threw the Ziploc to Chico and watched it drift down onto his legs. It was so light, even with the weed inside.

I gave Chico my bowl, too. It was a lime green. I bought it from a guy who said it would glow in the dark. “Like a light saber,” he told me.

“Burn away, you dirty Mexican,” I said.

Chico put the weed on his index finger. He let it sit there for a second, though, as if he had just dipped his fingertip in peanut butter and was debating licking it off. After a little while, he started to put the weed in the bowl. When he went to light it, he had trouble sparking a flame in the wind. His lighter flickered yellow, then blew out within a second.

“It’s like it’s God’s birthday or something,” Trim said. It was the first time he talked since he had come outside. “Can’t stop blowing out the candle.”

“It’s a lighter,” Chico said.

“Yeah. I know, Gary.”

I told Trim Chico’s name was Gary because I thought it’d be weird if I told him something different. Funny thing, none of us used our nicknames.

“All right I got it lit now.” Chico blew into the end of the bowl. “Stubborn little fucker.”

He passed the bowl to Trim. We both watched him. He inhaled once, then coughed smoke out into a dark cloud in front of us. It had escaped his mouth before it could even settle.

“You think we don’t find it weird?” I asked after taking my first hit. “Smoking with an old man?”

“He knows it’s weird,” Chico said. “Can’t think of anything weirder, can you?”

“It’s different, I suppose,” he responded.

“You don’t have anything better to do?” Chico had the bowl now, but he continued with the questions. He let it sit there unlit. “You don’t have anything better to do but sit here and smoke pot with us on a Tuesday afternoon?”

“I’m done with all the better things now. You two—I want you two to take me to the grave.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you both are giving me something to ease the pain.” He pointed at the weed. “I appreciate it.”

“What are you dying or something?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. How long’s ‘dying’ anyway?”

“Depends what you have,” I said.

“Like I said. I got all kinds of shit.”

“I hope we can give you lung cancer now too,” Chico said. “Go out with a bunch of shit. Maybe a clogged toilet.”

“I’d like nothing more.”

“You’re a weird one,” Chico continued. “I still don’t trust you.”

“Well, I’m sorry about that. I think you’re good kids, you know.”

“Really? Means a lot coming from you,” Chico said. “I was so worried you didn’t like me.” He took a hit and laughed smoke out of his mouth. His face hid behind gray until it all cleared away.

“Thanks,” I said. “You’re not so bad either.”

“I didn’t always cut grass.”

“Oh yeah?” Chico said.

“Well, what did you do?” I asked, but I couldn’t wait any longer. I reached across Trim’s lap and tried to grab the piece from Chico. He wouldn’t let go. I yanked at it until he budged.

“Many things,” Trim said. “I did many things.” He didn’t say anything about me skipping his turn.

“Like what?”

“Yeah,” Chico said. “Enough of the prompting. You want to say something, just say it already.”

“I don’t know what you guys want to hear.”

“Surprise us,” I said. I put my mouth to the end of the bowl and talked as the smoke left my lips. I pretended to chew on it, and Chico laughed.

“Make us laugh,” Chico said. “Yeah, make me laugh ‘til it hurts.”

“I know things that’ll make you laugh.”

“This isn’t holy confession. We’re not priests. Come on already, just spit it out.”

“I’ll tell you a story,” he said. “I’ll tell you guys a story right now.”

“We’re waiting,” Chico said. He motioned for the bowl and then started to repack the weed. “Make it last the length of this smoke.”

“Well, I never could piss with somebody next to me,” he said. “All my life I’ve avoided urinals. Haven’t pissed in one since I can remember.”

“That’s your fucking story,” Chico said. “That’s what you wanted to tell us.”

“I’ve never liked elevators much either,” Trim went on. “Always thought I’d get trapped in them and die of nothing to do.”

“What are you getting at?” Chico replied. He handed Trim the bowl and folded his arms across his lap. He let his legs stretch out as far as they could.

“One time I got locked in an elevator. Between the second and third floor of this building,” Trim said, pausing to take a hit. “Was there for two hours. I had to piss so bad I just did it right there. In front of all these people. Women and kids. Just pissed my pants. They held their noses and looked away when they saw my crotch getting all wet.”

We both laughed, Chico and I. He almost made us cry. My stomach hurt from how funny it was. I took the bowl and let my lips fall on it. Chico had made the end so wet I thought he had French-kissed the thing.

“That’s the day I learned my dick had more power than my head,” Trim said.

“Most important day in a man’s life, I think.”

“All right, you might be a little funny,” Chico said. “Give us something else.”

“Another story?”

“Sure,” I said. “How about you tell us how you lost that tooth?” I pointed at his mouth. I watched him stab his cheek. He felt the gap with his tongue as if he could somehow bring the molar back.

“It was a long time after the tooth-fairy stopped visiting. I was in my twenties. Maybe twenty-four, twenty-five. I’m standing behind this tall fellow at the driving range, waiting for a stall to open up, and he goes to me, ‘Watch this drive, I’ll blast it over the net.’”

“Must have thought driving the ball really far would compensate for his tiny dick,” Chico said.

“Well, Gary. That’s what it’s all about, isn’t it? A man tries his whole life to make his dick seem bigger than it really is.”

“So what happened? With the tall fellow?” I put the bowl on my lap as if it were some sort of pet. Chico thought he was funny reaching over Trim to pet it.

“Right, the tall fellow. Like I said, this tall fellow goes, ‘Watch me blast this ball over the net.’ He takes the driver back and smashes me right in the face. Breaks part of my jaw and knocks this tooth loose.” Trim stretched his mouth open with his index finger and showed us the space.

“What’d you do?”

“I showed him that my dick was bigger and punched him right in the face,” Trim said. “Watched him fall right on his ass.”

Trim laughed at his own words. He got the bowl after Chico once more and took

a big hit. We laughed again too. I heard something rustle in the woods, but I didn't think anything of it. The squirrels liked to play with the leaves. Chico swore he saw one humping a leaf a while back too.

Trim continued to speak: "Same shit happened, over and over again. All the fights. Like for a while, when I was young, I wanted to be a musician. But I got in an argument once with a fat man at a bar. I had my Gibson next to me, and I took it like a fucking baseball bat and struck him across the face. Not much happened after. I didn't have another guitar, couldn't afford one. That seemed to end my music career."

Trim coughed something into his hand and wiped it on his jeans.

"What else you do?" I asked.

"Nothing, really. Nothing much more. If you keep asking me questions, Sal, you're going to learn real fast that in sixty-six years I haven't done jack-shit."

Chico and I laughed and laughed, drowning out all other sounds. We grabbed our guts as if our laughter couldn't be contained, as if it were beating against our stomachs like an echoing drum. Eventually, though, it found its way. I don't know if laughter starts in the stomach, but I guess, if it really does, it started there as something small and grew and grew until escaping from our mouths. We closed our eyes too, afraid to see laughter in front of us. I thought that's why people must cry at times when something's really funny: they've seen laughter and know how frightening it can be. How distracting, how invasive.

Dr. Trim made us laugh.

When we opened our eyes, when laughter had finally left us, we saw Trim crumpled over on the ground, grabbing his chest. He was coughing up all kinds of blacks and yellows and reds. He shook as if he were naked in the cold, back and forth and forth and back. As he had been coughing, we were laughing.

If he were able to speak, I'm sure he would have made another joke. He would have told us that this was his final trip to the toilet. All the shit had finally caught up with him, too much to handle.

He would have told us he had to go to the bathroom, one hand on his ass, the other on his stomach. He'd be half-running and half-walking. He'd move in that sort of slow shuffle, that kind of side-step that tells everyone to clear a path to the restroom.

Nothing was funny now, though. We were high as can be. We had been laughing, and now we were watching a man meet death face-to-face. He spat out the last bits of his life in this dark mucus that looked like thick, discolored ketchup on the ground. Death had started in the stomach like laughter and fought its way out of the mouth.

In a couple of hours, I would watch my father pull up the driveway in his silver Chevy Malibu. My mother would be home soon, too.

Tomorrow would be another day and next week would be another week and eventually our grass would grow so high my parents would wonder what the hell that fucking landscaper was doing. "Jerking off," my father would say.

Trim would be nothing soon: just part of the grass and dirt and weeds he had

been paid to care for.

After a little while, maybe minutes, maybe more, Chico looked at me as if I had any idea what the fuck to do. He wasn't laughing anymore. Neither of us were.

I kicked the old bastard, but he didn't move.

INTERVIEW WITH NICK RIPATRAZONE

Nick Ripatrazone answers our questions about food, the challenges of being a young writer, and the changing medium of literature. His book of prose poems, *Oblations*, was published by Gold Wake Press in 2011. Ripatrazone's stories and poetry have appeared in journals such as *West Branch*, *Puerto Del Sol*, *Southeast Review*, *Sou'wester*, and *The Collagist* and have received honors from *Esquire*, *The Kenyon Review*, and *ESPN: The Magazine*. He graduated from the MFA program at Rutgers-Newark.

DANA DIEHL: Your stories make me hungry! There is the lobster in “The Bearberry Elegies,” the orange in “Claire”... What importance does food have in your life and in your stories? Are there any other themes or objects that you find yourself returning to when you write?

NICK RIPATRAZONE: That's certainly a nice compliment. Melissa Pritchard's “Sweet Feed,” about an overzealous prison chef's attempt at the perfect last meal for a picky inmate, was the first story to show me the power of writing about food. I've always loved food—the preparation and anticipation, the attached culture, the possibilities of refining and revising recipes, and, of course, the eating. Food can give personality to a literary setting, and some of my earliest experiences of real culture—from my parents' dining room table to sipping limoncello at Osteria Fiorentina, a now-closed restaurant in NYC—have been grounded in the truth that food is both sustenance and entertainment. Seeing my brother's care taken as a chef has only increased the appreciation. Not to mention the emotions connected to eating: we're all a bit coarser when hungry.

Food, sports, and Catholicism seem to be my literary trinity. Everybody in my family lived within the culture of sports, from athlete to cheerleader, and I teach a sports literature course at Rutgers. One of my favorite novels is Don DeLillo's tight *End Zone* about a Texas college football team and the inevitability of nuclear annihilation. Big ideas, but grounded in precise language. I'm also a fan of the French sports theorist Georges Hébert, whose dictum “Be strong to be useful” makes sense, especially when applied to writing. And Catholicism, at least for me, fits with the first two, as it is another way to ritualize the mysterious in tangible action.

DANA: It seems that many young writers have difficulty writing consistently and often,

especially with classes, work, etc. getting in the way. When you have a life and career separate from your writing life, what is it that motivates you to take the time to sit down and write a story? Do you just write when you feel like it or do you stick to a schedule?

NICK: I always go back to William Faulkner’s phrase, “demon-driven,” as in that a writer has to have some type of obsessive approach to creating work. Regardless of Faulkner’s intention, I’ve appropriated the idea for myself to mean that I simply need to write, nearly every day; the days not physically typing are spent thinking about stories. A rigid schedule could be dangerous, so I tend to identify a part of the day that feels appropriate for sustained attention: a long train ride, or very early or very late in the day.

I also think specific daily word counts are equally dangerous—if I write a 30 word poem for a day, that’s a big accomplishment. That said, I’ve written 15 pages plus, also. But to write exactly 504 words a day doesn’t work for me, although I’m sure such specificity has its benefits for others.

DAVID JOSEPH: What is the process one of your stories goes through before it’s “finished”? Do you put them through multiple drafts before sending them to magazines?

NICK: I usually jot story ideas in a notebook—I tend to come up with ideas in bunches, and these ideas are a few sentences about character, setting, or situation. Then, I draft the story in Word, print it—usually in a smaller font, so I have room in the margins—and edit the living Hell out of it, really taking myself to task for laziness or vagueness in the draft stage. I’ll type those changes, and then maybe print it out one more time and repeat before actually sending the story.

I have, on occasion, really revised a story that was rejected from one magazine to have it placed elsewhere. Then again, I’ve also had stories drafted in an afternoon that felt finished by the evening. It is all particular, I think, to how well the idea has germinated in my mind before I give it clothing through words.

DAVID: Your stories range from relatively traditional or realistic (I’m thinking of “Bully” in *Stymie*) to very experimental and strange in form and/or content (more like “Claire” in *Smokelong*). Do you ever find that once you’re familiar with a particular journal you write stories specially targeting it? If so, has this strategy been successful?

NICK: Interesting question—I wrote “Bully” for the ESPN Sports Fiction Contest, and it was a runner-up, so they had an agreement to publish it at *Stymie*. *Esquire* and *The Kenyon Review* both published stories of mine that received contest awards, so those were written specifically for those markets. But other than that, I write a story in the form particular to the content or emotion, and then try to find magazines that would be a potential match.

It is an interesting exercise, though, to be able to assess and identify the general

aesthetic of a particular magazine. It is much easier to do this with a magazine with a consistent editorship, such as *Sou'wester* or *Boulevard*, whereas other journals, such as *Indiana Review* and *Puerto del Sol*, have revolving mastheads. You've made a good observation, though, in delineating most of my fiction between work grounded in content and work where I'm likely to play with language. I actually think that experimental fiction is often more "traditional" in the sense that real language and communication is often imperfect and fragmented, whereas realistic fiction, in the mode of *Madame Bovary*, is so finely crafted that it feels like a fantasy.

DANA: To piggyback off of Dave's question, do you find that you read more traditional or experimental writing? Who are the writers that influence you, that you enjoy the most?

NICK: Ron Hansen is a continual influence, and he's written both traditional ("Can I Just Sit Here For A While") and experimental ("Mariette in Ecstasy") fiction. Faulkner might be considered experimental by some, but I think he was attempting to near the tenor of real existence; I actually think Hemingway was more experimental, with his dialogue tricks and narrative intrusions. Jayne Anne Phillips will always be an influence for the absolute energy of her first collection, *Black Tickets*, and the idiosyncratic poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins is inspiring for his willingness to be strange.

I absolutely love literary thrillers: stuff like *Deliverance* by James Dickey, the work of Ben Percy, and *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy. Such books remind me that plot is a powerful tool. As for poetry, I love the work of newer writers—Alison Stine, Traci Brimhall, James Hoch—and Harry Humes's "Trout are Moving" was the first poem to really ever capture my interest.

DANA: You write in both poetry and fiction. Is there one genre that you prefer over the other? Does your work in one genre influence your work in the other?

NICK: I definitely go through phases. I spent the first half of this summer finishing a new manuscript of lineated poems, so I wrote 60 poems in under two months. Since then I've been working on a short story collection manuscript, finishing a story every few days. Poetry keeps me honest to language, and probably increases the specificity of my fiction. Fiction forces me to remember the needs of a reader when writing poetry, especially the need for focus or narrative.

This summer I've also been reviewing several books for different markets, and that form has been incredibly helpful as I think about book-length projects. So, I think it's healthy for writers to dabble in other genres and forms, and to allow the needs of the particular project to outweigh their biases.

DAVID: You've experienced a lot of success for such a young author. When did you have your first story published? By whom? After that first publication did something click, did more acceptances come easily?

NICK: My first published story was actually solicited by a former professor, Molly McQuade, from the Rutgers MA in English program. She'd liked one of my flash fiction pieces from the prior semester, and included it in an anthology, *The Long Meanwhile*. That came after a few years of mailed rejections, those infamous cardstock, form-letter "no's" that writers tend to save.

After that, I honed my submitting a bit better, but still receive more rejections than acceptances. But the ratio gets more even each year, and this summer I had a bit of a recent epiphany: I've been blessed with a nice amount of publications to date, and would now rather bide my time than continue the carpet-bombing mentality. Blake Butler, a great younger writer, has written that he wished he could erase some of his early acceptances. I don't feel exactly the same way, but I do think there's an incredible amount of merit to waiting, holding on to a story until the right time.

Such patience is a virtue. But don't listen when a writer says they are desensitized to acceptances: I still get a kick out of an editor's "yes." If not, then why bother sending the work?

DAVID: What advice do you have for young writers who are looking to get published, and who are facing for the first time the piles of rejection letters?

NICK: A magazine rejects stories for many reasons, but here are the two most common: the story does not fit the current needs of the publication, or the story would never fit the needs of the publication. The first has to do with intake—what has been accepted, whether or not a backlog exists. The second has to do with an aesthetic fit—I would never send my pastoral work to *Clarkesworld* or *BOMB*.

What I'm saying is that an editor, really, isn't interested in objectively assessing a submitted work, because that's not her job. She's likely underpaid and overworked, fumbling with the new online submission manager, trying to sell her own short story collection, and maybe handling a big hangover from a recent release party for her friend's book of poetry.

Younger writers are stuck in the high-school mentality of teacher reaction to work: they want grades, they want rubrics, and they want reasons for rejection. Forget that. An editor does not owe you a reason. Some older writers still complain about rejections and editor commentary—they're obviously in the wrong business. Rejection reminds a writer that readers exist.

DANA: A hot topic these days seems to be the changing medium for words. There are countless online journals out there, and e-book readers are becoming increasingly popular. How do you feel about this new digital age for stories?

NICK: I love online journals, and think the best such markets have embraced the strengths of the medium. *The Collagist*, for example, matches clean design with sharp editing, the equivalent of an established print magazine. The *2River View* includes

audio readings from contributors. *Luna Park Review*, where I'm a staff writer, hyperlinks their articles in an encyclopedic fashion, so the breadth of the reading experience is multiplied. Many traditionally paper publications, such as *The Kenyon Review* and *Shenandoah*, have either switched completely to the online format, or at least offer samplings from recent issues. And why not? More people read my humor writing in *McSweeney's* than went to purchase my work in *Beloit Fiction Journal*. That's certainly not a value judgment on the publications, it's the reality of reader interest.

But the shift has not been without worry: some writers wonder if a publication at the online version of *Conjunctions* is the same thing as being published in the print version. Others wonder what will happen if an online publication goes under; this happened to some of my earlier publications. I think a mix of print and web offerings is the best compromise. A journal that publishes quarterly might shift to a print annual, and compliment that with frequent web updates. The *Atlantic* has made such a shift. A related concern to this is online versus postal submissions. Every time I mail a manuscript, I feel like I should be sending it via Pony Express. Many magazines have made the jump to online submissions managers, but such a commitment requires the support of a consistent staff.

E-books, though, are a bit of a problem for me. I own an unhealthy amount of books, have an entire room at my house as a library, and really appreciate the texture of such reading. If a publisher were to accept a manuscript and then tell me of plans to publish it only as an e-book, I wouldn't sign the contract. I might change that answer in a few years. It even feels a bit elitist while I write this. But it's a personal preference.

DAVID: Do you know what's next for you? Do you have any goals for your writing career?

NICK: I have several manuscripts "out there," searching for either publishers or agents: a novel, two short story collections, three poetry collections, and an anthology of Catholic literature. They were all completed within this year. I hope that one or more of those projects finds a home.

My goal is to keep writing, and hopefully, in a John Gardner-type moment of optimism, use writing as a way to better understand other people. I remember an article from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that explained the complexities of empathy, how it requires sustained effort. I believe in the cycle that good writing leads to good empathy, which leads to better writing, and so on.

DANA: To end on a fun question... Can you remember your first story? Could you tell us what it was about? Many of the young writers I know like to joke that we all have our bad, fantasy "dragon story." Does such a story exist for you?

NICK: From primary school through high school, my district ran a small, selected class: Program for Academically Creative Thinkers. It now sounds vaguely think-tank like, but it was incredible fun: astronomy, painting-inspired poetry, ornithology, discussions of

films we probably had no business watching (Ingmar Bergman and such). Our teacher was eccentric, and absolutely supportive, and she regularly assigned fiction writing.

I remember two early stories. One, “Revolution,” was a Twilight-Zone type tale about time-traveling soldiers who go from World War II France to crossing the Delaware River. It shifted into script format halfway through for no particular reason.

The prize, though, goes to “Being,” a story about a man who is abducted by a strange craft. Onboard he discovers a trove of trout being harvested for their blood by thin, grey aliens. Somebody screams, and then the story ends. Because when you travel hundreds of thousands of light years to Earth, you come here for trout blood, of course.

Jeanne Troy

POLAR BEAR

There is
a world turned over
beyond the
wintry texture and
imagined edges
of the north.

I envy you,
the north;
the disillusionment
of fractal sea-ice;
kaleidoscopic cracks
and creases
against the face of
permafrost;
the ferality of
instinct.

Do you know that
to give a name is:
1. to take possession of;
2. irrevocable
as stone?

I'd rather
not use names.

I envy you,
the ripples and shivers,
keen spectral colors
(that I will
never see);
and the great bear

emblem, which kindles
in the
inky space above.
(Your deity?)

Do you
know the name
we gave you?
Do you
count the days
until you disappear?

I envy you
not knowing.

Megan Erkoboni

THE NATURE OF NAME

The double call of *Vulpes vulpes*
bounds among the frozen rows,
to where he slinks between
the icy stalks
like splintered scarecrow bones.

The stubbled jaw and paleface tongue
that said the word to sow the seed –
the trestle for his step –
births a twin to chase the first
and him.

Indeed it is the same that spoke
Strix varia to talons in the pitch.
Where is his almanac
when lightening splits the porch
and spring-rains loose the hitch?

Hannah Karena Jones

WHAT TO EXPECT WHILE GRIEVING FOR YOUR FATHER

Usually, the first question people ask is how long it's going to take before you "get over it." How long until the thought of his absence stops crippling your knees in elevators, before the realization of his permanent departure stops punching you in the stomach each morning as you slip into closed-eyes consciousness. I have this theory that if you know it's coming—if your Dad's been dying for a week, a month, a year—if you've had time to prepare for it then you can slash that much off the total recovery time. Out of the blue fatal car crashes take longer to "get over" because they're sudden.

I had three days.

Expect to cry at the snap of anyone's fingers—friends, family, strangers, bus drivers—for two weeks or so.

The first few nights he's gone, well after everyone else has cried themselves to sleep, don't be surprised when you turn the TV on full volume before scurrying barefoot back to your pillows. Late night news programs have been your bedtime story and your lullaby for years. When your mother tells you to knock it off because it's both annoying and a waste of electricity, decide to either wean yourself off the habit, or set your alarm for 4 AM and turn the TV off before she wakes up.

In the handful of days before the funeral, expect to realize that you're an orphan, or at least half an orphan. Feel shocked. Study orphan movies like *Annie* and *Oliver Twist* and figure out how to alter your behavior to put on the proper performance for the rest of your fatherless life. During the third or fourth dance number, you'll wonder if you need to learn how to sing for your supper. You never could sing. Dad says it isn't in our genes. Said. He said it wasn't in our genes. Grow accustomed to correcting yourself and replacing present progressive verbs with the past tense.

Also, expect to hate all television characters who have living fathers and don't appreciate them with a parade and chipped beef on rye toast for breakfast, like he asks, even if the salted-cream smell of it makes you gag. It would have been such a small sacrifice. Not enough to pick a fight over.

Avoid watching any films with weddings in them. Cry over how, at your own wedding, your father won't be walking you down the aisle.

You'll wonder how your future fiancé will propose. Will he ask your Mom for permission instead? Or will he skip the whole tradition entirely? You never have to

admit to yourself that you found the whole practice antiquated and sexist before your father died. That you had hoped you'd find a man who popped the question because he loved you and damn your father's opinion. You're entitled to feel a sense of loss over something you never even wanted in the first place because now you can't have it. And that's not fair.

After a few months you'll emotionally graduate to watching wedding dress reality shows. You like them. The dresses are beautiful and you'll even allow yourself to imagine your own lace gown without simultaneously worrying about how odd it will look as you walk yourself down the aisle and give yourself away.

Do not go to church on Father's Day Sunday. The sermon will always be about gratitude for your Dad. Either you can sit, your Sunday makeup leaking so loud everyone in the hushed pews notices, or you can try to excuse yourself, knocking into sheer stocking knees and dripping snot onto their family Bibles. They'll notice anyway.

Expect, after a year and a half or so, to catch yourself subconsciously searching for a significant male figure. He will not replace your father, but rather maintain some of the practices. You won't realize until this new man does it that you've missed being praised for good grades, being bragged about to grocery store managers. He can be a relative, a teacher, your boyfriend's dad. Bonus points if he's related to your own deceased father because he looks like him and, on occasion, will tell you stories you've never heard about their childhoods together and he can retell the stories that you're beginning to forget, the details and facts growing fuzzy around the edges.

Accept—and give permission—that your mother may date, but constantly compare each man to your father. When she falls in love again, you'll remind her that she can, and has, done better. "Don't settle," you'll tell her as she smears on crusty lipstick last used on what was supposed to be her final date.

Have fights with younger siblings who don't remember the story behind the antique fishing reel exactly the same way you do. Storm out of the room when they insist his favorite flavor of ice cream was Strawberry instead of Cherry Garcia. Start a themed lecture series to refresh their memories on the correct facts and tell them how your grandfather almost bought a ticket to Australia instead of America when he immigrated in 1910. It's a story which they mistakenly insist Dad never told them. Have them recite it back, word for word, until it's seared into their brains. "It's family history," you explain when they whine for a break. "It's important you remember it right."

You'll emphasize the preservation of all these mundane details because you know that you're not getting over his death. You are not starting to feel better. You're just starting to forget.

Kelsey Kerr

SAWED

You still were in bed, limp, *wrapping your hand in plastic to try to look through it*, or—

I walked the house and reencountered each place we had fucked, had touched: sea-blue and coral and white striped couch, leaf and quicksand futon, purple sheeted canopy, kitchen floor with my hands pressed against its cool. We went to the garage to find the right tool to take to our bodies, to find the lost pieces and splice each back into our arms, our legs; it was no magic act.

No person reappeared.

As I heard the engine of your black Ford F-150 pull away, I could hear the ghosts creaking up the stairs. They grabbed my graveyard hand, stealing the blanket and trapping me for the thrill. We spoke of history, brushing off the tombstone where we'd met. It was one of the largest in the yard, concrete with two ledges and a pillar—perfect to sit on. My nose met your knee as your arm wrapped tighter around my body. Dawn dyed pink and purple, and we treaded the overgrown grass, past the arch, to separate rest.

Matthew Thompson

THE STUDY

According to the umpteenth Animal Planet documentary I've pretended to watch today, the hedgehog's mating ritual begins with the male covering itself in saliva. I turn the volume up in languid curiosity. There's information in spit, as it turns out. Sex pheromones. Other hedgehogs sense these little chemical messages from miles off. How convenient for them. Cows, I learn, use pheromones to attract mates, too—by foaming at the mouth.

So do pigs.

"You're too good a friend," he blurts one night. "I've never had a friend like you, and I don't want to mess that up." He takes a long, weary drag from his cigarette. I had not said anything.

We keep walking a while, aimlessly, watching the sidewalk pass beneath our feet, pulling at our coats to keep out the winter. He turns to me finally, lips cracking in the cold, and exhales, "Besides, you shouldn't pursue people you're friends with."

"What?" I'd heard him the first time.

"When you're friends with someone, you tell them things that you aren't supposed to tell your lovers. About exes and stuff."

He pauses, and I realize how empty the streets are, how the two of us, passing under amber cones of light, clouded in the smoke of our breath, must look like wandering apparitions tonight.

"You know too much," he says.

"I don't know if I can live with you."

My answer surprises us both. He seems to deflate instantly.

"Oh."

"It's just that," I struggle as if my tongue is anchored, "You know I like you. If we move in together, and you bring a guy over, I don't know if I could—" My voice is carried off by the breeze, it seems, and I don't try to finish. He smiles and shoves me playfully. "I'll be single and bitter forever. You have nothing to

worry about.”

44B is a duplex with burgundy shutters and a crude, wooden deck on the back. Stray cats and ducks wander up through the trailer park looking for food, and we feed them—bread, tuna, black bean soup. We are poor and in college, so our food is cheap and our furniture is sparse. We keep the heat low and burn sandalwood candles. When the weather is good, we paint cardboard outside and hula-hoop with the neighbors. When the mornings are cold, I lie down beside him because he is not.

Standing at his bedroom window, swallowed up in the darkness of our empty apartment, I watch them kiss goodbye. Seeing it will fix me. Their kiss will surely bring reality thundering up from the driveway below, through the second story window, and into my mind at last. I will know better. The streetlight pours softly down behind them, and when they finally kiss, their silhouettes appear to melt into one another. The kiss, at first, is timid, but crescendos unexpectedly. All at once, they are hunger and aggression and desperation. Their hands travel, their bodies rocking as if windblown. They kiss as if there are words that can only be tasted. They kiss as if they are melting. And I, cloaked in the empty dark, am colder than ever. My experiment has failed, and now I am just a creep at a window, embarrassing myself.

It is typical in the animal kingdom for alpha males and females to mark any territory they have claimed with a scent. I look on with glassy eyes at the documentary, mind adrift, as the narrator drones down the list. There is a border collie eagerly pissing all over his owner’s yard. There is a small, gray bird, chirping like mad in its nest. Annoying. Then there is a bear, rubbing its enormous body against a tree. Just before I lose interest and change the channel, there is the tiger.

I go to him one morning. His bedroom is bathed in ethereal shades of blue by the first light of day, and he floats before me in a reflecting pool of pillows and sheets. I wade through to him, wrap myself around him, and he is warm like I knew he’d be. Our bodies fit and we lie there, fading dreamily between

wakefulness and sleep, disappearing together beneath the blue of our Indian summer morning; the morning when even the dancing dust seems to rest on air for us. The silence is sacred. This is morning pristine. And I am unwilling to move—unwilling to resign to the inevitable rustling of sheets, the impending alarm, the procession of day. All things beyond this bed, beyond this moment, beyond this shade of blue, are grains of sand.

And then I see the bruise.

The tiger, proud and deliberate, springs up on his hind legs to claw away at a crooked tree, one that sways and bends to the tiger's will. A warning to all homeless critters seeking shelter: "This belongs to me." I turn the television off.

My eyes are open now. Fixed. At the small of his back, there is a bruise. Crimson, blackening, swirling, this bruise has cut through our ethereal blue, has stained the dawn. I'm curious, at first. He must have backed into something accidentally: a door knob, perhaps, a rail of some sort. Maybe at work. Maybe at the gym. I keep examining, until suddenly, the silence is no longer silence. It is the roar of trucks on a highway. It is the shrieks and laughter of pedestrians beneath his window. It is my tired bones cracking, and the sheets rustling, and the fan whirring, and the alarm blaring, and the day—the day is shattering with a sound loud enough to wake the dust, to scatter the particles like the violent flight of one thousand birds.

There are teeth marks in this bruise—there are teeth marks.

"I should be looking for someone." He tells me casually over Italian wedding soup one day, long before 44B. And I wait, soup growing cold on the spoon, for him to finish. He pauses for a second, concentrates on the something behind me, something I don't turn around to see. He continues to eat.

"Like who?" I nearly spit.

"I don't know," he says, squinty-eyed. "Somebody I can love."

The blue is gone, so I go too, careful not to disturb him. I journey back to my own cold bed, but there will be no more sleep for me this morning, and

certainly no silence—just the image of that bruise, crimson and swirling,
proud and deliberate, as I cocoon in my covers.

Shayna Blank

PREDATORS

We woke in the tumble of pillows,
sleep following
us into the daylight,
and I looked to see you perched
at the window, your back
twisting. You always pretended to
be a bird of prey, with
the precision of your eyes
and claws
and the exact span of your arms
when you spread them, en route
to folding them around me.

When you turned to look
me in the face, your eyes
were narrowed like sails and
you looked as though you
were moving in to clutch me
at the throat
with your long talons,
snap parts of me like I was prey,
and instead you dove into
the tangle of my blankets and arms,
sleep calling you back to me,
your talons and wingspan disappearing.

Juned Subhan

THE HUNTERS

IN MEMORY OF MR. PETER BURTON

At last, thank God, the twins have gone to sleep. A deluge of hot, humid weather swept across England during August, hitting the northeast the hardest, outside London. The prolonged yellow heat wave had left the twins, Chloe and Stella, restless and agitated. Edmund Griffiths gently patted their backs, rocked them both in his arms and cooed to them to induce sleep. Now that they'd been washed, had their nappies changed and tucked into their respective cots—it was Edmund's turn to do so, Alice reminded him, since she'd been with the twins for most of the day—Edmund finally breathed a sigh of relief. Adults and even domestic animals were unable to bear the heat, so he dreaded to think what babies and young children were going through. Edmund left the window open in the girls' room to allow for the breeze to aerate the room. Sound asleep in their cots, they appeared serene to him. He kissed them on their cheeks and left.

For the first time in the day, Edmund started to relax. He'd left the house at the crack of dawn to catch a BMI flight to Edinburgh from Manchester Airport for a meeting at the Scottish branch of the corporate law firm he worked for as a partner. He'd only just returned home to Ilkley early in the evening to find Alice had her hands full with the twins, and Stella had puked over her shoulder. Edmund took the girls off Alice, giving her a much-needed break and time to wipe herself clean. They'd kissed. She thanked him, exasperated, and said how glad she was he was back sooner than she'd expected. The heat made Alice's doughy skin a deep, flushed pink as though her ears and neck were scalded in hot water. Leaving Alice in the lounge to watch the CNN news on Sky TV, Edmund took a quick, cold shower then changed into a set of lighter clothes. His handsome face appeared tired and he rubbed his ankles and lean shoulders which ached after sitting for such long periods in various meetings and followed by a long, tiresome flight home.

He'd booked the next two weeks off work and planned to go cycling with a group he'd joined in Skipton and later hoped to go on a trip somewhere with Alice, maybe to the coast. He craved for the sea breeze and the beauty the sea offered. They could leave the twins with his parents, who lived in Ben Rhydding. He was sure they'd be delighted to have their granddaughters for a few days to cuddle and pamper. Edmund also planned to take Alice shopping

in Leeds. He wanted to treat her; he'd seen a bag at the Louis Vuitton store he wanted to buy for her. Possibly, they'd have lunch at the Arts Café on Call Lane, where they both enjoyed dining. They'd round off the day with a pleasant, late evening summer's walk along the Cow and Calf near the Yorkshire Moors, with the twins in their buggies, just them as a close family. After giving birth, Alice became a little aloof, despondent. She'd even been reluctant to make love or when she did, she did not seem engaged in the act itself, her thoughts seemingly elsewhere. The doctor diagnosed her with a bout of mild, post-natal depression and prescribed her antidepressants. Nevertheless, eleven months after giving birth, Alice rarely took the pills. Instead she decided to take on a more natural approach to her health whilst on maternity leave through organic food, natural remedies and yoga. The medicine cabinet in the bathroom contained her antidepressants tucked away behind the bottle of Listerine. He shook it; there were still a handful of pills in it. Edmund was tempted to chuck the bottle away but he put it back in the cabinet.

At the top of the stairs, Edmund paused. No crying came out of the twins' room. He crept downstairs.

"I'm going to pour myself a drink, Alice," he said. "Do you want one?"

"Yes, please," she replied, tucking her ash-blonde hair behind her shoulders. The lounge was cooler with the open windows, and the small desk fan in the corner.

"Coming right up."

In the kitchen, he uncorked a bottle of Argentinian Viognier and poured a full glass each for the two of them. He hummed to himself. Tangles of heat swirled in the kitchen. Edmund unlocked the French windows to the side, leaving them fully open to cool the house. He noticed how tall the grass had grown in the back garden. It resembled a jungle, wild and precarious-looking almost. The crab apple tree was smothered with ripe, crimson fruit. He'd been meaning to trim the garden with the lawnmower, but as always, it was hard finding the appropriate time. Edmund switched off his mobile phone. He contemplated disconnecting the landline. Sometimes, he received calls from the office which meant he had to drive to work in Manchester, but not tonight. He hesitated for a moment; the creases along his forehead became more prominent. Should he disconnect the house phone? No, he'd leave it, in case of an emergency.

Taking her drink, Alice asked, "Are the girls asleep?" She sounded exhausted but managed to smile.

"Yes, I checked on them. They're quiet as mice, all is well."

He sank next to her, put his arm over her shoulder, and Alice rested her head on the side of his neck and stretched her legs. They sipped their wine; the heat prickled his armpits. With the remote control, Alice switched the channel to Coronation Street. Edmund doubled-checked his mobile phone to ensure he'd turned it off, then slipped it into his trouser pocket. While two characters were bickering on the Street, Alice turned to Edmund to say, "Let's hope we never end up like that."

"I hope not," he replied, and they chuckled together.

"You're dozing off," she said, kissing his hand.

Silence fell between them apart from the television. Edmund shut his eyes for a few minutes. The heaviness of his eyelids, the heat, pulled him down into a close, darkened place like a narrow tunnel, airless. He rubbed his neck then, woke with a start, then finished his drink in one fast gulp.

“I invited Mum and Dad for dinner on Sunday,” Alice said. He admired her for accepting his parents as her own, since she’d lost hers.

“That’ll be nice. Did Dad have anything to say?”

“He’s been out hunting with the dogs. He said he’d bring a rabbit or a bird he’s shot for us to cook.”

Edmund snickered. Alice being a staunch vegetarian, he knew nothing could be more horrific for her than an animal on a plate. He struggled to keep his eyes open. They kept shutting on their own accord. He had to jolt his head forward to wake himself up.

“Dad used to take me shooting with him when I was a child,” he yawned. “We’d bring home many kinds of birds and rabbits.”

He noticed the way Alice scratched her arms with her sharp nails. In fact, he was certain he saw dots of blood emerge on the surface of her arms. He reached out, seized her hand and placed it over his waist.

“I’m so itchy I can’t stop scratching,” Alice said. “Did you lock the doors?”

“Yes.”

“What were you saying about going hunting with your dad? Didn’t he ever feel sad about killing those animals?”

“No. Dad always loved shooting and hunting. You’ve seen his rifles. He displays them with great pride.”

Alice said nothing else as they watched the end of Coronation Street. While the credits rolled, she yawned as well, stretching her legs out. After switching the television off, she raised her head but did not hear anything, not a sound from upstairs. Edmund was great with twins; he’d matured to be more confident around them, especially in recent months. He loved them dearly and would do anything for them; Alice knew he’d go to any extreme to protect their family. Earlier, she’d breast fed them simultaneously making her nipples sore, tender. Alice glanced at Edmund who’d fallen asleep. He had the ability to drop off anywhere. He made a soft, purring noise while he slept, nothing unpleasant, and Alice rested her head on his chest. Her eyelids grew heavy and in the brief second before she closed them, through the window, in the back garden, Alice was sure she saw something move, sneakily, almost slyly. A sleepless malice, perhaps a squirrel? It was probably nothing, just her eyes playing tricks on her. The sun hung low in the sky, casting a spray of shadows across the garden. She saw a shadow segregate itself from the others, it transformed into another shape, animal-like and hungry. Edmund continued to snore. Alice curled her feet. She felt really good sleeping on top of Edmund’s chest and drifted into deep sleep.

Thank God, the twins had gone to sleep. Quiet as mice, thank God.

Edmund shook his head from side to side. His dreams were indistinct, nebulous as though he couldn't quite make things out, as though he was trapped in an elevator or underwater, trying to push his way to the surface. Veins of sweat formed across his forehead. Suddenly, his eyes opened; he jolted up from the sofa, disturbing Alice who rose up as well. How long had they dozed off for? Just over an hour, but it felt longer, much longer. Dusk had fallen outside like a curtain of blue ink.

Groggily, he asked, "Alice, what's that? Do you hear it?"

He held her hand, giving her a look devoid it seemed of certainty, strength, or confidence even. She stared back at him. This time, her gripped tightened. They heard shrieking, like birds, painfully loud.

"It's the girls, it's the girls!" she yelled.

He leapt up from the sofa, went out of the lounge, and jumped up the stairs to the twin's room, his palms slippery against the banister. Alice followed behind him. The piercing cries of the twins hurt her ears.

"Dear God! What's happened? They've been —"

Edmund spoke in shock, in horror. The girls had been badly bitten on their legs. Their left legs were bleeding. Their little legs writhed in acute pain and Chloe had deep wounds on her lower left arm. He moved about crazily from one cot to the other, not knowing what to do, too scared to touch them or lift them up, in case he hurt them as well. A burst of adrenaline shot through his heart as sharp as a razor blade, and the whole room felt to him as though it had sunk; it sunk lower and lower, plunging into a pit. Blood rushed to the top of his head, throbbing. His heart hammered. "My poor babies," he said, "my poor babies, who'd do this to you?" and Edmund reached down to lift Stella up, but she squealed harder; her squeals cut right through his bones, his ribs. "My babies, please, please..." Tears leaked and burned out of his eyes. Everything changed in the room in that moment, every little thing in the twins' room zoomed in and out of focus for him, everything seemed bigger, then smaller, then bigger, their stuffed toys, their mittens, the pearly beads on their blankets, the hinges on the cots, and whatever torment he felt, it simply gloved around him with all its layers. He hadn't noticed her until that point, had she been standing there in a daze, in shock, as much as him?—and she screamed and wailed, her hands over her mouth. Quickly, Edmund grabbed Alice, he pushed her back, away from the scene, but no words came out of her mouth. She fought with him to get to the girls and he tried to calm her.

Her face turned ashen, narrowed. "I want to get to my babies," and she thumped him on his chest with her hands, but he held her back. Her face shone fiercely, she couldn't look at him. Alice saw the blood on the carpet, drops of bright, rose-pink blood. "Go downstairs and call an ambulance, hurry," he shouted, but Alice's eyes were unfocused. Her lips drew back from her teeth, and he repeated to her again to call 999. He had to keep her calm, and he needed to get to the girls.

“Tell them they’ve been attacked by an animal,” and she flew downstairs and grabbed the phone, shaking. Unable to speak coherently at first, her words jumbled, she spoke in a tremulous, wheezy voice and the operator told her to please slow down and explain herself again so an ambulance could be sent immediately. It sprung into Edmund’s mind that he’d left the French windows open. A fox must have skulked into the house. He managed to pick up the twins, one by one, and he kissed them on their heads, he pressed them tight against himself, not wanting to let them go, he felt their little hearts, their little hearts beating. He’d never let them go. Their pulses vibrated underneath his, and Edmund suddenly felt inseparable from them, he was as close to them as he’d ever imagine himself to be, he could not see himself severed in any way from the twins. Stella’s cheeks flattened and shrivelled to a dark blue colour, and Edmund bent down towards the floor with them both in his arms. Their blood oozed through his shirt. Their shrieks no longer bothered him. He remained calm, as calm as possible. A genuine fear ran through him, one he’d believed he’d left behind years ago.

Edmund and Alice raced into Airedale Hospital behind the paramedics as they rushed the twins into casualty. Alice clung onto Edmund. The twins’ blood on his shirt made her feel bilious. The air turned strangely chilly. The hospital stank of disinfectant.

He put his hand on her shoulder. “We’d better sit down.”

They sat on a pair of empty seats in a corridor whilst the hospital consultants attended to the twins. Limp in the legs, Alice sat clinging on to Edmund. His throat was so dry, his lips swollen as he leaned his head back and dug his fingers on his forehead. His eyes stung. The clanks, the rush of doctors, visitors, did not register within his parameters. Edmund was shocked at how in a flash, how unavoidably almost, without a warning, the twins were attacked. They could have been killed; they might have been eaten alive.

Alice let go of his arm. She watched him with a steady, clear gaze. “How did this happen to them? How? We shouldn’t have fallen asleep. I saw something in the garden before we fell asleep, something was moving in there...” She paused then continued, “The French windows, you opened them, didn’t you? You left them open. How could you, Edmund?” and Alice stifled her cries. She pushed her fist into her mouth. She saw it in his face, the indignity, the guilt, there was no way to circumvent it. Alice watched him as he struggled, as he slowly started to break like bricks on a high wall crumbling away, one by one.

He detected the resentment, the hurt in her voice, and Edmund understood he could not blame her. Not a word he uttered. His earlier fear hadn’t gone; it merely lay dormant inside him. He was too scared, too tired to explicate or rationalise the situation. She started to sob again, then she slapped him on his lap, not because she despised him and he held her, he held Alice as closely as he’d held the twins and she sobbed in his chest. “How could you,” she said, “how could you...” He kissed her head, he smelled the twins in her hair, a sour, milky smell, and the smell of wool. Her clothes were crinkled,

damp. She hugged him and let her head fall silently onto his lap. Edmund's lips moved. Mentally, he played over and over what had happened.

"It could have been a fox," Edmund murmured, but Alice did not hear him. His voice took on a coarse quality. He turned cold thinking of a wild animal like a fox creeping into their house, up the stairs, deliberately passing by Edmund and Alice. The fox would have eagerly gone into the twins' room. Edmund heard a shrill scream in the hospital, a single, sharp note; it came from down the corridor. His visions darkened.

"We could have done something," Alice said. She squeezed his leg and her body turned clammy under her clothes. He couldn't believe how cold her body was. He rubbed her back. "I don't get this, this can't be for real... Oh, no—" she said.

Maybe there'd been more than one fox, maybe an entire brood had crept into their house, sniffing. They'd sniffed the twins from outside, their sweet, innocent perfume which they could not resist and had picked up from miles away. Edmund, many times during the summer, sat with the twins in the garden. He had a few barbecues also with family and friends in July, so the foxes may have spotted and sniffed out the twins then. It wasn't uncommon for foxes to venture into people's garden, but weren't they timid, nocturnal creatures, easily frightened off? With care, he lifted Alice's head off his lap.

She asked, "Where you off to?" She wiped her puffed-up eyes. She looked deflated, not necessarily furious or disenchanted with him, just perplexed, perplexed by everything around her. "How could we end up here when we should be home with the girls?" They stared at one another. Their stares were filled with pain and fear: fear they shared for one another, for the twins, the repercussions for the future, for what had happened. Alice noticed Edmund's lips move to say something to her, to restore faith in her, that this was all but a dream they were having at the same time, that they were at home fast asleep on the sofa; he'd only just put the twins in their cots and later Edmund and Alice would wake up to see the girls were fine, they were still sound asleep. Yet, in the hospital she saw he couldn't speak in any coherent way. He touched her hands.

"I need to make a phone call," he said.

Sat by herself now, which she disliked, Alice never enjoyed being left alone, she heard whispers in all directions. Did everyone in the hospital know what they'd been through? Were people whispering that she was a bad, callous parent? Her visions became blurred, and she couldn't believe what was going on. She thought about the shadows she'd seen in the garden, that silent malice which lingered there. Alice became restless waiting for Edmund. She couldn't help but think he was culpable for this, but blaming him would be no use. Plus, she was too exhausted to provoke a fight as he did help to calm her down, he was good at that. Otherwise, Alice didn't know what she would have done with herself. She suddenly experienced a rage she hadn't before, the kind of rage which made her think she wanted to kill in retribution. Whoever or whatever had done this to the twins, Alice wouldn't have hesitated to kill them, point blank. She felt ashamed and despondent for doing so but found it difficult to deny these emotions. Alice had no idea she had it in her to feel such things. She'd do anything to safeguard Stella and Chloe, but she hadn't done enough then her rage declined,

succumbing to feelings of sickness in her stomach.

Upon Edmund's return after ten minutes being agitated and upset, she snapped, "Who did you call?"

Edmund shot a glance at her, then across the corridor with heedful eyes. He looked like a nocturnal animal with his darkened expression. At the same time, he appeared sad, he gave her the impression he'd forsaken something deep inside him, that a part of him inside had been removed, and he'd never get it back. What he'd witnessed with the twins rotated in his mind like a video which refused to stop. He felt so cold.

"I called Mum and Dad," he said.

"Are they coming?"

"I told them not to. I said we'll be okay for now. If we need anything they'll be here straight away. Did you bring your phone with you?"

She checked her pockets. "No, I left it in our bedroom." In the silence, they both relived their earlier ordeal. He tried to look up at her. His aquamarine eyes had paled in colour. She touched him but he sat still.

Edmund stood up when the female consultant, a young, pretty woman approached them to have a word, but Alice only heard bits of what was said. Her ears tingled. Edmund gritted his teeth. He dug his nails into the palm of his hands. He curled them into fists. He envisioned himself unable to get out of a tiny hole. The consultant smiled at them both with encouragement. The twins were stable, but the wounds inflicted on them by the fox were grave, and they had been taken into intensive care where shortly they would undergo surgery. They were told the fox had torn off Chloe's left eyelid but they'd do their best to save it. Alice took Edmund's hand, unable to breathe. She sobbed silently.

"We're doing everything in our power for them," the consultant said. "They're both strong girls. You should both try to get some rest."

"Just a second doctor, they'll be okay, won't they, nothing will happen to them?" Edmund asked rapidly, unable to appreciate the doctor's clarifications, his breathing heavy. "The girls are stable you said?"

The doctor appeared composed and spoke in an almost clinical, professional manner. "Yes, they are, you can be assured we'll do everything we can for them."

"Thank you," Edmund replied. "Can we see them?"

"Of course, but only from outside the room. I'm afraid, given their condition, we can't allow you to go inside the unit right now."

The consultant left and a male nurse escorted Edmund and Alice to the intensive care unit. Following the nurse, Edmund again saw himself pushing through a hole, but not quite able to make his way through. Other people drifted past them, and every person who did smiled at them with compassion. These strangers who passed by them, who caught sight of them for a few seconds, seemed to understand what they were going through, that they knew without being told the details. Alice wanted to stop and reach out to one of these people. Guiltily, Edmund glanced at the floor. The lights reflected on the shiny, stone floor.

"I'm really scared," Alice whispered into Edmund's ear as they went inside the elevator to another floor.

On approach to the intensive care unit, he whispered back, "Don't be."

The nurse pointed out where the twins were in the unit, then moved away, leaving them on their own. Alice turned to look back. They stared through the pane of glass, their gaze just reaching far enough towards the twins. She wanted to hold them and snuggle up to them and feed them, ensure they were shielded from harm. Alice questioned whether she'd done enough, if she could have done things differently as a mother. She thought, you sometimes heard in the news about terrible things happening to other people's children, but you quickly brushed it aside, reverting back to your usual self, accepting your life for the way it was, yet never considering that the same could happen to you as well.

Neither of them talked. He felt something open and bare inside himself. Alice put her hands on his shoulder. The twins looked asleep. Tubes were inserted through their noses, mouths. Alice appeared as if she'd aged by a decade in the space of a few hours and Edmund pressed his hands on the glass. They watched as the twins' chests rose and fell, jointly. They were both so beautiful. They imagined their hands were on twins' foreheads, soothing them, that their hands were on their chests, where they'd seen them for a while, but for a dreadful moment Edmund thought the twins' hearts had stopped beating.

"My poor babies," he mumbled.

Alice tried to hold back her tears. She suddenly became as scared for Edmund as she was for their girls. His hands slipped off the glass. She found the courage to ask, "How did we let this happen to them?" She grew angry; rage bubbled through her veins, quietly. Tears furrowed down her cheeks. "Do you remember after the girls were born you promised you'd do anything for us? You held them in your arms and you said those words, remember?"

"Yes, I do."

"We have to do something."

"We will," he said. "Yes, we will."

They lost sense of time and stared at the girls for what felt like hours, waiting for them to wake up and be back to the way they were. It didn't matter what the time was. Alice watched in a daze as two Indian, female nurses entered the unit to check the charts, and it frustrated Edmund that he wasn't able to touch Stella and Chloe, that there wasn't anything he could do for them. He grew more helpless with each second like a captive creature. It tore his heart to see the twins this way. He felt a pack of foxes were near him, about to strike, and bite and claw away at him. Not so long ago, he'd only put girls to bed, he'd changed their nappies, he'd comforted them and stopped them from crying. Whatever he'd done, he felt like he hadn't been enough. He felt totally responsible. Our poor babies. Edmund's face turned grey. Alice smelled the tangy smell which lifted off from his body, his clothes.

"Dear God, Edmund, look at them," she said, snivelling, she'd never been so afraid.

“I dread to think what they must be going through. I want to hold them...”

As the nurses were walking out, Alice stopped one of them and asked, “How are they doing? Will they be awake soon?”

“They’re stable,” the nurse said. “The doctor will speak to you again soon.”

After the nurses disappeared she turned to Edmund. “This can’t be happening, can it? Not to our family. This can’t be real... No, it can’t be...” Crying, Alice covered her face with her hands.

She enveloped him, suffocated with sadness, rage, and a sense of failure, they’d failed in their respective roles in their own way, and this sense of sadness, this failure, she knew wouldn’t leave either of them for a long time. Forever they’d be hunted by it. “Why don’t you get a taxi home?” she said, wiping her face. “You didn’t really eat anything. I’ll stay here with the girls.”

He considered this, but, being so tired, Edmund found it hard to think logically.

“I can’t leave you by yourself,” he said. He took a long, lingering look at the twins thinking, were they alive? Were they breathing?

“I’ll be fine. I want to stay with them on my own for a while. You go home.” He started to shake his head, and she took his hand, then entwined her fingers with his and Alice felt calmer holding onto him.

Edmund paused. He counted his heartbeats, he counted the space between them.

“Okay, maybe I should. We’ll take it in turns.”

“That sounds good.”

He detected the loss in her bloodshot eyes. They kissed, then he said, “I’ll make sure this never happens to us again.”

She nodded her head and looked down. “If I hear anything from the doctors, I’ll call you straight away.”

After a final look at Chloe and Stella, Edmund took a taxi to Ilkley. He looked back at the hospital, his gaze the size of a slit. On arrival back at the house, Edmund realised in their rush, he and Alice forgot to lock the front door. The French windows were still open. A fox could still be in the house. If one came, perhaps more followed. The thought was horrific, full of terror. Edmund gnashed his teeth. He stepped into the garden, in the dark. He heard nothing. There were no movements, no breeze. He switched the garden lights on. He shook the hedges, he poked about inside them, but there was nothing and giving vent to his emotions, he cried uncontrollably and cursed at himself for having left the French windows open, how could he have been so damn stupid, so damn unwise.

Entering the house, he slammed the French windows shut. He listened carefully. He pounced upstairs to the twins’ room. Edmund’s steps were agile, light, he moved forward with immediate speed. In the twins’ room, his gaze flicked from one end to the other, up at the ceiling then to the floor. Spots of blood were soaked in the carpet. He ran his hands over Stella’s blanket, then Chole’s. Both were stained red, and he shivered. He collapsed onto his knees, as though the twins were in his arms. Edmund sniffed the carpet. He noticed grains of soil on the carpet, the faint marks of an animal’s

paws. The room contained a musky tang. He imagined the fox returned to the twins' room. A brood of them would have come back. They'd waited slyly for Edmund and Alice to leave, then they'd roamed into the house. They'd licked the twins' blood off the carpet, from the sides of the cots. Edmund touched the carpet, which was wet. Had the foxes urinated in here? Had they marked the twins' room as a potential territory? He jumped up on his feet. He hissed. The foxes would continue coming back. Forever, they'd pursue the twins now they'd tasted their blood, they'd never cease to follow them. Maybe this very hour, miles away in their den, they could smell the twins, aware of their precise location. Edmund's heart sank with the sheer horror of his own thoughts. He imagined the foxes heard his footsteps reverberate through the air.

He did not eat the broccoli and cheese pie Alice left for him in the refrigerator. He guzzled a bottle of Volvic mineral water; streams of water gushed out of his mouth, down his neck. He wouldn't be able to rest and he would not shut his eyes. He called his parents, who consoled him with hopeful words, they told him he was a strong man, he was a fighter, he had a good family, he loved his wife and children and nothing could snatch that from him. You'll get through this, his father told him, he had it in him to do so. If he wanted to, he was welcome to go to his parents and stay there. They'd go to the hospital for Alice. You know what to do to get through this, his father reminded him, and Edmund wiped his tears and agreed, *Yes, yes, I know what to do. I know now.*

Neither of them for the next few days ate, showered or slept. At home, Alice and Edmund exchanged looks and held one another in a desperate, fierce embrace, and he'd caress her hair whilst she wept. She urged him to take them out of this nightmare. "What if they never leave us, Edmund?" Alice asked, and he had no persuasive answers to give to her. "What if they keep hunting for the girls? What if the girls' lives are forever in danger? *Our babies.*" They took turns to visit the twins in the hospital, who were in a far more stable condition and were safe. At one point things were touch-and-go with them, but they were allowed to hug them.

Edmund stood next to Alice by the French windows. They saw each other perfectly now, as bare as anything. Her eyes were threaded with blood. Her mouth looked coarse; neither of them had brushed their teeth. His face had turned grey with thick, wiry bristles, his hair the colour of cigarette ash. She smelled him; a dark, mossy odour clung to him. Whenever he breathed, his foetid breath became more and more pungent, like gone-off milk and grains of dirt were encrusted under Edmund's nails.

Together they looked, they listened.

He asked, "Do you see anything?"

"No," Alice replied, tears in her eyes. She stroked his arm. "It's probably too early. They'll come towards nightfall."

Alice went and grabbed the rifle from behind the sofa and passed it over to Edmund. He'd picked it from his father's place. She looked at him and somewhere on the edge of her mind, Alice came to the realisation that what they were doing bore no relation

to desire itself, not desire in the human sense. It went beyond that, to a realm she was fearful to dwell for long, but she understood they had to go there, there was no turning back. She wouldn't allow Edmund to turn back if he wanted to. He decided it was best to not step into the garden right now in case the foxes were about and ran away. They planned to wait, and when they'd catch one sneak into the garden, Alice would open the French windows for him...

"Tell me if you spot one before me," he said.

She noticed his hands tremble a little. "I will," she said, her expression dulled, pained. "I promise."

Alice saw him muttering to himself. At last, the sun started to sink, its yellow rays deepened to orange then cerise. She moved a few steps behind him. Shadows flickered across the garden; they danced and separated from one another. They resembled the same shadows she'd seen the night the twins were attacked. Alice choked in her breath. A burning sensation inflamed inside her, a deep anger which made her perceive herself to be taller.

His gaze flicked from one corner of the garden to the other.

"Edmund, just a second," she murmured in a cold, flat tone. "There's something moving." He turned his head at her and nodded. "Look, there!" she blurted. "There's one coming through near the apple tree. Look! Look!"

A pair of foxes approached the garden, one bigger than the other. He wanted them to come closer, a little closer, they weren't quite close enough. A knot formed in his stomach and Alice switched all the lights off in the house. Observing the foxes, they appeared playful to him all of a sudden, spirited and full of life. They were also coy and unassuming in their playfulness. They chased each other's tails. The fox's bright eyes sparkled at him, but they didn't seem to notice they were being watched by Alice and him. One of them gorged on the rotten crab apples under the tree.

Edmund clutched the rifle. Alice opened the French windows.

"Aim carefully," she said, and she kept an eye on him as he merged into the dark. "And Edmund, be careful."

He walked through the thick, soaring grass. Both foxes feasted on the crab apples, and as he slid out into the garden, all his doubts, his anguish, the rage that simmered through him, the love he had for the twins, for Alice and that sadness again, rolled down over Edmund in an isolated world, the way he'd held the twins in his arms, the beats of their hearts underneath his. He was consumed with disappointment, with despair as he'd ever been in his whole life, more emotion than he was able to endure for all that happened in the past few days. Yet, in this night air, Edmund didn't detect the scent of the twins, only the memory of them in the sweet smell of the grass. The foxes finished eating and one of them looked straight up but appeared undisturbed, motionless. Edmund wasn't certain if it noticed him, and he prayed the foxes wouldn't hurry off. The entire world, the world as he knew it, soon became out of sight for him.

He lifted the rifle and took aim.

Back in the house, Alice cupped her hands over her ears, and for a couple of seconds

Edmund debated with himself—could such inhibited, timid-looking creatures attack anyone? Were they really capable of such brutality? In a flash the weight of the rifle reminded him of the twins. They'd been alive in his hands as he held them. There was still life in them.

Amelia Possanza

AFTERNOON WITH A SOCIOPATH

for Dan

Years into our friendship, Dan wants to go to the whale museum. Well on in his years, he still marvels at their size and intelligence. In front of a painting of Jonah trapped in a cavernous belly, he asks me what it feels like to care about someone else.

It feels like this: You've been given an old whaling vessel. You keep it in the back yard and occasionally glimpse it through the window when you bother to draw the shades.

In the weeks you pace its upper decks, you notice where it's been, whispering beneath the punctured sails.

One day, no less damp than the others, you decide to head below deck with a candle and a heavy pistol. You can hear the rats scuttle through her empty spaces.

The interior brings to mind the whales. Not barreled up, but cavernous and high ceilinged on the inside.

You begin to look forward to the afternoon hour set aside for investigation.

She's got a room that yields in the light of the flame—brown bags of spices and coffee beans cascading to the touch.

Back in the house you fear
you will wake up tomorrow to find she's
set sail. Just as easily, you could set the whole thing
on fire and douse the flame
before it gets the house.

Or rather, it feels like this: Each type of whale
has a unique mating call. Two scientists
tracked a call for twenty years
and never heard another like it.

Gillian Chick

THAW

I ran in February's garden of dead things
and brown things which are only pretending death,
spent, but also will become atoms
split into live things breathing

my throat chokes on the cold air, two invisible
fingers down and through my nostrils running
the red flag of a nosebleed
I am the red maple and this is my autumn red
atoms falling on the brown dead almost I
bend in half like a broken branch to stop
the steady unfurling or drown in myself
but yes but as I close my body limbs to lymphs my mind

opens like a crocus, anticipating
not death, un-death, but a deer's breath
across the road, and at her feet,
daffodils.

Naomi Nix

THE POWERS PLACE

Wind tunneled through the open windows of Dad's rusted-out pickup truck. It made my tie fly back and wave like a flag against the headrest. Susannah's wedding present was on the seat between my sister and me, and I set my hand on top of the cluster of curled ribbons so the boxes stopped squeaking against each other.

Beth's blond hair flew out around her so it looked as if she was sitting in the center of a tornado. I don't know how she could see the road in front of her, but she probably didn't need to. It had been two years since she'd left for school in Chicago, but our blood was still in this road, in this stretch of tanned dirt and gravel.

Her freckles had faded in the city, and she had permed her hair. She was able to keep her nails long now, no farm chores to chip them down to size, and she had French tips. They were wrapped around the steering wheel, digging into the leather cover.

"Joseph," she shouted. "Is my tape still in the box under the seat?"

She squinted at me through her rose-colored sunglasses. It was the same way she had squinted at me when she walked inside the house yesterday, unsure of how to treat me now that we were strangers. Dad had come in behind her and slammed the door, jiggling the handle to make sure it latched. He stomped his dusty boots on the rug and kicked them off into the corner, then he hunched over his chair at the head of the table and glared at the dripping plate in my hands. Mom cried, of course. She left me to wipe the dishes dry at the counter and ran across the room, a trail of tiny suds floating in her wake, and embraced this new version of her only daughter.

"Bethany Sue," she whispered, petting my sister's wild hair.

"Hi, Mom," Beth said, tolerating the squeeze and her full name, her "hick title," she had called it once over the phone. When Mom finally pulled away, Beth turned to slip her heels onto the mat next to Dad's boots. Mom's wet handprints fanned out across the back of her yellow shirt like wings.

With my seatbelt in one hand, I leaned forward and brushed my free hand under the long seat. There were shotgun shells rolling around and bouncing with the dips in the gravel. My fingers crawled over empty Skoal containers and plastic water bottles Dad used as spittoons. And dirt. There was a layer of dirt on

everything. The box was all the way over on the driver side of the truck, tucked up in the back corner against jagged sunflower seed shells. I had to press my cheek into Beth's bare thigh to reach it.

"My Melissa Etheridge tape," she said, as if she needed to remind me.

I knew it was still in the box. I listened to it every time I slipped outside to be alone in the truck, but I didn't want her to know that, so I noisily dug through the contents. My fingers landed on the tape and brushed over the front as if there was a layer of dust I needed to wipe away. "Yes I Am" was the title, and it was printed in big white letters above the two spools. I closed it in my fist.

"When was the last time you saw Susannah?" I asked.

"Oh, God," Beth sighed. "It was probably at graduation."

I could barely hear her over the roar of the wind. My own graduation was coming up next year. It would be in the school gym, just like Beth's was. I was going to graduate with our cousins Carly and Robbie, just like Beth had graduated with Susannah. Our whole family lived in this area of Iowa; Beth was the first one to ever leave.

"I can't believe she's getting married," Beth shouted. "Then again, I can."

The wind swirled over and under my palm as I held it out the passenger window. Susannah was a bad stereotype of a country girl. She was plump and dumb, and she got too loud when she drank. When we were younger and forced into play-dates with her, Beth and I would come up with intricate schemes to dump her on someone else. Then we would get our bikes and ride, as fast as we could, out on this empty stretch of road to the abandoned farm a few miles down. Beth would wear pigtails then, braided all the way down her back and bursting into fuzzy clumps at the ends. She always rode ahead of me, held her arms out at her sides while her bike tires bounced against the gravel. Then she'd turn around and smile at me, pink skin shining beneath a cluster of brown freckles, because she knew I was too scared to try the trick.

There was a dead skunk nearby. The burnt rubber smell filled the cab of the truck. I waited for Beth to complain and roll up her window, but she didn't.

"Mom and Dad wanted us to meet them there at 3:00, right?"

I nodded. She smoothed her hair back and twisted it into the collar of her dress. The bangles on her wrist clacked together.

"Is the Powers place still here?" she asked.

She pointed at the turn coming up, our old, neglected play place. I nodded again, shrugged.

"I assume," I answered. "It's been there forever."

"You haven't gone back without me," she said.

"The bus drives past the lot on the way to school," I said.

The wall of corn stopped abruptly as we came to the property line. Beth shifted gears and turned the wheel so we were bouncing down the driveway. Dark dirt spread out for what seemed like miles until it finally dipped down over

a hill and came up as more corn. The surrounding farms were encroaching onto the property, just enough so they could plead innocence to whatever faraway relatives still owned this land. I could see the rusted-out truck on cinderblocks around one side of the boarded-up farmhouse. The wooden post that read “Powers” was still crooked in the ground at the end of the driveway.

The wind had stopped now that Beth was rolling the truck to a halt. She lifted her rose-colored sunglasses onto her head and whistled.

“Look at this place,” she said.

She parked the truck right in front of the house and turned it off. The driver’s side door opened with a deep groan, and the whole frame of the F-150 shook as she jumped down. When she walked, her sandals sucked up against the soles of her feet and then slammed against the packed down dirt with a dull thud. The tape was still in my hand.

The place looked like it had died from exposure. Dark green shutters had either fallen to the ground or were hanging by a single, loose hinge against the windows that were boarded up with plywood from the inside. The corn was six feet high all over Iowa, but there was no one to plant on this lot, and over the years, it had gone to seed. Tufts of tall grass jutted up from the ground, but the rest of it was packed dirt, pale grass chewed down to the root. Someone had been letting their animals graze here.

“Come on,” Beth said.

She circled around the front of the truck and ran along the side of the house. I put the tape in the player so that one end hung out. The contents of the shoebox gleamed in the sun until I slammed the door and they disappeared from sight. Beth was kicking at the cellar door. I could hear the old padlock rattling in the shade around the corner.

“Still locked,” she said when I found her.

The old truck frame on the cinderblocks was behind her. She folded her arms over her chest and twisted so she could see it. Rust had eaten away at the underbelly and was starting to creep up to the passenger door.

“You used to be my chauffer,” she said. “Remember?”

She stepped toward me and wrapped her arm around my shoulders. For a minute, I let her hug me sideways—the way our old aunts would be hugging me when we arrived for Susannah’s wedding. Beth’s bracelets clacked together as she rubbed her hand on my arm.

She used to sit in the bed of the truck and pretend it was the back end of a limousine. She’d slide open the back window, lean her head in, and tell me that she needed to get to Paris or Brazil—whatever place her class was studying. And I would obediently take her there, jerking the wheel left and right like kids do when they don’t know that roads are shared and swerving like you own them is dangerous.

“Yeah,” I said. “I remember.”

The last time I touched a wheel was a month ago when Dad decided it was time I learned to drive a stick.

“I knew how to drive one of these things when I was ten,” was his reasoning.

Beth’s hand slipped off my shoulder when she felt it tense. I crossed my arms across my chest and stepped away from her as if I was going to look inside the cab. Barely into Dad’s lesson, I had stalled at a stop sign near town. Someone behind me honked and pattered around us, craning his neck at us to see what idiot was clogging up the intersection. It was someone Dad knew—the man who owned the gas station in town. When I finally got it going again, he swatted my hand off the clutch and grabbed the wheel from his spot in the passenger seat. He steered us into the ditch.

“Your sister can do this,” he was shouting. “Your sister, Boy. Do you hear me?”

And he just kept shouting that, over and over. I had one side of my face pressed against my window, but he had crawled across the seat, pulled against gravity in this crooked ditch, and was in my ear, shouting so I could see the tobacco he had tucked into his lower lip. I cried in front of him that day, the first time I had let him see me cry since I was old enough to remember. That shut him up. He aimed his squinted eyes at some point on the horizon and tugged at the end of his red nose. I wiped my palms across my cheeks while he unscrewed the cap of a water bottle and spit.

I thought about telling Beth about that day, but it was a short thought. Dad and I were going to carry that between us until one or the other died.

“Let’s look inside,” she said.

The second step on the front porch was still broken. Beth gently pulled on the chains of a porch swing that neither of us dared to sit on now. The door was barely hanging on to the frame, and the knob shook in my hand when I twisted it and heard the bolt slide out. It might have dropped to the floor if I let go too soon.

It was much smaller than I remembered. The house smelled like cool dirt. The only light came from the one window that wasn’t boarded up—the broken one. The white paint on the walls looked brown. A dusty wasp hive clung to the upper corner of the ceiling, next to the broken window. Beth moved around me and through the door frame. The floorboards creaked beneath her metallic sandals.

“This place used to seem a lot bigger,” I said.

The remains of a kitchen counter against the back wall and gaping holes where plumbing and gas lines used to hook up were the only indicators that the house had ever been lived in.

“Your baby doll,” Beth whispered.

She crossed the room, toward the corner where a crumpled white lump was propped up against the wall. The floorboards groaned the whole way, and the

dust clouded beneath her feet. When she bent down, she ran her hands along the backside of her dress so it didn't lift. The toy's cloth torso pinched in her grip, and the plastic flesh-toned eyelids bounced up and down as she lifted it, the weighted lashes giving some illusion of life. The doll's mouth, stuck forever in a small "o," pointed at me as if to accuse me of abandonment and neglect.

"That thing must be nasty," I said. Beth didn't acknowledge that she had heard me. She flipped the doll over and rubbed the dark grime off the back of its head with the palm of her hand.

"You loved this thing," she said. "We kept it here because Dad wouldn't let you play with it."

Dad had thrown it outside, deep into our cornfield, after he caught me hiding it in the back of my closet. I watched him from the kitchen window, kneeling in the sink, pushing aside the floral curtains just in time to see his hop-step, his discus hurl. The doll spun, a twisting, white star, and landed deep in the emerald stalks. He turned around in time to see me, my forehead pressed against the glass. He smiled then, stretched his arms above his head, and walked back toward the house.

I had to wait until after dinner, when he was in the barn, to hug my bare arms to my chest and swerve between the thick stalks. When I found it, face down in the dirt, I had taken so many sharp turns that I didn't remember the way back. I curled my toes into the cold ground, tried to look for my footsteps, locusts I had blindly smashed. The night wind rushed between the rows of corn, shook the tops of the stalks against the stars in the black sky. And I couldn't find my way until I heard Beth whistling on the edge of the field. I ran then, hard plastic clutched against my ribcage so that my elbows caught the bruises in the narrow rows. She had made a space for me to hide the doll, under the front steps, so that it was safe until morning. Then we could wash her in the kitchen sink and bring it to the Powers place.

"Do you remember that?" she asked, holding the old doll out to me.

I crossed my arms over my chest and walked into the house, inhaling the dust that had been stirred up. I turned away to sneeze, toward the broken window where I had etched my name into the sill with a bent nail. It was still there, "Joseph" with a backwards "p." When I turned back, Beth was offering the doll to me, eyes closed now that it was horizontal. A dark smudge crept up the side of its head, the grime that Beth hadn't been able to wipe off. I took it reluctantly and, out of instinct, held it in the crook of my arm like it was a real baby.

Beth was standing in the doorway again, one hand on each side of the frame. One foot was on the front porch and one was over the threshold, pointed toes-down on a loose floorboard. Her bracelets had slid down her arm again, and she was looking out at the front yard, at the truck on cinderblocks, at the wooden post. Her face was hidden behind her hair.

"Is that why you left?" I asked. "Because of Dad?"

She waited a long time before she answered.

“No. Maybe a little. Mostly because I don’t belong here.”

I touched a finger to the coarse eyelashes on the baby-doll. They fluttered open and closed.

“You know how it feels,” she said. “You don’t belong here either. You know I’m not meant to be some doting wife. And you’re not made to be some hard farm man.”

Mice scratched against the inside of the wall, scurried from one end of the house to the other.

“Yeah,” I said, thinking about Dad on his tractor, dirt stuck to his sweat, and Mom in the window, outlined by the aged, floral curtains, cracked hand deep in the dishwasher. “I know that.”

“When you get out,” she said, smiling with her upper lip pulled taut, like she still had her buck teeth, “you never want to come back.”

She took her foot off the floorboard and stepped off the porch. There was a smudge in the dirt where her toe had been.

“Do you want to drive?” she called.

The keys jingled in her fist as she shook them above her head. I stepped outside, still holding the doll, and closed the door behind me. It didn’t latch.

“We’re going to be late to the bumpkins’ wedding,” she said.

She dropped the keys into my hand and climbed into the passenger side, sliding the shoebox into the middle of the seat with Susannah’s wedding present. I circled around the front of the truck, passing the mayflies plastered to the front bumper. The frame heaved when I stepped in.

“Turn the car on,” Beth said, although I was already leaning against the steering wheel and slipping the key into the ignition. “The truck is already in neutral, so you won’t stall.”

I turned the key, harder than I should have, and the engine started rumbling. The floor of the truck vibrated through the soles of my shoes.

“Step on the clutch, that far left pedal, and shift into first,” she said. She pointed down at my feet and craned her neck to watch me. I moved to the gas pedal before she could tell me to, and we lurched forward. I twisted the wheel to the right and moved through the front yard, past the Powers sign, and down the driveway. The engine started to strain as I accelerated, and I forgot to step on the clutch when I shifted into second gear. The truck stalled in the middle of the driveway. Blood rushed to my ears and made the sudden silence painful.

A tuft of tall weeds shifted in the wind outside the driver’s side window. A rabbit poked its nose out, saw the truck, and sped away in the opposite direction. I watched it disappear over a hill and wrapped my hands around my head. My fingers laced at the back of my neck. Dad was in my ear again, calling me *Boy*, as if he needed to reiterate that was what I was. I considered telling her that we should just trade seats.

“You’re doing fine,” Beth said. “Move back into neutral and start again.”

I was afraid she would reach out and try to touch me, a foreign comfort that would have made me lose it again, but she didn’t. Her bangles knocked together when she raised her hand and dragged her fingers through her hair. I lowered my arms, found the stick, and stepped on the clutch while I shifted back into neutral.

“Try not to think about it too much,” she said when we started moving again. “Just listen to the engine. When it starts to sound too strained, step on the clutch and shift up a gear.”

I stayed in first gear until we came to the main road, where I shifted into second, successfully this time, and watched the Powers place disappear in the rearview mirror. The wall of corn on both sides of the road built up again, and the wind wafted in and out our open windows.

“Try for third now,” Beth said, pushing the Melissa Etheridge tape into the player. “You’ve got this.”

The beginning of “I’m the Only One” plucked out of the speakers, but Beth fast-forwarded to a later track. I accelerated, listened to the engine groan, and shifted into third.

Beth shouted and slapped her hand against the outside of the passenger door. “Dad is going to shit when he sees you driving up Aunt Katherine’s driveway.”

She lifted her finger off of the fast forward button and pressed play. “Come to My Window” was about thirty seconds into playing, but she left it where it was and twisted the volume knob higher than anyone had let it go since she left. Noise was coming from all over –the speakers, the engine, the wind rushing through the windows. Beth beat her hand against the roof of the cab and sang along with the tape.

My cheeks hurt from smiling. I was squinting against the onslaught on wind that pushed tears out of the corner of my eyes. The gas pedal was almost touching the floor, and the roar of the wind and the engine grew like a gathering storm.

“I’ll be home soon” were the last lyrics I heard Beth shouting as I shifted into fourth gear. The wind pushed over my skin, under my shirt, and lifted it away from my torso so that the starchy fabric hovered out around me. It moved through my hair, rushed into my nose, and swirled in my lungs. My head was filled by the sound of wind, and my eyes were squinted so much that finally, I just closed them.

Emma Estrella

THE FAMILY JOKE

after the cancer had come and gone
like a bout of bad weather, all that remained
was a dusty-colored fear, not sharp or stinging,

but soft and settled like a sand dune, blown into place
by a storm. now my mother talks of death as constantly
as she reminds me to take my vitamins or lock my doors

when traveling. she's always done this though, usually
over steaming cups of tea, reminding me that she
won't always be around, that one day i'll be motherless.

sometimes i have to laugh, she says it as easily as she pours
the milk, a steady stream of light into the brew-dark water.
she thinks she makes it better when she tells me what she'll leave us,

my sister, brother and i. she parcels out the house to each of us,
piece by piece, endowing us with useless china, priceless instruments,
and mountainous sums of books. i think she doesn't understand

that leaving us with something is no recompense for leaving us.
sometimes my father chimes in, parcels himself out too,
he leaves me a leg bone, my sister an arm, my brother, his opposable
thumbs;

he's in on the joke, but i remember the night we heard the word,
malignant,
his truck pulled to the side of a road, his shoulders heaving silently
with cries so desperate, they couldn't find their way into sound.

Mary Hood

MAN AS TOWN II

You are the bank of the river,
wearing a necklace of beer cans,
a shawl of ruined hair,
and a skirt of small rocks
sunken in the cheek of the earth.
The boys will not take their girlfriends here.
I peel you back.
You are the lean-to
post-office—solemn, papery,
no different than the library
after dark,
in which the shelves arch their dusty backs,
full of cold.
Every thing you say
has been written and said
by another.
I try to tell you what the other town
is dreaming, but your ears
are too drunk to hear,
for you are also the tavern
on the corner,
where I first saw you, alone,
turning in on yourself,
and you are the very corner itself,
rough as cement,
and the man,
as well, leaning over
the chain link fence, kissing me,
such beery lips.

TWELVE WORDS THAT DON'T EXIST IN ENGLISH

Forelsket (Norwegian): The euphoria one feels when first falling in love.

Sixteen years old, December of my junior year of high school.

It is two in the morning, and I am breathless in the passenger seat of Shawn's car. "Go," I whisper, casting a nervous glance back at my sleeping home. Shawn laughs as he pulls out of my driveway.

"You've really never snuck out of your house before?"

"No."

"Well, then it's about time you fixed that, anyway." He drives out of my neighborhood much too quickly, intermittently checking his cell phone for messages, which makes me cringe.

"Be careful," I plead, and he laughs again. He is a year older than me, and sometimes I forget that seventeen comes with a shiny new coat of invincibility. My breath settles back to its normal rhythm, but the cold sends a shudder through my whole body. Shawn's hand moves toward the dials on his dashboard, turning the heat up and the volume of the music down.

"Where are we going?" I finally ask. He's been asking me, lately, how much money I have, and if I think that our total could get the two of us to Florida, since it's definitely not enough for California.

He's quiet for a long time before answering. "Just driving, Jessica. You don't need a destination to sneak out." He is the only person I know who calls me by my full name. I nod and let him continue to wander, swerving through pitch black, sinuous back roads. After a jarring stop at a red light, he leads us through a set of green traffic lights and we end up in the parking lot of a closed Italian restaurant. He circles it three times, pacing as he explains, "This is where she used to work. I used to come visit her so often that her manager would chase me out."

Shawn's car dives out of the parking lot and back onto the deserted main roads, swallowing speed beneath its accelerating wheels. He takes me through a tour of his last relationship, which ended about a week ago. He pushes his messy hair out of his blue eyes and I can't help but notice that he

won't look at me. There are clean, extra shirts in the back seat of his car, and when the interior finally warms up, everything smells like the laundry detergent his mother uses. The inertia of his tight turns makes me feel as though I'm tumbling around inside of a dryer, safe and warm and disoriented.

Shawn will always look, to me, like the picture of confidence. When I think of him, it's always with his hair stuck to his forehead, drumming his fingers on his collarbones to send a rhythm through his whole body. In my head, he's always leaning casually against the wall of a dusty club or deafening basement, internalizing his favorite songs, too absorbed to look over at me. Tonight Shawn's eyes are glazed from lack of sleep, but I can tell that he's sober. He keeps his attention straight ahead.

"Can you promise me you won't keep doing what you're doing? I can't stand to see you hurt yourself like that." Shawn, at first, gives no indication that he's heard me. My stomach sinks. "The pills," I add, pleading.

Another pause. "I can promise that I can go without it for tonight."

After some more swerving around, some detours through parking lots and races along corn fields, he turns the car back in the direction of my home. "I think you should call her," I say. "I think she only left because she was just as scared. If she made you that happy then you need to go after her."

He looks at me blankly, considering. "Thanks."

Stam (Hebrew): An agreement out of frustration that there is no satisfactory answer.

Eighteen years old, and three weeks into my second semester of college.

"What do you *mean*, you've never had a boyfriend?" my new roommate throws down her accounting homework and stares at me, bewildered. I have recently been moved out of a tripled dorm room across the hall, and I'm hesitantly tacking my Death Cab For Cutie poster to the wall across from her pink, Disney pop star shrine. She looks at my stack of indie CDs, and her responding expression looks as if she's just found out that I don't speak a word of English.

"I don't know," I answer uncomfortably. "I'm good at attracting stalkers. One guy asked me to prom after considerably informing me that the left taillight of my car was out."

"Okay, but besides that. You *never* dated *anyone*? Did you ever even like any guys at all?" The concept is foreign to her. She stands at four-foot-nine, and has freckles adorably sprinkled across her face and a cheerleader hype that's stuck in her blood from her high school days. Guys can't get enough of her. She certainly reciprocates.

"Jill, of course I *liked* some." My mind races to pick another topic. "How did last night go? You went to the soccer house, right?"

"I don't know. I think I passed your friend, Rachel, before I came back up to the room. I'm pretty sure she saw me making out with this one guy, but I was a little

drunk. The next time you see her, can you ask her if he was hot? I can't remember. I'm trying to decide if I should call him today."

I roll my eyes and laugh. "Yeah, I'll bring that up sometime."

Jill grasps her homework again and starts on the next problem. "Wait. You've at least kissed somebody, right?"

"No. I haven't."

"Oh my God, Jess. Why? Really? Please, please, can I get you drunk this weekend and find you a guy to hook up with?"

"What? No, Jill. Absolutely not!"

"Why not?" She shoots me a pitying look, but she knows she won't win.

"Just *because*, okay? Just because."

Sgriob (Gàidhlig): The itch that overcomes the upper lip just before taking a sip of whiskey.

Nineteen years old, the August before my second year of college.

Everyone is sprawled out in the living room of Meg's beach house, chasing whiskey with generic root beer, wincing after every swallow. Normally I observe this circle instead of joining in, but tonight is one of my exceptions. We all push the night away from us with brave, fiery sips. My two friends on the floor are drunkenly complaining about the infomercials on TV, which we've been watching for about an hour, but nobody reaches for the remote. I'm leaned back on a couch that's getting softer and softer over time. The hum of the air conditioning provides comfortable white noise, and the tips of my hair are salty from the day's seawater. I reach for one of the playing cards on the coffee table, and I giggle stupidly at the way my hands feel uncontrollable, floating, free. This is the only time that I realize how tense I must be every single day.

Every shot that burns its way down my throat seems to cut away more of the strings that are tied to all of my limbs. It reminds me of a trick that my father taught me when I was young. If you stand in a doorway with your hands pressed against the frame for a couple of minutes, then the second you walk out, your arms will involuntarily rise from your sides. My motions are no longer deliberate or tight. Every part of me rises dizzily, just a little bit. Smiling comes more easily, too.

"One more, Jess," Kyle prompts from the couch cushion next to mine. He takes away the glass of water that I've been using as a substitute in our game, sloshing a bit of it over the side with his own slurred motions. I'm already spinning but not sick, and I know when to stop. Everyone else laughs and nudges me with their encouragement. "Come on," he says, pouring me another shot of Jameson. "I want to see you get really wasted. It's adorable. Plus you take whiskey like a champ, no faces at all. Hilarious."

"I don't want to." The first rolls of thunder are threatening us from outside, and we can smell the slick, rain-pounded streets in the breeze that's sifting through the

cracked windows. I want to run outside, but Kyle calls back my fractured attention.

“I don’t care if you don’t want to. You are *going* to.” He shoves the shot glass into my hand, and everyone turns to watch me. I hate root beer, so I don’t even have the safety of a chaser.

I swallow quickly, sucking the alcohol down while forcing a laugh back up. If I don’t laugh, I’ll wince. My stomach prickles and rolls with heat as everyone applauds. I set the shot glass back on the table and lean into Kyle. Normally I flinch at the first brush of human contact—only because I’m not used to it. When I spent a summer working at an ice cream shop with my best friend, she used to poke at my sides while I brought sundaes to the customer window. The result was an explosive scream as I doubled over, open-mouthed, and took a heap of whipped cream to the face.

But without all my sober tension to hold me in place, I need somebody to hold me up. Kyle lets me lean into him, and he begins to rub his hands softly over my bare arms. He never gets me alone, and Meg watches me like a mother grizzly bear, so this is all the uncomfortable contact I’ll endure. Lightning throws window-shadows onto the floor of the room.

Less than three months from now, he’ll pin down Meg when she’s blacked-out drunk. I will never speak to him again.

Pesamenteiro (Portuguese): One who shows up to a group of mourners, appearing to offer condolences, but who is really just there for the refreshments.

Seventeen years old, the April of my junior year of high school.

I’m sitting cross-legged on Laura’s bed while she sobs into my shoulders. “It’s okay,” I promise her, folding my arms around her and letting her soak my shirt. It’s the night before our ridiculously inflated AP English project is due, so I know that we’re not the only ones awake this late. “When did this happen?” I finally ask her.

“He broke up with me a couple of hours ago. I didn’t know who else to call, I’m sorry, you probably have your project.”

“Nah, it’s fine,” I promise. What’s three less hours of sleep? “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No,” she keeps crying. Her computer is shuffling through the hundreds of Bright Eyes songs that she has, which isn’t particularly helping to cheer her up. “I just wanted someone to be with.”

“I’ll stay for a while,” I tell her. “And look what I brought.” I pull a pint of her favorite ice cream from a plastic grocery store bag.

She fakes a small smile. “Thanks.”

I toss her a spoon that I grabbed from her kitchen when I first walked in to her house. “Hockey players are stupid, anyway. They play a sport that has them repeatedly knocking each others’ heads into plates of glass. You don’t really want one.”

A fresh wave of grief sweeps over Laura, and she rattles off her ex-boyfriend’s

miraculous qualities while half-heartedly sinking her spoon into the softened surface of the ice cream. I listen and add comments when appropriate, but after spending the last few months watching her lose herself to this hockey player's "aura," I can only sympathize so much. I continue to listen, but the concentration on my face is more about excavating all the fudge dinosaurs from the pint without her noticing.

Culacino (Italian): The water mark left on a table from a cold glass.

Eighteen years old, winter break of my freshman year of college.

Shawn meets me for lunch and wants to know all about my first semester of college. He has brought his girlfriend with him—he's been with her ever since he called her back, the night after he snuck me out of my house. Her name is also Jessica, and she has recently transferred to his university in Philadelphia.

"So, Jess, any boys?" Shawn teases me.

"Some really sketchy guy sat behind me in one of my lecture classes. Apparently he watched me sleep the whole semester, because then he started following me around campus."

"Sounds like a winner."

"Tell me about it." The three of us laugh.

"What else has happened?" he asks, genuinely interested.

"I crashed my car," I laugh, half thinking he'll applaud my recklessness. But he isn't seventeen anymore.

"Is everyone okay?" Jessica jumps in, alarmed.

"What? Oh, yeah, fine. I swerved at the last minute, so it wasn't as bad. Otherwise the air bag would have gone off. I could have had burns all over my face." Their expressions are confused, pitying. "But the rest of the semester has been awesome. I love school," I lie. I can't take their sympathy in contrast with their own stability, so I stop before I also tell them that I've only made one friend, and she goes home every weekend. I don't tell them that I've lost over ten pounds because I can't eat alone, and I don't mention that my parents have gotten so worried about me that I don't really call home anymore. I trace my finger through the beads of condensation on the outside of my water glass, ending in a ringed puddle on the table. "How about you two, what have you been up to?"

Shawn tells me about his new job and how much money he'll make someday, and Jessica recounts the benefits of her new school. The only thing I really want to know is: *Have you found it yet? Are you happy?*

Pena ajena (Mexican Spanish): The embarrassment you feel when watching someone else's humiliation.

Nineteen, the May following my first year of college.

Meg walks into my house without knocking, and I smack my face on an open

cabinet in surprise. I am looking for ammonia so that I can clean the house for her “surprise” (see also, “requested”) birthday party tonight, and I am on speakerphone at my mother’s office, so they hear my violent reaction.

“Put down the phone.” Meg nods in my direction. “I need your help.” I apologize and immediately hang up on my mom, gingerly touching the bridge of my nose as blood runs from the fresh gash. I look to her for more instruction, and she continues at a rapid-fire pace. “Tyler took Matt to the shore for the day, and Matt locked his keys in his car outside of Tyler’s house. Matt wants me to go find his hidden house key, get his spare car key, and get the locked key out of his car so nobody can steal it. Jess, stop standing there like you don’t understand plain English.”

“Oh . . . kay,” I respond slowly, trying to assess the situation. Tyler was Meg’s boyfriend of two years, and Matt is Meg’s best friend. This looks almost like a good set up for a birthday surprise, except for the fact that Meg and Tyler had broken up a few weeks earlier. There’s an awkward tension between us as we tacitly consider that this is either something special that they’ve designed for her, or the two of them actually have gone on an adventure without her, not only leaving her alone, but leaving her to clean up their mistakes.

“Let’s go,” she urges, and I set down the ammonia at her command.

Meg drives us over to Matt’s house. “He says that the spare key is in some secret compartment of a squirrel statue in his garden.” Matt’s garden stretches all the way around his house. We trample clumsily through the beds of flowers, rooting through stone angels and white rabbits, trying to find the key without disrupting his mother’s careful gardening. Nothing. There are no secret compartments in any of the statues, and it dawns on us that this is no sort of birthday surprise. Bees hum lazily and loop through the warm air between our open arms as we pick up each figurine and check beneath them. She keeps tearing through the garden, searching angrily, and I pause to dizzily rub my face, which has stopped bleeding.

“I think I may have a concussion.”

“You don’t,” she says without looking at me, and steps back out of the garden onto the grassy lawn. “Come on, we’re going to go get Chinese food.”

That afternoon, our friend Sawyer is strong enough to pull down the window of Matt’s car and to get the key out. We move his car to another safe neighborhood in town and smash glass bottles where the car had been. For a while, we convince Matt that his car has, in fact, been broken into and stolen.

Tsujigiri (Japanese): To test a new sword on a casual passerby.

Nineteen, winter break of my second year of college.

It’s January and it’s almost two in the morning and so it’s cold outside and so I don’t want to go out, not right now, and my head feels heavy and nothing will stop moving and everyone keeps pouring me drinks even though I keep spilling them straight onto Meg’s carpeted basement floor. Steve is sitting next to me on the floor,

and both of us have our backs pressed into a couch, using it to steady ourselves. I lean on him and he keeps his arm around me. It's not draped around me loosely, in a way that could be casual, or in a way that could suggest possession, familiarity. His arm is tense and rigid, deliberately holding up the entire weight of my upper body. He realized earlier that I'm not faking my dependence when he relaxed his arm and my body spilled into his lap, orange juice sloshing over the rim of my plastic cup and onto his jeans. I collapsed like a paper doll, and I felt like I was soaking up the alcohol the way a napkin does—cell by fragile cell, with epidemic speed.

I'm a little bit better now, slowly rediscovering my body, but my head is still on Steve's shoulder as Sawyer slides open the back door and steps out for a cigarette. I shake when the blast of cold air hits me, but I don't actually feel it. I deny that I'm cold when several people offer me a blanket. As our small group watches the smoke rise from Sawyer's lips, they gradually filter outside to ask him to share. Steve is the only one who doesn't leave, realizing that if he stands up, I'm likely to lose my composure again.

A deck of cards is spread out, facedown, before us. We've abandoned a game of King's Cup in the middle, but I have no concept of how long ago we stopped playing. "It's your turn," he prompts, stirring the wavering silence that has settled between us.

"No." I shake my head. "We should wait for everybody. Otherwise we'll have to fill them in on everything." Steve shrugs. "They all got up and left. They won't miss a few cards." Realizing I'm still not convinced, he stretches toward the pile with his right arm, still using the other to keep me steady. He drops the card between us. King of hearts. "We get to make a rule," he translates.

"What rule?"

He leans in toward me, his lips offering vodka whispers into my ear. "One kiss." I freeze, tense, finally steady myself and then shake my head. "It's okay," he covers quickly. "You don't have to. It was just a thought." He tries to move over from me a bit, his hand still not leaving my shoulder. Another quiet minute passes before he asks, "Can you just tell me why? Is there someone?"

"Yeah," I finally answer, and of course neither of us is convinced. Steve is looking through the glass doors, watching everybody smoke. "You can go out if you want. I don't want to hold you back."

"You're not holding me back," he laughs. "I'm holding you up."

"I'll be okay," I promise him. I want him to leave. I want him far away from me. Not because he's been unfair to me. Not because he made me uncomfortable. But because I feel as if I've been unfair to him. As if I owe him something, as if I'm ungrateful. "See? Look, I'll bet I can even stand up now." I jump up from beside him and immediately, the floor rushes up toward me. I catch the edge of the couch on the way back down, and next-day bruises are the only evidence of whatever pain I may have inflicted upon myself. Steve shakes his head, reaching to help me up. I slide away from him and lean with my back against the couch, folding my hands in my lap like a second grader. "I can sit real still and I'll be fine. You go."

Steve stands and backs away from me cautiously, making sure I don't fall over. It takes all my concentration, but I don't. The next time we'll have a deck of cards between us, we'll be sober and he'll be teaching me how to play poker. Both of us will continually knock our friends out of the game, bluffing shamelessly despite the terrible hands of cards that we're repeatedly dealt.

L'esprit d'escalier (French): The feeling you have when you walk away from a conversation and realize all of the things that you should have said.

Nineteen, November of my second year of college.

"You have to guess." Sean, a boy in my photography class, shoots me a crooked grin which seems somehow familiar, as if I've known him from a long time ago.

I lean over the tray of developer as he runs a pair of tongs over the surface of a blank, glossy sheet of photo paper. I squint to see the image that appears beneath the dim, amber safe-lights of the darkroom. Gradually, grey, amorphous shapes solidify into hard, black lines and clean white space. I dip my fingers into the tray and gently rotate the sheet of paper. The chemicals stain my nails and the smell will stay with me for hours. I am now looking down at miniscule people frozen on the sidewalks, from the perspective of a towering building.

"It's the parking garage at Penn State!" I guess, looking to him for confirmation.

"Exactly," he smiles. He turns his blue eyes back to the photo. He picks it up with his tongs, lets the developer run off the surface and drip back into the tray, then submerges it in the stop-bath solution next to it.

What I say: "That edge looks a little overexposed. You might want to dodge it, let a little less light in when you're making the exposure." He tosses the picture into the trashcan in agreement and thanks me for the help.

What I should have said: *I know you were shooting your film at Penn State. You left a drunken message on my cell phone on Friday night, saying you wished that I were there. Any memory of that? Or maybe: You remind me of someone. I don't know why you've been avoiding me, but I'm starting to think that we're running from the same things. And we'd at least make good friends.*

He walks away and starts on another exposure.

Janteloven (Norwegian): The concept that no person should ever think that he or she is better than another.

Nineteen, earlier in November.

My cell phone is in my lap, and there's a new, vodka-scrambled message asking why I'm not at Penn State. I don't answer, because I'm trying to listen to Greg, who is sobbing hysterically into the steering wheel of his car. The engine is running the heat while we sit in the deserted parking lot outside of a closed Starbucks. He has been going out with a girl who has been one of my closest friends since second grade, and

she has recently broken up with him. I listen to him list everything evil about her, and I nod supportively without actually agreeing. Then I listen to him list everything wonderful about her, and all of his plans about how to get her back. “What do you think I should do?” he finally asks, his voice pleading.

“I think that if you really love her, you have to let her have her independence. It’s what she needs right now, and it’s what she thinks will make her happy. And I know it’s hard, but sometimes you have to let somebody go.” I sound like a recording. I sound like a self-help guide. I don’t even sound believable anymore. I pull at the sleeves of my sweatshirt until they cover half of my palms, and then slide my hands under my thighs, warming them. The streetlamps of this parking lot are adorned with *SEASON’S GREETINGS!* banners that are really just an all-inclusive, non-denominational way of saying, *IF YOU ARE ALONE AT THIS TIME OF YEAR, YOU’RE DOING IT WRONG!*

“But what am I supposed to do?”

“You take care of your own needs and give yourself time to heal. Eventually, it’ll be easier to look back on. It just really, really sucks right now.”

His passive sorrow turns to anger, and he grips the wheel. I’m glad we’re parked. “You wouldn’t know,” he protests. “You wouldn’t understand because you’ve never been in a relationship, and you don’t know what it means to love someone like this.”

“Greg,” I interrupt him for the first time in over an hour. “I need to get home now.”

I don’t want to have an argument with him. I’m the girl who never raises her hand in class because she doesn’t want to stumble into an accidental debate. The only time I have ever gotten into a fight in the middle of a classroom was when we learned about Linguistic Relativity Theory in a sociology class. It states that language directly impacts your comprehension of any concept. If your culture does not have a word for a certain concept, then you will fail to understand it. If you haven’t experienced something, there is, theoretically, no need to name it.

I absolutely refuse to believe it.

Tatemaie (Japanese): What you pretend to believe, as opposed to what you actually believe.

Twenty, November of my third year of college.

My scriptwriting professor’s face is puzzled, but a stroke of sympathy hangs at the corner of her lips. My classmates and I are seated in an arc around three students who I have asked to read my first one-act play. The students at the front of the room lower their scripts into their laps as my professor prompts the class for comments. The entire room is hushed. I am not a playwright—this course is required for my major—but over the length of a semester I have managed to produce work that is at least decent, at least on par with the rest of my class. As comfortable as I am with criticism, the silence in the room is forced, uncomfortable. I scan the faces surround-

ing me in an attempt to get a reading on whether or not it's at least a good silence or a bad silence, but everyone's faces are just as hungry, confused, and concerned as that of my professor.

This particular play is vaguely romantic. The last time I wrote a true love story, I was probably sixteen. Since then, my characters fall in love from time to time, but they always walk away from one another, valiantly sacrificing themselves and then moving on. My professor finally breaks the silence. "What I don't understand about your ending," she says, pausing occasionally as she chooses her words, "is how you could create such likeable, relatable characters and then they just let each other go. They have all the opportunity in the world here. You set up a subtle, beautiful love story and I just, I enjoyed it, but it actually hurts."

Another classmate backs her up, raising his hand and nodding in agreement. The girl sitting next to me teases, "C'mon, Jess—give them a happy ending!"

My professor's eyes light up. "Give *us* a happy ending! Anybody else? Anybody want to see those two get together?" Her exaggerated hand gestures remind me of a movie-style preacher riling up a zealous congregation, and the motion makes her oversized earrings swing wildly. One by one, everyone in the class raises their hands. Even the students whose plays are all battle scenes and gangster zombies and gore. "Why doesn't it end that way?" she asks directly, bolder now with everyone rallying behind her.

I should be grateful. I should be proud. I should be so excited that everyone is so invested in my piece. But I'm not. I feel betrayed as, hand by hand, they oppose me. I don't know how to tell them that nobody wants a happy ending—not in writing. I don't know how to tell them that I don't know how to write an ending like that. I don't know how to say that I don't know what that conversation sounds like, what stage directions I could use to convey that relief, what characters could be worthy of that safety. My classmates' stories usually end neatly and with miraculous timing, the plot all tied up like a satin ribbon. I shred the ends of mine. Or let them wither. To give my characters a storybook ending would be to turn their adventure into an artificial, over-processed piece of bubble-gum fantasy. I can't say any of these things out loud, so instead, I just say, "Okay, I'll try."

It takes me two more rewrites before everyone is satisfied. In the final version, it begins to snow, and the two characters end up dancing in the girl's frozen front yard. Neither mentions love, but they have their moment together. I end up liking the new ending better than I would have thought.

Saudade (Portuguese): A continual longing for something that is lost, does not exist, or probably cannot exist. It is a love and emptiness that is felt along with this absence, or a recollection of feelings, experiences, places, or events that make one live again. It is expressed in situations when you miss someone or something, but instead of meaning, "I miss it and wish it was here," it is more like, "I miss the way it was," or "I miss it and it is always with me." This feeling can exist with or without

remembering what it is that triggered it. Very few languages have a word that's even remotely close, and frequently it takes paragraphs to give an adequate explanation. Some people who do have this word within their vocabulary have reported that pronouncing its three syllables can cause them to physically shake.

Sixteen, October of my sophomore year of high school.

The pavement is cooling off with the last lingering smells of Indian summer heat. Shawn has just finished telling me about a girl that he has met, who has the same name as me, who he believes he is falling in love with.

"Don't tell anyone," he warns. "You're the only person I've told this to. I trust you."

"I won't. I promise."

He takes my right hand in his left and slips his fingers through mine. I immediately, gently start to pull away from him, but he tightens his grip. "What are you doing?" he asks.

"I hate my hands. And nobody's ever tried to hold them, so I don't know how."

He laughs at me. "I'm going to teach you. You should know how, because somebody's going to hold your hand someday." The muscles in my fingers relax as he brushes his thumb over my knuckles. "You're an amazing person, do you know that?" he says, surprising me. "You're different. It's something you can't ever forget, Jessica. If anyone ever tells you differently, I don't want you to listen to them."

We all have moments that replay in our heads over and over again. Each time you watch, you will see something different, something hopeful, something agonizing, until you realize that it will never change. No part of you will ever be able to go back and change it. And some part of you will always be locked in that moment.

When I am twenty, Shawn and his girlfriend will invite me over for dinner. It will feel to me like we're playing house, but I'm the only one who sees it as make-believe. I will forget to let myself in through the back door, and will instead wait on his front porch on a freezing January night. I will be able to see him sitting in the foyer at his piano, back arched over the keys, his attention far from the window. He'll be playing so loudly that he won't hear me knock, and I'll give up until he finishes his song. The chords, the cadences, the memory will build as he loses himself in the music that I'll have thought he'd given up about a year ago. Jessica will walk up behind him and kiss the back of his neck. They won't hear me, won't see me, and I'll lose sight of them as I wait for the last note to resolve and my breath fogs the window. All I will think about is the young, time-frozen part of me that has always felt safest in an October parking lot, holding his hand.

That memory, that October night, will unfreeze. The sound will stop skipping in my head, no longer caught on the same notes. That moment ends with me finally tearing my hand away from Shawn's and racing him across the parking lot, both of us laughing.

The last note of Shawn's song will end with his ring finger resting on the last de-

pressed key and his gaze slowly rising to the window. When he sees me, he will rush to let me in from the cold. He'll unlatch the door and then pull me into his open arms with apologies.

Kondo (Japanese): "This time," "next time," or "last time" This phrase can only be understood in context, and is based on the idea that time is always coming and going at once.

Eighteen years old, the July after I have graduated high school.

Faye and I are sitting on the roof of our high school, hoping that no cops will drive by. It is some time after midnight, and we are two stories in the air. She sits opposite of me, cross-legged, raking her hands through the layer of small pebbles that cover the roof and are digging into our bare calves. They stick to us with our sweat, leaving pockmarked indentations when they finally fall away, but we don't notice for a while.

"I can't figure out why I feel like this," she says, looking to the fields and parking lots below. Faye has spent the past few years trying desperately to fall out of love with her best friend. She is convinced that I am the only person who can understand her.

"You're sad because you see something beautiful," I tell her, hoping she'll agree with something I've been trying to tell myself for a long time. "Even if that beautiful thing is absent or impossible. You can't just pretend like none of it exists."

A cool, wild breeze rustles the treetops below us as she thinks about this for a minute. Then, she picks up a handful of pebbles and throws it back down at the roof, reminding me of the way that children rip at grass when they're frustrated. Purple sparks scatter from the points of collision. "Did you see that?" she demands excitedly. We both stand up and test it again. We throw showers of stones down at the roof, watching low, purple fireworks burn back. We keep going, with the calm rhythm of someone skipping stones over a smooth lake, but with more noise and light to satisfy us.

"I just . . . almost feel bad, you know? It's not something I can turn off." More sparks.

"I know," I soothe her. "But the worst thing you're guilty of is loving someone, and there really shouldn't be any shame in that. All you've discovered is that you have a capacity to love someone to a point that hurts."

"Yeah. But it hurts."

"Then either it'll hurt so badly that things will have to work out in this way, because they're meant to be, or someday you're going to be able to love someone just as much. Maybe even more. All you've proven are your capabilities."

"I like that." She throws another handful of rocks down and laughs. We let the resounding clatter serve as punctuation. There is nothing more to be said.

Or maybe we just don't have the right words for it yet.

McLane Nagy

THE HEART

I can feel my blood. I can feel it whirling in the tributaries and veins of my body just beneath the surface of my skin. An undertow. A silvery fish of a memory. When you were eleven you saw the ocean for the first time and your parents took you to a beach with white sand. The water was so clear it didn't even seem to be there except for the sun's reflection on the surface. Your father found you about to enter the clarity and he pulled you back hard. When you started to cry he held you close and picked up a rock. See, he said as he let it sink. As if by an invisible force the rock tumbled violently on the sandy bottom over coral and stone. The undertow would have taken you under in seconds. His voice is afraid, as though he hadn't stopped you in time. Your thoughts are all new now. You see danger. Your father does not say you might have been spilled on the sharp coral. He does not tell you about your little rivers joining the ocean.

CONTRIBUTORS

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STEPHEN PACUK is a fourth-year student at the School of Visual Arts in New York, NY working toward a BFA in the Photography department. Focusing greatly on nature and its epicene genderless context, this project has been a chance for him to explore the discourse of gender as it applies to my life. Projecting his own genderqueer identity onto that which is inherently without gender has been a meditative process through which he has been able to grow closer to his gender, his self, and nature. His photography collection *Both and Neither* is an exploration of Self, an exploration of Other, and an exploration of the space between the two: the three.

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