

# *phoebe*

issue 41.2, fall 2012



# PHOEBE

*Phoebe* is a nonprofit literary journal edited and produced by students of the MFA program at George Mason University since 1971. We welcome online submissions of fiction, poetry, nonfiction, and artwork between August 15th and April 15th. We publish twice annually; our print edition, published each January, is \$6, or \$10 for a two-year subscription. Our annual online edition is released each May. Back issues are available for \$6. *Phoebe* sponsors annual contests in poetry, fiction, and nonfiction.

*Phoebe*, MSN 2C5  
George Mason University  
4400 University Drive  
Fairfax, VA 22030-4444

phoebe@gmu.edu  
<http://phoebejournal.com>  
[facebook.com/phoebejournal](https://www.facebook.com/phoebejournal)  
@phoebejournal

# PHOEBE

<b>EDITOR</b>	<b>BRYAN KOEN</b>
<b>ASSISTANT EDITOR</b>	<b>JAY IVEY</b>
<b>POETRY EDITOR</b>	<b>DANIEL D'ANGELO</b>
<b>ASSISTANT POETRY EDITOR</b>	<b>MIKE WALSH</b>
<b>FICTION EDITOR</b>	<b>KEN ISRAEL</b>
<b>ASSISTANT FICTION EDITOR</b>	<b>WILL FAWLEY</b>
<b>NONFICTION EDITOR</b>	<b>LESLIE MAXWELL</b>
<b>ASSISTANT NONFICTION EDITOR</b>	<b>TRACI COX</b>
<b>WEB, ART, &amp; NONFICTION EDITOR</b>	<b>JOSH AMBROSE</b>

## **POETRY READERS**

Catee Baugh, Amber Cook, Maggie Conlon, Mike Kern, Darby Price, Paul Fauteux,  
Jack Snyder, Rachael Graham, Sarah Marcus, Brian Fitzpatrick, Matt Blakley

## **FICTION READERS**

Alex Henderson, Jared Kieschnick, Liz McLean, Mario Perez,  
Nick Seifert, Spencer Seward

## **NONFICTION READERS**

Erica Dolson, Danielle Harms, Kyle Giacomozzi, Steph Liberatore

## **COVER ART**

Heather Evans Smith is a Winston-Salem fine art and conceptual portrait  
photographer. More of her work can be viewed on her website:  
<http://www.heatherevanssmith.com/>

## **SPECIAL THANKS TO**

Jacques Mouyal and the GMU Creative Writing Program

# CONTENTS

## CONTEST WINNERS

### GREG GRUMMER POETRY AWARD

JUDGED BY MATTHEA HARVEY

*WINNER*

ANNE MARIE ROONEY.....My year with flowers, unshrinking 5

*RUNNER-UP*

ANNE CECELIA HOLMES.....A Test for Safe Zones 6

### ANNUAL CREATIVE NONFICTION PRIZE

JUDGED BY MARY ROACH

*WINNER*

PRISCILLA KINTER.....Sea Change 7

*RUNNER-UP*

BRET SCHULTE.....This Town 16

*HONORABLE MENTION*

SHARON DEBARTOLO CARMACK

.....From the Other End of the Speculum 28

### WINTER FICTION CONTEST

JUDGED BY DAVID MEANS

*WINNER*

CRAIG BARNES.....Service 41

# CONTENTS

## POETRY

JULIA COHEN.....	You'll See My Design Inside a Lemon	55
ADAM DAY.....	Driving Home Through Virginia	57
JOSH FOMON.....	Swampmeat	58
EMILY KENDAL-FREY.....	from SORROW ARROW	60
JOSHUA KRYAH.....	Annunciation	64
	The Children's Crusade	66
JOYELLE MCSWEENEY.....	from Glock Chorus	67
JOHN A. NIEVES.....	Altitude Sickness	71
	Daydreamt	72
KATHRYN L. PRINGLE.....	[obscurity for the advancement of poetry #6]	74
	[obscurity for the advancement of poetry #7]	75
DEAN C. ROBERTSON.....	Otron and His Dark Horse	76
NICK STURM & WENDY XU.....	I WAS NOT EVEN BORN WHEN YOU STARTED PAYING GREAT ATTENTION	78
	I WAS NOT EVEN BORN WHEN YOUR FACE WAS LOOKING AT MINE	79
	I WAS NOT EVEN BORN WHEN YOU TURNED ME INTO A BABY	80
J.A. TYLER.....	Hallucinations Brought on by Inclement Weather	81

## FICTION

BRADLEY BAZZLE.....	The Case Against Dr. Smetana	82
L. ANNETTE BINDER.....	Ithaca	88
LAURA ENDER.....	Shoplifting	90
MINDY FRIDDLE.....	Group Dynamics	97
SUSAN FRITH.....	Three Hearts	113
ZACH POWERS.....	Use Your Spoon	122

## NONFICTION

ALICE LOWE.....	Cornish Pasty	130
RACHEL TOLIVER.....	How the Lake Saved Me	135

# MY YEAR WITH FLOWERS, UNSHRINKING

ANNE MARIE ROONEY

.....(nor were they much for winking. In that way, we were similar, the meat and I, our faces full of twitches, rhyme-hinged on awkward hitches. Our expenses were expansive, like, excuse me, we'd better have it: gold wallops, white eggs, even the sterling shone over-basket. Got water? It showed, that slouch. Little tick marks smeared the day with been-blown kisses. Sure, we were angry, and lonely, overmouthed. Our stains showed only in movies, filmy stings set to melt. Believe we fasted slow. When real hit its stride its pace was to track as a body is to pelt, fast marks hitting black as a belt-splayed vein.) Outstanding image: pollen-basted body; body in the no.

# A TEST FOR SAFE ZONES

ANNE CECELIA HOLMES

The first thing is how to rescue. How to be less  
damaged but damaged enough to seem fair.  
A favored method is never use your hands for anything.  
To inspect your tongue every day and get ready  
for a surprise: there are always intruders.  
There is always a place where the number of knots  
you untie equals the number of people fighting  
to comb your hair. What I suggest is a whole different animal:  
Assembling rugs until they form a heap.  
Waiting for snow just to have something constant on supply.  
I can store all the rakes I want in the mud room but only  
at the dinner table can I demonstrate the truest salvage.  
What it is to eat as if by megaphone I will show you.  
If I commit to claiming *brain cloud* what am I accountable for?  
I am told it's all in the way you ride that penny pony  
but I've never known the right time to buck.  
There is always so much to misunderstand.  
Like how everything with lineage can't ever sit still.  
The exact circumstances for swapping a ladder.  
God I am so full of odds. What if I crawl inside  
the base of this house? What if I built its outside last?

# SEA CHANGE

PRISCILLA KINTER

Growing up in the country, in Pennsylvania, nature was every bit of the world on the other side of the screen door, a place I went to when I stepped off the back porch or past the garage. Nature, the natural world, had I been defining it (which I hadn't) was most obviously the woods, the creek, the chicken hawks, black racers, and honeysuckle.

Then there were other degrees of nature, like the eighteenth-century springhouse on my great-grandparents' farm at the top of the hill, grown wild round with orange and freckled tiger lilies and magenta phlox, extra-spectral and glowing in the shadows of the low, field-stone springhouse walls. The aged wooden door was angled and flaking its whitewash, resistant to all but the hardest push, like the doors to the houses that stood empty here and there in the woods. Like the door to the house across the road and up the hill, back along a near-forgotten cow-path lane through the trees, through green-tinted light. The springhouse, the abandoned farmhouse—these were on a sliding scale of natural, a scale of slow devouring. Engulfed by nature, their atomistic parts in a process of disassembly. Not returning to an original, natural state, but transformed into forms that would eventually stop looking like human contrivance.

Soil and leaves filled the empty human spaces, and always the buzzing of insects. Spider silk and dust and feathers and carapaces accumulated to build soil, to make new ground for the first seedlings of oak or mulberry that would push through the glass of those stone-walled greenhouses, reaching through broken windows to the sun, pushing through warped floor for the damp and earthy root cellar. Connecting, intimately, through touch, the wood and stone of human habitation to the wood of a living trunk, and the brown scaly stones of a pioneer oak's first acorns.

These things I'd have connected to nature, had I been counting. But then, too, there were the country roads, snaking like black water through arched green tunnels, or past baking fields where fog would roll

down from the flanking hills of an evening. Fog creeping and rolling like the slow ghost of a landslide, white, wet, chill, covering the crops along the road or, by the end of summer, just touching the corn-silk-topped stalks and spilling across the road and dissolving near the still-warm asphalt. The roads were not apart, not separate from the nature, that other, and the more closely I look now the more the otherness disappears in all directions.

\*

There were aspects of the landscape I took for granted as belonging, when I was a girl. That black ribbon (tarred and aromatic for six-feet on either side to keep down the weeds) that led to the Coke Works, a fuel-producing offshoot of the Bethlehem Steel, rising from a desert of cinders beyond the road, beyond the narrow scrubby meadow that remained between the baked, oily dust and the tar. And on low, man-made ridges in the meadow, the nightly-dumped molten slag, poured from pots mounted on the backs of train cars, illuminating the road and warming our faces as we waited in the car on the shoulder of the road to watch it flow, liquid nickel and aluminum and arsenic. The slag was a controlled eruption: tangerine heat, a magmatic phenomenon of uncommon beauty, colored so intensely as to produce shivers in my teeth, viscous light that smelled like pouring honey. It was a normal part of a varied environment.

\*

When I was a girl, we had a family cabin in the Pocono Mountains just inside the boundary of a tract of game-preserve land. We, my mother (or my grandparents, or any combination of those three plus or minus various uncles and cousins and such) and I, would drive north from home, from the Lehigh Valley, up and over the elongated hills, the twists and folds of the Alleghenian Orogeny visible at every cut-through. Leaving the Great Appalachian Valley for the Ridge-and-Valley Appalachians meant piercing Blue Mountain's Great Wall, slipping into the Lehigh Tunnel at a ridge-wall green from shoulder to toe-hold, a dense canopy that sheltered

blueberries, magpies, star mosses, spring peepers, horns-of-plenty.

Exiting the tunnel was discovering another world.

The northern mouth of the Lehigh Tunnel opens to Palmerton, where the sulfurous exhalations of a large-scale zinc smelter breathed a great upside-down yellow bowl, a gaseous cap that warmed and burned the northern side of Blue Mountain and the mirroring ridges until they were seemingly free of any living thing. The smelter closed almost thirty years ago, when I was almost ten, but virtually nothing grows on the hills above Palmerton even now.

This is what covers Blue Mountain, where the Lehigh and Aquashicola flow past its toes: standing sticks, bleached grey and smoothed by the wind, the trunks of trees killed by cinders and sulfur dioxide—those trees that were too slim to fall under their own weight. They rise tall and white and long on near-sterile slopes. The dead trees stand, still and broken, decades after the gases cleared from the air, unable to decompose, their upper parts shattered and littering the ground like tinder, parched sticks that cannot rot. When the trees and undergrowth died, the rich forest soil washed down the mountain to the river, or simply blew away. What were left were dry rocks weathering in the sun, pebbles and larger stones, and the match-stick trunks and branches.

The Palmerton zinc smelter left its own mountain, a moraine of waste from the burning of ores. The smelter's cinder bank along the Aquashicola holds thirty-three million tons of refuse from eighty years of smelting: zinc, cadmium, manganese, arsenic, lead, and other heavy metals and toxins in a mountain-ridge of waste. Two-hundred-feet high, a thousand-feet wide at its maximum, and almost three miles long—Google “Palmerton” and you can see the cinder bank (as it is called) from the satellite view. The cinder bank is now terraced in wavy Nazca lines, presumably to slow down the progress of heavy metals into the river. But this pile, too, is part of the natural world—the world turned inside out, an evisceration

of the hills, their contents brought to the light and spilled in every direction. Palmerton is a frame of a larger picture, a place greatly changed at rapid speed, where geology and biology continue to work. Where rain falls, where tardigrades might still wait in suspended animation under stripped grey trunks. Where Superfund money pays for sod and saplings. Where the biological mechanism of reclamation is carried out by government agents, and pioneer scrub from blown seeds and pips shat by passing birds.

\*

The normal circumstances of nature come easily: verdant fields, deep forests, dusky hills, and dark wild waters. But what about the unusual circumstances, the nature that is we, that is domestic, inside, and surrounding?

I sometimes hear cries against classifying violence, whether physical or environmental, as natural behavior. People say that to call a horrific act “natural” is to excuse it and to invite accusations of being biologically deterministic. But this reduces the argument to ridiculous simplicity, and so allow me to reduce it in another direction:

What relation does a human hunter, of whatever kind, bear to a macrophage or other apex predator?

Predation, the earliest form of violence, where violence is defined by the *New Oxford American Dictionary* as “behavior involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill someone or something,” evolved more than a billion years ago in the Precambrian Era with the first cellular life that evolved to feed on photosynthesizing cyanobacteria. Where would we (or cobras, grey wolves, praying mantises) be, if not for the early evolution of strategies that allowed some organisms to bypass photosynthesis and nourish themselves by engulfing others?

This is not to condone violence—but to suggest that we can never escape nature, even at our worst.

This is not to say *natural* equals *good*. Remove the culturally

constructed portion of the definition and “natural” becomes chemistry, geology, natural selection. Natural is about iron ore smelted with coke in a blast furnace, vulcanism worked by mammalian hands.

This is to say that *natural* and *nature* can't only be Out There and The Other—in fact, they are not the other at all. Nature and natural are in here, in the springs of this couch and in the division of my skin cells.

\*

When I was about thirty, I felt that I was somehow losing the ability to distinguish between the green world and steel. (That sounds airy-fairier than I mean it to be.) Or maybe I just didn't want to keep doing the work. Understand that I still escape to the woods to camp as often as possible, that I smell the car exhaust and frying potatoes in my neighborhood and that I am not deaf to the morning clashing and clanging of garbage trucks.

A contributing moment: when Andreas, having hoped to leave the city for quieter habitation, the chance failing to materialize, took the attitude (with a sigh) that “You can never walk the same alley twice.” (He was trying to cheer himself up, but Heraclitus goes on record as the first to have said that you can't step in the same river twice, real water or river of time. Nor can you fish the same water twice; the surface is never the same glass or riffle, the hatch is never the same brood of mayfly, the trout rising or holding tight to the underside of a waterlogged trunk will not be exactly the same fish two moments in a row.) The alleys change as much every day as any forest, any woodlot, with flowers mating, birds crying, mice sneaking alongside wooden garage walls. I must have been in exactly the right frame of mind to hear it, because the aphorism gained some blood and suggested a new way of looking at this city landscape. The afternoon light on stucco or an enameled car roof is as changeable and subtle as the shades of a forest of trees. The rock doves and house sparrows are not wilderness superimposed on brick on concrete; the generations of birds that have

come to feed, mid-winter, on the frozen ornamental fruits of my crabapples are as coevolved with this urban space as I am. Their instincts are not the same as mine, nor their strategies, but my rooftop is as much a part of their natural world as are the fruits of my non-native fruit trees.

\*

The cinder bank, the slag heaps, seem sometimes to be not so far from the waste piles of a colony of leafcutter ants. It's true that the leafcutters' bank of moldering bits of foliage and ant carapaces doesn't cause the soil below it to become uninhabitable for all but extremophile organisms. And it's also true that the leafcutter, while being the largest consumer of green material in any given habitat it inhabits, does not strip a tree barren, does not leave the trunk bare to grey and parch on the hillside. A leafcutter colony works with the same tireless energy as a zinc smelter or coke works operating at full capacity; it's just that the ants are far more prudent in their resource use than are their human analogs.

Don't make too much of my use of the word *prudent*. I'm not arguing for the self-aware wisdom of ants—as far as scientists know right now, human self-consciousness is special, if not a wholly unique way of interacting with and conceptualizing the world. I don't ascribe the same level of awareness to the Formicidae. The human tendency to act contrary to our own health and safety is not what distinguishes our cinders from the ants' leaf mold. Rather, the difference lies in the human species' ability to outpace the mechanisms of natural selection, mechanisms that have presumably selected against (for more than one-hundred-twenty million years) ant colonies depleting their resources to the point of extinction.

But to say “we should know better” is another kind of biological determinism. We are so changeable, our species, so adaptable. We mutate our behavior to exploit every niche and material we find, like bacteriophages undergoing recombination at rates beyond those of the medical technology that tries to keep up with them. (This is not a new analogy.)

We do not practice responsible usage but then, what species does, really? Natural selection has simply not yet smacked us down hard enough, broadly enough, to incur a change deeper than at the level of the individual. At the level of individual self-awareness.

Suffice it to say that wastefulness and carelessness come naturally to us. But remember that *nature* is not synonymous with *good*.

\*

This is all just exercise. I am neither a philosopher nor a biologist, and I can only barely convey that sense of noumenal sameness of the nature of all things. A liminal perception. A broadening and opening of the bounds. I'm a fan of the German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who said that to talk about and describe how things are is to offer mere tautology—most of what can be said about life and the world, that has value, is literally unspeakable.

\*

Is it all language games, then, to say *look* and *touch* and *see*? Can the game be made to live and carry a pulse by connecting the looking to the unspeakable? The bounds of classification count, as do the atomistic elements of the equation. The connectiveness of the elements counts, too.

\*

So we have bounds and elements and connections, twine and copper and neural pathways. What is in a stone but molecules of minerals, and atoms of the elements that compose those minerals? I can say that basalt is primarily composed of feldspar and pyroxene. I can break it down further and explain that these are both silicate minerals and that the silicates account for the preponderance of Earth's rocks. Silicon is element number fourteen on Mendeleev's periodic table, a metalloid lying between aluminum and phosphorus. But what does this say of the unspeakable qualities of a chunk of extrusive volcanic rock?

\*

When I was thirty-four or thirty-five, I began hunting. The decision to do so was based on personal ethics; I felt that, were I to continue eating meat, it was right and good for me to know how it felt to take the life I would then consume. I hunted ducks and pheasants with a friend of a friend, with a borrowed 20-gauge and my grandfather's wool coat. We hunted a pastoral middle-ground between farm fields and open water, where the willows and cattails grew untamed, and the fauna fed on the refuse of corn and sunflower farming.

Sometimes the language games of *look* and *listen* become *what is ethical?* and *talk about violence* and *what does omnivore mean?* Sometimes these things grow to carry a pulse and a shotgun.

\*

These suggestions to look and see all come down to my own tautology: I look for what I already know to be there, and so I find it and support my own scheme. And then offer that scheme to you. But it becomes an empirical truth that the world is a system, if you are willing to widen your scale.

\*

To *see* and *listen* and *look* may come down to tautology, but perhaps these actions can induce a new paradigm.

\*

I began in the woods in Pennsylvania, on the asphalt ribbons, at the Coke Works, in creek water and springhouses, in bright Chinaberries and farm middens. I say *I began* because these things are the wooden blocks and Legos that built me. Began again in the city, on new asphalt, with car exhaust and the perfume of linden trees, by Midwestern lakes, with mulberries and rusty green dumpsters.

\*

Wittgenstein wrote, in his posthumously published *On Certainty*, that, "We know the earth is round. We have definitely ascertained that it is

round. We shall stick to this opinion unless our whole way of seeing nature changes. ‘How do you know that?’—I believe it.”

# THIS TOWN

BRET SCHULTE

When my family moved to Omaha in the spring of 1991, I heard jokes about Boys Town from Tina, the realtor. “We got a place for kids like you,” she’d say, and then she’d squeeze her false eyelashes together and smile, causing the makeup on her face to crack like old siding. As realtors go, she was a fixer upper.

Tina joked with me because it was quite apparent I was a “good” kid; friendly but not brave, comfortable with adults, and in my case, devoted to reading the complete works of John Steinbeck. I was unhappy about the move to Omaha, and perhaps in her own way she was trying to cheer me up, letting me know that I was all right, that no matter what happened, I would never end up in a place like Boys Town—the name of which was made more ominous by the fact that I had little idea what it was.

My imagination produced something like Pleasure Island in *Pinocchio*, a shadowy assembly of cigarette-smoking juvenile delinquents, the sort of unfortunate kids we called “druggies” where we lived in Iowa. My friends were all “good kids,” abstainers of drugs and alcohol except for a single and daring round of vodka shots one Friday afternoon. Our idea of fun was driving golf balls from the roof. And sneaking out at night to hose trees with toilet paper and to fork lawns. I had a girlfriend whom I hadn’t even kissed.

We were leaving our town because my father had made himself literally sick trying to rescue a nursing home in the suburbs of Des Moines that was near bankruptcy. He was hospitalized from the stress and anxiety, and by the time he returned, he had decided we would do what I feared most. Move.

Tina invested several consecutive weekends to finding a home in Omaha for my family. Our demands didn’t seem like much: Mom and Dad wanted something they described as “well-built” and “reasonably priced.” I began to dread Fridays, knowing that my weekend would be spent gazing from the back of a minivan at a city I did not know but did not like. For no good reason, I developed an opposition to ranch-style homes, announcing that an upstairs was essential to my happiness. My sister, then 11, cultivated a similar hatred for split foyers. More than a decade later and after a degree in architecture, her dislike

would grow into professional loathing.

\*

We drove in what seemed like circles through the city, Tina pushing us farther and farther west, where neighborhoods are patterned like paisley, all loops and expensive dead ends. One day Tina drove us out on Pacific Street, which runs east and west through the middle of town. When we reached 132nd Street, Omaha suddenly gave way to pastoral, fancy: a planned community of corn field, barns, homes, administrative facilities, schools, and athletic fields. From there, it reached to the other side of 144th Street and north past the torrent of Dodge Street.

This was Boys Town. It began as an orphanage in 1917 when an Irish priest named Father Edward Joseph Flanagan took in five orphans in a rented house at 25th and Dodge. He soon moved to a bigger place. But in 1921 he took his flock of orphan boys, which now numbered a hundred, and fled the crowded city and its vagrants, drunks and migrant workers. He moved to a farm ten miles west of town and left the city behind.

Today, Boys Town is nine hundred acres of incorporated village. And Omaha long ago surrounded and swept miles past it. With the city around it, Boys Town looks like a set piece of the American gothic, blown across the landscape. Dozens of houses sit along tidy, winding streets. Flags flap over porch fronts; shadows of old trees flicker in the streets; geese and ducks float on a wide pond; and next to it, is the Boys Town National Headquarters, a postmodern construction of the late '70s that appears to be part Colorado ski lodge, part Ikea moon colony. As a kid, it accentuated the strangeness of the place; I had certainly never seen anything like it in Iowa. It seemed sophisticated—as new, ugly things often do—and worldly. I look at it today and it still seems worldly. But more so, it seems liberal.

And there are older brick buildings. The Wegner Middle School is red, modern, boxy, and utilitarian. The Boys Town High School is of the same build, but the brick is yellow; meanwhile, the cavernous, art deco Skip Palrang Memorial Field House feels as expansive and triumphant as the post-World War II era that produced it.

The Boys Town Post Office delivers the mail; Boys Town police patrol

the streets; and the Boys Town Fire Department handles cats stuck in trees, and presumably, fires. About five hundred kids live there at any given time, though I saw none that first day. It was quiet, and the middle school and the high school were both dark. I paid close attention to the houses: no ranches. They looked big enough for a family of ten and bore a striking resemblance to Nebraska-style McMansions, which are mostly new and bulging and clustered in planned communities. The homes are meant to give these kids, and the married couples who care for them, a sense of the security and normalcy of suburban wealth. From ghettos and rural poverty, from foster homes and state-run institutions, these kids undergo a radical transplant of privilege.

When we were driving through the city toward Boys Town, my first sight was a familiar one: corn. The field—several dozen acres of it—stops where the main Boys Town campus begins. On the other side of campus is the final vestige of Boys Town as a working farm: a small cluster of barns and feed lots and tractors, where kids work with geese, chickens, pigs, and their pasts.

The cornfield always drew me back. Something struck me as odd about it, beyond the fact that it existed at all. Later, when as a journalist I began researching Boys Town, I realized what it was: no fences. I grew up in and traveling around rural Iowa to the farms of my aunts and uncles. Never had I seen a cornfield without a fence, whose purpose is to corral cattle that are released into fields after harvest.

It was hard to imagine a farm without fences. But it was harder still to imagine forgoing fences in a place like Boys Town, home to hundreds of kids with criminal records, kids who have been abused, abandoned—kids who have survived by learning the art of running away.

My parents didn't notice and they never expressed any concern that day when Tina drove us down the street that constitutes the southern border of Boys Town, and then swung us into an adjacent neighborhood. To the surprise of everyone, she had found us a home that fit three kids and my parents' budget. It had a walk-out basement and three bathrooms and, I was happy to see, an upstairs. It was considered a good neighborhood, not rich, not a commune of millionaires striving for sameness, but in the middle, with trees, and schools in walking distance. After Tina closed the deal with my parents, I didn't hear

another word about Boys Town.

That year in Omaha, however, I became the closest thing to a Boys Town kid that I had ever been. My grades dropped. I watched TV or listened to music in my room, at levels that infuriated my parents, with the door locked. I grew more entranced with my old life. I took the Greyhound back to Iowa on weekends to stay with friends and to get away from my parents, whom I blamed for transplanting me into hell. As the new kid at my Omaha high school, I kept to myself, and ate by myself. Because I was not brave, I chose a small Catholic school in south Omaha over the big public school just a few blocks away. But the shelter I sought in the small school backfired. I found that the cliques were tight, and the kids could be cruel to an outsider. I told my friends in Iowa I was going to run away and come live with them. Then I told my parents. My mother, alarmed, enlisted us in family therapy. The psychologist suggested I would snap out of it.

In the meantime, I needed money to maintain my collection of angsty grunge rock, and to pay Greyhound. I got a job as a hamburger-and-fry guy at the Dairy Queen down the street.

\*

On the first day, I met Donald, the mad king of the Dairy Queen kitchen. Donald was in his 40s, tall, and slightly heavysset. He had driven a delivery truck for 20 years before deciding that his fortune lay in the career of nursing. My first lesson from Donald was to avoid as much contact as possible with the “cracks,” he said jutting a thumb through the heat lamps in the direction of the three girls working the front counter.

“They’re cute and they know it and if they can get you to do their whole fucking job for them, they will. And don’t expect anything in return. Those little bitches will bite your dick off,” he said. “You just watch ’em handle a popsicle for Christ’s sake. Go at it like it’s a carrot stick.” One of those “bitches” was a no-nonsense but big-hearted punk rocker named Carla, who had grown so close to Donald and his wife that she took up a permanent residence in their basement. And Donald, who could and would say whatever he wanted to her or any other female, loved her as he did his daughter, who was grown and gone. He stood up for Carla when the owner was unhappy about what shifts she could work and

when she failed to re-fill the M&Ms. Before Carla moved in with Donald, she had a boyfriend who was not kind to her. Donald took care of that, too. For those reasons, I guess, she didn't care what came out of Donald's mouth, or how he sounded to other people.

Carla helped Donald study for his exams, which seemed to occur at ten-day intervals and would result in violent, verbal explosions when a day at Dairy Queen had stressed him out. Orders processed by the girls at the counter, and they were always girls, appeared to us in the back as thick green letters on a tiny monitor. Donald didn't like the system, and he shared his thoughts with his co-workers through the heat lamps.

“GODDAMMIT! THIS WHOLE SCREEN HAS LIT UP LIKE A FUCKING CHRISTMAS TREE AND YOU CRACKS ARE TELLING ME YOU CAN'T GIVE ME A HAND BACK HERE ... OR A HAND JOB?”

The most amazing about Donald was that he got away with it. His explosive temper was disarming in its sheer creative force, and when he used words like “bitch” or “crack,” it was in some ways ironic, a joke on himself and the fact that he knew he occupied a station in life with expectations of ugliness. He wanted you to laugh at him, despite what he said. We did. But the biggest laughs were reserved for Jerry, the guy who owned the place—a blond, burnished, and tan male nurse. He was the butt of Donald's jokes, but he was also Donald's model for success. Of course, Jerry didn't make his money from nursing. He made it from the small number of franchise restaurants he bought with his wife's money. Occasionally, she and Jerry would show up in matching tennis outfits, which sparked joyous ridicule by the fryer. The day manager, Scott, had as many laughs as anyone.

Scott was in his early 30s, had a thin moustache and bandy legs, and carried a comb in his back pocket that he used to sweep up and over his high doppel of brown hair. I eventually learned he had gone to Boys Town. He ended up there circuitously. One day, his mother dropped off him and his brother at their grandparents' house and never came back.

Scott's grandparents were too old or too tired to care for the boys. After spending some time in foster care, they were bounced into Boys Town. They were lucky to still be together, and he credited Boys Town for that. Beyond that, he

would say only that it was a good place. It prepared him for the real world. He graduated from high school, which, I think, surprised him. And like almost a third of Boys Town graduates, he enlisted in the military. He served four years in the Navy and declined to re-enlist, but the Navy remained his favorite topic. He regarded Dairy Queen as his ship, a friendlier and better-tasting ride, not to mention one equipped with a crew of teenage girls.

According to Scott, DQ bore a startling number of similarities to life on an aircraft carrier. Flushing out the Mr. Misty machine was “like wiping shit out of a latrine. I wouldn’t eat that either.” When he was stocking Buster Bars in the walk-in freezer, he’d pant out the story of sailing in arctic waters, frozen breath hanging from his moustache like ornaments. “Jesus Christ, cold like this reminds me when we were stationed off Argentina, man. You never felt wind like that. You think it gets cold here, brother, you haven’t felt cold until you stood on an aircraft carrier and have that fuckin’ wind hit you, man. It will blow you off that fuckin’ boat like a paper cup.”

I was washing dishes in the back when he wandered over one day, pushing buttons on a round, white plastic device about the size of a pocket watch. I asked him what was beeping in his hand. “Well, shit, I’m trying to quit smoking and this fuckin’ thing is supposed to tell me when I can have a cigarette. So instead of going outside and smoking for five minutes, I stand around all day watching this thing. Great fuckin’ plan.”

Scott said he wanted to quit because he knew cigarettes would kill him. He had often said the same thing about the Navy. And as he stared at the plastic cigarette timer in his hand, he said, “You know, I could have stayed in the military. They offered me a Corvette if I would have stayed on four more years. I was like, ‘Nah, fuck that.’ It’s not worth it, and what the fuck am I going to do with a Corvette if I’m floating out on a pond for the rest of my life?”

“I pretty much made up my mind when I was on the deck one day and I was working on some cable with this guy Trevor. He was from Oklahoma. How two guys from Oklahoma and Nebraska ended up in the Navy beats the hell out of me.

“Anyway, we were stringing and tightening some cable for the aircraft when they land. The hook on the plane catches the cable and that’s what stops

them. It's dangerous work, man. The pilots, if they miss the cables, they'll fucking skid off the deck or crash into something. And if you're working on that deck, you have no idea the things that can happen to you. Get sucked into a jet engine. Get blown overboard. And the cables, man, those things are strung so tight, they can just snap. And boy you better pray you're nowhere around when that happens. And they get worn out and you got to replace them. So me and Trevor are there and we are tightening this cable. The wind is fucking screaming across the deck. My fingers are so cold I can hardly move them. And then PHITH!! That cable snapped and I seen Trevor crumple. That cable snapped back at him and sliced him across the abdomen. Like he was a piece of cow or something.

"But the worst thing was that he lived for awhile. I held him and I was screaming for help. And the medics rushed over. And he was still alive, looking at us. I just thank God he didn't say anything. I couldn't have handled it if he would have said something, you know, because that would have meant he was really aware of what happened. Like he knew he was cut almost in half; his blood was everywhere. He was in shock, though, and that's how he died.

"After that, I was like 'fuck it. What did he die for? His country? A Corvette? I'll take a fuckin' job at Dairy Queen, man.'"

He looked down at the white piece of plastic in his hand, pushed another button. It beeped. He said, "Jesus Christ, I still got five minutes." Scott walked away, contemplating his life, I suppose, as he stared at the device that was to save him from cancer, and that reminded him of why he left the Navy and ended up at Dairy Queen.

\*

The fact that Dairy Queen was close to my house meant that it was also close to Boys Town. The day I met my first Boys Town kids, Scott and Donald were in the manager's office watching television. Scott and Donald emerged, laughing. They had just seen a Dairy Queen commercial introducing its new slogan: "We treat you right."

At that moment, we heard a cry for help from a new employee named Tasha up front. Carla and Scott went to investigate while Donald and I spied through the heat lamps from the kitchen. I saw the lobby filled with kids, black, white and Hispanic, swarming in and out of make-shift lines, yelling, cracking

jokes and laughing.

They were in T-shirts and jeans, looking pretty much like any of the high school groups that come into Dairy Queen, usually after a sports team pulls off a big win. Scott came rushing into the back to load up on Blizzard filler. He was grabbing at a bag of mashed Snickers or Heath Bar or something when I asked what was going on.

“Boys Town kids,” he said matter-of-factly. This was intriguing. I had never seen Boys Town kids for myself.

“Why are they here?”

“Shouldn’t you be in the fuckin’ kitchen?”

I turned heel and saw Donald shoving hamburgers into the grill, screaming that the monitor was lit up like a fucking Christmas tree.

The kids were rowdy and hungry. I tried to observe as much as possible while preparing the food: They seemed no different to me than any other kids. Some looked friendly; others sullen. I gathered they were out on a shopping trip at the nearby mall, and swung by DQ for a treat. Just like any other kids, or any other family for that matter. A handful of adults supervised the crowd and, after they had eaten, rounded them into extended conversion vans.

We were nearly wiped out of French fries and several fillings for Blizzards. Scott looked exhausted and angry as he wiped puddles of melted ice cream and candy bar bits and chunks of Oreo cookie off the counter. Donald came up and slapped a hand on his back, and said: “Hey man, we treat you right.”

Later, I asked Scott if those sorts of outings were common at Boys Town. He shrugged. “It’s just like if you were raised in your house. Except no one there is really your family.”

Boys Town became a source of intrigue for me. One day, I told my parents I didn’t like our church, St. Wenceslaus. It was modern and warm and yuppie and it was shaped like an arena. Nothing about it felt particularly solemn, or even holy. People backed into their parking spots so they could leave as quickly as possible. And many of those people were driving cars that I considered emblems of excess and wealth. Exactly the sort of thing Jesus railed against. Isn’t the gospel devoted to the principles of self-sacrifice and service to the needy? I told my parents I wanted to go to mass at Boys Town.

They agreed. And I exulted in my triumph. I imagined mass at Boys Town as old-timey, with rows upon rows of boys and girls in blue suits and neckties, their hair slicked or tied back, freshly scrubbed and full of reverential joy. I imagined something more akin to English boarding school than modern-day Catholic church. I don't think I was alone in this idea. The fact that Tina had often misidentified Boys Town, albeit in a teasing way, as a religious reformatory caused me to later wonder how many people in Omaha actually knew about Boys Town's methods or history or ideology.

Years later, I discovered that opinions are widely divergent. Many people regard it with reverence; some describe it as bizarrely optimistic, others as cruel due to its philosophy of rigid behavior modification. Many people believe it's still primarily an orphanage—though orphans are rare these days—and that it's exclusively for Boys. Boys Town has accepted girls since 1979. Many think it is exclusively Catholic when it is, in fact, nonsectarian. Many want to believe it is conservative and rigorous and therefore uniquely successful in producing upstanding young men and women. They want to believe it is successful because they want to believe it is a holdover from a healthier, more robust time.

For people like my father, Boys Town proves what he wants to believe: that faith, structure, and high expectations are the answer to society's problems. When we arrived at Boys Town, we all saw what we wanted to see. I noted that the church was old and stone and shaped like a crucifix the way I liked it. Priests bustled about before the beginning of mass, behaving as if all this really meant something. One or two retired into wooden confessionals built into the walls in back, where people had already lined up, ready to purge. All this activity was more than I had ever seen in a mass.

At the front, rows of heads, interrupted only the occasional adult supervisor, belonged to the children of Boys Town. Some wore suits. Others were in jeans, collared shirts. My dad smirked and elbowed my sister when the Boys Town boys filed into mass. He thought they looked like the right kind of guys, clean cut and brought up in the faith. Better yet, brought up in the church.

Most likely, Dad wouldn't have been so effusive had he known that more than half of Boys Town kids arrive on mood-altering or anti-psychotic drugs, that half have attempted or threatened suicide, that most have a history of violence

and drug or alcohol use, and 75 percent come to Boys Town through the court or child welfare services.

But Boys Town has a beguiling effect on people. Most anybody familiar with the place knows its focus is on troubled kids, most often from broken homes, neglected and living by their own rules. At Boys Town, they are groomed and given contemporary but neutral clothing. They are divided by sex and live up to eight at a time in a house with a married couple, which has the endearing appearance of being a real and very large family.

Boys Town's carefully tended lawns, big houses, and happy children seemed like the actualization of our American ideal of community: White, black, Christian, Jew living alongside one another, growing up together, united by a common experience. They go to school together. They eat together as families at night. Everything is within walking distance: The houses are close to the middle school, which is close to the football field, which is close to the high school and the vocational center and the field house. Mass transportation is everywhere in the form of extended white vans sitting in driveways. Two churches sit within a hundred yards of each other, one Catholic, one Protestant. Residents of other faiths are taken to worship off campus.

In the 1990s, Father Val J. Peter, then the director of Boys Town, typically took the pulpit and welcomed the congregation. What hair he had left was white and curly, rising in plumes from his round head. His homilies usually relayed anecdotes from Boys Town, which he would tie into the liturgical calendar. I remember stories about children who came to Boys Town with nothing and still learned the value of giving, children who learned to read, who learned the importance of family and love. The stories often seemed a little too perfect. Peter also spoke about social justice, particularly for children—just as Flanagan once had.

Since Boys Town was founded, it has operated on the idea that no one is admitted who doesn't want to be, and kids can leave if they choose. The lack of fences is important to this idea of cooperation, and for almost ninety years, the pact between child and Boys Town has worked in place of incarceration.

Certain things are required if they want to stay. They are expected to abide by the Boys Town method. Developed in the 1970s by the University of

Kansas, the method is one of behavior modification based on positive reinforcement. Before most people hear a criticism at Boys Town, they have received four words of encouragement. The ratio of positive feedback to negative is supposed to stay at 4:1 during a child's tenure. "Catch 'em being good," is a mantra repeated among the faculty. In return, the child is expected to learn and abide by sixteen "Essential Skills" that are plastered on the walls of Boys Town's schools with the repetition of concert flyers. Some of them are: Following Instructions; Accepting Criticism; Accepting Consequences; Accepting "No" for an Answer.

Every skill begins with "Look at the person," which seems simple enough until you consider that it applies to children who've been beaten or neglected. Looking at the person then takes on new meaning, looking at the person is to acknowledge the person, respect the person, even confront the person. Looking at the person can be its own form of punishment.

When I think of Boys Town, I think of Scott at Dairy Queen. One day on the job, I told Scott that I went out to church at Boys Town a few times. I don't know what I expected from him. He just said, "Oh yeah."

"Yeah, it's a pretty cool place."

"Boys Town or the church?"

"Both."

"Yeah. I should go back sometime and see some people."

"Father Val is pretty cool."

"Yeah, I didn't know him, really. A lot of people liked him."

And that was that. Scott had little to say. I seemed more interested in the place than he did, but what was exotic to me were just the facts of his life. Maybe he simply didn't think much about Boys Town because his life before gave him ample food for thought.

When May rolled around, I gave my two weeks notice to Scott and told him I was going to work at a summer camp back in Iowa. My friends would be there, but already the urgency to be with them was waning. I had stopped riding the Greyhound back to my former life.

I had found some things in this new city that I liked. I had begun to make friends at my school, and I had grown to like Omaha, its size, its quirks, its history. I had discovered its punk scene and its nascent indie and emo-rock scene,

which would soon blossom into cult status as home to Saddle Creek Records. Scott told me there would be a job waiting for me after the summer, if I wanted. I told him I'd think about it.

At the end of the summer, I came back home and found work at a different restaurant, this one in the mall, where plenty of other kids from my high school worked. One day, I stopped in at the Dairy Queen to see everybody. Carla was there but Donald had found a job as a nurse and Scott had quit.

I asked what Scott was doing now.

Carla didn't know. But she said since he left, the restaurant had been robbed twice. The cops found no evidence of forced entry from either burglary. They figured someone who had keys was the culprit.

"They think Scott did it. The cops are looking for him."

Whether they found him or not I don't know. Maybe the reason Scott looked so uneasy to me was he was always so close to running. McMansions and rented parents didn't change that. Maybe there's a reason so many of their graduates take to the military, migrating among Army bases or clinging to the decks of aircraft carriers. When you are someone like Scott, the idea of home must be an abstraction, like the idea of mothers who do not leave. Boys Town argues that it has an eighty percent success rate with its kids. "Success" is defined as those who graduate from high school or receive an equivalent degree, who get a job, stay out of jail, and are off drugs.

They get these results by running surveys of their alumni. I wondered if they would ever find Scott, and I wondered what he would say.

# FROM THE OTHER END OF THE SPECULUM

SHARON DEBARTOLO CARMACK

*April 14, 1844*

“Are you aware that you are in a dangerous condition?” the New York City coroner asked. \*

The fever flushed Eliza’s sunken cheeks, and her hair, oily and stringy from sweat, was matted against her scalp. Perspiration glistened on her forehead. “Yes, sir,” she said. The physician who’d been attending her had given her narcotics to make her comfortable, but as the infection spread, it was impossible to find any position on the worn cot satisfying. Every part of her body ached, from the burning behind her eyes to her stiff muscles and joints. During the past two weeks, any fat reserves she’d had were depleted, and her muscles had atrophied. Her limbs felt heavy, as if stones had been placed on them, although they had never been lighter. The pain in her swollen abdomen hurt worst of all. She bent, then straightened her legs, trying to alleviate her misery. She pressed her hands against her belly, as if the pressure would make the pain subside.

Dr. Sweeney had summoned Coroner Edmund Rawson to Mrs. Bird’s boarding house because Eliza was in a “dying state.” Dr. Sweeney told him that the girl was a native of New Haven, Connecticut, who had “respectable connections.”

Rawson arrived on Sunday evening at eight o’clock, bringing with him Police Justice Merritt, to hold an antemortem examination in Eliza’s bedroom. Upon entering, they found the young woman lying on a cot in the center of a small, dimly lit room. The transom above the door provided perhaps the only ventilation from the putrid, sickeningly sweet smell of infection. Eliza had wasted to a mere skeleton, despite Dr. Sweeney’s attempts to save her. Eliciting as much information as he could and afraid she’d expire at any moment, Rawson had twenty-six-year-old Eliza make her mark on the deposition after each short series of questions. All she could manage in her fragile state was a faint X on the paper. Rawson suspected she wouldn’t survive much longer, but he made sure he had her signed testimony. Someone would pay for the condition of this girl.

Over the next eight hours, Eliza sunk lower and lower. Dr. Sweeney

roused her when he could with stimulants, then Rawson continued with more questions.

“Did you have an operation performed on you for the purpose of procuring an abortion?”

“Yes.”

\*

*July 2, 1975*

“It’s almost over,” I told Terri (as I’ll call her), the twenty-something woman on the examining room table, as I held her hands in mine. She squeezed so tight I thought my bones might break.

I stood by her side. Her tears, glistening from the fluorescent ceiling lights, slid down the side of her face, wetting her blond hair. I looked at Dr. Eames, only the top of his fuzzy gray-haired head visible. He huddled between Terri’s naked legs draped in a pastel-blue paper sheet, suctioning the unwanted pregnancy from her womb.

In my training as a medical assistant, I’d learned to disengage myself from the patients, not to let myself imagine what the patient felt during a procedure. This detachment made it tolerable for me to give wailing babies injections, to pierce a squirming child’s spaghetti vein for blood on the first try, to assist without fainting as a doctor sliced through skin with a scalpel blade. But when Terri’s legs, propped in the stirrups, began quivering involuntarily, the paper drape crackling as she trembled, my resolve broke, and I fought the urge to flee the room, never to return to a doctor’s office again.

Loosening a hand from Terri’s grip, I placed it on one knee to steady her leg. I focused on a colorful anatomical diagram of the female reproductive organs on the opposite wall. As I mentally reviewed the names of the parts—cervix, uterus, fallopian tubes, ovaries—then recited the lyrical medical terms I’d learned in school, like bilateral salpingo-oophorectomy (surgical removal of both ovaries and fallopian tubes), I regained my composure.

“It’s OK, Terri,” said Dr. Eames. “We’re almost through.”

This was my first job after interning in another medical practice. My wide-eyed wonder for the glamorous world of doctors and medicine began when

I had volunteered at Planned Parenthood. There, teens and women could obtain low-cost birth control, but not abortions. For that, they had to make an appointment with a doctor. I decided then to go to medical assisting school, already knowing I wanted to work for an obstetrician-gynecologist. When I interviewed with Dr. Eames, I learned he did abortions two mornings a week, scheduled on days when expectant mothers who wanted their babies didn't have appointments. This kept the women, some of them teenagers, who decided against bringing their pregnancies to term, from having contact with his other patients. Was it to protect the privacy of those ending their pregnancies, I wondered, or to sequester them? Because Dr. Eames terminated pregnancies in the office building of his private practice, not in an abortion clinic, his patients, most of whom were middle class white women, never had to confront protestors. Nor did I.

When a woman came in for an abortion, Dr. Eames counseled her and explained the procedure. On that first visit, when I initially met Terri, I assisted as he inserted a laminaria, a compacted piece of seaweed from the Sea of Japan that looked like an algae-green houseplant spike with a string, into the neck of her cervix. Overnight, the laminaria dilated the opening somewhat, as it swelled like a tampon from the mucosa in the surrounding tissues. This dilation caused less physical trauma and slightly less pain when Dr. Eames performed the abortion the next day.

I had no way of knowing then the impact these procedures—and the women who had them—would leave on me, especially this first abortion. Terri was surely more frightened than I, but I was scared, too. When her legs started shaking, I swore to myself right then that I would never miss taking a birth control pill. Terri's ordeal was one neither of us would forget.

\*

Eliza Munson found the strength to tell Coroner Rawson that her abortion took place the previous December, when she was six weeks pregnant. A woman named Madame Restell of Greenwich Street performed the abortion. Eliza's boyfriend, James Fraser, had seen an ad in the newspaper and accompanied her to the abortionist's house. The couple explained to Madame Restell that Eliza needed assistance with her condition. James paid for the procedure—\$19—then Madame Restell took Eliza into a room and shut the door.

In the diffuse glow of the flickering oil lamp, Eliza took off her winter cloak and bonnet, but Madame Restell instructed her to remove just her knee-length chemise from under her long bell-shaped skirt, then to lie on the floor. What thoughts went through Eliza's mind as she lay there? How could she not be frightened? Did she have second thoughts? Did she know how it would hurt? Was she wishing she had someone's hand to hold?

Restell knelt and reached her bare, unwashed hands up Eliza's skirts. Eliza couldn't see what Madame Restell was doing, so she didn't know whether the woman used her fingers or an instrument, or both. But Eliza could feel the pain. Without any pain medicine, Restell forced something inside her womb. Eliza surely cried out.

\*

After pulling out the exam table extension, I lifted and lowered Terri's shaking legs from the stirrups to straighten them and adjusted the paper drape blanketing her legs. Dr. Eames stood from his stool and removed his surgical gloves, snapping them off and into the waste can, infusing the sterile air momentarily with the smell of latex and powder. As if choreographed, he stepped over to Terri's side while I moved out of her sight to cover the clear jar reflecting her terminated pregnancy. From a stainless steel cabinet, I pulled out a sage-colored surgical towel, then I draped it over the container—like a flag over a casket. Dr. Eames patted Terri's arm, told her she had done well, and asked if she had any questions. She sniffled a no and wiped her tears with the Kleenex I had given her. I wondered if the glare from the ceiling lights bothered her eyes. Dr. Eames told her I would explain the post-op care and would schedule her follow-up appointment for a week from today. He gave her arm a quick squeeze, turned and nodded to me, then left the room.

I placed a sanitary pad between Terri's legs and asked, "Do you feel ready to sit up? Or do you want to lie here a few minutes?"

"No. I can get up."

I gripped Terri's arm and put my free hand on her back, feeling the damp warmth of her skin. She rocked slightly to the side and lifted from the waist to sit up. Her body still quivered, a nervous reaction from the procedure and the medications Dr. Eames had injected into her vein several minutes before he began:

Valium to relax her and Demerol for the pain.

\*

After Madame Restell finished the procedure, she had Eliza stay in her care the rest of the day and night, but she didn't see a need for Eliza to be confined to her bed. She could rise and move about when she felt like it. The next day, Eliza took the train back to her hometown of New Haven.

But she eventually returned to New York City to work at her sewing trade, because people in New Haven were talking. The gossip about her condition and the solution to her problem had become known. "I did not wish to remain there to mortify my friends," she told Coroner Rawson. She rented a room in Manhattan from Mrs. Susan Devlin, and Eliza lived there until she became ill in mid-April 1844. She claimed she had never been right since the abortion last December, and she'd had two heavy periods, which she called "floodings." Hoping to receive a remedy for her ailment, she sought help from Mrs. Bird, a nurse, at 18 Oliver Street.

Dr. James Sweeney attended Eliza, treating her at Mrs. Bird's. "She had violent uterine hemorrhage at that time," he informed the coroner. Sweeney had packed her with cotton and treated her with "two drachmas of powdered *Secale Cornutum*," a compound made from ergot, which would help the blood loss and constrict the uterine muscle fibers. When he visited Eliza later in the afternoon, the hemorrhaging had subsided. Upon examination, "I found something in the neck of the uterus and protruding a little from its mouth," he said, "which to the feel appeared to be a portion of the placenta."

Eliza's back and abdominal pain continued. Dr. Sweeney tried to alleviate her suffering. At first, he did not administer any opiates because he was afraid the drugs would interfere with her uterine contractions and the expulsion of the remaining placenta. At various times, however, he ultimately gave her laudanum, nitrous aether, and castor oil, even though it was three or four days before the placenta completed its expulsion. The placenta, Sweeney reported, "was in a putrid condition, from which I inferred that it was detached from the uterus for some time and had lost its vitality."

Dr. Sweeney knew Eliza was dying. Even after the placenta detached, she complained of abdominal pain. He catheterized her, but only a tablespoon or two

of urine dripped out; he administered an injection, “which operated freely on her bowels.” The next day Eliza still had abdominal tenderness, so Dr. Sweeney applied leeches. Then he gave her calomel, a common treatment for gastrointestinal problems, and opium. The bleeding from the leeches relieved some of her pain, and she began feeling better. But within days, Eliza relapsed. “There was distension [sic] of the bowels and the pain returned,” said Dr. Sweeney. “I prepared a turpentine injection [to treat intestinal parasites], which was administered and a large blister was applied under the umbilicus...” After he caused her skin to blister by giving her a second degree burn, he drained the wound. Physicians believed that an imbalance in the four humors—blood, phlegm, and black and yellow bile—caused disease. Bleeding, purging, puking, blistering, poulticing, and applying toxic ointments were typical treatments to restore balance.

When Eliza didn’t improve, Sweeney called in a colleague, Dr. Olliff, for his opinion. Dr. Olliff concurred that Eliza was dying. Sweeney told Eliza that she was in a “dangerous situation,” and he applied more leeches and created two more large blisters. On another visit, Dr. Sweeney brought with him another colleague, Dr. Colwell, who “proposed moistening a segar [sic] and passing it up the rectum, and withdraw[ing] it [quickly] in order to reduce the flatulence, which was done without producing any effect.” When Dr. Sweeney again emphasized to Eliza that she was in a dangerous condition, she confessed that she’d had an operation performed by Madame Restell.

When Coroner Rawson heard the story, he issued a subpoena for the abortionist.

\*

Some twenty years after working in Dr. Eames’s office, I had changed careers, becoming a professional genealogist. I happened upon Eliza’s case in the New York City coroner’s files, where she reeled me into the lives of women, not unlike my patient Terri, who endured the trauma of deciding to terminate a pregnancy and then the physical ordeal. I understood what Eliza suffered. When I stood by the sides of women who’d had abortions, I was the one who held their hands, trying to comfort them through a procedure that left permanent emotional scars. I was the one handing them tissues to dry their tears. I was the one reassuring them that everything would be fine—as if I could know that.

\*

Eliza, like all women then, had few, if any, dependable methods of preventing pregnancy other than abstinence. The rhythm method gained popularity slowly in the 1840s and 1850s. More common for birth control was vaginal douching with warm water and an astringent such as tannin, powdered opium, prussic acid, iodine, or strychnine, all considered spermicides. There were also no reliable means for determining whether a woman was pregnant until quickening, or fetal movement. Unable to distinguish between an early pregnancy or a missed period, physicians and women often treated a late period as an “obstruction,” thereby terminating—intentionally or unintentionally—a potential pregnancy. Most people did not see this practice as either morally or legally wrong.

Women commonly resorted to using botanical and chemical abortifacients. Eliza had ingested oil of Tansy, a poisonous flowering herb, on at least one occasion to produce a miscarriage, but without success. Ergot, a fungus that grows on rye, was known to cause uterine contractions, thereby forcing a miscarriage. Women obtained these remedies from chemists, doctors, and midwives. Early nineteenth-century statutes made abortion a crime only when poisons or “instruments,” such as a hat pin, knitting needle, or wire to separate the fetus and placenta from the womb, were used after quickening. In order for Madame Restell to reach inside Eliza’s uterus, she almost certainly used an instrument. Even with Eliza’s knees bent close to her chest, Madame Restell’s finger likely wouldn’t have been long enough to reach through the vaginal canal and into the neck of the cervix, a little more than an inch long, to then penetrate the uterus and dislodge the fetus and placenta. Her finger also would have been too large to insert into the tightly closed cervical os (opening) without using extreme force.

By Eliza’s day in the 1840s, abortion was on the rise. It was no secret that single and married women from all classes, but especially middle and upper class women, used abortion as a means of family limitation or to treat an unwanted pregnancy. In newspapers across the country, chemists, midwives, and physicians advertised “menstrual regulators” in the form of “pills guaranteed in every case where the monthly periods have become irregular.” Warnings that these pills “would undoubtedly...produce miscarriage” did not escape anyone’s attention. Prescriptive literature, such as *The Married Woman’s Private Medical Companion*,

published in 1854, offered advice on “when proper and necessary to effect miscarriage.”

One physician of the day remarked, “Ladies boast to each other of the impunity with which they have aborted, as they do of their expenditures, of their dress, of their success in society. There is a fashion in this.” For many bourgeois women, it became common practice to abort “pregnancies that occurred during the first few years of marriage, pleading that polite society considered early pregnancies déclassé.” A Michigan physician reported in the *Detroit Review of Medicine and Pharmacy* in 1873 that abortions were so common in America that it was rare for a married woman of childbearing age not to have had one or more abortions.

\*

Coroner Rawson needed Eliza to identify Madame Restell. When summoned, however, Restell refused to cooperate, so he issued a warrant for her arrest. The officers found Madame Restell in bed and brought her to the house on Oliver Street where Eliza lay dying. To assist in their line-up, the officers directed two other women who boarded in the Restell household to dress themselves like Restell and to fashion their hair like hers. Restell wore her black hair parted down the middle, smooth against her head and pulled back into a bun at the crown of her head. Long spiral curls dangled on the sides in front of her ears.

When the three women arrived in Eliza’s room, they stood before her.

“Do you know the women present in this room?” Coroner Rawson asked Eliza.

She raised her head, giving each an earnest look. In the glittering light, she probably squinted to see. Then she pointed. “I know that one. I believe it is Madame Restell.” Eliza sunk back on her pillow.

Rawson continued his questioning. “Is the woman present, the one that operated on you, for the purpose of producing abortion and, if so, which one was it?”

Eliza pointed at the same woman. “That one seems to be the one. I never saw her but once before in a house in Greenwich Street.”

Rawson looked at Madame Restell, then directed another question at Eliza. “What business did you have with this woman when you saw her in

Greenwich Street?"

"I went there to have her produce an abortion upon me."

"And what induced you to come to Mrs. Bird?"

"I was out of health." Eliza's words faded under her breath. "I thought I would come and see what ailed me." Then she spoke no more.

Death relieved Eliza Ann Munson of her suffering around four in the morning on April 15, 1844.

\*

In Eliza's time, rarely was it solely a woman's decision to terminate her pregnancy without regard for her husband or lover. In almost all cases reported in the press, medical journals, and court records of the time, men, like Eliza's boyfriend James Fraser, either encouraged women to seek abortions or helped women secure them.

Yet it wasn't religious or moral reform groups who eventually swayed lawmakers, nor was the life of the unborn child a foremost issue. Rather, the laws changed in part because white Protestant Americans feared being out bred and out numbered by the arrival of thousands of European immigrants throughout the nineteenth century. At the same time, an increasing number of middle- and upper-class white Protestant married women sought abortions to limit their family sizes. It was the American Medical Association that lobbied for legislation to curb deliberately procured miscarriages. One by one, states passed harsh laws during the late nineteenth century, making abortion at any stage during gestation a criminal offense and holding the woman and the abortionist accountable. These laws remained unchanged for nearly 100 years until the Supreme Court overturned them in the famous *Roe v. Wade* case of 1973, which gave women an unconditional right to terminate a pregnancy in the first or second trimester of pregnancy. Pregnancy in the third trimester could also be terminated, but only if the life or health of the mother was at risk.

\*

"Can...can I see it?" Terri asked me, then blew her nose.

I wasn't sure whether I was supposed to show her the collection jar or not. Dr. Eames hadn't told me this might happen.

"It's only blood and fluid," I told her. The vacuum aspiration abortions

Dr. Eames performed in the office were done in the first twelve weeks of pregnancy. He'd been doing them regularly since *Roe v. Wade* had legalized abortions two years earlier. After Dr. Eames had inserted the duckbilled speculum to open Terri's vaginal canal and removed the laminaria, he introduced into the neck of her uterus a rubber tube called a "cannula" and turned on the 180-watt rotary pump. As the vacuum suction unit hummed and whirred like a small electric fan, he moved the tube forward and back inside the womb, suctioning the tissue. He removed the tube to scrape the inside of the uterine wall with a curette, an instrument similar to an iced-tea spoon with a hollowed loop at the end. He inserted the cannula a final time to eliminate any remaining tissue. The suction unit contained two clear, polycarbonate jars, each capable of holding two liters of fluid, although rarely did the procedure fill the receiving receptacle more than a quarter full. One canister held tap water, which the unit circulated into the other jar to mix with the uterine tissue. The whole procedure took less than fifteen minutes, although to Terri, it surely felt much longer. Suctioning and scraping the uterine cavity caused intense cramping. The tears streaking her face weren't only from the emotional pain.

I decided to show Terri the jar, and I would later realize that some women needed to see it, although I didn't understand why. What were they expecting to see? A baby suspended in liquid? How could that make them feel better? Terri sighed with relief when she saw what I had told her was true. There was no fetus to see. Just murky red water with a few clots of blood resting at the bottom. She dabbed at fresh tears brimming her eyes and murmured "Thank you." I nodded and averted my eyes, staring blindly at the linoleum floor. I didn't know what to say, nor how to comfort her, or even if I could. Holding her hand during the procedure seemed natural; now I felt awkward. *Should I hug her?* I wondered. *Is that appropriate? Or wanted?* I replaced the towel over the jar, and, picking it up, I cradled the container in the crook of my arm. I left the room to give her privacy, gently pulling the door closed behind me.

\*

*Had Eliza Munson wanted to look?* I wondered. No one stood by her side. No one held her hand. No one gave her a tissue to wipe away her tears while she underwent the most traumatizing experience of her life. Her abortion occurred

in the days before the discovery of the germ theory and sterile practices, before anesthesia or routine administration of pain killers, before antibiotics might have controlled her infection and saved her life. How many other women like her suffered the same fate before surgical procedures became safe?

\*

Madame Restell was an assumed name. She was born in England as Ann Trow in 1811. Ann and her first husband and infant daughter came to America in the early 1830s. Not long after their arrival, her husband died, and Ann supported herself and her daughter as a seamstress. Toward the end of the decade, in 1839, after marrying a second time and after returning from a trip to England, she began advertising her fertility control services in the spring. In one of her first ads placed in the *New York Sun*, she claimed that she was introduced to the specialty “by the celebrated midwife and female physician, Mrs. Restell, the grandmother of the advertiser.”

As Madame Restell’s New York City practice grew, her fees increased, and as her fees increased, Restell moved to more fashionable parts of the city, eventually purchasing a mansion at the corner of 52nd Street and Fifth Avenue. Her clientele consisted of a broad spectrum of women, but she catered to the social elite, most of whom were married. Her newspaper advertisements were targeted “To Married Ladies,” which sometimes brought as many as twenty women a day. Madame Restell had a reputation for complete discretion. The authorities rarely bothered her because she often threatened to reveal the names of her wealthy and well-known clients.

In Eliza’s deathbed testimony, she told the coroner she’d had an abortion in December 1843 performed by Madame Restell. When Coroner Rawson began the inquest, however, the all-male jury heard a different version of the events, as did everyone in New York City. For five days running, the *New York Herald* printed transcripts of the inquest testimonies, often taking up a full column on page two and sometimes the front page. Eight people testified, from Eliza’s sister to her landlady, as well as a brother and a cousin of James Fraser (Eliza’s boyfriend), and two doctors. Witnesses revealed that Eliza didn’t have just one abortion by Madame Restell, but a second one a few months later by Mrs. Bird.

“Mrs. Bird” was also an alias. Her real name was Margaret Dawson. Like Madame Restell and other abortionists of the day, she advertised her services in the classifieds of newspapers. Bird claimed she had trained “at several celebrated hospitals in Germany.” Abortion in the mid-nineteenth century had become a booming commercialized business and one of the nation’s first medical specialties. With no laws to the contrary, anyone could hang out a shingle and style themselves a midwife or a physician, trained or not.

After Eliza’s first abortion in December, she became pregnant again, seeking another abortion the following March or April. But why hadn’t Eliza returned to seek help from Madame Restell? Why had she pointed a finger at her and not at Mrs. Bird? Were fear and scandal part of Eliza’s motivation to keep the secret, even on her deathbed? Frustrating as it is, Eliza’s reasons were buried with her.

The doctor who conducted the postmortem exam on Eliza’s body determined the cause of death was from blood loss and peritonitis, the spread of infection to the lining of the abdominal cavity. Mrs. Bird was indicted and found guilty of procuring an abortion on Eliza Ann Munson, which led to injuries resulting in her death. The crime was a misdemeanor, and she was sentenced to spend six months in the city prison and to pay a \$250 fine.

And what of James Fraser, Eliza’s lover? Where was he during all this? Conveniently, he had disappeared.

\*

I found Dr. Eames in the supply room, rooting for something in a cabinet. I held the jar, my hands under the draped surgical towel.

“What do I do with this?”

He glanced over his shoulder to see what I was talking about. “Pour it down the sink and rinse out the container.”

His directive stunned me. I was amazed I hadn’t dropped the jar. Was he serious?

He found whatever he looked for, and as he passed by me to leave the room, he nodded toward the sink. “Over there.”

I didn’t know what I had expected. A ceremony? A soprano to sing “Amazing Grace” perhaps? A priest to administer last rites? Something? Anything?

I stood where Dr. Eames left me, for how long, I couldn't say. The insides of my own thighs quivered now. Despite the coolness of the room, I could feel sweat seep through my favorite uniform top, the patterned one with pink and purple petunias against a white background. My hands felt jittery, as if I'd had too much caffeine, and the warmth that had radiated against my palms from the jar's interior began to chill.

I sucked in a breath and, not knowing what else to do, I moved to the sink and quickly poured the cylinder's contents down the drain, flecks of blood and tissue splashing against the sides of the stainless steel basin.

\*

A century and a half after Eliza Munson's death, she found in me someone who had an inkling of what she'd gone through, someone who wouldn't let her life—or her death—be forgotten, because Terri and countless other women whose hands I'd held had never left me. I was the one in Dr. Eames's office to whom these women turned for comfort, for empathy, for understanding, a person Eliza never had by her side. But what reassurance could I have given her? The women I attended in 1975—some of them teenagers, others in their twenties and thirties, some single, others married, some not ready for children, others not wanting more—always thanked me for the kindness I showed them and for not judging them. I never asked their reasons for terminating a pregnancy, although most volunteered their stories. Was it absolution they sought, or was it simply a need to share their decision with another woman? Over time, I suppose, I became better at anticipating what they needed from me: a smile, shared sadness, distraction, pure professionalism, or maybe even a laugh. But they never knew how I had to numb myself to the flow of their tears. They never knew how inadequate I felt in the role they expected of me, a strong, empathetic caregiver. I hadn't been prepared for that part of my job. How could I have been? I was only 18.

## SERVICE

CRAIG BARNES

My father might be in trouble. We are on the phone at one in the morning—two in the morning where he is—and there is a pain in his chest. The pain is also in his left shoulder, in his left arm. All the scary places. I tell him to sit down and take deep breaths, shoot a few aspirin.

“Think I should chew or swallow?”

He sounds weirdly chipper, like it’s exciting to have options. We haven’t spoken in months. “Maybe chew,” I say. “Considering the circumstances.”

“Then what?”

“I don’t know, Dad. I guess we play it by ear.”

I do and do not know how it came to this. Earlier today, he trapped a squirrel in his yard. He put the trap in the cab of his truck, put a blanket over the trap so the animal wouldn’t be frightened, and then drove out into the sticks. He was about to tip the cage at his usual spot—he’s done this three times already, he has a procedure—when he was confronted by an angry farmer. Apparently, the farmer didn’t appreciate having squirrels in his field, and my father’s concern about the car threat to those same squirrels in his subdivision didn’t stir up any pity. Apparently, my father and this farmer exchanged words, almost ended up hitting each other. The squirrel made it to the promised land, but now he, my father, has this pain in his chest. “Maybe you should call 911,” I say.

“I don’t want to be one of those people.”

“What people, Dad? Living people?”

“Alarmists. Can you just stay on the phone for a minute? I think it’s about to pass.”

“I’m in another time zone.”

“Just talk to me. Tell me about school.”

“No school now. It’s summer here too.”

“Then tell me about your new job.”

“It’s not a job.”

“Fine. What do you do with your life?”

\*

The lunch rush comes at the shelter before I can tell Cherry the squirrel part. It would have been a better story if I had gone on, but shit gets crazy. By the time things settle down, we are too tired to talk. That's one of the things I like about my new job: the tiredness. It keeps you from thinking. Still, in this particular case, it doesn't serve me.

I shouldn't complain.

After the rush, Cherry remembers to ask if my father is OK—as in, did he die while we were on the phone? I am surprised that she remembers. I'd almost forgotten myself in the hurry. I say, as far as I know, he's doing fine—which is true in context. We talked until the pain went away—just going over the standard script, no what-does-it-all-mean dramatics—then said goodnight. Out of context, probably not so much, but who wants to hear all that? I like Cherry. She's an older lady with blonde hair and an infinity symbol tattooed on her neck. When it's hot in the kitchen—which is always—we talk about swimming. She used to skinny dip in the Clark Fork, and I think that must have looked pretty good: a younger Cherry, skinny dipping. Otherwise, we have a mother-son thing going—me being the son she's never mentioned having.

“Parents are hard,” she says as we're hosing down the dishes—whole galaxies of beef stroganoff swirling down the drain. “Kids too.”

“Who does that leave?”

“Dogs,” she says, “and the Holy Trinity.”

Through the wall, I can hear Rod Stewart on the radio asking everyone in the dining room if they think he's sexy. The eternal drone of the kitchen fan drowns out the base. “You've got a girlfriend,” I say.

“I'd probably be better off alone.”

“Any kids?”

Cherry looks pained. I have stepped on something unacknowledged between us.

\*

I shouldn't call what I do at the shelter a *job*. It is court-ordered community service. It's not voluntary, and I don't get paid. I have to report my hours and I can't quit—not unless I want to fulfill my debt to society in some other, less-desirable way.

That said, it is work—sometimes a lot of it—and I do it regularly. I have a schedule, a boss, and co-workers. Sometimes, if I hold the thing up to the right mental light, I can call it a job.

“That’s a good way to think about it,” my father said after the court date. “Just another job.”

“Sure. I hit a guy. They put me to work. Who knew it was that easy?”

“It’s not funny.”

And it wasn’t. I struck someone, a homeless man named Aaron Katzenbaum. I don’t remember doing it, but, according to the report, the blow was vicious. They can’t put you in front of a judge until your blood alcohol zeros out so I had a lot of time to sit in jail wondering about what I’d done. I didn’t think it would be anything violent. I don’t have a history. Instead, I remember worrying about job applications, how I would have to explain this incident to well-dressed, slightly frowning strangers for the rest of my life. I don’t know where the yuppie anxiety came from. My father makes ancient Egyptian pottery replicas for a living. I made the mistake of calling him from jail.

“A homeless man?” he said. “How does that even happen?”

My father may be confrontational in person, but, in theory, he is a strict pacifist. “I couldn’t tell you,” I said.

“Me either.”

“I mean I was too drunk to remember, Dad.”

My mother left him when I was thirteen. She took me with her because, at the time, he was very focused on his work. It was his one legitimate artistic period. He spent it producing numerous large, white clay orbs with single black dots in the center—symbolic of life, death, rebirth, etc. (This being before he sold-out with the replicas). She still lives in the same town as he does, but on the other side of it, with one Doctor Samuelson who got in on the grand finale of my explosive adolescence. She’s had two more children since, and I’m only welcome in their home for birthdays and Christmas. We also keep in touch.

\*

Cherry’s girlfriend, Waffle, stops by the shelter during my lunch break. I’m on my way out but I say what-up because I’m doing the son-of-Cherry thing. Waffle has one of the most interesting faces I’ve ever seen. It is angular from all

sides, like a pineapple. She reaches out like she's going to lay a hand on my chest but she doesn't. "Cherry mentioned your Dad on the phone," she says. "Gnarly."

Touching can be complicated at the shelter. Personal space issues. Personally, I have too much of it. I lean forward into her hand, and her sunburned fingers spread out across my chest. "I knew it was bad," she says. "I could feel it."

"He's been playing Moses to a bunch of squirrels."

She gently pushes me upright. "Like I said—bad."

I have thought about Cherry and Waffle sexually. I haven't thought about it a lot. I also haven't been aroused since I woke up in jail. I don't know what this means. "So what's shaking?" I say.

This is when she tells me about the ceremony. She and Cherry will be going into the woods tomorrow night to draw down the power of the Moon Goddess. It is an ancient ritual—pagan, Wiccan, supernatural—the idea being to summon celestial forces that bring physical and spiritual healing. *Physical* and *spiritual* healing. She doesn't emphasize it; I'm just susceptible to the idea. I get an image of Cherry reordering the heavens with a spatula, hairnet glowing with the power of the cosmos. I am invited, and of course I say no. This is a good example of where I draw the line between me and them. She tells me they need a priest, both of them being priestesses. The implication is that I am the man for the job, but this seems unlikely for a lot of reasons. I notice she still has her hand on my chest—fabric, nipple, heart. I'm just about to beat it for the Civic I always hide two blocks away—this is a good example of where I blur the line between me and them—when she gives me the hard sell.

"You can also call down blessings on family members," she says. "Any loved one in need."

"Can the Goddess do a triple bypass?"

She pulls her hand away, and I almost fall into her face. "You think I don't know how this sounds?"

This is a big question around the shelter. *Do you know how this sounds?* It separates the lifers from those who are just passing through. I suppose it's the same with my crime. "No thanks," I say. "I need to stay by the phone."

\*

My father calls again that night. The pain is back, a shapeless hurt radiating out from the heart area. It is not hot, he says. It is not a burn. It is cold and sharp. If it was a color, it would be the color of the talc encrusted along the walls of his kiln. Polluted milk. "Bury my ash in one of my pots," he says. "I want to die self-sufficiently."

I tell him he has to call someone.

"I did," he says. "I called you."

I think of some of the times I have called my father. From my mother's new house. From the backseat of a van headed for Portland. From a rest-stop in Butte to say I would be staying in Montana permanently. There was a lot of time in-between each call, but it all feels like one conversation. "Dad," I say, "if you die, it's going to be your own fault."

"What else is new?"

"Hello, self-pity."

"I'm just saying the poetic justice of the situation is not lost on me."

"Now what does that mean?"

"I pushed you out of my life. Now you don't want me to pull you in at the end. It's not that complicated."

I am surprised and embarrassed by where this is going. Maybe I should have expected it, but we usually don't talk like this. I don't like getting emotionally torpedoed. "How bad would you like me to feel?" I say.

"Awful would be a start."

"You need a doctor."

"Doc Samuelson is the only heart man in town. I don't want his hands on my tits."

I don't know if my father cheated on my mother or if she cheated on him. I think about this sometimes. Maybe there was no affair, but I doubt it. They are both creative, charismatic people. Maybe they cheated on each other. Maybe I'm not even his son. Maybe. I hope it wasn't just things not working out. I'd rather they were both banging strangers at craft shows. Anything would be better than a fizzle. "Are you still relocating squirrels?"

"Hell no. They're the only family I've got left."

“I’m hanging up now.”

“Forget it. Watch out for something I’m sending you.”

“Not another pot.”

“It’s the creepy jackal for carrying organs into the afterlife.”

“Jesus Christ, Dad.”

He doesn’t know that I know he’s already been to Doctor Samuelson. He doesn’t know that my mother called me to say that he has major problems with his heart: the valves, the arteries—all the scary parts. That was the night I got arrested. He’s always been better at handling bad news.

\*

Aaron Katzenbaum, the homeless man I hit, comes into the shelter the next day. I remember him from court. He looks like a celebrity in the way a lot of homeless men look like celebrities—Mickey Rourke, Mick Jagger—something ragged and memorable in the face. The possibility that this might happen never occurred to me. From the way he looks at me, it must not have occurred to him either. We stare each other down over the sneeze guard, with me poised to dump Asian vegetable mix onto his tray. Again, I am surprised by how big he is. In court he was in a suit, showered and shaved with a lily white bandage over one eye, a lawyer trick to do something for his vulnerability, but now his swollen neck stretches out his tee. He has, among other things, *fuck you* tattooed on his forearm.

“Hey” I say. “So I got community service.”

He thumps his tray on the rail once. It’s like the opening bell of a fight I don’t want any part of. Then he slides down the line. As he goes, I notice that none of the other servers say hey. Aaron is apparently not a regular. He goes heavy on the salad bowl and then sits down at a table by himself.

I point at his back. “I punched that guy,” I say to Cherry.

She looks up from the goulash and squints at Aaron’s gorilla shoulders. “You’re a fool,” she says.

“It was OK. The police broke it up.”

“Well the police aren’t here now, are they?”

When my shift is over, I go out the backdoor, but he’s waiting. He’s sitting on a tomato crate out in the alley, smoking a cigarette. I think about my

Civic parked two blocks away. “My father’s dying,” I say.

I don’t know why I say it. It’s just the first thing that comes out of my mouth. He puts the cigarette out on the building and waits.

I try again. “Fuck you.”

Now he stands up, and I’m not under any illusion about where this is going, but he just offers me a cigarette. I’m so surprised that I forget that I don’t smoke. I stick the little paper cylinder in my mouth and realize it’s pot. There doesn’t seem to be anything to say about this. We sit down next to each other on the tomato crate. The sun is directly overhead, and it’s hot in the alley. The garbage bin behind us smells like the lunch I just served, the lunch he just ate. I’m still sweating from the kitchen, and a drop runs into my eye. “Sorry,” I say. “I say stupid things when I’m nervous.”

“Remember what you said when you hit me?”

“Not at all.”

“I didn’t think so.” He exhales, and the fumes are clear in the heat. It’s too bright in the alley for smoke. When the light catches the gray in his black hair, it looks like lightning. “You said, ‘Remember me?’”

“I did?”

“Uh-huh.”

“And we haven’t met?”

“Not in this life, brother.” He inhales and then let’s go. “I didn’t want you to get busted. I was hustling you for Grayhound money even though I knew you were gone. Totally wrong intention on my part. But the cops saw you hit me, and I’m on parole, so I had to make a big shit out of it.”

I nod like I know what this means.

“And you’re dead?” he says.

“Huh?”

“Your *dad*. What’s wrong with him?”

The pot is good. I hold it in for another second and concentrate on the hairs on my legs—all of them. “Currently chest pains.”

“Shit, man, chest pains are no joke. My dad had a heart attack last year. He was fat and disabled though. Is your dad fat and disabled?”

I think about this for awhile, maybe a minute. “He’s a little fat,” I say finally.

“But not disabled? Like he doesn’t cash his disability checks to buy Cheetos and crack? Sorry, weird question. I’m still getting used to normal people.”

“He makes Egyptian pottery replicas for a living. He loves rodents more than life itself.”

“No shit? I’m in no place to judge. I’m just looking for a place to heal. Let the hate go. You know what I’m saying?”

I nod, and the tip of the cigarette, which is not a cigarette, bobs up and down between my eyes. Time is overheating in the alley. It is skipping and repeating itself. For some reason, I feel like we understand each other. “Healing,” I say, “like physical *and* spiritual?”

“That’s right, brother. No more anger.”

“I was in prison once.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah, man. All fucking night.”

\*

Waffle is excited that I’ve brought Aaron along to draw down the power of the Moon Goddess. She says that two priests are ideal. Two priests for two priestesses. I don’t know if I’m supposed to read anything into this, but I notice that Cherry is not saying anything. This might be weird for her: our relationship extending beyond the shelter into the world. By the time I come down from Aaron’s powerful weed, the four of us are already a mile out into the Rattlesnake Forest. A lot of the shelter people make their camps here during the summer, and every so often I see a tent through the branches a few yards off the trail. Last summer, there was a murder. Some unfortunate beaten to death—probably by another unfortunate.

Eventually we turn off the trail to follow one of the streams that cut down out of the mountains to link up with the Snake. The going is not easy, but Waffle moves with assurance, and the sound of Aaron smashing through the bush behind me is motivating. He has been telling stories about Grand Rapids, Michigan—a place I’ve never been or taken the trouble to imagine. Apparently, he had a nice garden there, in Grand Rapids, before it was vandalized by a rival

gang. I am not a nature person, but the prettiness of the woods at dusk is not lost. Cherry's legs moving up the path in front of me are also surprisingly excellent.

We stop where the stream pools in a lagoon surrounded by a grove of aspens. The white trunks are skeletal under the darkening leaves, a stand of bones ringing the water. The ragged leg of a deer hangs down over one of the branches. "Mountain lion," Cherry says. "Must have drug it up there to eat."

"That's awesome," Aaron says.

I tell him there are bears out here too.

"Awesome. Awesome. Awesome."

My father called again before we left. When I didn't answer, he left a voicemail even though I've told him that no one leaves voicemails anymore. He must have remembered because he texted me a minute later. *2 b n heaven, ur must b lighter than a feather. Ur thoughts?* ♥

I didn't text back.

Still staring at the deer leg, I don't notice Waffle taking off her clothes. When I turn around, she's naked down to her hiking boots—long, tan legs and greyhound ribs. Cherry pulls off her shirt to reveal pink nipples pierced with silver half-moons. The effect is somehow elegant, and, before I can think about it too much, I kick off my shoes.

Aaron is staring at the point where the aspen roots flow into the water. He says, "I didn't know it was going to be this kind of party."

"Party probably isn't the word," Cherry says.

"It's just, whoa, what am I seeing here? You know what I'm saying?"

I didn't tell Cherry or Waffle about the prison thing. Maybe I should have. Maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe. Aaron peels off his shirt to reveal the expected number of anti-social tattoos. He points to the inky outline of a tree growing up his side. The tree is slender, upright, and surrounded by vivid, orange lips of fire. "Wanted a burning bush," he says. "Got a flaming vagina."

"We have to hurry," Waffle says. "The moon is ahead of us."

A revealing minute later, the four of us step naked into the water. It is cool but not cold. The aspen roots go down under the surface, and I cling to their knobby edges with my toes. We wade in up to our knees and, on some unspoken signal I can't pinpoint but fail to miss, join hands. I'm holding onto Aaron and

Waffle, neither of whom is giving me a heavy squeeze. Cherry is across from me. The dusk is at her back, and the red light coming through the branches pushes her shadow across the water to head-butt my knees. I have been around naked people in the woods before—hippie kids from the U dipping in the hot springs—but this is different. The four of us aren't friends but we're also not strangers. Something is at stake.

Waffle says. "We are gathered here to call upon the power of the Moon Goddess and seek her aid in our lives and in the lives of the ones we love. We ask that she bless us with her presence and grant us her healing powers."

"Amen," Cherry says. And then Aaron says it. And I feel like I'm supposed to say it too but I can't get there.

Waffle steps behind Cherry. "You go first" she says.

"Just a second," Cherry looks at me. "Are we scaring you?"

"I'm OK," I say, but I'm really not sure.

"Because you can take off if you want," Cherry says. "Lord knows I wouldn't judge."

"It's cool," I say. "Nobody's judging anybody these days."

She smiles, but she doesn't look happy. She says, "We don't have anything to be ashamed of." And before I can figure out what to say to this, or decide if it's even close to true, she lays back into Waffle's arms. Waffle kisses the top of her head and then crouches down, lowering her into the water. It's not deep, and Cherry has to extend her legs forward as she goes in. They sink until Waffle sits on the bottom with the back of Cherry's head resting in her lap. Only Cherry's face and breasts break the surface. Her breasts float like two pink hills in a shallow sea, a silver weathervane stuck through each pointing towards the sunset. Her eyes are closed, and when she spreads her legs, just inches below the surface, it reminds me of a drawing my mother did right before I ditched out for the coast. It was called *Birth Basket in the Rushes*. I remember she sold it to some rich guy's big-hearted daughter.

"Now I summon the presence of the Moon Goddess upon us," Waffle says. "Priest and priestess alike, we stand before you as one kindred element." She looks up at us. "Stand on either side of her. We're going to draw down the power now."

“Sounds complicated,” Aaron says.

“You have to believe in it for it to work,” Waffle says. “It’s like anything.”

My phone is ringing. I can hear it going off in my pants which are hanging in a tree next to the ravaged deer leg. I know who it is. I don’t have a lot of friends. “I should get that,” I say.

Waffle says, “This is a crucial moment.”

“It could be a crucial call.”

“The Goddess isn’t going to take a message.”

“She might,” I say, “if she were real.”

Waffle drops her head back onto her shoulders, and I think I see Cherry’s eyelashes flutter. Aaron is staring down into the water, a hulking monument to offended sensibility. Waffle says, “By diminishing us, you diminish yourself.”

The bank is not far away, but the water slows me down. It drags at my feet, and my toes crack on the roots along the bottom. My ringtone is nothing—a tiny, anti-ringtone—but it is brazen out here in the wilderness. It fills the grove with the urgency of trumpets, but the thing is silent when I take it out of my pants. I press the button to call back and cover myself with my other hand. It’s cold now among the aspens, a chill on my wet legs in the dusk. I duck behind the tree for some privacy, but no one answers. Just voicemail. The familiar voice, which is not really a voice, promising to get back to me as soon as possible. Too surprised to talk to the beep, I slip my phone back into my pants and then squat down behind the tree. The rugged bark scratches my ass, but I hardly notice. I’m in that gap before thought—the calm before the landfall of the one horrible possibility I’ve been watching through a telescope for the last three days. For a second I think I might still miss the storm, but then the proverbial shit tide comes rolling in—namely the knowledge that it wasn’t always like this. I don’t know what it was like. I was young, but I remember something better—and he was a part of it. Still, I’ve never complained, and he’s never explained. At this point I don’t expect him to. I just can’t believe he’s fucking up my life again.

“So we going to do this?” Aaron is poking his big head around my tree. He takes in my fetal crouch, the way I’m squeezing both hands into my crotch with my knees, a pitiful posture. I feel something like understanding pass between us. “Because I’m still in if you’re in.”

I squint at the chewed-up deer hoof hanging over my head. “What am I doing out here?”

He looks back over his shoulder like something might be crawling up out of the lagoon to eat us. Then he crouches down and whispers in my ear. “Shit, man. Who says you supposed to know? It’s just life, my brother.”

I can’t stop hugging myself. “I’m not your brother.”

But he’s already waving back towards the lagoon, signaling to the naked women that everything is going to be OK. He leans in again. “My brother’s dead, fuckhead, but you’re alive. Now get your little prick out from behind this tree and get in the pool. What would your Daddy say if he knew you was too chickenshit to save his ass?”

\*

When it’s my turn to go down in the water, I resist. I don’t know how to ask the Goddess into my body. What’s more, I am not prepared to try, but no one listens. Aaron waits behind me, his big arms outstretched to cradle me into a rejuvenating pool of moonlight. Cherry and Waffle are holding my hands, a combination of reassurance and restraint after my phone call freak out. They are squeezing in rhythm—first one than the other. I don’t know how they’re doing it. In my cell, the morning after I hit Aaron, all I wanted was water. I was thirsty enough to suck it up through the cement floor, but now I’m afraid I’ll dissolve if anything above my knees touches the surface. My thighs are shaking. It is more than a feeling. “I’m not ready,” I say.

“It’s not a question of being ready,” Waffle says. “You were born ready.”

But this seems unlikely for a lot of reasons. The sun is almost down, only a shard of red cracking over the mountains closing off the Rattlesnake Valley. Soon it will be dark, and I am afraid. “Did you know there’s water in the underworld?” I say. “Ra had a boat for getting through every night.”

“I knew a Ra from Detroit,” Aaron says.

“Ra is the enemy of the moon,” Waffle says.

Cherry pushes on my shoulder. “Down you go.”

And just like that my body goes limp. It’s like I’ve been holding every muscle rigid for years and then, boom, magic release. I collapse into Aaron’s chest, and the back of my head drags down his torso as we make the descent together.

I have never been held like this before. It is surprising, but not unpleasant in the way I thought it would be. The lagoon slides up over my knees, then my thighs and stomach. It rises up to my chin which is tipped up towards the first surfacing stars. Now my head is lying in Aaron's lap, and the world comes to me through the wavering suction of water. He looks down into my face, his shaggy outline looming overhead. "I got you, brother."

"I'm scared, Aaron."

"Sssssh. Just let it happen."

Waffle begins to speak but, with the water in my ears, she sounds like a trippy mash up of her greatest hits: healing, spirit, harmony, etc. She's said this part of the service three times already, but I haven't been paying attention. I have been thinking about my dying father. I've been wondering if he heard my call. Now I'm supposed to say something to save him, but I don't know what it is. I suppose I've never known, and, even if I did, I don't think I'd be able to say it. In any case, my mouth stays shut. My body, suspended in strange hands, floats silently in the current of the underworld.

We wait. The light fades. The lagoon bottom, a soft pulp of mud and rotting branches, rises up between my legs. An aspen root digs into my spine, but I stay quiet. I can feel everyone waiting for me to say something—me included—but it's not happening. It was the same in court. They asked me to explain myself, and I could have said anything—just I'm sorry and it would have tipped the scales, but I couldn't do it.

I don't know what they expect from me now.

When the sun is finally down, and the Moon Goddess has still not descended to pry open my lips, Aaron drops my head into the water. My face goes under and, for a second, I am dying. Then I come up. When I can see again, I spot a single puff of cotton drifting across the moonlit surface of the lagoon. In its center, there is a single, dark eye.

\*

The pot arrives three days later. It comes with a note dated the day after the night my father quit answering my calls, the night I couldn't ask the Goddess to save him. He feels better but has decided to discontinue the squirrel exodus. He has also decided to stop calling me.

*I'm not angry, the note says, but I'm done pretending that I know you. If you can do the same for me, you got my number.*

The pot is the creepy jackal, a smooth clay jar with the alert, onyx head of a little dog. I turn it over in my hands and listen for the sound of something inside. Then I shake it like a cocktail mixer.

Nothing.

I don't know why I'm nervous. There's never anything in the pots he sends me, but, for some reason, this time, I'm not sure. This time, I'm worried there might be something stuck to the bottom—a heavy, black pulp baked into the clay. Or, worse, something lighter than a feather. It might float up in front of my face when I open the jar and hover there like an aspen seed, a single, dark kernel in a cloud of white.

I stare at the jackal's face. There is no way to know without looking inside.

# YOU'LL SEE MY DESIGN INSIDE A LEMON

JULIA COHEN

I thought of fish scales & drops  
of war like a line of spiders

You leave marks in  
the dirt & that's my pattern, ants  
swarming a cut potato

They say joy  
They say banish the foreign night  
choked by childish branches

The wedding of war & a thatched roof  
Take off your acorn hat

Children pop  
out of boxes like lanterns released

Soldiers bury lemon buds, "Have you  
seen a muzzle on a bull? What I use  
as my design?"

They say carve your potato to stamp  
the envelope's white forearm

The pattern of a marriage  
procession: hooves, hairpins, mud  
meshed to scalp, motoring

They say children fall instantly  
into use

Condense our lives inside  
a single lemon

Seeds scatter on a feather  
The weft you attach to foreheads



# SWAMPMEAT

JOSH FOMON

In the current cycle of this hollow  
ground there is a spring  
where you hide blue  
and in the mud. I will lick my way  
through the gorged dirt there is a bison  
on my neck. Do not frighten this beast  
I will fashion a sleeve from its throat.  
Do not be a monster I cry  
out my palms until they glisten.  
If you put my bison head on  
your map let me wallow in your mouth  
my new breath is an incense  
and benefaction. In your silent tree  
I could lift you like a farther  
similitude of olfaction my nostrils drip  
singed wings because I am wheezing.  
Fire proclaim me beneath your tongue.  
O decrepit flower you are hovering  
at my feet! Let me shape you  
as a semblance of electricity muzzle  
my broken cuffs against your cheek.  
I am open. Your windows in a morning  
without cadavered songs. Crawl through me  
thoroughly or shut I am difficult.  
Watch how the poles tingle  
and through my shades I am lapidary.  
If you remain in a meadow you hold  
an oozing life. A burnt tree. This space  
is a cube and you are my filter. Drip  
my devastation. Is there a better gravity?

If you can be contained  
in a heart I will have to have you  
coat my walls in light. The paintings  
strewn in the mud foretell abstraction  
is a type of curtailment  
in absence you glow your sticky  
truth. This love is fetid  
yet throbbing as a face lined  
in mesh. Reflection you have cracked  
a hole through my eyes. Purring from a can  
it will fleck quiescent in your arms moisten  
this swamp enough to pray. In total stasis suckle  
these directions I will conflagrate forever  
in my heart's puckered aperture.

# FROM **SORROW** **ARROW**

EMILY KENDAL FREY

You are stringing arrows by a lilac bush

Every time I forget a person my body apologizes

Bad night of dreaming

The rows of devils thick as trash

I want a world I can get inside

We cross the street

In our bone marrow is bread

There's oil in the plankton that lines the ocean

On the fifth morning you rise, the air around you soft as islands

The white dog shits in the grass

You want your dream masts to rise

Oil covers the sloping lawn

The black dog eyes the roses

You want to put the cold egg of her breast in your mouth

Trash gilding the roadside bramble

You walk to the store

The first level of the food chain is contaminated

Giant rocks covered in oil

You sit in your body, quietly making blood

Wild blood

Bird of the world

I cried so hard I cried rice

It fell from my eyes

I'll love you later people sometimes say

Not now is a dynasty

Time stacks up then rises, steaming not-love

Eat it and love it

We stopped at Runza

Eat this, you said and I took a bite

Hope is cabbage and rice

Death sweeps it away

If I run over your arm will it feel like a pretzel?

I give grief to the same structures on a daily basis

The lilies are reaching out their death

You keep trying to leave

We're lakeside on the same towel

This is the world one of us says

My grandfather nodding into his decaf

The car keeps going over the fence

The arm bleeds until love fills it

# ANNUNCIATION

JOSHUA KRYAH

Too alive to it, too aware of it.

How it fits in mine but does not resemble  
my own. An animal's hand.

The one thing no one else wanted.

She asks me to help her and her idiot son down  
the wet sidewalk. Slowly, I walk backwards

watching him, his eyes rolled up  
like an animal enraged,

lost in himself in a way  
only animals are.

It is not love, it is custody that binds them.

It is not love, it is not wanting to be alone, not  
knowing what it means to be alone.

The world, around us, is enraged.

Is this animal, this child so near  
to me in the dark.

And it is terrible to be among them, to be like them.  
His misshapen face, his hands always grabbing.

And her tireless, her never ending.

We are, all of us, enraged.

Meaning, we will hurt each other.

Meaning, we do already.

Without effort or apology, it happens and it happens  
and it happens. The child whose cruelty is a part of him.

The mother who cannot get away, her eyes  
turned up, her animal face.

And what she says to me, *you can't know,*  
*you'll never know.*

Too alive to him, too aware of him.

The one thing no one else wanted.

Where, mother, do you look for me?

# THE CHILDREN'S CRUSADE

JOSHUA KRYAH

*How sure so ever I be, that the world shall never perish  
by water, yet I may be drowned.*

—Donne, Sermon No. 6

Childhood is a lie. Ask anyone. Floods appear to make us thirsty. But floods do not exist. We have been told many things. I tell my children, “wait where you are, wait a little longer.” Then the submersion of everything beneath the river. The drinking water now mingled with raw sewage. The children playing in it, sick with it. “When I was young...” I tell them. We did this to us, to you.

# FROM GLOCK CHORUS

JOYELLE MCSWEENEY

TOUSSAINT L'OUVERTURE i.e. the DEAD OF IRAQ:

*(glaucously, raucously)*

In the vault of heaven  
In the steam of heaven  
In the crease of heaven  
In the jeans of heaven  
In the genes of heaven  
In the dream of heaven  
In the grease of heaven  
In the seam of heaven  
In the cream of heaven  
On the thigh of heaven  
In the guise of heaven  
In the sky in heaven  
In the sweet of heaven  
In the sweat of heaven  
Turing test of heaven  
Hot tureen of heaven

Hot wax in heaven  
In the cracks of heaven  
Cellophane in heaven  
On the drain of heaven  
Wet drip of heaven  
In the crypt of heaven  
Counterfeit in heaven  
On the clit of heaven  
Lead tip of heaven  
In the clip of heaven  
Gold plait of heaven  
Sur le plage of heaven

Pest wind in heaven  
 In the surge of heaven  
 In the surge of heaven  
 In the heavenly surge  
 In the heavenly urgency  
 Purge-ry perjory

THE PENNSYLVANIA SWEETS (triplets):

Pennsylvania sweet thief station  
 sweet taffy on the rind of the moon  
 Pennsylvania sweet sweet stantion  
 stained and sagging blinding bandage of the moon

Gonna whistle home you blind stallion  
 gonna whistle home you blind goon  
 gonna whistle me home you blind capsule  
 landing in a pustule of the moon

My target's face it was pockmarked  
 tho hidden by a sack of ice  
 tho hidden like a crooked account book  
 fell open where the hammer hit twice

O whistle me home, you blind stallion  
 O whistle me home, you blind foal  
 I'll be whistling home, through my chokehold  
 throathole won't you histle me home

AVARICE REVERIE, USMC:

Reverie reverie and the last marine was Avarinne  
 when the last marine climbed from the scene  
 her flanks were gilt with avarinne

her cheeks were cut with avarinne  
 she checks were cut from avarinne  
 her irises were rimey and they went whoot whoot  
 the closed eye of the camera went whoot whoot  
 the brain's black camaro went whoot whoot  
 tossed off its pearly lining like a two piece suit  
 eyes turned white as a consulting room  
 an owl's eye ate up the marrow of the room  
 then the last marine climbed out of me  
 her locks were cleaved with averinne  
 her locks were struck with averinne  
 her teeth were thick with averinne  
 Oh break the doors from their hing-es  
 Oh break the very hinges from the door-ors  
 The corny twang and the neural niches  
 of the girl who went down swinging as she swore-ore  
 O averinne how I wish for gold  
 O averinne how I wish to hold  
 in the cauldron of my human hand  
 a globlet from your treasure horde  
 like spit in the tress or trees in the dress  
 treasurine how I list for thee  
 treasurine how I lisp for thee  
 and pour my cargo to the sea  
 and pour my cargo into thee  
 treasurine here's a hip for thee  
 treasurine here's a lip for thee  
 treasurine a harelip for thee  
 treasurine a hip flask for thee  
 treasurine here's flak for thee  
 treasurine in the gut of thee  
 the boot is a clump it goes clump clump  
 the wrist is a gauntlet that clutches the gut  
 to the gut of the woods I humped my clump

in the gut of the woods my hump came up  
from the gultch of the gut I whupped my whelp  
clutching its gut I docked its tail  
I docked its pay I read this tale  
the big metal bird went whup whup whup  
with my blood it was whet as it went up up  
a girl in the tread and a girl on the blade  
a girl in night vision and a girl on nightraid  
defibrillate night's sternum with your enfilade  
defibrillate night's sternum with your Escalade  
till she wears her martyr's dressing like a coach wears gatorade

# ALTITUDE SICKNESS

JOHN A. NIEVES

It's the difference between sinking and falling.  
The ocean floor lives on what sinks, but the fish

that never naturally crest the surface could not  
even imagine falling, could not conceive

of landing, of the shrieking of all its delicately  
calibrated nerves slapping the deck of a dirty

ship and air—how could anything live on  
something so thin that no matter how hard

it's pulled, it could not be gilled in. And since  
there is no such thing as a temporary exile,

could a fish that did escape ever shake the fear  
of up, the primal certainty that one must climb

to fall and that if we climb high enough,  
there will be nothing there at all?

# DAYDREAMT

JOHN A. NIEVES

Without smoke,  
you fill my throat  
with smoke. I taste the flames

shimmy across my tongue's  
meridian. You are not  
one of the tastes

it is programmed to process.  
You replace  
my breath. I exhale you worded.

\*

I keep trying to caption this  
picture of you: [White  
copal, ground fine, sizzling  
on charcoal, making myth roomful.]

[Girl with no shadow confronts the sun.]

[Ash speckled with ice  
crystals—new heat  
from old fire.]

[One flower petal, maroon,  
swirling seaward a thousand miles  
from the sea—velveteen—knowing.]

[A self-addressed, stamped 3x5,  
wet with waiting, lines  
on only one side.]

[Light is clear until it hits  
something. It takes dust  
to make color. It takes collision  
for us to see objects at rest.]

# [OBSCENITY FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF POETRY #6]

KATHRYN L. PRINGLE

those motherfuckers only take indecent photographs of ice blinks.

there's a stitch in my rib it is mobile it has been there for a week it is hard not to lie  
down with a stitch / secure all the rooms / sleep in front of the closet and ignore wind

erasure is synaptic gesture / when i die i hope it will not be soon and not from  
cancer / someone tried to kill her / he bought guns and video

taped himself making a bomb mailer for her / my wash basin is covered with toothpaste  
which is unfortunate because otherwise it is such a lovely, green color / was it the right

decision? enraging white house canines / pasture / if i listened  
maybe / but we are still manipulating you and squaring off / o maybe they will take a

cross-section of my lung freeze half then sputter off OFF: i am a soldier in my  
own military / in my house the war is always on/ more details/ more

loosen up ARMY / you disabled authors my law school was painful and grotesque so i  
returned to the high desert where / ALLEGEDLY // what would

egedly mean / that city was poison and i've done what i can do to / escape you it must be  
legitimized // it is taking so long / a file that is corrupted / our name LEXICON/

i have a virus in spanish we are cult-cult-cultural peoples / billy lives in prague /  
my computer's bass is electric AND fretless

# [OBSCENITY FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF POETRY #7]

KATHRYN L. PRINGLE

derision settled into the stone of the place  
a tree once living now dying  
the practice of killing extended

the subjects wanted to know  
why the king labored over words  
not swords

instead of speech  
they nailed their questions  
to his door  
thinking him deaf  
but for text

he would not stop his musing

# OTRON AND HIS DARK HORSE

DEAN C ROBERTSON

Sometimes, I feel like writing my own obituary. I grab hold of a bottle and spin in circles, the living room's recessed lighting hiding the wrinkles on my sleep deprived face. Later, I jump off the roof of a strip mall, plant my voice in the parking lot. My dark horse and I board up shop windows, casting a tragedy of bank seizures, a mannequin with a wallet in his mouth. We resuscitate the victim with pillow talk, a hand for his member. Wading through vomit and the bodies of a thousand burned birds, we make candles from steel & watch angels yearn.

\*

Sometimes, I feel like writing postcards to dead neighbors. I grab hold of a pen and spin letters into an awkward "hullo!" for the beyond, a nightingale song for eyelids the color of leather. My dark horse and I take shopping carts through the KFC drive-thru and point out Jupiter using our cell phones. We threaten the pony ride outside the supermarket with a switchblade, ask for all the change it has eaten. My dark horse laughs, asks for a tattoo of night on his body. We hold each other and twirl until we both vomit fountains of glitter from our ears.

\*

Sometimes, I feel like painting a glow-in-the-dark skull on my dark horse's back, an ink stamp I'd use to find him. We reach into potato sacks, pull out mane-wigs and he wears them beneath a disco ball made out of horse glue which makes him feel queasy. He traces bull's-eyes on his flanks and the whole city starts chasing him; they paste horns on their heads and wear red capes before they fake flight around the Erie Canal into Arizona, the one place my dark horse refuses to go.

\*

Sometimes, I feel like taking walks when my dark horse doesn't. He says, "gimme your keys, I'll take the truck," and even though I wonder how he drives, I give

them to him anyway, only to get my truck back with ten parking tickets, one photo-radar, a bed-full of hay, turds, a carrot for a snowman's nose, and two dents on the passenger door. He tells me, "choir children were never babies." My dark horse and I sip lemonade in the Catskills, eat lamb hearts, and wonder when canoes became so large. We stitch nightgowns to our skin and dream in patterns.

\*

Sometimes, grief is too much for my dark horse; he wastes the day at his salt lick, brooding over the sunset's lack of color. The world can't be as voluminous as the nebula he's from. The gas clouds, the harmony of matter. Whiskey sours don't cheer him up. He whinnies with a noise maker, shoots up dope, and vomits on the hottest mare in the pen. He has a chance to escape, but he's belted down by being.

# I WAS NOT EVEN BORN WHEN YOU STARTED PAYING GREAT ATTENTION

WENDY XU & NICK STURM

All of my insides have turned to lightning.  
My heart is a telephone. It is ringing music  
from the future all the time! It is making  
international calls in the middle  
of the night. You say *I have big plans for when  
nobody expects us to make it.* I go pull  
the truck around. We load it with outrageous  
ideas! We drive it around town like  
a surprise factory stopping at all of  
our friends' apartments. It is so nice to be  
unexpected. It is so nice to imagine  
a hugging tour of America. Your brain is much  
louder than even mine! You leave  
these gorgeous voicemails while I sleep.

# I WAS NOT EVEN BORN WHEN YOUR FACE WAS LOOKING AT MINE

WENDY XU & NICK STURM

Here comes our conversation about ponies.  
Here comes you wielding the treatise on non-human  
ways of having feelings. Then those feelings  
used to make decisions. I have just decided to take  
up painting. Thank you for being an expert  
on making failure look stupid. Thank you for being  
around abstractly while I eat this salad.. I pick up a handful  
of walnuts and fling them at cities! I think maybe  
let's happen outside of any physical space we  
find on a map. Check out this sun! I think  
it's getting ready to happen.

# I WAS NOT EVEN BORN WHEN YOU TURNED ME INTO A BABY

WENDY XU & NICK STURM

I was a little glob of lush circumstance.  
You dressed me up in snow and holy  
emergency. I pointed at a record player  
and called it my father. I pointed at a harbor  
and called it my mother. But you said *No*  
*no no no that is not so healthy!* and fed me  
coffee and kaleidoscopes. We had big plans  
and even bigger talons. You stayed up all night  
plucking light from my teeth. The whole  
world was delicious! You told me words  
were the closest we could get to being  
inside the people we love. I told you  
when I grow up I want to be a megaphone.

# HALLUCINATIONS BROUGHT ON BY INCLEMENT WEATHER

J.A. TYLER

*This township is buried in a fogged stupor, houses stair-stepped up and down wet paved streets. A township of hills that This Son and That Son ride their bicycles through, rampant with slick tires and wishes to see the new girl who moved in just houses up their hazy street.*

*Our Mother stays in, mourning Our Father the pirate who sailed again days ago, all her homemade dresses like unfound treasure in a closet, Our Mother's sex likewise buried beneath layers of maps and secret skeleton keys. She sews dress after dress, watching documentaries about mummies, learning how to preserve.*

*Our Father seeks the next island, another stand of trees to scorch, new sea chests to crack, veins of rubies pouring like blood. Our Father, whose ragged buccaneer crew asks "How are This Son and That Son?" and him only nodding his bearded pirate face, answering "The same, the same."*

*The new girl doesn't show in her window, and This Son and That Son tire of their bicycle legs. They spend the afternoon instead lusting at machines in the arcade, the jangle of coins in metal traps, staying until dusk draws bat shapes in the soft and low nighttime clouds.*

*Sleeping, This Son dreams that Our Father has returned but only asks, on stepping through the front door, "Where is the bathroom?" And That Son dreams he is a pirate with a throat full of rubies, a buccaneer ship swaggering beneath his feet, a misted township in the blooming distance.*

# THE CASE AGAINST DR. SMETANA

BRADLEY BAZZLE

- Dr. Smetana has published neither books nor articles. His lone publication is a short monograph, yet to be translated, in the arcane German-language quarterly *Erotischen Futurismus Vierteljährlich* (Erotic Futurism Quarterly)
- Dr. Smetana teaches no courses. In his entire tenure, he has taught exactly one: a Fall 2002 introductory survey titled “Eromathematics: Machines in Love.” The department file lists twelve students and a teaching assistant named June Cunningham. Cunningham won a prestigious post-doctoral fellowship at a research university in the Midwest before disappearing in 2005.
- Dr. Smetana has neither advised nor read a graduate thesis in any official capacity, according to department records, since that of June Cunningham. His copy of her thesis bears a single marginal comment: “Eromathematics. Lovely breakfasts. Time machine?”
- Dr. Smetana neither enters nor leaves his office between the hours of 7:00 AM and 12:00 PM (9:00 AM and 10:00 PM on weekends). These are the official hours of Harkness Hall, home of the department. According to Bill Herman, Head Custodian of Harkness Hall, no one is allowed to live in Harkness Hall.
- From the roof of Wylie Hall one can see, through the dirty window of Dr. Smetana’s fifth-floor office in Harkness Hall, a single wooden chair and several spiny metallic mobiles hung from the ceiling by string or yarn. The wooden chair is of the type employed by elementary schools in the 1950s. The mobiles are of unknown type.
- From a crack in the door to the graduate workroom, across the hall from Dr. Smetana’s office, one can watch an undergraduate named Anu Mehta slide a small plate under Dr. Smetana’s door. The plate contains three poached eggs. Later, the plate slides back with the egg whites still intact but devoid of yolk.

- When asked if he has ever seen Dr. Smetana, Anu Mehta responds in the negative. He adds that the task of poaching and serving the eggs, which he does as part of his work-study employ at the department, is distasteful to him.
- According to Herm Jackson, award-winning salesman at Showtime Ford and the only student from “Machines in Love” locatable through conventional channels, Dr. Smetana is a small man, bald on top but with long silver hair over his ears and neck. “Nose like a beak,” Jackson adds. “So thin you got nervous just looking at him. Turtlenecks and loose-fitting jackets.” When asked about the content of “Machines in Love,” Herm Jackson fails to respond then looks at his phone. “I’ve gotta take this,” he says.
- The department file contains one single page from the syllabus of “Machines in Love.” Page six (of nineteen) lists *Sugar Boys: a Memoir of the Second Machine War* by Carlostwelve Jimenez as the only required text. No record exists of said book in the Library of Congress, nor of its author. The rest of page six consists of words and phrases positioned haphazardly. These words include “eromathematics,” “prurient,” and “semiconductor” (twice), as well as possible nonsense words such as “bilf” and “murkmork.”
- The department secretary, who hasn’t seen Dr. Smetana in two years, contacts him via campus mail and will do so, somewhat hesitantly, on request. When asked why she doesn’t call him on the department-issue phone in his office, she explains that he speaks in a monotonous, barely intelligible murmur. “I think he has his lips on the receiver,” she adds.
- Dr. Smetana meets students only Fridays at sunrise. When meeting, he sits with his back to the sun-struck window while the student, sitting on a dilapidated chair in the corner, squints to make out the doctor’s tiny silhouette, crowned by a twinkling constellation of delicate mobiles.
- Dr. Smetana speaks in a low monotone, frowning almost constantly. “Bilf,” he says, as if in greeting. “Murkmork?”

- Dr. Smetana will agree to be one's thesis advisor as long as one's thesis employs the concept of eromathematics in at least two prominent but unrelated chapters. He asks that chapters-in-progress be slid under his door, along with three poached eggs. Meetings are infrequent but lengthy.
- Dr. Smetana describes eromathematics as, among other things, a unifying discipline involving research, rigorous calculation, and erotic love. "It is a mathematics," he adds.
- Dr. Smetana speaks wistfully of June Cunningham. "Human touch," he whispers, "warm and un-mechanized."
- When reminded of Herm Jackson, Dr. Smetana walks into his closet and returns with a slim document: "Final Paper" by Herm Jackson. The document is yellow and crisp. In it, Dr. Smetana has circled a passage where Jackson compares the American Civil War to an imagined war between military robots and household appliances. Beside the passage, Dr. Smetana has written, in tiny square-shaped letters, "Check dates."
- Dr. Smetana predicts that Harkness Hall will be destroyed by a molten projectile during mechanized warfare, as will much of the surrounding area. When asked if he refers to the Second Machine War of Carlostwelve Jimenez, he replies, "No, the first." He predicts that this machine war will also be known as the Great Machine War and will be distinguishable from the Second in that it does not involve human simulacra.
- Police ask questions about Dr. Smetana. Statements one gives are compared to those given by Anu Mehta, Herm Jackson, and the department secretary, whose name is Bev Horner.
- Dr. Smetana puts on a false beard before leaving his office at midnight on weekdays (ten on weekends) for the seventh-floor bathroom. Of the so-called "Emergency Beard" he says, "Developed by Iberian pederasts in the seven-

teenth century, its function is twofold: to disguise the known violator from local authorities, and to disguise the love-object as a bearded midget. Will it ever surprise me, what we humans do in the name of love?"

- In the closet of Dr. Smetana's office one can find, in addition to stacks of paper and metal cubes of various sizes, several industrial-sized mayonnaise jars full of viscous yellow liquid.
- Dr. Smetana predicts that America will be vanquished and the world united in a single peaceful kingdom known as the General Assembly. He warns, however, that this peace will be built on the mass grave of millions of accountants; that, in the future, war's primary source of terror will be, in addition to robots and animate appliances, proper billing; and that countries will cleanse themselves of this terror through institutionalized accountant pogroms.
- Dr. Smetana claims to have developed an alternative to war. The alternative involves eromathematics.
- Dr. Smetana is shrinking.
- Dr. Smetana predicts that Jesus will return to Earth, or at least a man claiming to be Jesus and calling himself Jesus Number Two. This man will gain many followers, according to Dr. Smetana, then change his name to Mohammed Number Two, which confuses everyone, and then to Jimmy Carter Number Two. Later, he will be found in a hotel room sodomizing a simulacrum of himself.
- Dr. Smetana bemoans his once rakish good looks and blames time-travel for stealing them. He takes solace in his belief that diminution will someday be regarded as a mark of wisdom. He adds, "Our benevolent leader, Carlostwelve Jimenez, is the size of a rhesus monkey."
- Dr. Smetana warns that he might be a simulacrum of Dr. Smetana.

- Police have arrested Dr. Smetana for the 2005 kidnapping of June Cunningham.
- Dr. Smetana serves as his own counsel during the trial, calling no witnesses and speaking inaudibly when called to the stand himself. The district attorney objects that Dr. Smetana puts his lips on the microphone. The judge overrules it.
- Dr. Smetana agrees to stay on as my thesis advisor from jail.
- Dr. Smetana claims that the viscous yellow liquid in mayonnaise jars, which is egg yolk, will fuel his time machine. The problem, he says, is he let June Cunningham use his time machine and doesn't know when or if she will return.
- Dr. Smetana causes incidents in jail.
- The jailer, whose right index finger was liquefied during one such incident, recounts in a confusing monologue that Dr. Smetana disappeared then reappeared. "Colored lights," he adds. "Hisses, screams, the tearing of metal."
- The mayonnaise jars in Dr. Smetana's office are missing.
- The woman who took in June Cunningham's cat, Sugar Boy, reports that the cat has disappeared along with two skirts and eleven eggs. The woman thought she wore a smaller dress-size than June Cunningham.
- Dr. Smetana makes the following closing statement at his trial: "With the conclusion of my trial, a new epoch has begun. Eromathematics has been proven, and proven impregnable. The wars have been erased. We march towards a future of erotic love. A new epoch has begun." Urged to clarify, he repeats this statement.
- Meetings with Dr. Smetana, who repeats the closing statement and several

other love-related statements in non sequitur fashion, are unsatisfactory. My chapter on eromathematics remains impenetrable.

- Dr. Smetana might be a simulacrum of Dr. Smetana.
- Bev Horner says if so, good riddance. Dr. Smetana stole parts from office machines.
- Herm Jackson says the simulacrum is only the beginning. He writes letters to Ford Motor Company urging them to equip cars and trucks with what he calls “sweet spots,” which, when shot from a distance by trained snipers, will cause the sentient vehicles to explode.
- We wonder, will love really save us?

# ITHACA

L. ANNETTE BINDER

Sometimes she found herself in a yellow room. She sat by the window or by the table or in a rolling chair. Just a gravel courtyard outside and a strip of brilliant sky. The smell of Lysol and lilies and dirty diapers. An Estonian woman sat in the far corner humming to herself and rocking in a metal chair. *Ta lendab* she was saying. *Ta lendab mesipuu* and nobody understood her or told her to be quiet. Sometimes a fat woman came to visit and she had chicken yellow hair. They'd sit together by the window. There was a plum tree in the courtyard and its leaves were starting to curl because it never rained enough. *Ma*, the blonde lady would say. *Ma, tell me about Zimmern, tell me how it was. Tell me how to make your apple cake*, and who knew what she wanted this lady whose pants were too tight around her belly.

\*

250 grams of unsalted butter. 150 grams sugar with two teaspoons vanilla sugar. 250 grams flour. Two teaspoons baking powder. Three eggs. One large apple, peeled and cored and cut into eight pieces. The apple had to be perfect. The apple was the most important part.

\*

Sometimes the blonde lady brought deli meat. Slices of gelbwurst and fat garlic pickles. Sometimes she pushed the chair closer to the window. *Tell me about the church bells*, she'd say. *About the priest who fell off the ladder picking that last apple. Tell me the story about the cartwheels*. She'd sit there and wait for an answer. Her eyes were gray like Henry's. Why didn't she just turn around? Behind her shoulder the plum tree was dying. It needed a little water.

\*

The hillsides were flowering and Henry turned his face toward the sun. The gänseblümchen, storchschnabel and forget-me-nots, the lampionblume and wiesen-schaumkraut. The river had thawed and its waters were green. All the sharpness was gone from the air. He smiled at her and his front teeth overlapped and he went down on his knee. *Heirate mich*, he said, and his accent was terrible. *Wir gehören zusammen*, and who knows where he learned those words, maybe from one of the old ladies who worked at the PX. He somersaulted down

the hill when she said yes. He threw some cartwheels, too, and his shirt got untucked and for the first time she saw the whiteness of his belly. They'd go to the Springs. They'd raise a family there. Her sweet Henry from America who was only twenty-three.

\*

Sometimes she slept in her rolling chair. Sometimes she watched the tree. She knocked against the glass because there were men working outside and they needed to give it water. She tapped the window with her cane, but they never turned around. Any time now the black lady would come with those white teeth. She'd bring a bowl of butterscotch pudding or a little tray with pills. The black lady or the blonde lady whose lips were always moving.

The sky so blue and those perfect clouds, and these days, these endless days with the smell of soup from the kitchen, that watery broth that needed the bone. The hammers outside, always the hammers and the cars and the Estonian lady and her strange humming. Like birds crying or a baby yearning for the bottle. The room went dark when she started.

She closed her eyes because that's where Henry was. She closed them even when she kept them open. He was sitting under the tree and it was April. It was always April and the tree was blooming and the hillsides, too, and Henry was twenty-three.

# SHOPLIFTING

LAURA ENDER

First, find a tube of lipstick—a good color for you, sure, but more importantly one that fits your palm and pocket. Pick it up. Pick up some eye shadow, mascara, lip gloss—whatever. Survey everything, look at price tags, and then put it all back. Except the lipstick.

You need thumbnails for this. Grow them out. Make them sharp.

Wander the store—look at body wash, deodorant, family packs of Pringles. The lipstick has a wrapper, usually a perforation, too. This is where your thumbnails come in. Pick at the wrapper. It won't look like anything to other customers. Like a nervous tic, maybe, if they even notice. Do it slowly—look at lots of stuff. You're going to need something you legitimately want to buy. But first, pick things up, look them over. When the lipstick's unwrapped, grab an item with the hand it's in. When you put the item back on the shelf, you'll tuck the wrapper behind it. Next, shove both hands in your pockets (lipstick and all) and wander the store a little longer.

Don't buy anything too expensive, but nothing too cheap, either. Tic-Tacs aren't enough. Scented candles are too much. Buy Cheetos or a soda. Hair gel. Something they'd expect from a teenage girl.

And smile. Ask the cashier about his day. If you can't make conversation, if your hands are shaking or you're turning red, put the lipstick back and walk away.

When the cashier rings you up, look him in the eyes. Notice how green they are. Notice how straight his teeth are when he smiles, and the little dimple in his right cheek. When he asks your name, tell him. He's probably twenty-two or twenty-three, but you like older men and he obviously likes younger girls. Women. You've got to start thinking of yourself as a woman.

After you've bought your Diet Coke, go sit outside by the bike rack and drink it. Stay under the awning, in the light where the clerk can see you. Maybe turn around and watch him through the window, flirt with him a little. When he comes outside on his break, don't walk away, even if he is looking at you like he's wearing X-ray specs. Be happy this is a twenty-four hour store, that they keep it lit up like the Vegas strip, which you've heard can be seen from outer space.

Keep drinking your soda. Smile. Check your watch. Gina said she'd pick you up at ten.

Don't flinch when his T-shirt brushes your arm. Say hi to him. Ask how long he's worked here. Don't cough when he lights a cigarette or tell him he needs to be twenty-five feet from the door. When he puts his hand on your back, let him. When he asks what you're doing later, write your number on his arm with the pen you've got tucked behind your ear—the one you took from Office Depot last week, walked out with two of them stuck into your ponytail like chopsticks and nobody noticed.

You'll want to jump when you hear Gina honking, but don't. Let him write his phone number on your arm, and don't cringe when he pushes too hard. Make him think you like it, the way he almost breaks the skin. Make him think you're dangerous. Get in Gina's car.

Tell her the clerk's name is Jake, that he smokes Lucky Strikes, which is totally badass. Don't ask about the burn mark on her right arm or the golf-ball sized hickey in the crook of her neck. She never gives you a straight answer, anyway. Suck in your gut (your dad's been buying jumbo bags of potato chips lately) and check your hair in the rearview. Show Gina the lipstick, broken-blood-vessel purple. Feel that jump of jealousy in your stomach when she slides it over her lips without looking, one hand on the wheel while the wind whips her hair around her face.

Don't think about last time, the shimmer peach that she chucked out the window. Or the argyle socks you forgot to unwrap in the dressing room, even after she explained (how many times?) why they had to be unwrapped in case security turned out your purse. Or the corset you took out from under your clothes right in front of the store. She really nailed you for that one, but it's not like you got caught. Stop thinking about it. Think about tonight. The party. The clerk named Jake.

Gina has a fifth of Jack under a blanket in the backseat and a fresh pack of cigarettes (most likely her mother's) on top of her purse. She has a tattoo on her ankle that her cousin Frankie did when she was fifteen, a broken heart oozing blood toward her foot. She has three holes in her right ear, four in her left (the fourth is your own handiwork, though afterward you ran to the bathroom and threw up your breakfast). She has yet to tell you how she knows the guy whose

house you're headed to, and whether she has dibs on any of the guys there.

Slip out of your jeans and into a skirt while Gina drives. Wait until she parks to take the scissors to the hemline (your dad bought this one, so it's all the way down to your knees). There's an old lady across the street, walking her dog. She stares at you while her dog stops to crap. Give her the finger—or think about it, anyway—and glare until she yanks her dog's collar and totters away.

This is a really nice neighborhood, and Gina is already walking up to the nicest house on the block. Don't let it throw you. Sure, you usually party with burnt-out college guys in rat's-nest apartments. There are usually a few girls with belly rings out front smoking (or, if you arrive after midnight, holding each other's hair and puking), beer cans in the grass. Here, there are a few luxury cars parked along the curb (and Gina's POS). There are rose bushes. There's freshly mowed grass.

Say, "What is this, a tea party?" when you catch up to Gina at the front door.

She rings the doorbell. There are never doorbells.

Say, "Whose party is this, anyway?"

A guy in a suit answers the door, with grease in his hair or gel or something. He has nice eyebrows. He grabs you and Gina by the waist.

Gina told you this would be a different kind of evening, but you thought that meant Jell-O shots or some kind of psychedelic. You made sure to eat a hefty dinner so you wouldn't wind up passed out before midnight. Instead, you're being led into a room full of cigar smoke and middle-aged men. A couple of them are handsome, you guess—especially the eyebrow guy—but mostly they look like they should be in some dive somewhere, ogling waitresses.

Don't say anything when Gina gets up on the coffee table and dances to whatever jazz they've got playing. They have an actual record player. Some of them have a little gray in their hair. Don't ask them how old they are. You're pretty sure they're older than your dad.

Try not to smack Gina when she announces that you'll both be right back, that you need to freshen up a little. Let her hustle you into the bathroom. Let her explain. There's got to be some angle to this that you haven't figured out.

"Put this on," she says once the bathroom door is closed. She's holding a lacy, purple bra. You're getting a bad feeling about this.

She lifts your arms above your head and before you know what she's doing, she's got your T-shirt off and your bra unclasped. Cross your arms over your chest and elbow her in the ribcage. Ask her what the hell she thinks she's doing.

Slow your breathing. Calm the muscles in your neck.

"Drink this," she says, shoving the bottle of Jack in your face. Take a swig as she pulls your hair into a clip and straps on the new bra.

Don't think about the time your dad bailed your aunt out of jail, the night she slept on the couch and left wide smudges of mascara across the throw pillows.

Figure this has to be distraction. You'll prance out there in your purple bra and get those men looking the other way while Gina lifts a Rembrandt or something. Tell her you're not sure about this, that you don't want to go to prison. Notice she's putting on the same bra she gave you, so you'll be twins or something.

"He already paid me fifty bucks," she says. "We'll get fifty more when it's over."

Try not to choke on the bile in your throat. Don't let your jaw fall off your face as she tells you it's not sex or anything, just a little dancing, and that this could be a great way to help pay for that trip to Mexico you've been talking about. If you do well tonight, they're sure to hire you again. It could be regular.

Remember how shocking it was the first time she dropped a necklace down your shirt and ordered you to act natural. You were still a freshman drama geek who cared about homework and ate lunch behind the library. You couldn't have imagined this scene, this bathroom (with its shell-shaped soaps and lacy shower curtain), those men in the other room. Remember how skinny and flimsy Gina looked when you first saw her stumbling out of the girls' bathroom, smelling of clove cigarettes. You'd imagined snapping her collarbone with two fingers, and you probably could have done it. Could you do it now?

"They won't touch you," Gina says. She pulls out this evening's lipstick and dabs it on your mouth. "You just have to wiggle around a little, strip down to your panties, and it's over. It's not like you don't do the same for free on any other Friday night."

Put your shirt back on and smile. Tell her it's fine—you'll do it. Tell her to go out first. You'll be right behind her.

She wants a pinky swear. Go ahead and do it.

When she closes the door behind her, take another shot of Jack.

Don't think about your aunt walking around your house in her nightgown, her toothbrush in your bathroom, her arm around your father while they watch sitcoms on TV, on the same couch where her sister sat and braided your hair when you were little, or the ugly green soaps she put in the bathroom, the frog motif your mother would have hated.

Grab Gina's bag. Ignore the weird world music that's firing up in the living room. Just unzip the bag and start filling it. Take the shell soaps and the hand towels and a half bottle of shaving cream. Open the cabinets. Take aspirin, vitamins, mouthwash, aftershave. Take the toothbrushes, used and unused alike.

Pop the screen out of the bathroom window and pray you can fit through it after all those potato chips. Try to land on your feet as you fall into a rosebush. Ignore the thorns.

Don't stop to wonder if there's a guard dog or if Gina will be okay with all those men. Don't feel for her at all. Don't think about your pinky swear. Walk. Run. Climb the fence. Gina's keys are in her bag. You can take the car, drive away.

Don't think about the glass ponies your aunt has started collecting, or how she uses your dad's money to buy them, or the job she quit because your dad said it was the source of her misery, or the way she stays home while your dad works on Saturdays, cooking food no one wants to eat and telling you you're her only friend, though she hasn't treated you like one in years.

You can't go back to your house, where your dad and aunt are probably watching game shows, thinking you're spending the night at a friend's. You can't go back to the drama club, to the desk in your bedroom that's been covered with clothes for months now, to eating lunch alone behind the library and calling the librarian by her first name. You can't go back to zero.

Imagine Gina with those men, all of them drunk, all of them leering. Imagine their hands on her, their lips, their teeth.

Go back to the bathroom window. It's too high to climb through. Go around to the backdoor. Drop the bag by the kitchen table and walk straight into that living room.

Pretend it's all a gag, like you'd planned it all along. Like you were supposed to barge in, slightly bloodied from the rosebushes, like it's sexy or some-

thing. Let the eyebrow man pluck a leaf out of your hair. Let him trace the phone number on your arm and ask what your plans are around midnight, if you prefer men or boys.

But keep your eye on Gina.

Watch her step onto the coffee table and start turning her hips in circles, a dance you're pretty sure she ripped off from one of the R&B videos she's always ragging on. Keep listening to the eyebrow man—give him the yes's and no's he's looking for—but don't let Gina out of your sight.

Keep your pulse steady, your palms dry.

Remember the time Gina poured grape juice into your math teacher's purse after she gave you a C on your final. Remember the time she punched Kylie Mays in the eye for calling you ugly.

Watch as two of the men start putting their hands on her legs. She bites her lip, like it's supposed to be sexy, but you can see the muscle between her eyebrows flex. Watch their hands move upward, their fingers crawling toward her waistband, her bra strap. Watch the vein start to pulse in her forehead.

And then, start crying. Use everything you can remember from drama class and more. Dimpled chin, plump lower lip. But not sexy-like. Cry like you did in the second grade when that bitch Teeny Williams stole your Strawberry Shortcake lunchbox and chucked it over the fence, into the street. Remember the way it flew open, sending your peanut butter sandwich under the tire of a car. You could swear you heard the bread squish. Let your face get red, let the tears flow. Morph into something uglier than you think you can; let the snot drip down your nose. Wail. Don't let anyone touch you except Gina, as she hustles you toward the backyard. When she slaps you, cry harder. Feel it in your chest, your guts. Make her edge you all the way around the house, to the street, to the car.

Now settle down. Breathe. Don't mind the hatred in Gina's face—it will pass. You'll get her fifty bucks back somehow. You'll snag something at an antique store and sell it on eBay. You'll ask your aunt for it. You'll babysit the neighbor's kids, if you have to, and make up the difference with a lost piece of jewelry.

“Damn right you will,” she says as she shakes your hands off her. “You little puke.”

She's never called you names before, and you want to think she doesn't mean it, but she probably does. It can't ruin the feeling you have, every inch of your skin kicking with adrenaline. You could bring that house down if you wanted to, the way you feel. You could tear the drywall down with just your fingernails.

# GROUP DYNAMICS

MINDY FRIDDLE

As he pulled into the parking lot of Jackie Jump-Up's Pizzeria and Animal Band, Connor realized just how impossible it was to hide desire. He was in love. Stupid with it. He couldn't keep happiness off his face—and knew it was futile to try. Like sunlight leaking around a drawn curtain, his new joy left its traces. It was only a matter of time before his wife confronted him with her suspicions. He was surprised she hadn't made a stink yet. She was probably already talking to a lawyer or her girlfriends about the best way to screw him to the wall. Well, bring it on. Glenda's ire was the least of his worries. All too soon, he would have to stay at home more. The official grand opening of Jackie Jump-Up's was tomorrow and Suzie's husband would be in town for it. Connor's affair with Suzie would have to stop—for a while. For a week. Maybe two. Until her husband left again.

Connor walked over to the glass double-doors of Jackie Jump-Up's and searched inside for a glimpse of Suzie. He could make out the outlines of the mechanical animal band, still and silent after an evening of practice runs. The band was in atrocious shape. Greasy metal spikes poked out of the animals' garish fabric like compound bone fractures. Connor sighed and left a small foggy patch on the glass.

He spotted Suzie behind the counter, at the cash register counting change. He tapped on the glass, but she didn't hear him. He heard a car approach from behind him, and turned around to watch it circle the edge of the parking lot. It slipped away and disappeared onto the main road like a shark into dark waters. Why weren't the parking lot lights on? He pushed through the doors (unlocked!) and crossed the lobby.

"Goddamn it, you didn't lock the front door again." He shook his head. "At the cash register, in broad view, and the door is unlocked."

She was still counting change, whispering numbers, ignoring him. Her lilac-scented lotion teased him. (For Extra Sensitive Skin—he remembered the bottle by the bathroom sink). The top of Suzie's head barely reached his shoulders. Her diminutiveness was just one of her qualities he adored. He felt large and vaguely dangerous beside her. No telling what lengths he would go to, to protect

her. He listened to the pinging of dimes, like rain on a tin roof.

“Suze, you have to be more careful.”

“One hundred eighty-two dollars and eleven cents. Not bad, I guess, a day before we’re officially open.”

He made his voice sterner now. “The front door should be locked at ten sharp.”

“You think anyone’s interested in going to the Big House for ripping off Jackie Jump-Up’s?” Her brown eyes looked beyond him, sweeping over the empty tables and red vinyl booths, before she met his gaze. She smiled, reached up and kissed him, softly gnawed his bottom lip with her small perfect teeth.

“Arnold was supposed to lock up tonight, but he’s been tied up with the animal band.” She walked to the front doors and locked them. “I wasn’t expecting you till later. I thought you had to go to that neighborhood thing.”

“Well, I went and I’m back.” The neighborhood “thing” was the annual barbecue at his subdivision’s clubhouse. Connor was president of his homeowners association, so he couldn’t very well get out of making an appearance, a cameo role. And that’s what he’d done. Gulping Coronas, then leaving his wife with her virgin strawberry daiquiri and her hard stare, leaving his neighbors with their discussions of lawn fertilizers and trash pick-up, leaving it all.

“Arnold, you done yet?” Suzie cupped her hands around her mouth. “Arnold!”

“Yes Ma’am!” There was a dull thud from the stage of the animal band. Arnold appeared, grinning. He was an oily-looking, too-thin kid, with bad posture. He worked nights at Johnny Jump-Up’s, saving money to buy a new truck. He was trying to get the mechanical animals in tip-top shape and it kept him busy. For the last six months, Connor rarely saw Arnold without his toolbox, holding a wrench or a hammer or a screwdriver, peering out from under his shoulder-length hair.

“Did you fix the gorilla yet?” Suzie asked.

“Yes, ma’am. I fixed the gorilla. Damn thing popped a wing nut. I nigger-rigged it.”

“Arnold! I told you I don’t like that word. Don’t say it again. Not here at Jackie Jump-Up’s.” Her face was flushed. Connor realized how rarely Suzy grew angry about anything, but when she was mad—like right now—her face grew

pink and lovely.

“Sorry. I mean I jigger-rigged it to last a few more weeks until they send us that one part I done asked for two months ago.”

“How are the rest of them holding up?” Connor asked. “The wolf or the fox, or whatever the hell that middle one is that was stiff last week. Will they be ready for tomorrow night?” He saw Suzie glance at him, her mouth tightening. Maybe he was butting in, but he couldn’t help it. He liked things to work right, to take care of things. Wasn’t that why he started coming here? He’d made sure her bank loan had come through, had approved it himself, and had begun stopping in to offer his advice about contractors and where to buy used restaurant equipment. Of course, it wasn’t the project that excited him—building a local pizza place for kids—it was Suzie.

Arnold kicked at a crust of pizza on the floor. “Mr. Sims, you know those damn thangs are on their last leg. I mean, they came second hand from that no-count carnival. I can’t work miracles. I just try to keep them going.”

“I know you are, Arnold.” Suzie chimed in. “And they’re holding up just fine. I could tell those kids tonight were impressed.”

Suzie petted Arnold, Connor thought, but she was right to. Arnold could fix anything, and he was cheap. When he’d heard about Arnold’s mechanical skills, Connor had steered him to work for Suzie. He’d helped push through Arnold’s mobile home loan at the bank. He would make sure he got his truck loan, too, when he needed it. Connor looked at the boy with grudging admiration. Arnold had a wife, a one-year old, and another on the way. He wasn’t much older than Connor’s son, who was a freshman at Florida State, flunking out of mass communications, drinking himself to death.

Connor walked over to the soda machines in the kitchen. He poured himself a diet Coke and then started breaking down the machines. He unscrewed the caps from the spouts, put them in glasses, filled each with water, plopped in denture tablets. The glasses were fizzing and popping so loudly, he didn’t hear Suzie behind him.

“Thanks,” she said. “You’re learning the steps here pretty fast.”

“Where’s my reward for a job well done?”

“You’ll get yours, don’t you worry.”

He laughed and patted her ass. Her jeans were tight, and one back pocket was torn, hanging down. She had one of his shirts on—a Roseblade Country Club t-shirt.

“All I have to do is wipe down the machines with a little bleach and we can leave.” She stretched and bunched up her long black hair in a little knot in back. Connor kissed the damp hollow at the nape of her neck.

He wandered over to the front doors and looked outside. The parking lot was empty, the street was quiet. There were no cars driving by that he could see. But for some reason, Connor felt uneasy, sensed something different. Could be someone was casing out the joint, a new place like this. He walked to the back of the restaurant where Arnold was on stage again, fiddling with the gorilla. Connor sat down at one of the tables and sipped his diet Coke. He was stressed out, was all. Juggling this thing with Suzie, trying to keep it under wraps. But the worst part was yet to come. Thinking about her husband here, *here*, and Connor having to stay away until he left. And, let’s face it, thinking about him—the husband—sleeping with her.

*Manuel.* Connor never said the name aloud, resorted only to pronouns to keep Suzie’s husband anonymous. He cringed when Suzie said “Manuel,” or worse, “Manny.”

“How long will he stay?” Connor asked her last week.

“I don’t know,” she sighed, her back to him. “Two days, a week maybe. With Manny, I never know.”

Suzie had been a sociology major at North Carolina State when she met and fell in love with Manuel Garcia Solis. That was five years ago. She was studying living conditions of migrant workers for her senior project, she said, and her advisor suggested she talk to Manuel. An activist. A folk hero. “A troublemaker,” Connor blurted out, in the middle of her story. “That’s what those kinds of people usually are.” Suzie had indulged Connor with a small grin, and continued her story. She had sought Manuel out, she said, and finally found him in an old trailer without electricity. She walked in and found him sitting there on a bare mattress, reading by candlelight. Canned food and books—hundreds of books, surrounded him. “And that impressed you?” But this time Suzie ignored Connor, her eyes wide and staring, remembering.

She wasn't too forthcoming about the details of how she and Manuel ended up together, but Connor could imagine them so much it hurt. Suzie interviewing Manuel, writing down everything he said on her legal pad, riveted by his tales of dropping out of school in fourth grade, drifting up and down the East Coast with his mother and sisters—an ungodly number of sisters, six or seven—all of them picking tomatoes or cucumbers or peaches—picking anything that would pay. Thinking of Suzie stretched out on the bare mattress, Manuel's brown hands running up and down her pale, small body, left Connor nauseated. So did Suzie's offhand remarks about how the last two times Manny came home for a visit she ended up pregnant, which was fine with her. She loved children.

“The thing about Manny—he's a real intellectual. He really is, Connor. Even though he works all those no-count jobs. When he was a little boy he stole books from libraries and bookstores, just to have them, just to eat up what he wanted to know. He started reading law, too. I was sure he was going to wind up at law school, but how many fourth-grade dropout lawyers do you know? So he decided to write his own book about how migrant workers live, told by a migrant worker. That's what he's working on, now.” Picking tomatoes and writing down his thoughts in spiral notebooks, Connor added to himself, while Suzie was raising his two babies and trying to support the family by starting her own business, a crazy pizza place with a broken down animal band.

The day they'd met, in his office at the bank, Suzie told Connor about how the animal band was just to get kids in and begging their mamas to bring them back. There were plans for a little library in the back and an arts and crafts room (and a loom for God's sake). Old people were going to be welcome, too, and after a while there would be daycare for the kids and the old people. This was going to be a regular little community, she told him, her eyes on fire, a good one.

Now, Suzie's elaborate plans scared Connor. Just when he started to capture them and translate them into some kind of business strategy, to draw up a budget, her vision grew unwieldy and galloped ahead. *And a greenhouse out in the back. That would be perfect.* It terrified him, not only because businesses didn't run that way, but because the success of Johnny Jump-Up's Pizzeria and Animal Band was the only thing that would keep Suzie staying in town. Staying with him.

It was a long shot, this Johnny Jump-Up's. He'd known that all along. He thought the idea was hopeless when she first told him about it. But that was before he fell in love with her—about two minutes before. Before he lost his objectivity and his head. In his office at the bank last spring, the first thing she told him was how her daddy died and left her a run-down steak house, and how she was going to make it a place for children.

She didn't sit down across from his desk like most people did, clearing their throats nervously. Suzie headed right to the book shelf beside his desk and picked up the arrowheads he had there, his collection of Indian arrowheads and artifacts from his father's farm, meticulously labeled (*found in the garden, three feet south of the barn, by the pecan tree, November 12, 1978*). She talked to him with her back to him, her fingers fluttering and rubbing around the edges and points of all those old rocks. Connor had swiveled his leather chair around, and finally stood and joined her. Her hair was wet, and a sharp clean smell, bath soap, floated up to him. She wore sandals, a crisp, white blouse with a missing top button, and a long, green skirt with an orange scarf knotted at her waist. She wore silver rings that caught the light when she waved her hand to dismiss his questions about filling out forms.

"I know what I want to do. I guess I need you to help me figure out *how* to do it, Mr. Sims. I'm always a little suspicious of official rules and legal requirements." She backed away from him, and a small smile wrestled out from her seriousness. Something inside Connor shifted. "Here we are in a town that witnessed the Trail of Tears," she said. "The laws didn't help the Cherokee. The Cherokee people marched right out there one hundred fifty years ago. Just thinking about that forced march to Oklahoma . . ." She wiped her eyes with her pinky and collected herself.

"Yeah, I know about that," Connor said, and it came out defensively, not the way he had intended. They were in Cherokee County, North Carolina after all. Their town had not only made peace with its tragic past, but the Chamber now marketed it to tourists. They were on the official Trail of Tears National Historic Tour.

"I guess you know a third of them died on the way? And the tribe around these parts are from those poor souls who escaped into the woods."

Connor nodded, wondering if he should sit back down behind his desk and reclaim some of his authority. This was about a small business loan for God's sake. But he stood rooted, watching Suzie's hands cup his arrowheads.

"Laws didn't help them any," Suzie said. She picked up one of the arrowheads, plowed up from his parents' farm the summer he turned twelve. It was yellowed white, like a tooth, the point still sharp. "They owned their own farms and land, slaves even, since the Revolutionary War. The Cherokee had their own newspaper, and some of the best schooling around for children. But then somebody had to go discover gold in the mountains, and then Pow! It was time to move them out. They fought legally to keep their farms. But that didn't help all those thousands of them on that death march in winter, did it Mr. Sims?"

They looked at each other. Connor crossed his arms and leaned against his desk, besotted.

"That's why I don't trust all those fancy rules and laws," she said. "And besides, I hate paperwork."

Arnold hunched beside Elmer the gorilla with a pair of pliers. After a minute or so he stood up and called out to Connor.

"Mr. Sims, I'm going to give them a run and I want you to listen out for bad rattles."

Connor raised up his empty glass like a toast as Arnold moved to the control panel.

"I'm all ears, Arnold."

The song, "It's My Party and I'll Cry If I Want To," began to blare. The four man-sized animals began jerking and snapping. While the lights dimmed, the animals gyrated and rolled their eyes and clacked their mouths and clamped their musical instruments. Connor concentrated, watched the rigid movements. Arnold walked across the stage and stood beside Jackie Jump-Up, a kangaroo with a tropical shirt and a straw hat. The kangaroo swiped at a stringless electric guitar while his mouth opened and closed like a dying fish. Arnold darted over to the control box and stopped the song. The animals continued to whir and grind without music. Arnold walked over and stood by the gorilla, his head cocked, listening. The gorilla sat behind the keyboard, wildly rolling his eyes, his blunt wooly fingers tamping on the painted-on keyboard. Like a doctor, Arnold pressed his head to the gorilla's chest. Behind Arnold, the giant squirrel squatted over a set of

drums, his paws prayerfully meshed, holding a drumstick like a Roman candle.

The mechanical animals' ferociously congenial expressions always left Connor a little unsettled. Those things were trying to look cheerfully alive up there. They gave him the creeps. With that thought, Connor felt himself tense up; a jolt of panic moved through him like an electrical charge. *If the restaurant failed, Suzie would leave.*

When Suzie slid in the booth and sat across from him, they both watched the animal band. Connor tried to keep a neutral, unworried expression on his face.

"I'm changing this town because it is a mean little place," Suzie whispered loudly to Connor, her face glowing with pride.

Connor knew why Suzie wanted to change this place. She'd told him how her father had been a drunk and how she would find him passed out in the back of the restaurant after hours. She told him about the time in high school a football player raped her. They'd been drunk one night after a game. The quarterback, Dean Looper, now worked over at Larry Looper's Honda, which his uncle owned. "I have to drive by that place every day, Connor," she'd told him.

"Jesus, that's horrible," he'd murmured, then held her as he thought of Larry Looper, beefy and florid, stuffed in a cardboard-stiff white shirt. He was in the Rotary Club with Connor, had once brought his nephew along.

Now, when the song ended and the lights flashed back on, Connor reached out and pulled Suzie's hand to his mouth. He kissed each finger, her open palm.

Another good thing about Arnold. He was discreet.

"There's just so much hate in this town and I am going to rise above it. I'm going to change things, Connor, I really am."

Connor avoided her eyes. He didn't want to see the raw excitement there.

"You know what I remembered just now when I was wiping down the counters? That sociology is the study of group dynamics," she said. They both watched as Arnold appeared on stage, looking up at the spotlights. "It's in groups that things change, Connor."

"Is that right?" He pulled her over to his lap.

"Like Margaret Meade said, 'Never doubt that a small group of people can change the world because it's the only thing that can.' Something like that. It

was on our Sociology Club t-shirts in college.”

Connor smiled in her hair. He, himself, believed in the power of the individual and maintained a skeptical outlook about groups—from family units to government. Connor—Republican, libertarian—did not feel the need to express his own philosophy with Suzie the way he would with, say, his sister-in-law, Anna Marie. A liberal, the family’s only Democrat, Anna Marie gave him indigestion every Thanksgiving with her need to pepper him with arguments about corporate greed. But Suzy—she wasn’t belligerent and pedantic—she was kind. He could overlook her misguided faith in group dynamics just fine.

Arnold stood at the front of the stage now looking out at them, one hand shielding his eyes. “I reckon we’re ready as we’ll ever be.”

“Oh, thank you, Arnold,” she called out.

“Can I ask a question?” Arnold said. “You know that Jackie Jump-Up animal suit in the back? The one you said I might have to wear when I wave to people in the parking lot? How does ol’ Jackie perform up here in his band and at the same time walk around out there, too? I mean, kids is going to figure that out, ain’t they?”

“Children have a strong willing suspension of disbelief,” Suzie said.

“A who?”

“They like to pretend and make believe,” she said. “It comes naturally to them.”

“Well, it’s a real head scratcher, if you ask me. Jackie here and out yonder, too.”

Connor thought he saw sadness linger on Suzie’s face when Arnold began to shut down the band, but the expression passed. She slipped out of the booth and headed back to the kitchen in her own quick-stepped little trot.

“Have you ever heard such a racket in your life?” Arnold asked Connor after Suzie left. He began dousing the kangaroo with an oily spray. “This is my favorite one,” Arnold said as he walked over to Foxy, who gripped her shivering tambourine. She was noisy—Connor could hear the metal clicks of her batting eyes. “Woo hoo Mama,” Arnold said, laughing as he ogled Foxy’s large breast mounds. He lifted up the skirt. “I think she might need lubricating, too. Ain’t that right, Miss Foxy?”

“I don’t think she likes you, Arnold.”

“Yeah, she’s ignoring me pretty good.” Arnold’s expression moved from mischievous amusement to seriousness. “So, Mr. Sims, how do they look up here? See any more snags?”

Connor gave him a thumbs up.

Because it was to be their last night together for a week, Connor stopped and picked up a bottle of wine on the way to Suzie’s apartment. For a good six months now, they had settled into a routine of heading separately to Suzie’s apartment after working at the restaurant. After Suzie fell asleep, Connor slipped out and headed home. He had become expert at unlocking doors without so much of a jingle, floating from one sleeping household and sliding into another.

When Connor arrived at the apartment complex, he barely missed passing the teenaged baby-sitter in the hallway. They used to be more discreet, Connor parking down the road, waiting a good fifteen minutes after the sitter left, but now—Connor had stopped being careful. At home, his excuses had grown thinner, then finally disappeared.

Suzie was in the back bedroom, murmuring to the baby. Connor turned off the television and began to pick up the playing cards scattered on the sofa, the remnants of the baby-sitter’s game with the children. He stacked the cards neatly, shuffled them for good measure, and stuck them back in their box. *Fifty-two cards*, Connor thought. *Fifty-two years. A year for each card. That’s how old I am.*

The apartment was small and cluttered, filled with toy-stuffed milk crates, makeshift cinder-block-and-plank bookshelves, and baskets crammed with blankets and towels. Connor felt like a fairytale giant in a cottage, hunched under the hallway’s low ceiling.

He discovered the baby, Janie, asleep in Suzie’s room. He picked her up, and tiptoeing, carried her to the other room. He smelled her milkiness, the infant scent of her head as he carefully laid her in her crib. Had his own children once been so small? Suzie hummed in the rocking chair with the two-year-old, her eyes closed.

Connor moved to the kitchen and opened the bottle of wine. He filled two jelly jars he found in the cabinet, and took them to the bedroom. He waited, naked, under the covers of Suzie’s futon. Suzie and her husband’s futon. He heard Suzie finally give the two-year-old a kiss, her muffled steps moving to the bath-

room where she brushed her teeth and put in her diaphragm.

When she came in the bedroom, Suzie sat beside Connor, stroked his face. She was crying. He sat up, but when he reached for her, she put a hand on his chest to stop him. “Connor, there’s something I’ve been meaning to say all night, and I’ve just been brushing it away, but I see I got to face it and tell you.”

She stood and moved around the room, lighting candles, her back to him. The candles flickered—there must have been a dozen or more of them, squat and tall, thin and fat—throwing Connor and Suzie’s shadows on the walls, the ceilings. “I thought Manny had pretty much run his course with me.” She turned to look at him now, closing her eyes hard for a few seconds before continuing. “I mean, I was okay about how he wasn’t coming home to stay, that he was drifting away from me and the kids. I thought that might be the best we could do. But now . . . well, I’m pretty sure he’s coming here to stay.”

She was sitting on the bed with him now, watching his face, but Connor’s heart was thumping hard, his ears were full of sound, *ka-thump-ka-thump*.

“What do you mean?” His mouth was dry.

She said Manny would stay now and write his book on migrant workers. He had enough material.

Connor was going to be sick. He rushed down the hall to the bathroom, stepped on a squeaky toy. He let the spasms do their work, vomiting until he felt hollow and weak. He cleaned himself up and stared at a wilted pansy stuck in a formula bottle beside the sink. He heard a soft knock, then felt Suzie rub his back. He turned and embraced her violently, his hands gripping her back, her hair. For so long, the deadening of his life had been gradual. He had managed to numb regret—his wasted life!—until Suzie. She’d given him another chance to live, for Christ’s sake. But this—Suzie ending it? Taking herself away from him? The shock of it was like a beating. A hot, bloody fight. He was getting pummeled.

“When?” he croaked. “When did you decide this?”

“This morning.” She pulled away and looked at him. “He called this morning.”

“My God, Suzie, how do you know he won’t swoop in and wreck everything you’ve set up here?”

She shook her head. “I’m not a planner, Connor. You know that. And with Manny, I take it day-by-day.” They were sitting on the floor of the tiny bathroom now, both of them naked. Suzie’s eyes were wet and dark as damp soil. “I wanted to take care of you, Connor, before you die inside, you know? I just saw so much life wanting to bust out of you when I met you the first time, I swear I did. Everything was all pent up inside you and when we were together I just peeled you open and you gave your heart to me. I couldn’t resist you.”

He thought of his friends, a few co-workers, some of them already hit with cancer or heart attacks. Talking about their pensions, early retirement. But Connor wasn’t settling down at all, he was kicking and screaming. Moving and jumping in a blizzard keeps you alive. Swimming laps three times a week at the club keeps you going. Being in love kept your blood pumping. He was busting out, popping open. Yes.

“You’re so worried about your son down there in Florida flunking out, go down there and enroll yourself and get another degree. Study about those Indian artifacts, the ones you keep at your office. Stay with him for a while. Get away and save yourself, Connor.”

He shook his head.

“Why not?”

“My life isn’t like that, Suzie,” he said bitterly. “I have responsibilities.” He could feel the mean words trying to muscle out—*What perfect timing! Now that you got your business loan, your sorry ass husband thinks he’ll sashay in?* He rubbed his hand over his face. “Hell, I’m living in Tupperware Land, the air is sucked out over there, everything . . . left-overs.”

“You needed some danger in your life and I guess I’ve been that danger. But you need love, too, Connor, something you love and care about.”

“Do I.” He stood up.

“It’s me right now, but it’s not really me, it shouldn’t be. You know, when people first start out together, and they’re crazy in love? They think it’s going to go on forever, the two of them, smooth and straight, and they can’t imagine slowing down. I guess that’s why people finally marry. It just wears you out not to. You have to slow down. You don’t know what’s up ahead.”

“It’s a fucking cul-de-sac.”

“Oh, Connor.” She laughed.

For a minute they were quiet. “Don’t do this,” he said. “Let’s give it a week. See if he’s singing the same tune about staying in a few days.”

She slowly shook her head. “Manny and me, we have to try to make this work. The kids and all . . .”

“I thought we were . . . set. Don’t you understand? I told you I’d take care of you, Suzie. I told you I’d make sure your kids would be taken care of. Now you’re telling me you’re going back to that deadbeat?”

What happened to their own little group dynamic? is what he wanted to say. Didn’t that count for something?

Glenda was still awake when Connor came home, her back to him in bed. He undressed, and did not have the energy to be quiet about it. He stretched out on his side of the king-sized bed, the mattress big as a parade float. His heart pounded, a furious fist. From beside him, Glenda let out ragged sobs.

He awoke to the smells of coffee and bacon. Perhaps it was an invitation to come down, to face her after arriving home just hours ago at dawn. Perhaps it was an ultimatum in the making, or even a decision.

He stepped into the shower, his head fuzzy, his stomach recoiling, grief clawing inside. Looking down at his naked body, he was reminded of Suzie wrapped around him, one lean, pale leg thrown over his. He closed his eyes, put his head back, let the hot water hit him hard.

When he walked downstairs, the carpet muffled his footsteps, a willing conspirator. In the kitchen, he sat down at his usual place at the table. His wife stood at the sink, her back to him. Connor snapped open the newspaper and hid behind it, his eyes at once drawn to the half-page advertisement announcing the grand opening of Jackie Jump-Up’s. The photo of the animal band was grainy, black and white. *Prizes! the advertisement said. Fun! Food! Games! Enjoy performances by Jackie Jump-Up and the Animal Band!* The newspaper shook a little in his hands.

Glenda, efficient and weary as a waitress, poured him a cup of coffee. She was dressed in a powder blue suit. She wore earrings and lipstick. From somewhere in the thicket of his sorrow, he realized how unusual it was for Glenda to be dressed up, and so early. *Who died?* he wanted to ask, but even his resentment

wasn't spiteful.

"I want you to take the day off," his wife said. Her face was a round, white dumpling of agony. He returned to reading his paper, at staring at the advertisement. "I want you to sit right there and tell me . . ." Her voice rose, before trailing off. He looked up. She was facing him, her back to the sink, her arms crossed. Connor found himself saved from a confrontation by his daughter, who bounded in the kitchen like a puppy and devoured the eggs and toast and bacon that neither Connor nor his wife could think of eating.

At the bank that morning, Connor could not sit still. His thoughts flew around the room, not perching or lighting. The forms in front of him, the memos and letters, were unreadable, indecipherable. He left, claiming a bad case of the stomach flu.

Connor picked up his daughter from school early and persuaded her to skip band practice. He bribed her with promises of a shopping trip to the mall and dinner out. Connor took her plump, dimpled, still-childish hand in his own, and though it startled both of them a little, pressed her hand to his mouth. "Jan, you know I love you."

*"Daddy."*

He embarrassed her, he knew, but he was soft and raw with emotion. Soon enough his grief would scuttle for shelter, would harden and hide. The tears that threatened to well up in his eyes—though they disappeared quickly—stung like alcohol.

Connor stopped at a gas station and fueled up the car while his daughter called home. "Mom wants to talk to you," she called out to him, holding up her cell phone. But he pointed to the gas nozzle.

"Can't talk now. Tell her we'll be home in a few hours."

"I think this has something to do with starting my period last month, Mom." Connor listened to his daughter through the half-open car window. "Did you tell him about it or something? He's like, freaking out."

The parking lot was packed at Johnnie Jump-Up's. Inside, Connor guided his daughter—whose face expressed the horror of being, at twelve, too old for such a place—to one of the few available booths.

"What kind of pizza do you want?"

“You expect me to eat here? This is like Sesame Street *hell*, Daddy. I want to *leave*, that’s what I want.”

Connor felt a hot flash of anger, and then it was gone, quenched, frozen.

“Honor your part of the deal, Jan. I just dropped two hundred at American Eagle. I guess you can have a little dinner with your old man.”

Connor had plowed through the nerve-jangling crowd with the single purpose of finding a table, but now he began looking around. Why had he come? To see her? For Suzie to see him? Strangely enough, he and Suzie had never talked about this night, about his making an appearance. He spied Arnold moving around the darkened stage, a wrench in his hand. The familiarity of it, of Arnold’s squatting now beside the giant squirrel, hit Connor straight on, like a physical blow to the chest.

Jan, sulky and silent, sat down in the far corner of the red vinyl booth. The tabletop was sticky with ice cream, littered with wadded-up, brightly colored napkins. Connor sat with his back to the band. Jan refused to look up.

Everywhere children were lined up waiting, for pizza, for balloons. And, of course, to meet Jackie Jump-Up, who moved among the crowd now with Suzie’s unmistakable spring-stepped walk. She was buried in that bulky, mangy costume, he knew it, could sense her swathed presence in there, like a soul. Connor turned to watch as she hugged the kids, all of them grabbing onto her in that animal suit.

And trailing behind her, Manuel. Connor was sure it was Manuel. The image burned, imprinted on his memory—the pony tail, the tank top, the gold earring, holding the two-year-old, pressing his lips in his child’s hair. Connor had just enough time to shrink back into himself, his curiosity curling up and shriveling like scorched paper. Across the table, Jan slouched a practiced pose of misery and boredom while managing to text on her phone.

“Let’s go,” he said.

As they made their way to the door, the lights darkened, the stage lights flashed. A scratchy version of “The Lion Sleeps Tonight” blasted, and the animals began to screech and move.

And then, a collective gasp across the room. The gorilla’s massive arm dangled, then fell to the floor. The limb thudded, and seemed to have a life of its own, gyrating on the stage floor. The gorilla’s shoulder rod, a metal stump, moved

back and forth. Several toddlers wailed. Everywhere, now, an ocean of howling children and tense parents. The adults became animated themselves as they tried to distract their terrified children or explain to them the animals were not real.

Someone was pulling at him. Connor was standing, transfixed, his daughter tugging at his wrist. When had he stopped moving? “Come on,” Jan said. “Daddy, come on.” There, finally, was Arnold, who frantically worked the control panel, and behind him, Manuel, whose muscled arms rippled in the stage light. “Can we please *please* leave now?”

At home, his wife was ready for him. After their daughter disappeared upstairs to try on her new clothes, Glenda dumped out a thick brown envelope of photographs on the kitchen table. She stared at him wordlessly as he sorted through a catalog of images capturing his last few weeks with Suzie. At her apartment window. Through the window at Johnnie Jump-Up’s, Connor’s face buried in her neck. Even the night before, when he was worried someone was going to rob the place, heard the car drive by, it was private detective Lou Walken, he saw by the business card at the bottom of the stack. Not a crazed criminal at all.

“Tell me it will stop, right now, right this minute.” Glenda’s voice was quiet and enraged.

The sounds of their daughter moving around above them grew louder, like stage thunder. When her approaching footsteps thudded down the stairs, his wife covered the incriminating photos with newspapers. It was all Connor could do not to grab them. He wanted to keep them, and he knew how desperate and sad that was: he cherished those incriminating photos.

Jan twirled around Connor, modeling an outfit (*Thanks Daddy!*) before dashing back out, disappearing in a flash of color and giggles. In the wake of her cheer, the silence grew as heavy as the granite counters that surrounded him. Connor realized his adventure in emotion’s landscape had ended. Apathy welcomed him like a lover. His own voice seemed to come from far away now. “She is out of my life,” he heard himself say. “It meant nothing.” He was freezing up, a rusty cog. His wife sat down, dabbing at her swollen eyes, but he was gone from her, gone. The best he could manage was this anesthetized façade, this veering away from the heat of hatred, from the rawness of love, too. That would have to be good enough.

# THREE HEARTS

SUSAN FRITH

Wilma clutched her empty lunch sack and watched the jellyfish bob and sway out of rhythm with the Andean flute music the aquarium played on Mondays. It was her seventh visit to the jellies exhibit in almost as many days working here as an administrative assistant in one of the research labs. She always sought the moon jellies first. With their pale translucence, they reminded her of the negligees her aunt Gina used to sell in a little shop back home. Twice a week she had taken the bus there after school to sort and re-fold all the tangled bras, camisoles and garter belts, while her mom and aunt sat gossiping on satin stools in the back of the shop.

In the next tank, the glowing orange sea nettles were overflowing cauldrons that bounced off one another, throwing up their tentacles in a froth that roiled her stomach. Wilma turned away and tried to suck in enough air. She'd just gulped down her turkey wrap in the ladies-room stall, wanting to disappear.

During her first few days at the aquarium, Wilma had eaten alone in the employee cafeteria, rereading her welcome folder from Human Resources. At first she simply felt unheard at her new workplace, like a diver trying to talk underwater. No one seemed to notice her as she went about her job of making life easier for everyone. Then the pranks began, and it was hard not to wonder which of her coworkers was watching and laughing. First, Wilma noticed that the red lacquered fan she'd bought on a tour of Hong Kong was missing from her desk in the research lab. Later that afternoon she found it jammed in the dirt of the ficus planter and covered with a sticky film.

By the following day, someone had snatched the Russian nesting dolls that Wilma had lined up on her desk from tallest to smallest. Their red and black heads turned up near the coffeemaker, nestled among the tubs of non-dairy creamer. She knew it was no accident.

She wondered if someone resented her efforts to personalize her workspace so soon, so she took down all of the knick-knacks. This morning, though, she came in to find the discreet cache of tampons she kept in her drawer on full display, lined up like piano keys across her desk. The wrappers were intact, but damp.

No one in the lab remarked on the prank, but a pale-yellow complaint form appeared on her desk. Wilma filled it out. She got a prompt call from Christine, the Victim's Advocate. She was told to show up to her appointment 10 minutes early, but not 15, to fill out more paperwork. It was now 1:04 in the afternoon. Wilma looked back at the moon jellies once more and walked down the hall to Christine's office.

Christine had her computer monitor propped on a Harley rider's atlas and an *Emily Post's Guide to Etiquette*. A desk fan sounded a collection of wind chimes without ruffling her stiff grey hair. "Now tell me exactly what happened," she said.

Since her separation, Wilma had done a lot of explaining to strangers—the lawyer, the bank teller, her realtor, her new landlord. Now everyone seemed to treat her as if she belonged to another, less reliable class of citizens. What Wilma couldn't explain to them was that she had been quite reasonable, in fact, dividing everything in half, exactly—the hardware, the Christmas ornaments, the famous-pairs coffee mugs (Bonnie for her, Clyde for him; Frida for her, Diego for him, and so on)—all to save Paul any extra trouble beyond that of not loving her.

Christine tapped her pencil on her desk as Wilma finished her story about the pranks. "It's probably Gavin behind all this."

"Gavin?"

"He's been a problem, off and on, since he arrived," Christine said. "But Gavin was very special to a major benefactor and we can't get rid of him. Not without violating the terms of the will."

Wilma tried to picture a Gavin among the dozen or so grad students, post-docs and interns who floated through the lab, growing jellyfish from flowery polyps to silver-dollar-sized rounds to tissue-thin bells like the ones on public display. But she was having trouble connecting names to faces. "Where does he sit?"

Christine snorted. "You haven't been introduced to Gavin? I don't understand how they do things up there." Then she opened a manila folder and pulled out an 8 by 11 glossy. "This is Gavin."

Wilma took in the bulbous head, bulging eyes, eight wrinkled arms, and hundreds of suckers. She pushed out the breath she'd been holding. "I'm being harassed by an octopus?"

“A Giant Pacific Octopus,” Christine corrected. “Housekeeping sometimes forgets to shut the door to the tank room and he just—” Christine scamped her fingers across the desk.

“Why me?” Wilma had found herself asking this question a lot lately.

Christine shrugged. “Gavin probably saw a crack and just squeezed right on through. Between you and me—” She leaned forward. “You need to let him know you won’t take his shit. That, or you wait him out. They don’t live forever, though this guy seems to keep hanging on.” She snapped the folder shut. “Anything else I can do for you?”

\*

When Wilma told her mother on the phone that night that she was the victim of a prankster octopus, she gave her typical response: “He probably likes you, hon.”

That’s what her mom had said when the boys in elementary school stole her purse. They tossed it around the classroom, taking out her little comb and brush, and a tiny precious bottle of perfume, which tipped over, filling the air with its terrible sweetness. “They tease because they like you,” her mom had insisted. But that was not true at all.

Wilma studied the one picture she had put up on her fridge since moving into this apartment. It was taken during her trip to Hong Kong with her mom and Aunt Gina. The trip had been their consolation prize to her after her separation. Mainly, though, it was an excuse to visit a man that Gina had met, who played in the philharmonic orchestra there. After years of being widowed (in the case of Wilma’s mom) and divorced (Gina), they were both trying to get “out there.” Wilma wore a sleeveless yellow dress in the photo that made her look washed out, her eyes like little kidney beans sunk into her pale face. Her mom and Gina were all shine and sparkle, from their eyeliner to their stiletto heels. Standing between the two of them, Wilma was the unlit letter in the neon sign.

\*

When Wilma got to work the next morning, she found a puddle of purple-black ink on her desk chair and a trail of paperclips on the floor leading to the door of the tank room. This time it was locked. She knelt and squeezed two fingers under the door. The narrowest of spaces. She stared through the glass windows at the maze of pipes and tanks that filled the room. There were plastic

buckets, turkey basters, and tongs that served mysterious purposes. So little had been explained to her. Gavin's tank ran the length of the window. He was hiding in his cave now, rearranging himself in the darkness. All this time Wilma had not noticed him because he'd been holed up in there, studying her.

"The jellies are the only things he won't eat."

Wilma startled at the voice. She turned around to see a man with curly, thinning hair pulled back in a ponytail, who appeared to be doing hurdler's stretches between two desks. He introduced himself as Martin and said he was a post-doc. His hair was wet like he had just stepped from the shower. "Gavin ate the seahorses, so they had to move him in here."

"Lucky us."

"Lucky *you*. You've been singled out," he said.

"Should I be flattered?" Wilma reached for a stack of paper towels and spread them on her chair. They watched the purple seep through the layers.

"He finds you curious," Martin said. "Are you?"

Wilma put down another layer of towels, pretending she hadn't heard the question. "How do you keep from getting stung handling the jellyfish?"

"When they're babies, they can't do much to you. For the grownups, we've got gloves," Martin said. "Want to feel a jelly?"

"I'll pass." Wilma had been stung by on the beach as a teenager. It had hurt like hell, but even worse, her mom had to embarrass her by trying to set her up with the lifeguard who was dousing her leg with vinegar.

Later on, there was a birthday lunch for her supervisor. Wilma skipped it to revise a grant proposal he wanted done by the end of the afternoon. *Not in my job description*, she mumbled to herself. At least it was interesting work.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Gavin jet out of his cave, trailing what looked like pink party streamers. He was handsome in an ugly sort of way. Earlier, she had seen one of the aquarists come in for his scheduled feeding, tossing him a ball with shrimp tucked inside. Apparently, Gavin liked a challenge. When he tired of playing with his ball, he would squeeze his entire body up through a tube no thicker than a shower rod and come out the other end with a splash. *Showoff*, Wilma thought, and went back to typing.

Martin brought her back a piece of birthday cake, pointing out the cur-sive *Ha* of icing on top. "You've been working hard," he said. "So I thought you

should get the last laugh.”

“Or I can wait till I get this proposal done,” said Wilma. “Then it will be more like *Ah*.” She had made the feeblest attempt at humor, and yet Martin was laughing. She didn’t get him.

Wilma felt her phone vibrate and stepped out in the hall. It was her mom again. She wanted Wilma to know that she had sent her a yoga CD. “You seem tense. Anyhow, I ran into Paul at the gym, and I told him about your suitor.”

“I don’t have a suitor.”

“Of course you do. There’s Gavin.”

“He’s a mollusk, mom.”

“Well, anyway. Paul seemed a little concerned about this.” Her mother went on, breathy and excited. “You know, Wilma, I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s rethinking things.”

When Wilma hung up, she found that her cake was missing except a few crumbs on the plate and a trail of them across the floor. She stormed over to Gavin’s tank. It was smeared with icing.

“You see Gavin take my cake?” she asked an intern sitting nearby.

The intern shrugged, too busy texting to look up. “Dude’s got serious camouflage.”

Wilma rolled up her sleeves and scooped the red ball out of Gavin’s tank. “Here’s how we’ll play this game.”

Martin stood nearby, squeezing something out of one of the basters. “Wouldn’t do that,” he said. “Last person took Gavin’s ball got a beak-full of cephalotoxin. Laid up for three days.”

“Fine with me,” Wilma said. Even though her heart was pounding up to her ears, she carried the dripping ball back to her desk and zipped it inside her purse.

\*

The next morning Wilma found a thick stack of papers on her desk. The images on them were faint, but looked like they were covered with strands of pearls. Gavin had been on the photocopier last night. She flipped through the pages, amazed at how many had been needed to capture his likeness. On the last one an eye stared out at her, challenging her to blink.

“Wanna touch a jellyfish?” Wilma jerked in surprise. Martin stood there in a faded blue terrycloth bathrobe, holding an electric razor. He had missed a stripe of stubble on his left cheek.

“No, I’m looking for my employee ID. I think Gavin stole it.” Wilma raised her eyebrows. “Do you live back here?”

Martin rubbed his chin. “It’s temporary,” he said. “Anyway, once you’ve been chosen by Gavin, there’s not much you can do.”

“What was the last—victim like?”

“Well, she couldn’t take it anymore. Kind of light-brownish hair like yours. Couple inches shorter maybe.” He paused. “Gavin likes the pretty ones.”

Wilma blushed. “I can’t believe he wasted so much paper.”

After work Wilma stopped by the makeup counter at the mall. She dabbed her finger into the sample pots of eye shadow and stroked each iridescent shade across her palms. The store had a buy one-get one deal, so she left with a pair of striped hands, two shadow trios, and two eyeliners.

The next day she brought in a can of tuna to work and tucked the contents into Gavin’s ball. Then she hid it in the back of the coat closet. Before noon the ball had been returned, empty, to her desk. Wilma’s chest tingled as she thought of the swift response and not knowing what would happen next.

\*

One night, a couple of weeks later, there was a knock at Wilma’s apartment door. It was Paul, her ex. He’d brought a tub of cotton candy, which they used to eat together, hands-free, pulling the strands of pink and blue apart with their tongues.

“You wearing makeup now?”

Wilma shrugged. She wondered how clownish her new eye shadow looked in the glare of the entryway lights. She hadn’t seen Paul in more than a month and found herself doing a secret inventory of his chewed-up fingernails, his high-arched eyebrows, and the thick blonde hairs on his calves. There was a bandage on his shin, probably from playing soccer. Paul used to keep his bandages on too long because he hated how the adhesive stuck to his hair. Wilma would sometimes yank them off for him in sneak attacks, calling him her “big chicken.”

Wilma invited him into the kitchen, fully intending for him to see Gavin’s likeness on her fridge. Paul opened up a couple of drawers, which seemed

rather domestic of him. He pulled out a pair of spoons. He talked about seeing her mother at the fitness center. Her bench-pressing routine had been improving for a while, he said, but then she seemed to reach a plateau.

“Got to admire her,” he said. “At least she’s doing something.”

Wilma stiffened. What place of his was it to admire her mother, or not?

Finally, the talk turned to Gavin. Paul stared at the fridge. “How many of them suckers he got, anyway?”

“More than you’d think.”

He shoved his hands in his pockets and studied Wilma. “Those hickies on your neck?”

“It’s complicated,” Wilma said. That afternoon, while the rest of the staff was attending a weekly research symposium, Gavin had snuck up behind her to yank off her earring. The suction had been incredible.

Standing in her new apartment, Paul seemed smaller than she remembered—at least compared to Gavin. Stretched end to end, Gavin was the length of her living room, his head the size of a piñata. He could open jars and turn four different colors. He had three hearts. And Paul apparently didn’t have a single one.

On the other hand, Paul didn’t smell like fish. Plus he got along with her mother. And they used to do that thing with the cotton candy, though now they were eating it from separate bowls. Wilma bent down to pick up the plastic lid that had fallen to the floor. On the way up, she was tempted to rip off Paul’s bandage.

Paul licked his spoon and set it down in the sink with a decisive clang. “I’m glad you’ve found someone,” he said. “Makes me feel better, you know? I think I’ve found someone, too.” He flipped open his phone and showed her a photo of his new girlfriend: high heels, two arms. No siphon.

After Paul left, Wilma went to the grocery store, bought 20 cans of salmon, and packed them in her workbag. She wondered what would be on her desk the next morning.

\*

Wilma was late for work. It was one of those mornings when her toast burnt and every stoplight turned red. She tried to do a last-minute application of eye shadow in the parking garage, but she couldn’t find the extra set she kept in

her workbag for just that purpose. When she finally got to the office, Martin was pacing in front of her desk and a crew was clearing out Gavin's enormous tank.

"What's going on?"

Martin gave her shoulder a little squeeze. "Gavin didn't get back to his tank on time," he told her. "Found him on the floor. All dried up."

Wilma stared at the film of sweat along his hairline. She felt the weight of the salmon cans pulling down her shoulder. "What was he doing?" she asked.

Martin shrugged. "Just his time, I guess. Now you don't have him to worry about."

Wilma nodded and said she had to get to work. She searched the top of her desk and in each of her drawers, looking for a message from Gavin to explain what it all had meant. Why had he chosen her? But she found no signs of him—not even an empty shrimp shell.

That night, Wilma baked three large salmon casseroles, ate a few bites of one, and tossed the rest in the trash. She put on her mother's yoga CD. As she inhaled and exhaled on cue, a soothing voice told her to think of everything that was keeping her out of the present moment. *Put it into a boat. Now let the water carry it away.* At first Wilma imagined Paul and Gavin occupying the same row-boat, but there was a fight over the paddles, so she had to separate them. In her next visualization, Paul paddled away first, leaving only Gavin, who soon filled his siphon with water and shot off into the deep.

Martin came by Wilma's desk the next morning. He dangled a glove over her head so it tickled her nose. "It's a good day to touch a jellyfish."

"I have no interest in touching a jellyfish," Wilma said.

Martin rocked back on his heels and up on his toes, staring at her expectantly.

"I'm sorry," she finally said, unsure of what she was sorry for.

"Suit yourself." Martin turned and walked back to his desk, twirling the glove by one of its fingers.

A few weeks later, when Wilma was hard at work on another grant for her boss, she got a follow-up call from Christine, the Victim's Advocate. It had been 60 days since she filed her complaint. How was she doing now that Gavin was no longer a threat?

“Absolutely fine,” Wilma said. She’d taken a sick day earlier in the week to interview for a job at the local horticultural society. The salary wasn’t much higher, but they’d pay for her to attend a couple of grant-writing workshops. She wondered if Christine could even hear her over the wind chimes in her office. “Why would I be anything but fine?”

“Well,” said Christine, “sometimes there are lingering effects. Do you feel anything—lingering?”

Wilma felt a rumble in her stomach. She didn’t know, she said.

Christine gave a little grunt of disapproval. “Well I can’t tell you how to feel.”

\*

On her last day of work at the aquarium, there was no cake or goodbye card; Wilma didn’t expect there to be. She thought she would at least experience a certain satisfaction at walking away from the coworkers who had treated her as all but invisible. Instead, there was another symposium that afternoon, and she found herself packing up her small box of things while the lab staff filed out the door before her. Martin stopped and gave Wilma a stiff handshake. They had hardly talked since Gavin’s demise. “So, you’re changing kingdoms,” he said. “From Animalia to Plantae.”

Wilma nodded. “If this doesn’t work out, there’s always bacteria, right?”

“Don’t forget fungi,” Martin said. “Good luck.”

When she was the only one left in the room, Wilma ripped off the marked-up month on her desk calendar. She stared at the new month ahead. Each and every box was covered with sparkling swirls in three different shades of lavender. Gavin must have gotten a hold of her eye shadow.

The door to the tank room was slightly ajar. Wilma walked in. She watched the jellies dance in the silence. Someone had left a glove draped over one tank.

Wilma removed the lid like she’d seen done before. She reached in and cupped a full-grown jelly in her hand, letting its lacy tentacles curl around and claim it. Then she slipped off the glove. For a moment she felt like she was folding satin again at her Aunt Gina’s shop, listening to the warm drone of women discussing possibilities. She handled the creature so gently, with such care and concentration, that it didn’t sting. At least not yet.

# USE YOUR SPOON

ZACH POWERS

“I sense an awful strength within me.”

-Daniil Kharms

1

When I was seven I did not perform my first miracle.

On the tips of bare toes, arm stretched so far it hurt, I placed the final red brick. This was the top of my tower. I had more Legos, but I could only reach so high. I stepped back to see what I had created.

It should have been a moment of triumph. But looking at the little red block at the top of my tower I wanted it taller. It wasn't even a want. I felt no desire. I simply sensed that I had, within me, the ability to make it taller.

Shadow spread across my bedroom. The lamps didn't dim, the sun didn't set, but it was like something around me pushed away the light. The windows were closed, but gusts of wind lifted papers off my desk. Crayon drawings and pages marked with my childish scrawl flapped around me. I heard popping and realized the noise came from my hands. Blue sparks leapt from my fingertips to the Lego tower, spiraling around it like climbing vines.

With the sparks from my fingers came the knowledge of my abilities. With a thought I could do anything, cause anything, create anything. I could reach any height. In my mind I saw a Lego tower to rival the architecture of Rome.

But what did it mean? I'd read Spiderman comics. Great power and great responsibility and all that. The word *responsibility* was synonymous with cleaning my room and feeding the dog.

The sparks faded, the wind died down, and the light returned to normal. I closed my fist and punched through the Lego tower. Bricks scattered across the floor. I dragged my bare foot through them. Their corners poked at my skin.

\*

At the breakfast table the next morning I dumped milk over my Cheerios, spilling as much on the table as into the bowl. My mother didn't seem to notice.

The sun shone in the window over the kitchen sink, giving everything a lemon glow. The cheap dinette set. The chairs with chrome legs. The bowl, the Cheerios within. I pulled a few out with my fingers.

“Use your spoon,” said my mother.

I ate the Cheerios.

“I’m a miracle worker,” I told her.

“I always knew you were special.”

“Thanks.”

“What miracles can you perform?”

“Anything.”

My mother got up from the table and took her plate to the sink. “Why don’t you get your father to pay child support, then?”

“That’s not really how it works.”

I reached in again with my fingers and grabbed more Cheerios.

Without turning around, my mother said, “Use your spoon.”

2

A dead frog sprawled in the pan in front of me. Its skin was milky brown and spongy to the touch. My lab partner, Natalie, pinched her nose at the smell of the formaldehyde. There were tears in her eyes.

“Are you sad?” I asked.

“Sad and disgusted,” she said.

The teacher stood at the glossy whiteboard, sketching a crude frog shape in blue marker. For the organs he used red. The finished product looked more like a map of an obscure island than an amphibian. He talked, but I didn’t listen.

“I’ve always kind of liked frogs,” said Natalie.

I poked our dead frog with the metal probe, as if trying to wake it from a nap. I wanted its eyes to snap open. I wanted its tongue to flick out as it yawned away murky dreams. I wanted Natalie to remain innocent in her like of frogs. What more did she need to know than their hopping?

I pointed my finger at the dead frog. Sparks arced into the rubbery body, sending spasms through the muscles. Natalie screamed and ran out of the room. Everyone was looking at me, but I had stopped when she screamed, so all my classmates saw was a confused boy and a dead frog. I shrugged.

The teacher followed Natalie into the hall. My classmates turned their attention elsewhere. I felt pained that I had frightened Natalie, when I only wanted to make her happy. A miracle, I learned, has unforeseen consequences. I flicked the frog with my finger.

It did not respond.

\*

I swallowed the last bite of my ham sandwich and slurped the last dribble of liquid from my juice box. The sides of the box caved as I kept sucking up the air inside. I released my mouth and the box puffed back into its original shape.

Natalie sat down beside me and set her tray on the table. Her lunch consisted of a rectangle of pizza and a carton of milk.

“I’m sorry about in biology,” she said.

I shrugged. “Everybody screams.”

“What were you doing?”

“I’m a miracle worker.”

“You were bringing the frog back to life?”

“I guess so.”

“What else can you do?”

“Anything.”

Natalie picked up the pizza and took a bite. The cheese looked like the skin of the frog. She chewed thoughtfully then took another bite and chewed thoughtfully again. She put down the pizza.

“Can you make me feel love?” she asked.

I looked into her eyes but nothing happened.

“I guess not,” she said.

Her eyes were very blue and beautiful.

3

I tried to pick out the music above the other sounds of the party. People danced in the next room. It was easier to see the beat in their movements than to hear it. Everyone was coupled up, boy-girl, boy-girl. They ground against each other. They held their beers high, red plastic cups suspended above the grind.

One of the frat boys came in and pumped the keg and thumbed the tap. Air sputtered out but nothing else.

“The keg’s tapped out,” yelled the frat boy.

Someone cut off the music. Those without drinks started moving toward the door. As the crowd thinned I saw Natalie standing in the far corner, sipping quickly from her drink without quite chugging.

I hadn’t seen her since high school. I hadn’t talked to her since long before that. Her hair was longer. She was in the middle of a group girls urging her to drink faster. Very few people remained in the room where they had been dancing.

I lifted the keg. It was surprisingly light. I wanted the party to continue. For that to happen, I needed more beer. I closed my eyes and felt the metal grow warm as sparks bounced around the empty interior. The room darkened.

It felt like beer was pouring directly into my brain, a layer of bubbles foaming just below my scalp. I leaned forward and couldn’t stop the motion. My fingers slipped. The keg clanged against the floor.

I awoke to one of the frat boys shaking me, slapping me lightly on the cheek. I got up and rushed to the other room.

It was empty. Natalie was gone.

\*

I sat at the counter in Mussolini’s Pizza eating a slice. The crust was thin and greasy, sagging like wet paper. With each bite the fog in my head cleared a little.

The owner of the shop looked me up and down. He was a thin man with a fat face. A thick white mustache filled the space between his nose and lip and then some. He placed his hands on the counter and leaned toward me, shaking loose a dusting of flour from his skin.

“You look like hell,” he said.

“I’m a miracle worker.”

“You got sauce on your face.” He gestured to his own cheek.

I looked down at my napkin, saturated with red-orange grease, and shrugged.

4

My apartment was small and overlooked the city. I could see all the beautiful architecture, but mostly I saw the ugly roofs. They were stained by water and washed out by the sun. Dirt and debris gathered in the corners. Once, in a nearby window, I saw a woman changing clothes who looked like Natalie. I called out her name, but the intervening space stopped the sound from reaching her. Or it was not Natalie.

Someone knocked on my door. Three quick knocks.

I cracked open the door. My landlady was outside. She filled up a large muumuu and the folds of her chin hung down over her chest. A smoldering cigarette dangled from between two of her beefy fingers.

“Rent,” she said.

“Is it that time already?”

“You owe me for six months.”

“Let me get that for you.”

I closed the door and walked to the middle of the room. Where could I find three thousand dollars? I scavenged \$4.53 from my pocket. I checked the cushions of the couch, but found only stale Cheerios.

I cracked the door.

“Six months?” I asked.

“In my hand right now or you’re evicted.”

“Just a moment.”

I closed the door.

Sparks jumped from my fingers. All the money I needed and more was only a snap away. I pointed at my palm and imagined the crisp green bills sitting there. I imagined the look on my landlady’s face as I handed her the money.

But no, a miracle is not for proving other people wrong.

I lowered my hand.

I pulled my suitcase from the hall closet and packed some t-shirts and some jeans and underwear and socks. I opened the door. My landlady was leaning against the opposite wall puffing on her cigarette.

I exited the building without saying a word.

\*

My feet were propped up on the suitcase under a table at a fast food restaurant. I bit into my burger and with my free hand I stacked ketchup packets on top of each other. I could only stack three or four before they tumbled over. A line of people stretched back from the counter and all the tables were full. In the back corner near the bathroom a baby was crying.

I finished the burger and started in on the fries. A young black man set his tray on the table and sat down in the seat opposite me. His bald head reflected the fluorescent lights. He had a double cheeseburger and a large fry and a drink I couldn't identify through the cup. He gestured at my suitcase.

"Going somewhere?" he asked.

"Definitely somewhere."

He unwrapped his burger and the paper made crinkly noises.

"I'm a miracle worker," I said.

"What exactly does that mean?"

"Whatever, I guess."

He held his burger in front of me. "Can you heat this up? It's cold."

"You better take it back to the counter," I said.

The man shook his head and left the table.

I ate my fries and some of his and I was gone before he returned.

5

Everything around me was brown.

I woke up in a cardboard box in an alley under an awning. The air was chill. My head rested on a wad of newspaper. My toes poked out of holes in my shoes. My stomach rumbled.

I crawled out of the box into the alleyway and stretched myself as tall as possible. In the next box over Phil was waking up, too. He shuffled out and straightened his back and folded his knees under him and sat on his heels. Phil was old and his skin was milky brown, almost translucent.

"Mornin'" I said.

He grunted something that wasn't language.

It hit me without warning. My guts convulsed. I doubled over and fell to one knee. Phil came over and patted me on the back, then he walked off down

the alleyway and out onto sunny Flotsam Street beyond.

My insides would not unclench, as if someone had stuck a fork in me and was twisting everything around like spaghetti. I closed my eyes and breathed slowly until I could tolerate the pain.

I looked at my cardboard box.

I thought of a fine brick house with a kitchen and a refrigerator full of food. I thought of a dinette set with chrome legs. I thought of the cool touch of cutlery.

I looked at my cardboard box.

I pointed my finger. Sparks jumped to the cardboard. A gust of wind ripped through the alley, kicking up discarded newspaper and little bits of debris I couldn't identify. My brick house was just a thought away, but I saw Phil's box out of the corner of my eye. Then I thought of every box in the city. Every box in the world. And all my thoughts were packed away in boxes.

With a few last pops the sparks faded. I walked out of the alley clutching my stomach.

\*

The line stretched out into the street. Men in holey sweatshirts and dirty jeans shuffled closer to the door one step at a time. Everywhere the faint scent of vinegar wafted through the cold air. I crossed the threshold into the warmth of the room.

Smiling volunteers ladled brown slop into Styrofoam bowls and handed one each to the disheveled men who walked by. Steam rose from the bowls. The scent of vinegar mixed with that of boiled meat.

Phil stood behind me in line. He mumbled gibberish to himself. The smiling volunteers filled my bowl. As they went to prepare Phil's, the ladle dinged against the bottom of the empty pot.

"I'm afraid that's all we've got," said one smiling volunteer.

I pointed at Phil.

"Give mine to him," I said.

"Are you sure?" asked the smiling volunteer. "You don't look so good."

"Don't worry. I'm a miracle worker."

“Oh, really? What can you do?”

“You know...whatever.”

“How about a refill?” she said, gesturing to the empty pot.

“I don’t think you understand.”

I left my place in line and walked back outside. I walked all the way to the heart of downtown, through traffic and past business people in expensive clothes chatting on cell phones. I walked by storefronts filled with electronics and appliances and toys. I walked quickly, like I was trying to get away from something.

My insides hurt worse.

I stopped beside a green-glass skyscraper, the tallest building in the city. My stomach caved in on itself. I sank back against the glass, smearing my filth across it. I slid to the ground. People stopped to look at me. A smiling volunteer asked if I was alright.

I saw Natalie in the crowd. She didn’t recognize me. Blue sparks flashed in front of my eyes, just a few of them then nothing. I had hoped that death was a miracle, but it was not.

# CORNISH PASTY

ALICE LOWE

The smell of English pubs grabs you at the door. The aroma of stale ale, like in American bars, mixed with the bouquet of pub grub emanating from the kitchen—savory soups, chips bubbling in hot oil, and here, the meaty fillings and buttery dough of the ubiquitous Cornish pasties. When it rains, add whiffs of wet wellies and mackintoshes parked at the door, of soggy dogs as they shake themselves off before settling at their owners' feet. On a sodden April night, the third day of our week in St. Ives, Don and I leave our cozy suite of rooms in Talland House—Virginia Woolf's childhood summer home now converted into rental flats—and slosh our way down to the village for Folk Night at the Trevor Arms.

We join the gathering in a room lit by lights cast from the bar and warmed by a fireplace in the adjacent lounge, the walls hung with rustic scenes of local landscape and old-timers in period dress, regional relics and bits of historic hardware. Tables have been pushed to the wall, and the performers sit in an inner circle—Don among them—he lugs his guitar on our travels just for opportunities like this—while I and other lookers-on sit like groupies at the tables in back. A woman with a gravelly voice, chopped gray hair, and a face etched with swirling fine lines like our Ordnance Survey map, picks up a concertina and starts playing an Irish jig. Others join in with fiddles and guitars, recorders and harmonicas; they jangle maracas and castanets, beat bongos and table tops. Fingers are flexed, the mood is primed, everyone's ready. Someone starts off the round-robin solos, and they continue around the circle—old folk songs, jazz riffs, *a capella* vocals—anything goes. One man reads a poem by Oscar Wilde. Don twangs Hank Williams' "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" and flashes a mock-humble "aw-shucks" smile at the enthusiastic reception, the American novelty among the locals. I enjoy the array of entertainment with just a touch of wistfulness, wishing I could pull a thumb piano out of my bag and join in.

A visible peal of pleasure ripples through the room as a latecomer makes a grand entrance, guitar slung over her shoulder in a waterproof traveling case—"Here's Fiona!" Tall and slim, long chestnut hair pulled back in a barrette, setting off that creamy English complexion, she shrugs off her rain slicker to reveal dark indigo jeans and a long-sleeved, high-necked cobalt blue shirt. She accepts the

homage, comfortable in her milieu, and joins the circle. She plays and sings a cute ditty, its witty verses interspersed with a convincingly accented French chorus, her voice a lilting soprano with inflections of Joni Mitchell, Judy Collins. She writes most of her own music, and I later learn that she's an accomplished painter, too.

When Don says, "Wow, she's good," I muster up a grudging agreement, but I can taste the bitter wilted greens of envy. I'm already lamenting my lack of musical ability; now I feel dowdy, too—my chocolate brown sweater, the lush cashmere that I love for its tactile elegance, seems drab, its rich earthy hue muddied like the path we'd mucked through in the downpour.

\*

*A pasty (rhymes with nasty) is a filled pastry, made by placing uncooked filling on one-half of a flat pastry circle, folding the other half over the filling, crimping the edge to form a seal, and baking it. The result is a raised semicircular package shaped like a capital "D." Pasties go back several thousand years. They were made by the wives and mothers of Cornish tin miners. Sometimes known in Cornish dialect as tiddy oggy, it is the food most associated with Cornwall and accounts for six percent of the Cornish food economy.*

\*

The English say, dismissively, and the Cornish agree, with pride, that Cornwall isn't really England. Cornwall is unique, with its own distinct history, landscape, customs, vernacular, food. We met locals, old-timers who bragged that they'd never been to London, others who venture out of the county as seldom as possible. "What for?" they ask. But they welcome—if only for the economic boost—the Londoners and Brits from all over the U.K., as well as foreign visitors, who invade its coastal towns on holidays when long-awaited blue skies and warm days arrive.

St. Ives is an old fishing and mining village on Cornwall's Land's End peninsula at the southwestern tip of England, a jagged finger, bent and arthritic-looking, pointing into the Atlantic. It became an artists' haven in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, then a tourist destination, which it remains today. It isn't a posh town, but there's an air of refinement, and it has become a low-key alternative for British vacationers and others who shun the carnival appeal of places like Brighton, Blackpool, Widby, and Folkstone and seek a little culture with their sunbathing. There's an allure here in the eclectic mix of

artistic heritage—D. H. Lawrence and his circle of literati, the esteemed St. Ives Tate and Barbara Hepworth Museums with their showcase of the artists who brought renown to the area—and the tawdry seaside attractions. Visitors must elbow through throngs of humanity and the glut of tacky gift shops, arcades and second-rate galleries, sticky-sweet candy and ice cream stalls to find the charm.

Charm abounds, in concert with the natural beauty and a rugged otherworldliness. It's in Carbis Bay, a cerulean sea dotted with surfers and sailboats, outlined by coastal paths clinging to saw-toothed cliffs. It's beyond the town, where it blends into the landscape. We were drawn to it ten years ago, when we spent a week in Penzance, on the other side of the peninsula. We'd hiked over to St. Ives, crossing the history-laden neck of land, Bronze and Iron-age burial mounds sharing the sometimes harsh, sometimes bucolic countryside with the scars left by copper and tin mining. At that time, I paid homage to the setting and the Godrevy Lighthouse that inspired Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*.

Now we're sleeping under the same roof that used to shelter her family, walking the same paths, seeing the same scenery. We've climbed the cliffs and hiked to surrounding villages, had lunch in Zennor, where D. H. and Frieda Lawrence retreated during World War I until her German ancestry—she might be signaling enemy submarines from the coast—raised suspicion and they were banished. Before the week is over we will cross over the peninsula again to revisit Penzance and make our way out to Cape Cornwall near the western tip, but not to Land's End itself, which we've heard has become a theme park. We will pub-hop along the way and become sated with the local fare, indulging Don's passion for fish and chips, mine for the fish pies and cold smoked mackerel, and of course more pasties.

\*

*Traditional Cornish pasty, filled with beef, sliced or diced potato, swede (yellow turnip) and onion, has Protected Geographical Indication status in Europe. Pasties are also made with varied fillings, including pork and apple, Stilton cheese, chicken tikka, vegetarian, chocolate and banana. It is said that pasties used to be made with different fillings at each end, one end with meat and vegetables, the other with a sweet filling. The sweet end would be marked with an initial so the minrs knew which side to eat first.*

\*

Woolf's family, her autocratic father Leslie Stephen at the helm, would pack clothing and linens, books and papers, croquet wickets and cricket bats, their family of nine plus staff onto the train at London's Paddington Station for their annual summer getaway, changing at Penzance to the branch line that would bring them to St. Ives. Toting their household with them, there wasn't much they got away from except London itself, but that was enough. Life at Talland House, with its spacious grounds and clean air in what was then a small quiet town, gave them the freedom that they didn't have in the city, room for the children to spread out and cut loose. The summer idylls ended with her mother's death when Virginia was 13, and the family never returned.

The lighthouse is barely visible now from a corner of what remains of the Talland House property. The direct view that tantalized Woolf as a child and later stirred her writer's imagination is obscured by new construction along the cliffs and is often shrouded in clouds and mist, but it's the town's most notable icon, memorialized on postcards and posters, shot glasses, mugs, stained glass, charm bracelets, earrings, refrigerator magnets, paperweights, baseball caps, t-shirts, baby bibs.

We're in the smallest flat in the house, a ground floor add-on that may have been a toy shed, a laundry room, servants' quarters. It's been done up in nondescript, clean and modern Ikea style in monochromatic shades of peach, salmon and tan. There's not much sense of its history, its significance, but I know where I am and that's enough. On the coffee table—no doubt on coffee tables in each flat—is a copy of *To the Lighthouse*, compliments of the Virginia Woolf Society of Great Britain. It doesn't take long before I'm immersed in it once again, this time seeing its source, seeing it through her eyes.

\*

*Sea birds love pasties; they hover overhead and swoop down on an extended hand holding a greasy paper-wrapped pie or one that you've entrusted to a table or ledge while you take a swig of your Blackcurrant Tango. On our first day here, eager to sample the local specialty, we waited in line to buy our pies and perched with them on the sea wall. It was cool and breezy, the bright sun bouncing off the choppy water, calming and invigorating at the same time. Awash with contentment, I closed my eyes and lifted my face to the sun. My dreamy countenance was a signal to the waiting gull to dive in and take the half-eaten pasty from my hand. I recall the half that I ate—*

*spinach, potato and cheese—and the half that I lost with equal delight.*

\*

Back at the Trevor Arms, the atmosphere gets livelier with each round of song and drink, and I'm swept into the merriment. I know, of course, that my sudden attack of angst, like a flurry of indigestion, is not about Fiona; I don't covet her or anyone's looks or clothes, accomplishments or abilities (well, maybe now and then)—it's about youth and opportunity. It's about time. She has a lot more of it ahead of her than I do. All that potential. And I indulge in occasional flights of fancy, fits of pique. But they're fleeting, and I whoosh them away like flitting gnats. Or diving gulls.

Chalk it up to too much Virginia Woolf. When I read her works and explore her life, I tend to submerge myself in pools of introspection. Like jumping into a fountain. And—as she and her fictional characters so often did—I ruminate on the directions life takes, whether by our choosing or the vagaries of fortune. On my own choices, which are still abundant. I come out bathed and refreshed, my head clear as I shake off the lingering droplets of doubt.

I have choices tonight. I can choose a meat pasty or Stilton and mushroom. I can dunk my toes into a puddle of self-pity or I can wave it away and revel in this moment. What Woolf calls “moments of being.” The evening is rich with promise, and I bask in the communal warmth, the aura of Virginia Woolf's ethereal presence, the sea shanties, a couple of pints of Skinner's Cornish lager, and the savory pie. I hold it out—traditional beef, Don's favorite—as he takes a big bite, cradling his guitar, and licks the oozing fat off my fingers.

# HOW THE LAKE SAVED ME

RACHEL TOLIVER

I used to crave the lake, and its air became the silvered lungs I could use, and its waters felt smooth like mercury—like mercury edging that wrong Chicago with the limning gray grace of the East. I used to be a young girl, only 18, who had left the East—where I had neither much sinned nor been much sinned to—but had been often tired, and often had been the girl who did not raise palms when the others raised palms, who did not flay under a spirit-hook. In my 18 years, I'd lived with my two parents, a paid-for life that went neat and mute as well-shelved library books. And there were the slots for youth group and Bible club, but the choruses of praise songs, whether twice or thrice-sung, only spun in my mouth—cogged and sprung and device-like—a fulcrum of nothing like need and nothing like love.

So I went to Chicago, to a house, where the pastors and sinners all shuffled their living around, and the money ladies gave us pop money to use in the machine, and the men were called brother, and the women were called sister. The brothers and sisters and pastors all bore pasts like gashes, and the Cincinnati or Dallas they came from involved blue tarps stretched for sleeping or dread-handed families or hunching over wrong powders. Their conversions had come in lashings of lightening, and so I gave myself to that place—its huddled, breathy *befores* and *back theres*—its smitten windows and folding chairs and whoosh of industrial kitchen and clothes-washing—hoping for a little bit of that, a little lashing, a little foaming blood on the lips—a little, just a little, electrocution.

But soon, where I wanted to be was never that house, and was never Chicago, and sometimes where I wanted to be was never awake, and sometimes where I wanted to be was never anywhere at all—not in the banana-smelling snack room, or the daycare, or the lobby's greasy fake-wood gape. I would never say I'd had enough, but in that house, there was too much of everything—too many intervening prayers over grody breakfast, too many children and children's scabs, too many hairs in the pastors' beards, too many socks and strange, tangled skirts in the cast-off box. The proliferation of that place—its fug of human breathings, its insistent humid sins—adhered to my skin, and there were too many *alleluias* in too many heavy metal songs playing behind too too many

grimy-handled doors.

The lake, though, was slate-colored and singular and disinterested in our doings. The lake never asked of us, but sometimes soothed into cerulean, sometimes misted off aloof, until its breathed distance eased into the East itself. And so, supplicating the lake, cast through the weathers, I'd go, going along walking with one girl or two. Or I'd go to those waters with the house's girl multitude, going along with the single-girl thronging. But never alone, for even the pastors themselves never strode out alone—for eroding was known even to them, known to those past pastors, gone now, scoured down as if by God's own salts. It was true, too, that girls had strode off into sin, together and alone. The one who'd packed her things, and another's things, in garbage bags during the night. The one who called from the highway to say *fuck you all*. The one who sold her blood at the junkie plasma place, on the sly, till she could save enough to get away. The ones who went back to the flesh, to giving head, to jobs in Walgreens in Ohio.

With the girl who was my German friend, or the other girl, who was from grief and from the South, I'd walk the damp flagstones, look out into the ponderous, gray invocation of waves. All the prayers that were not in my mouth seemed to reside in that lake, sunk like stanchions, pitted with barnacles, keeping company with the inscrutable lake-rot. But o! the clean days when the seasons were in their hinges, the way I wanted to lie down in that lake, to live not in the house where the pastors with their boots scared me and the Christian punk rockers scared me and the sight of everyone scared me so that I stayed mostly in my room. But o! when there was even an inkling of blue, how I could feel the East like a cool hand during a fever. And how the words that I could speak back East—the words that I could not speak in that house—came like a zephyr to me, new and cool, off the lake's polished surface.

Despite the lake, so much of that Chicago seemed wrought simply for never letting me in. Outside the house, there were ruinous gulls—all rag and beak and hunger—gabbling and scuttling through the gutters. Beneath the L platform, there were things rusting covertly, corroded loops bolted into concrete, rungs of miniature ladders, terrible rivets. Even downtown, where we girls would go for ice cream or an OK'ed movie, seemed too broad-shouldered in its buildings, its pavements too wide, too plain-like, too swept. None of the East's shady nooks there, barely a graffiti's kink for camouflage—only expanse, only dread plateau.

Too easy to be witnessed, it seemed, in that open, glib Midwest—witnessed with my measly sins: a thought of that one brother’s angled spine, my Ani DiFranco albums, the things that I might do next year at the secular college.

As if that eye-bald Illinois weren’t enough, there was the house, and the dread, always, of being seen. The money ladies with their plastic thumb-guards for the counting of filthy bills—seeing—the young and sheepish detoxers—seeing. The pastors seeing from beneath their rad-pastor caps, seeing in the too-gracious way that pastors saw, their way of seeing and already bearing an awful forgiving. The girls, even—seeing—and the worst girls, the pastors’ daughters—seeing—eyelashes laminated onyx with mascara, lids drowsed about by lavender or snake-emerald or a precocious kohl—wondering always why I hadn’t made better catastrophes of my 18 years, why I’d failed to crank out even one decent sin. Those girls—all edgy with ready, fledgling guilt, the entirety of their little histories cramped up in that house, in their berth-size beds. And I—I from a real high-school, where sins stuck like gum under the desks—had done nothing. And so it was, that their nudges of *curfew?* and *dates?* and *prom?* proffered nothing from me, till they turned, bored, to see if the money ladies would give them ten bucks for shoes, to see if the dubious, brooding new brother would pay them any mind.

But unto the lake even these—the pastors’ daughters—would come, sometimes, and the lake would cast its flat, cobalt apathy back on them. At the lake and always—while mid-laundering, or slotted, near to sleep, in our triple bunk beds—there were girl confessions, for confessions were what girls did. O, the girl confessions! O, the sins lapping into sins! *I was stumbled by the hair on Brother Jim’s knuckles; we backslid as soon as we saw each other, backslid over and over in the 7-11 bathroom, and it felt good at the time; I am afflicted by nicotine, by the remote control, by thoughts of the heat of mouths.* And how that narrow-halled house—its black-gunk carpet corners, its bleak plaster—was what had saved them. And how they wouldn’t ever go back, how the house—in all its strictures and burnt-out bulbs, in all its mop-buckets and portioned poverty—had saved them from going back. And how the going-back was all my longing, how the confession of this could never spool out from my lips—how I ate food-bank day-old gumbo and sloughed plates through the dishwasher and watched Disney VHS and never, never said it.

And how the lake saved me, all the days I lived in that house. Unto the lake's opalescent irreproach, and unto the girls, I had nothing to confess—nothing but studying too much, being too untouched, too unlike all of them. The lake—through all that obdurate and metal-tongued Chicago—was my portioning of home. When all we earnest girls would pace its hoary, light-scaled bounds, it was the lake I'd venerate. Enfolded in the waves lay some untarnishment of sterling, some unknown surface of the gracious East. Confessing, if I were to, would be something like this: *O, God, I hate this place. I thought you led me here, yet each of my days, I wake unto dismay. These girls are not my people, nor are the pastors, nor the pastors' daughters, nor the brothers, nor the sisters. They are your people; this they believe, and they belong to you in ways I never have. O God, I am faroff. Oh God, I am faroff faroff faroff.*



## CONTRIBUTORS

CRAIG BARNES received an M.F.A. in fiction writing from the University of Montana and a B.A. in history and English literature from the University of Iowa. He received the 2008 National Undergraduate Fiction Competition award from *Cargoes Literary Magazine* and placed third in *Glimmer Train's* May 2011 Short Story Award for New Writers.

BRADLEY BAZZLE has an MFA from Indiana University and is working on a PhD in English at the University of Georgia. His stories appear in *The Iowa Review*, *New England Review*, *Opium*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Splash of Red*, and *Beloit Fiction Journal*. He used to make comedy videos with Trophy Dad.

L. ANNETTE BINDER's fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in the *Pushcart Prize Anthology*, *One Story*, *American Short Fiction*, *The Southern Review*, and elsewhere. Her collection of stories, *Rise*, will be published by Sarabande Books in August.

SHARON DEBARTOLO CARMACK, MFA, is a Certified Genealogist and the author of *You Can Write Your Family History*. Her work has appeared in numerous genealogical journals, as well as *Brevity*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Hippocampus Magazine*, and *Steinbeck Review*, to name a few. She is an assistant editor for *Brevity*, a contributing editor for *Family Tree Magazine*, and serves on the editorial board of *Steinbeck Review*. She operates the website [www.NonfictionHelp.com](http://www.NonfictionHelp.com).

JULIA COHEN is the author of *Triggermoon Triggermoon* (Black Lawrence Press, 2011) and her work appears in places like *Colorado Review*, *New American Writing*, *Kenyon Review Online*, and *Octopus Magazine*.

ADAM DAY is the recipient of a 2010 PSA Chapbook Fellowship for *Badger*, *Apocrypha*, and the recipient of a 2011 PEN Emerging Writers Award. His work has appeared in the *Boston Review*, *APR*, *Poetry London*, *AGNI*, *The Iowa Review*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Guernica*, *London Magazine*, and elsewhere. He coordinates The Baltic Writing Residency, is an advisory editor for the literary & comics journal *Catch Up*, and is currently writer-in-residence at Earlham College.

Laura Ender earned her MFA in fiction from Eastern Washington University, where she served as an assistant managing editor for *Willow Springs*. She remains a contributor for *Bark* and writes her own literary lifestyle blog. Her short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *PANK*, *Ascent*, *Monkeybicycle*, and elsewhere. She is currently at work on a novel.

Josh Fomon, a native of Iowa City, is an MFA candidate at the University of Montana and serves as Editor-in-Chief for *CutBank*. His poems appear in *Caketrain*, *Ilk*, and *iO: A Journal of New American Poetry*. He also contributes poetry book reviews for *Read This Awesome Book*.

Emily Kendal Frey is the author of *The Grief Performance* as well as several chapbooks and chapbook collaborations, including *Airport* (Blue Hour 2009), *Frances* (Poor Claudia 2010), and *The New Planet* (Mindmade Books 2010). She lives in Portland, Oregon, where she hosts *The New Privacy*.

Mindy Friddle's second novel, *Secret Keepers* (St. Martin's Press/Picador), won the 2009 Willie Morris Award for Southern Fiction. *The Garden Angel* (St. Martin's Press/Picador), her first novel, was selected for Barnes and Noble's Discover Great New Writers program in 2004. Her latest story, "Geographic Tongue," is out in the current edition of *Hayden's Ferry Review*.

Susan Frith is a freelance writer in Orlando, FL. Her fiction and non-fiction have appeared in publications including *Sycamore Review*, *Potomac Review*, *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, *Air & Space*, *University of Chicago Magazine*, and *Johns Hopkins Magazine*.

Anne Cecelia Holmes is the managing editor of *jubilat*. Recent poems have appeared in *Denver Quarterly*, *H\_NGM\_N*, and *La Petite Zine*. Her chapbook, *Junk Parade*, is forthcoming from Dancing Girl Press. With Lily Ladewig, she is co-author of the chapbook *I Am A Natural Wonder* (Blue Hour Press, 2011). She lives in Northampton, MA.

Priscilla Kinter has an MFA in creative writing from the University of Minnesota, where she currently teaches creative nonfiction. She has written for Public Radio and is the nonfiction editor at *Midway Journal*, and her work has appeared in *Sentence*, *New Delta Review*, *Caketrain*, and *Hotel Amerika*.

JOSHUA KRYAH is the author of two collections of poems, *We Are Starved* (Center for Literary Publishing, 2011) and *Glean* (Nightboat Books, 2007). He teaches at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas where he is the poetry editor of *Witness*. In the spring of 2013 he will be the Thornton Writer-in-Residence at Lynchburg College.

ALICE LOWE is a freelance writer in San Diego, California. Her creative nonfiction has appeared this past year or is forthcoming in *Hobart*, *Eclectica*, *Foliage Oak*, *r.k.v.r.y.*, *Tiny Lights*, *Prime Number*, *Jenny* and *City Works*. In addition, she was the winner of a 2011 essay contest at Writing It Real. She has published essays and reviews on the life and work of Virginia Woolf, including the 2010 monograph, "Beyond the Icon: Virginia Woolf in Contemporary Fiction." Virginia Woolf has a way of showing up in her creative nonfiction. Alice blogs at [www.alicelowe-blogs.wordpress.com](http://www.alicelowe-blogs.wordpress.com) and is a regular contributor to [www.bloggingwoolf.wordpress.com](http://www.bloggingwoolf.wordpress.com).

JOYELLE MCSWEENEY is the author most recently of *Percussion Grenade*, poems and a play from Fence Books, and the upcoming *Salamandrine*, *8 Gothics*, prose and a play from Tarpaulin Sky, as well as four other volumes of prose and poetry and an artist's book, *The Necropastoral*, from Spork Press. She edits Action Books, writes for the collective blog *Montevidayo*, and teaches at the University of Notre Dame. For 2012-3, she will be a Visiting Professor at the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

JOHN A. NIEVES has poems forthcoming or recently published in journals such as: *Indiana Review*, *Southern Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *New York Quarterly*, *Ninth Letter*, *Poetry Northwest*, and *Cincinnati Review*. He won the 2011 Indiana Review Poetry Prize and the 2010 Southeast Review AWP Short Poetry contest. He received his PhD from the University of Missouri in 2012.

ZACH POWERS lives and writes in Savannah, Georgia. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Caketrain*, *The Bitter Oleander*, *Opium Magazine*, *Quiddity*, *The Nervous Breakdown*, *Pindeldyboz*, *Paradigm Journal*, *PANK*, and elsewhere. He is the founder and co-host of the literary performance Seersucker Live. He is a past winner of Literary Death Match, a reading event held in cities throughout the world. He leads the writers' workshop at the Flannery O'Connor Childhood Home, where he also serves on the board of directors. His writing for television won an Emmy. Get to know him at [ZachPowers.com](http://ZachPowers.com).

KATHRYN L. PRINGLE is an American poet living in Oakland, Ca. She is the author of *fault tree* (winner of Omindawn's 1st/2nd book prize selected by CD Wright), *RIGHT NEW BIOLOGY* (Factory School 2009) and two chapbooks: *The Stills* (Duration Press) and *Temper and Felicity are lovers* (TAXT). Her work can also be found in the anthology *Conversations at the Wartime Cafe: A Decade of War* (Conversations at the Wartime Cafe Press/ WODV Press) and in the anthology *I'll Drown My Book: Conceptual Writing by Women* (Les Figues 2012).

DEAN C ROBERTSON lives and writes in San Diego, California. His work has previously appeared in *Best New Poets 2011* and *So to Speak*. He is a Contributing Editor for Poetry International.

ANNE MARIE ROONEY is the author of *Spitshine* (Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2012) and *The Buff* (The Cupboard, 2011). Her work has been featured in the *Best New Poets* and *Best American Poetry* anthologies. Born and raised in New York City, she currently lives in New Orleans, where she is a teaching artist.

BRET SCHULTE is an assistant professor of journalism at the University of Arkansas.

NICK STURM is the author of the chapbook *WHAT A TREMENDOUS TIME WE'RE HAVING!* (iO Books, 2012). His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Aesthetix*, *Dark Sky*, *Dinosaur Bees*, *Forklift*, *Ohio*, *Hayden's Ferry*, *Jellyfish*, *Red Lightbulbs*, and elsewhere. His reviews and interviews can be found widely in places like *Coldfront*, *HTMLgiant*, *The Rumpus*, and elsewhere. He is associate editor of YesYes Books and curator of THE BIG BIG MESS READING SERIES.

RACHEL TOLIVER has work published or forthcoming in *Brevity*, *Alligator Juniper*, *Literal Latte*, and *Third Coast*. Toliver teaches English at a public high school (which also happens to be her erstwhile alma mater). She lives in bucolic West Philadelphia, and disagrees with all the nasty things people say about Philly.

J. A. TYLER is the author of *A Man of Glass & All the Ways We Have Failed* from Fugue State Press and *No One Told Me I Was Going to Disappear*, co-authored with John Dermot Woods, from Jaded Ibis Press. His work has appeared with *Black Warrior Review*, *Redivider*, *Diagram*, *New York Tyrant*, and others. For more on his work, visit: [www.chokeonthesewords.com](http://www.chokeonthesewords.com).

WENDY XU is the author of the chapbook *The Hero Poems* (H\_NGM\_N BKS). Her poems have appeared, or are forthcoming in *CutBank*, *Forklift Ohio*, *Diagram*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Third Coast*, and elsewhere. She co-edits *iO: A Journal of New American Poetry* / iO Books, and lives in Northampton.

# So to Speak

a feminist journal of language and art

*So to Speak* publishes poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and visual art that live up to a high standard of language, form, and meaning. We look for work that addresses issues of significance to movements for women's equality and are especially interested in pieces that explore race, class, and sexuality in relation to gender.

We hold annual poetry, fiction, and nonfiction contests that award \$500 to first-place winners.

For submission guidelines, visit:  
<http://sotospeakjournal.org>

Yearly Subscription | \$12  
Sample copy | \$7

George Mason University  
4400 University Drive  
MSN 2C5  
Fairfax, VA 22030  
[sts@gmu.edu](mailto:sts@gmu.edu)



