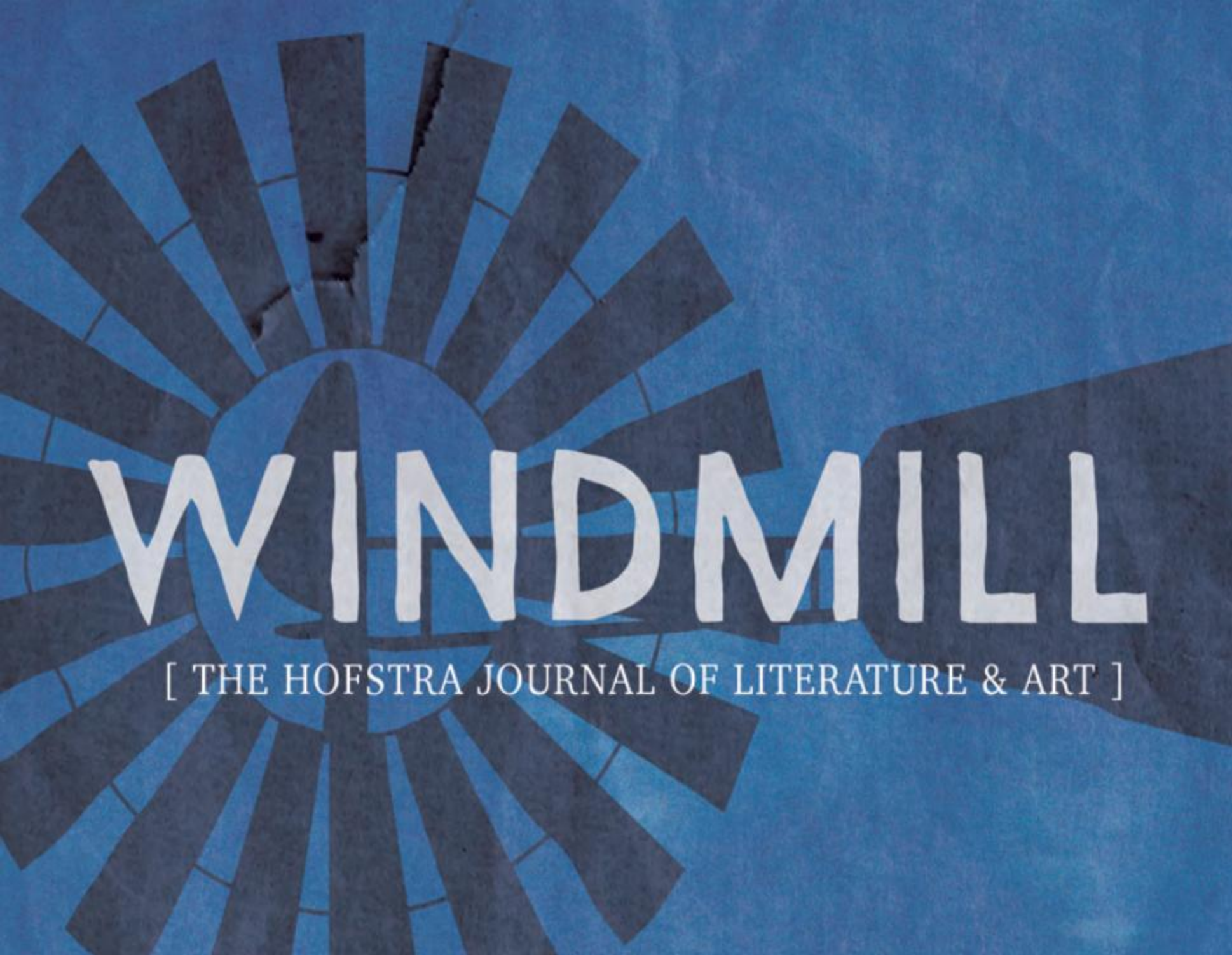

WINDMILL

[THE HOFSTRA JOURNAL OF LITERATURE & ART]

A CONVERSATION WITH PHILLIP LOPATE
from the Hofstra Great Writers, Great Readers series

VALERIA LUISELLI TALKS TRANSLATION
Hofstra MFA faculty spotlight

POETRY IN THE TIME OF SAMPSON STARKWEATHER
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FICTION & CREATIVE NONFICTION
from Mark Brazaitis, Yardenne Greenspan,
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WHAT IS CREATIVITY?
An interview with TEDx speaker Gerard Puccio

WIND/MILL PRIZE WINNERS
Featured work by the winners of our MFA and
Ugrad creative writing awards

WINDMILL

[THE HOFSTRA JOURNAL OF LITERATURE & ART]

A collaboration between Hofstra's MFA in Creative Writing program
and
Hofstra's undergraduate Publishing Studies program

Hofstra University
Mason Hall 225
Hempstead, NY 11549
(516) 463-4040

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hofstrawindmill.com
windmill@hofstra.edu
(516) 463-4040
Twitter: @HofstraWindmill

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Editor's Note

12.20.16
Hempstead, NY

So much has changed in our world since we first imagined Windmill in February 2016. Initially, the endeavor was meant to build a synergistic bridge between two programs at the heart of our English Department: Hofstra's MFA in Creative Writing and our undergraduate concentration in Publishing Studies. That the two should join forces to build a literary journal felt like a natural extension of their dual focuses on art and publication; in practice, the collaboration between these groups of students worked as an amazingly elegant solution.

In this first issue, Team Windmill is honored to showcase a wide array of brilliant thinkers and writers, including master creativity scholar Gerard Puccio; translator and new faculty member Valeria Luiselli; poet phenom Sampson Starkweather; and essential essayist Phillip Lopate, who is such a fundamental part of Hofstra's creative writing history. Our selected writers include the established and emerging, ranging from veteran novelist and short story writer Alix Ohlin to sophomore computer science major Julian Fernandez. Our writers' stories and homes span the globe, from Brooklyn to Tel Aviv, Nigeria to Alaska, Washington to West Virginia. As disparate as they are, each piece has what we hope will be the Windmill hallmark: strong narrative that is moving, interesting, and true.

While our focus is on the creative work, we'd be remiss to not remark on the experience of producing a new journal dedicated to literature and art during the 2016 Presidential election cycle. That the publication of our inaugural issue will be timed nearly simultaneously with another inauguration is coincidence, but feels strangely fitting. Here at Hofstra, we were right in the fray since our university hosted the first debate between Secretary Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. The campus and our editorial meetings rippled with energy, an energy that shifted in size and shape after the votes were counted. A week after the election, Hofstra hosted essayist and poet Lia Purpura through our Great Writers, Great Readings series. Purpura, known for her laser-like ability to see the surprise of beauty in corporeal realities we typically dismiss with disgust (think rotting food and flesh, the dead body of a bird) spent the night reading from her work and talking about the power and primacy of writing—not just political writing, but simply artistic response, attention to beauty, and protecting the holy grail of language. We were grateful to her for reminding us we had a job to do.

When we named our journal after a wind-driven wheel, it was this idea of work that we liked so much, leaning on a kind of physics-based definition, as in force over distance. We hoped to conjure the feeling of a place where, for centuries, townsfolk gathered to share stories as they waited for their grain to be processed, a kind of grassroots version of the village square. We also drew inspiration from the way these sleek and steel turbines have become agents of change in their own right, leading us from our storytelling past to the infinite possibilities of our future.

And so, as 2017 dawns, here is our windmill: its slender form and its powerhouse function, its heavy grey stones, its slicing silver blades, its pinioning swirl, waving its arms around in the air, making room for beauty and for all of our words.

With such hope,

Kelly McMasters
Editor

From left to right: Melissa Connolly, Nicole Anania, Anh Pham, Kelly McMasters, Madeleine Caroll, Deysi Aguilar, Kyle Pratt, Keaton Ramjit, Melanie Rainone. Photo courtesy of Hofstra University.

We would also like to thank the following people for their support: Dr. Bernard J. Firestone, Prof. Janet Kaplan, Prof. Martha McPhee, Dr. Craig Rustici, Hofstra Cultural Center, Hofstra University English Department support staff, Hofstra University Office of University Relations, and The MFA Grad Club.

What is Creativity?: A Q&A with Gerard Puccio and Melissa Connolly

Edited by Kirsten Rickershauser

Creativity and innovation have become two of the 21st century's most prized attributes thanks to an increasingly complex workplace and world. Long gone is the assumption that creativity is the domain primarily of artists and writers—we now recognize that innovative thinking is as important in the classroom and boardroom as it is in a literary salon. But can we teach this critical skill?

Last spring, Hofstra hosted its first annual Creativity Symposium, offering displays of creative work, sessions on the creativity of collaboration and the role of creativity in fighting climate change, and even an interactive presentation and workshop by the New York Neofuturists. The symposium's keynote address was given by Dr. Gerard Puccio, a department chair and professor at the International Center for Studies in Creativity at Buffalo State University, the only academic department in the world that offers a Master of Science degree in creativity. Dr. Puccio has co-authored three books—*The Innovative Team: Unleashing Creative Potential for Breakthrough Results*, *Creative Leadership: Skills That Drive Change*, and *Creativity Rising: Creative Thinking and Creative Problem Solving in the 21st Century*—and his popular TEDx Talk, "Creativity as a Life Skill," explains the origins of human creativity and ways to develop this ineffable quality.

On April 20, 2016, Dr. Puccio sat down with Windmill Publisher Melissa Connolly to discuss the importance of brainstorming, the dreaded drag of writer's block, and why failure may be the most creative instinct of all.

MC: So—what is creativity to you? How do you define it?

GP: Well, in several ways the most widely accepted definition of creativity is an ability to produce original ideas that are perceived as valuable. Now, that's a very transdisciplinary way of thinking about creativity… because producing novelty applies to all domains—it's how we build new content, new knowledge, extend a field whether it's in the arts, sciences, social sciences—and it's also a synthesis of two things that we often view as pulling in opposite directions. But that's the beauty

of what creativity is all about. It's all about synthesis, originality that has value. With respect to the arts it's stimulating thought, it's challenging people, it's communicating meaning; so if I were to think of creativity in relation to the arts and apply that definition—and often when people hear that definition they say, "Well, that sounds like a manufactured definition of creativity"—it *is* like product, but it's still equally applicable.

MC: Well, the arts at the end of the day are also a product.

GP: That's the interesting thing about that definition. The other element in it—"the production of"—means that we have to see the evidence to be able to call a person creative.

MC: Right, it's not just a thought.

GP: No, it's not completely being a dreamer. It's translating that into something that's tangible or can be used in a tangible form.

MC: So, do you think that some people are more innately creative than others? Or the other question is—people access creativity in different ways; do you think that these different methods that people use can make them more or less creative?

GP: Well, I like the way you phrased it because there is often the view that you have creativity or you don't—binary. When I travel and I talk to people about what I do professionally, they carry enough into the conversation to ask about the particular field that I teach in, and I say, "Creativity." More often than not people will say, "Oh, I'm not creative." That's their first response, and it absolutely just breaks my heart to hear that because all people are creative. It's what defines our species. We create. It's our competitive advantage.

So, I'm glad you didn't ask, "Are some people innately creative, and others not?" because the first point that I want to make is that we all are. We are all innately creative. We can thank past generations in terms of evolution that one of the things that got passed on over time is the ability to imagine, the ability to creatively think, the ability to solve problems. In terms of what we come into the world with when we start to measure creativity, it's normally distributed, like any other ability. People will vary when we come into the world, and when we start to measure creativity, you find most thinking about it as a bell-shaped curve where most people are somewhere around the standard deviation in the middle, some are farther to the extremes in terms of being able to express their creativity.

Which then leads into one of the other questions that you had: Is creativity teachable? Is it trainable? The evidence is very clear on this.

There are more than 70-some studies. Do people vary in terms of their level of creativity? In terms of being able to express it, to produce something that's novel and useful? Yeah, they vary, but whatever your particular level of expression is, what we know from the research—70-some studies—is that you can enhance creative thinking through training. What works? Well, they say the methods that are most successful in training creativity are the ones that take a cognitive approach, the ones that focus on teaching a process of how to engage in creative thinking. What are methods you can use to provoke your creativity on a regular basis? Well, one method is to continuously expose yourself to new ideas and other fields. So yes, everyone has creativity in varying degrees, and whatever your level of creativity is, we know it can be enhanced.

MC: But do you think there's a particular set of personality traits or types that enhance creativity on a daily basis?

GP: Yes. So, when the field of creativity really started to formally, explicitly examine this human behavior, it was primarily undertaken by psychologists, and a lot of the early research was about the creative personality. One particularly interesting program was the University of California's Institute of Personality Assessment and Social Research. It was formed out of the Office of Strategic Services during World War II because one of the key characteristics they looked for in spies was the ability to be creative. They argued that creativity was one of the distinguishing features between the spies that were successful and those who weren't.

MC: Because of the ability to think on their feet, or…?

GP: Being able to think on your feet, improvise, solve problems, adapt quickly, be flexible—those are all qualities of creative people. So, that methodology that was used in terms of spy personnel selection was then applied to studying creative people. And there is loads of research on the creative personality. Being visionary, being flexible, being humorous, playful, risk-taking. These are all qualities of highly creative people. There are particular traits that we know of spanning across several different fields that are highly predictive of creative behavior. The early research looked at mathematicians and scientists and writers, and the qualities I just described were uniform across these disciplines.

The thing that's interesting about the creative personality—and it kind of goes back to the definition of creativity that I shared in terms of this strange amalgamation of opposites and novelty that is valuable—is that the creative personality is complex. One of the themes that we see among creative people is this union of things that are often

opposites. Creative people are both feminine and masculine; they're outgoing and introverted; they can be excellent divergent thinkers, but they are also very good convergent thinkers; they press up against conformity and norms, but they also embrace conformity and norms. There's a concept in the field called "Yes And, Yes And" that applies to creative people when they bring together things that we would often think to be one or the other, but of which they possess both. I think the idea of this is intriguing.

MC: It has always seemed to me that the stereotype of the creative personality is sort of this solitary thinker off on their own instead of a social brainstormer, but you make it sound like they're both part of the archetype?

GP: Well, that's another polarity, yes. Creative thinkers are both individualistic and collaborative. So, the interesting thing about the creative people is that not only is their way of thinking such that they bring together things that are opposites, but their personality makeup, the way they live is like this as well, which I find absolutely fascinating.

MC: I've been reading a lot about the extrovert and introvert dichotomy lately— very appealing to me because I always feel that way. I love being around people, but I also need to be alone. So, being a writer, that sort of polar opposite idea speaks to me in particular.

GP: Well, the thing I find interesting in terms of the creative personality is that you have this mirror, if you will—the union of these things that are opposites. But it also probably feeds into a way of thinking that allows someone to move back and forth and to see shades of gray and to make connections, which are fundamental cognitive abilities that we know is true of creative people. So, it's not surprising then that they see the world in shades of gray and are able to make connections over opposites like we said. This extraversion, introversion, masculine, feminine—they have flexibility in their personalities, which mirrors the flexibility that they have in the way that they think.

MC: Are there any other qualities that anybody looking to enhance their creativity can use? Are there traits that they should develop?

GP: Yes. The creative process—when you think about what is the cognition that allows individuals to have great creative breakthroughs—really comes down to being able to synthesize and balance, to engage in a "yes and" form of thinking, where the great creative thinkers can balance both divergent operations, which are highly exploratory brainstorming thoughts that move away from a center point in order to think non-linearly, along with convergent thinking, which is where education tends to focus to find the single right answer, critical

thinking, evaluation. Great creators can do both. They can balance both a divergent exploration where they entertain lots of options and a convergent narrowing of these ideas to bring it back down to earth.

Let me use a writer as an example. Hemingway was a classic example of someone who developed a practice of balancing divergent and convergent thinking. From the biographical material that I've read, Hemingway would get up in the morning and be at his standing desk. He would start with free-writing, using blank sheets of paper and—this was crucial—pencils without erasers, so that he wouldn't edit his thinking. He wrote in half sentences, ignored grammar, ignored punctuation, and just got going. He explored what he was writing from all angles and then, only when he felt he had enough material, he would move to the typewriter. That's divergent, followed by convergent thinking. And this is what became his routine. This is what good creators do.

So divergent thinking is the ability to generate many varied original options. *Many varied and original options*. The principle that one has to master in order to be an effective divergent thinker, of which I think Hemingway is an excellent example, is to manage your judgment. It's argued that criticism kills creative writing. So when you're exploring, if you enter into editing and premature evaluation, it will snuff out your imagination. Another one of the things that Hemingway did, which is another good example of his ability to engage in both divergent and convergent thinking, was revealed when he was interviewed by by George Plimpton for "The Paris Review." Plimpton asked him, "How do you come up with your titles for your books?" And Hemingway said, "Well, when I'm done writing the book I sit down and I generate 100 titles. No less. And then I look through that list and if there's a title that I like, then I select it. If there's not one that I like that gets at the essence of what I want to be able to communicate, then I generate another 100 titles." Again, this is divergent thinking being balanced off with convergent thinking. Hemingway did the same thing again when he wrote the ending to *Farewell to Arms*. He wrote more than 43 endings before he selected the one he was going to go with. And what's even more interesting about that is that some of the endings he didn't go with were then embedded earlier in the story because he liked what he wrote so well.

So, the key to the creative process is really learning how to balance those two forms of thinking. Now, unfortunately, in schools we focus on convergent thinking. Single right answer instead of divergent thinking, which is a skill we have proven can be taught very effectively to students.

MC: In MFA programs, you go to a writing workshop with the first draft and you start having people criticize it. I'm wondering if that's a little early in the process to have that critical thinker come in.

GP: I think your sense around that is probably right.

MC: Maybe the way we approach workshop should allow more divergent thinking—at least early on.

GP: Well, one of the keys to great creative breakthroughs is the proliferation of ideas. The less material you have to work with, the more difficult it is to have a great breakthrough. So, if you look at Picasso for example—let's stick with the arts—he had more than 20,000 works that he created over his lifetime. Were they all equally creative? No. But the more you produce, the more you challenge yourself, the more you learn, the more you borrow from yourself, the more you synthesize your own thinking. It takes a while to come up with a great creative breakthrough. You know, Mozart had 600 and some compositions over his career. It wasn't until something like his 400th when music masters said that he had his first real great breakthrough. Most of us would have stopped our thinking way short of that.

I think that there are a number of factors there. One is proliferating ideas, testing ideas. I mean, we fool ourselves. We see someone's book, we see someone's piece of art and we say, "It must be something special about that person." The reality is it took a lot of work and a lot of failed ideas to get to that point. You know, often when you do X-ray images of a master's artwork, there're actually several layers of paint on top of each other on the canvas. They were experimenting, tinkering, modifying…

MC: Do you think there's something to that expression that excellence in creative fields takes about 10,000 hours of practice?

GP: The 10,000 hour rule really is a reflection of the fact that it takes a lot of work to have a great creative breakthrough. But what is happening is that people see the culmination of these hours of effort and they just think, "Oh well…I'll never be that good." But that person had to chase lots of ideas, had to develop lots of ideas, had to fail along the way and had to persist.

MC: So that's also inherent in the creative personality—an ability to handle failure. Because as we talk about it, it's obviously not just that an artist has this flash of inspiration, it's also a tolerance of rejection—of failure—that enables the artist to get to this creative work that someone actually values.

GP: Let's go back to the creative process. There are four fundamental phases in the creative process. There's clarification, which is doing your homework, understanding your domain, building up your knowledge. You can't have a creative breakthrough if you don't understand your domain, whatever the domain is. Then there is the ideation, playing with new possibilities. That's the "a-ha," the breakthrough that you were just referring to. And it's a myth to believe that creativity stops there because actually that's where the hard work starts. Sometimes it's almost easy to have the "a-ha" moment. It's then the third step, the third phase of the creative process, which is difficult, and we call that develop. That's where the sweat goes into it. Testing the idea, refining the idea, editing it, shaping it, getting feedback, being willing to be open to feedback, modifying it—that's all part of the third stage. And then the fourth is the production part, which is to put it into action, to implement it, to publish it, to hang it on the wall, to release the paper to the world. So it's clarify, ideate, develop, implement. Those are the four steps of the creative process, if you will.

MC: Here in the MFA program, we hear a lot about writer's block. Are there issues that are blocks to creativity, things that shut creativity down in the process of thinking, especially when we talk about ideation?

GP: Well, let's talk about writer's block first since you're specifically looking at writers. How might you overcome writer's block? I love Hemingway's solution, which is: you just keep working. You just keep writing. And he would actually stop when he knew…I thought this was very clever…when he knew what was going to come next. That's when he would stop.

MC: That's when he would stop for the day?

GP: Yes. And he then would—and this is a way of overcoming a barrier when the new ideas are not coming to you—engage in what's called incubation. Now the neuroscience even shows how incubation works. You engage in a routine task that's cognitively low demanding—Hemingway would go for a mile swim—which allows your mind to wander and to create new connections. If you engage in a different highly cognitively demanding task, your brain power is so focused on what it is doing that it doesn't have an opportunity to mind-wander. So it is important that it is a routine, and I would argue a physical activity—a kinesthetic.

MC: We hear a lot about writers who go for really long walks. I've been walking a lot, hoping…

GP: And I bet you get lots of ideas.

MC: I do, and if I don't do it, because of the day job, family distractions…

GP: Precisely. If you look, great creators build incubation time into their routine. So that's one thing that you can do. Another thing you can do is expose yourself to ideas. Pick up a magazine, start flipping through it, get on the Internet and look at images—stimulate. You can stimulate your mind because it's easier to break through that block when you're using something as a springboard, a mental springboard. So don't just sit and fume about it. Do something. Something kinesthetic, visual stimulation—these are ways of getting through that writer's block.

As for things that might cause the block and prevent creativity in the first place…Well, you touched on one earlier. Fear of failure, fear of standing out. In order to create, there has to be a willingness to defy the crowd, to buy into an idea to which others are saying, "Why are you doing that? That's low potential. Why are you going in that direction?" So, fear of failure and fear of rejection. Conforming to what you believe the crowd wants. You know, there is a theory in creativity called the investment theory. Robert Sternberg and Todd Lubart came up with it. And I think it's a very elegant way of describing creativity. It's that great creators see the potential of a new idea that others do not yet see. They buy into that idea, they develop that idea, and then they sell it to the crowd. Now when you first present novelty, it is not warmly accepted by the crowd. So that is where being persistent comes in. Dealing with what might look like failure but persisting over time, eventually the crowd will swing in your direction. Most people buy into ideas that are already accepted, but if you think about it like an investment, there is not a lot of potential for growth. The real potential for growth is getting into the emerging markets, if you will. But most people don't do that because they are not willing to defy the crowd, because they want to do what everybody else is doing, what's already perceived to have value. That is the benefit of what great creators do for us. They move us into emerging markets.

MC: Let's change gears a bit and talk about the International Center for Studies in Creativity, where you teach. Your program, it's a Masters of Science Program? What kinds of people do you see coming into your program, and what are they hoping to get out of it?

GP: One of the wonderful things about our graduate program, because creativity is transdisciplinary, is that it attracts people from all of the fields, which is just fantastic from a curriculum perspective because you are mirroring the creative process—the fertilization spanning different disciplines and different tracks of thought. We attract teachers,

which is really important to us because we want to change education, and having teachers exposed to this way of thinking and then passing it on to their students is a big help. And then we have individuals from the business world. But then we also attract people from all kinds of other fields. Lawyers, engineers, artists, nurses, attorneys—wherever there is a need to solve problems creatively, which is pretty much everywhere, is where we get students from.

MC: I'm curious. You said you get a lot of educators in your program—how do you think they take what they learn and apply it to change either how they teach or how they encourage students to learn?

GP: Well, they use the process skills, for one. We have two operating values in our graduate program: theory and application. A polarity. We think they are mutually beneficial, so we balance them. The educators are probably applying what they learn on a Monday night the next day in class. Hopefully. But you just talked about it in terms of the draft and the workshop. Maybe we should be managing this process a little differently. I mentioned the creative process in its streamlined form is four phases: clarification, ideation, development, and implementation. Clarify, ideate, develop, implement. We teach cognitive methods, cognitive tools, and strategies in each of these areas. So we give teachers a toolbox, teaching the tools around. Here are tools that you can use to clarify, here are tools that you can use to ideate, here are tools you can use to develop, and here are tools you can use to implement. And they teach those tools to their students.

In writing, for example, when giving feedback, there is a tool we call POINT, which is an affirmative evaluation tool. Pluses, so the first thing you do when you're evaluating something is you start with what you like about it. It builds momentum and honors what should be retained. Then you look for Opportunities. "What if you were to incorporate this?", "What if you were to move in this direction?" It's thinking about future developments. Then there is the "i" which stands for Issues or concerns. These are places where there are opportunities for specific improvement. We use problem solving language, like "How might you…?", "How to…?", and "What ways might you…?" rather than saying, "This is awkward," "This doesn't make sense," "This isn't clear." You know, "How might you add a richness to this character?" See, when you pose it in the form of a question, it encourages thinking. Then comes the "NT" or New Thinking. In New Thinking you go back to the issues or concerns, and you say, "Alright, so now let's use some new thinking to address the issues that came up." So if a concern came up—How might you add complexity to this character?—we can now think as a pair or a team about how it can be resolved. And that creates collaboration. So Pluses, Opportunities, Issues, and New

Thinking create POINT. That's an example of a cognitive tool that we can teach. Those are the kinds of things that teachers use. But that's also a great management tool and a great leadership tool. You can use it when you're doing a performance review or you're giving feedback. When I go and observe a junior faculty member teach, I use POINT as my way of observing and giving that faculty member feedback.

MC: Like you said, it encourages the individual who's receiving the feedback to think about it, and that encourages more creative thinking… right?

GP: Right. And that's what teachers and leaders need to do to facilitate thinking rather than shut it down.

FICTION

A Good Lonely Place

Ace Boggess

Wind whined, swirling. Lina Bolling could see it as if it were solid, a funnel cloud made from all the crisp, brown leaves. How it ripped them from their mass grave, clearing the dirt path and its shoulders before depositing piles like fat snowdrifts against big rocks and trees. It seemed a righteous wind, or a damned one. No storms, though. The evening was sunny and rather warm for mid-November.

Lina kept moving up the hill, the thin gray of her windbreaker slapping one way, then another, as if nature meant for her to turn around. But Lina pushed forward, her back bent even more than normal to help her stay balanced. She walked up that same hill behind her yellow box of a house as she had almost every day for the past eight years, ever since Mitch left her for another woman—a younger one whose face wasn't ashen and cracked, one who didn't chain-smoke menthols even after the chemotherapy ravaged her head of hair.

What did she care? She hadn't expected to live this long, hadn't expected remission or recovery. She hoped Mitch was happy, although she doubted it. That cranky bastard hadn't been happy one day in his life. It's why he drank Jim Beam, which didn't make him happy either, just more likely to cry about his problems.

Well, Lina had problems, too—more than just the cancer. Layoffs at the bread factory put her out of work for a few years, although there she was lucky. Cancer turned out to be a blessing, allowing her to collect a disability check from the state for thirty-eight months before the bread bosses began hiring people back.

Then there were her kids: Jessica and James. Both in their late twenties, they lived their own lives in other states as far from West Virginia as any road could take them. They rarely called. Lina missed them, but, as with Mitch, she hoped they were happy.

Lina was happy, or she believed she was. Being so close to death had purged her of sorrow and self-pity. She no longer worried about what other people thought, how they acted, what they did. She refused to let folks distract her from the two things she enjoyed: cigarettes and long walks up the hill, even during the coldest days of winter.

Wind sang now like an old, blind blues singer moaning a refrain. It wept and wailed. It stomped its heavy boot against the stage. This was unfamiliar music to Lina.

She knew the wind well. She sometimes spoke to it, not surprised when it spoke back. She allowed its words to pierce her. But this was different—soulful, lost, ranting. Its words erased debris from the path. It shrieked and brushed back dirt from both shoulders, exposing tree roots, jagged bits of rock, and just to Lina's left, a pattern she first thought a track left by a bird's foot. Not a bird, though. Too big. It seemed to get bigger as the wind's song lifted more chunks of dirt like imaginary notes.

Lina went to one knee for a closer look. *Definitely not a bird*, she thought. It also wasn't a fossil, mineralized and etched into stone. These were bones. Short, pointed stubs of bones. *Human*, she thought. *Two fingers and a thumb.*

The wind laughed at her now, its message delivered, its voice heard.

"Shit-fire on the Fourth of July," Lina muttered. She already wished she'd walked on by without pausing. Now the world she knew was about to change.

Her cellphone never got reception in the hollows of Clay County, so it lay sleeping and silent on the kitchen counter. Lina used her landline to call the police and report—what? a body? a corpse? a victim?—*bones*, the word she chose.

It took forty-five minutes before the first officers arrived. She was explaining her discovery to one of them when a second car pulled up. Not long after that, her street was clogged with the vehicles of state troopers and Sheriff's deputies. Blue lights burned like a witch's fire, igniting the air already dimming toward twilight.

"We'd better go on before it gets too dark," said one of the troopers.

Lina had caught some of their names but quickly released them into the wild. She led four—three men and a woman—up the path, wind cussing and mocking them with every step. "Careful," she said whenever a root or rock jutted from the dirt. She'd been here enough that she could walk the route blindfolded.

One of the cops, broad-shouldered and broader-bellied, panted like a dog, his sweat chilled by the gusts. "Didn't realize it'd be so far up," he said.

Another asked him, "Do we need to call an ambulance? Hate to have two bodies up here."

The heavy trooper grunted and scowled.

Lina said nothing. She kept moving, figuring the rest would follow.

At the spot where she saw the bones, Lina again went down on one knee. She pointed. "There they are. See?"

"I'll be damned," said the big cop. He seemed to be in charge. "I had my doubts, but those are definitely bones. Looks like a human hand. Part of one, anyway."

The female cop said, "Wonder what else is down there?" She was skinny and tall like a basketball player, with brown hair combed straight back and tied off with a clip. The others looked at her as if she'd asked how many fives she needed to change a ten-dollar bill. "What?" she said. "We don't *know*. Could be a body. Could be just the hand. Wild dog might've brought it up here. Or wolves."

"There were wolves here once," Lina said. "Not in my lifetime, though."

"I hear they're making a comeback."

"Okay," the big man said, quieting everyone down. "Fair enough. We'll have to get a team up here, and some eggheads from forensics. Have to call the M.E. down in Charleston. We'll bring 'em up first thing in the morning. It's too dark to start tonight."

The others agreed.

The female cop pulled a roll of yellow crime-scene tape from her coat. She tied one end to a nearby tree. When she had tape stretched across the path, wind slapped at the yellow plastic as if it were a banjo string.

That night, after the officers left, Lina tried to call her children—first Jessica in Arizona, then James in California. She wanted to tell them what happened, to share the weirdness of it with them. They'd lived here. They'd played on that hill when they were kids. Jessica once came running home full-sprint and screaming after facing off with what turned out to be a four-foot black snake sunning itself on the path. James went up that hill to catch fireflies in Styrofoam cups, before transferring them to a jar with air holes in the lid. The kids must have passed those bones a hundred times or more. They weren't *fresh* bones, after all.

Neither answered. Voicemails picked up—Jessica's with a friendly greeting, James's with an automated message. Both times, Lina hung up before the tone.

She wanted to tell *someone*, to feel for a moment that she had connection with the world. But she wasn't on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or any of the other sites that she didn't understand. She hadn't chatted online since phone modems and AOL were big. Most of the people she called friends these days were just associates from work—men and women her age who once were bakers but now performed the duties of button pushers on the bread assembly line. Other than that, the folks she spoke to most regularly were Dr. Andrews, her general practitioner, and Dr. Call-Me-Jenny, her oncologist. Lina didn't feel right about dialing up either's answering service and leaving the message, "You'll never believe what I found." She'd been good friends with Pastor Danning at the Second Episcopal Church of Clay, and she had enjoyed talking to him, but he kicked the bucket a couple years back (natural causes: Viagra and

a loving wife), and Lina never got to know his replacement, Pastor Conklin. Besides, she'd changed since having part of her lung and two lymph nodes removed. It's not that she lost her faith after coming through all that. If anything, she felt *more* religious once her hair grew back, silvery and brittle like a scrubbing brush. It was just that now she believed different things—things personal to her—and didn't like to talk about them with others.

"Shit-fire," she said to herself.

In the end, she called Mitch. She hadn't seen him in half a decade or spoken to him for at least a year, but his was the only name left on her list.

When he answered, his voice carried the impatient groan of irritation. "Lina Lynn, is that you?" He had called her Lina Lynn since their first date. She never knew why, her middle name was May.

Lina wasted no time on pleasantries. She raced through the story of her day as if trying to get it out before her final breath, which might come at any second. When she finished, she added, "I thought you should know."

Mitch, surprising her, thanked her and said, "Call me back if anything changes."

"I will," she said, and ended the call. At first, she felt good about it. She'd done the right thing. This had been Mitch's boyhood home, after all. Then she thought maybe she shouldn't have told him *because* it was his boyhood home. Maybe he already knew the bones were there. Maybe his daddy put them there. Or maybe Mitch did. They belonged to someone he knew—a childhood friend, perhaps. This was Clay County. A person could go missing for forty years or so and not be found—maybe not even missed.

Lina slapped herself to erase those thoughts. She folded her arms behind her head and stretched out on her mud-colored sofa. She lay there for hours, listening to the wind as it whistled down the chimney, making a sound like a fire engine's siren in the distance.

On Monday, Lina took off from work. Too many people and too much craziness filled her house. None of the TV news crews out of Charleston had shown up yet, but she figured they would. So far, the press consisted of a reporter and a cameraman from the Charleston paper, along with another reporter from the Clay County weekly.

The police instructed Lina not to go back up the hill, so she hung out at home, serving coffee to the troopers or letting them in and out to use the restroom and warm themselves for a bit. The wind still tried to smite them and brought a biting chill this morning.

"That guy's a lying son of a bitch," said the heavyset trooper, who she now knew to be Lt. Berry. "Pardon my language." He was referring to the weatherman on Channel 13 who'd predicted calmer winds. "Trooper Miles just radioed

down to say it's loud as a jet engine up there." Lt. Berry chose not to go back to the site, preferring to supervise from level ground.

Lina refilled his coffee cup. She'd been waiting all morning to joke that at least the cops brought their own doughnuts, but so far she hadn't seen a single pastry.

She wondered what it looked like up there. Were they raising the bones like archaeologists using thin brushes and delicate strokes? Was it more like on TV where there'd be two shovels and a lot of trading off? She hadn't seen any heavy equipment, and she didn't know how the cops could get it up that hill.

Lt. Berry wore a well-pressed uniform today-—olive green with hints of brown and blue. He had prepared himself for being in front of the cameras, which he knew would happen at some point. He kept his hat placed neatly beside him on the tan kitchen table so he wouldn't end up with a bad case of hat hair. His radio buzzed. He stepped into the other room to answer it. When he returned, he spoke as if there were no need for secrecy. "They've recovered most of the arm," he said. "Looks to be pretty old."

"What about the rest of the body?" Lina asked.

"Not yet. Could be farther down."

"How old, do you think?" She tried to sound curious without being over-eager. The last thing she wanted was to put her ex under suspicion by saying the wrong thing.

"Hard to tell. We'll ship the remains to Charleston, and them folks'll run a buttload of tests. That should give us some idea."

"Do you think it was murder?" Lina asked, regretting it. Thoughts of Mitch or his dad being some kind of serial killer flooded her brain. She wondered if other bodies might be up there. "Do you think somebody killed him?"

"Well, Mrs. Bolling..." He pronounced her name *Bow-lin*. "...much too early to tell. Right now, we can't even be sure it's a *him*."

Lina slurped her coffee from a cobalt-blue mug. The liquid had gotten cold, so she poured more to warm it up. She added some to Lt. Berry's mug as well.

He smiled at her, a second grin forming beneath the bone of his chin.

One of the other troopers came into the kitchen. He looked about nineteen or twenty, with no hat and a fuzz of shaved blond hair on top. The tips of his ears were so red that they could've been made out of rock candy. His lips showed off the purplish halo that meant the start of chapping. "Lieutenant," he said, "they've found some more. At least a thigh bone. Maybe a knee. They'll keep going until...."

"Lieutenant." This voice came from a young female trooper who'd just stepped out of the bathroom. She stood in Lina's narrow beige hallway, shadowy like a ghost. "Could you come in here for a minute?"

"Excuse me, Mrs. Bolling." He waved off the male trooper and then pressed his palms flat on the table to leverage himself out of his chair. He followed the woman into the bathroom as Lina watched, rather unnerved. She heard the lieutenant's voice say, "Jesus on a popsicle stick." That was followed by a sound she recognized as the clack of pills rattling in their amber bottles.

When the lieutenant and trooper returned, they loomed over Lina like chiding parents. Lt. Berry held at least three of her prescription bottles in his left hand, squinting and scowling as he read the labels.

The female trooper said, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Bolling. I wasn't prying. I was just looking for a bar of soap."

"Am I in trouble?" Lina asked.

Lt. Berry said, "Trouble? Lord, no. I can tell you're not a pillhead. Some of these bottles are six or seven years out of date, and they're almost full. If you're dealing, you're not very good at it." He paused, cracking a smile. "Trooper Shandy was concerned because there are so *many* of them. You have at least fifty bottles in there."

"It was cancer," Lina said, not wanting to explain further and not needing to. She looked away as if ashamed of her own former frailty.

"I figured," said Lt. Berry. "Still, that's a lot of pills. Oxycodone, hydrocodone, hydromorphone—just to name the big ones. All different doses, different shapes and colors. Wow. That's all I can say. Wow."

Lina didn't want to think about it—the surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, the years of pain. Dr. Call-Me-Jenny wrote one prescription after another, trying to find something that would soothe Lina without making her sick. On average, she took each drug for about a week before she started vomiting or just hurt too much. Some days she felt so bad she thought she'd black out and not wake up again. After that, she'd toss the bottles in the cabinet under the bathroom sink and forget about them. "You'd never believe what I've been through," she said.

"Sure I would," Lt. Berry replied. "My dad had cancer."

"My grandmother died of it," Trooper Shandy added. "Two of my great-aunts, too."

"It's not exactly rare around here. If you don't have a relative with cancer, you must have been raised in the jungle like Tarzan. Even then, you got to wonder if maybe Cheetah didn't have a few tumors he just preferred you didn't know about."

Lina nodded over and over.

"Still, I recommend you get rid of all those pills. Maybe bring them in when we have our annual take-back day. It's not a good idea to keep 'em around like that. Kids might get into them or … who knows what? Just because they're out of date doesn't mean some dope fiend won't bust in here to steal them. We got far too many pillheads in this county."

Lina kept nodding. "Okay," she said. She couldn't think of anything to add, so she closed her eyes and listened to the wind as it rattled against the windows like a handful of Percocet tablets falling from their bottle onto the cold linoleum floor.

The troopers dug for four days, combing the hillside, terrorizing the dirt path. They found about three quarters of a skeleton before giving up. They unearthed fragments of gray cloth like swatches of curtain fabric, except rotten and brown around the edges. There were also bits of leather, a buckle, and the heel of a boot, Lt. Berry said. He assured Lina no crime had been committed. "M.E. says the bones have been there a piece. Confederate soldier, she thinks, though damned if anybody can figure out how he got up there or why. Far as I know, there wasn't a battlefield around here for miles." He paused. "We haven't found any guns, and no bullets either, whole or spent. Doesn't look like the fellow was shot, and it's doubtful he was doing any shooting, although I guess there could be a weapon still up there somewhere."

Lina coughed. She felt it difficult to breathe today. She hadn't taken her walk since Sunday. Now her lung and a half felt like they were filling with sediment after a flood. She heard a wheezing sound in her throat. A couple times, she gasped, which Lt. Berry misread as a sigh.

"Son of a bitch wasn't hanged, either. Pardon my language. M.E. thought maybe a Union boy caught him and strung him up, but the neck wasn't broken. Who can say? Finding a genuine cause of death might be tough."

At least Mitch didn't kill him, Lina thought. *Or that cranky old man of his.*

"That's for the nerds to worry about. Hundred-fifty-yearold bodies are past my purview."

"Wonder why he was up there," Lina said, straining for a breath. To remedy the situation, she lit up a menthol. She'd been good about not smoking while the cops were in the house, but it was *her* house, and she decided it was time she got back to treating it that way.

Lt. Berry didn't pay any attention to the smoke. "Your guess is as good as mine. Maybe he was a deserter. Left his regiment and headed north. Maybe he starved to death, or maybe he got himself caught up there in a bad snow and froze. I'm not sure it matters as anything more than a curiosity. Still, it's given us something to talk about down at the barracks that's a little more interesting than speeding tickets or trying to catch the Plymales cooking meth out of their trailer for the fifth time."

Lina took Friday off. She'd used up all her vacation time for what was left of the year, but she still had plenty of sick days in reserve. She hoped she

wouldn't need them, but the worry remained. Her oncologist suggested—no, *assured* her—the cancer might return. During the first few years, Lina went in every six months for a checkup. Then, with her body still clear, she cut back to an annual visit. That time for her next exam was coming around again. She dreaded going. The only things that could come of it were horror and hope, which is its own kind of horror. She tried not to think about it.

With no police around, she slipped on her warm clothes and hiking boots, then headed uphill along the dirt path. She struggled at first to catch her breath, but it came back to her. Her cheeks flushed. Her feet stumbled as though she forgot the way. She felt sweat beneath the band of the knit brown toboggan she wore. But she kept going, left foot after right, hard breath before an easier one.

When she reached the spot where she'd found the bones, she stopped. The path had been wrecked. A deep trench cut across it, with other holes like open graves along the sides. Mounds of reddish-brown mud and dirt were piled all around like anthills she'd seen in nature documentaries. Yellow crime-scene tape still encircled the whole mess.

"Shit-fire," Lina muttered. She'd spent years building herself a comfortable routine, and now those bones had ruined it—possibly forever. "No," she said. "No, they didn't." She decided she'd borrow a shovel and come up here one day soon to fix her walking path. That is, when she regained her energy. That is, if the cancer hadn't returned.

Unable to go any farther, Lina found a good-sized rock nearby and sat on it. She rested her elbows on her knees and covered her mouth with a gloved hand.

She thought about that soldier, lost on the hillside for a century and a half. *Why did you come up here to die?* she wondered. *Lost, alone, forgotten?* She always heard that animals—cats and such—see the end coming and run off to find a private place where they might embrace it. People, too, seem to hold on until just that moment when no one's watching. *Is that it*? she thought. *Is that why you came?* She uncovered her mouth and whispered, "Is this a good lonely place to die?"

Lina waited and listened for an answer, but no soldier's ghost moaned its reply. Not even the air spoke to her today. Instead, she noticed the wind was calm and quiet, a warehouse filled with books that no one reads.

Ace Boggess *is author of the novel* A Song Without a Melody *(Hyperborea, 2016) and three books of poetry, most recently* Ultra-Deep Field *(Brick Road, 2017). His recent fiction appears in* Notre Dame Review, Lumina, *and* The Cossack Review. *He lives in Charleston, West Virginia.*

Dear Kristi Yamaguchi

Mark Brazaitis

October 1, 1991

Dear Kristi,

I am writing to you because I love how you skate. I know you will win the gold medal at the Olympics.

Some people think I'm an amazing skater. Mom still calls me Alice Marvelous even though she hasn't seen me skate in two months. She's too tired.

Mom doesn't drive me to the rink anymore, so I walked again today. It isn't far. Two miles. Ivan, my coach, tells me I should think of the walk as off-ice training. "Good for thighs," he says. He's Russian. He lives here because his wife is studying biology at the university (Ohio Eastern). He was a Russian national champion in pairs skating.

By the way, I'm thirteen years old. I'm in the eighth grade at Sherman Middle School. I have two of your posters.

Sincerely,

Alice Maravicious

P.S. I don't know how I will mail you this letter. I don't have your address.

October 3, 1991

Dear Kristi,

Today at the rink, Bev was talking to Gisela, the French exchange student, about God. Bev is a junior in high school. She calls herself a "melting pot in one person" because her father is from Sweden and her mother is from Antigua and her grandfather was one of the leaders of the Carnation Revolution in Portugal. (She said he used flowers instead of guns, but she was joking. I think.) Sometimes Bev wears her long, black hair in a ponytail. Sometimes she doesn't and it dances around her face, which is the color of "a sunrise dipped in coffee" (her words). Bev told Gisela that God is never in church because God would never want to be so bored. God, she said, is in places where there is elation.

Gisela asked Bev what elation means, but I knew because I like to read. When I need a break from skating, I sit by the fire in the lobby and read books I find in Dad's study. (He's an English professor.) I am reading a book called *Anna Karenina*, which is about a sad woman who doesn't like her husband.

Gisela asked Bev where there is elation. Bev said, "Right here." She spread

her arms wide like Jesus. Gisela thought she was joking (so did I), but Bev flew around the rink, shouting like a preacher, "This is the house of the holy!"

My family is Catholic, but we don't go to church anymore. Mom is too tired to go anywhere except, sometimes, to the doctor.

Sincerely,

Alice

October 4, 1991

Dear Kristi,

Gisela doesn't do doubles yet, but Ivan says she skates "like angel." He winked at me and said, "And you skate like devil."

Is it better to skate like an angel or like the devil?

Sincerely,

Alice "the Devil" Maravicious

October 6, 1991

Dear Kristi,

Danny, my younger brother (nine years old), asked me this morning if Mom has cancer.

I told him she didn't.

"Why is she in bed all the time?" he asked.

"Because she works hard," I said.

"But when does she work?" he said. "She doesn't have a job."

"She works hard on her paintings."

"I don't ever see her painting."

"She looks after you and me," I said.

"But after school, I'm at Kaleidoscope and you're at the rink."

"There is a lot you don't know about adults," I said. "Believe me, okay?"

I think he believed me. But I didn't believe myself. Does Mom have cancer?

Your concerned friend,

Alice

October 7, 1991

Dear Kristi,

Mom doesn't have cancer! I asked her and she said, No, 100-percent no.

I was super, super relieved and super, super happy.

But now I'm worried she has something else.

Your fellow skater,

Alice

October 9, 1991

Dear Kristi,

Today, Mr. Williams, the rink manager, let me stay past the end of the freestyle session to practice my double axel. When I came off the ice after landing it three times in a row, Bev was in the lobby. She had come back to the rink because she'd left her math book in the locker room. "I'm not surprised you're still here," she said to me. "You work harder than any skater I know."

She said she and her mom wanted to give me a ride home. "It's dark," Bev said. "And the police haven't caught the Sherman Strangler."

The Sherman Strangler is what the newspaper (*Sherman Advocate and Post*) calls the man who killed two women in the trailer park behind Sherman Elementary School. He killed one of the women last week and one of the women three weeks ago.

I guess I should be scared of the Sherman Stranger. So I said yes to a ride.

In the car, Bev's mom, who looks like Bev except with darker skin, said because of the Sherman Strangler she checks three times a night to make sure all her doors are locked.

I said, "My dad bought a gun."

He bought it because the Sherman Stranger, he said, "is not going to strangle us." He said he was going to put the gun in a special place known only to him and Mom.

Bev's mom said, "I don't like guns, but I understand."

I said, "My mom doesn't like guns either. She's a pacifist." I remembered this word because it's like pacifier. I remember when Danny sucked on a pacifier. Sometimes I wish I could stick a pacifier in his mouth now, especially when he's asking Mom and Dad if he can have a dog.

I might like a dog, but Danny is too young to take care of it, Dad is never home, Mom is in bed all the time, and I spend three-quarters of my life at the rink.

If dogs could skate, I might change my mind.

Do you have a dog?

Sincerely,

Alice

P.S. I stopped reading *Anna Karenina*. It is too long and too sad. And too boring.

October 11, 1991

Dear Kristi,

Last night, I heard Mom tell Dad she was tired of him treating his classes like *The Love Connection*. I was supposed to be asleep, but sometimes I can't sleep, especially when the moon is full. Or half full. Or grinning at me like a cat.

Mom said, "Tell me she's at least a sophomore this time."

He laughed the way he does when he thinks she's being crazy.

Is Mom crazy? She cries a lot, over weird stuff. Like when she found Danny's old blue blanket in a drawer. Like when she found a portrait she painted of me when I was six. In the portrait, I'm wearing a gold medal.

I remember how Mom used to paint and sing and help me with my homework and clean Danny's room and make dinner—all at the same time!

I remember Dad saying that even if you added up me and him and Danny, we didn't have half the energy Mom did.

I remember how when I played Alice in "Alice in Wonderland on Ice" last year, she came to all three shows and applauded the loudest and longest of anyone. (I was embarrassed.)

Where did she go?

Sincerely,

Alice

October 14, 1991

Dear Kristi,

Today as I was walking back from the rink, I saw Dad's car coming from the other direction. I knew it was Dad driving because he wasn't looking at the road. He was looking at the person sitting next to him, which he always does when he tells stories. At first, I thought she was Mom. She had the same black hair and pale skin. But she was smiling, so I knew she wasn't Mom.

Dad never saw me.

Sincerely,

Alice

P.S. Bev said if I mail these letters to the U.S. Figure Skating Association, someone will give them to you.

October 16, 1991

Dear Kristi,

I asked Danny today what kind of dog he wants, and he said, "A gold dog."

I said, "Do you mean a golden retriever or a golden Lab?"

He said, "I don't care. If it's gold, it will make Mom happy."

I said I didn't see how.

"A gold dog is like sunshine," he said. "Sunshine makes people happy."

I said it might be easier if she just walked outside.

Do you have a brother?

Sincerely,

Alice

October 17, 1991

Dear Kristi,

Ivan was late for my lesson, so for an hour today I had the rink all to myself. I made up a program to "Song of Me," which is by a singer named Becca Bishop. She used to live in Sherman. Here are the words I like:

The best company I find
is my own mind.

Eventually Ivan came and I had my lesson.

Afterwards, Bev and three other girls came. Bev takes from Francine, who is in a wheelchair because she has lupus. She always waves Bev over when she wants to give her advice. Bev calls her the "Wheelchair Whisperer" and says she is a "high priestess" in her figure-skating religion.

Bev sometimes paints stuff on her cheeks. Like hearts and diamonds. Today it was the number three. I asked why and she said, "It stands for the holy trinity of my religion—my skates, the ice, and me."

I think she wants me to think she's weird. But I don't.

Yours faithfully,

Alice

October 18, 1991

Dear Kristi,

When I came home today, I thought Mom would be in bed as usual, but she was in her studio, sitting in a corner, with her knees bunched into her chest. There was a canvas on her easel. It was smeared with black paint.

She looked tired and her skin had splotches of pink and red, like she'd been swimming in the cold ocean.

She said she tried to paint a picture of the black dog that lives in the yard behind ours.

"Were you painting the dog for Danny?" I asked her.

She said, "It's such a mess."

When I looked in the studio later, I found five canvases smeared with black paint. I thought, it's like falling down on an axel five times in a row.

I'm always thinking about skating. Maybe you've noticed.

Sincerely,

Alice

October 19, 1991

Dear Kristi,

Last night, after Dad came home and I was in bed, I heard my parents talking.

Mom said something about pills and how they weren't making her better, only ruining her art.

Dad said, "You can't paint if you feel like hell."

Mom said, "You don't understand."

They said other stuff, but I stopped listening.

At least Mom doesn't have cancer.

She'll be better soon, right? She always says so when I ask.

A little worried,

Alice

October 20, 1991

Dear Kristi,

I'm preparing for regionals. They're in Columbus, which is two hours from where we live. I'm hoping that since it isn't so far away, Mom will come.

Maybe if I win gold, she'll feel like her old self.

I know: It's like Danny thinking a gold dog will cheer her up.

But I bet your mother will be very, very happy if you win the gold medal at the Olympics.

Sincerely,

Alice

October 21, 1991

Dear Kristi,

Last night I woke up because the black dog was barking like crazy. I thought he must be barking at the moon. Or at the Sherman Strangler.

I heard Mom open her bedroom window. "Stop it!" she yelled at him. "Please, God, stop it!" Eventually, he stopped barking. But afterwards, I heard Mom whisper, "Please, God—stop it! Stop it!"

I must have fallen asleep because when I opened my eyes it was morning.

I don't know if Dad came home last night.

Sincerely,

Alice

October 23, 1991

Dear Kristi,

The Sherman Strangler has been caught! He was the lawyer (public defender) of the women he strangled!

"You don't need the gun anymore," I told Mom.

She said, "I want you to know how much I love you, Alice. You won't forget, will you?"

I said, "Why would I forget?"

She said, "Ever."

I said, "Ever."

I asked Mom if she would come with me to regionals. I want her to see me because, as she told me last year, "We are both artists and we understand each other."

She said, "I really, really wish I could come."

After I left Mom's room, I walked to the rink. I didn't have to worry about the Sherman Strangler and I didn't see Dad drive by with some woman who isn't Mom. Yippee!

I skated for three-and-a-half hours except for a couple of breaks so I could warm up my feet in front of the fire. I read four books last week, but all I had in

my backpack today was *Anna Karenina*.

Do you know what I want to do before I'm sixteen? Land a triple axel. I know, I know—it's like wanting to win the lottery.

Your ambitious skating friend,

Alice

October 27, 1991

Dear Kristi,

I won regionals!

I can't believe it! I beat Mira Denisovich, who is seventeen years old and was born in Moscow!

Ivan was so happy he forgot his English and started talking to me in Russian.

Mom didn't come, but Dad did. Afterward, he said, "We have to celebrate," and he treated Ivan and me to dinner. Dad and Ivan drank a whole bottle of red wine. They toasted each other in eight languages. My father knows a little German, French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese. Ivan knows Russian and languages I'm sure he made up.

It was late when we got home from Columbus. Mom was in bed. Dad went to sleep in his study. I tried to sleep in my bed but I was too excited. I looked out the window and saw the black dog pacing in his yard. I whistled at him and he stopped and looked up at me. I leaned out the window and showed him my medal. I swear he smiled.

The next morning, Dad was gone and Mom was downstairs with Danny at the breakfast table. Danny was eating a big bowl of Rice Krispies. Mom looked tired but said, "Congratulations, Alice Marvelous." She wore a blue dress and smelled like flowers.

I asked her if she was going somewhere.

She said, "I have a job interview."

But when Danny and I left to meet the bus, I looked back and Mom was lying on the couch.

Bev picked me up at school. She's driving now! She doesn't think I should have to walk to the rink.

When I showed Bev my medal, she said, "This will be an icon in our church."

I had to ask her what an icon was.

Bev told me her mother wants her to go to an Ivy League college. She said she would rather study mysticism in India. "Or Indiana," she said, and laughed.

Bev's laugh is like an invitation. Even when you don't understand why she's laughing, you still want to laugh with her. I think you would like her.

Yours truly,

Alice

January 10, 1992

Dear Kristi,

I'm sorry I've gone so long without writing to you. My mom died. Well, that's what Dad said I should tell people. If they ask how she died, I'm supposed to say: She had a serious illness.

But no one at school asks me about her. They all seem to know.

It isn't healthy to think about it, Dad says. So I'll tell the story to you once and never again, okay?

I was in my bed late at night, and I heard a loud sound, like a dog's bark. I wondered if Mom and Dad had bought Danny a dog. So I left my bedroom and walked down the hallway to their room. I said, "Mom? Mom? Did you buy Danny a dog?"

Mom's door was locked from inside with its little hook. I didn't wait for her to come unhook it. I pushed and pushed, and I broke the hook and the door opened.

She was in bed, lying all crooked and wrong. Moonlight covered her. When I saw what had happened to her face, I wanted to scream. But when I opened my mouth, I couldn't make a sound. I rushed out of the room. Danny was in the hallway, saying, "I heard you, Alice. Did they buy me a dog? Did they?"

I couldn't speak.

"I want it now," he said.

I said, "You have to wait, okay? Please?"

He said he didn't want to wait, but he saw my face and said, "Okay, Alice."

I walked him back to his room and watched him climb back into bed.

Dad came up the stairs. He must have been sleeping in his study. He stepped into the bedroom and I heard him say, "Oh, no. May, please, no!"

Inside the bedroom, he made a phone call. When he stepped outside the room, I was still in front of Danny's room, guarding the door.

Dad looked at me. I said, "I saw."

He covered his face with his hands. I heard a siren.

January 13, 1992

Dear Kristi,

I forgot to sign my last letter, but I guess it doesn't matter. I haven't mailed you any of them. Obviously.

I didn't go to sectionals. Mom's funeral was the same weekend. Even Ivan understood why I couldn't go.

If I had finished in the top four at sectionals, I would have gone to nationals, where I could have met you. But I probably would have been too shy to say hello.

So I'll say hello now. Hello, Kristi!

I'm trying to be okay. Can you tell? But I think about Mom all the time.

Sincerely,

Alice

January 15, 1992

Dear Kristi,

I haven't gone skating since Mom died. Gran-Gran (Dad's mom) has been with us since the day after she died. We spent Christmas and New Year's at her house in Cleveland.

Gran-Gran drives us to places around town. We spend a lot of time in the Book and Brew, where she buys us ice cream made at the Ohio Eastern Dairy Farm. I am tired of ice cream but I don't tell her.

Sometimes Gran-Gran will ask if I want to go skating. I always say, "Not today."

Ivan called me and said, "Come back when you want to come back. Tomorrow. Next week. Next month. Next year. I will be here."

Bev called me twice but I wasn't home. She left messages both times, but I haven't called her back. I don't know what to tell her.

I shouldn't have been at the rink so much. Maybe if I'd stayed home instead of going skating I could have helped Mom.

Sometimes I think it's the Sherman Strangler's fault she's dead. If it hadn't been for the Sherman Strangler, Dad never would have bought the gun.

Sometimes I think it's Dad's fault.

Mostly I think it's my fault. Maybe I'm a devil after all.

I miss her.

Alice

February 1, 1992

Dear Kristi,

Dad bought Danny a dog. It's a one-year-old golden retriever. It's a rescue dog. The people who had the dog before us didn't pay enough attention to it, Dad said. It was lonely, he said.

"Like Mom was lonely?" I said.

"She wasn't lonely," he said.

"She was lonely because you were in love with one of your students," I said. "I saw you."

His face turned red, but for a long time he didn't say anything. "I admit, I am not a saint," he said.

"You're the devil!" I screamed.

Danny started crying, and the dog started barking.

Dad said, "I am not a saint and I am not the devil. I wish I could have helped your mother more than I did. But she had severe depression. It's an illness, and people can die from it—by doing what she did. I didn't recognize how bad she had it. I should have. I wish I had. I'm so, so sorry."

He started crying. We all started crying.

Afterwards, I wasn't as mad at him anymore.

Sincerely,

Alice

February 21, 1992

Dear Kristi,

Congratulations on winning the Olympic gold medal. I watched you on TV. You skated great. Obviously.

Before we watched the Olympics tonight, Danny and I brought his dog into the backyard. We thought Olympia (I named her!) would bark at the black dog like always. But this time they wagged their tails and sniffed at each other between the fence like they were long lost friends.

And speaking of friends, I think I might give Bev all the letters I've written to you. I'll tell her she can either read them or mail them to you. Did I tell you she sent me roses last week? Her note said, "I miss you in church." She drew two smiley faces in the B of her name.

Sincerely,

Alice

February 22, 2014

Dear Kristi,

I dropped all the letters I've written to you (except this one!) at Bev's house. I left a note with them: "I think I would like you to read these."

Now I'm worried. I hope she doesn't think I'm weird.

I still haven't been to the rink since Mom died.

Sincerely,

Alice

February 23, 1992

Dear Kristi,

Tonight Dad came into my room and said I should go back to skating, to doing what I love.

I said, "If I hadn't skated so much, I could have helped Mom."

I was sitting on my bed. He kneeled down beside it. He has lost a lot of weight and his hair is too long. He put his elbows on my bed and put his hands together like he was praying. He said, "Alice, it isn't your fault, all right? Believe me. Please believe me. There was nothing you could have done."

I said, "I don't believe you."

He said, "I don't know much anymore, but I will always know this: It wasn't your fault. You loved her and she loved you."

I started crying and he started crying. I put my hands next to his so we were both praying.

Danny came into the room. When he saw us crying, he started crying. Dad and I both hugged him.

Olympia came into the room and jumped up and down, barking. It was like she wanted to be hugged, so we hugged her until she licked Danny's ear and he started squirming on the floor like he was being tickled.

It was so funny we stopped crying.

Sincerely,

Alice

February 24, 1992

Dear Kristi,

Today was my first day back at the rink since Mom died. Bev came up to me and said how sorry she was. So did the other girls.

I didn't want to look at anyone, so I stared at my skates. I guess I felt ashamed and sad. All the girls except Bev skated off. Bev said, "You're a good writer."

"Thank you," I said.

She grabbed hold of both of my hands. "We're going to do a little mourning dance," she said.

"Is this part of your religion?" I asked her.

"Of course," she said.

She led me around the ice. First she skated backwards and I skated forwards, then we switched. Then we skated side-by-side like we were ice dancing. I noticed the looks on the other girls' faces. I bet they thought we were crazy.

But I didn't feel crazy. I felt like maybe I'd been in deep, dark water but had come up for air.

And it was even okay when Bev and I tripped over each other and fell smack on our faces.

"It's one of our sacraments," Bev said, "to kiss the ice." Both of us kissed the ice and laughed and helped each other up.

Love,

Alice

Mark Brazaitis *is the author of seven books, including* The River of Lost Voices: Stories from Guatemala, *winner of the 1998 Iowa Short Fiction Award,* The Incurables: Stories, *winner of the 2012 Richard Sullivan Prize and the 2013 Devil's Kitchen Reading Award in Prose, and* Julia & Rodrigo, *winner of the 2012 Gival Press Novel Award. His latest book,* Truth Poker: Stories, *won the 2014 Autumn House Press Fiction Competition.*

Closet

Julian Fernandez

Jom rustled in his bed, then turned over to his side. Slom had rustled as well, there, in her bed on her side of the room. Jom rubbed his eyes and slipped out of bed. Slom did the same.

"Good morning Slom," Jom said.

"Good morning Jom," Slom said.

They both dressed and sat down at their gentle wooden table in front of the window with the great view, and poured themselves two cups of green tea.

"I dreamt last night," Slom said, after a moment's pause.

"You dreamt?"

"I dreamt a magnificent dream last night, Jom."

"Do tell."

"I dreamt I opened our closet," Slom said.

"That doesn't sound very interesting at all," Jom replied.

She smiled at him with her eyes and said, "But there was something in the closet."

Jom yawned.

"There was a delicious piece of salami in the closet. It was huge, and every time I took a bite it replenished itself!"

Jom narrowed his eyes and gave her a purposeful frown. "I hate salami," he seethed.

Slom closed her eyes and said, "I don't care. Do you want to open it with me? I really want to look inside."

"Look inside?" Jom asked. "Who knows what could be in there? It's unsafe."

"Unsafe? It's just a closet. We've never looked before. Aren't you a little curious?"

Jom crossed his arms and said, "No," as firmly as he could. But he looked over at their closet, and then back at their window with the great view. Their room had no door—just two beds, the table with chairs, the window with the great view, and the intricately patterned oak closet, all encased in plain white walls—and thus, lacked excitement. Could he live out his whole life without ever learning what lay beyond those mysteriously carved armoire doors?

"Well *I'm* hungry, so you can just look out the window with the great view, and *I'm* going to find out what's in our closet," Slom said with a conclusory grunt.

"Wait," Jom said. "Wouldn't you rather just eat this carrot?" He pulled a carrot from his jacket pocket.

"I don't want a carrot."

"Maybe I have some turnips," Jom said.

But she was already standing there with her hands on the closet.

"Jom, there's something engraved here."

"What does it say?"

"'Thou shalt not.'"

"Maybe you should take the closet's advice."

"If I listened to every closet's advice I would be truly lost."

"Has a closet given you bad advice?"

"Has a closet given you good advice?" Slom looked at Jom and smiled. Jom frowned. The curiosity in his heart was swelling, but so was his sense that opening this closet could only bring trouble.

"Wouldn't you rather just look out our window? It's got a great view."

Slom shook her head and swung both closet doors open with a flourish. The room suddenly smelt of candles. Jom shielded his eyes with his hands. He didn't want to look. He couldn't look. Slom gasped.

"What's in there?" he asked, his voice fluctuating. "Is it scented candles?"

"Spaghetti!"

"Spaghetti?"

"It's spaghetti! The closet is filled to its brim with spaghetti, Jom."

"Don't lie to me."

"I've never lied," she promised.

"Is it really spaghetti?" Jom opened his fingers and peeked an eye out at Slom and the closet.

"Spaghetti to its brim."

She was right. Filled to the closet's brim was pounds upon pounds of thick pasta, lovingly coated with just the right amount of marinara sauce.

Slom turned around and looked at Jom with a smug smile and her arms crossed. "I told you it was a good idea! I've always wanted spaghetti."

"It does look delicious," Jom said.

"But 'thou shalt not,' right?"

Jom fully uncovered his eyes. The spaghetti was magnificent. Slom smiled at him. He had a difficult time standing up. There was just so much spaghetti. It wafted aromas of bread and freshly plucked tomatoes. Yes! The winding perfection of the spaghetti itself was the pattern on the closet. Why had they not done this sooner? Thou shalt not what?

"Well Jom, would you grab some forks?" Slom said, embellishing her words.

"Yes, I'd say it's long past time we began," Jom said.

"So you admit it then?"

Jom replied with a smile.

He took two forks from the table and handed one to Slom without hesitation. He turned to the spaghetti closet and plunged his own into the beautiful mess.

The first bite was warm heaven, and the second was beyond it. The elegant toasty mixture of wheat and tomato kissed his pallet and he closed his eyes and he was amongst angels. The flame of the spaghetti spread from his mouth to his skull and warmed his limp body and danced easily through his arms to the tips of his fingers and through his legs and out his toes and into the magnificent abyss beyond him. His lips tingled with marinara.

Jom's eyes opened and the plain white walls were no longer plain. They were light itself. The air had texture, color, flavor! He thrust the fork back into the spaghetti closet and twisted it. Slom did the same. Carbohydrates fluttered in between the fork's teeth. She held the spaghettied fork in the air near her mouth as she chewed and drifted her head. Jom's eyes met hers in a perfect lock and it was clear that she felt the same way. The value of the spaghetti was objectively infinite. There was no mistaking it. Jom closed his eyes.

Slom let a deep C note resound as a hum, through her spaghetti mouth. Jom replied with an equally deep B note. Slom hummed the same note again, and Jom did the same. They brought forkful after forkful of the sacred material into their bodies, and they hummed.

Where once the closet was filled to its brim, it was now barren.

Jom was filled to his brim now, but still he said, "I could do with another bite." He bit the icy metal of his fork, and closed the closet doors.

"I could, too," Slom said, staring at her own fork. "I guess it's time for another cup of tea then, isn't it?"

"I guess it is." And then they sat at their table and drank tea in silence. The air had lost its timbre as the closet had lost its spaghetti. The air moved slowly and brutishly now. Slom looked at Jom as if she had something to say, but then said nothing.

Jom poured himself a second cup, and gestured with the kettle towards Slom. She shook her head.

They sat there in silence for a while, Jom not sipping his tea and Slom staring at the table. It was getting dark.

"Do you think there will be more spaghetti tomorrow?" Slom asked.

"If there isn't... I don't know what I might do," Jom said.

They returned to the silence. The chatter of their life had disappeared, gone somewhere else. Jom listened for something. Some noise; any noise that could signal the second coming of the spaghetti. There would have to be spaghetti the next day. There would have to be. Jom continued his intent listening.

Without a word to each other, they both crawled into their beds and Jom turned towards the wall, keeping the patterned closet in the corner of his eye. Just as he was about to sink to sleep, his listening finally returned something. A soft sob. Thou shalt not.

Rise. The sun peeked and shed a single hair of light in the room. Jom woke, but did not open his eyes. The closet, before Slom awoke. He slowly adjusted his sheets to a position suited to leaving. He opened his eyes and placed a toe on the floor. Slom was asleep. He grinned at her dreaming body. He had won.

He turned towards the closet and crept towards it. He savored each step. He was miles ahead of Slom. Yes, she was only a few feet farther from the closet, but *he* was awake, and *he* was standing. The closet would be filled with spaghetti again. Of course it would. If it wasn't, all was lost. There could only be death.

He reached out his lank hand and caressed the spaghetti patterns with his finger. He shuddered. The patterns were like Braille. It was clear as day. They were like Braille and they told him that there was spaghetti inside, and that it was all his and he would be able to eat it. But he'd forgotten a fork. He muttered a curse and—

A cold hand gripped his right shoulder.

"Good morning, Jom," Slom said.

"Good morning, Slom," Jom said.

He turned. Her face was blank—the same as ever—nondescript. Although, in this case, "same" meant entirely different. It was as if the chill of the morning had crept through some unguarded pore of the room and somehow penetrated the fortress of Slom's blankets and infected her face with a grave "sameness." Her look was blank, nondescript, and yet it had somehow become the exact antithesis of spaghetti.

Jom blinked though, and when his eyes opened, Slom's face lay before him. Not blank. Normal. He had imagined this terrifying sameness. His upper chest heaved a moment, and then he was fine.

"I dreamt last night," Slom said. She was smiling at him. "But go ahead, open it up. I'll tell you about it later."

Jom had not yet opened the closet, and thus was saved. Thou shalt not. He smiled back at her, and then opened the closet.

It was spaghetti. He exhaled deeply through his nose, and Slom pushed him to the side. He had been blocking the entrance. They both stared open-mouthed at the spaghetti. There would be spaghetti every day. Slom started chuckling, and Jom did, too.

"You know what, Jom? We don't even need forks."

He looked at her, and then back at the spaghetti. She was right. He shot his hand into the spaghetti. His nerves cried out in joy. The spaghetti not only tasted of heaven; it felt like it, too. He was vaguely aware of Slom's hands doing the same thing as his. Thou shalt not, as he brought his first handful towards his mouth. And again he was presented with bliss.

His head warmed and the same sensations from the previous day passed over him. The warm ooze of the marinara tickled his arm's hairs. Then a strong force moved him.

"Jom!" Slom had pushed him. "Can you hear me now?"

Jom stumbled to the floor. He felt indignant at being moved so far from the spaghetti for this long. He picked himself up.

"Yes," Jom grunted. "I can."

"You weren't responding," Slom said. "I'm sorry I pushed you."

He looked at her, sore and unhappy.

"I want to go inside the closet."

What a good idea. What a good idea she had. He hated her for having such a good idea. Complete spaghetti immersion. He didn't hate her. "Ok," he said. "But just for a moment."

"Would you like to go in too, Jom? First?"

He ran over and hugged her. This was the height of his life. She hugged him back and it was warm. "I would," Jom said.

She motioned and he set a foot inside, letting the spaghetti rustle his bare sole. His skin danced and sung. He put another foot in, and with it his entire anticipating body. He gripped the sides of the closet, pressing spaghetti against oak, and spun around. Slom never looked as graceful as she did in that moment. She stood there, with only a single handful of spaghetti in her hand, dripping wine-red sauce onto the undeserving ground. The tangles of spaghetti around him sent waves of joy through his nerves.

She closed the door and he was immersed.

Deep breath in. The lush tomatoes. Grace. Light. Wheat grown with love. These things were all inside him. He breathed this pure air. He drifted his arms up and down, and nudged his head forward to bite the spaghetti.

'Thou shalt not' rung in his ears and he laughed. Writ on oak like someone would listen. Every movement was joy. Every breath was—

Marinara entered his nose. It stung, but its presence there felt necessary. He gripped a bouquet of angel hair and pushed it against and into his nose. He bit the underhangings. He took another handful and pressed it into his ear. There had to be more. He swung his head around, grinning, sliding his features and tangling his hair against and into the spaghetti.

His skull collided with the side. It would bruise. He decided to relax. He needed some time to be alone with his thoughts.

But he found it difficult to think about much of anything.

There was spaghetti. Only this spaghetti. This closetful of spaghetti would be the only spaghetti he would have for the entire day. And he had to share it. There wasn't enough. He wanted to slam his head against the closet wall again.

He banged on the door three times with his elbow. Slom let him out.

He grabbed a handful of spaghetti, feeling sunken. Where was the contentedness he had held so firmly before?

Slom stepped in, still looking graceful. He bit the spaghetti in his hand and closed the oak-patterned doors with his other. The spaghetti in his hand dwindled, and then dissipated. He looked around the room, tapping his feet and clutching his wrists. He walked about and left a trail of marinara and stray noodles. He decided he would wake in the middle of the night—when the closet had been emptied—and quietly eat them from the floor. His plan gave him some comfort. A tomato aftertaste graced his pallet.

He turned back to the closet. Slom was still in there. How long had it been? It couldn't have taken him this long. What if she came out, and all the spaghetti of the day had been eaten? He clenched his fists. Ah, what was the use in patience? He groveled some spaghetti into his palm and slipped it into his mouth. A taste of grace, and then nothing. Nothing, but Slom's quiet murking in the closet.

What had become of their lives? It was as if they were in separate rooms. Surrounded by different walls. Spaghetti was... but spaghetti couldn't talk about its dreams, or drink tea with him. Keep out the loneliness. Appreciate the great view. Comment on the weather outside. Muse about owning a door.

Or could it do all these things? Could spaghetti be sentient, hiding it? A bunch of... material. Carbohydrates. What was it exactly? What was Jom exactly? From where had Jom come? There must have been something crucial and necessary about the structure of his being that he did not or could not understand that allowed him to exist so differently from something as pure as spaghetti.

But what if there wasn't? Spaghetti was inside him, but that did not make him spaghetti. In fact, his body was working to actively destroy this heavenly creature, this living being, and change it into something awful. He cursed his digestive system. Maybe that was it.

Other things could just be, but oh, not *him*. He had to be *doing* something. He could not just lie. If he lay, he was *waiting*. If he had ate, whether he liked it or not, his body would destroy and remove the peaceful thing. And he *had* to eat. Thou shalt not.

"Thou shalt not *be*!" Jom shouted. His roar shook his head and his blood rushed desperately to his face.

"What?" Slom said, obviously in the midst of chewing spaghetti.

There was nothing for Jom to say. Nothing to be done. He looked at the closet and those damned words and those beautiful patterns. He looked at the mess he had made. The room was covered in blood. A sauce, a coating.

"Well... I'm ready to come out," she said. "Let's keep eating!"

Jom was shaking. He looked at the closet door. He hesitated. Did not move.

He traced the winding patterns with his eyes, following them closely. Looking for some message. The only message he could discern was, 'Thou shalt not.'

"Jom?"

He stepped to the door and opened it all at once. She was grinning, and draped in the lovely tangle of spaghetti. A life purer than his, or hers.

"Let's eat," he said. Something wrong in his heart had been corrected when he opened the doors.

"Let's eat," she said, and they ate until it got dark again.

That night they both drank tea. The air felt lighter than it had yesterday.

"What do you hope you'll dream tonight, Jom?"

"What I'll dream? Well," he adjusted himself in his chair, "I'd really only like to dream about this closet of ours."

"This closet of ours. You say it like the closet is the desirable thing and the thing inside is an afterthought."

"I don't mean it like that. I'm for the substance within."

Slom waved her hand to push the subject away. She said, "Tell me. What do you think 'Thou shalt not' means?"

"I think it means what it says."

"But what does it say?" she asked.

"'Thou shalt not.'"

"But what does that mean? In the context, of course."

"What context?" Jom asked.

"I'm beginning to think we've made a mistake," Slom said.

"Did we do something we didn't intend?"

"No."

"Then we haven't made a mistake," Jom said.

"But what if we've done something irreparable?"

"Then we've done it on purpose. I refute the notion of a mistake," he said, and slammed his teacup on the table. He had not meant to perform such a dramatic motion, and when the cup met the table, the wood shattered the porcelain. Hot fluids escaped in all directions and snaked towards Jom. Clatter, and then dripping.

The noise had made them both jump in their seats. But after a moment Slom wiped her look of horror and laughed. "Brilliant, Jom. And you said owning three teacups was 'excessive.'"

Jom's face was hot, tea dripping on his legs. Slom moved to wipe some of the tea away, but Jom said, "Don't bother."

"You're right. Let's just go to bed. It's dark."

"It's dark."

Jom awoke again with his eyes closed. He stopped himself from rustling. He had woken her yesterday. He would have to be more careful today.

He slipped out of his blanket and looked at Slom. She was turned toward the wall. She could be awake! There was no way to tell. He had to be fast.

He eased and snaked to the closet. It was beautiful. An entire day's worth of spaghetti. Untouched. 'Thou shalt not' was writ over the door. He mouthed the words, smiling.

He cursed himself for mouthing and looked back at Slom. She lay in the same position, but she was surely awake. He opened the door and began the process again.

He gripped the spaghetti so tight that sometimes it would split apart before he could bring it to his mouth. The cracked, stale marinara that coated

his hands infected the pure and fresh spaghetti. He grasped another handful and threw it at the wall. Impure!

Slom was moving now. "Jom?"

He took another bite. Spaghetti fell from his mouth. He had soiled it by touching it. It was great, but it wasn't the *same*. He grunted and threw more spaghetti at the wall. Slom was beside him now, her hand on his shoulder.

He thrust his face into the closet and the spaghetti stung his eyes and coated his nostrils again. He bit and he bit. It was better, but still not the same.

"If you're this hungry, why don't you just go into the closet?"

He looked at her. She would not, could not understand this spaghetti. It wasn't hunger he was feeling. This was life in front of them. Pure life. The spaghetti was alive and he wasn't. The spaghetti could *be* and he couldn't.

But she was right. He did have to go into the closet. It was inevitable. Nothing to be done about it. He stepped in, barefoot, impure, sweating.

She closed the door and a horrible smell wafted through the stale air. It wasn't the spaghetti of course; it was him. What a despicable creature he was! Oozing sweat, digesting what he loved. He could never become. He could only destroy. Break down. Digest digest digest. He scratched the walls and the oak peeled off and burrowed into his fingernails and he tore his mouth to the left and ripped the spaghetti and he bit and he ate and he consumed and he *could not become.*

He shoved his head below his neck and buckled his knees and ate more. He pulled spaghetti with both his awful hands from both sides of him out of the pile and into his mouth. It was dark in there. There was nothing but him and the spaghetti. And still he was not alive. Surrounded by, covered in pure life and still he could not become it. There was nothing to be done. Nothing to be gained. He pounded on the closet door.

Three times, then four. "Slom!" he said. "Thou shalt not!"

He was shrieking. He pounded ten times. His arm felt wet with a non-marinara texture. He held it to his face. The smell of iron. He pounded with his other arm. "Slom!"

There was no answer.

"And thou shalt not thou shalt not thou shalt not thou shalt not thou shalt not thou shalt not thou shalt not thou shalt not thou shalt not thou shalt not…"

He was bleeding onto the spaghetti. Ruining it. There was nothing to be done.

He was not alone, but the spaghetti was.

He cried out. "I'm sorry. I didn't ask for this."

There was no answer.

"There's nothing here."

There was no answer.

"There is nothing to be done."

No answer.

"I want to be something."

Light shattered into the closet and he collapsed to the floor in a landslide of spaghetti. He was on his hands and knees. He looked up at Slom, and then at the marinara-stained room. The spaghetti on the wall. He stood up. The broken teacup.

"I feel quite full," Slom said.

Jom nodded. He felt full, too. He felt.

They drank tea that night, occasionally glancing over to each other. Jom felt an odd sort of peace when he looked at her. He wondered what she thought. Her eyes were fixed on the window with the great view. He turned to it. It was an undeniably great view. He should look at it more often.

"I meant to tell you about my dream from the other night," Slom said.

Jom said nothing. His lungs heaved air in and out of him.

"It was a nightmare," she said. "I dreamt I woke up and our closet was gone."

Jom breathed.

"The closet was gone and I went to wake you up and tell you and—"

Acid clung to Jom's throat.

"When I removed the sheets from your bed, you were gone."

Nothing.

"Spaghetti was in your place. A pile of spaghetti. And it spoke to me."

He stared at her. Deep into the brown of her eyes.

"It said, 'I am nothing!'" Slom was shouting. "And then crumbled away. Disappeared right before my eyes."

Jom nodded at her, and looked down at his body.

"It was unsettling, but when I woke up I felt so relieved that you were still here."

She finished her cup and poured herself another.

She crept into bed without another word after she finished her second cup. Jom stayed with his in his hand for a while. He let the view fade to darkness, and then he went to bed as well.

'Thou shalt not' was writ over the door. Slom had closed it. They would not open it again. This was their unspoken agreement. Jom felt comfortable in his sheets, although they were stained with tomato blood.

The words remained the same, but the patterns behind them seemed to be different. How odd! He was sure the winding spaghetti engraving had another shape the day before. He almost felt curious. But instead he closed his eyes, and slipped into a deep sleep.

Julian Fernandez *is a sophomore Computer Science major at Goucher College in Maryland. He enjoys writing fiction about different types of foods. His favorites include spaghetti, chips, and jalapeño peppers. He hopes to one day write a novel and work as a software developer.*

Reasons for Moving

Yardenne Greenspan

For the second week in a row, Sasha Green woke up before dawn. No alarm clock, no bad dreams, no noise from the street, not even needing to pee, as he now always, *always* did. He was fully awake, sitting up in bed in an instant, the itchy cover crushed under his arms, rendering the skin pink and irritated.

He hadn't spoken about it to anyone except his boss at the market, and only after Larry had noticed the dark circles under his eyes and asked if Sasha was using.

"Using what?" Sasha asked dumbly, staring in the general vicinity of Larry's eyes.

"Whatever all of yous are up to," Larry said, shoving the air between them with one limp wrist movement, as if swatting away an invisible fly. "I don't know. In my days it was all about the weed. Now my daughter comes home 'hopped-up on coke.' Her words."

"Oh." Sasha swallowed. "I'm not – no."

"Well, what's the matter with you then?"

"I've been having trouble sleeping. I mean, I wake up too early."

"What's early?"

"I don't know. Like 4:00."

"Psh, that ain't early. You listen to me, now, Sash. That's the best time to be up. Next time get out of bed, go for a little stroll. I tell ya, Ithaca at its finest. Puts that Watkins Glen to shame."

But Sasha tried and found that he disagreed. From the creak of his building door opening onto Meadow Street to the pull of the wind through the trees, there was nothing fine about Ithaca before dawn. There was none of the friendly small-town ease of daytime. The streets were complacent like a comatose patient who'd stopped twitching his eyelids. "A goner," Sasha whispered. The only activity was a band of Ithaca College kids who were laughing and belching their way out of the State Street Diner.

"Dude!" one of them brayed. "Muffled muffled mumble retarded!"

"For realz, bro!"

Sasha wanted to scoff and roll his eyes at them, but even wrapped in his black winter coat he felt nude to their gaze, and moreover, there was no one

to scoff or roll his eyes with. He put his hand to his chest. They were his age, he thought. He could have been them. Still could, maybe. Of all the places in America to go, he chose a college town.

Where was the magic? He followed the drunk kids up State, then cut left to Cayuga, to where his feet always took him, in spite of himself, to Fall Creek. He'd been here the previous evening. He was here every evening, either before or after work. Why did he keep coming? There was nothing to see in the private homes where someone was always cooking dinner, someone was always listening to music, reading a book next to a warm yellow lamp, watching television with the volume low. The people in them were nothing like the miserable students and locals who stopped by the Commons Market at eleven o'clock at night, buying tubs of Breyers ice cream and lottery tickets, looking so lonely that Sasha wanted to—and often did—cry. No. The houses of Fall Creek were different. Cut off from downtown, the university, and the college, these houses sat in their own silent universe, alone, self-sustained, wanting for nothing.

And that is where they differed from Sasha: he needed *all* the time. He needed his friends, his family, everyone he escaped from. He needed life outside of his apartment. He needed the restaurants and coffee shops he never went to, the people with their noise, the noise with its echo, reverberating inside of him as he went about life alone, the sun and the wind, the rain against windows to give a rhythm to sadness, sweet and fresh, bearing life.

As a character in a Jane Austen novel might say, he was not self-sufficient. When he walked by those houses, boy oh boy, even the sight of a rocking chair on the porch or a glimpse of a dining room sent him into tremors. In those houses, people lived fully in each other's company, day in and day out, resting and rearranging, eating and cleaning, doing homework, reading books, painting, practicing music. Whatever it was that people did. Whatever.

It seemed unfair for him to feel so alien to this scene. He was a kid in a family home once too, where he played with Legos and devoured Maurice Sendak and used a pencil to trace some of the illustrations, badly, while everyone else chatted sweetly around him until dinnertime. And yet standing here, it was as if none of that had counted. Everything here was a chapter in a book: beautiful, curious, never obvious. Outside of those houses, he was somebody who's never lived in a home, who's never spent an evening in the warmth of a family doing nothing in particular.

His arms wrapped around his torso, his hands gripping his chest, he cut through the park and through the creek, a blanket of ice covering the water beneath where, he just knew, something was still brewing, keeping alive the notion of life. Aurora Street brought him to the falls. They were almost frozen solid, nothing but a trickle by way of waterfall. The wind ruled this place, almost angry if it hadn't sounded so desolate, powerless. Wasn't that the thing about this place? Everyone was always so damn calm. The initial comfort of being treated like a friend all the time was soon replaced by dread, an itch that never

goes away, turning cancerous. No one ever raised their voices in dissatisfaction. The old lady at Hal's Deli still wished a nice day to all of her customers, even the assholes who never tipped. People on the street apologized when you bumped into them, even if you did it on purpose, even if you did it because they seemed warm and awake. Even Isaiah, on the Commons, with his neon-green leggings and tank top and dirty dreads smiled at you if you happened to walk into his endless train of words. *Isaiah!* He wanted to shout at him. *Isaiah, do something! Show these bastards!* But Sasha said nothing, and Isaiah kept smiling that ignorant smile for yet another season, and then he was gone.

And then Sasha was the last freak in town.

There was nothing unusual about the piercings coming out his eyebrows and mouth and that soft spot where his cheek met his lips, or about his unwashed hair. He looked no different from any of the other people working the head shops or the tattoo parlors. He was a freak because he failed to have an Ithaca attitude. He wasn't happy and helpful, and he wasn't involved in any type of band or co-op. He wasn't on the board of any of the festivals, and he wasn't angry about fracking, and he wasn't active in helping Nate Shinagawa get elected for congress. He wasn't a student, and he wasn't a hippie, and he wasn't anything to take pride in. And that is what the wind was howling at him.

The trees swayed in front of him, doing a slow, enticing dance above the water that trickled and sprang out of the frozen falls like the miracle of goddamn creation. And then Sasha knew why he hadn't been able to sleep. It was clear as fucking day, and if he hadn't realized it before it was only because he was afraid to admit that it was actually happening now.

He had come here four months ago, putting Wisconsin and his mother and the kids from school behind him. He chose Ithaca because he heard it was the most liberal small town on the East Coast, and while New York City was tempting with its shining lights and yellow cabs and the guys holding hands down Gansevoort Street, he felt quite sure that he would disappear in such large and impossible a place, felt quite sure that he would not make it there, make it anywhere, if it were up to him.

On the Greyhound, waving goodbye to no one, he swallowed down the very first pill. He gave his chest a little rub. The old lady sitting next to him shot him a sideways glance and then asked, "What are you traveling for? Are you in school?"

"No, I'm just moving," Sasha said apologetically. It would be the first in a long series of blurry and boring confessions that he would much have preferred to replace with exciting lies.

Which is why he couldn't tell Larry that yes, he was hopped-up on coke, though he wanted to so badly, and given that miserable bastard an excuse to kick him to the curb. Which is why he couldn't tell those awful kids coming out of the diner that they were little shits, little nothings, that no one gave a fuck about them, so that they could knock him down and punch him good and hard in the stomach.

Which is why now, in the dark, among the dark monument of the falls and the wet and icy earth that surrounded it, around the sloshing of what little water grew warm enough to be released from the claws of frost under these gray skies, Sasha couldn't tell himself that he wasn't sleeping because he was depressed, or because he was sick, or because something in his dreams was telling him to get out. He had to admit the truth, had to own up to what was happening to him, what had begun happening with that first pill on the Greyhound.

He popped off his glove and reached a tentative hand beneath his scarf and into his winter coat, through his fleece jacket, beyond the wool sweater and thermal undershirt. Some cold air penetrated through to strike his chest and he heaved for a moment, then reached down to touch his nipples. There were distinct bulges underneath them, a sprouting. They were scrawny little things, like a ten-year-old's – more like protrusions in the skin than anything else. He pictured the girls back home in their ill-fitting training bras, waiting expectantly for their buds to follow through, awkward and cone-shaped for a little while, then round and firm to the eye and soft to the touch, milky mounds of flesh with a soft cherry on top. Is *this* what he wanted? To shed invisibility? To become someone?

With his hand still in his shirt he began walking back into the neighborhood. It hurt to press his finger against the middle of his nipple, but he did it anyway, all the way back down the creek. The throb of pain made him feel more awake than he had in days. He sliced through the dual curtains of wind back to the far edge of the park, to the corner of Marshall and Willow, to his favorite house. He stood before it, dark ochre bricks with black designs, just steps away from the frozen water of the creek. Expansive enough to breathe, but small enough to still be able to find the edges of one's body. The perfect balance of in and out.

Not thinking, barely existing, he climbed the steps to the front door. The creaking of wood under his feet was lost in the wind. He tried the front door and found it unlocked. *You got to love Ithaca sometimes*. It groaned as he pushed it in, and he paused, waiting for a stir from inside. He took the silence as a sign: he was welcome here. At least in the living room. At least for a little while. As he slipped inside, the warmth of the radiator already making his feet heavy with sleep, Sasha conceded that he'd have to stay till daylight. It was simply too nice. He couldn't wait to find out where these people sat, what the landscape looked like from their picture window. As he yawned in anticipation of it all, he thought he heard a voice beckoning to him, telling him to make himself at home.

Yardenne Greenspan *is a Tel Aviv-born, Brooklyn-based writer. She has an MFA from Columbia University. Yardenne blogs for* Ploughshares *and has published work in* The New Yorker, Haaretz, Guernica, *and elsewhere.*

How To Make Crème Brulee

Taylor Larsen

1. In a large glass bowl, mix all of the items you've gathered from the supermarket: the egg yolks, vanilla extract, white sugar, heavy cream, and brown sugar. The index card recipe sits on the counter, given to you by your kind neighbor Mrs. Tate. You get the cream heating slowly in a saucepan over a tiny flame. Your daughter Nell comes down the stairs, brown hair spilled over the shoulders, full pretty mouth, and sits on the couch, watching you at work. Earlier, she left her door open and when you walked by, she tentatively said: "Dad?" (A delicious sound from a still innocent voice.) "Will you make me crème brulee? Sugary stuff is the only thing I can keep down anymore." You rushed out happily to get her what she wanted. Tyler came by the other day. He says he has a new job and will be a better provider. Your daughter seems to like him. It is not your business. The cream is removed from the heat immediately just before it starts to boil.

2. It was your business to protect her all through high school. You smiled her way when her dates arrived and then sent them stark messages with your eyes, one by one, when they came to pick her up, the jocks, the pimply alternative boys, all of the contestants in the game of your daughter's life. They got the message. You couldn't stop them but you could keep them at bay. She is older now and you couldn't protect her this time. You whisk the eggs briskly to make her laugh.

3. Let the glaze harden. You put the mix for the glaze down by the broiler so that it can become like brittle stone. When Tyler drops by tomorrow, with his skinny body and apologetic smile, try not to break the glass mixing bowl over his head. He will try to take her to live in a cheap apartment, your beautiful girl, and he will treat her well until he doesn't anymore, since he is only twenty-three and likes to drink. She will forget her magnificence and become ordinary by being around an ordinary man with his ordinary problems of not enough money, cheap used furniture, and half-vacations to water parks. She will look at the baby and cry and think of him once he leaves. His genes are now in your family line. She won't be returning to college in the fall, but promises you she will, when the baby is a little older.

4. Much time is needed to let the mixtures cool before you can present her the masterpiece. Her ravenous gaze follows your every move. You explain that it

needs time to all come together. "Can you wait?" you ask. You want to make it perfect for her. She asks if she can eat some of the custard now, right out of the bowl, and eat the glaze later. She is so hungry. "Is that okay, Dad?" "Anything for my princess." Her baby bump is barely visible. She keeps absentmindedly running her hand across it. You bring her a dish of the custard without the glaze. She could have waited and found a man who would have made crème brulee for her. Who even knew what crème brulee was. She could have waited for a man like you, who would have protected her, always. She is eating the crème brulee, her face awash in pleasure, looking at you like she did when you got her exactly what she wanted for Christmas. When Tyler comes tomorrow, you will steel yourself as every father has had to do for every unworthy young man who takes so easily the body of his daughter. She is Tyler's now. For all of the disappointments in this life, you had not been prepared for this one.

Taylor Larsen *is a graduate of Columbia University's MFA program and her first novel,* Stranger, Father, Beloved, *was published in the summer of 2016 through Gallery Books of* Simon & Schuster. *Her essays have appeared in* Bustle, Literary Hub, *and* Women Writers, Women's Books.

Life Expectancy

Noah Milligan

The job was in Oklahoma, and the wind there is something unforgiveable. It's hardened, stubborn, biting, and it blows across the plains so hard I thought gravity an unequal match. I'd never experienced anything like it. It drowned out all other noise. It roared. It whistled. It taunted me, reminding me how small and inconsequential I truly was. For a time, I was convinced I could bottle it up, that I could take it with me, and if I faced something daunting, I could unleash the wind upon it, and whatever it was would be destroyed. Silly, I know, but that's how damn hard that wind blew.

I got the job through a friend of my brother's. I'd be working for a young entrepreneur named Sayer, a bald-headed adrenaline junkie who got rich through his buy-here, pay-here auto dealerships and who was buying up life insurance contracts on the old and dying.

"Ninety-eight percent of life insurance policies lapse," he told me standing on the outskirts of Duncan, Oklahoma, this blue-collar town reeling from depressed oil and gas prices. The land was dotted with abandoned wells, parked trucks, and crumpled Busch cans, all shining underneath the mid-summer sun. "That means these life insurance companies, these blood-sucking large conglomerates, take these hardworking people's monthly premiums year after year, then as soon as they can't pay, their policies are cancelled. Those poor bastards pay thousands of dollars over years and then poof, their investment is gone, surrendered to the pockets of strangers who ride in private jets and drink 18-year-old scotch for breakfast. It's not right. And that's why we're here to help."

There was a doctor with us, an old guy by the name of Dickinson, and he carried with him a bag full of equipment to give our clients a physical on the spot; that way he could estimate just how long our client may have to live. A "life expectancy evaluation," he called it, and it was essential to determine Mr. Sayer's return on investment. If the insured lived too long, Mr. Sayer might lose money. The three-to-five-year window was the sweet spot. Pay the insured a percentage of the face value, have him or her sign over the beneficiary to Mr. Sayer, and he would continue to pay the premiums until the insured passed, hopefully sooner rather than later. Then Mr. Sayer would reap the rewards. He called them uncorrelated assets, investments that didn't rise or fall with the stock market. It was smart, I had to admit, yielding returns damn near triple digits if underwritten correctly.

The first call I ever went on was a small house sitting on an acre. Ranches surrounded the lot, the lazy moos of cattle audible between wind bursts, the smell of cow pies stinging my nostrils. A drought had scourged the southwest

part of the state in recent years, so the land was cracked, blades of grass burnt brown, crunching underneath my footsteps. Though it was a small house, it was well cared for and neat. I could tell it had started out much smaller. The owners had added on a couple rooms-—one on the north side, another on the west—and there was a large, newly-built detached garage. Out front was a modest pontoon, an F-250 Super Diesel, and a used, but still impressive, RV.

Mr. Hannahan greeted us at the door. Rotund and tall, he had a shiny hairless head and a granite mouth. He seemed gigantic, his head nearly touching the doorframe. Inside, the house was dim, illuminated by uncovered bulbs, their light oscillating through lazy, undulating fans. Walls covered in floral wallpaper, stained with cigarette smoke. Ceilings low, popcorn textured. In the kitchen, Mrs. Hannahan stood nearly as tall as her husband, readying a tray of finger sandwiches.

"Forced retirement," Mr. Hannahan explained once we were all settled in the formal dining room, sipping on sugary iced tea. "Oil companies started laying off. Tax revenue went south. Thirty-seven years at the high school, and they told me during finals week this year would be my last. Should've saw it coming but didn't."

"We understand," Mr. Sayer said.

I was here to observe, that was all. Learn from Mr. Sayer, note his inflection, his concern, his empathy, so that I'd be able to do the same.

"Times are tough. You have to look out for your family. For your wife."

Mrs. Hannahan offered him a refill, and Mr. Sayer accepted with a warm and friendly smile.

Dr. Dickinson began his physical, measuring blood pressure, heart rate, blood sugar, checking his pupils and listening to his lungs, testing them relative to the medical history we'd already studied. Mr. Hannahan had had his first heart attack seven years prior, his second just a year ago. High blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, still smoked a pack a day. We gave him two to three years tops, and he was sitting on a term life policy worth half a million with premiums inching up toward three grand a year. We offered him twenty grand to take that burden off his name.

"Upside down on the house. Upside down on the truck. Upside down on the RV. Can't hardly make the payments on my pension. It was stupid." He shook his head and stared at his drink like he was talking to it. "Stupid."

"You don't have a crystal ball. You aren't psychic. How were you supposed to see this coming?"

"Just stupid."

"But that's all about to change."

Mr. Sayer pushed over the contract. It was a short document, just ten pages long. A tab marked where Mr. Hannahan was to sign. He flipped through it, glancing over the terms and conditions, the fine print, masquerading as if he were reading it but not taking the time to fully understand. He then grabbed his pen and held it over the signature block, pausing for a moment like he was

remembering how to sign his name, and put pen to paper in a short, quick stroke.

Before this gig, I'd held several jobs, never one that actually took: used car salesman, personal banker, fastfood restaurant GM. Each had their perks; each had their downfalls. Probably the worst was being a recruiter for Hertz. My job was to pack in as many bodies as possible, all on thirty- or sixty-day temp contracts. Their job was simple: to detail the cars. I'd find these kids all over, working as gas station clerks, trolling Facebook for anyone complaining they were out of work. Bail bondsmen would send me referrals, kids who'd been arrested for public intox or street racing. All of them were desperate; all of them needed something to hold on to. And so that's what I sold them, stability. A chance for them to better themselves.

Problem was it hardly turned out that way. The company I worked for, Singular Temp Associates, had a cash flow problem. A year prior, their CEO had been sued over a commercial real estate deal that went south, and he had a judgment placed against him. That left him with his revolving line of credit called due but a contract to fulfill. He had temps to pay in thirty days, but Hertz didn't pay until sixty, a problem he never was able to fix.

The kid who got to me the worst was a boy named Eddie. Seventeen years old, he'd been busted for a B&E a couple of months prior. Wasn't the kid's fault, really, if you believed his lawyer, just started hanging out with the wrong crowd, got dragged into something that wasn't his idea. We worked with the DA to get his charge reduced to a simple trespassing if he kept his job for ninety days and completed a year's probation. Day 68 rolled around, and Eddie didn't get paid and so he quit. Couldn't blame the kid, working for nothing. This sprung the terms of his plea deal, though, and the kid wound up getting charged as an adult and spent a year behind bars. Once released, he showed up at my doorstep.

Eddie was a wiry kid, malnourished, the veins protruding from his arms an indigo blue. Wrapped in his hand was a crowbar.

"You fucked me," he said.

"I'm sorry."

"You stole a year of my life."

"I'm sorry. I really am."

Didn't matter though. Ended up with a four-inch laceration on my forehead, black eye, a fractured cheekbone. I could've turned the kid into the cops, got him sent back to the pen on an assault and battery charge, but I didn't. Instead I just made myself a promise: I'd never fuck anyone over like I had Eddie. Not knowingly anyway.

My girlfriend at the time, Callie, collected vintage action figures and comic books, selling them to nerds throughout Oklahoma City and Tulsa, usu-

ally at trade shows or on Facebook. Pimply-faced teenagers, middle-aged men reliving their childhoods, divorced dads looking for something cool to get their kids for their birthdays. It was a lucrative business, actually, hocking mint condition, still-in-the-box C3POs and Green Lanterns. She had nice things, smelled nice, drove a nice car, had a nice IRA. She was just a nice girl.

"You're not going to believe what happened to me today," she said. We were at dinner, celebrating my recent hiring, at this upscale comfort food joint called Cheever's. They had this jalapeno chicken fried steak that could change a life, but Callie never would order it, regardless of how many times we came, regardless of how many times I asked her to just try it.

"What do you think you're going to get?"

"I got a call from this guy, and he was looking to sell a Spawn #1. Mint condition. Never been out of its sleeve he said, and so I said sure, bring it down."

"Everything just looks so good." I flipped the page of the menu: smoked chicken fusilli, molasses roast chicken breast, five spice trout.

"So I wait for this guy all day. Like all day. Finally, I get tired of waiting and decide to close up shop, but as soon as I go to lock the door, there he is."

"You've tried the chicken fried steak, right?" I asked, even though I knew she hadn't.

"I tell him to come back tomorrow, but he gets all pissed off, screaming that it's like an hour drive for him to get here and blah blah blah, so I'm like fine, whatever, and let him in."

"It's so good. It's got jalapeno in the breading and gravy. You think it's going to be too spicy and heavy, but it really isn't. You should try it."

"So he shows me the comic, and it checks out. Spawn #1, great condition. Doesn't look like it's seen the light of day since the nineties, and even better, it's the newsstand edition, has the barcode on the front and everything, so I ask him how much he wants for it. Know what he says?"

"I really think you'd like it if you just gave it a chance."

"Twenty bucks! Can you believe that? I laughed at him, thinking he was joking at first, but he wasn't. This guy had no idea what he had. There's only like, maybe ten thousand of these puppies around, and he's just like *twenty bucks*."

She made a voice like what she thought a stupid man sounded like, deep and guttural, cinching the last syllable up like asking a question.

"So what'd you do?" I asked.

"I pulled up Amazon and showed him the comic store edition. Told him these only sold retail for ten or fifteen, that I could only offer him five."

"You did that? Really?"

"He was pissed at first. Started cussing right there in the store. Cussing somebody named Brett, cussed the comic book, even cussed me."

"But he took it, didn't he?"

She nodded. "And I'm going to turn around and sell it for $300."

She smiled, proud of herself, and I returned to the menu. She chewed some unbuttered bread, taking her time before swallowing. It was crowded in

the restaurant, with little room between white-clothed tables. The lighting dim. Conversations hushed.

"So how do you like it so far?" she asked. "Your job. Is it good?"

"Sure," I said. "It's good."

"Oh? Just good?"

"Yeah."

"What's good about it?"

"I don't know."

"Just *good*?"

"It's a job."

"Do you like your boss? Do you like your clients? The travel? What exactly?"

"So what are you going to order?"

"Or maybe you just like the pay? It's okay to like a job just because it pays well."

"I haven't been paid yet."

"But you will," she said. "You will. It's just a matter of time before you make a sale."

She reached across the table to grab my hand, but it was too far to reach. She pulled her hand back and laid it in her lap.

"You really should try the chicken fried steak," I said. "I know you'll like it. It's famous. Like really famous. Outside of Oklahoma even."

"I've been thinking," she continued. "You know, it doesn't make much sense for us to keep two places. Financially speaking. You're always either at my place, or I'm at yours. It just makes sense, right?"

"What does?"

"Moving in together."

"Like, *us*? Me and *you*?"

She cocked her chin to the side, mouth poised to respond, but before she could answer, the waiter came. He was a young kid, maybe early twenties with a mustache trying too hard to make him look older. "Have any questions over the menu?"

"No," Callie said. "I think we're ready."

"And what'll it be?"

"The salmon," she said, snapping her menu shut.

First time I went out by myself, the temperature reached almost 110 degrees. Luckily, I didn't have to wear a jacket or tie. I donned a simple cotton polo, some chinos, loafers without socks. Mr. Sayer encouraged us to stay pretty casual, said that clients tended to trust us more than if we constrained ourselves in suits.

I'd always had a problem with perspiration, though. No matter the clothing, I sweated. I soaked through my polo, my underwear, my pants, everything, until visible rings stained in inadvisable places. And I stunk. Regardless of how much cologne I wore, how much deodorant I applied, how hard I blew the air conditioner, I emanated a debilitating and nauseating body odor. I'd seen doctors and dermatologists and dieticians, trying to mask or cure it, applying topical solutions and eating more pineapple, but nothing worked. Finally, I just came to expect it, and the unrelenting scowls of strangers.

My first prospect was a rancher down in Empire, OK, Mr. Cartwright. His place was sprawling, about three hundred acres of pasture, a couple barns, an ancient home passed down from generation to generation, from father to son since the Homestead Act.

When I arrived, the whole family was there. Father, son, daughter, wife, aunts, uncles, grandparents, grandkids, cousins, nieces, nephews. They crawled over one another. They fed each other ham sandwiches and iced tea and hit each other over the head with hand-me-down toys. There must've been two dozen of the clan, all waiting, like this was some sort of family reunion rather than an estate planning pitch.

They bid me sit at the dining room table. The adults all joined me there, the kids remaining in the family room making a racket. Once inside, I'd hoped my sweating would come under control, cooled by the air-conditioning, but with so many bodies jam-packed into such a tight space, I couldn't stop. It poured from me. It stung my eyes and made my vision blurry. It was so bad Mrs. Cartwright even offered to get me a fan.

"No thank you," I said. "I don't want to be any trouble."

"No trouble," she said. "Really. And there's no reason to be nervous. We won't bite." She winked.

"I'm sorry for the stench," I said.

"Can't smell a thing," she lied.

"Maybe I should just freshen up a bit."

"That might be wise."

Their bathroom was small, covered in sky blue tile and pink towels. Elephant figurines donned the windowsill, the sink rim, even the back of the toilet. The magazine rack housed decades old *Sports Illustrated* and *National Geographic*, and everything was in its place: toothbrushes and hand soap and towels with the family name stitched into the fabric. It reminded me of my grandmother's home, before she'd lost her memory to Alzheimer's and we had to stick her in an assisted living center outside Pawhuska, and I splashed my face with cool water and kept telling myself I can do this, I can do this, I can do this.

Back in the kitchen, I was greeted with handshakes and smiles and introductions, a glass of iced tea and questions. All types of questions.

"You're going to pay me $125,000 for my policy? Cash? Today?"

"Well, it'll be put in an escrow account. The funds will be wired to you after closing."

"Doesn't matter its cash value is only $100,000?"

"Nope."

"And you'll take over all the premiums? I won't have to pay a dime?"

"Not one cent."

"So what's the catch?"

The catch. That was a good one. I knew what Sayer would want me to say: there wasn't one. You got a policy you can't afford or don't need, and we'll pay you for it. Problem was, that wasn't always the case. There were tax consequences, estate-planning implications, debt that will no longer be able to be retired after death. There were a whole host of concerns and questions they weren't grasping, or even knew to ask. The most glaring of all: we were going to profit off of your death. When you die, your family would get nothing. A stranger would, a bald-headed guy you'll never meet and who only thinks of you as a line item on his balance sheet. They were relying upon me to tell them those things, but it was my job not to, and soon my shirt was soaked again in perspiration.

"Don't worry." Mrs. Cartwright patted me on the hand. "You're doing just fine."

Part of my job was calling the insured to see if they were still alive. I'd leave a message, and usually they'd call me back. Still kicking, they'd say, for a minute still. Sometimes, though, I wouldn't hear from them. I'd call two or three times over about a month's span, and if they didn't return my call, I'd have to go make a house visit.

After a while, we hadn't heard from Mr. Hannahan. It was a hot day, the sun burning the cracked, red clay of Oklahoma. Thermometer only said 98 but the heat index topped 110. Despite the air-conditioning blaring in my Honda Accord, every single part of me was covered in sweat. My arms, my neck, the inside of my thighs. It was so bad I stuck to my car interior. I thought I would, at any time, start melting.

The place looked exactly as it had a few months prior. A sleepy town, Duncan had more than once boomed and busted, but this past bust just seemed to last longer than all the rest. Houses went unpainted, fences un-mended. The townsfolk took to just sitting. Sitting at the IGA, sitting at the high school football field, sitting on their front porch, all of them looking off into the distance.

I knocked on the Hannahans' front door. They had one of those old-timey brass knockers on the front, and it felt strange using it, like I might have unknowingly slipped into a former time. There was no answer. I knocked again, this time using my fist. I checked the windows, but the blinds had been drawn shut. I tried the back door. I tried calling. Still, no answer. I rang the doorbell, but no one came to the door. There wasn't even anything stirring on the other side.

Walking back to the street where I'd parked, I stopped at the mailbox. It was full, stocked with furniture catalogues and credit card applications, mostly unpaid bills: their mortgage, their second mortgage, the RV, the pontoon, all stamped red, stating Third and Final Notice, Foreclosure Proceedings. It looked like no one had taken a thing for a couple weeks, and so I called the police.

"Come quick," I told them. "I think we may have a problem."

They found Mr. Hannahan sitting in his recliner. He had a microwavable dinner on his lap, molding. The TV was still on, tuned to the local NBC affiliate, the volume turned low, barely audible. I found this odd. If I could barely hear it, then Mr. Hannahan likely would not have been able. It appeared he hadn't cared to hear the actors' voices—it had been enough just to see them, living their muted lives, filling in the details as he sought fit.

I moved into my girlfriend's apartment on a Saturday morning. It was unseasonably cool. A thunderstorm had moved through during the twilight hours of the morning, and the ground smelled wet and was unstable. The air felt like it vibrated, gravid with static electricity.

There was a guy walking down the street, picking through trashcans. Every time I unloaded a box and came outside to grab another, he'd be there, elbow deep. What he was looking for, I hadn't a clue. He didn't look homeless. He wore a newish-looking sweatshirt, not marred with stains or dirt. His jeans fit and were devoid of fray. His boots were a bit muddy, older, but not falling apart. Clean-shaven. Recent haircut. But he just kept going through all the trashcans, never taking anything out, always picking up after himself if he accidentally spilled an item. It was the strangest thing I'd seen in a while, and I couldn't help but stop what I was doing and watch him.

"Do you think we should call the cops?" Callie asked.

"What?"

She pointed at the man. "The cops. He's freaking me out a little."

Maybe. But it didn't seem necessary. He might just be looking for something he'd lost, or had been stolen, or perhaps, in a momentary lapse of judgment, he'd thrown out, and now he desperately searched every trashcan on the street because he couldn't quite remember where he'd put it. That had to be it, I thought. He'd had a change of heart, and now he had to do whatever he could to get back the thing that was gone.

Shortlisted for the Horatio Nelson Fiction Prize, ***Noah Milligan****'s debut novel,* An Elegant Theory, *was released by Central Avenue Publishing in November 2016. Connect with him at www.noahmilligan.com.*

The Detectives

Alix Ohlin

When I was twelve years old my father hired a private detective to follow my mother around. He believed she was having an affair, which she was, and he wanted proof to show a judge, in order to fight for custody of my sister Nicole and me. The detective was a short, dark-haired, overweight man named Sam Postelthwaite, who came to our house one evening with a manila envelope clutched in his meaty hands. My father introduced him, stupidly, as a colleague—stupidly because my father kept the books for a few local businesses, and didn't exactly have "colleagues"—and then hustled him into my parents' bedroom, where they spoke in whispers for a few minutes, then emerged with somber expressions on their faces and hugged goodbye, as if they'd been attending a funeral service in there. Years later I waited on Sam Postelthwaite at the Blue Dragon Café. He was even more overweight and had not aged well, and I knew he could sense me staring at him from behind the bar while I pulled his beer, but he didn't seem perturbed by it. Probably it happened to him a lot, in his line of work.

Like many of my father's schemes this one both backfired, and didn't. When confronted with the photographs, my mother was so angry that she ripped them up and left: him, us, town. We never saw her again. He got custody, and Nicole and I lost our mother, whom we spent the rest of our teen years idolizing as a free spirit who threw off the shackles of the ordinary world. She was our hero, despite having abandoned us, and every time we defied our father, which was often, we did so in her name.

At a certain point, though, I saw how foolish this was—which is to say, I grew up—and came to appreciate our father and his dogged affection for us, which endured the rocky years of our adolescence and was still there, waiting, when we became adults. After I went away to school and came back home (returning to work at the Blue Dragon, as if my education had never happened), I often had dinner with him and his girlfriend, Noriko, who was a stylish, successful real estate agent and whom both my father and I thought could probably do a lot better than him.

Nicole struggled more than I did. She inherited our mother's dark brown hair and her restlessness and her love of attention. At nineteen she went off to Los Angeles, wanting to be famous. And she sort of succeeded; she appeared on one of those reality shows where she competed alongside twenty other reasonably good-looking girls for the attention of a man with highly defined abs and no personality. When she didn't win, she came home, in debt and with a drink-

ing problem, and got a job as a kindergarten teacher. She was the most famous person in our town, and people often turned to look when they recognized her at the gas station or the grocery store.

There was no party Nicole wouldn't go to. She had a string of short relationships, if you could call them that, and she often stumbled over to my apartment on a Sunday morning, still wearing her clothes from the night before, to complain and confess. She wanted me to make her eggs and tell her to straighten up. She had become our mother, and I our father, the two of us performing a script that had been written before we were born. It didn't feel fair to me, and I told her so; we fought, and then the following Sunday she'd show up again, and of course, I'd let her in.

It was nine o'clock on an April Sunday when the doorbell rang, which was early for Nicole, but I'd been up for hours, drinking coffee and reading the real estate section of *The New York Times*. Moving to the city was a fantasy so long ingrained in me that I couldn't let it go, though I had lost any intention of actually doing it. It was an unusually warm spring after an unusually cold winter, and the cardinals and robins were singing loudly, as if both pleased and alarmed by the extremities of temperature.

At my front door stood Sam Postelthwaite. He was an old man now, thinner, his cheeks sunken and wrinkled like a deflated balloon, but I still knew him instantly. He was wearing khaki pants and a blue plaid shirt and holding something in his hands. For a second, I thought it was the manila envelope he'd brought to my father all those years ago, and I frowned and said, "Is this about my mother?" and he said, "No."

I saw then that he was holding a woman's purse, which was light brown and expensive and which I had given to Nicole the previous year for Christmas, and I said, "Is she all right?" and he said, "I'm here to take you to the hospital," and I nodded and got dressed. I suppose it was odd that I didn't ask him anything else. I knew the situation must be horrible, and that soon I would be required to face that horror in its entirety. When I was ready to go, he showed me to his car, a Ford Taurus that smelled like French fries, and I sat in the passenger seat with my sister's purse in my lap. My mind wouldn't go to her, not yet. Instead it kept dwelling on the strangeness of my being driven to the hospital by Sam Postelthwaite. "Why are you the one who came to get me?" I asked him.

"Your father was worried about your sister. He asked me to keep an eye on her, so I've been doing that. Trying to, anyway."

I glanced at him, then out the window, at the quiet streets with budding trees, the drab early grass just starting to recover from the weight of snow. We'd been pummeled that year.

"Your father and I have been friends for many years," Sam Postelthwaite said, answering a question I hadn't asked.

"Is he already at the hospital?"

"No," he said, which was also strange; but he didn't elaborate. We rode the rest of the way in silence, and then he pulled up in front of the hospital and

didn't park, and I understood he wasn't coming in, whether because he had somewhere else to be, or didn't think he was invited, or for some other reason that I couldn't possibly calculate. The whole morning felt beyond my calculation. I opened the door. "Good luck," he said, and drove away while I was still standing in the parking lot.

The woman at the reception desk had gone to school with my mother, and when I was a teenager I sometimes babysat her son; that's the kind of town this is. When she saw me she said my name and tutted sympathetically and told me that my sister was in the ICU on the third floor. Upstairs, I followed the signs to my sister's room. She lay with her eyes closed, breathing through a respirator. Her left arm was in a cast, and the right one was hooked up to an IV. The hospital gown they'd given her was too big and slipping off one shoulder; it almost looked lewd, and instinctively I reached over and pulled it up. "Nick," I said.

"She don't hear you," a voice said behind me, and I turned to see a man sitting in a chair. I'd been so focused on Nicole that I hadn't noticed him, even though he was quite imposing, and, when he stood up, well over six feet tall.

"I'm Lord," he said. "You must be Amber." He was wearing a blue T-shirt and dark jeans and a thick cluster of necklaces; one of them was made of shark teeth, and another one had a gold cross. His hair was in tight glossy cornrows. He reached out a hand, but I didn't take it. I didn't mean to be rude, or maybe I did; I'd never heard Nicole mention his name.

I turned back to Nicole, placing a hand on her arm.

"She's under sedation," said the man. "It's standard, they said."

"Standard for what?"

"A counter-coup lesion," he said. "That's when the brain gets jammed against the inside of the skull. They sedate the patient while waiting for the swelling to go down."

"I see," I said, though I didn't. Inside I was already blaming him, whoever he was, already organizing the categories in my mind. Nicole: the victim. Lord: a mistake she'd live to regret. All my sister's friends were delinquents.

"They think she was hit by a car," he said. "Walking home last night. They called me because mine was the most recent number on her phone. We talked most nights before she went to sleep."

"I'm sorry, who are you again?"

Lord faced me across my sister's bed. "A friend."

There was too much mystery to him, to this. I left the room and tried to flag down a nurse, but they all strode past me busily, shaking their heads and not making eye contact as if I were begging for change, and I was left in front of the nurses' station, crying angry, confused tears.

Just then a pair of arms circled me, cool and familiar, and a voice I knew said, "Hush, hush." It was Noriko. We'd never hugged before—Noriko, my father had once explained to me, "does not enjoy casual bodily contact"—and this more than anything made me grasp, all at once, the gravity of the situation. I stopped crying, and asked her where my father was. She just shook her head and held my left hand in hers, firmly, and then pulled me in the direction of Nicole's room. There, she exchanged introductions with Lord and summoned a doctor, who gave us a weary, terse recap of Nicole's condition: a traumatic brain injury, prognosis unknown. For the moment, drugs would keep her from moving. It was important that she remain immobile while her brain healed. I asked the doctor if we should speak to Nicole, and he said, "Sure," in a dismissive tone that made me hate him, and then he left the room.

Lord rubbed his eyes, like a tired child. I told him, "You don't have to stay, you know," and only when he flinched did I perceive what a mean thing it was to say. I just didn't know him, he was a stranger to me, and I was full up with strangeness, that day.

"I'm going to stay," he said quietly, and I shrugged.

Outside the door a shadow loomed, disappeared, passed by again, and then there was a quiet knock. I slipped outside to see Kevin Hewey, who was a police officer, waiting for me with a notebook and a wincing expression designed, I guess, to convey sympathy. In high school Kevin had been good-looking and a bully, and I was pleased to note that he was losing his hair.

"Hey Amber," he said. "How you holding up?"

I was irritated by his concern. Kevin and his fellow cops would sometimes come into the bar and get rowdily drunk and make lewd comments, on top of which they were mediocre tippers. "Never better," I said.

He didn't even register it. "I need to take a statement from you if you've got a minute."

I told him I didn't know anything about what had happened, and he nodded his chin at the door. "Who's that?" he said.

"Some friend of Nicole's," I said.

"Was he with her last night?"

"I don't think so, but you'd have to ask him," I said.

Kevin frowned. "I don't recognize him," he said. He made to open the door, and I stopped him with a hand to his arm.

"Do you think you can find the person who hit her?" I said.

He gave me his wince-face again. "We'll do everything we can."

Then Lord came out of the room, closing the door gently behind him, and Kevin's demeanor changed instantly. "Sir," he said, "could you step this way?"

Lord nodded. "Of course," he said mildly.

Kevin led him past the nurses' station to a bench in the hallway; I assumed he wanted to make Lord sit down because Lord was so much taller than he was. I couldn't hear what he asked, but I could see Lord shake his head, over

and over. I remembered, watching them, that Kevin's brother Stu had taken Nicole to the junior prom. They'd gotten high in the parking lot and stumbled so badly, walking up the steps to the gymnasium, that the principal wouldn't let them in. I didn't know where Stu was now. Lord stood up then and Kevin barked at him—no other word for it—"Sit down, sir!" Lord sat down. He gave me a look I couldn't decipher.

"Is everything okay?" I said.

Kevin glanced from Lord back to me, then nodded. "Don't go far," he said to Lord, and then gave me his card. I thought it was sort of funny he had a card. It said *Officer Kevin Hewey*, and below that the number of the police station, which anyone in town would have known to call already. Lord and I watched him walk off, saying nothing.

We spent the rest of that day, and all that evening, at the hospital, until the nurses kicked us out. Noriko and I—Lord slipped off separately, without saying goodbye—took the elevator downstairs and walked out to the parking lot together. The night was clear, the stars hectic in the sky.

I asked her where my father was.

I'd called his cell phone three times and each time it went straight to voicemail. Then I turned my attention back to my sister, to silently willing her recovery, which felt like the more pressing task. In the parking lot, Noriko held her car keys in one hand and her purse in the other. I was still holding Nicole's. Noriko and I liked each other—I was pretty sure—but we rarely spent time together just the two of us, and we didn't share confidences. She and my father had been together five years. They'd met when he bought some rental property on the edge of town, based on a rumor that a tech company was going to be expanding to our area; he was convinced that a boom was about to begin. The boom never happened, and half the rentals were empty; but he'd met Noriko, so it was, we all felt, a net gain. I knew little of her life before they met; she had a grown son in Seattle who visited once a year, in summer, during which time my father and Noriko did not sleep over at each other's houses. The son was a lab tech at a fertility clinic; he spent his days measuring hormones in blood. "These women think they can wait forever and still have kids," he'd told me once, rolling his eyes. "That's not the reality." I wasn't a fan of his.

"Your father is very upset," Noriko said now. "He can't handle seeing Nicole in this condition."

"Can't *handle* it?" I said. It didn't make sense to me. Our father had raised us on his own after our mother left; he bought us tampons and bras and didn't flinch when we screamed at him that our lives were ruined, because as teenagers we always thought our lives were being ruined. When I needed money for school he refinanced the house, and when I came home from school and went right back to waitressing, he didn't ask for any of it back.

"It reminds him too much of your mother leaving," Noriko said, "which was very traumatic for him."

"Noriko," I said. "His daughter is in the *hospital*. You agree that it's crazy that he didn't come, right? I mean."

"Of course I do." She opened the door to her car. "People can surprise you with their weakness, can't they?" she said. She hugged me again, awkwardly, with both the purses between us, then got into her car and drove away. I sat in my own car, rifling through my sister's bag, which I hadn't thought to do earlier. There was nothing of note in it: her driver's license, lip gloss, a pack of cigarettes. Her phone, which was dead.

In the morning I drove to my father's house. He'd bought a small condo—Noriko also serving as the agent—and Nicole and I had helped him decorate it. None of us wanted the things that had been in our old house, and we laughed with a sort of hysteria as we took truckloads of knick-knacks and old clothes and sports equipment to Goodwill. The theme for our father's condo, we decided, would be Clint Eastwood Unwinds At Home. At the same Goodwill we picked up some pictures of old gas stations and restaurants, which I framed to look arty. Nicole found some throw pillows with horses on them. Our father laughed, but he liked it, or said he did.

Now he came to the door wearing a dark blue bathrobe and let me in without speaking. In the kitchen, he poured me a cup of coffee and listened while I harangued him. He just kept shaking his head. A few strands of his comb-over stood up on his head, waving slightly, like aquarium plants. It made him look wild, but his eyes were distant and dull.

"I'm going to need you to be understanding of this, Amber," he finally said. "I'm going to need you to find some room in your heart."

This was not the way he usually spoke. It was not the way anyone I knew spoke. I put my undrunk coffee down on his counter with a clunk, and it splashed. "If you care about her, you'll come with me right now."

"I do care," he said, "And no."

On my way out the door I passed Noriko coming in; she widened her eyes in a question and I rolled mine in answer. She pressed her lips together. I stood on the front porch for a minute after she entered, listening; but all I heard was silence.

When I got to the hospital the only other person there was Lord. My sister looked the same, the same hushed pump from the respirator guiding her breath. A nurse came to check her and make notations on the chart.

"Such a beautiful girl," she said to me. "I used to watch her on that show. Couldn't believe it when he chose Courtney instead."

"Courtney was a bitch and a nympho," I said, and she looked startled and left hastily.

Behind me, Lord snorted.

"Well, I mean, come on," I said.

On the nightstand next to Nicole's bed I set out the things I'd brought: a CD player, some music she liked, a scented candle, some copies of *People* and *US Weekly*. Nicole loved celebrity gossip. When she was in LA she was forever texting me about seeing somebody famous at the grocery store and what they had in their carts. After she came back home, broken and broke, I tried to cheer her up by taking her shopping at the mall, the big one an hour away, and she got so bummed out by it that we just turned around and came home. This whole life was her second choice.

Having Lord in the room made me self-conscious, but I wanted Nicole to know that I was there, so I read the magazines out loud to her, describing what people were wearing in the pictures, what they were buying at Trader Joe's. Who looked good and who was too fat or too thin. Every once in a while I'd glance over at Lord; he was reclining in the chair, which was too small for him, looking up at the ceiling. He seemed to be listening. For all I knew he was also a celebrity gossip fan. After a while my voice wore out and I took a break.

"Do you mind?" Lord said, and I shrugged.

He moved closer to Nicole and clasped his palms together. It took me a while to realize that he was praying. Our family had never gone to church—a total disinterest in religion was one of the few things our parents had in common—and I felt ill at ease. I went down to the cafeteria and got something to eat, and when I came back, Lord was standing in the hallway, doing a series of stretches. He was a big guy, solidly muscled, and when he reached his arms over his head he practically touched the ceiling. When he saw me, he dropped them back down.

"How did you meet Nicole, anyway?" I asked him.

The pause before he answered made me suspicious. "It was at the Lutheran church," he said.

"Nicole didn't go to church."

"Not usually, no," he said.

His presence made no sense to me. At first I'd thought he was one of her party friends, or a sometime or would-be boyfriend, and now I had no idea who he was, except an unwelcome guest at my sister's trauma. A rubbernecker.

"She was trying, you know," he said. "To change her life."

"I know," I said. Every Sunday morning Nicole would tell me she wasn't going to party any more, and she meant it, too; she just couldn't act on it. I'd told her there were things she could do, people who would help, that she didn't have to do it all by herself, and she'd say "It's not that easy, Amb," and I thought that she preferred the drama of it, the allure of her own misery, which at least made her feel important and alive. And then, in the hospital hallway, I put it together.

"The Lutheran church has AA meetings," I said. From the expression on his face I knew I was right. "She didn't tell me she was going."

He shrugged. "She was private about some things," he said. "I know that much."

It almost made me laugh. My sister was the least private person I knew. She'd been on television crying, drinking, making out with the guy who was the star of the show; she'd been photographed for a magazine shoot with the other contestants, all of them wearing lacy bridal lingerie, which was supposed to signal their hopes for a sexy wedding night. She said things out loud I wouldn't have whispered to my closest friend. Then again, she'd surprised me earlier that year by showing me a printout from the internet of all the women in North America who had our mother's name. "She could be in Seattle," she'd said, "Or Toronto. Or Des Moines."

"I don't care where she is," I'd said, which was the truth. "I don't need her for anything."

"How do you know what you don't need?" Nicole had said, folding the paper and putting it back in her purse.

"I just do," I'd answered, and she went quiet. I'd been surprised that she was even looking for our mother. I'd always thought we had an unspoken pact to let her go, to match her strength and defiance with our own. A while later I asked her if she'd contacted any of the women, and she shook her head and never brought it up again.

Kevin Hewey came by once more, but only to admit that they had no idea who had hit my sister and would likely never find out; she'd been discovered well after the accident by some high school kids dazed and jubilant on molly, who'd called the police in between giggles. They hadn't understood how serious her injuries were and they were not helpful witnesses.

Noriko visited every day, bringing thoughtful, useless gifts for Nicole—fresh pajamas, fancy hand lotion, an audiobook called *The Power of You!* which I refused to play—and food for me and Lord. Muffins she'd baked from scratch. When I asked her about my father, she hesitated and then shook her head. I was so angry at him I didn't know what to do, except to shelve my anger and deal with it later. Instead I focused on Nicole; Lord and I took turns reading to her, combing her hair, lotioning her hands. Her nail polish was chipped, and I took it off and applied a new coat of pink. It was something to do. During the long hours, of necessity, Lord and I got to know each other a bit. He'd been living in town for around a year, he said; he'd moved from Glens Falls to start over after he got sober. Despite his name, he hadn't always been religious; for the longest time, he said, his teachers and social workers would shake their heads at him and say, "I wonder how you got *that* name."

"How did you?" I asked him, and he said he didn't know. He couldn't remember his birth parents, who'd named him; he'd spent his childhood bouncing around foster care until he wound up in a semi-permanent situation with an aunt and uncle. Then they got divorced, and Lord was on his own again, and there were a few years of his life that he clearly didn't care to discuss. He

worked at Foot Locker at the mall, and when I said it was nice of them to give him time off, he shrugged and said, "I'll find something else." I nodded. At the Blue Dragon, I'd gotten people to cover my shifts so far but the weekend was coming up and my manager, Doug, was starting to make noises. Doug knew Nicole—they'd even dated for a while, a couple of years earlier—and said he wanted to be sympathetic but "you know Saturdays, Amb, we need all hands on deck." I hung up on him.

Of course we talked about Nicole, me more than Lord. I told him how Nicole was my closest friend, how because our mother had left, we'd each acted as mother to the other; we'd taught ourselves about makeup and boys, we'd shared every morsel of information we found out about the world. The bond between us felt so solid that when Nicole came back from LA, plastic and haunted, with a fake bubbling laugh that hurt my ears, I assumed it was only a matter of time before the closeness between us would return. And when I saw her on Sunday mornings, her makeup smeared, scratches on her knees from God only knew what Saturday night events, I couldn't see her for what she was, for her trouble and pain. I saw her as my little sister, my partner in harmless crimes, and I believed against evidence that she would be restored. I had refused to understand how far gone she was, and now—I said this to Lord, crying, while he listened silently—it was too late. Lord didn't deny it.

Three days passed and my sister's condition did not change. My father still refused to come to the hospital. When I called him with updates, he said, "Keep me posted," as if Nicole's injuries were a party I was planning. I was furious with him, and when I yelled he didn't yell back or excuse himself or explain. It was like punching a pillow, all give. Needing an outlet for my fury, I went to see Sam Postelthwaite. He lived in a run-down house near the old glove factory, where men of my father's generation had worked straight out of high school and which now stood abandoned. People missed the jobs but not the gloves themselves, which had been cheaply made and caused rashes. When Sam saw me, his whole face wrinkled in chagrin. "Come in," he said.

In the living room, he gestured towards the couch, and lowered himself down into a green armchair with the air of a man whose bones hurt him all the time. I told him I was there about my father, and he didn't seem surprised.

"I've known your father a long time," he said. "He's a decent man."

"I know he's decent."

"He's under a lot of stress."

The look I gave him must have been severe, because he wiped his palms on his pants as if I made him nervous. I went to his kitchen without asking him. It was the home of a man who fended for himself well enough: neat stacks of canned food in the cupboard, a freezer fully loaded with microwave meals. On a small shelf next to the fridge I found a bottle of whiskey. I wasn't much

of a drinker—I saw too much of it at work—but I was craving alcohol, and I brought the bottle back to the living room, pouring us two glasses. By the time Sam had raised his glass to toast me, I'd already drunk mine down and poured a second. I examined his old man's face, the folds of flesh, the dark hairs on his bulbous nose. His skin hung on him like a bigger man's suit. He cleared his throat.

"I'll admit I feel responsible for your sister," he said. "I was supposed to look after her, but I couldn't be there every minute. She kept late hours, and I'm not as young as I used to be."

There was a pause in which he waited for me to say it wasn't his fault, and I didn't.

"Nicole is a wonderful girl," he went on. "But troubled as you know. In the past two years she'd been badgering your father for information about your mother. She wanted to find her."

I remembered the printout she'd shown me, the list of names and addresses.

"Your father told her he didn't know where she went, but that's not entirely true."

"What do you mean it's *not entirely* true?"

He poured another shot and drank it. I took another too, which was more than I usually ever had. I didn't feel drunk, though, just flushed with an anger I didn't know where to direct—at my father, my sister, the car that had hurt her and then disappeared.

"I mean it's not true at all," he said. "Three years ago your father came to me and asked me to track your mother down. For you girls' sake. And for his own, too. So I did."

"You found her?"

I had always thought of our mother's disappearance as magical and complete. In my mind she'd reinvented herself so thoroughly thatthe transformation was irreversible. She owned a bar in Mexico and went by the name Dolores. She lived on a pot farm in the mountains and made millions, which she kept under the baseboards because she didn't trust banks. She was the wife of a gangster or a cult leader and everybody called her Mia. (Her real name, which she'd always hated, was Gwen.) Sitting on Sam Postelthwaite's brown tweed sofa, whiskey in my veins, I couldn't bring myself to ask him where she was.

"She died, Amber," he said. "She died five years ago. She had a hard life after she left here, I think, though I don't know the whole story. She was involved with drugs and, well, things caught up with her after a while, I guess."

My anger was a furnace inside me, glowing with impossible heat. I put down the glass of whiskey because I was afraid I might shatter it. I looked at my shoes.

"Here," his voice said. He was holding out a photograph of a woman I didn't recognize. She had my mother's eyes but her hair was blond and frizzy and her appearance was one of disturbed neglect. Her teeth were dark with rot. In the picture, she was wearing a blue dress and smiling sloppily at the

camera—it may have been taken at a party—and these festive touches made the picture altogether sadder and worse than it would otherwise have been. I didn't take it from his hand.

"Your father couldn't bring himself to tell you," he said. "And now he thinks that maybe if he had, your sister…" he trailed off. I understood that our father had tried to allow us our fantasy of our mother, just as he used to let us eat all our Halloween candy on the first night, even though it made us sick. He had always been soft-hearted, unlike our mother. *Now look what happened*, she used to say sternly when Nicole and I fought and ran to her, wailing from the injuries we'd given each other. *Look at what you've done*.

When I left Sam Postelthwaite's apartment I was exhausted and drunk, and I made it only a few blocks before I pulled over and laid my head on the steering wheel and cried. The night was dark and it was still cold enough that when I turned off the engine my breath plumed around me, boozy and visible. I called my father, and reached his voicemail. "Daddy," I said, and I had not called him that for many years, "I need you. I know everything and I need you." Snot bubbled out of my nose and I wiped it on my sleeve and dropped the phone under my seat. As I was bent over, a wave of lights strobed over the car. They almost instantly gave me a splitting headache. There was a hard rapping sound at the window, and I rolled down the window to see Kevin Hewey.

"Jesus Christ," I said. "Aren't there any other cops in this town?"

"I'm going to need you to step out of the car, ma'am," he said, and the *ma'am* was a rebuke to every sarcastic answer I'd ever given him, every time I'd stepped out of the way as he grabbed my ass at the bar. I got out. He took my license and then came back with a breathalyzer test, which I took and failed. Then he turned me against my car and ran his hands up and down my legs, my shoulders, my back and stomach, my breasts, my crotch. I didn't make any protest. In my head I saw my ruined mother and my ruined sister, my companions, all of us ruined together.

People can surprise you with their weakness, Noriko had said, and Kevin Hewey surprised me with his. He finished his rough inspection of my body and then turned me around. He put a hand on my cheek. He had affection for me and he wanted me to know it. "You've had a bad week," he said. "Don't do this again." Then he lowered me into the passenger seat of the police car, with his palm on the top of my head, and drove me home, where I fell drunkenly asleep on top of the bed covers, still wearing all my clothes.

In the morning I had to call Noriko to take me back to my car. She said she would come, but the person who showed up, his face steadfastly neutral, was my father. He was wearing a blue baseball cap and jeans and, for some reason, a sports jacket. I offered him some coffee and he shook his head. We drove out to the glove factory in silence and all he said, when we got to my car, was that he would see me at the hospital. I started to make some hostile comment—"miracle of miracles" is what I almost said—but then buttoned my mouth.

When we got to my sister's room, no one was there except her. The lights were bright and the machines hissed and beeped and the hallway intercom was a constant broadcast. When my father saw Nicole, his face crumpled and his bottom lip jutted like a little kid's. "Stop it," I said harshly, and pushed him toward her bed. Obediently, he sat down and placed his hand over hers, whispering something to her I couldn't hear. He sniffled and put both his palms over his eyes. It wasn't the first time I'd seen my father cry. He cried when our mother left, and when his own parents died, and he even cried at movies sometimes. Nicole and I used to make fun of him for it. It was unusual for a man of his generation, and I don't know if it meant that he was more sensitive than those other men, or more damaged. Maybe it meant nothing at all.

My father stayed by Nicole's bedside for a few hours, and he came back the next day, and the day after that. We didn't talk about Sam Postelthwaite or my mother; we didn't talk much at all. My father read the local newspaper to Nicole, scores from high school baseball games, the weather. The doctors began to lower the dose of Nicole's sedatives in preparation for waking her. Two weeks after the accident, Nicole opened her eyes, and her expression was confused and unhappy. It fell to me to describe to her where she was and what had happened, and I did my best. My best was not adequate to the task. Nicole's voice was raspy, from the respirator, and she wanted to get out of bed right away, and she had to be restrained.

Her behavior in those early days was troubling. She couldn't seem to understand what had happened, and she was upset—with me, our father, everyone. Her short-term memory had been affected, so that every day I saw her, every new hour, we had to start all over again.

Nicole didn't want to go to physical therapy. She wanted a drink. She wanted us to go away. Many times I stalked out of the room, unable to take any more of her quarrelsome confusion, while our father stayed, dipping into the deep well of his patience.

The doctors said her confusion was normal. They said her anger was normal. They said she might never be the same person she was before.

I cried in stairwells. My father shook their hands.

Eventually Nicole was moved to an outpatient facility, which she didn't like any better than the hospital. She was walking and talking but her memory and her mood did not improve. I spent part of each day with her, and other

wise I went back to work at the Blue Dragon, fending off questions about her condition with a noncommittal smile. I was having trouble sleeping, and on a Tuesday night I found myself loitering outside the Lutheran church, smoking a cigarette and watching people filter into the parking lot. The last one out was Lord. If he was surprised to see me, he didn't show it.

"Hey," he said. "How is she?"

I frowned. "I was wondering what happened to you," I said. I wasn't sure which had annoyed me more, his constant presence at Nicole's side or his sudden absence.

Lord looked over my shoulder. "Got busy, I guess."

"Seriously?"

He lit a cigarette, and so did I.

"I'm working at Bobby's now," he said. I knew Bobby's. It was a sad diner out on the highway where Nicole and I used to go when we were teenagers. We'd eat pie and flirt with middle-aged men and then leave suddenly, knowing they'd settle the bill. We thought we were so dangerous. We thought being girls was such a game.

"I don't understand you," I said tightly.

"Look," he said. "Your friend made it clear I shouldn't come around."

"My friend?" I said. "I don't have any friends." This was true. I knew just about everyone in town, I saw everybody at the bar, and when I went home to my apartment I crawled into solitude. I dreamed about living somewhere I knew no one, dreams all the more powerful because I'd never tried to make them come true.

"Officer Hewey," he said.

"He's not my friend," I said immediately, before I understood this wasn't what Lord meant. He meant that Kevin was a police officer; that we were both white; that we were both from this town. I remembered Kevin saying *I don't recognize him* and making Lord sit down on the bench, and I remembered, though I'd tried hard not to think about it, how he'd run his hands up and down my body, owning it and then discarding it, because he could.

In the silence that followed we smoked. "I'm sorry," I said. "That guy is a dick."

He tilted his head, to say *whatever*. It didn't make a difference to him whether I was sorry or not. I rushed into the silence, wanting to ease my own discomfort—that's how I see it now. I told him about Nicole, how she'd woken up and was improving, but she wasn't herself. I told him how hard it was to see her so confused, how I had to keep explaining her life to her: the car accident, the brain injury, the rehab facility. I told him how I was about to start double shifts at the Blue Dragon, to help cover the costs. I even told him about our mother, how Nicole had wanted to find her, and how she would never be found, and how our father had blamed himself for keeping this secret and worried that Nicole would follow her same path. I presented my life to him in rambling summation, and he listened. We stood in the parking lot for a long time, the

night mild and damp, smoking one cigarette after the next. At last I leaned myself against him and tried to press my lips against his, and to be honest it didn't humiliate me any less that he was very gentle when he put his hands on my shoulders and pushed me away.

Nicole lives with me now. She is not herself, but she is not not herself either. She is herself but more forgetful, herself but meaner. She laughs less than she used to but when she does it's loud and startling and violent. At Sam Postelthwaite's funeral—he died in his sleep, at home, and my father, who found him, said it was peaceful, but that's what he would have said regardless—she sat in the back and her shoulders shook with strange, dramatic grief. She hates to wash her hair and it hangs lank and tangled around her shoulders. There's something different about her face, not the features themselves but how they sit in repose, never quite settling, which doesn't mean that she isn't still beautiful. She is still beautiful. She has a job, answering the phones at a real estate office, which is good because she tires easily, and needs to sit down. She doesn't miss teaching kindergarten, she says. "I always hated kids," she says, and it's hard to know if she's just being honest or whether it's the brain injury talking. I always like to say *it's the brain injury talking*, as if the injury is a force separate from my sister, an outside agent whose involvement one day can be curtailed.

This is a small town; people take care of her. If they see her lost in the grocery store they help her find her way home. The local news came to do a story on her recovery and she spat at them and sent them away. Our father shook the reporter's hand and apologized, and then he and Noriko made Nicole some tea. Nicole will tolerate both of them, but only for a limited time. She will tell them to get out, she's sick of them, and our father will say mildly, "That's not very nice," and my sister snorts with derision. I see in my father's face, at these times, a pained expression that is achingly familiar from my childhood, and I see how Noriko stands next to him; I see them drive home together.

Sometimes Lord comes over; he prays with Nicole and they talk about AA, and he is kind to me too, in a careful way that continues to embarrass me. I have understood that when he visits my role is to step aside. My sister listens to him pray, a frown on her face, and I'm not sure what she thinks about God now, if anything. She's hard to read. When I told her about our mother, her reaction was stony. Whatever need she had to find her seems to have folded itself away, inside the jumbled crevices of her brain, and I don't know if it will ever emerge again. I'm glad she lives with me. In the early mornings I wake and drink coffee, read the paper, watch the sky. I stand outside her room and listen for the ragged rise and fall of her breath.

Alix Ohlin *is the author of four books, most recently the novel* Inside *and the story collection* Signs and Wonders. *She lives in Easton, PA, and teaches at Lafayette College.*

The Schoolteacher

Ifediba Zube

Nna is dying of cancer. He has refused chemotherapy, he has refused radiotherapy, he has refused hospice. Last week he called Dad to come pick him up from my uncle's house. He said my uncle, Dr. Chime, is worse than the doctors, and wants to kill him faster than the cancer. My uncle's concern and worry is driving him crazy, and can't an old man die in peace anymore?

He spends most time on the cane chair in the verandah chewing tobacco and reading the papers. Dad returns from work with more newspapers and more tobacco packed in a tin box. Dr. Chime insists Nna stay with him. He says Dad doesn't have the skills to care for a terminally ill patient. Dad calls my uncle a self-righteous schoolboy and tries to hide the boxes of tobacco from him. My uncle discovered the boxes in Nna's drawer, after complaining of the tobacco smell that clung to Nna's skin.

Dad and my uncle spent close to an hour arguing. My uncle held about three tin boxes in his palm and shook them in Dad's face. He said Dad was adding to the medical expenses, Dad would send their father to an early grave. Dad said he didn't have the strength for childish talk and left the room. My uncle followed him to the parlor, to the kitchen. In the dining room they argued about who was the better son. Nna remained on the cane chair, flipping through newspapers, and when I stopped to watch them argue, he told me to help Ma with the food on the table.

Dr. Chime doesn't know that Nna takes more than the pain medications prescribed, he doesn't know that Nna has started seeing things that are not there, that he coughed up blood the other night. Dad doesn't tell him these things because he worries a lot.

We've settled into a kind of routine. Dad leaves for work in the morning, I leave for school and Ma stays with Nna till four when she leaves for her night shift in the hospital. I stay with Nna from four till Dad returns by eight.

I use the time to sit with Nna in the verandah and edit the stories for the school magazine. I don't have a story to write yet, none seems to settle, so between reading the stories, I go through a few pages of my favorite stories, trying to stir up my muse.

"What are you reading," Nna asks, peering at me from the top of the papers.

"Joyce Carol Oates," I say.

"Onye?" Who is that?

I show him the cover of the book.

"Tattooed girl?" He makes a sound like this is ludicrous.

My grandfather drops the paper on his lap and looks at me.

"Who are your authors?"

"Joyce Carol Oates, Mary Wesley, Jane Austen, and oh, Barbara Taylor Bradford!"

My grandfather's disappointment pierces me.

"Only that?" He scoffs.

"Do you know Buchi Emecheta?" he asks.

I tell him I do.

"And?"

I tell him her stories are too simple for me.

Nna laughs.

"Stories should be simple. I gave my students Flora Nwapa to read, and they read and read and reread."

He stops talking and looks past me, smiling, lost in wherever he was.

"*Ngwanu*, get me three pain tablets, a pen and a paper and write the stories I tell you."

I have written about fifty pages of Nna's life. He gives it in scraps and jumps through time; he is a child, he is a father, and he is a young man with impossible dreams. He insists I listen while he talks then waits for me to write them down as I heard it. I ask questions. He flips through his paper as he answers my questions, but sometimes when he is so animated, he drops the paper and describes with his hands. Sometimes Dad joins in the conversation, then he turns to face Dad, they talk in Igbo, and leave me to figure out what they are saying.

He was to become a bonesetter like his father. He was the first son and had his father's hands, long knobby fingers with wide palms, not too tough, not too soft, perfect for massaging bones. He followed his father round the village to attend to men with broken ankles, palm wine tappers who fell from palm trees and broke their backs, young wrestlers with dislocated knees and wrists, children with dislocated elbows.

Nna kept a straight face at the sight of wounds, jutting bones, and in rare cases, amputations. He watched as his father made incisions with a blade on the festering wounds to let the bad blood seep out. His father grounded pepper with clay and coated cuts with the poultice. He used fire to burn off bad flesh, he made splinters with wood and cloth, he massaged joints with palm kernel oil.

Nna was good at massaging joints with palm kernel oil. Maybe it was because of his hands. But everyone agreed it was a talent he inherited from his father. *Odinaka,* they said. It's in the hands. He rubbed into the joint with his wide palms, putting the muscles to work, stretching the tendons and liga-

ments that, if left idle, would remain stiff. Massaging a joint was not a pleasant experience for the patients. Children ran at the sight of him and when caught struggled and left scratches and bites on his arm. Older men drank themselves to nothing, and in usual cases vomited.

People trusted his skills, so much that when the hospital opened an orthopedic centre, they still favored Nna's services. Perhaps they didn't have enough money for the bills in the hospital or perhaps the sight of an entire limb cast in white plaster seemed too much for them. But they valued Nna's services mostly for the massaging. Experience showed that those who went to the orthopedic centre for treatment always returned with their joints stiff. The ones who dislocated their elbows returned holding the affected arm to their sides, like they were posing with handbags.

Nna left the family business to become a teacher. He became a teacher's apprentice and lived with his master in a wide, low bungalow that housed about ten teachers for the only secondary school in the community. He washed clothes, went to the market, cooked, swept and cleaned the house. He was too old to start secondary school but the master noticed his love for books and taught him Grammar, Lexis and structure. Nna read almost all the literature books for the curriculum, wrote lots of essays and was soon able to assist the teacher in marking the students' scripts. He couldn't write the entry exam to the college of education because he had no A level certificate. But when the secondary school started a primary school, his master arranged for him to teach in the nursery class.

"I had seen myself reading and rereading to a class of quiet listening children, but not this one. They were noisy and restless with running noses. They were not interested in reading; they could only recite the alphabet. I didn't give up though. I read the alphabet with them, wiped their noses and whipped their backsides when it called for it. I taught in that primary school for five years until the teachers impressed by my efforts sent me to Form 1! I finally could read aloud to a class of quiet listening students."

It is two weeks until the prom and I haven't found any date for the dance. It's not that I've not been asked; about five boys have asked me to the dance and I've turned them down. Adugo said I'm selfish, I should think of the other girls who haven't been asked at all. Adugo is going with Stephen, they have been together since Jss3.

I'm waiting for Ay to ask me. I was certain he would ask a long time ago, but I'm not so sure anymore. I think he has asked another girl. Mum has bought the dress, a red dress with sleeveless arms, held tightly at the waist. The day she bought it I wore it in front of a mirror and walked around. She said the gown looked lovely, she said the boy is so lucky. She doesn't know I have no

date yet. If the worst happens I will wear the gown to school, take it off and hide somewhere.

Her name was Oby, but everyone called her Miss because she wanted to be a teacher. She was preparing to take the exams for the College of Education at Umudike and she spent most of her time reading and gathering children to teach. Nna met her when she came with her father who had slipped in the bathroom and broken his ankle.

"She didn't talk when she came with her father, her head was always in a book."

Nna could read, but he didn't bother to read a book. He still had a lot to learn from his father and he didn't show any particular interest in reading; he stopped at primary education.

When his father busied with the ankle, Nna stole glances at Miss, her beautiful eyes blinking at the pages, her mouth pursed in concentration. Finally he got close enough to talk.

"What are you reading?" he asked.

"A story," Miss started.

Nna was struck by the softness of her voice, hoping she would go on.

"A story about the River Niger."

She looked at him.

"Do you know Mungo Park?"

Nna shook his head.

She laughed but Nna didn't find it funny.

Her father's treatment lasted for two weeks. By then Nna and Miss had worked out an arrangement. She loved to read aloud and he loved to hear her read, so she read The Jungle Book, Tom Sawyer, Oliver Twist and other English classics she had read before. Soon he began to read, reading two chapters a night of the books she gave him. So keen he was on impressing Miss, you would think he as preparing for the exams she was about to take.

"We got tired of the English classics. They were too heavy you know, all that 'tis and 'twas was tiresome. So we wrote our stories. Fables about the tortoise's craftiness, how he cheated death, how he got wings to have a feast with the birds, how he came to have his rough shell. We wrote about the creation story, Eri who came from the sky and landed on the river. We wrote about the owl, the announcer of death, we wrote of ghosts who left the spirit world and started a new life in a new village. They had wives and children, farms, attended age grade meetings and disappeared when someone realized who they were.

"Her father didn't know about me. Oby made sure he didn't. He wasn't impressed by me; I was the son of a bonesetter and I didn't go to school. His daughter was to become a teacher; he was amongst the few to attend university, so you can imagine."

The night she was to leave for college, she and Nna met at a farm and sat on a tree trunk. They had already talked and promised to write as often as possible. They remained quiet for a while, he was staring at his palm and she sighed a lot. Nna wasn't sure what she wanted until she leaned on his shoulder and he knew she wanted him. So he kissed her.

The kiss was enough to fuel him to send her letters twice a week. It made him write, rewrite, perfecting his writing, going through his grammar; he wanted to please her with the perfect story. They wrote each other for over a year, and he consumed her stories hungrily. He stopped writing when his father died.

"He left me with a lot of responsibilities, he owed a lot of people, and people weren't coming as before to fix their bones. Besides, I wanted to teach. But the responsibilities he left were so much, it choked my dreams. Where was the time to be a teacher's apprentice? I had to clear people's farms, carry hefty loads on market days, climb palm trees, skin grass cutters. I finished a day exhausted."

When Miss returned, Nna hid.

"She came to where I worked looking for me. I was covered white with cassava flour. She looked lighter than I remembered, more beautiful than I remembered, wearing this neat yellow dress I feared would stain if I got too close to her. I begged the stall owner to tell her I wasn't around."

Nna could have hidden, probably for the rest of his life, until Miss showed up in his house.

He was in the backyard splitting firewood, his mother was busy with the fire.

"She called my name and stood there, clearly angry. My mother suggested I take her in. I couldn't think straight, I spent time holding the axe in mid-air.

"She wanted to know why I stopped writing to her, why I didn't come to find her when she returned, didn't I know she had returned?

"I remained quiet. What was I to say? Should I have said her presence shamed me? That her return made my failures so obvious?"

"We spent the next week trying to fill the gaps we left. She talked about her school, her final exams. She wanted to know what I had been up to but I became evasive. She was so animated and all the while I withdrew, intimidated by knowledge, the fact that she was now a teacher and I was, well, what was I? I was intimidated by her voice that had a sophisticated ring to it."

Miss told Nna her father brought a suitor for her. A young doctor who came to run the health center in town. Nna fell quiet and tried to steady his hands by rubbing them together.

Miss looked at Nna expecting him to say something.

"What was I to say? I looked at her and saw what she wanted me to do. I told her I couldn't marry her. She kept asking why, as if the answer wasn't obvious. Why? Why? Why? Then she asked if I loved her. Haa!! As if love will put food on the table, or make me capable of taking care of her. I told her I didn't. Next thing she started crying. When she got up to leave I didn't go after her. I

remained on that stool till midnight. The next morning I took my bag, waved my family good bye and went to the next village to become a teacher's apprentice. I never saw Miss again."

Nna looks at me smiling, his eyes shining with tears. He fans himself with his paper.

"●h well, that life is over and here we are!"

He spreads out his hands, trying to sound cheerful.

"Here I am with bone cancer."

"But you miss her?" I ask.

"Always."

"You could have tried you know, even if there wasn't a chance," I offer.

"My mistake."

I look at my notes, cough a little and try to be bold.

"Nna, next week is prom and I don't have a partner yet. But there is this boy I really like, and I am waiting for him to ask me out and he hasn't. Should I ask him to the dance?"

"What are you waiting for?" He looks amused.

"But Papa, I'm a girl."

"Even more, even more. Life won't wait for you, and she certainly won't forgive you for not trying."

Ay is on the pitch training with the rest of the team. He jogs back and forth. I go to the other end and wait for him to jog past me.

"Hey, Ay," I say too loudly.

He stops to look over, then jogs back.

My heart is in my mouth now. I see the stupidity of it. How cliché for me to be inspired by my grandfather's love story.

"Uhm… I was wondering, will you go to the dance with me?"

His face falls. I am an idiot!!!

"Uhm. I've already asked Tracy, sorry."

The ground should have swallowed me.

I turn back thinking about Miss. How dare she ask so much from my grandfather even when she knew he stood no chance? I am shaking with anger.

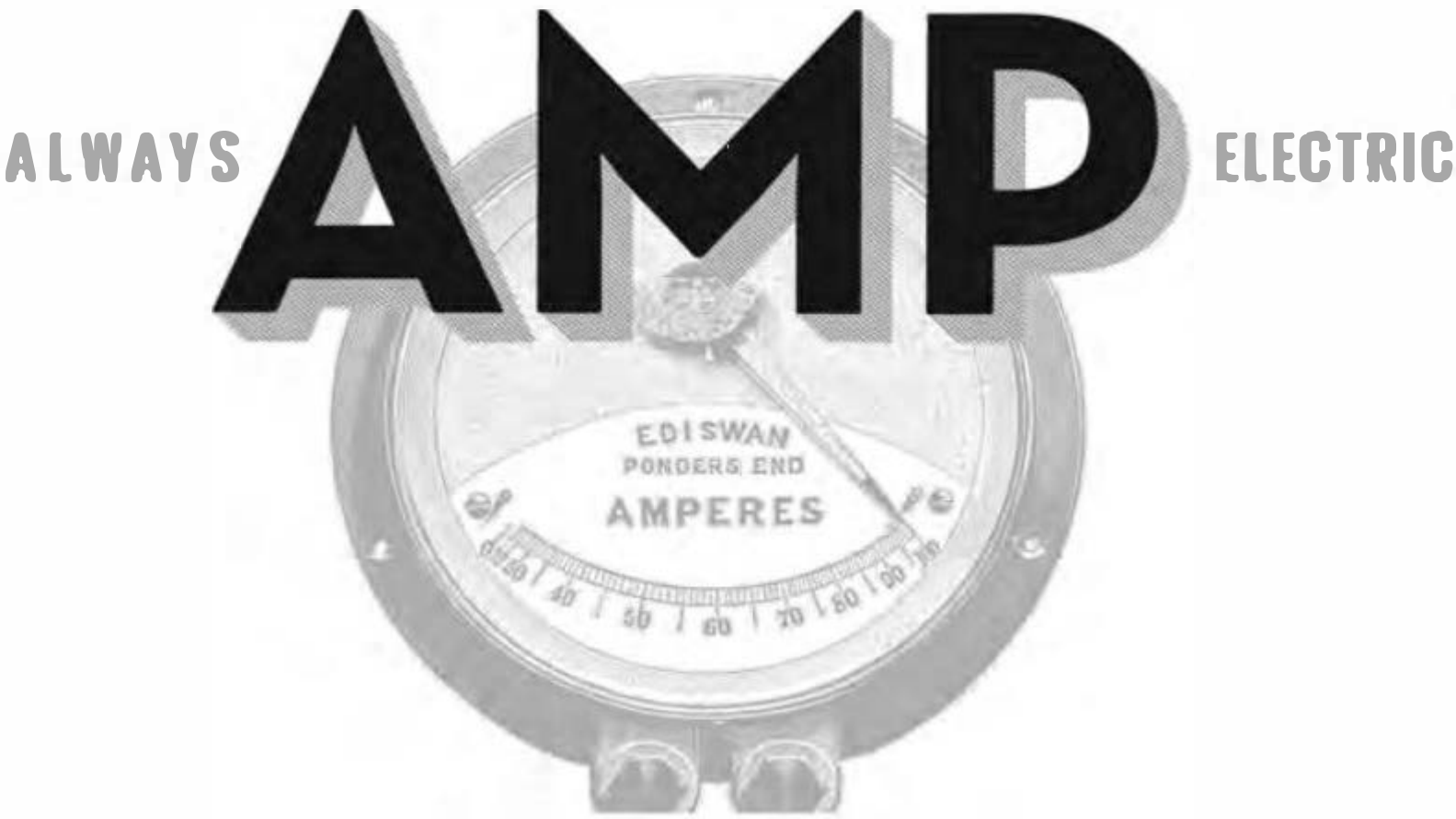
"Ada?"

"What?" I almost yell.

He looks amused, then for no reason scratches his head.

"I would love to take you to the dance."

Ifediba Zube *writes from the University of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital, Nigeria. When she is not neck deep in postings she is running a 25k or in hiding with a good book.*



AMP Poetry Selects:

Sampson Starkweather

AMP magazine publishes the best innovative and contemporary work by emerging and established writers and visual artists. AMP is a publication of Hofstra University's Digital Research Center (amp.hofstradrc.org), and is cosponsored by Hofstra's English Department and MFA program in Creative Writing.

Sampson Starkweather is the author of *PAIN: The Board Game* (Third Man Books, 2016) and *The First Four Books of Sampson Starkweather* (Birds, LLC, 2013). He is a founding editor of Birds, LLC, an independent poetry press. He is also the author of nine chapbooks, most recently *Until the Joy of Death Hits*, pop/love audio-visual GIF poems from Spork Press, and *Flux Capacitor*, a collaborative audio poetry album from Black Cake Records. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Jon-Michael Frank created the illustrations found in this section. He is the author of the chapbook *Nostalgia Flower* (Sad Spell Press) and a book of poetic comics, *How's Everything Going? Not Good* (Ohio Edit / Cuneiform Press). He is an assistant editor for Birds, LLC, and lives between Austin, TX and the Puget Sound.

The poems and illustrations included in this section were selected from Sampson Starkweather's *PAIN: The Board Game* (Third Man Book, 2016).

Poetry in the Time of Sampson Starkweather

Dayna Troisi

Reading poet Sampson Starkweather's work is like reading a beautiful, existential text message; a text message that manages to engage in the very minutia of our everyday life—emojis, emails, texts—and the heavier stuff—lack of empathy, the Dakota pipeline, Trump's rhetoric, depression, isolation—all while maintaining a playfully dark tone. Sampson isn't afraid of being sad, or funny, or weird. He is daring when it comes to language, in both his work and the way he publishes it. An untitled poem in *Until the Joy of Death Hits*, a multi-media chapbook of GIF poems from Spork Press, mixes old with new, technology with philosophy, comedy with apocalypse:

I text like Dostoyevsky
we fuck
and the internet
does not exist

Described as a meta-realist poet, 40-year-old Sampson is the author of nine chapbooks and two collections of poetry: *The First Four Books of Sampson Starkweather* (Birds, LLC) and his newest, *PAIN: The Board Game* (Third Man Books). He is a founding editor of Birds, LLC, an independent poetry press. Born in North Carolina, he received an MFA in Creative Writing from Sarah Lawrence and lives in Brooklyn.

His Ditmas Park apartment is as full of books and bookcases as one might expect for a poet, and his long brown hair and beard fit the part. But this is where the clichés end. Sampson is a regular Pelé, playing professional soccer for years in New Zealand, where he also used to live.

"People think that it's a little weird that a poet plays soccer," he said, but went on to describe the undeniable connection between sports and poetry. For him, the two connect unconscious movement and freedom. "I have Attention Deficit Disorder—my brain, it just doesn't stop. I have a million ideas,

thoughts, anxieties, fears, hopes, dreams, images, languages, to do lists flashing through my brain...so for me, writing and soccer are this place where all those thoughts silence and I feel like I'm in a more receptive space."

Sitting in his apartment, I realized his living room looked the way I imagined the inside of his head might: wild, vibrant mismatched rugs pile over one another, small bursts of color and texture and pattern, and books everywhere—in bookcases, stacked on each other, on desks, on coffee tables. He offered me a Mason jar of water and didn't bother with coasters. Like his home, Sampson emits an infectious energy of engagement, experimentation, and warmth. He is always pushing boundaries but is never pretentious. He makes the mundane beautiful; he doesn't go looking elsewhere for poetry—he knows how to access it right here and now and how to make it live and sing.

Even at first glance, a common reader knows his poetry is something different. A single poem reveals a little world in an unusual form; the poems cascade and fall into each other. A single-word line creates a breathlessness, a sense of scrolling and discovering. I was excited to learn he actually writes them as texts: "The poems are often long and skinny because I write them as text messages to people. I'm really into this because when you get a text poem, it's like a poem is happening in front of your eyes because you're scrolling and you don't what is going to happen next." To learn that he writes poems on his phone gave a strange validity to my own process. When I write on my phone, I feel most natural and uninhibited, until I hear the echoing of past teachers stressing the importance of pen and paper. I worry about how I look, a disengaged millennial scrolling through Instagram or something. Sampson showed me that every moment, even scrolling through Instagram, can be a space for creativity. Phones are a part of our lives, so of course they can inevitably become vessels for poems. The restraint of a device can affect the poem in a positive way.

Sampson incorporates many striking, humorous, stark and profound hypermodern images in his poems, like "white iPhone lost in snow" and "death-flavored Blow Pop." Emojis appear in a number of his poems. "I write about what matters to me, no matter what it is. I mean, I write my poems on this thing [gesturing to phone] and you're telling me people don't care about it? They do. I heard that comment in grad school—people said, 'don't put coca cola in your poem. What about the future when people won't know the reference?' And I say, first of all, fuck the future. Who knows if we'll even get there at the rate we're going? I'm not writing for the future. I'm writing for now."

As a poet who is also fascinated by hypermodern relics—emojis, GIFs, Tinder, etc.—I wanted to know how to insert these images in my poems in a meaningful way that didn't seem to heavy handed and self-conscious. Sampson's new book *PAIN: The Board Game* has scan-able barcodes that reflect a GIF for each poem. His virtual chapbook, *Until The Joy of Death Hits*—a collaboration between Sampson and Croatian poet and artist Ana Božičević—is a wild, disorientating movement through audio, visual, and text. From GIFs of women endlessly fading into each other, to a pigeon with a surveillance camera for a

head, the chapbook keeps the reader investigating how the poems and GIFs speak to one another. "Poetry is always meant to be at some level a documentation of what it's like to be alive at any given time and iPhones and GIFs are part of what it's like to be alive now. Everything can be sacred, everything can be profane. Does an emoji come up in your life? Then let it come up in your poems, but don't force it." He calls GIFs "little infinities."

Sampson is not precious about his process. One bookcase in his apartment is lined with notebooks, filled with chicken scratch, drawings, magic. But he primarily writes on his phone. "I write whenever I have free time—mostly on the train. My process is an accumulation of little moments that I have to myself. Sometimes it's just a line, image or idea. I write it down as soon as possible and then when I have free time, I sit down to write. The process is like a mixture of collage and cutting away. If given time, good lines sit inside me. I tend to sweat when I write, so I have writing shirts—shirts that I can foul up."

An important part of Sampson's process is misreading. As stated in his poem "love in the time of gentrification," "I often mis-/read poetry/ as poverty." The power of his poems comes from not only their content, but also their shape and how the shape allows for misreading and multiple meanings. "Misreading and mishearing are gifts. What's cool about having fourth grade handwriting is I can't read my own poems sometimes. A normal sentence will turn into some magical weird thing. Sometimes when I write on my phone, autocorrect is wrong and I keep the mistake—like, whoa, that's oddly beautiful. I drove on Saturn instead of Saturday—that's way cooler, that's poetry. I like the element of mistakes."

Sampson's publishing practice is as radical as his poetry; he is one of the founders and editors of Birds, LLC, an inventive, artist-run publishing collective. "Ten years ago, the way to be published tended to be contests. The contest system, similar to the MFA, creates a certain kind of book. I think there should be all kind of books: 300-page books, 40-page books, vulgar books, books that represent young people and their world. Contests were judged by older people that were looking for stuff that matched their own style and legacy. The only way poetry moves forward is by murdering your masters. I helped create Birds, LLC to find new ways to capture our lives and what it's like." For him, this meant focusing on publishing voices and styles from the edge.

Being a young poet feels like constantly negotiating the line between speeding up and slowing down. As an MFA student myself, with the daily swirl of anxiety about publishing and succeeding, I feel like my fellow poets and I are somehow living in one of his poems, engaging with all this hypermodernity while still trying to maintain gravity, to create something beautiful.

"Be skeptical and always trust your instincts. Find writing that isn't taught in the program. To be a poet you have to know what's going on in the world, not just America. I think workshops create a certain kind of poem and students should push against that. Write poems that don't feel like other students' poems. My MFA taught me I want to write in ways that are sort of go

against the way my teachers write." Sampson stressed the importance of thinking for yourself and questioning everything—the same way his poems question their own writer, their own masters, and the world that surrounds them.

Ultimately, Sampson is a scribe of the human experience and has a vision for a more empathetic, connected world. For him, the dark political reality of 2017 is a kind of creative call to arms. "I think poetry is more important than ever. Writing poetry is an act of resistance. It is choosing art and beauty and truth over disengagement. It's almost a form of protest in itself. You can't think writing poems alone is going to solve our problems but poetry is a form of prayer...it's a form of magic."

Sampson's poetry clearly strikes a chord in its readers. *PAIN: The Board Game* heavily deals with depression and Sampson received many letters about how the book gave its readers hope. "I get really depressed. When it seems overwhelming, I think of memories. For instance, I thought about how my mom used to cut my hair outside. Just writing it down and documenting it...that little act of beauty and care is almost like a way of survival. It's excavating from the archive of your own life. In this time where history is terrifying, it's nice to make counterhistory with little personal moments."

Dayna Troisi *is a poetry MFA candidate at Hofstra University where she also teaches Creative Writing. Her work has been published in* Jezebel, Broadly, The Tiny Tim Review *and elsewhere, and her spoken word poems have been performed at KGB Bar, Canios and Harbor Books.*

how to enjoy your new ghost

the first thing you'll notice
when you tear open
the packaging
is your ghost
is just like you
(white and bound
to disappoint)
imagine everything
you've ever lost

love ❤ money  people 

opportunities  time 

memories  blah blah blah
all repackaged
and marketed to you
and your customized damage
finally you have something
you can't lose
for best results
you should die

now lie back
and watch
your ghost
go

LOVE IS THE SHIT

attention deficit disorder

I'm struggling
to focus
like a hand-held
home-movie
of a dead
loved one
in the woods
naked in front
of a waterfall
doing something
impossible
to describe
all true ghosts
go straight to
VHS 📼
why can't
be kind ☺
rewind
apply to life
or death
who didn't crush
on a shy gangly
employee
of a video store
renting
Wild @ Heart
religiously
as a message
always
remember love
is the shit
and nobody
has to die
in a poem

A MUTE PROTEST
AGAINST DEATH

legalese, baby, legalese

language is not
to be
trusted
floating ocean
sky beach
gloryhole of snow
I want
to say
so I do
wounded with flowers
I crawl
from the $ store
to the hovel
I pay 1700 a month for
to die in
comfortably
surrounded by
bright & broken
things
I have collected
(a mute protest
against death)
a spiritual ritual
practiced by
the miserable animals
of this period
otherwise known
as
now

PRETEND TO LIVE IN A WORLD WITHOUT MONEY

what if we call this *Tenderness*

some corporation
or collection agency
calls me
3 or 4 times
a day
maybe they are kind
of another mother
or ex-lover
genderless
& savagely patient
either way
they are after me
I'm convinced
they want
my poetry
I take it
wizard-level
at dodging
incoming calls
go invisible
at the grocery store
pretend
to live
in a world
without
money
my answer
ing machine
is me crying
(in French, oui)
call me
914-573-9721
please
leave me
something
tender

THE BLACK SWIMMING POOL OF MY FUCK UPS

life event

I tried
to interview myself
but it's hard
to transcribe crying
besides who needs
another white dude's
mumblecore dreams
I am terrible
with Excel
spreadsheets of peace
consume me
the soul
the sole
contestant
of the ache sweepstakes
so I hoard the spoils
kick back
do some laps
in the black
swimming pool
of my fuck ups
heated to perfection
by these jets
of living-death
conveniently recorded
on my timeline

HOPE
your tattoo says
in a dead
language
I can't read
(translated by Bing)
all I know
is the want to know
is the ®ealist desire
let's get old-school
like fingerbanging
in the park
u kiss like a Goya painting
locked in a basement
the biographer of your dreams
bursts into flames
so we can see
our drugs
gracias dream-scholar
our band would be
The I Don't Knows
touring our apartment
to sold out shows
of die-hard *N•things*
(follow them on Facebook)
our problems are not real
you are right
life IS
everything
we hail
a Death Taxi
from the reading
you flick the ash
from your cigarette
and smile
and the rain
rains

goth kids on the golf course

I Shazamed
your orgasm
which found a match
in a Prince song
that didn't exist
until that exact moment
you're welcome world
sometimes I swell
with a weird mix
of nostalgia & mischiefness
thinking about
our matching
toothbrushes
writhing with electricity
instruments of
intimacy
like we're in a band
called Secret Pain
and you are the drummer
and me a roadie
with ridiculous dreams
no ideas
but in sings
see even my sadness
has steez
like a peacock
lost
on a golf course
at dusk
pining for
the rush
and famished ache
the rough magic
of bodies
illuminating
the lack
of any
limitation
when one

Life Without Devices

A One-act Play for Your Face

Sunlight: (speaks inaudibly)

The End.

The Life of a Wave

(The sea is cruel and endless and too too blue.)

Wave: Why was I born?

Wave: I was born to break. Unless!!...unless you think I may never break, I may be the exception, I may make it, I may move on past the sand, past the beach, over the dunes, across roads, through traffic, past parking lots, through fields and forests, across lawns and cities, over mountains, through deserts, to the edge of the world, through the ether, past the moon, moving through space, infinitely, forever, the wave which never breaks...

(The curtain falls. The wave takes a bow, then breaks.)

Hofstra MFA Faculty Spotlight: Valeria Luiselli: Found in Traslation

Melanie Rainone

There are some words that do not exist in the English language, whose meanings are truly lost in translation. One example is *ya'arburnee*, an Arabic word that literally means, "May you bury me," a way to express the wish that one never need live without the one he or she loves. Another much less heart-wrenching example is *lagom*, a Swedish word that means something like, "not too much, not too little, but just right." In both cases, English translations come close, but can't quite touch the true meaning, and the act of translation creates an alternative ephemeral understanding—something new that lives between languages. It is within this undefined new space where the act of translation holds its mystery.

For writer and translator Valeria Luiselli, inhabiting this new space created by translation is not just a question of language but of life. Her father was a Mexican diplomat, so she grew up all over the world, living in India, Korea, Costa Rica, Spain, South Africa, and France, as well as Mexico. Spanish was Luiselli's first spoken language, and English was her first written one. "My writing process has become more and more bilingual," she said in her office at Hofstra University, where she is an Assistant Professor of Romance Languages and Literature. Describing the writing and rewriting, as well as translating and retranslating what went into her first book of essays, *Sidewalks*, she kept her book-filled bag on her shoulder, stopping for only a few moments between classes. "I often start translating into Spanish almost simultaneously, and then what I write in Spanish creates changes in the English version and the English creates changes in the Spanish. Really, it's a process where my two languages, my two *brains*, are kind of mixing what I wrote."

Her second novel, *The Story of My Teeth*, written first in Spanish, was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award and won the 2015 LA Times Book Prize. The novel tells the story of Gustavo "Highway" Sánchez Sánchez, an offbeat collector and auctioneer who has an obsession with teeth. He discovers that people (himself included) are willing to pay large sums in an auction if they believe that teeth once sat in the mouths of the rich, famous, and history-making.

"I am going to recount for you the fascinating stories of all of these teeth, and I would urge you to buy them, take them to your homes, use them, or simply cherish them for persecula seculorum. That is, for forever."

At some point, there was an English manuscript of *The Story of My Teeth* that didn't differ much from the Spanish book, which had, at this point, already been published. But she was not satisfied. The manuscript was used as a draft, and it changed. "In those changes, I found a lot. It's a different book in many ways." One of the major changes was an entire English chapter written by literary translator Christina MacSweeney that didn't exist in the Spanish original. Luiselli's creative relationship with her translator is much like the one between her two brains. "If something is lost, five things at least are gained."

The translation process that *The Story of My Teeth* underwent was not merely a transition from one language to another, but is an integral part of the story itself and, an even more integral theme in the author's life. This constant revisiting and reassessing was crucial while writing *The Story of My Teeth*. Luiselli wrote the novel in Spanish in installments as a commissioned work for a juice factory that also funds a gallery space. The company wanted the book to serve as an explanation of how the two spaces worked together; how they are similar and how they are different. She would send the installments to the factory's workers, who would then read the installments out loud and workshop them. All of that was recorded and sent back to her in New York, where Luiselli would listen, rewrite, and begin the process again.

Luiselli said the book differed from those she had written in the past; her simultaneously-published first novel, *Faces in the Crowd,* and essay collection, *Sidewalks*, both focused primarily on living multi-lingually and being a foreigner, interrogating the space she inhabits between her Mexican heritage and New York City address. However, the strands of displacement and space, along with the definition of home, appear throughout all three works. While *The Story of My Teeth* may tell a different story, the thought and technical process behind it was indicative of Luiselli's fascination with language and the inclusion of many diverse voices in one story.

The Story of My Teeth's transition from English to Spanish adds dimension that may not have existed if her work was limited to one language. Much of the credit for this lies with her translator, who has translated all three of Luiselli's books thus far. "I don't worry if there's something that gets lost in translation because, in her case, it's not a matter of lack of talent or commitment to the text, but something that really does not pass in translation. But those things that don't pass can be substituted for new things, new meanings, new findings."

She believes that this isn't just the case with her own work. "A great example is the translation of *101 Nights* from Arabic into English. The whole part of Aladdin does not exist in the original. It was an addition. I believe that translation is a way in which languages, and also national literature, evolve and change." Luiselli describes the evolution of language through translation as

near Darwinian: what is important and universal will stay, but the parts that are more difficult to understand will, over time, fade away.

Translation is more than telling stories on a page. Luiselli works as a Spanish-to-English translator for migrant children seeking political asylum in the United States in the court system on Long Island. As faculty advisor for the Hofstra student club La TIIA (Teen Immigrant Integration Association), she helps local immigrants settle into the Long Island community, navigate the public school system, and begin the college application process. Luiselli also teaches writing classes in both Spanish and English at Hofstra University, where she is spearheading a Spanish concentration in the MFA in Creative Writing program. Luiselli treats the various pieces of her life as parts of a whole. "I don't see them as split identities," she explained. "They're all activities that enrich one another and are constantly making me rethink things and reread things." At Hofstra, and on the page, her life continues to be a constant act of translation, with little lost, and new continents continually found.

Melanie Rainone *is a Rhode Island native and recent graduate from the Hofstra English program. She currently lives in Brooklyn and continues her love of reading and writing while working as a college admission counselor and getting her Masters in Higher Education.*

CREATIVE NONFICTION

The Last Seat

Dan Branch

An old white guy in a knit cap and Walls insulated overalls slept next to the last open seat on the Alaska State Ferry *LeConte*. He smelled of fuel oil and hard drinker's sweat. I still took the seat. Our reflection in one of the lounge windows showed two gray-haired men with laugh lines deepening into wrinkles around the eyes and the corners of our mouths.

Over the intercom, the *LeConte's* purser announced the ship's 7:00 a.m. departure for Haines and Skagway. My neighbor slept through the announcement and the ferry's exit from Juneau's Auke Bay Terminal.

I envied his ability to sleep through the noise and wondered why his face didn't show more evidence of hard drinking. To help me ignore his smell and the chattering din of the other passengers, I skimmed a Smithsonian Magazine for photographs of the Arctic or other empty spaces. My neighbor woke when I slipped the magazine into the dark space beneath my seat. In the assured voice of a storyteller, but with that near-Minnesotan accent of Bush Alaska, he said, "Must be a good read."

"Yeah."

Reaching under the seat for the magazine, I asked if he wanted it.

"No. I'm getting off soon in Haines. Been down in Juneau to stock up on those peaches that Costco sells in glass jars. Filled the car with them."

He explained that he wanted to get back to his place along the Haines Highway before the spring construction season. After partying the previous night he had overslept and almost missed the boat.

He shared his opinion of Juneau (too big, unfriendly and crowded) and Haines (too much politics for a little town). I told him that I understood how he found Juneau unfriendly but that most of its people are actually nice. Fear of commitment inhibits them from smiling at anyone but their friends. They worry that one smile given to a stranger would require them to smile at that person every time they met. Rather than show any teeth, they remain strangers because their stressful lives do not have space for even one additional relationship, no matter how shallow. He replied that in Haines everyone had to smile or at least say "hi" when they passed someone on the street. The town was too small to let people think you were better than they were. He smiled at people even if they teased him about his dog. The animal died six years ago and people gave him a hard time because he had built a tiny concrete mausoleum in honor of her. His girlfriend had given him the pooch when they lived together in Anchorage.

"I keep the path to her crypt cleared of snow all winter so I can visit her in the morning. People think I'm nuts to spend so much time and money on a dead dog but I don't care. Came from Aniak, like the girlfriend."

I gathered that the dog had stuck but the girl hadn't and saw, like sun breaking through fog, a possible connection between us. I had worked as a magistrate in Aniak, a Kuskokwim River village in Western Alaska, for over two years. The job separated me from people in a village where, like on the crowded ferry, I was as exposed as an aquarium fish. In Aniak, I'd felt as though everyone judged the judge, even my choice of dogs. After we had imported a curly-coated American Water Spaniel to the village for bird hunting, my partner overheard someone at her work whisper, "The magistrate has a poodle."

Looking around the *LeConte,* I wondered if the expensively dressed cross-country skiers that filled the other seats scrutinized me as they apparently had my smelly neighbor when they left open his adjacent seat. Finding no hint of judgment on his pale face, I said, "I used to live in Aniak. Maybe I knew her. What was her name?"

"The dog's name was Susie."

"No, the girlfriend."

He told me her name. I had never met the woman when I lived in Aniak, but I had helped a Kuskokwim man with the same last name check on the safety of his daughter in Anchorage so I asked whether the daughter was his old girlfriend. In a voice that revealed surprise and what might have been jealousy he asked, "How well did you know her?"

"Didn't, but I knew the father and he used to talk about her."

After his pursed lips relaxed into a smile, he said, "Oh, yeah, he was a character. I think I'll head back and get something to eat from the cafeteria."

Twenty years before the ferry ride to Haines, my partner and I lived in a poorly insulated slab shack on the northern bank of Aniak Slough. In winter, we could walk across the frozen slough to the village. When it was ice-free, we crossed the half-mile wide slough in a canoe. During freeze-up, in November, pans of ice on the slough made the crossing dangerous. While I considered navigating a path around the ice on a Saturday so I could visit the village post office, someone knocked on the door. I opened it to find an old man with small Asian eyes, pale skin, and flat features spread across a round face. He stood maybe five foot three and wore heavy insulated overalls, the kind used by snowmachine drivers in cold weather. A tipped-back hat made of three marten pelts rested on his head. Over his overalls, he had fastened a worn leather harness to hold the stump of his right arm tight to his body. He asked if I was the magistrate. When I admitted it, he asked me to help find his daughter. He hadn't been able to reach her the day before using the one phone in the village of Chauthbaluk.

I knew the man by reputation. The son of a Yup'ik mother and a Norwegian Sámi brought to the Kuskokwim River by the federal government to herd reindeer, he lived with his elderly wife in a cabin about twenty miles upriver from Chauthbaluk Village. His severed right arm made him famous. He had chopped it off with a camp axe when his snowmachine flipped and his hand and wrist became trapped in the machine's track suspension. Everyone on the river said he was tough. I'd thought he was a myth until he stood at the top of my cabin steps, wet with melted snow.

I asked him in for tea but he said he didn't have time. He was worried that the ice islands now floating downriver would soon jam. If that happened, he'd be stuck in Aniak until the ice firmed up enough for snowmachine travel. I agreed to call his daughter using the courthouse phone. People in need commonly asked me to make phone calls for them. The confidence in their face when they asked for help told me it was considered part of the job, that I had assumed the responsibility to serve as well as punish when I donned judicial robes. Having served for five years in the Bethel Legal Services Office before moving to Aniak, I didn't mind helping people. It was harder to send them to jail or banish them from their families after an act of domestic violence.

In the village, I made few friends because I feared I would not be able to rule fairly in cases where friendship for the victim or the defendant might cloud my judgment. I worried that neither would find a court order fair if they thought my affection for a member of one of their extended families influenced the outcome of the case. Magistrates serving larger communities rarely sat in judgment of a friend or neighbor, but in Aniak, I sentenced the postmaster and the trash collector my first week on the job. Later, I arraigned a man on an assault charge right after he had installed a flush toilet to replace the courthouse honey bucket. I saw no choice but to serve the village in isolation. Had I erected an unnecessary barrier between the village and myself? Could I have lingered on a bench seat at the Aniak Lodge, drinking coffee with guys I might have had to sentence the next month?

That snowy Saturday morning in Aniak, the worried father powered us through slough ice to Aniak in his old flat bottom skiff. He shopped at the Alaska Commercial Store while I checked the mail. Then we went over to the courthouse. The previous night must have been quiet because no one was sleeping off a drunk in any of the courthouse jail cells. I called the phone number he gave me. When a man answered, I told him I was the magistrate in Aniak and that his girlfriend's father hadn't heard from her for a while.

In a guarded voice, the kind people use to answer cop questions, he said, "She's fine now. We got into a fight and she took off for a week or so. Now she's back, sleeping it off." He spoke without drunken slurs or the half-whisper favored by the hung-over.

The father didn't want to talk to his daughter's boyfriend so I hung up after asking him to let the woman know about the call. As he looked down at the courthouse's filthy floor, the father said, "She's still drinking. That's bad.

Can you stop her?" Not sure if other magistrates had been able to solve his past domestic problems, I told him there was nothing I could do.

"We worry about her. She's got a kid, you know. She can't take care of the kid when she's drinking."

In an effort to make him feel a little better, I told him that his daughter's boyfriend sounded like an O.K. guy. He said, "He's O.K., but he drinks too. Not so much. Doesn't get so crazy when he parties." I thought that she could have a worse roommate but didn't say anything more to the man.

Now that my own adult daughter has moved far away, I can understand why a father navigated around ice islands for thirty miles to check on his girl. But on that day, I just worried that I had not given him the help he needed.

All that was twenty-some years ago. Was the guy who'd left for the cafeteria the same one I talked to on the phone that November Saturday?

Thirty miles south of Haines, the *LeConte* pulled past the eight-sided lighthouse on Eldred Rock. I thought, as I usually did on a ferry run from Juneau to Haines, of the ideal life a guy could live isolated on its tiny island. White, with crisp lines and a widow-walked tower rising above the slanted roof like a Russian Orthodox Church dome, the lighthouse promised an ordered, simple life for its keeper. On a rock that discouraged visitors, I could sit alone and look at the mountains of granite and glacier rising up both sides of Lynn Canal. It'd be quiet enough to hear humpback whales surface and sea lions' growl. No one would be able to see enough to judge my actions. After a few months, the island's silent solitude might become oppressive, but I longed for it as we passed the lighthouse on that crowded ferry.

Away from the main snowmachine trails through Aniak, we'd had silence most days in our cabin. Still, I always assumed we were under constant surveillance, that we lived in a glass bunker rather than a comforting hermitage. This seemed fair. I couldn't sentence others for their criminal violations unless they believed that I obeyed all laws—state, federal, and cultural. I tried to act as if Sister Anna Marie, my mean-spirited first grade teacher, kept us under a twenty-four-hour watch.

I wondered if the one-armed father had built his cabin twenty miles from the nearest village for the solitude it offered or for the nearby eddy where he anchored his salmon-catching fish wheel. When my smelly neighbor returned from the *LeConte's* cafeteria, I asked if he had ever visited the old man's cabin.

"Never made it out there but he and his wife stayed with us when they came to Anchorage."

"What happened to your old girlfriend?"

"Not sure. Her drinking got worse so we broke up. I heard her kid moved out to Aniak to stay with the old man. That was awhile ago, before I moved down to Haines."

The Haines man and I talked the rest of the passage to his town about peaches, the Kuskokwim, birch trees, and dogs. I didn't ask him whether he was the guy I'd called at the old man's request. I decided he probably was. Even if he wasn't the guy on the phone, he had been part of the old man's family for a time. That, in the way that only makes sense in rural Alaska, made him part of Aniak's extended family. My job as magistrate made me no more than a shirttail cousin to that family.

The old peach-eater and I wouldn't smile at each other if we bumped shopping carts at Howsers' IGA in Haines or Juneau's Costco, but on the *LeConte*, I missed him after he disembarked. His presence on that ferry ride to Haines had freshened my Aniak memories. His words renewed the image of the one-armed father so wet from dripping snow, his face tense with worry. They dropped me into the old man's open skiff as it plowed through new ice on Aniak Slough. They carried me to the village's spruce and birch forests, then to shared tea and stories at the table of our few Aniak friends. His Bush-accented stories reminded me of Aniak's kind Yup'ik residents. They made me wonder what I might have gained if I hadn't sat in a judge's chair.

Dan Branch *is a MFA candidate at the University of Alaska Anchorage and lives in Juneau, Alaska.*

Such Fun

Margot Kahn

Just before noon, Chuck Smith hoisted his mother's La-Z-Boy into the back of his pickup. To someone who didn't know her, Edna Smith might have seemed downright unenthused as she watched Chuck from her kitchen window. But there was excitement, in the slip of her smile, in the way she put on a pot of coffee, how she refused to sit down.

Chuck drove the La-Z-Boy from his mother's house to the Boot and Bottle in downtown Cody, Wyoming, while Edna changed into a floral dress, a soft cardigan sweater, and cream-colored flats. A dark-eyed Texan in a black hat with a beard and twirled mustache thick enough to rival any Portland hipster turned to Chuck's younger brother, Bill, and said, "Is Swanson coming?"

"He sure better," said Bill. "Mom's gonna know who said they were gonna come and then didn't show up. She's got that invitation list and she's been study'n." Besides her own seven children, Edna had practically raised Swanson, too. After his dad left and his mother started drinking, he hung around the Smith's house so much he wound up moving in.

Sure enough, by the time the second pot of coffee percolated, Swanson had arrived with a gold bracelet set around with tiny roses in a maroon leather box. He presented the box to Edna and helped her clasp the bracelet around her wrist. Edna held both his hands in hers, then hugged him to her, her cheek against his chest.

Edna's eldest daughter, Eileen, pinned a corsage to her collar, and by half past twelve she was ready to go. She walked unassisted to the car, Eileen carrying her cane. For the next three hours Edna held court at the Boot and Bottle, sitting comfortably in her La-Z-Boy, greeting each of her 100 guests by name and smiling for a thousand clicks as everyone took a picture with their favorite centenarian.Here was a woman who had seven children in the cold, windswept middle of Wyoming over the span of twenty years—from 1938 to 1961—and she hadn't lost a single one. She cooked at the local elementary school and took care of her kids, made the cow's cream into butter and kneaded flour into bread. She didn't have a stitch of help, and oftentimes they didn't have much to eat for dinner. But every Sunday, no matter how difficult the week had been, she made fried chicken and biscuits. One old bronc rider, when he was young and on the circuit, used to drive 500 miles out of his way just to have that Sunday dinner at Edna's house.

At half-past four, Edna went home to put her feet up before the party continued at The Sunset House on 8th Street. The after-party crowd was com-

posed of close family and out-of-town friends and the wait staff at The Sunset, who were accustomed to dealing with school sports teams (several were already seated), quickly rearranged tables to accommodate. Edna was delighted that so many people had come out. At the center of the long table she ordered fish and chips with a side of cottage cheese instead of slaw and enjoyed the conversation all around. Having made do with very little for most of her life, she was now surrounded by stories. She preferred to listen rather than talk, but she chimed in whenever someone asked, "Edna, do you remember that?"

"Oh yes," she'd say. "And how about the one where…"

To an outside eye she might have looked cautious, even frail. But there was none of that about her: only a precious conserving of energy, the patience of time.

An Idaho cowboy whom Edna had known in his younger years quietly paid the bill, and as the thirty-or-so guests got up around 9 o'clock Edna didn't seem any worse for wear. She took a few steps toward the door before asking someone to grab her cane. "Did you have a good time?" she asked the young woman at her elbow, gracious but reluctant, twelve hours into her party but in no hurry for it to end. And no one in the crowd was old enough to remember her as a teenager 85 years ago when she'd ridden all day—35 miles on horseback—with her boyfriend, Glenn Smith, from Red Lodge to the Beartooth Lake barn dance, danced all night and ridden home again at dawn.

"I've had such fun," she said as she left the Sunset House, "I just want to keep going." She might have been referring to the evening, or the past century. The night, after all, was young.

Margot Kahn *is the author of* Horses That Buck, *winner of the High Plains Book Award. Her essays and reviews have appeared in* Tablet Magazine, River Teeth *and* The Los Angeles Review, *among other places. She holds an MFA from Columbia University and is the recipient of awards from the Ohioana Library Association, the Seattle Office of Arts & Culture and 4Culture.*

Like A Boy

Mara Koren

I sit backwards on a chair in the kitchen. The chair is old, wooden, reupholstered at least three times by my mother, and has skinny slats I like to run my fingers along. It's after dinner in spring or early summer. I am ten years old, and my parents and I are deciding if I should start public middle school in the fall, after being homeschooled by my father for the past five years.

"Dad's not sure he can take you all the way through middle school," Mom says, leaning against the counter.

I nod, silent. I cannot predict what the outcome of this conversation will be. With most decisions—where to eat dinner, if I'll get in trouble for buying ice cream from the ice cream truck without asking—I have an inkling of the way it will go, but not this. It's too huge.

"What would my school be?" I ask. I'm not going to Sudbrook Magnet like my older brother Max did. After I sat in an airless room for a few hours drawing a still life of metal kitchen objects placed on a rumpled blanket, I didn't get in.

"It's called Pikesville Middle; we drive past it when we take Max to high school," Dad says. "Remember? It's off to the left?"

I shake my head.

"What do you think?" Mom asks. "Do you think you could try school for a year?"

I hug my hairy legs to my chest. My father stands in front of the electric coil stove, my mother silhouetted softly by the light through the window behind her. After more deliberating, more questions, and more gazing sideways out the window, wishing the red azaleas would give me the answer, I say yes. I can try it for a year.

The next day Dad drives me past my soon-to-be school, which is made of orangey-tan brick, has blue double doors and lots of blue poles all along the side holding up the lip of the roof. It's long and low, just one story. I am not enamored. The brick looks dusty and, especially with the summer emptiness, forlorn.

My father homeschooled me for first through fifth grade, and over that time I grew to look more and more like a boy. My parents always let me choose my own clothes. My mother tells the story of how my grandmother grimaced when they sent me off to kindergarten in a striped shirt and floral-printed shorts. Mom also tells the story of how when I was three or four, I asked her if

I could get fancy socks, with lace edges and patterns. She agreed, on the condition that I pair my own socks. She hated pairing them; her method was to buy all black socks, then reach into her dresser and pull out any two. "I will, I will," I said, but broke that promise instantly. From that day on, I wore mismatched socks. My parents thought it was funny. They always bought me socks two pairs at a time so I could mismatch them.

Around age seven or eight, I really looked like a boy. My hair was cut short, about to the bottom of my ears. I started wearing Max's hand-me-downs and shunning the things I loved at age five: flowers, pink, anything with a skirt. I don't remember why this change happened. The only thing I can reason now is my exposure to a male world. When I was three, my parents switched places: Mom went back to work as a software developer and Dad stayed home with the kids. Two of my closest friends were the boys who lived next door to us, Micky and Menelik, whose parents were from Ethiopia. In the afternoons I was with Dad and Max and, in the evenings, Max, the neighbor boys, and I played on their trampoline, tackling and fighting each other, racing our bikes down the driveway. I was aware of my anatomy and general genderlessness. There are pictures of me dressed as a pirate with my shirt off, a belt with a sword stuck in the back running like a seatbelt down my bare chest.

My parents let me dress like a boy without question. When waiters asked me, "What would you like, young man?" or called me my parents' son, my family corrected them good-naturedly: "This is our *daughter*, actually." The waiter was always embarrassed and apologized. We smiled to each other every time someone addressed me as a boy but, looking back, I have no idea why we were surprised. I *really* looked like a boy. I wore polo shirts tucked neatly into khaki pants with a belt. I wore ambiguous red high tops, I wore cargo shorts down below my knees, and a bulky digital watch on my wrist. In my world of homeschooling, this didn't matter. Homeschooling sparks individuality, and I was proud to be different. I loved Indiana Jones instead of Britney Spears.

I must have known people would misgender me at school, but I don't remember worrying about it. People already called me a boy and, for the most part, it wasn't a problem. The only exception was going to the bathroom in public. I often asked my mother to go with me, after I once heard someone hiss, "I think a boy just went in there!" as I walked into the women's room. At age eleven, though, I didn't know how weird I was, with my love of old TV shows like *The X-Files* and *The Brady Bunch*, no knowledge of popular culture, and a propensity to have in-depth conversations with imaginary friends when no one was listening. It's obvious to me now that to the incoming sixth graders, with their six-plus years training in how to be cutting and aggressively self-preserving, I was dead meat.

I took a placement test in the library at Pikesville Middle School with three other kids. We each sat at a table, surrounded by metal shelves of books.

The questions were reading comprehension and math. I remember a passage about blue jays, and taking a long time, staring at the red booklet. I was the last one taking the test, chewing on my Dixon Ticonderoga. The other three students left one by one, folding up their packets and Scantrons, handing them to the teacher. I had never taken a test in my life. I worked for a while longer, penciling in the small circles, and eventually turned in my things.

Apparently, I sucked. I was put in all standard classes, which was the lowest level. I've learned since that other schools usually just have standard and honors, but in Maryland, or Pikesville anyway, we have standard, honors, and GT: Gifted and Talented. I got my schedule in the mail, and on a day a few weeks before school started, there was a welcome night for new students. The school felt huge and impossible to me. Hallways met and diverged, and I followed my parents helplessly. I met my teachers in a blur, shaking hands and trying to smile. My parents told all my teachers I was homeschooled, while I ducked my head. I didn't want a reason to stick out. I left in a haze.

Before school started I met a girl named Sarah. We must have met at the welcome night, but in my memory she appears fully situated in my life with no introduction. She was new to Pikesville Middle, too. She had long, beautiful, deep red hair, she had a younger sister and brother, and her family had just moved from Vermont. My parents invited her to lunch, hoping to send me into school with a pre-made friend.

We went to Noodles & Company, a restaurant relatively new to Pikesville. That day we sat outside, on the small back patio with metal furniture. Sarah and I both ordered macaroni and cheese: a huge bowl of elbow noodles in a gooey sauce. I could never finish the whole thing.

"Vermont mac and cheese is better," Sarah said. "Vermont has the *best* cheese."

"How was the move here to Maryland?" my dad asked.

"Okay. We moved for my mom's job." She pushed around her noodles. "But I'm mad. I would have gotten to stay in elementary school if I were in Vermont. In Vermont, middle school doesn't start until seventh grade."

"Really?" I asked. I liked Sarah, I admired her hair, her confidence. She made you want to know her, and her exotic Vermont roots. Later she and her new cool friends would push my green lunch bag down the table when I went to use the bathroom, leaving me on the edge of the group instead of next to her.

We went to my house after, and I showed her my Playmobile house. I liked to make houses like blueprints, laying out blocks for the walls, creating rooms that you could see straight down into. The house I had set up was modeled after the cabin my grandparents owned in Maine. I showed Sarah some of my tiny furniture. I loved the bunk beds the most; they had plastic blue frames and orange covers, and you could stack or unstack them. I loved creating families and playing out their lives in the newest house I built.

"Sorry," Sarah said, moving my tiny fridge from one corner to another, "I just need things to be a certain way. It's not personal." She rearranged a few

other kitchen appliances: the sink, the dishwasher that even had a removable tray inside.

"Sure," I said, glad that she didn't think I was weird for still playing with toys.

When she left, though, I moved everything back to where it belonged.

My homeroom was Ms. Stapfer's reading class, and I sat in the first row to the left. I had a red locker with a built-in combination lock, which was always a source of stress. For whole weeks, I would forget how or struggle to use it. I still have nightmares about forgetting my locker combination. I don't remember much about the first day, except a kid named Ben said he liked to "Shoot things… with a camera!" when we all introduced ourselves. I remember there was a kid named Brock with orange hair, and I'd never heard of anyone named Brock before. I would graduate high school with them both seven years later.

Moving from class to class was dream-like. In the beginning, I sat with Sarah at lunch. She quickly attracted the cool crowd: Lacy, Zoe, Sydney, the girls who would remain popular for the rest of my school career and whom I would never really like. They pushed me to the end of the table, crowding and interested to know about Sarah's soccer games, and what she thought of our math teacher. I had ratty brown hair and wore boys' painter pants. I was about as disconnected from middle school culture as possible, but even I could get the message: I was out. I started praying for assigned seats at lunch, which happened frequently. Assigned seats were organized by last name, and we got them if we were bad. At the end of each lunch, the assistant principal for our grade, Ms. Frasier, a tall, African-American woman with gray-black hair who wore pant suits every day, would count, "One…Two…Three," and if we weren't completely totally utterly silent by "three," we got assigned seats for lunch the next day. If anyone complained, we got assigned seats for the whole week.

My assigned seatmates were Ryan Kelly (white, pudgy, brown hair, glasses); Jasmine Kam (light brown skin, hair always in a ponytail); and Daniel Kravitz, who I nicknamed Smucker's in my head because he brought Smucker's Uncrustables sandwiches all the time. That or popsicles. I was astonished by a world where people just ate popsicles for lunch. When Sarah dropped me and there were no assigned seats, I found castoff places to sit, usually the edge of a table near the back, anywhere inconspicuous, anywhere I wasn't taking a popular kid's seat.

The lunch room was also our theater, with a stage on one end and lunch lines on both sides. I packed my own lunches every night before school. My parents were pretty laissez-faire. When I was nine and was paid in checks to be a mother's helper, they let me bike down to the bank, about a mile away, on my own on Saturday mornings. They let me ride on the hood of the car down our long driveway. "That's what the bus is for," Mom would say when I didn't finish all of my homework. It was something of a source of pride and aggravation. At age seven, I was tasked with doing my own laundry. No one told me when or how to do my laundry, but I had to carry the heavy bucket down to our scary

unfinished basement, where mice and sometimes bats made their nests. I got to put whatever I wanted in my lunch, but I hated lunch meat and cared more about getting my lunch packed than how much I would enjoy eating it. That first year of school I had peanut butter and jelly every day, until I couldn't stand it anymore, and then ate gross concoctions like cheese and mustard on bread that I flattened thin between my hands.

The alternative to packing lunch was even worse: I was horrified by the school lunches. Everything was sepia-toned, the chicken patties smelled like dusty bread crumbs, the brown apple juice in the paper cartons, the oil-soaked, withered French fries. My parents had given me a few dollars in case I ever lost or forgot my lunch. I only forgot it once in all seven years of public school, and I planned on going to the vending machines—anything but the lunch line—until my father kindly dropped my lunch off at the office.

After a few weeks of standard classes, I was moved to honors, my whole schedule rearranged. Now I was in Ms. Getty's language arts homeroom. I liked her a lot. She was short and young, and had chin-length dyed-blonde hair. I sat in the back left. Sarah was already in that homeroom. The chance to be close friends seemed over, but at least I'd proved I was smart enough to be in her homeroom. The morning I moved in she leaned over my purple binder to explain what they did in class.

"Each morning we have a drill where we try to find all the mistakes in a paragraph," she told me.

"Mm-hmm," I said. I'd already been in Ms. Getty's class; I'd just had it at a different time under the "standard" label. I soon found out that standard and honors were pretty much the same thing, just with different kids.

"We're reading this book," Sarah said, showing me *Hatchet* by Gary Paulson.

"Yeah," I said. I was reading the same book.

"Mara knows, dear," Ms. Getty said. "She's on track."

"Oh," Sarah said.

Ms. Getty put Sarah up for a little camaraderie award anyway, just for being such a good friend. That morning Mr. Hecht, the guidance counselor, came to fetch Sarah so she could get a donut as a prize. I sat cold with jealousy while Sarah rose and walked out of the room in a swaying pink skirt. I didn't understand. Why did she get the donut? I'd been moved to honors, I got A's on most of my assignments except for math. Why wasn't I special enough?

We turned to the drill, and I wrote in blocky letters in my binder, not comprehending the words as I copied them. I was a good student; I knew what "plausible" meant when no one else did, but Sarah got everything. Once, our science teacher let Sarah show the slideshow of her soccer team's visit to the Netherlands. "They have funny traffic lights there," Sarah said, pointing to the

screen. "The soccer goals were so low we could sit on top of them to block the ball with our feet." In games of Seven Up, she was always picked and won a prize, while I stayed with my head down in the dark.

Then, Mr. Hecht reappeared.

"Hi, Mr. Hecht, back again?" Ms. Getty asked. I knew he'd come back for me. He smiled. I sat up a little straighter. This would show Sarah.

Mr. Hecht called for Jade.

My first-day-of-middle-school outfit was a blue t-shirt from the Target boys' section with thin yellow stripes across the front, and boy's khaki pants. My mother had bought me a colorful set of headbands so that people would know I was a girl. On the night before the first day, I chose a yellow headband to pair with my Target shirt. I was excited to be someone new for middle school: I would now be a headband-wearer.

I wore the yellow headband to the first day. No one else looked anything like me. Shirts with Abercrombie and Aeropostale and American Eagle were in, as were sweatpants and Ugg boots. I'd never heard of any of those brands. Girls wore tight long sleeve shirts with the start of the cuff sewn higher up on the sleeve. I always wanted one of those long-cuffed shirts, but I nearly always got my clothes second-hand. My other item of back-to-school clothing, besides the blue and yellow shirt, was a red fleece with a gray collar and a small zipper pocket on the arm. I deemed this my only acceptable piece of clothing and wore it constantly. It wasn't girly, but it didn't scream BOY, either. I wasn't willing to drop all my old clothes and adopt a girl look. I didn't know how, and I was too proud. For sixth grade, I existed somewhere between coded genders. I stopped wearing the headbands after the second or third day; they squeezed my head.

School bathrooms were gross. They all used the same pink soap that made me gag. Opening a stall door was a game of Russian Roulette, either a clean toilet or one full of blood or pee. Once my schedule got rearranged I had Ms. Stapfer's class last period. I tried to only pee once a day, but if I couldn't hold it anymore I'd duck into the bathroom close to her room before class.

Safely inside a stall I heard a girl say, "Was that a boy?"

I stayed silent, hoping they would leave.

"Damn, I swear a boy went in there!" These were not the girls who would let my ear-length brown hair and boy's pants slide.

I only had three minutes between classes. I couldn't wait for them to leave or I'd be late. I left the stall, keeping my head down. The bathroom sinks were all white and blocky and heavy. I washed my hands, forgoing soap because I hated the smell so much.

"Are you a BOY?" one of the girls asked.

I ignored them.

"HEY, are you a boy??"

"No," I said quietly, reaching for paper towels.
"*No*," one of them mimicked. They cackled. I fled.

For my sixth-grade year, Dad drove Max and me to school every morning. First, Max to the high school, and then me, three blocks down the road, to middle school.

Dad got in the loop of cars to drop off one morning in September. I was crying. The thought of walking into school was too horrible to stand. I couldn't get out of the car, I just couldn't. I couldn't go back there.

"We're having a little trouble," Dad told the man waving drop-offs around the loop. Dad rolled up the window and took me to Lenny's.

Lenny's was a breakfast restaurant about ten minutes away. It had an ordering line where the workers fried eggs on a counter of hot silver metal, and squirted pancakes from squeeze bottles. It always smelled like syrup and pink air freshener. I got a bagel with cream cheese and bacon, which I cracked in fourths and put on top of the bagel. We sat on one of the hard wooden booths by a window, my bare legs skidding over the seat. I secretly hoped I'd never have to go back to school.

After starting public school, I desperately wanted to go back to homeschooling. My father and I had had an easy routine for the last five years. In the morning, we ate cereal and watched *The X-Files*; in the afternoon we walked to the nearby coffee shop, where we knew all the workers by name. We each got an everything bagel with long silver packets of Philadelphia cream cheese, and my father, an ex-newspaper reporter, read me the headlines and comics from the *Washington Post*. In the evenings, Dad made dinner, and sometimes after he would turn on a special mixtape he made for my mother, and the three of us would dance in the kitchen, socked feet on the plastic tiles, sliding and spinning.

"Is there something you want to talk about?" Dad asked. He got a bagel with bacon, too, plus a fried egg.

I shrugged. "I just don't want to go back. Every day's the same."

Dad covered my hand with his. When we were homeschooling, each day was open to possibility. We went to the toy store out of the blue. I was crazy about toads and we went to the library to get out books instead of learning fractions. School was too enforced. I couldn't go to the bathroom without asking, and in the bathroom, everyone looked at me sideways.

I ate slowly, trying to draw it out. Maybe he would forget, I thought, and just take me home. Maybe if I cried again he wouldn't make me go back. I took forever finishing my apple juice.

"Sweetie, you have to go back," Dad said, looking sad. He later told me this was the saddest thing I said to him, that all days were the same.

Slowly, I got in the car. He drove the few miles back to sandy-colored Pikesville Middle and wrote me a note on a piece of notebook paper.

Dad and I both loved homeschooling, we both missed each other, but Dad had a newly-started writing career, and it was time for me to learn my way in the "real world." Dad came to look back at homeschooling with fondness and nostalgia, and though I did too, I saw it as a time of naiveté. I learned that being out of the loop meant I didn't deserve respect. I unlearned all the beauty homeschooling ascribed to individuality.

I never told Dad about the girls in the bathroom, the laughs and snickers on the bus I was sure were directed at me, the time boys threw bits of pencil at me in art class. I'm not sure why. I guess it was too embarrassing. I was afraid that he'd feel bad for me and intervene—call my teacher or try to punish the bullies, and I knew that would only make it worse. No one wants more attention in middle school. I'd gone from loving that I was different—my tomboy look, my dislike of "girly" things like nail polish, Hannah Montana, and anything pink—to resenting my oddness. How had I been so stupid? It wasn't cool to dress like a boy, it just got you jeered at.

My only hope was Mr. Hecht, the guidance counselor. Somehow he knew I was having a hard time. My parents talked with him before I started school, and after the match with Sarah fell through he was probably worried. One day he came to my math class and asked us all to write about how we liked school so far. I laid it all out for him. Sometimes, I want to cry in class, I wrote. I really wish I could go home.

A few months into school, Mr. Hecht put me in a group for people who didn't have friends. Of course, it wasn't called that, I don't remember the actual name, but Shira and I dubbed it that later, when it was funny to us instead of pathetic. The Group for Losers was where I met Shira. She had been in a private Jewish school for all of elementary, and she was different like me with her large poof of curly brown hair, glasses, and oversized T-shirts. We didn't share all the same cultural references, but we at least both liked things outside of the norm. I loved *The X-Files*, and I remember her telling me about *Seinfeld* in the lunch room, where I finally had someone to sit with. In the group, we drew pictures and played games. We talked about how we felt, if we'd made any new friends. The group met seven times, and by then Shira and I were fast friends. We ate lunch together, she came over for sleepovers and we stayed up late lying on my floor on our stomachs, propped up on our elbows, talking about TV shows and how we both hated Vlad from math class.

At the end of the year, Lawrence, a boy from our group, died of Leukemia. Mr. Hecht told us he'd done Make a Wish and gone to Disneyland. It didn't affect me much then, I guess because I knew him but didn't *know* him, and he'd died of a disease, not a freak accident. "I love Lawrence," Shira said, as both of us sat at the long table in the meeting room for our group. "We used to pass notes in

science class." I remember thinking how kind Shira was, how she made friends in all places. I was trying to survive, and Shira was reaching out, pulling us with her, immune to her own and others' awkwardness. What had their notes to each other said?

I think about Lawrence now and I wish I'd known more about him. He was probably the first kid my age I knew who died, but I don't remember being sad. I remember him as calm, down-to-earth. He wore glasses, his yearbook smile seemed easy. Somehow, I feel I know he had a family who loved him, who went with him to Disneyland and held his hand in hospital rooms, but maybe that's not true. Maybe he was just a boy with no friends who is remembered by me and Shira and a page in the yearbook.

Later, when we had more friends and our lives were a little more figured out, Shira and I would remember Lawrence. It was too sad to be sad about, so we laughed.

Shira and I stayed together through high school. Our senior year we painted a mural in the science hallway. Each year, one art student painted a mural and quote on a patch of blank wall above the lockers. In an art department with one teacher and three seniors, I was that art student, and enlisted Shira's help. We painted a beautiful night sky with clouds of constellations and an orange sunset fading into night. Our quote was from a John Green book: "My thoughts are stars I cannot fathom into constellations." We thought we were pretty deep, and maybe we were. Two years later the science hall, and our mural, were torn down for renovations, our work undone in dust, but I was never avid about leaving a mark on Pikesville High, anyway.

Shira never wore dresses, but by the end of high school she had a few. She was the girl who reached out to me, to the dying boy we didn't know was dying. While I learned the rules of public school, Shira decided dresses were pretty and she would wear them if she wanted. Her bushy hair turned long and shiny. In college at University of Baltimore County, she switched from psychology to ancient studies to gender and women's studies, and she loves art and journaling. She is the most fabulous doodler I've ever known.

I didn't wear dresses until the summer after high school. In public school, I felt trapped in the version of myself I'd entered school with: the awkward kid who always wore the wrong clothes. Even piercing my ears was a big step. I was afraid to let on that I might actually like girly things. I thought there would be total shock if I came in wearing a skirt. College was another chance to remake myself. I started with the one skirt I owned: soft synthetic and slippery, brown with yellow flowers. Then, Mom gave me a wrap-around orange skirt that didn't fit her anymore. I bought a blue dress that smelled like incense and had pockets. I wore a skirt to the first day of freshman orientation. I was me. I was ready for everyone to know.

On the last day of sixth grade, I took the bus home as I always did. It was hot. I stood to heave the window down, and sat again on the scalding green vinyl seat. I had a best friend now, I had one year of public school. I looked out at the bright maple trees, and felt tears come. It had been so hard, but I was almost sad it was over. Maybe it was a moment of grief for the girl who walked into that school nine months before, and didn't know middle schoolers cussed, or screamed at each other, or could make you feel useless for wearing your brother's clothes. The bus pulled out of the driveway in front of the school, gaining speed to the corner of Seven Mile Lane.

I didn't know it then, on the bus home from sixth grade, but six years later, on a similar bright day, Shira and I and our friends would lounge in front of the high school under the metal awning, smelling the asphalt melt in the heat, and I would stand, get in my father's green Honda Accord, and drive Shira home, leaving that school and that place for the last time, our arms out the windows, our faces bright with relief.

Mara Koren *is an English major at Ursinus College, with intended minors in Creative Writing and Visual Art. She has been published in* Runestone, *and was the recipient of Ursinus' Creager Prize and the Sigma Tau Delta E. Nelson James Poetry Award.*

Restoration

Bridget Potter

It is winter, a Friday night in the country. I am woken past midnight by a phone call. A man. Heavily accented. She has tried to get out of bed again and fallen. This time, just as a precaution, he tells me, she has been taken by ambulance to the emergency room of New Milford Hospital. Should I rush over there, about a forty-minute drive? No, no, he reassures me. She's probably fine, in which case they'll bring her right back to the nursing home. I should wait an hour or so and then call the hospital.

I make a cup of tea. I turn on the local NPR station. I turn it off. I turn on CNN. I turn it off. I pick up an old New Yorker. I've already read every word. It's chilly in my leaky log house. I make a hot water bottle to warm my now icy bed. I lie down. I get up. What I really want is a nice big Stoli, but I haven't had a drink for fifteen years. I have another cup of tea. A long hour passes. I call. She has broken her hip. Yes, yes, they know it's again. But it's the other hip. I laugh. She is resting comfortably, sedated against the pain. It is past two. I will wait and see her in the morning. She is safe. Could this be it?

Almost fifty years earlier my father had been relocated from England, promoted to a job in Washington DC, just for a year. When it was decided that he would stay on for at least another two, my mother joined him.

The job moved them to New York, living in temporary apartments with thrift store furniture, my mother yearning for home. She hated America. "I just don't like the way they DO things," she would complain to anyone who wasn't one of "them."

Three years later, it was time to settle. In a WASP-y community high on a ridge in Dutchess County, New York, they found a golf club and an ex-pat British community, and she fell in love with a pretty little old house, a saltbox on the side of a hill. At last, she would send for her own furniture, inherited in excited dribs and drabs as relatives died. Anticipating the arrival of those pieces, stored away for years, she became a little less miserable.

The wooden crates were unloaded by crane at the Cunard Line Pier on the West Side of Manhattan. Swaying in the air, her legacy was skillfully guided by stevedores who shouted them down in a dangling basket to a giant P on the dock. My mother turned her back until they were safely on the ground. My father counted. It was all there. The crates were loaded into a Mayflower Moving and Storage van and the Potters followed the moving van all the way to Quaker Hill.

As she aged, the fine old furniture suffered from the climate in America. The wood first dried out, then split a little and then cracked. Pieces began to disintegrate. Antique craftsmen know how to take care of old wood. Sometimes pieces are gently taken apart, left to become accustomed to the dryness, then re-assembled. But none of this happened as my mother's ignorance, then her carelessness, then her dementia all made their mark.

As we age, we shrink, even the committed yoginis among us. Our personalities, our characters, also reduce, boiling down to their essence, like a sauce. This was certainly true of my mother. She had managed her anxieties, terrors and social difficulties with great effort and alcohol. As she aged, her phobias grew more intense for her and more difficult for me. She became more fearful, more critical, more angry with the world, less and less pleasant to be with, and hence, more and more isolated. Then, Lady Dementia took over. She became impossible.

She refused to leave the little house she loved. I organized professional care to keep her clean, dressed, shaved. Yes, her face had started sprouting bristly hair in a bewildering fashion. After she threw the third, or was it the fourth, Home Healthcare Aide out of the house by calling her a fat pig, the agency gave up. Fernanda had cleaned the house for twenty years. My mother locked her out. Other than me, the only person she let into the house was Pam who had helped in the garden, now weeded over, gone to seed. Pam shopped for her few needs from the supermarket, her Ensure and her scotch, coaxed her to eat the prepared meals I brought up, reminded her to take her medicine, change her clothes, and wear her Depends. The little house she loved became filthy. On one visit, I tried to sneak away a few of the empty scotch bottles piled up in a corner of the dining room. "What are you doing? Leave that! I need that! I said LEAVE IT, goddam it," she screamed. Uselessly, I screamed back. Eventually, I even shrugged off the messes left by the irascible dog she had adopted a couple of years before. "If you don't behave I'll send you back to where you came from," she barked in her crisp Queen's English at the undisciplined mutt. I knew that tone of voice. She meant it. I can't pinpoint the moment, perhaps there wasn't a moment but just a gradual seepage of horror, but I began to wonder if, then to believe that, my mother would be better off dead.

She fell, broke her hip and failed, unsurprisingly, to press the button on the alarm I insisted she wear around her neck. Pam found her on the living room floor the next morning, unable to move, not wondering why. I was glad. She was finally out of the house and in the care of doctors and nurses.

When she recovered enough from hip-replacement surgery to leave the hospital, she wanted to go home, but to my relief, she was now inside a system, no longer a demented old Englishwoman living alone in a filthy little old house that was starting to fall down, with all her stuff rotting around her and an angry dog. She was moved to a nursing home for rehabilitation. I vowed that she would never go back to the lonely squalor of that little house but I didn't tell her. I found and paid a deposit on a studio apartment in a beautiful assisted living facility nearby. It was on the ground floor with a pastoral view, a little

patio with a spot for a bird feeder. Birds stayed around all winter at her house as a source of entertainment because she fed them so well. I measured the room and, in my head, decorated it with some of her beloved stuff.

The anesthesia had obliterated her short-term memory. Each time an orderly wheeled her to the physical therapy room it seemed to her that she was going for the first time. Bewildered, she could not learn. She abused the kind women who tried to get her on her feet. The doctor stopped prescribing the therapy. It was time to move on.

The assisted living community sent an evaluator. Could she stand up on her own? Could she dress herself? Get herself to the bathroom? She flunked every test. I flew into a silent rage. How dare she fail?

She would have to stay "indefinitely" at Candlewood Valley.

I calmed down and brought a few small pieces of her beloved stuff to cheer up her room. She didn't seem to notice.

She became impossible for the aides to manage. I gave my permission to lock her in the Dementia Unit where her raving would be less disturbing to others. "It will be better for her," the social worker insisted. *Easier for you, for sure*, I silently railed.

The common room in the Dementia unit resembled a nightmare designed by Goya with the help of Tim Burton and a hopelessly cheerful nursery school teacher. The inmates were diapered; monotonous effort was made to keep them clean by lethargic aides dressed in baggy pajama-like outfits with cheerful little bunnies or bears in the design of the fabric. Repetitive drool wipers, they were, those aides. The minds of their wards were gone, some back into infantile petulance, weeping when a weak moan for attention was not immediately met. Their bodies were in various stages of decay, some twisted, some flopped over, some seemingly medicated to the point of oblivion. Clumsy arts and crafts projects were taped to the wall, dusty plastic flowers lay in pathetic disarray on one table, abandoned beadwork on another. At feeding time, orderlies would appear in hairnets with various prescribed meals, feeding most of the creatures by spoon. I visited on Fridays and Sundays and in all the time she was there, I saw only one other visitor in the Dementia Unit: an elderly woman on Mother's Day.

My brother arrived from California to witness the change in our mother. He was devastated. "I told you," I said gently. I told you so, na na na na nahh na, I wanted to yell at him in the rhythm of the playground. Visiting her house was almost too emotional for him but we agreed it was time to sell. Brusquely, efficiently, with pen and paper, we listed the few things that he wanted. We decided I should clean it out, stage it, put it on the market and sell it.

But I didn't.

A year passed. I darted in every once in a while to check. A drab film of dust settled, and between the windows and their screens, the spiders were busy. The water continued running, the heat and the electricity worked fine. It sat as it did the day she left.

On Saturday morning, I wake early. I lie in my bed, staring out of the sky-

light at the branches of the maple tree that shades my room in the summer. They are almost bare now and the watery light wobbles over my bed. I dress, feed and let out my eager dogs, make good strong café-au-lait, and head off to the hospital.

I tiptoe into the room. She is in the bed by the door; the other bed is empty. She is sedated, white, hooked up to tubes. She's had another brutal haircut at Candlewood Valley. She looks shorn, butch. She hasn't noticed her appearance for years but I do and I hate the way she looks. As I approach her bed, she stirs, glances at me and turns away. "Where am I now?" she complains with feeble fury.

"You fell, Mom. You've hurt yourself. You're in New Milford Hospital."

"Why?" she weeps a little.

"Why?" she repeats slowly, again and again. It becomes a chant, a profound question. I do not have an answer; just the same question. She smells rotten and sour; the smell of bad infection.

"Can I go home now? Can I?" She is so wistful.

"We'll see, Mom, we'll see." She struggles to raise herself to contain a cough. Furtively, I steal a pillow from the empty bed next to her and put it behind her head, but that's silly. She is in a hospital bed. I can wind her up. As the head of the bed rises, she moans loudly. A nurse, disturbed by the roar, rushes in and tells me she must lie absolutely still and flat. It is a very dangerous time. The doctor will come soon and explain everything.

I pull up a chair and sit by her bed, my knees touching, feet flat on the ground, prim. Hospital visitor pose. She is dozing. She wakes. "What are you doing here?" she asks, annoyed. Oh Mom, come off it, I flail at her in my head. But I sit straight and silent, purse in lap.

Her best handbag was black alligator, the perfect 1940's shape. What was inside intrigued me. "Close that up this minute," she would command. "If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times. Why can't you listen?" I had been caught, but I had already stolen a peep. Loose tobacco crumbs from a stray cigarette, a rumpled lace handkerchief with a lipstick stain, a hairpin or two, a hexagonal threepenny bit. And the smell. Stale tobacco mixed with face powder, perfume, dust. It was private and female and curious and grownup and forbidden and I loved it, that smell.

The doctor on call comes. He looks her over; and then tells me that the hip replacement surgery has been scheduled for first thing Monday morning. She is heavily sedated, he explains, medicated both for pain and to keep her still. A massive dose of blood thinner will prevent the biggest danger: clotting. They must replace her hip immediately. A break at this age often causes a clot to form, which can very likely be fatal. I nod.

"I understand," I say.

"So, the surgery is scheduled for Monday. Nine in the morning."

This is my moment.

I can decide.

Her life is in my hands.

"I don't think so," I say tentatively.

He is startled.

"No," I say, still trying out the idea. "No surgery."

He has trouble knowing what to say.

"I'm going to have to insist...."

I am almost completely sure now. "You understand what the consequences may be, then," he says. "Yes," I reply, no longer tentative. "Yes, I understand."

He leaves to go talk to the nurses' station with her chart in his hand. The orders will be changed.

I understand the consequences. I sign a lot of forms.

I have to get out of there.

It is noon. There is a good coffee place on the Green in New Milford, so I pick up a copy of the New York Times and settle in to read. The Saturday crossword defeats me but I kill an hour and a half. I return to the hospital.

There are no more tubes. She is making gurgling sounds, watery snores, occasionally coughing in her sleep. The nurse comes in every once in a while and wipes the corners of her gummy mouth, lifts her head a little and holds a paper cup of chipped ice to her lips. I sit. I sit until dark comes, and then I sit past darkness.

I spin a frantic fantasy. You'll carry me out of here in a box, she used to say, so I will take her back to her little house. If she needs 24 hour nursing, I'll find someone. No. I'll stay. I'll rent a hospital bed, I'll reconnect the cable TV. She can watch golf. I'll fill the refrigerator. Smoked salmon, her favorite. Brown bread. Capers. Onion. Lemon. I'll buy a quart of good scotch. I'll bring clean sheets and towels. A bed pan, I'll need a bed pan. It's November. We'll have Thanksgiving there. No. She doesn't celebrate Thanksgiving. "You know that's not my holiday, dear. You and the children do it without me." Okay, Christmas. We'll have Christmas. I'll get a tree. She hasn't had a tree for years. Tomorrow is Sunday. I'll organize it all tomorrow and I'll move her back in on Monday. It's a jumpy, jiggly, fantasy plan. I haven't eaten all day, I realize. It's the caffeine.

The night shift nurse come in, looks at me, looks at my mother's chart. "You look beat," she says. If I want to go home she'll call me if there is any change. This feels like permission.

I flee.

For the previous year and a half I had been rewarding myself for my visits to the nursing home by stopping at Carvel on my way home. It is late but I spot the sullen boy in the pale light behind the counter. I order my regular; a hot fudge sundae with vanilla and everything, yes a cherry please, and extra sauce if you don't mind, I'll pay if you want. I sit in the car in the dark and I slurp it all up. Then I drive home to bed.

The call comes at about eleven o'clock. A soft-voiced woman. "She passed at ten twenty this evening. I am so very sorry. She was not alone. You can talk to the nurse who was with her if you like. It can wait till the morning, but we'll need to know which funeral home so they can handle the details."

I call my brother. "So fast," he exclaims. Not to me, I wanted to say. I call my daughters. She's gone, I tell them. She was not an attentive grand-

mother and they knew that she was failing. They were sad for me but I reassure them that I am fine. Relieved. I don't tell them then what I have done.

My job is still not over.

Alone, I empty the garbage out of the little old house on Quaker Hill, three dumpsters full. Paint, a cosmetically new bathroom, and the dusting and polishing of her antiques ready the house for buyers. It sells. I watch as movers lock up her precious legacy in a storage space just up the road.

I do nothing more. Months pass. I can't decide. Should I give the stuff to a dealer? An auction house? Should I have it appraised and advertise it for sale myself? Should I give it away? Why can't I decide? Could I rescue it? Could I fix it up? Where would I put it? Little by little, these questions grew into a mission.

Empty nested and alone in my New York apartment, I had been feeling like Dickens' Miss Havisham, surrounded not by a crumbling wedding banquet but two shrines: the high school bedrooms of my college graduate daughters. I decided to use the windfall from my mother's estate to make the place my own.

Now, in my remodeled kitchen there is an 18th century oak corner cupboard. Because of the beamed pre-war construction of the apartment building, there are not many right-angled corners, so the architect drew and the contractor built out a new corner. The original brass key to the cupboard is missing. I use an old ivory-handled butter knife of my mother's to pry open the door.

Each weekday morning after breakfast until I went to boarding school when I was eight, my brother and I trooped from the warm kitchen into the chilly and unused front dining room of the small suburban London house of our childhood to get our medicine from that corner cupboard. It held the dietary supplements provided to all post-World War II children by the National Health Service: orange-colored Vitamin C supplement in a dark blue glass bottle, thick like honey but sour; Cod Liver Oil in a corked white glass bottle, opaque yellow, slimy; Maltex, in a wide-necked earthenware jar, sticky and sweet, a spoon of which our young mother would lift high and twist round and round till the thick thread of goop stopped falling. "Quick, now," she would say as I opened my mouth like a baby bird in the nest. Then, there might be a treat. In a dented old red cake-tin high on an unreachable shelf in that cupboard were a few very sticky sweets, procured with whatever scant sugar ration coupons were left over from baking.

I suppose I did what I could in the last years of my mother's life to take care of her. But she should not have ended up in the dementia unit of a nursing home. And I certainly did not care for her as well as I have for that beautiful old corner cupboard. And for other pieces of her legacy, now restored, in place, in my life.

But letters and photographs, some going back to the turn of the last century, remain hidden away in grimy boxes in the back of a closet. I drag them out and poke around in them from time to time. Then I shove them back in. It never ends. I've kept so much.

***Bridget Potter**, a consultant in the Writing Center at Columbia University, has been published in the* Wall Street Journal, Guernica, *and* Best American Essays. *At work on a personal history of the 1960's, she lives in Manhattan and Wassaic, New York.*

The Patron

Lee Taylor

James was called to duty. It was January 1, 2005 and his boss, the music director of the Cleveland Orchestra, was stuck on the other side of the ocean with a raging ear infection. Because of the holiday, it had proven difficult to engage a replacement. James, my boyfriend at the time, was the twenty-six-year-old assistant conductor and he had been summoned to save the day. We raced back home to Cleveland, throwing our holiday acquisitions, eight-pound dog and a new recording of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony into the car. As I drove for seven hours from New York, James frenetically studied; he was to take the helm of the venerable orchestra in less than forty-eight hours' time.

Amid the madness, a patron came into our lives, emerging from the sea of audience faces to offer educated and thoughtful words of praise. T. had traveled to Cleveland to see a performance of the oratorio *Scenes from Goethe's Faust* by Robert Schumann, a rarely performed piece with the famed Thomas Hampson singing the title role. By chance, between performances of the work, James was giving a recap concert of his Beethoven program, a holdover from the previous weekend. For lack of a more compelling activity on a winter's day in Cleveland, T. decided to attend. He was skeptical that a young conductor would have any depth to display in such a demanding program, but since the museum was closed for renovations and the shopping mall was too far away without a car, he ended up at Severance Hall. It was this Friday afternoon that T. later said he would keep reliving on his journey home, while Schumann's *Faust* faded into the concert graveyard of his memory.

James was flattered by the initial email he received from T., which had been forwarded to him by way of a marketing executive in the Cleveland Orchestra administration. He was smitten by the effusive compliments and T.'s encyclopedic knowledge of repertoire and artists. As someone we'd refer to as an "opera queen," T. delighted in gossip and polarizing opinions. He seemed to know everything and pretended to know everybody. He wasted no time in comparing James to Bernstein, the quickest way to a young American conductor's heart. T.'s praise was keen and articulate, but still distant enough to qualify as "normal." Even the passing invitation to visit him in Chicago seemed innocuous; immediate intimacy is not uncommon in the world of classical music. We come together as if we are all on some cultural lifeboat trying to keep our beloved art afloat.

On a lark, James and I decided that we should go to Chicago. We had never heard the Chicago Symphony and since money was tight, T.'s offer seemed like

an easy way to cash in on a cheap vacation. We were nervous as our cab veered through the socio-economically checkered neighborhoods between Midway airport and downtown. We were ostensibly going on a blind date. All we knew about our intended, T., was that he loved classical music and happened to be acquainted with some people with whom we were acquainted. I kept reminding myself that we were staying in our own guest suite; if escape was necessary, it seemed feasible.

When we turned onto South Lakeshore Drive, the tension in my shoulders dissipated significantly. As the numbers climbed towards T.'s address, on what I would later come to realize was Chicago's "gold coast," the buildings became increasingly ornate. There was evidence to back up T.'s repeated allusions to affluence. Even if the man were certifiably crazy, the sheets would most likely be clean.

By appearances, T. was an ordinary middle-aged American. He was pedestrian in the way a manila envelope is, with pasty skin, male pattern balding and not a stitch of intrigue. He wore round-framed tortoise shell glasses, and his smile was narrow and tight. T.'s deportment was awkward and hinging on the effeminate. As he led us through the cramped, indulgently-furnished apartment, I imagined that he had been the boy picked last for teams in gym class.

Within fifteen minutes of walking though the door of the T.'s abode, we were served martinis. T. favored blue cheese-stuffed olives, but I opted for a twist of lemon. I carefully carried my drink into the baroque furnishings of the living room and perched on a chair beside the baby grand piano, an instrument that was more photo showcase than anything else. I scanned the odd mix of T.'s photos with opera singers and old-time movie production pictures bought on Ebay. Across the room, T. and James sat facing one another. I listened as T. grilled him with the journalistic panache of a New Yorker profiler.

Hours later, James and I emerged on the ground floor of the building, making our way to the guest suite in T.'s apartment complex. The air in the hall was stale, giving off a smell much like a nursing home. As I pulled the door closed to our room, I placed my hand on James's forearm. I was only going to say this once.

"Be careful what you say to this guy. He really likes to talk."

"Oh, come on," he said. "He's a sad man. He just wants to feel important."

Part of James's appeal and, I would venture to wager, his success, hinges on his ability to be a completely open individual; he is always comfortable in his own skin without artifice. However, this quality can also make him vulnerable. He fancies himself a cynical native of the five boroughs, but his penchant for exposing his personal life betrays that paradigm. As James revealed inappropriate things to T. during the cocktail hour, I moved uncomfortably in my chair with wide eyes. Unfortunately, despite my efforts at telepathy, the addition of alcohol to ego had all sorts of private details pouring from James's lips. It was a verbal torrent that T. was gleefully bathing in.

It took me about thirty seconds to assess T's character. He was not dangerous, but I could also tell that he was not to be trusted. It was clear that what-

ever you mentioned to T., you could be confident that he would pass it on for you. In just those couple of hours, James had managed to tell T. about our bleak financial state, and our tenuous relationship history. He also shared opinionated thoughts on individuals in the music business: administrators, conductors, managers, you name it.

As we changed clothes for the symphony that evening, James assured me that he would be more judicious in his conversation topics. He also insisted that I was being paranoid; T. was just looking for someone to talk to. "He just wants a friend," became his universal defense of T.

The three of us met in the gilded art deco lobby of the apartment building, where my reflection gleamed back at me in every direction. Together, we shuffled on the ice to the parking garage in the frigid winter air coming off of Lake Michigan. When retrieving the car, T. made loud efforts to be recognized by all the men working in the garage, which resulted in questioning glances from many of them. If he felt the need to prove his social saliency there, I couldn't imagine what it would be like at the symphony.

As we motored along the lakefront, T. informed us that we would not be sitting together at the concert. He was in the midst of chronicling his musical experiences, via recording, so it was necessary for him to sit on his own in the front of the hall. He sat in the third row, center, with a fifteen-thousand-dollar microphone attached to his eyeglass frames and a minidisk recorder in his pocket. In the past three years, he had illegally recorded all the Chicago Symphony and Chicago Lyric Opera's performances, as well as several at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. He had even recorded James's Beethoven Five with the Cleveland, as well as my own brief soprano solos in Schumann's *Faust* the same week.

After T. had made his pirated recordings, he would bring them home and painstakingly transfer them to compact disc, trying to the best of his audiophile abilities to snuff out any extraneous audience noise that had occurred in his vicinity. Then, he would fashion his concert program into liner notes and stow the finished product away in his alphabetized collection. It was clear that this cottage industry, executed solely for the edification of one, was maintained with meticulous order. This man was so obsessed with music that he was willing to sacrifice his reputation as a member of the board of governors of the Chicago Symphony to commit himself to this illegal and highly unethical hobby.

During the concert, James and I were sitting several rows behind T. in the left orchestra section of the house. We could see his erect, pale head center in the third row as promised, rapt with attention like the teacher's pet in his favorite class. He kept his overcoat on and remained motionless from the first downbeat of the conductor's baton until the applause. It was remarkable and absolutely crazy.

We made our way to a post-concert reception after greeting the soloist and the conductor in the green room area. As I mingled by the cheese and crackers, T.'s wife, M., made her first appearance of the weekend. I was taken

aback by her ease of carriage and her magnetism. She was an executive at a Fortune 500 company in Iowa and she divided her time between the Quad Cities and Chicago. Even though I knew this information, I was expecting someone less blonde and less clad in St. John to be the wife of T. She was a graceful slip of a woman, I observed, as she made her obligatory rounds of the room, handling each acquaintance with utmost care as she did so. It was funny; I had assumed that any woman who would share a bed with T. would be one who had exhausted all other options for a life partner.

While we had been told that M. worked sixty hours a week, T. did not have a job. This intrigued me since he appeared to be only in his early fifties. There was no evidence that he had cashed out of a prospering business; in fact, he made no mention of having had a career at all. He alluded to his undergraduate studies in economics at Northwestern University, but what followed college was an extended European vacation, one that lasted several years. T. had confided in us during martinis that he suffered from a condition known as chronic leukemia. The disease had saddled him with two lengthy periods of chemotherapy and radiation treatments. The first battle left him fleeing to Europe to find himself, and the second had taken place just a couple of years prior to our meeting. He decided after this recent scare that he should "retire" and focus on his passions, his health being on the precipice of catastrophe. What he retired *from* was seamlessly omitted.

"I don't need money," he claimed.

When we returned home to Cleveland after our weekend with T. and M., there was a lot to think about, specifically a tidbit that floated into conversation during our second night there. The four of us were gathered in the living room before heading out to dinner. Although we had known T. and M. for only twenty-four hours, they spoke to us like lifelong friends. They would cackle wildly at James and make comments along the lines of, "that is *so* like you!" It was no surprise then when T. turned to M. and asked with exaggerated drama if "we should tell them about the W. thing."

There was obvious reason to tell us about "the W. thing." I like to think of it as a pre-emptive strike. The classical music world is socially minute and colleagues are rarely separated by more than one degree. T. couldn't risk having us hear about his complicated relationship with another young conductor from someone else.

"Do you know W.?" he asked.

"Yes. I went to Aspen with him," James replied. "We haven't talked since then, how is he doing?"

T. went on to tell us about his relationship with W., and the scenes he spun were crafted with the linguistic pathos of a scorned lover. He described his devotion to W. and the efforts he had made to further the young man's career.

But over the years, W. became increasingly insecure and even suspicious of T., ultimately withdrawing into his private life with a wife described as "overbearing and controlling." Initially, in front of M., we were just given broad strokes of the conflict, but once the relationship was out in the open, T. couldn't help but let more details emerge. Suddenly, every subject was ripe for a comparison to W. or the orchestra with which he worked. I was convinced that T. had developed strong feelings for W., regardless of their non-reciprocation.

"I'm not allowed to talk to W. anymore," T. said. "Things got blown way out of proportion by that bitch wife of his."

In the silence that hung after a statement like that, T. appeared to be thinking about this relationship that spiraled out of his control. The way he recounted his history with W., they were just two friends with a common love of music and tennis. In fact, T. recalled how during a Sunday tennis match he told W. that he was once again ill with leukemia. W. had choked up with the knowledge that his friend was sick. T. didn't care to speculate why things had turned sour between them except to say:

"To tell you the truth, I think W. is gay."

Well, I thought, *someone is*.

A week or so after our trip to Chicago, I traveled to Tallahassee, Florida to visit a friend of mine from graduate school. One afternoon, as I walked along fraternity row, James called from Cleveland to tell me he had received a FedEx envelope from T. Inside of it were ten crisp $100 bills and a note that stated simply, "I thought you could use this."

"Send it back," I said.

"What? Are you nuts?"

At that time, a thousand dollars was a very hefty sum of money to us. T. was correct; we could use it. But I was reluctant to accept his gesture, and I did not want to be indebted to him in any way. Patronage has been around as long as classical music. Private support has ensured its growth from the 17th century onward, and even today the patron buttresses the finances of orchestras and individual musicians alike. It's a delicate dance with patrons, and an artist must know when to pull them in close and when to push away, making sure that protective lines are drawn just lightly enough that they don't dissuade a sense of interest and generosity. I had learned that some patrons are truly selfless and want nothing in return for their support. T. was not this type of patron; he wanted his name in the credits.

Ultimately, we accepted the money. T. told us that if we sent it back, it would reappear. There was no use fighting him. As it turned out, that FedEx envelope was just the beginning of a profusion of T's involvement in our daily lives. Several times a week, the surly mail lady would knock on my door and hand me a large padded envelope. Recordings. He sent us hundreds; some were his illicit piratings, others were burned copies from his collection. If James mentioned casually that he was interested in a certain opera, two days later we would receive ten different versions of it. The complete works of Strauss. The

complete works of Stravinsky. I started to feel as if we had more selections than the audio library of the nearby Cleveland Institute of Music.

One day, in their increasingly frequent correspondence, T. asked James where he purchased musical scores. They had been discussing the relatively unknown Wagner opera *Rienzi* and T. decided that James needed to see the overture for himself. James referred T. to Educational Music Services, a company utilized by orchestras, conservatories and professional musicians. T. created an account with EMS so he could purchase music for his new "buddy". In due course, scores began to arrive at the house, adding the UPS man to my daily knocks on the door. T's pièce de résistance was the hardbound urtext of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. Owning this score was a fantasy for James, who, as a high school student, fell in love with Wagner and was even caught trying to shoplift his recordings from the Metropolitan Opera Shop. The *Tristan* scores are cloth-bound in rich maroon with Richard Wagner scripted across the front in gold. Each of the three acts is a self-contained volume, 11"x15", and weighing in collectively at over ten pounds. Besides their artistic value, their size also makes them handy for flattening a new carpet edge or crumpled document. The scores arrived one at a time, by act, as if the five hours of music were unfolding before us like a serial novel. As is customary with EMS, their invoices were encased in plastic and affixed to the front of the packing envelope. The price of the "complete *Tristan*" (as it is called in the business) was over $700, an expense we never could have justified without a pending performance of the work.

As the material bounty accumulated, so to did T.'s communicative efforts. He was calling and emailing all the time. I received emails from him thanking me for my "friendship" and for "taking care of Jim." I also received emails from his wife telling me what a pleasure it had been to have some girl talk during our visit. James received emails throughout the day, T. corresponding as voraciously as a college freshman with newly unchallenged internet access. They would talk about programming or T. would recommend that James look at the website of a particular soloist. T. would ask about the work James's manager was doing. Had she talked to the people in Chicago? Philadelphia?

"Is there anyone you'd like *me* to talk to for you?" T. wondered.

I began to grow weary of James's compliance with T.'s longwinded conversations and his omnipresence in our life, albeit primarily through "stuff". When James was on the road working, I was impressed if he stayed on the phone with me for fifteen minutes. It was infuriating that he would indulge T. for more than twice that time, making laps around the apartment to compensate for being tethered to the phone. I would scowl at him while dodging his unpredictable pacing.

One day, James called me into the study, where he was checking his email after the morning's rehearsal. He was sitting at the huge teacher's desk his mother had pilfered from her job at P.S 32 in Staten Island, and our titanium laptop rested on its knotty blond finish. James had just finished reading an email from T. His leukemia had returned, and this time, it was sure to be terminal. T.

explained that this was the cause of his enthusiastic interest and involvement in our lives. He didn't have much time left; a year would be a generous prognosis.

"Really?" I said. "He's dying?"

T. informed us that he would be heading to Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in Manhattan, and he provided us with a link for information on his doctor and his treatment. He would henceforth be dividing his time between M. and New York as he had barred M. from joining him during his treatment. Her job was too important, and he'd been through this before. He felt best going it on his own.

It is not polite to question a person who says he is dying. In fact, it is so inappropriate that one even feels guilty doing it internally. So, I kept my suspicions to myself. T. and M. would be coming to Cleveland in a month's time to see an opera; I decided to wait and see how dire T's health appeared to be. I had just lost my aunt after a prolonged and ugly battle with metastasized breast cancer. I had seen what the disease and the treatment had done to her body. I thought of this while T. made plans to continue his concert-going. Wouldn't he be too nauseous to sit through three acts of Strauss?

Just before T. and M. were due to make their weekend visit to Cleveland, T. told James that he'd decided to come a few days earlier on his own, so that the two of them could have more time together. He made several hints, in hopes of being invited to crash on our couch, as if he was a friend from conservatory. Of course, my answer to this was a definitive "NO!" Aside from the fact that I don't really care to have any type of houseguest, in that apartment the distance between the guest "accommodations" and our bed was roughly seven feet, separated by glass-paned doors. It was typical of our friends to complain about James's snoring as if they were in the bed with us. T. was not welcome to experience such intimacy.

Eventually T. relented, but he still arrived in town a few days early. On a snowy Wednesday morning, he took a taxi directly to Severance Hall to meet James after rehearsal. I was able to keep T. at bay for a couple of days, but it was only a matter of time before I would be forced to feign interest in his sagas of opera-watching and radiation treatments. Thankfully, at this point, James was starting to feel the strain as well. We collaborated to allow ourselves some space from T., because it became clear that he would take every hour of James's for himself if given the opportunity.

When the weekend proper came, and M. arrived in town, the four of us shared a double date. James was obligated to work at the symphony, so we made arrangements to have dinner beforehand and attend the show together. In keeping with "tradition" (according to T.), we had martinis at our apartment first. T. and M. seemed to get drunk very quickly, M. especially. About half a martini into cocktail hour, both of them started to lose their grip on propriety. M. began to ramble about an abusive childhood and T. began to speak in passionate terms about his new "best friend Jim." Then, he decided that he needed to ceremoniously sign the *Tristan und Isolde* score that he had sent James. He wanted to

autograph the page that contained his favorite leitmotif (a melodic germ that recurs throughout the opera), but James would not allow T. to sign on the actual manuscript. Instead, he guided him to one of the sparse title pages where T. wrote in elaborate hand:

"Zwei herzen, die von Liebe brennen, kann menschen ohnmacht niemals trennen."

The quote is from Mozart's *The Magic Flute,* the composer's homage to freemasonry, which extols the virtues of male camaraderie. Loosely translated it means, "when two hearts come together with a common love, no man can tear them apart." When I pulled down the score from its storage place recently to unearth this quote, a shudder of recognition ran through me as I remembered Schickaneder's poetry; the sentiment was clearly not intended for a collegial friendship.

The night after the drunken double date, T. and M. insisted that I go to the opera with them while James worked. They assured me that I would love their friends whose daughter was singing the title role in *Turandot*. Short of faking food poisoning, there was no delicate way to sidestep their entreaties, so I headed off to a pre-theatre dinner with them. I sat beside T. at the supper club. As the bread basket was passed, he ignored its offerings, and he made a show of picking at his salad. As the waiter took our plates, T. looked at me with a downcast expression.

"The treatments completely ruin my appetite. Do I look thinner to you? I feel like I must be so pale and disgusting."

"I don't think you look any different than when I met you."

He was surprised by my matter-of-fact response, but it was the truth. He looked identical to the man I had met six weeks earlier. There was no evidence in his appearance that he had been undergoing intensive medical treatment, and he didn't exactly elicit sympathy as he sucked down his second martini of the night. Some people who are dying may want to throw caution to the wind, but most undergoing palliative care don't feel up to six ounces of gin (and then some) with their evening meal.

The next morning, while James made my cappuccino, we traded stories. I told him about the dinner table scene. He laughed and told me that the two of them had taken a walk around the neighborhood the day before, because T. wanted to have a talk with him. I pictured them walking the icy, empty sidewalks of Cleveland Heights, T. in his camel cashmere coat and silk paisley scarf, and James in a North Face parka. T. decided he needed to share his wisdom as a more experienced man. He felt that James and I had been dating for so many years that it was time for a marriage proposal. Marriage, he stressed, was not something a man does for himself, but a gesture of commitment for the woman in his life so that she may feel secure. T. assumed that our finances were in the way of James making this life decision, so he reached into his pocket and produced a diamond ring.

"You can have this ring. You need to do this," he said.

James balked at the offer. He assured T. that he was planning on proposing to me some time in the future, but he certainly wasn't going to do it if he couldn't buy the jewelry himself.

"Besides, Lee would never wear a ring like that. It's gold. She never wears gold."

T. put the ring back in his pocket. James thanked him for the advice and assured him that he understood his sentiments. He was careful not to offend T. while also trying to make him realize that his ideas were intrusive. This sensitive waltz became James's modus operandi for the next few months as T.'s health continued to deteriorate.

The weeks after that visit brought a flurry of activity from T. It was almost as if he could sense us bristling with discomfort from across the Great Lakes. First, we received a check in the mail for $5,000. While visiting, he and M. had looked out of our dining room windows to see James's car languishing with a flat tire in our outdoor parking space. We explained that the car was in need of some major repairs and we were waiting for James's forthcoming fees from the Zürich Opera to take care of it. It wasn't a hassle for us to share my car in the interim. Apparently, living in such abject poverty was unconscionable to T. and M., so they sent us money with "no strings attached" written on the accompanying card.

To follow that display of bravado, T. began sending James emails about his estate. He was spending a lot of time putting his affairs in order and, seeing that he had no children, he decided that he wanted to include James in his will. He promised us a Mark Rothko miniature, and a monetary gift. An account had been created in James's name with Bank of America, and it would become accessible to him after T's death. He provided James with a ten-digit account number and said that the password would be forwarded to him via attorney at the proper time. James wrote the number down and folded it within the pages of *Tristan und Isolde,* but not before attempting to find out if the account number was valid on the bank's website, an experiment that proved inconclusive.

One afternoon, I was working on some audition arias when the buzzer rang. I went to the front of the apartment and saw two UPS men through the window. When I was signing for my package, a score I was expecting from Indiana University, one of them said, "Hold on, we've got some big boxes for you also."

I hadn't ordered anything; I immediately thought of T. What had he done now?

The men heaved the load into my foyer and I saw that there were stickers on the boxes requiring proof of age. Inside, within Styrofoam containers, were twenty-four bottles of 2000 vintage Bordeaux—a stellar year even for third and fourth growth bottles. And along with the wine, he sent eight crystal Riedel wine glasses, which I imagined must be around $20 apiece. All I could do was laugh, fill the wine rack, and get back to practicing. He was crazy, and that's what we started to call him: "crazy T."

Later that week, I was looking forward to James's return from rehearsal, because I found out some travel information that I wanted to share with him. I smiled as I caught sight of his car pass the study window. As he came up the back staircase, I could hear him speaking on the phone. "T.," he mouthed to me as he passed through the kitchen where I was waiting. "He's a mess," he said rolling his eyes and patting me on the hip. Then, he rounded the corner and walked out of the apartment through the front door, so he could circle the courtyard while T. held him captive. For the next forty-five minutes, while I attempted to translate some songs at the dining room table, I kept looking over my shoulder to watch James turn beneath the budding wisteria along the arbor. Through the single paned glass, I listened to the cadence of his sympathies and felt the interminable silences that held him while T. most likely whined about the unfairness of mortality. My patience was exhausted. I was jealous of how much attention this loon was garnering from my boyfriend. I wanted a day without hearing T's name. I wanted James's undivided attention.

By the time James came back into the house, I had percolated into a state of tearful frustration. I felt that T. was taking advantage of James's kindness; T. had no one in his life to talk to and no vocation to distract him from loneliness. In my stomach, a gnawing intuition was telling me that T. was not a good person. I pleaded with James to let the relationship go.

"Why? He's not hurting anyone. Look at everything he's given us," he said, gesturing towards the wine rack behind me.

We argued back and forth, ultimately agreeing that we weren't going to agree on the matter. James promised me that when we went to Zürich for six weeks, I wouldn't have to deal with T. It was impossible for him to communicate with such consistency while we were overseas.

In a way, we did share a pleasant freedom during our time in Zürich. We had no internet access in our apartment and we weren't able to use our mobile phones. All we had was a local phone, and it rarely rang. On the evening of James's first performance of *La Bohème* we arrived at the hall early and made our way though the bowels of the theatre to the conductor's dressing room. We filed past the ballet dancers lunching on cigarettes in the canteen, the singers vocalizing in the hallways, the seamstresses steaming costumes, the techies arguing in German, and all the beautiful chaos that makes a European opera house what it is. The conductor's dressing room was high above it all, on the third floor, tucked at the end of a long corridor. Inside, on the coffee table beside the Eames chaise, was a fancy looking box. It bore the logo of Zürich's most posh hotel, the Baur au Lac—more explicitly, the Baur au Lac wine shop. Inside were two bottles of expensive champagne and a note from T. and M. expressing good luck in the operatic tradition, "*toi, toi, toi.*" The mighty Atlantic had nothing on those two. T. was on the phone the next day making sure we had received the gift and recounting the arduous task of selecting champagne with a clerk for whom English was not a first language.

Two days later, we received a frantic phone call from M. She was in tears. T. had suffered a heart attack, something that was a potential risk of his last-ditch treatment efforts. She was in hysterics, especially because T. would not allow her to fly to New York to be with him. When James caught up with T. later that day, his reedy voice was barely audible over the long-stretched wire. While in the past couple of months he had kept James on the phone for hours crying over his impending death, this time he claimed to have made peace with the end.

The rest of our time in Zürich unfolded without the daily inclusion of T., and I enjoyed the quiet. When T. did reach us, I sensed that he was raising the stakes. If he was able to commandeer a moment of James's time on the phone, he always had a grave bit of news to share. James would amble on our back porch that overlooked the wildflowers of the botanical gardens. Then, he would come back inside and tell me the latest. By the time we were packing to return to Cleveland, T. had survived multiple mild heart attacks, come within inches of his life only to recover miraculously, and soiled himself while watching a matinee of *Salome* at the Metropolitan Opera.

While T's stories became increasing unbelievable, neither James nor I had the gall to question him directly. In light of his generosity, it seemed gauche to do anything other than listen and be a "friend," although, I would have preferred it to be a very distant friendship. We simply carried on. James made tentative plans to return to Chicago (against my wishes) to see the conductor Daniel Barenboim's final concerts with the symphony. He felt it would be one last opportunity to thank T. for all he had done, and he also really wanted to see Barenboim work with the CSO. Thankfully, before we could seriously get into it, fate intervened.

One night, around 10:30, James came flying though back door. He was speaking before I could even greet him.

"You're not going to believe this!"

He darted around the apartment while I listened. That night, during the concert, the marketing director of the Cleveland Orchestra, the woman who originally put us in touch with T., stopped James in a crowded backstage hallway.

"Are you planning to go to Chicago next week?" she asked. "I think you should call Henry before you do."

"What does that mean?" James asked her.

"Just call him."

James went into his office and called Henry, an important figure in the classical music business and a longtime acquaintance of T's. Henry was happy to hear from James. A nagging feeling had been plaguing Henry, so he decided to call Sloan Kettering and inquire after the patient T. There was no such patient, and in fact he would come to learn, there was no such person. We had all been had.

"Not only is he not dying," James told me, "he's never been sick, not once!"

T. had been courting death and illness for decades in order to draw people close to him. All of us: W., Henry, James and I, and even M. had been scripted into his great tragic drama. As the layers unraveled, shocking details emerged. The emails James and I received from M. were actually from T., who had set up an email account in her name. He had also drained her 401K to purchase gifts for us and to finance his trips to New York City, where, rather than go to treatment, he hired male escorts to occupy his time.

I have to say my reaction was one of elation; I had been suspicious of T. from day one. And, I had been frustrated with James for not trusting my intuition. When he looked at me and said, "You were right," I could not have been more thrilled. I thought of a day when James was laughing on the phone with T. a week earlier. T. was supposedly being pushed around Central Park in a wheelchair by a nurse who was listening to hip hop on her iPod. He kept interrupting his conversation with James to yell instructions to her. Now, I realized that he was just walking around the park alone, shouting to himself and looking every bit the lunatic he was.

Lee Taylor *has an MFA in Creative Writing from The New School where she worked with Phillip Lopate. She is currently writing a novel and raising two children in Brooklyn, NY.*

My Circle, *Rape*

Jeneni Withers

When first discovered, I didn't show my rape to anyone. I held it in my arms: an invisible, circular mass. I wondered if people could see it, if they could smell it, or even hear its steady repetitive beating. I kept telling it, "*Shhh, just be quiet*," but no one could hear it anyway.

When it started getting visible, I showed it to my friend, Ann Elise. "I'm sorry, one night stands are the worst," she said, "and they hurt like hell." She was from D.C., and she knew all about one-night stands. Later that night, I found a knife and carved: *One Night Stand* across my circle's face in tiny little letters. I carried *One Night Stand* around with me. Sometimes it would drum louder or faster, and when it would, I tried feeding it, holding it like a baby, lulling it to sleep, wondering if the steady pounding would go away, wondering if I would ever sleep properly again.

I took up clubbing; the floors were dark, the rooms were big, and the pop music was much louder and heavier than *One Night Stand*. The drinks made *One Night Stand* smaller, small enough I could fit it into my back pocket, where it wouldn't get in the way. Before I knew it, all eyes were on me. No one could see my little beating circle peeping out from my back pocket, and I started having sex again. At the end of each one-night stand, I'd learn a new word to carve into my circle: *Whore. Evil. Destructive. Powerful.* This went on for months.

"Here is my circle. Do you hear it beating? Do you want to hold it?" I'd say. Then, they'd give my circle new words, new names, new labels. When I came home after that long year in Africa, my circle, with all its new identities etched into its skin, was beating louder than ever.

I was walking down an alleyway in the middle of the day with my older brother Gregory, my hero, wondering if it was just me that could hear the beating, wondering if I was the only one who was trying to match my step with its tempo.

"Here is my circle, I got it in Africa. I don't know what to call it, what do you think?" I said to him.

"Jeneni, do you feel *guilty?*" His eyes meant well, like a bubbly warm hug, but his words were irreversible. So later that night, I scribbled *guilty* on my circle, with tears in my eyes. This was the name that felt the most accurate; I finally knew who my circle was. *Guilty* grew heavier, but I couldn't stop carrying it, feeding it, cradling it like it was my baby. My sweet, noisy baby that wouldn't shut up at night. *Guilty* had grown so large, so strong that I finally decided to share it with my friend Daniel.

Daniel wrote me a love song once, about how angels fly away and how his heart had to let me go. I was in Ghana when he wrote it, and my circle was barely visible at that time. My circle hated his song. It was cheesy, insincere, unrealistic. I was laying in bed with Daniel one night, wondering when and how I would introduce my circle to him. We started having sex, when suddenly *guilty* was pounding harder and louder than I had ever heard it before. It shook and I shook. It got louder and I sobbed harder, without even understanding why. Later that night, I etched another name into my circle—*panic*. Daniel continued to lie next to me, never really knowing *panic* until one night, *panic* got softer, and he told me that he felt the thumping. It was faint, he said. It didn't bother him, he assured me.

The nights passed on, and Daniel heard the thumping with more clarity each day. I tried to feed *panic*, to console it, to understand it so that Daniel wouldn't have to. Daniel's eyes weren't bright anymore, his grip around me at night loosened, and that's when my circle got another name: *dirty*. Daniel's grip became so loose that it was only distracting me from *dirty* and I had to let Daniel go. I pushed him, and clung on to *dirty*, consoled the little circle, hushing it, hoping it wouldn't cry too often.

It stopped crying for a while. It stopped beating, or at least, it was barely audible, and 23 sexual partners later, I could barely hear *dirty* at night. I stopped showing *dirty* to people. I was really protective of it because I had finally gotten it to a place where it was small, compact, and nonintrusive. I started to introduce *dirty* to counselors, hoping that they could help me get rid of it. It was like a shadow. A barely beating, heavy shadow that was triggered when someone tried to touch it. I thought no one could see it, no one could hear it, but the quieter it became in my ears, the more audible it was in the ears of others.

"Get some *help*."

"You need to let yourself *feel*."

"You have been *hurt*."

Help. Feel. Hurt. More words were etched into my circle, and the beating was getting loud again. When I started talking about my circle, everyone began to pull out clipboards and read from them word for word. On the back of their clipboards were titles like, *How to Talk to A Victim of Rape, for Dummies*, and *Survivor Alliance: Help Them Know They're Not Alone*. Soon enough, the clipboards separated my circle and I from the people that were supposed to help us. They tried to place my circle, with all its names, all its memories, into boxes and packages and plans. That felt OK until I realized the relationship I had with my circle. I began missing it at night, missing its rhythm, the reminder, the companionship. I missed how when I held it, it had endless names, but the same rhythm. I missed that when I gave it to the people I loved, just to see it, listen to and observe, they got to feel that rhythm, just for a second. A rhythm that means too much to me to put into a box somewhere. When I cradle it and hold it and share it with others, they feel the drum beating steady. Strong. Clear. They can call my circle what they want, I know that it's rape and I know what that

means to me. I know that it has never wanted to separate me from people, that it brings us together—slowly, somehow. The steady beating drawing people in.

When I close my eyes and feel the drum's rhythm through my hands, I envision this memory from two years earlier:

Tears fall from my eyes while I sit in the grass on a farm in Hawaii. I've moved here because the labels I've etched into my circle have become cluttered. I am seeking to understand the rhythm my circle echoes: *Where does it come from? What does it mean?* I've been working on the farm all day long, the beating drum of my circle pounding in my ears, pounding while I turn the soil, pounding when I put the seeds into the soft earth. The farmer's wife, who owns the land, approaches me. Her name is Jeanne. She sees my tears and I see that she walks to the tempo of my throbbing circle. From watered eyes, I hold my circle out for her to see, to know. When she sees it, she says, "I see you."

I close my eyes and feel the tears in a new way, like the water from within me is cleaning my outsides. My circle thumps. Jeanne places her hands gently on my shoulders and says, "*You* could have been a rapist in a past life."

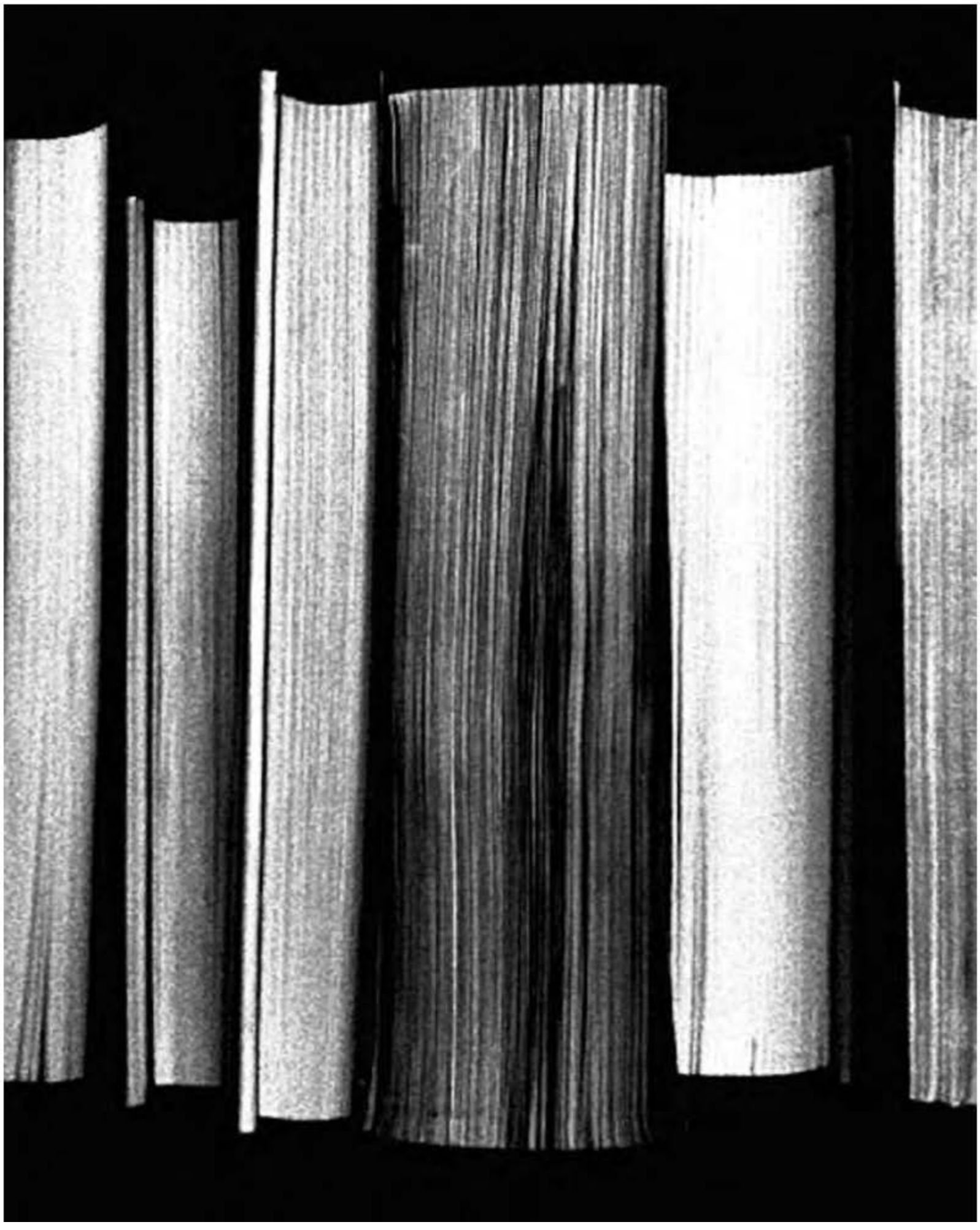
Her words don't condemn me. They free me. I look down at my circle, run my fingers over the scarring words, the interpretations. I feel an urge to squeeze it, to kiss it, to rub it. Instead, I press my ear against it and the rhythm is soft and steady like a drop in a cave. I do not move. The rhythm grows and I close my eyes to imagine faces of men and women from countless centuries before me. I see them holding circles, just like mine. I see them in tents, in caves, in huts, in homes, in beds. Carving, etching, scraping, shushing, questioning their circles. I watch these people—so many humans—and finally I know where the rhythm comes from, cries from. I see them all.

The rhythm is not only one circle or one tragic event in history. It is not meant to shame, to blame, to guilt, to harm or to loom over. The rhythm is an awareness of what everyone carries inside them: the potential to tenderly love and care for something that is very difficult to comprehend.

Jeneni Withers *is a junior at Carnegie Mellon University studying Creative and Professional Writing. She writes in order to connect with people, to challenge herself to be more honest, and to inspire her peers.*

ARTWORK

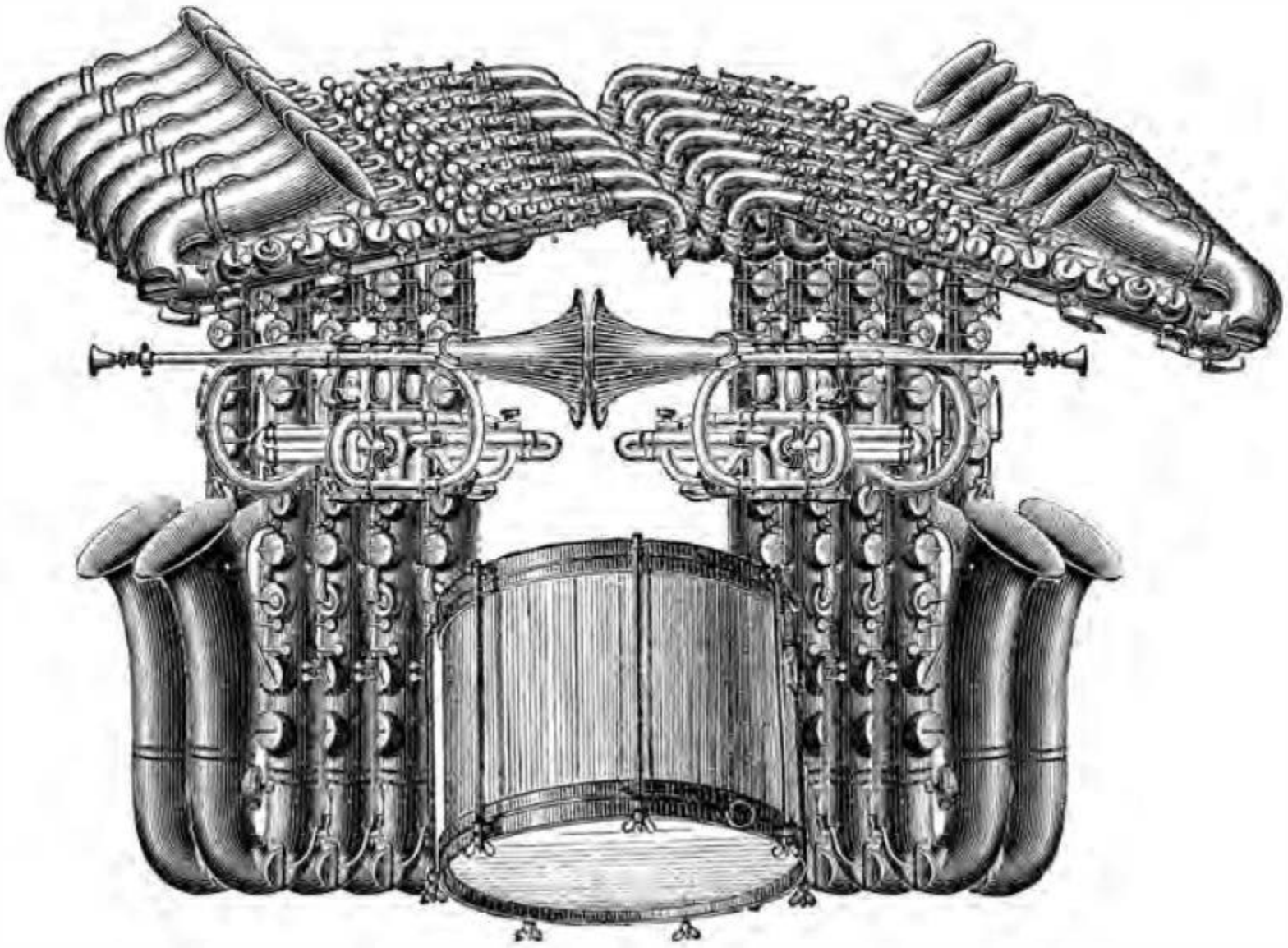
#647, from the series "Phonography" by Matt Gold, photography.



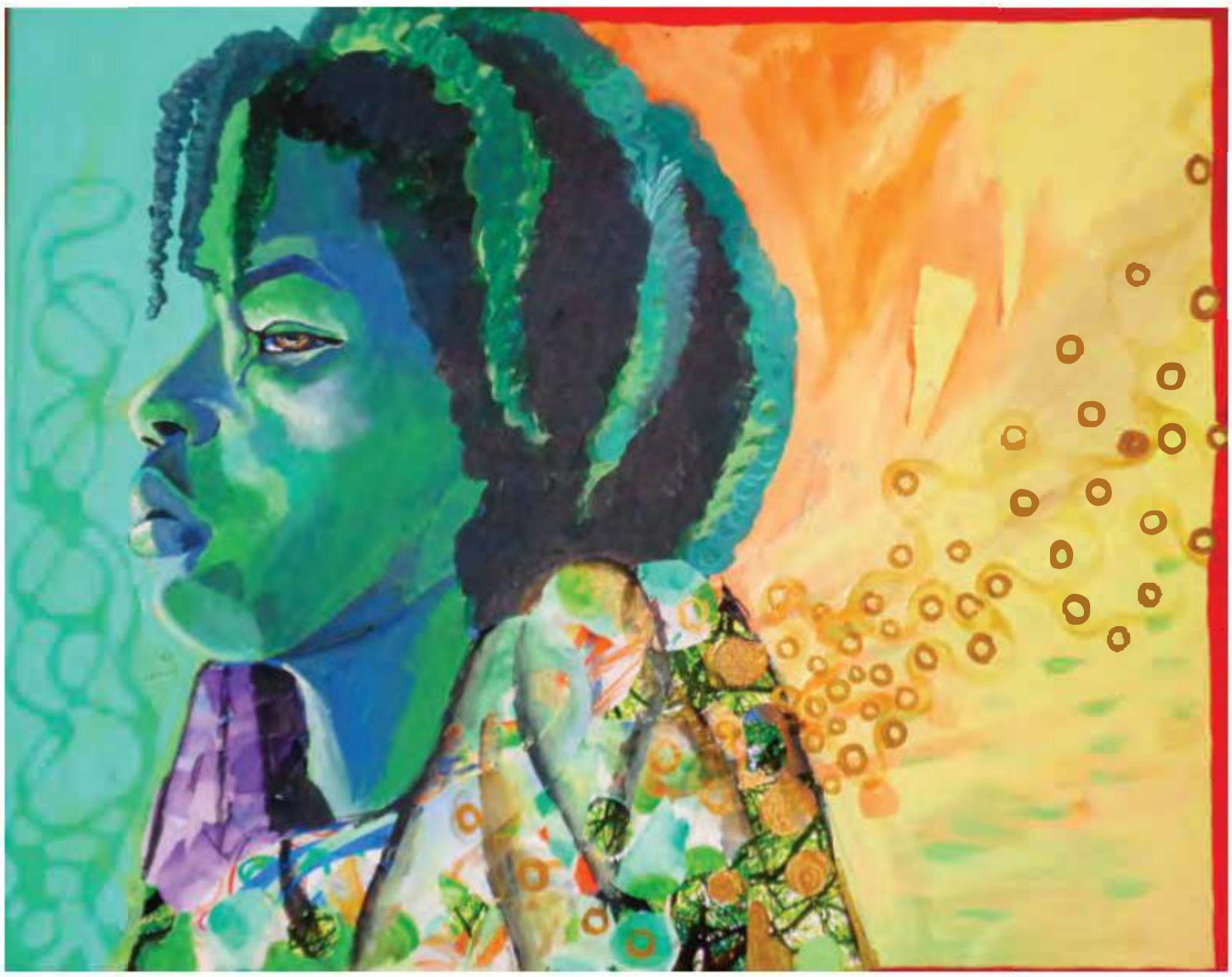
#473, from the series "Phonography" by Matt Gold, photography.

#752, from the series "Phonography" by Matt Gold, photography.

Giant, Anni Wilson, engraved stained glass.



The Borrowed Moonlight of Melody, Bill Wolak, digital collage.



Black Boy Dreaming, Kiarra Lynn Smith, acrylic paint, fabric paint, glue, and paper.

Coney Island, Ira Joel Haber, photography.

House Colorings Crumpled, No. 1, Ira Joel Haber, colored pencils, paper.

Great Writers, Great Readings: A Q&A with Phillip Lopate and Kelly McMasters

Edited by Matt Paczkowski

A prolific writer, Phillip Lopate has been published in every genre, consistently pushing boundaries and exploring new territories through his fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and literary criticism. Most notably, Lopate has influenced and shaped our understanding of personal essays as part of a literary lineage. In addition to his innumerable achievements as a writer, Lopate has guided new waves of essayists through his workshops at Hofstra University, Bennington College, and Columbia University.

On September 28th, 2016, as part of the *Great Writers, Great Readings* series, Hofstra University was honored to welcome Phillip Lopate back to campus. Following a reading of his essay, "Experience Necessary" from *After Montaigne: Contemporary Essayists Cover the Essays,* edited by David Lazar and Patrick Madden, Lopate sat down with Hofstra MFA faculty member and essayist, Kelly McMasters, for a Q&A.

KM: Thank you. I got to hear you read ["Experience Necessary"] at AWP, and it was even better this time. This is the perfect essay because one of my questions has to do with the lists and arithmetic that goes on in that essay—the lists of unanswered questions. In an interview with *Harper's Magazine*, you said, "I often start out in a place that feels like a baffling cul-de-sac. I think, 'How did I get here? What's going on?' I can't start out in a self-pleased place because then there's no tension. There's no place for the essay to go." One of our students was hoping you would have some advice for young writers trying to figure out how to take their thoughts from that baffling cul-de-sac to a concise essay.

PL: Well, one thing I did in this essay was divide it up into small units so I could control it better. Then, I played around with some of it, like the section that's all clichés or the section that's all questions. I was able to mix in some literary references at times. When I write something, I'm not just thinking about what I'm writing, but I'm also thinking about the whole tradition of the essay and piggy-backing on it. It's not like I have to reinvent the wheel every time. There are some great essays on

experience, not just Montaigne's, but Emerson has a great essay on experience. In a way I thought, "This is ridiculous. How can you write an essay about experience? It's just too big a topic, too shapeless." Then, I tried to carve some pieces off of the marble. In a way, there is a kind of comedy underneath it. You can't really write an essay about experience. I'm playing with that in a way. For me, when I start to feel baffled, I try to reach for something mischievous. I try to do mischief. That keeps me going. It really does. If I can laugh at something, then I think, "Okay, this is not going to be so terrible."

KM: In that essay, you also mention Lily, your daughter. Of course, children change things. The way you talk in this essay, the way you live and the way you see the world changes because of her. [Children] also change the way we write. One of the main questions I get over and over in my classrooms is, "But what about the people we're writing about? How do we protect them but still do our job as writers, as artists?" You have many amazing essays where I think, "Omigosh, I'm so happy he wrote that, but how would that person feel?" I wonder how you work out the lines you draw for yourself. I know you can't draw lines for other people, but what are *your* lines?

PL: Well, first of all, I don't have an answer for other people, and I don't have a one-size-fits-all answer. I have to decide it each time, anew. The short answer is that I write about what's important and accept the guilt. I say in this, it's a good idea to make lots of friends, because you're going to lose some, and also to be born into a large family. The third recommendation I make is to only write about people who are too poor to sue you. That's very important. Seriously, I do think that it's a question that doesn't go away. It won't go away. Thomas Hardy wrote a lot of beautiful love poems to women he had crushes on, and his two wives read them. Got him in a lot of trouble, but they were important for him to write. I used to fool myself and think, "I'll write this and then I'll put it in a drawer. I won't do anything with it. This is just for me. Secret writing." Then if it turned out well, I think, "Well, to heck with that, I'm going to publish it." I do think that, this will sound like a rationalization, but in a way, you are giving the people you're writing about something. You're communicating with them what you actually feel. I think if you can write about other people without vindictiveness, without vendetta, without revenge, and try to, at least partly, understand their side, then I think you have the right to write about other people. Obviously, fiction writers say, "Well, I'm just going to disguise everything." The problem with that is that usually the people know when they're being disguised, and they get just as angry with you. I think being alive is potentially hurting others, but you do the best you can.

KM: Sometimes, you put other people in the spotlight, but more often than not, you put yourself in the spotlight. In "Against Joie de Vivre," you say, "I distrust anything which will make me pause long enough to be put in touch with my helplessness." I wonder, how do you become brave enough to admit, face, and live within that helplessness, and then expose it to your readers?

PL: I don't have an option. I will, at times, be helpless, and that's true for everyone. I think that being honest is a two-step process. I have to search my thoughts all the time to think, "What is going on here? What was I doing? Why am I doing this?" On the other hand, I have to turn myself into a character, so that when I write about myself, I don't feel so vulnerable. I think that's *that* guy. I've made myself into a character. I don't feel exposed because I'm aware of the artifice involved. Even in the shaping of each sentence, you're not taking your clothes off in public. You're thinking, and if you're humble enough, you know you're not the first person to have this thought. I'm just trying to understand the way I operate and transmit it into shapely sentences, which other people can read and some will identify with.

KM: When did you know how to do that? When you first came to nonfiction, when you first started writing essays, did that come naturally to you, or was it harder during certain parts of your life?

PL: I think that it was a form that I was really born to write. I had always liked first-person fiction that had a strong, confiding voice. That's true even for poetry. In "My Last Duchess" by Browning, I really liked his voice, somebody who's taking risks. That's just a preference. I like the warmth that can come through an articulate first person. Then I've always had, as I said in this piece, a propensity for detachment. I didn't feel my life was on the line somehow. I wrote fiction and poetry before I came to nonfiction. [Nonfiction] seemed to me a form that I could use some of the elements of poetry, like jumping around, free-associating, and also keep those elements of fiction, which were character, story, and narrative. I was able to combine those two threads essentially. I guess it has gotten easier, but that's a problem because if it gets too easy then you get bored and think, "Well, I've written this essay already." You have to keep setting new challenges. I will admit that at this point in my life, I have the feeling that I could figure out some way of putting it across. Some trick, something. So, yes, in that sense, it has gotten easier.

KM: In thinking back to when you first started writing, or in looking at the students that you teach now, what are the greatest mistakes that young writers make when they try to use their own experiences in their writing? Do you see hallmark mistakes of a new personal essayist?

PL: Sure, I think that the biggest mistake is self-righteousness and its nephew, defensiveness, and somehow confusing defending one's life with creating an artifact. With that, I would say, solemnity in general. Sometimes, I read student work and it feels as though there's a stone on the student's chest, and I just want them to not take themselves so seriously and have a little more fun with it or just be a little more worldly. I think that is certainly, I don't know if you would call it a mistake, but an inevitable stage of development. If you're young and haven't experienced much or haven't been exposed to much, you're bound to be a little unworldly. You may be shocked at something that, later on, you realize, "What was so shocking about that? Everyone knows that." Part of what you may have to do when you're first beginning is to bluff more worldliness than you really have.

KM: I agree. I think that often, though it's not only with age, young writers sometimes bluster in a different way on the page as a way of giving permission to write something about themselves. You often hear today about memoir, and the age of memoirists, "Are they too young? What do they have to tell us?" I think that sometimes there's a confidence issue. I also see that, regardless of age and with writers who are coming to nonfiction, there's less space to hide on the page.

PL: Yes, absolutely, and I think that sometimes students will simply be evasive. Sometimes they'll scramble the chronology unnecessarily because they're afraid of being straightforward. There's a kind of shame underneath it, like, "Do I really have the right to tell this?" That's why they have to figure out ways of having fun with it.

KM: Now, here's a question that I still struggle with: creative nonfiction verses literary nonfiction. I know where you stand. That's a big question in the classroom for students coming in. Why is it *non*fiction? Why can't we call it something else, and then what is creative nonfiction verses literary nonfiction?

PL: What would be the alternative to nonfiction? What would they want to call it, prose?

KM: Nobody in my classroom has ever come up with a better answer. I think that's why we all get stuck with being defined by what we're not.

PL: I know, it's like the uncola or the Antichrist, or something like that. I have a very good reason for supporting the term "nonfiction," which is that I'm a careerist and it helps me get a paycheck to say that I'm a nonfiction writer. I'm being euphemistic in a way, but I prefer the term literary nonfiction because it speaks to the artifact. Creative nonfiction seems to me like you're patting yourself on the back, and no one sets out to write *un*creative nonfiction. Robert Frost says, "You shouldn't

call yourself a poet. Let other people call you a poet." I think basically there is this tradition. You can't call it autobiographical prose because there's a lot of non-autobiographical prose. It's nonfiction. For me, the reason why I'm drawn to literary nonfiction, even though one could say it's another way of patting yourself on the back, is that I'm in love with this idea that it's been going on for centuries, that this is not something new. I feel like there's something disingenuous about acting like the memoir is this new form. I like the idea of alluding to the shadow of tradition.

KM: I like that idea, too. I was speaking to the essayist Lina Ferreira recently, who wrote a piece about cannibalism for the same Montaigne anthology that you just read from, and I asked, because she sat on that panel with you, if she had any recommendations for questions. She suggested that I ask you something simple like your favorite color.

PL: No, don't ask me that. I love that green, though [referring to Kelly's green skirt].

KM: [Laughs] Thank you! Back to Lina, though. She just won a Rona Jaffe Award. Leslie Jameson just started teaching with you at Columbia. Elena Passarello won a Whiting last year, and she's burning up the West Coast. Why this appetite for strong younger female voices in the world of essays?

PL: You know, the essay used to be a male province, and there were women writers, obviously, going back before to Aphra Behn and through the 18th century, but they were mostly writing novels, plays, and letters. They were not writing essays. The male essayists were oftentimes ridiculing themselves and calling themselves outsiders, nonplayers, idlers, and so on, but they were doing it in such a way that was drawing on a lot of easy authority, something that was harder for women to assert. We've seen so many powerful women essayists in the 20th century and now in the 21st century, like Susan Sontag, Mary McCarthy, and so on. I think that, obviously, the feminist movement gave a certain amount of commission to talk about one's body, one's relations to men, and to talk about, for lack of a better word, vulnerable subjects. Essentially, women have really moved into the area. Some of the strongest essayists now are women. A friend of mine, Lynn Freed, sent me her new book, and it's just beautiful. Emily Fox Gordon. There are so many. I think curiously enough they are undefensive, and you might say now that men are on the defensive. They're not sure. Men are not sure how to speak without offending. I, of course, am shameless, so I don't have this problem.

KM: Well, the key to so much of nonfiction is vulnerability. It sounds like you're saying we're at a place where women feel more protected, and so they can be more vulnerable on the page.

PL: Or they can stage their vulnerability. Let's make that clear. Yes, vulnerable, but once you make it into an artifact, it's much less vulnerable. It's that thing, it's not you anymore. *That* bowl, *that* piece of pottery. You've shaped it.

KM: I think, for a young essayist coming to the form, one of the most important things to understand is that it's not yourself on the page. You talk so beautifully about that in your book on creative nonfiction, [*The Art of the Personal Essay*], and also in the essay, "Turning Oneself into a Character."

Speaking of instruction, you direct the nonfiction part of an MFA program [at Columbia University]. Thinking about MFA programs in general now, there's a discussion about the MFA crisis. When you think about how to structure MFA programs to teach people writing, because I do believe you think it is teachable, what do you think is the most important thing we can do, in the next ten or twenty years, in an MFA program in particular?

PL: What I've tried to do at Columbia is to add a lot of courses like science writing, criticisms, or master classes in food writing and environmental writing, for example. Let's say a student enters writing memoir or personal essays. I want them to leave being able to do more than one thing. I want them to be able to do research, and I want them to be able to move between different subject matters because I want them to be able to make a living. Let's look at nonfiction as a big text. I have been writing a lot of criticism lately, but I see criticism as a demonstration of personality, just as much as the personal essays. If we read people like Lionel Trilling or Edmund Wilson or Susan Sontag, they might never use the word "I," but you still feel very strongly that they've created a voice and a personality on the page. I just want to broaden the idea of nonfiction. I taught a course in what I call Continental Essay. In that course, I started out with Seneca and Cicero and I went to Leopardi and Nietzsche and Freud and Walter Benjamin and Susan Sontag and so on. It involves some philosophy because philosophy is also a kind of nonfiction. I'm looking to expand the intellectual reach of nonfiction. Because it's wonderful when students realize that they can write about themselves but they can also use a generalization or aphorism that goes beyond their personal experience into something larger. Part of the answer is that I'd like [the MFA program] to be more intellectually rigorous, and I'd like it to be more various and more involved with the tradition. If we learn to write in the 2017 way, by the time it's 2018, it's already all hack, so you might as well go back to Cicero.

KM: And that will be new again!

PL: It's not that I think you can teach someone to be a writer, it's that I think you can do something parallel to them, and you can form a relationship, which is what teaching is. It's a relationship. What I've observed in MFA programs is that my students get better as writers. Am I teaching them to write? I don't know, but I'm throwing lots of stuff at them, and they're taking what they can, or maybe they would have gotten better within the course of those two years even without that. Something is happening. It's not systematic. One learns a lot from a teacher, but it has nothing to do with what that teacher is saying. Body language. Just seeing them persist, maybe when they're down or something like that, or seeing them being uncertain. You're learning the other person. You're going to school for studying the teachers as human beings as well as for what they're trying to teach you.

Wind/Mill Prizes

To celebrate our inaugural issue, Windmill held two contests with a prize of $500 attached to each. Team Windmill is made up of both undergraduate and MFA students, and we wanted our prizes to reflect our commitment to fostering strong student writers.

Initially, we used "Wind" and "Mill" as placeholder titles for the prizes, until we realized these names genuinely reflected what we hoped the prizes would reward: Mill, our undergraduate prize, references the hard work of grinding (and, at times, pulverizing) our pages, feeding them through the workshop process until the grain turns into flour. Wind, our graduate prize, brought to mind the constant power and push required when undertaking a graduate degree in creative writing, and the need to harness and direct that power in order to create.

In both prizes, our judges looked for incredible narrative and strong story-telling, regardless of genre. We thank our esteemed judges—Julia Markus, Martha McPhee, Stephen Russell, and Paul Zimmerman—for their time and attention, and for making the difficult decision of choosing the winners out of a very competitive crowd.

THE WINNERS

The Wind Prize:
"Glazed" by A. Lyn Carol

The Mill Prize:
"The Seawater Lighthouse: An Annotated History" by Collin Van Son

Glazed

A. Lyn Carol

My daughter leaves for college in less than two years. She will be driving in less than two months. Her encroaching departures, both large and small scale, trigger a recurring nightmare for me. In my dream, she is late coming home, way past curfew. I am watching out the window for her car, peeking through the blinds, calling her phone every few minutes. I see nothing but the thick darkness of two o'clock in the morning. After hours of waiting, lights sweep across the living room wall as she pulls into the driveway. Fog makes the headlights fuzzy. As she walks from the car, her gait is uneven and tilting. Her long hair conceals her face. I swing open the door, as angry as I am scared. My voice is strident as I throw questions at her, not giving her a chance to respond. "Where have you been? Who were you with? Do you know what time it is? Did you not think of how worried I'd be?"

But in my dream, she is unable to comprehend my questions. Her glazed eyes skim over me. She doesn't register that it's me. My panic bleeds into terror. I ask her the same litany of questions, my volume and speed increasing with each iteration. She continues to look at me without recognition, her pupils small and fixed in the blue eyes she inherited from me. I realize she is drunk. A loud, buzzing static fills my brain. I realize they aren't my eyes at all, or hers, but my father's. *My father drank Wild Turkey whiskey straight from the bottle and often didn't come home after his shift at the post office. He was a mail carrier. I was proud of him because his job had an actual uniform, which was fancier than the local hog farmers with their shit-crusted gumboots and pungent odors. When my father left for work in the mornings, his blue work shirt was tucked into blue work pants still smooth from the iron. Every hem was crisp. His wide-billed work hat sat tall and straight on his head. My favorite part of his uniform was the eagle insignia. In the logo, the eagle is poised for takeoff, powerful wings raised and strong beak masculine and commanding. Beneath the eagle, in bold black letters surrounded by red, white, and blue: U.S. MAIL. To me, my father was as important as the president when he wore that uniform.

Sometimes when my father didn't come home by suppertime, my mother rounded up my sisters and me, and we went looking for him. We usually found him at Charlie Brown's, a dive bar that served food. He favored their fried chicken gizzards when he was drinking. Being the oldest at age eleven, I was the one my mother sent in to fetch him and let him know that we sure did want him to come home. When that didn't work, my mother told me to tell him "Jesus wants you to come home now." That didn't work, either.

Every time I walked into Charlie Brown's, the stench of cigarettes watered my eyes and burned my nose. The bar was smoky enough that as a child, I imagined you could cut a square out of the thick gray band that hovered over everyone's heads. Usually one of my father's buddies spotted me first and gave him a nudge. They'd swivel around on their barstools in unison, each of them looking different but also the same, enough that they blended into one looming, blurred mass of men. I saw different colors of hair, but it was all side-parted with greasy Brylcreem. They had red faces with deep creases around their eyes and mouths as they laughed at me, and all their teeth were big and yellow. Their hands were huge with ridged fingernails that looked as thick as a horse's hoof. They ribbed my father about being fetched by a little girl, now he'd gone and done it, he was in the doghouse for sure. My father never thought it was as funny as they did. My stomach squiggled when he bore into me with angry eyes, his mouth pressed into a thin, straight line.

The nights we didn't go looking for him, the tension of waiting and listening slowed down the clock and muffled our voices. Most times my sisters and I were asleep by the time he stumbled through the front door. His vomiting or the thudding of his heavy feet on the creaking floorboards usually woke me up, but I was too scared to get out of bed. I'd never seen his eyes at the tail end of drinking until the night of the chocolate-almond ice cream incident.

On this particular night, my sisters and I were up late, so it must have been the weekend. We were waiting for him to get home so we could have a special treat: fancy-brand, store-bought, chocolate-almond ice cream. My family ate squirrels, cow tongue covered in gravy, and dented-can discounts for supper. Ice cream, when we had it, was homemade and runny and vaguely vanilla. The silken goodness of machine-churned milk and cream was a rare extravagance. Chocolate was amazing, but almonds made it exotic. My mother had bought it for us in an attempt to foster some family bonding.

My sisters and I gathered in the kitchen around the large oak table. Each of us held a spoon at the ready, chipped bowls empty and waiting. My mother stood at the counter next to the sink, watching the kitchen clock tick closer to midnight. In a display of false optimism, she set out the half-gallon of Breyers ice cream to soften. A few minutes later, she peeled the carton away from the ice cream, waiting to slice the block into two-inch slabs. She preferred slices over scoops.

By the time my father sauntered into the kitchen all easy-breezy, the ice cream was pooling at the bottom. The tails of his wrinkled work shirt were sticking out, and he had sweat stains under his arms. The first few buttons of his shirt were undone, and I could see his graying undershirt. One of his pant legs was caught in the elastic of his regulation work socks. His hat sat cockeyed, making the eagle look silly. But it was my father's surreal grin that unsettled me the most. His mouth looked plump and oversized like a pair of red wax lips.

My mother peppered him with questions: "Where have you been? Who were you with? Do you know what time it is? Did you not think of how worried

we'd be?" My father didn't answer, just nodded along as if she were making pleasant inquiries about the weather on a lovely summer day. Her rage and hurt slid right off him. He put his hands in his pockets and continued nodding. I could hear him jangling his keys.

His casual gesture was the boiling point for my mother's fury. She grabbed the melting block of ice cream with both hands, lifted it high into the air, and with a scream brought it crashing down onto my father's wobbly head. He stumbled backward and fell against the table where we were seated. This was the moment he seemed to realize that all three of his children were in the room. Almonds and creamy chocolate dripped down the sides of his face and from his nose as his eyes swept over us and then landed on me. The grin stayed at the same caliber of detached brightness, completely ignorant of context and shame. His eyes matched his grin: vacant and meaningless.

I know I said something, maybe just asked if he was okay, but his gaze kept moving. "Dad!" I said. Like a simple pet, he turned his head back in my direction, but there was no recognition in his eyes. "Dad?" I asked. It was as if I were a stranger, or maybe a ghost. He continued to look at me with glassy eyes that had no flicker in them. For a moment I wondered if I was real. How could I be if there was no reflection of me in his gaze?

After the chocolate-almond ice cream incident, I made my father his favorite chili with extra onion and mashed kidney beans, crafted more homemade gifts and cards for him using my good construction paper and favorite crayons, and worked hard to make him laugh. I needed to reassure myself that he knew who I was. When I picture myself at that age, I see a caricature, a girl tap dancing with jazz hands and a white-tipped cane, Shirley Temple with a tambourine.

About a year later, my sisters and I were in bed when I heard the crunching of gravel that meant my father was home. I waited for the lullaby we children of alcoholics all know: one parent cries as the other parent denies. But this time a third voice joined the chorus, something different enough that my sisters and I got out of bed to spy. My father stood next to his mother, also an alcoholic. Grammy was an elegant drunk, always dressed to the nines even in the middle of the night. Her bejeweled fedora sat atop her tight curls. A leopard-print scarf snuggled the collar of her camel hair coat. She had the watery eyes of a Pekinese. She stood in her soft-soled loafers, barely clearing five feet, as her six-foot son swayed and bumped into her shoulder. Blood covered one side of his head and most of his face; from the neck down he was mostly covered in mud. Even the eagles were soiled.

He'd been driving home after a night at Charlie Brown's and pulled an Evil Knievel on some railroad tracks. The car went airborne and sheared a telephone pole in half before careening into a cornfield. He walked away from the scene and the sound of oncoming sirens with a deep gash in his head. Our fam-

ily car remained in the field. He walked all the way to his mother's house, and she drunk-drove him home. They were both sloshed.

My father's eyes rolled around in their sockets, trying to find a focus. Then he saw the three of us in our nightgowns, watching from our bedroom doorway. He smiled, a big, dopey smile, like he was a five-year-old who'd just arrived at a birthday party. There was blood on his teeth, too. He didn't appear to recognize a single one of us.

Soon after this, I became terrified of riding in the car at night because I couldn't see my parents' faces, only the backs of their heads. They were often angry with each other and silent, so I had no auditory confirmation it was still them. I stared at their silhouettes with a growing suspicion that when they turned around, their eyes would be gone, replaced by spinning silver discs that sat in expressionless faces. Every drive home in the dark turned into a silent panic, me gripping the door handle should I need to jump from the car.

*My daughter has those same blank eyes in my dreams, and right before the static fills my brain, she gives me that same loose-hinged smile. My panic turns into fury as I ask her the same questions my mother asked my father. I say her name over and over, but no matter how many times I repeat it, her eyes continue to skim over me, through me, past me. She is alien and gone. Anger and fear sweeps through me, and I am lost to terror. Then, I slap her. That was the first dream. In the next dream, I boxed her ears. In another, I shook her. In the last one, I scratched her face.

In every dream, it's right after I've become so unimaginably violent with her that her eyes clear and she comes back to me, which brings me back from my rage. Our eyes latch as we process what I've done. The horror of my actions renders me mute and then I am trying to hold her like I did when she was an infant and we spent every day together on the loveseat with her cuddled on my chest. I am beside myself with remorse and grief as a torrent of apology pours out of me. *Please, I'm so sorry, it was your eyes, I take it back.* But she resists me, and we are forever split apart. Her eyes go cold as she turns away and leaves me for good.

When I awaken from these dreams, my chest aches as if I have pneumonia. I ease myself through the morning routines and afternoon doldrums with the pace of the infirm, creeping around corners lest the dream's memory bites me again. I've never felt this intense panic and rage toward my daughter except in these dreams. I've certainly never felt violent. Freud would tell me these recurring nightmares are a manifestation of sublimated rage toward my father triggered by the fear of my daughter leaving home. My therapist would say it's the Adult Children of Alcoholics version of empty nest syndrome. But knowing this doesn't help me shake the dreams.

One time when my daughter was a toddler, I took her to the community swimming pool. She wore a bright pink bathing suit with navy trim that stretched across her little rounded belly. She had Princess Ariel floaties on her arms. I tied her hair up into a tiny blonde sprout on top of her head. I held her in

my arms as she acclimated to the water and when she was comfortable enough, I started gently turning in a circle. She loved the feel of the current against her legs and torso, so I spun a little faster. Her giggles made me giggle, and we kept spinning, but for a little too long. When I stopped and leaned back to smile at her, I realized I'd made her dizzy. Her eyes didn't focus on me right away, and for just one second, she didn't recognize me. In that one second, I was back in my childhood, seeing a father who failed to see me.

A. Lyn Carol *was the flash nonfiction winner of the inaugural* Redivider Journal *Blurred Genre Contest. Her work has also appeared in* The Rumpus, Hippocampus, *and* Not Like the Rest of Us: An Anthology of Contemporary Indiana Writers.

The Seawater Lighthouse: An Annotated History

Collin Van Son

Euphonious Smith, thirty-three-year-old lighthouse keeper of Seawater, Mississippi, fixed an appropriately blank stare onto the blank paper he held in his hands. *Petition to Save the Seawater Lighthouse.* Euphonious[1] groaned and leaned his head back. Strands of blond hair clung to his forehead in the humid air, and the low August sun stretched his shadow to pencil proportions. Ankle-deep in crabgrass, he opened his eyes and breathed in the sight of his home.

Though weathered by nearly three decades of persistent heat and humidity, the Seawater Lighthouse never failed to impress. Alternating red-and-white stripes brought the tower to a height of sixty feet, making it possible to see the center of town from over two miles away. The glass cupola was encircled by a narrow balcony and housed a custom bulb rated for up to four kilowatts. The entire mechanical assembly had endured minimal wear, a direct benefit of having never been activated.

At the base of the tower stood a humble one-story cottage, whose front door featured a bronze door knocker in the shape of an anchor. The floor plan was limited to a single bed and bath, a large kitchen that doubled as the dining room, and a modest study, outfitted with an extensive collection of nautical volumes and assorted accounts of seaborne heroics.

Surveying his dominion, Euphonious felt a surge of immense pride. When the sinking sun caught the mirrors just right, and the tower seemed to erupt right out of the surrounding swampland, he could almost forget that Seawater and its lighthouse were over two hundred miles from the ocean[2].

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[1] A week after the birth of their unnamed son, and an hour after finishing most of a bottle of port, Mr. and Mrs. Smith agreed to let fate decide upon a name by opening the dictionary to a page at random. Fate did not appreciate the gravity of this task, and as a result Mrs. Smith mistakenly retrieved the family's seldom used copy of Wylock Sterling's Pretentious Dictionary, Fourth Edition, an unbearably haughty text populated with entries such as antediluvian, chrysostomatic, and euphonious.

[2] In 1933, The United States Lighthouse Federation appropriated funding for the Seawater Lighthouse after mistakenly assuming that a town with such a name would undoubtedly be located on the coast. In actuality, the town was named after the dying words of its founder, Clark Bradford. Upon reaching the site of modern-day Seawater, a member of Bradford's expedition observed that the festering swampland was entirely unfit for human habitation. In an attempt to disprove the skeptic, Bradford drank a glass of swamp fluid and remarked to his companions: "See? Water." He immediately dropped dead from what would become the first recorded case of Super Dysentery. His final utterance was improperly transcribed, and the town was christened Seawater in his honor.

The ring of a bicycle bell interrupted his brief moment of tranquility. Euphonious peered down Tanglewood Road, a dirt path that snaked through two miles of swamp and served as the only connection to town. A freckled teenager atop a rusted bicycle came huffing into the clearing, his face flushed with pained determination. He wore a mud-splattered shirt and a matching pair of white shorts that were a size too small for his chubby frame. A mess of red curls was topped off by a yacht cap with the initials S.C.B. embroidered in yellow. The thirteen-year-old boy dismounted and snapped off a sharp salute, his shoulders heaving with asthmatic breaths as he spoke.

"Afternoon sir! Bernard P. Russell, Vice Commandant of the Seawater Couriers Brigade!" The boy appeared to be on the verge of passing out.

"Bernie, you don't have to do this every time," said Euphonious. "I know who you are." The boy remained at attention, his raised hand beginning to shake.

"Oh, for the love of—at ease!" shouted Euphonious, half-heartedly returning the salute. Bernie let out a ragged sigh and his saluting arm flopped to the side. With his other hand, he produced a crisp white envelope from his breast pocket.

"Dispatch from the Mayor's Office," said Bernie, finally beginning to breathe normally. He handed the envelope to Euphonious. "Priority Nine Communiqué."

Euphonious reluctantly accepted the letter. "What's Priority Nine mean again?"

Bernie began to recite from memory. "A Priority Nine Communiqué contains news of a disappointing and or regrettable nature, and is to be delivered by a member of the Couriers Brigade in order to spare the sender from having to witness the pitiful and or unpleasant reaction said message will evoke from its intended recipient."[3]

"Well, that's hardly encouraging," said Euphonious. "Would you at least like to come in for some water?"

"Afraid not sir," replied Bernie, hoisting himself back onto his bicycle. "The Public Safety Commission just enacted another Emergency Mosquito Curfew. I have to be indoors by 1900 hours or I could have my badge revoked."[4]

"Another curfew?" exclaimed Euphonious. "That's the fourth one this month!"

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[3] The Priority Nine classification originated the day after Collier T. Wax was elected to serve as the 34th mayor of Seawater. The first Communiqué given this classification was a petition for divorce, and was delivered to Wax's first wife by then Junior Cadet Bernard P. Russell of the Seawater Couriers Brigade.

[4] Officers of the Couriers Brigade were initially issued a badge and a semi-automatic handgun, intended as a form of self-defense against the notoriously aggressive swamp gators. However, the entire force had to surrender their firearms after Cadet Hans Jorgssen shot Second Lieutenant Bryce Gordon twice in the foot. The subsequent Internal Affairs investigation revealed that Cadet Jorgssen was taking revenge for Lieutenant Gordon asking Margaret Broms to the spring Swamp Ball, when everybody knew that Jorgssen had been planning to ask her. A Couriers Brigade Tribunal expelled Jorgssen in light of his gross misconduct, but since Lieutenant Gordon was still in the hospital, former Cadet Jorgssen took his place in accompanying Margaret to the Swamp Ball.

"It's getting pretty bad back in town," said Bernie. "Last week Mr. Gaddis ignored the curfew and ran outside to rescue the family cat. By the time he got back inside his face was so puffed he couldn't even talk. Over three hundred bug bites, according to Doc Sapwell. Said the skeeters could've drained him dry."

With a final salute, Bernie started pedaling back down Tanglewood Road and into the depths of the swamp. After watching the young Vice Commandant round the corner and disappear behind a curtain of Spanish moss, Euphonious grimaced and tore open the envelope.

The letterhead was dominated by the official insignia of the Seawater Mayor's Office, a poorly drawn copy of the U.S. Presidential Seal in which the bald eagle had been replaced by a massive mosquito[5]. Euphonious scanned the page.

The Seawater Public Appropriations Committee has concluded their vote...funding for the position of Lighthouse Keeper has been suspended indefinitely...this was a fairly easy decision to make...as far as we can tell, nobody in town has ever even seen the ocean...quite honestly, having a lighthouse in the first place makes us feel rather silly... an inspector from the Seawater Zoning Board will arrive tomorrow morning to cordon off the property...Cordially, Mayor Collier T. Wax.

By the time the letter hit the ground Euphonious was already bounding up the lighthouse's metal staircase, spiraling through the center of the tower two steps at a time.

"We'll show 'em!" he shouted. The echo repeated his declaration like a schoolyard posse. Euphonious took this as a sign of encouragement and decided to yell more words at nobody in particular.

"If they're shutting us down, then we're gonna show 'em what they're missing! We'll light this place up!"

Having reached the top of the staircase, Euphonious clambered up the short ladder and burst through the hatch that led to the balcony. He tore open the front door of the control box and began to flip the dusty switches with gleeful abandon.

"What do you do?" he asked, flipping a switch at random. A steady hum sounded from inside the glass cupola, its pitch increasing as the large convex lens began to rotate.

"What do *you* do?!" he yelled, using both hands to pull down on a large lever. Electricity coursed through the bulb's vibrating tungsten filament. Twisted wire glowed red to orange to white, forcing Euphonious to shield his eyes. Confused photons, guided by the curved mirrors that lined the interior of the cupola, organized themselves into a coherent beam and sliced through the hazy swamp air.

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[5] The Office of the President would go on to issue sixteen cease and desist letters, file seven formal injunctions with the Department of Justice, and make one surprisingly rude prank call, on the grounds that the Seawater mayoral seal is blatant plagiarism. To cope with this legal harassment, Mayor Collier T. Wax established a policy of immediately shredding any form of correspondence which, in his words, "looks or smells like the Federal Government."

Euphonious let out a triumphant whoop and collapsed against the railing. The glowing column skimmed over gnarled treetops, occasionally reflecting off the yellow eyes of the swamp's nocturnal inhabitants. The distant rooftops of Seawater were illuminated with every twenty-second rotation. Gradually, the periodic sweeping of the beam lulled Euphonious into a warm state of content.

A curious anomaly coaxed Euphonious out of his drowsy stupor. The lighthouse beam seemed to be shrinking in length, whittled down slightly with every strafe across the outline of town center. Euphonious squinted into the night. Some invisible darkness was approaching from town, devouring the column of light as it went. A high-pitched whine pierced the stagnant air. The sound triggered an unconscious reflex, and Euphonious swatted at his ear. His eyes widening in understanding, Euphonious's cry of alarm was drowned out by the crushing wave of black that engulfed the lighthouse.

As far as collective nouns go, *swarm* falls pitifully short of describing the sheer amount of mosquitos that descended upon Euphonious Smith. An *atmosphere* of mosquitos is far closer to the truth. Where oxygen had been moments before there was now only insect. Euphonious could feel his limbs growing heavy as thousands of mosquitos landed on exposed skin to feed[6]. An involuntary yelp of pain admitted dozens into his mouth, and Euphonious choked violently to expel the bugs from his lungs. Blinded by the impromptu plague, Euphonious fell to his knees and searched desperately for the hatch. Feeling his fingertips brush against the metal handle, Euphonious threw himself through the opening and into the relative safety of the lighthouse interior.

Euphonious recoiled at the sight of hundreds of throbbing red welts erupting across his arms and legs, and could feel a similar landscape forming across his face. He descended the staircase, wincing with every step. It was only fifteen feet from the lighthouse to his cottage, but he did not dare open the door. A small number of resourceful mosquitos were already squeezing their way in through the keyhole. Quarantined in the damp stairwell, Euphonious gradually fell into a restless sleep, while his hands continued to mindlessly swat the bloodsuckers that managed to find a way inside.

Euphonious awoke to a knocking on the front door of the lighthouse. The sound reverberated off the inside of his skull, triggering an immediate migraine. Euphonious was reminded of the morning after Mayor Wax's second wedding—the one with the open bar and dangerous surplus of Seawater Swamp

[6] In the late 1980's, a team of scientists from the World Health Organization would arrive in Seawater to conduct a genetic survey of the town's population. It was discovered that after generations of living in a region with the world's highest mosquito density, the citizens of Seawater had developed an inherent immunity to the West Nile Virus. After analyzing the blood samples collected in Seawater, W.H.O. was able to synthesize a vaccine that has saved an estimated 4,000,000 lives to date.

Rum[7]. Fearful of another wave of knocking, he cautiously opened the door. Daylight stabbed through his swollen eyelids, aggravating his headache even further. Satisfied that the sun had cleared away the winged demons, Euphonious swung the door fully open.

Bernie puffed out his chest and gave Euphonious a crisp salute. He was wearing the same uniform as the previous day, except the initials on his hat now read S.Z.B.

"Good morning, sir! Bernard P. Russell, Inspector First-Class of the Seawater Zoning Board."[8]

"I don't know why I was expecting anyone else," said Euphonious. He returned the salute and whimpered when he accidentally touched his tender forehead. "I suppose they've sent you to close off the property."

"Initially, yes," said Bernie. "However, I've been issued a new directive from the Mayor's Office." He reached into his pocket and read from a folded piece of paper. "To the attention of—are you alright, sir?"

"Hm? Yes, what's the matter?" said Euphonious.

"Sir, you've been scratching your arm so much you appear to be drawing blood."

Euphonious stared at his bloodied fingernails. "Oh, um, just a little itchy. Carry on."

Bernie obliged and returned to the message. "To the attention of Mr. Euphonious Smith. In light of recent developments, the Seawater Public Appropriations Committee has voted unanimously to restore funding for the position of Lighthouse Keeper. This arrangement is contingent upon one condition: that every night, without fail, the lighthouse is to be illuminated so as to attract the violent swarms of mosquitos away from town, thus eliminating the need for the inconvenient Mosquito Curfew. Failure to comply will result in termination of your employment and immediate eviction from the premises. Cordially, Mayor Collier T. Wax."

Bernie looked up and beamed at Euphonious. "Congratulations sir! Looks like you'll be staying here after all!"

Unfazed by the look of horror on Euphonious' face, Bernie snapped off another salute, climbed back onto his bicycle, and began the long journey back to town.

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[7] Mayor Wax's second wedding is still regarded today as the rowdiest party in the history of Seawater, a drunken spectacle that damaged countless reputations and over $3,000 of public property. Two days later, when the chaplain finally sobered up, it was revealed that Mayor Wax had passed out in the bathroom before the vows could even be administered. A private ceremony was held later that week.

[8] A detailed analysis of the Seawater public records system reveals that Bernard Russell held no less than fourteen civic titles during his teenage years. The more exotic among them include: Chief of the Seawater Dewey Decimal Society, Honorary Town Bamboozler (there is no record of what this means), and Personal Poison Tester to the Mayor.

Collin Van Son *is an undergraduate student at Penn State University where he is majoring in physics.*

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