[THE HOFSTRA JOURNAL OF LITERATURE & ART]

Slam Poet
LIV MAMMONE

Conversations with
REBECCA SOLNIT
MARGO JEFFERSON

Faculty Spotlight
PHILLIS LEVIN

WINDMILL

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

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Windmill is published biannually by Hofstra University at 1000 Fulton Ave, Hempstead, NY 11549. The short pieces in this publication are works of fiction and nonfiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the products of the authors' imagination or are inspired by their real lives. In fiction, any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. The views expressed in the writing herein are solely those of the author.

Jericho Parms' essay "The Theory of Substance" was first published in her collection of essays, Lost Wax, printed by University of Georgia Press in 2016.

Windmill is set printed on 50 lb. white offset and 70 lb. white offset. Printed by The Sheridan Press, Hanover, PA and designed by the Publishing Studies capstone students and managing editor, Keaton Ramjit.

Manuscripts and art pieces may be submitted digitally through hofstrawindmill.submittable.com. Manuscripts between 3,000 to 5,000 words are generally preferred, but pieces up to 10,000 words will be accepted. Pieces with higher word count will be judged at a higher level. Art pieces must be submitted as a JPEG or PNG file at 300 dpi. Please visit us at hofstrawindmill.com for more information about submissions. Please do not email us your submissions or they will not be considered.

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We would like to thank the following people for their support: Dr. Bernard J. Firestone, Prof. Janet Kaplan, Dr. Craig Rustici, Hofstra Cultural Center, Suzanne Viggiano, Pauline McInnis, Hofstra University Office of University Relations, and the MFA Grad Club.

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Editor's Note

4.19.2017
Hempstead, NY

Welcome back to *Windmill*! We've been extremely busy here at Hofstra this semester, from celebrating the launch of our first issue at AWP 2017 in Washington, DC, to enjoying campus visits through the Great Writers, Great Readings series from A. Van Jordan and Susan Orlean. The redoubtable Rebecca Solnit also came as a guest of the Hofstra Cultural Center for Women's History Month and agreed to be interviewed for the literary magazine. In her interview, she asked, "If we want the world to be better, do we have to wait until everything's perfect before there's pleasure?"

We feel this issue of *Windmill* responds with a resounding "no." There is much work to be done in the world, as well as in the classroom, but what we hope this issue of *Windmill* puts forth is the suggestion that the pleasure of beauty, sound, and strong narrative is not to be shelved. From Jenny Bhatt's masterfully sensorial short story "Life Spring" to Jericho Parms's achingly stunning essay "A Theory of Substance" from her new book *Lost Wax* (University of Georgia Press, 2017), we hope to underscore the idea that taking pleasure—in the mundane and the mystical, the disturbing and the decadent, the silly and the strange—is, ultimately, a worthy practice, even as the world shifts unsettlingly under our feet.

Although this is our second issue, in many ways this is an edition of firsts. When we initially dreamt of *Windmill*, our publisher, Melissa Connolly, and I imagined an entirely student-run publication, and this issue is the first to be produced along with the undergraduate Publishing Studies practicum. The class used our first issue (Winter 2017, Volume 1) as a textbook, keeping what worked and refining what didn't. The junior and senior students had a hand in building the book from the ground up, helping our MFA students choose the work, and then editing, copyediting, and even, in some cases, writing the pieces. Undergraduate Gary Duff interviewed critic Margo Jefferson, and MFA students Dayna Troisi and Lily Vu profiled powerhouse poets Liv Mammone, our selection for *Windmill's* signature mini-chapbook, and professor Phillis Levin, for our Faculty Spotlight.

This is also the first time the issue was designed on campus; with the convivial guidance of undergraduate phenom Keaton Ramjit, who has seen us through two issue cycles as Managing Editor now, the class talked margins and fit, kerning and four-color process. The students looked at budgets, retooled our digital presence, built a social media platform, and considered web content accessibility standards like section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act.

Much consideration was given to the visual construction of the issue, as Emily Nguyen writes about in her Art Editor's letter. Featured artist Timna Tarr's quiltwork rests on color and small compositions; this issue of *Windmill* is like one of Tarr's quilts in that way, with each block constructed as its own independent element, coming together as a whole to tell a multi-faceted story.

Along with having a hand in all parts of putting this book together, each student took ownership of a web series, exploring current literary considerations from the state of creative nonfiction to the way social media is joyfully disrupting the status quo of the publishing pipeline. Many of our print stories have digital components; we hope you check out these additional layers at HofstraWindmill.com.

In closing, I return to Solnit, who says, "I think pleasure can be very subversive and it can also have a kind of depth to affirm the value of something like autonomy, solitude, and wild landscape." Cover artist Laura McManus's painting *Strawberry Moon Riverside* captures perfectly this sentiment, and what we hope is the small gesture of the book as a whole. The mix of movement and isolation, the tumble of clouds in the sky against the darkness of that wild landscape, the way moonlight changes the way we see the world: this is what we hope to give to you with our second issue, and all those to come.

Kelly McMasters
Editor

Clockwise from upper left:
Gary Duff, Courtney Zanosky, Kelly McMasters, Rachel Moskowitz, Keaton Ramjit, Nicole Anania, Alyssa Ennis, Lindsay DeMarco, Emily Nguyen

Photographed by Jonathan Heisler

A Conversation with Rebecca Solnit

Interviewed by Kelly McMasters
Edited by Courtney Zanosky

Photo by Adriana Mendoza

Powerhouse writer Rebecca Solnit is a force to be reckoned with—from popularizing the term "man-splaining" to building fanciful literary map collections, the 55-year-old firebrand demands to be heard through her works that drip with simultaneous beauty and activism. Ranging from historical interpretations to creative nonfiction masterpieces, Solnit's work is incredibly varied, prolific, and at its core, a catalyst for change and action.

Author of 20 books and countless articles and essays, she consistently surprises her readers with her unique views of geography, community, art, feminism, and politics. Solnit is the recipient of a variety of awards, including the Lannan Literary Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. She is also the first woman to regularly write the 1851 "Easy Chair" column for *Harper's*.

On Monday, March 27, 2017, the Hofstra University Cultural Center had the pleasure of hosting Solnit for a Women's History Month event to celebrate the launch of her newest essay

collection, *Mother of All Questions*. Prior to her reading and talk, Hofstra MFA faculty member, essayist, and Solnit fan Kelly McMasters had the pleasure of sitting down with the graceful and poised author for a Q&A.

KM: So—what was it that initially got you into writing? Where did you draw your inspiration from in your early career?

RS: I knew I wanted to be a writer from shortly after learning to read, but as a kid, what do you read? You read stories and you don't even make a distinction between fact and fiction. I didn't start reading the newspaper for a long time after that, and it was later in my teens that I started gravitating towards criticism. The great Pauline Kael, who's from the town next to mine, was writing in *The New Yorker*. I think I was reading some Orwell.

I had bought Jorge Luis Borges's *Labyrinths* which was, of all the books that came my way, maybe the great revelation that in fictional short pieces is the sense that they're concerned with plot and character. You can open up whole new worlds and explore possibilities. I consider him akin to an essayist even though a lot of his things are considered fiction because he's making something up. You look at "Funes the Memorious" and it's about a man who remembers everything. He's not really concerned about what that feels like. There's not a narrative arc. It's just an exploration of what would happen if your memory was comprehensive—how destructive, strange, and overwhelming it would be. So it really is essayistic.

Then, I got a degree in English, realized I learned how to read in terms of Dante and fourfold allegory, symbolism, meanings, and references, but I hadn't really learned how to write. And so I went to the Graduate School of Journalism at UC Berkeley where I got a fantastic training—not only the resourcefulness of going out and getting a story, but also in ethics and principles that I think stand everyone in nonfiction in good stead. You have a responsibility to your subjects, to the historical record, and to your readers while writing nonfiction, which is why I'm a real stickler about nonfiction really being nonfiction. But I really had this kind of essayistic thing, which meant that in a way I was a bad journalist, not because I wasn't accurate and I didn't want to go out and report, but because I was interested in style and opinion and expression.

KM: I've seen you described as an essayist, a historian, and there's also you as a writer. How does that identity, or does it, affect what you write and how you identify what comes out on the printed page?

RS: That's a bunch of questions. Where to start? I got hired by an art magazine right out of graduate school and wrote a lot of art criticism in the next decade, which is an essay in its most straightforward form. What scales are for guitars, reviews are for essays. You introduce the subject you analyze, and then you contextualize and situate and evaluate it. You summarize and close it in some way so that it has the whole arc of the classical essay. Then I kind of burst out of writing about artists because it felt like I

was more interested in what they were teaching me to think about those interests and to think about the subjects rather than thinking about the subject, so I kind of left that behind.

I've written very lyrical things like *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. I've written very factual things like my book on Eadweard Muybridge or my history of civil society and disaster a paradise built in hell. But those don't feel that separate to me. It feels like if you use the academic term "field," I have a really big field or, as I said in *Wanderlust: The History of Walking*, I trespass through a lot of fields in the course of my explorations. *The History of Walking* is anatomy, gender politics, urbanism, environmentalism, private property laws, and poetry.

It's been great having writing being the home base and feeling free to roam into anything that nonfiction can do. I have not been impelled to move to fiction, which feels as different from nonfiction as painting from photography or poetry, although I finally realized one day that a lot of modern poets are essentially essayistic in how they work and how they write. It's been kind of shocking and great to see nonfiction shift in stature, but at the same time I worry about it being codified, particularly in writing programs where it becomes all personal essay and memoir.

I hated the term nonfiction when I started out because it's like being called nonwhite, which lets whiteness define you. And then I reclaimed it a while back because it means fiction gets its little magic Dino Kingdom and we get everything

else. I taught a class at Berkeley a few years ago where we looked at encyclopedias, cookbooks, dictionaries, and atlases. I've done an atlas and called a book of essays organized more or less alphabetically an encyclopedia. I still commit to journalism as a columnist and so I love the wide openness of that. What started as trouble ended up as spaciousness.

KM: When you just said that painting and photography were about as different as fiction and nonfiction, which one was which in that analogy?

RS: I worked at a museum in graduate school so I was being trained as a journalist and as a sort of art historian doing research for the museum simultaneously. Photography is a relatively late arriver into the fine arts in the same way that nonfiction was considered so direct that it wasn't creative. We now understand how Manuel Álvarez Bravo photographs in a completely different way than Imogen Cunningham, to name two great 1930s photographers. When I was at that museum in the early 80s, photography was still being integrated into the museum world and had been integrated into MFA visual art programs in the post-war era. I've worked a lot with photographers Richard Misrach and Lewis deSoto. I work with the wonderful photographers Mark Klett and Byron Wolfe. There's a kind of going out in the world and being curious about it.

When you're writing a novel you can say your mother weighed 800 pounds and had four pairs of

wings because you can do that in magic realism. In nonfiction, you have to deal with what's there and you can deal with it. It's an absolutely creative task. When I wrote about my mother, I left stuff out that was nobody's business and I put stuff in that was very clearly my interpretation and experience rather than an objective fact.

It feels like finding patterns of meaning in the world as it is, rather than inventing. Painters start with a blank canvas; a novelist in a sense with a blank page. Generally, you know photographers go out into the world and look for meaning and patterns. They select, collect, focus, and crop and that is a lot of where the art is. And so that's how I feel analogous to photography as well as being a really interesting parallel struggle to define it as art.

KM: Keeping this difference between photography and painting in mind, how do you likewise think the view of fiction versus nonfiction has changed in our society?

RS: It's a funny thing, when you look at the rise of the novel in the 18th and early 19th century, you see that it's considered a kind of unintellectual déclassé form. Smart people were reading histories, sermons, and essays. They were reading Addison and Steele, not Richardson. Novels were considered feminine indulgent—you know, a bit low brow. It's now considered to be the great pinnacle. How the fallen have mightied. Some professions are degraded as they become feminine in pursuits or are raised up as they become masculine. As

we learned from the great movie *Hidden Figures*, a lot of the first programmers were women and that was always considered this kind of lowly secretarial thing to do. And then it became clear that programming was a really intellectually challenging high-skill art. It's now a male-dominated field in all of Silicon Valley.

KM: You've spoken a lot of curiosity; I find your intellect on the page so engaging. It's the most beautiful nonfiction moment when you can actually see the mind at work on the page. But on the other hand, at some point, you have to tame and contain that curiosity. How do you contain the voice in your head or decide to tame the voice and shape it?

RS: The subject kind of begets the form. My great breakthrough, which I've talked about in a number of places, was with my second book *Savage Dreams*. What happened is that the Nevada test site was so compellingly complex and troublesome a place, a place where we'd exploded more than a thousand nuclear weapons, that most Americans didn't know existed. So a bomb was going off in their own country while they were thinking nuclear war was only a terrible thing that might happen someday. It is Native American land. There was a Native American story. There was a story of Henry David Thoreau and the history of civil disobedience through the civil rights movement and black struggles to what we were doing. There was the history of the making of the atom bomb. The history of Western attitudes towards the desert.

At that point, I'd been trained as a journalist. I'd been doing journalism and environmental journalism, I was doing art criticism, and I was writing these very personal, very polished small essays like prose poems. And it really felt like three different things. And the test site taught me how to write because that place made it clear that I needed all those techniques, all those ways of surveying and exploring the world and describing it, to describe that complexity of experience of watching a beautiful sunset in handcuffs and hoping that maybe it was doing something about the fate of the world and integrating all those experiences and the firsthand experience and the deep history behind the place and the actions. That begat that kind of synthetic writing I've done ever since.

KM: Synthetic writing is a great way to describe it. In this kind of writing, how would you define the first person?

RS: There are times where I think it's important to be first person and disclose your own experience, but when I wrote the book *River of Shadows* about Eadweard Muybridge, the man whose work of sequential photographs laid the foundation for cinema and all the moving pictures we have now, I was tired of the first person as I used it in *Wanderlust* and I had written a number of other first person things. It was interesting to not use the first person at all except in the last chapter where I describe visiting key places. I was everywhere because it chronicled what I thought was important and how I interpreted the facts. In this book in which

I connected the building of the railroad, the Indian Wars, the technologies of photography, the telegraph, and other things that sped up and transformed communications and representation, I was deeply present.

There's a lot of different first persons from "here's my innermost life," to "here's how I feel about something in the world," to "here is me, just as a witness like a war correspondent." And so those all get used. But I like feeling that I have a lot of tools at my disposal. There are architects who make houses, campus buildings, public hospitals, bridges, or others kinds of structures. I like feeling that I'm not confined to do one kind of thing. I always look at writers who do one thing over and over and I don't know how they can bear it. Often, I've done one kind of thing so much that I want to do another.

I've done a lot of very political writing about the present moment over the past several years and I'm kind of missing a more introspective, more lyrical first person voice. So I'm trying to figure out how to shut out the Trump era a little bit while feeling really responsible to follow it, critique it, and try and feed hope in this moment. You know, go deeper because it's easy as a political writer to feel like you're kind of skating across the surface of everything that happened yesterday. What do you think about it? And then you drop it Sunday when the next thing happens and move on.

KM: Yes, the cycle. How has the influx in technology and digital media changed

the way you're able to work as a journalist and cover topics that are fluid and always changing?

RS: I think it's a challenge for all of us in this digital media information saturated world. How do you go deeper? How do you go read a novel without interruptions—how do you live inside yourself rather than in that kind of shallow busyness of what everybody else thinks and what's going on everywhere else. I think it's going to be a struggle. I'm teaching a writing class in Stanford starting next week and we're going to look a lot at these questions. I'm going to look at what it means to write in Silicon Valley. What is writing? How do we write in this busy world? Does writing adapt to this? Is it a refuge from or in opposition to these things? And how do we write about these things that have all arrived without us really comprehending and digesting how profoundly they've transformed our psyches and our relationships?

KM: The idea of refuge is an interesting one, I think, especially after just last week with the National Book Critics Circle Awards ceremony.

RS: Oh, did you go?

KM: Yes! I'm teaching a literary criticism class in the MFA and we went as a field trip.

RS: Oh, how fantastic. I love Louise Erdrich so much.

KM: She was just amazing.

RS: She's an amazing being.

KM: Yes, and that came across on the stage. The whole evening was incredible because every single person who came up to the podium, in some way, made a political speech, whether it was poet Ishion Hutchinson simply thanking his grandmother or a full on, "We need to come together." The study of refuge is really interesting because one of the award winners reminded us that people forget headlines but remember stories.

RS: If you're lucky! People also remember simplistic, and that can go both ways where people remember a simple statement or an attack and they don't investigate or vet it for themselves. Often, particularly now, people grab junk out of the headlines and run with it.

KM: Well, as you were saying that, I'm thinking of all the success Trump has had in manipulating language. In your piece for *The Guardian*, you talked a little bit about this with the idea of the activism that has been activated. When you spoke of refuge, do you foresee a turn towards the insular and the beauty or away from it? For me, your work does a beautiful job of combining those things, beauty and activism, but not everybody can do that.

RS: You don't have to do it in the work. I'm often asked that and people think I

have a duty to commit propaganda. Anybody who feels that way is probably not impassioned about it. I think we're all citizens and we have a duty to participate, but whether that's by donating, serving on the school board, demonstrating in front of Trump Tower, running a blog on politics, writing, or being an investigative journalist, there's a lot of different ways to be involved. Robert Hass is very involved as an environmentalist and you can see it in his poetry, but his poetry is not advocacy per se and it would not be the poetry it is if it was. Then there's someone like Bill McKibben or Naomi Klein, or. some of the great voices coming out of Black Lives Matter who can advocate with passion in ways that are beautiful and moving, and Jeff Chang, whose book is a great book for this moment. If we want the world to be better, do we have to wait until everything's perfect before there's pleasure? I think pleasure can be very subversive and it can also have a kind of depth to affirm the value of something like autonomy, solitude, and wild landscape.

Human rights can deepen us and strengthen us. Something I often go back to in this conversation is Vermeer in Bosnia by Lawrence Weschler. Because that's an essay where he has to interview a judge for the War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague. How can he stand to listen to these horrific stories of rape and torture and mass murder? Day after day, month after month, year after year, and the judge pauses for a moment and then his face brightens and says, 'Oh, after work I go and look at the Vermeers and it's so amazing because like there's lots of painting and photography and

writing about human rights abuses.' But if you're a judge who's dealing with human rights abuses all day, you probably don't want to go look at Goya etchings let alone documentations of war crimes. You're a person who doesn't need it. Other people may need it. Maybe you take refuge, but you take refuge to strengthen yourself so you can go back and continue doing the work, to go deep because that's how we deal with the world.

Part of being on the opposition is having depth—having compassion, having these things that require us maybe to use a Buddhist term or take refuge within a supportive community within literature and ideas that support and strengthen us. There's a way I see activists that are so caught up in fighting their enemy that they become obsessed and can lose sight of their values. One of the worst things that you can do is transform yourself into them and take up their hatred. Or, they can make you paranoid and angry—they can make you vicious, dishonest, and willing to harm. That's what I think the refuge is: a place where you go so you can come back out. It's like you go to sleep so you can dream and wake. You're going to get out of bed the next day and you're going to go back into the world, not in bed for the next five years. Generally speaking. Then you get people like Laura Hillenbrand, the woman who wrote the book about *Seabiscuit*. She's got chronic fatigue and she did everything from bed. Some people can do a lot from bed. She interviewed all these old jockeys and pieced together the story that had happened 60 or more years before with incredible vividness all from

old newspapers and research materials. Being in bed is not always a retreat either.

KM: That's true. I interviewed Anne Fadiman once and she talked about being on bedrest when she was pregnant and how it was like an island. She would get her husband to bring her books in the morning, and that's all she had for the whole day, because she couldn't move, and it did make her produce what she thought was some of her more different and interesting works.

RS: Well, Frida Kahlo had that easel built so she could paint lying on her back in a cast from her back surgery. Yeah. I'm pro-bed, just for the record, and pro-street and balanced diet. Pro-mountaintop, to finish the rounds.

KM: Pro, what did you call them? Wild landscapes? Another type of refuge that I've noticed, especially at the past two AWPs, is this sort of influx of female essayists and specifically young female essayists that take refuge through humor. So, you have these kind of exciting, serious, intellectual grappling essayists like Leslie Jamison, Lina Ferreira...

RS: There's also Eula Biss, who I admire so much. There's a lot of young powerhouses coming forward and it's great.

KM: And Jericho Parms, who is writing on art. There's also humor writing, you know, if you think about SNL and that kind of humor.

RS: The kind of Amy Schumer-y stuff.

KM: Jenny Lawson and Lindy West.

RS: Let me throw in the woman I'm having a conversation with tomorrow, Jia Tolentino, who's now at the *New Yorker* and writes about politics including, but not limited to, feminism with incredible force. She has a kind of scornful humor about the kind of outrages of privilege and cluelessness. She is somebody to watch. I just think she's so good.

KM: You're also very funny on the page.

RS: Sometimes, and it's funny because I don't realize quite what's going on until I read it out loud. But yeah, there's a kind of dry humor. Not long ago there was this whole bullshit that feminism has no sense of humor which meant that we're not laughing at their rape jokes and there's an essay in the current book called "The Short Happy Recent History of the Rape Joke," because as recently as 2012 there was this kind of position that rape jokes aren't funny. That's because male comedians were telling stories about the degradation and disempowerment of women. They literally weren't funny because there wasn't a punch line. And Daniel Tosh mentioned that if a bunch of guys gang rape a woman who just called him out—wouldn't that be funny? And it's like, dude that's actually just hateful and kind of twisted and a little bit sad

and maybe actionable, but then women started making rape jokes at the expense of the rapist, including Bill Cosby. And to see the former kind of king of comedy exposed first as a horrific serial sexual predator and then seeing lots and lots of women—including Amy Schumer repeat that on her show, and Amy Poehler and Tina Fey just destroyed him. I thought it was incredibly funny. And then it's like, "Hey, guys, rape jokes are funny. We're laughing. How're you doing over there?"

I think some of that humor was always there, but I don't know if people felt confident to deploy it. There was this whole "women aren't funny" thing and kind of groundbreaking comedians like Phyllis Diller, who was very isolated as a woman comedian. There was Carol Burnett and a lot of other funny women, including comic actresses like Goldie Hawn back in the day. I sort of think we could all say that men don't have a sense of humor about some of the jokes we're telling.

KM: Yeah, that's not allowed. It's still not allowed. Nobody can own a sense of humor. But it seems sometimes, especially for the younger set, that you have to be one or the other: serious or funny.

RS: There's a friend of mine, a former student, Heather Smith, who I think is an extraordinary writer. Part of her gift is to have this kind of piercing lyrical quality of seeing things absolutely fresh but also seeing what's funny about it. I often think what humor consists

of is revealing the gap between how things are supposed to be and how they are, which is why it's often a tool of the marginalized—black humor, gay humor. I grew up on the edge of the Castro. I've been around gay men most of my life. And there's no humor like gay men. They're kind of witty, caustic, queenie, ironic, cutting, and there are so many different kinds. But it's often about just piercing the bubble of heteronormative views of what is manhood, what is good taste, what is a prom dress, what is a patriarch, what is a party? It's just awesome to be around.

KM: Speaking of men: I appreciate the way that you make space for men in your essays.

RS: Yeah, not all men noticed that, but I try.

KM: Personally, I'm thinking about this as a mother of two little boys that I'm trying to grow up into the world. You talk a lot about hope, and I have a lot of hope for girls and women coming up right now. I don't have a lot of hope for boys. Do you have hope for boys?

RS: I'm an aunt to a lot of little boys and one amazing 15-year-old. I just became the godmother to a newborn boy. I've seen people wish for girls because they know how to encourage girls. But how do you encourage boys without just encouraging them to think that they rule the world? And I think it's there. I think

mostly we model it and they'll learn from the men around them. And my godson's father, who's one of my two or three best friends, is like the kindest, most modest, most caring person ever. So I'm not worried about him, but it's hard. It's in the culture.

All my boyfriends have been men, all my brothers are male, and all my nephews are male. There's an essay in *80 Books No Woman Should Read*, and it's an essay that celebrates a lot of men. A lot of male writers and a lot of books by men excoriate others for their misogyny. I think there are a lot of wonderful men out there. One of the things I also talk about in *The Mother of All Questions* is more and more men, many of them black men, understand a lot about oppression, marginalization, and the pitfalls of the status quo—men speaking up for feminism and seeing it as their job to stand up and speak up. Only when I started seeing that happen a lot in 2014 did I think that for decades we treated feminism like women's work. Did we ever treat ending racism as black people's work? The racism that comes from white people can only be ended by white people. The sexism that comes from men can only be ended by men.

One of the things that's shocking for me about campus rape, which are often group assaults, is that young men now, with the help of porn and other kind of internet culture, live in a world in which degrading and assaulting and disregarding the rights of another human being is considered to be really fun, cool, and enhancing

your status. They often videotape it and show it around as a triumph. When will we be in a world where the rapist is ashamed and the rape victim, the rape survivor, is not? We're moving towards it as these amazing young campus activists refuse to be ashamed into silence. But the process is under way and it's everybody's work.

Seeing men join us does make me hopeful. Not all men, but a lot of them. And changing the norm. The shift from Obama as a feminist father of daughters to the Pussy-Grabber-in-Chief is really concerning because we know that modeling takes place with this and legitimization takes place. I've heard of assaults on women and people of color after Trump's election with a sense of, "Now we get to do this. Now we get to beat you up. Now we get to assault you. Now we get to grab you." It's a battle, but Trump may be going down in flames and there will be other lessons to read from that. We don't know, but we can try and make it so.

KM: Thank you.

RS: You're welcome. Do you want to end on that note or is there another question?

KM: Okay, just one more, since I think it would be a nicer end to look forward. You have about 20 books now. How do you decide what to do next? What will that thing be and what do you know it won't be?

RS: Well, it won't be a novel. I like to move around. I like to explore subjects: loss and getting lost, or walking, or women's rights. But it's about the kind of writing I want to do. And it's also about what it feels like I have to contribute to the world at this moment with something like hope in the dark or a paradise built in hell. Is there something I can contribute to the way we describe the world? What am I doing that might be a benefit for others? What is the most meaningful thing for me to do? Happily, this is the joy of being a writer. Those aren't necessarily separate or opposing goals.

Join us for the Fall 2017 Great Writers, Great Readings Series at Hofstra University

*September 27th: Lily King**

October 24th: Claudia Rankine

November 15th: John McPhee

hofstra.edu/gwgr

**in conversation with her editor, Elisabeth Schmitz*

Slam Poet Liv Mammone: My Body is a Political Statement

Dayna Troisi

Photo courtesy of the author

Liv Mammone is a badass poet. She demands your attention with her performances, unabashedly confronts uncomfortable topics, and is unapologetic in her delivery. Her poems engage with the intersections of feminism and disability. Her language both shocks and comforts. Her images are com pletely wild and beautiful. She whispers, shouts, and pulls you closer. In short, Liv isn't afraid to go there:

> *When my vagina makes my toes curl;*
> *my legs won't let them straighten again.*
> *I have to sit up and pull them like artichoke leaves*

A self-described spoken word poet, 27-year-old Liv is the first visibly disabled poet ever to place as a finalist for a national slam. Liv's cerebral palsy makes the details of performing in slams difficult—the travel, the waiting, navigating often-inaccessible stages—but she demands to take up space. She has performed at Sip This,

Artists Without Walls, Tache Chocolates, and is the winner of Union Square Slam's 2015 Nerd Slam. She's a two-time nominee for 2016's Best of the Net poetry anthology. Her poetry has appeared in *Wordgathering, Wicked Banshee, The Medical Journal of Australia, Rogue Agent, QDA: a Queer, Disabled Anthology, Grabbing the Apple* and *Typo Magazine*. Liv resides on Long Island, where she was born, and has taught creative writing at Hofstra University and Queens College.

Liv has always been writing, but hasn't always been writing about disability. "It's a story in my family that I have always been a writer, even before I could write. When I was little, a psychologist told my mom 'this girl is going to be a writer.' I was always telling stories but the actual physical act of writing was super hard for me to learn, and I really wanted to figure out how to do it. That took years, but once I could, I was off to the races."

Sitting across from Liv in a Thai restaurant, with plates of sweet and sour chicken between us, I was spellbound by the passion and honesty with which she spoke. Her voice is gentle but strong—almost hypnotizing and always surprising—perfect for a spoken word poet. She speaks in elegant, beautiful phrases while remaining completely down-to-earth, starkly honest and funny. Her hair is cropped to her head at an almost buzzed pixie cut, fitting for her striking face and petite body. Her crutches rested on the floor next to our table.

For me, reading Liv's work was a big part in forming my own identity as a disabled writer. I interviewed her in 2015 for my

senior undergraduate creative writing thesis on fetish and disability, when I myself didn't broach the topic of disability in my own writing yet. I didn't know Liv personally, but she was open and kind. We had an amazing conversation about sexuality and gender that pushed me to confront intersections of my identity I once tried to ignore. She talked to me about navigating her femininity and disability, from her experience shaving her legs, to asking her mother for help doing her hair, to figuring out how to make sweatpants and a t-shirt into a fashion statement when she's in too much pain to wear tight clothes. She talked to me to about the complications of feminism, her experimentation with gender, her feelings about porn, her experiences with devotees, or people who have a fetish for disability. At the time, I was desperately trying to intellectualize these taboo topics so I could talk about them. I was scared to just say what I felt. Liv simply talked about these topics head on. I read textbooks on devotees to find out if I thought the fetish was empowering or degrading. Liv simply talked to devotees. Like I said, she isn't afraid to go there.

For me, and for many other readers, Liv is a stand-out voice. But she wasn't always so fearless and open to speaking about disability in her writing. "For a long time I was really against it. I didn't want to get up on stage and have who I am be carrying the work. When I was in college, people would see me at readings and wouldn't remember any of the work I did, but would just come up to me afterwards and be like, 'It's so great to see you out there.' It just meant like, I've never seen a disabled person do a thing, so that's amazing. I didn't want to be a part of that."

Then something changed. Nicole Cooley, the head of the Queens College graduate program, gave Liv *Beauty is A Verb*, an anthology of disability poetics. “I realized I come from this whole continuum of people who are trying to speak to their experiences. That realization was totally lacking in my life before, and once it was there, I finally started writing about disability openly. I wanted somebody else to be able to look at my work and see their experience reflected back.”

Liv just returned from the Women of the World Poetry Slam, where she was one of two disabled poets competing. For Liv, the scariest part of slam is memorization. To prepare for the slam, she listened to the theme song from Black Sails, a historical adventure series on Starz (a prequel to Robert Louis Stevenson’s novel *Treasure Island*). “I really like pirates...and this song just pumps me up. It makes me say, okay, I’m ready!”

I was curious to know if Liv found the slam world accessible, literally and figuratively. Liv alternates between using a wheelchair and crutches to get around. Many slam locations do not have elevators and the stages don’t have ramps. “I think there is a physical accessibility issue. Slam season is January until March. The reason that I’m not a better slammer is because the season happens during the time of the year that I’m really ill. It’s difficult to get out in the snow, into Manhattan, but I try. I think the way that it’s structured has a kind of inherent ableism to it. I’m sure there are better poets than me, who don’t slam because they can’t physically, or they don’t feel comfortable because of any kind of mental illness that they might have.” She

says she tries to be there in that room for them. "That was part of my [Women of the World Poetry Slam] experience. I wasn't there to win; I was there to represent a group of people. My body is a political statement, to say I'm here for all these poets who can't make it."

Reading and listening to her work reveals that Liv has a great handle on the poetic line. She is a master of speeding up, slowing down, playing with line lengths like an accordion. It's heartening to know that these works take time and start out rather messily. "Mostly, it's just panic. It's this interesting balance. Writers have to be egotistical, because even the notion that you have something that needs to be said, and the world will not be the same if we don't say it...that's a really arrogant thing to think. So it's this like constant balance between being that arrogant, and also learning and also being a constant student. My first drafts are messy, messy blocks of text. Complete word vomit."

Liv's work broaches politics, sexuality, and pop culture. She is a witness to it all. From writing about her vagina, to calling out Kylie Jenner for posing in a wheelchair, to a heartbreaking letter to her grandmother discussing a friend's death, Liv encapsulates the human experience, from the universal to the devastatingly specific. The Trump era has only exacerbated the unavoidable politicization of her body and her work. "Suddenly people care about us [poets], which is kind of nice. Now more than ever, it's crucial for people to be writing. Writing has always been a political act, but now it's very consciously a political act."

There has been much conversation surrounding what kind of poetry will make up the resistance. Liv thinks all poetry is resistance. "My friends and I are struggling with, like, is it okay to just write love poems right now? Is it okay to just be writing poems about the boy who won't call you back in the age where they're rounding up people and sending them back to their home countries? Intellectually, you know that the love poems are equally as important as the poems directly confronting whatever the issue is, but it's hard emotionally to reckon with it. For me, specifically, being a disabled woman in this new era is inherently political." The very act of speaking as a marginalized person, not even about politics but about personal experience, is often inherently political. Especially today, groups including female-identified people, people of color, disabled people, Muslim people and queer people cannot escape the inherent politicization of their voices. For some, it can seem like an unfair responsibility. For others, it can be empowering. For Liv, it is necessary.

"If the Affordable Care Act gets repealed, disabled people are going to die in droves. They're not going to have access to their health care, and they are going to die, and that is something that we have to confront. My voice is critical because there are so many people who aren't going to be able to speak up, and who are really going to be in trouble, so my voice, even talking about love or flowers, or whatever small thing I choose to talk about, carries so much more weight because we are here, and we are living real lives. We're not constantly thinking about being disabled and we're not constantly thinking about

the dangers we face; we're also thinking about how we're going to feed our cats, and the boy that won't call us back, and the barista that we like who makes our coffee."

After the Thai restaurant, we returned to Liv's home to continue our conversation. She talked of upcoming slams, and continuing to write and perform, as well as take on freelance editing jobs. The mix of pragmatism and hard work with electricity and desire mirrors her writing. Her poems access the pain, the anger, the beauty. Her treatment of her disability shows fearlessness, honesty, and urgency. Through both, she is able to find magic in small moments.

"The other night, it really snowed and my cat Bear ran outside. I went outside to go get him—it was like 2 in the morning—and I looked up at the moon. I realized I didn't remember the last time that I was outside in the snow." She'd recently been trying a new therapy to help with the effects of cold on her body. In that moment, she suddenly realized how much the therapy must be helping, since she was able to accomplish this small act of searching in the snow. "I could actually get outside, walk around in the snow for half an hour, and look for this cat." Liv leaned her body back into her couch, eyes closed, her lips pulled into a smile, remembering.

Dayna Troisi *is a freelance writer and poet. Her work has been published in* Vice, Racked, Autostraddle, Jezebel, Broadly, Bright, *and elsewhere. Her main projects include poems and nonfiction essays that engage with feminism, queer experience, and disability justice.*

At the End of the Dog's Life

Everyone thinks this will be the thing
that unspools you. Your father's smile
is a flinch. Your mother stares while you
take your medication. But what's shocking,

even to you, is how the dark
dripping of depression you live with every day
has something to collect in now, as if
grief was a china bowl. You are grateful

to not be senseless in your sadness.
When the voices naming you useless
rise, you see how the vets exhaled
when you told them what you wanted done.

You went into that decision's house
alone and it was right.
You are filled with power and with love.

Men Who Wear Jewelry

I can see her
cherry blossom

palm batting all
those necklaces

always tangled
on your chest and

her eyes rapt by
that lapis ring—

your grandfather's.
My father wears

a cheap tin cross;
a ring made from

a bent fork; beads
of wood and bone

I have innate
trust for men in

jewelry. It shows
what they value.

You wear your past
only so long

as it glitters,
sits light on skin.

I won't spend hours
in the bathtub

like a teabag
with a pulse,

my head under
hot lavender

water, guessing
your daughter's name.

Synonyms for Broken in the Key of Depression

Afraid. Afraid. Advisory.
Bloody feathers. Dead
finch. Swallow. Adult(eress).
Nailscratchmoon. No
metaphor. 4 am.
Asylum night.
Hysterical. Two
days' unbrushed
teeth. Bi. Goodbye.
Good Friday. Possum
pissing in Daddy's bookcase.
Sober. Sea glass. Stealing
Xanex. Chocolate for
breakfast. Poison. Freed.
Chest scream. Chewed skin.
4 showers. Body pillow. Wet
dream. Sallie Mae. Drama Queen.
Stage door. Gold chain
from a dead girl. Toothless
lioness. No moon. Oldest.
Dandruff. Dark haired Edward
Hopper girl. Mojo Risin'. Madrid.
Never redhead. Sleep with the TV.
Rooster-mad. Harmonica moan.
Brother. God damn.
Acne. I can't. Suburbs. Shut
up and dig. Smash
the phone. Home. Unwashed
hair smell. Coming of (r)age.
Midnight oil. Deathwish.
Daughter. Separate. Crumpled,
bloody, first draft mouth.

that word

after Tracy K Smith

When did I hear it?
When was it first
held up before me, a rainbow

between each physical therapist's
thumb and forefinger--
what I'd get if I was good and learned

and learned; if I tied laces, read maps; didn't
fall from a big, squishy ball or cry
when the stairs were too high or they did up

the straps of the braces too tight?
They didn't give it an antonym,
living without not an option.

Doctors put me to sleep and cut
muscles to bring it closer.
It gave me disgust for my brother

who--mute, flapping, and huge--
would never even reach for it.
Now I can't remember what I dreamt

every time someone said it.
There is no color to it, no scent.
Nothing I'd someday hold to know

it was mine. Only its push, how it was first to make
me
turn from my mother's hands;
that word that meant worth that halved my world.

Ghazal for My Great Grandfather

Dede, was it from you that this family learned not to tell stories?
Your daughter is old now. Repeats herself. All the stories

she tells are black bile and white wine.
The women who raised me treats a story

like a carcass to be picked bloody clean and squabbled over
but only the juicy wrongdoings. Were you too good a father to be storied?

Your middle granddaughter remembers the smell of dry cleaning,
the scent of your cinnamon gum in her hair, glass Coke bottles—that's the story.

But I have your eyes. I'm hungry. You have too starved a legacy
for my spinning wheel head. I want a joke that made you roar; the story

of how you met an Italian girl. What dress was she wearing? Why did you
choose the names you did for your children? Can you recognize this little storymaker

from where the dead go? In my dreams, we meet on two sides of a river.
Is it your silence that two generations are shouting against? The story

I once got was that you hid with nuns before enemies turned your country
to a sea of blood. I want the truth of how far a boy can run, your American story.

But your children and their children are such loud lock boxes. We shatter glasses
with the backs of our hands. Dede, Leo, I made up a story

and in it you quietly love me. You gift me with the broken bricks of a language or a dance your mother taught you. I think we only know how to live, and why,
because of stories.

Daughters

after Iron & Wine

Mama, don't worry, Dad got the cockatiel down off
 the dogwood
Mama, don't worry, the feral cats will relax while
 the house floods
Mama, I never asked you to cut the meat for me
 at dinner
Mama, don't panic, your baby son's got the arms
 of a killer

So let your days in bed rally strength while I weep
 in the kitchen
Daughters are dogs sinking teeth through the flesh
 that has borne them

Mama, the poems they scream when my bones let
 the pages stay empty
Mama, I can't reach out for the lilac I asked you to
 bring me
Mama, the books in me aren't dictated to me by
 Satan
Mama, your mouth's a cage where I know you had
 hoped for a haven

So let your days in your bed rally strength while I
 weep in the kitchen
Your little girl sank her teeth through the flesh
 that had borne them

Mama, I fell prostrate with the love that I felt for
her belly
Mama, she made me flute and her lips were the
music that filled me
Mama, her skin was yours; you have birthed the
same number of children
Mama, don't tell me so; there's no dead baby
under the garden

So let these days in your bed rally strength while I
weep in the kitchen
Daughters are dogs sinking teeth through the flesh
that has borne them

After Seeing a Facebook Post Proclaiming: Stop Romanticizing People Who Hurt You!

But (the ocean/the ocean/she walked into the ocean/sunflowers/she drove ten hours/she made the best playlists/she knitted me wrist warmers/her eyes were sun on bay water; her back, a nebula/i once made her come by text while her daughter slept next to her/ waves crested at my collarbone//with her, i was a fountain/birdsong//my poem tattooed on her tricep/without her i'm a wrath animal/she's gotten a cat, i think, to replace me/i feel her hating and missing/the stories/touch/we never took that fast drive/she said she'd hold my hand in the hospital/her chipped tooth/even the lack of her memory makes my bed dark water/my skin is made of beetles/she was going to tell me which old films to watch; teach me punk rock/ first times never return/she risked so much/i promised/what does forever mean/what if/soul/ is any one thing that lays claim to my soul good) how?

Liv Mammone is an editor, poet, and poetry slam competitor from Long Island, New York. She has previously taught creative writing at Hofstra University and Queens College and was awarded a Brooklyn Poets Fellowship for the Winter-Spring 2016 season.

Phillis Levin: Sowing the Seeds of Sounds

Lily Vu

Photo by Sigrid Estrada

Phillis Levin enters the restaurant with a frazzled look on her face, possibly from her fashionable lateness, the unusual crowdedness of the small yet cozy space, or simply the Upper West Side wind. Bundled up in a jacket, scarf, and winter fur hat, the 62-year-old poet looks like a line of poetry herself with her wild black hair framing her long, alabaster face, eyes wide and searching, alert.

Professor of English and Poet-in-Residence at Hofstra University since 2001, Levin is the author of five poetry collections. Her most recent book, *Mr. Memory & Other Poems*, a finalist for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, is a delicate representation of a sublime vision through various poetic structures and sonic lyrics. "I usually have an image or phrase," she says, describing her writing process. "And that phrase becomes a generative force: a sound seed."

Sifting through Levin's poetry is like taking a front-row seat on an emotive and evocative ride, one that conjures intimate images and fluid senses through her ability to add a touch of

lightness and persona even to the most melancholy of subjects. As a sound- and image-based poet, much of Levin's writing begins as a mental process. "I recite poems in my head while I'm walking, waking up in the morning, before I go to sleep. I revise in memory," she says. She believes that poems have the ability to be smarter than the poet, that "maybe all of our writing is smarter than we are." Maybe so; perhaps this is why such beautiful and detailed images make their appearance during the most ordinary moments of her day.

Levin is the recipient of an Ingram Merrill Grant, fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, and a Fulbright Scholarship. She is also an essayist, and edited *The Penguin Book of the Sonnet: 500 Years of a Classic Tradition in English*. A former student, Ishion Hutchinson, whose collection *House of Lords and Commons* recently won the 2016 National Book Critics Circle poetry prize, is also one of the five poetry finalists of the 2016 *LA Times* Book Prize along with Levin, who feels it is truly sweet to see their names near each other in this way. She is in every way a scholar, a mentor, as well as a poet, and her work is steeped in history, intellectually rigorous, and displays her mastery in detail and rhythm.

In her most recent collection, one of her longer poems, "Boy With a Book Bag", is about bullying and took almost 20 years to finish. Levin returned over and over to the piece she calls traumatic and personal, playing with structure, point-of-view, and narrative, finally settling on using the imagination of a six-year-old and details from her own hometown of Paterson, New Jersey:

If I could be accused of killing Christ
Couldn't I be the person the police
Were in hot pursuit of for robbing
A bank at gunpoint in Paterson?

Levin recalls some of her earliest memories of writing poetry coming out of a "feeling of injustice and feeling that something wasn't fair." Emotion and process is deeply helixed for Levin, who describes her practice as having "lost my self-consciousness by entering the trance of writing."

"I write very fast and then I spend a lot of time revising. Most things I write happen in 10 or 15 minutes—sometimes five—and then I can spend a whole month revising," she says. While studying writing at Sarah Lawrence College, she first discovered how certain poetic patterns can shape and enchant the sounds and rhyme within her own poetry. Often, the poem and the personal are engaging within the same conversation; she believes there is an "inextricable connection between the patterns created and the subject."

Published originally in *Kenyon Review* and featured in her 2008 poetry collection *Mayday*, Levin's "A Needle in the Sky" is a prime example of her ability to take the small and mundane, transforming it into the expanded and detailed. The piece reads:

There is a needle in the sky
    Being threaded now, but the thread is blue:
That is why you cannot see it
    Threading its way

The poem also alludes to the philosophical and personified, as the needle changes its course:

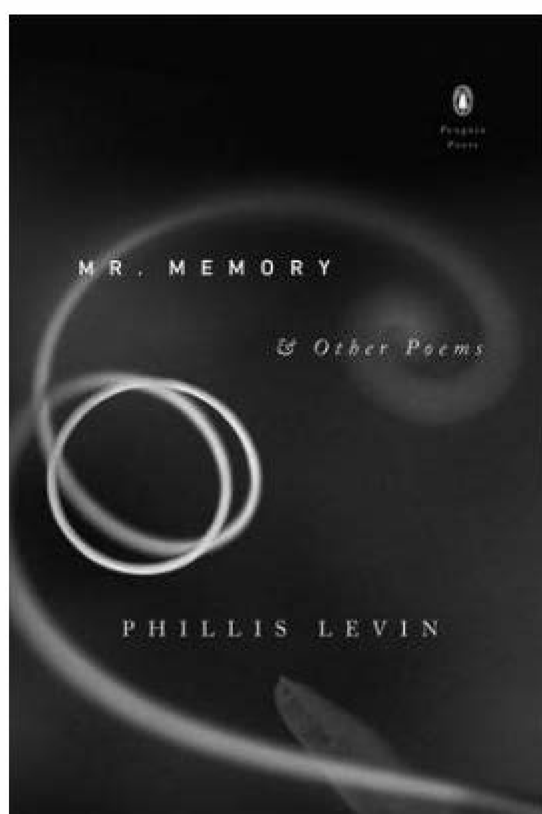
...There is a needle
Pulling a thread through your veins...
Tugging your heart as soon as you believe
There is nothing left.

Some of the most particular stories are told through the perspective of another entity, in this case, the needle in the sky. And that's the intimate beauty of poetry writing: a "trance" that one naturally enters once the pen and the personal hit the page, like fishing from a cloud in the sky.

Levin doesn't get to ordering her beet salad accompanied by a cup of coffee with cream and sugar until 30 minutes post-arrival; a conversation in poetry respectfully takes precedence over a hankering for French cuisine. Her presence in the cafe resembles her presence in the classroom: confident and assured, stark and gentle.

Levin's salad and coffee finally arrives and she prepares to tuck in. But first she thinks again to the idea of revision, revising her thoughts one more time. Levin doesn't envision the process of writing a book of poetry as a book writing process, exactly. "I write each poem individually and at a certain point, there's a gravity towards the clustering of poems that feels like a collection—there's the impetus to shape it." She posits that perhaps a poem, regardless of its composition time or perceived impeccability, can always remain in the revision stage.

Afterall, she says thoughtfully, "the problems that one can have in a poem are almost infinite."



Phyllis Levin's poetry collection

Mr. Memory & Other Poems

is available now wherever books are sold.

Lily Vu is an MFA candidate at Hofstra University. Her interviews have been published in Keep-ENG in Touch *and* Eastern Writer's Guild. *She enjoys creative nonfiction, poetry, and dancing with hula hoops.*

ARTWORK

From the Desk of the Art Editor

4.19.17
Hempstead, NY

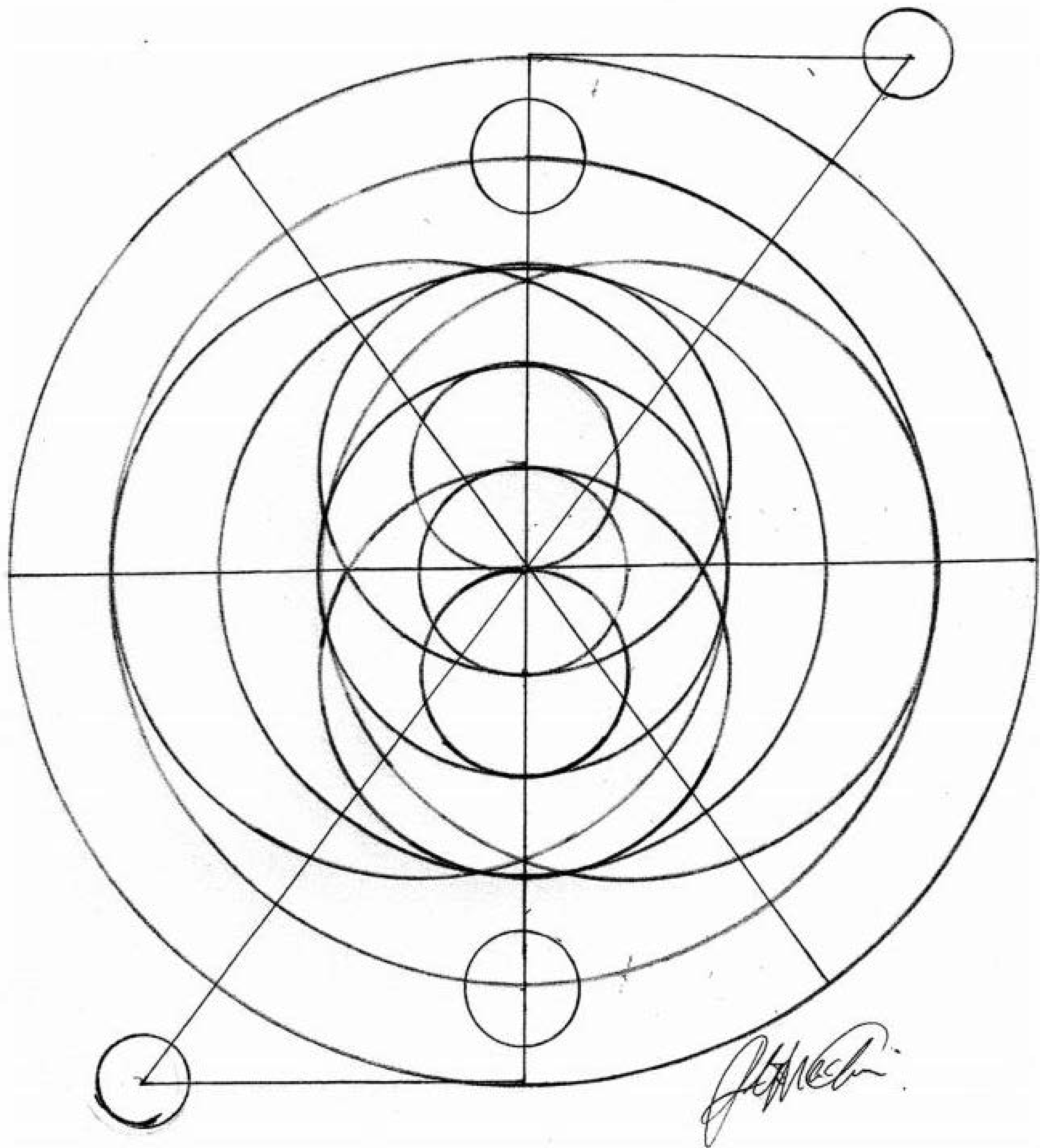
This issue, *Windmill* faced the tremendous task of establishing which direction we wanted to take this magazine. A huge part of the decision was choosing an art piece for our cover, one that carried on the precedent set by our first issue while continuing to hone the magazine's voice. Two paintings in particular cast a spell over us: Laura McManus's *Delaware River* and *Strawberry Moon Riverside*. Both pieces spoke to the lightness and darkness of this issue, the solitude and strangeness. We eventually agreed that *Strawberry Moon* better portrayed the spirit of this issue, but we loved *Delaware River* so much we had to include it here.

In addition to Laura's work, the featured art in this issue reflects a diverse, multi-faceted collection of backgrounds. We fell in love with Timna Tarr's quilt *Twelve Dozen*, which combines quirky and memorable with the mundane. Peter MacQuarrie's piece *The Point* grapples with finding a purpose; the artist uses his art practice and process to cope with mental illness. Louis Staeble works with photography, and his piece *Cracks* reveals beauty in simplicity.

We were incredibly fortunate to have the opportunity to showcase this eclectic collection of artwork. Thanks for your support, and we hope to see you in the next issue as well.

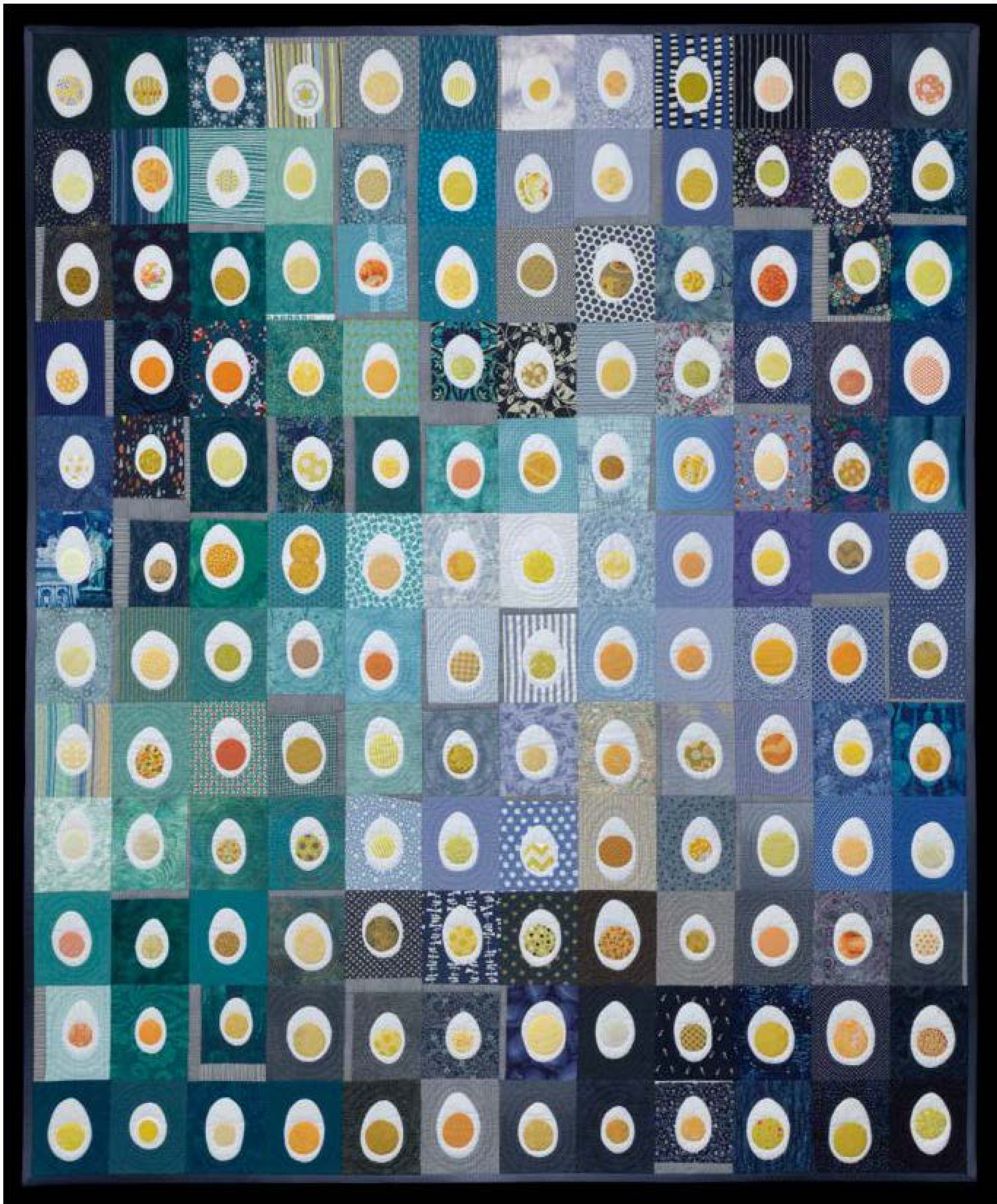
Regards,

Emily Nguyen
Art Editor

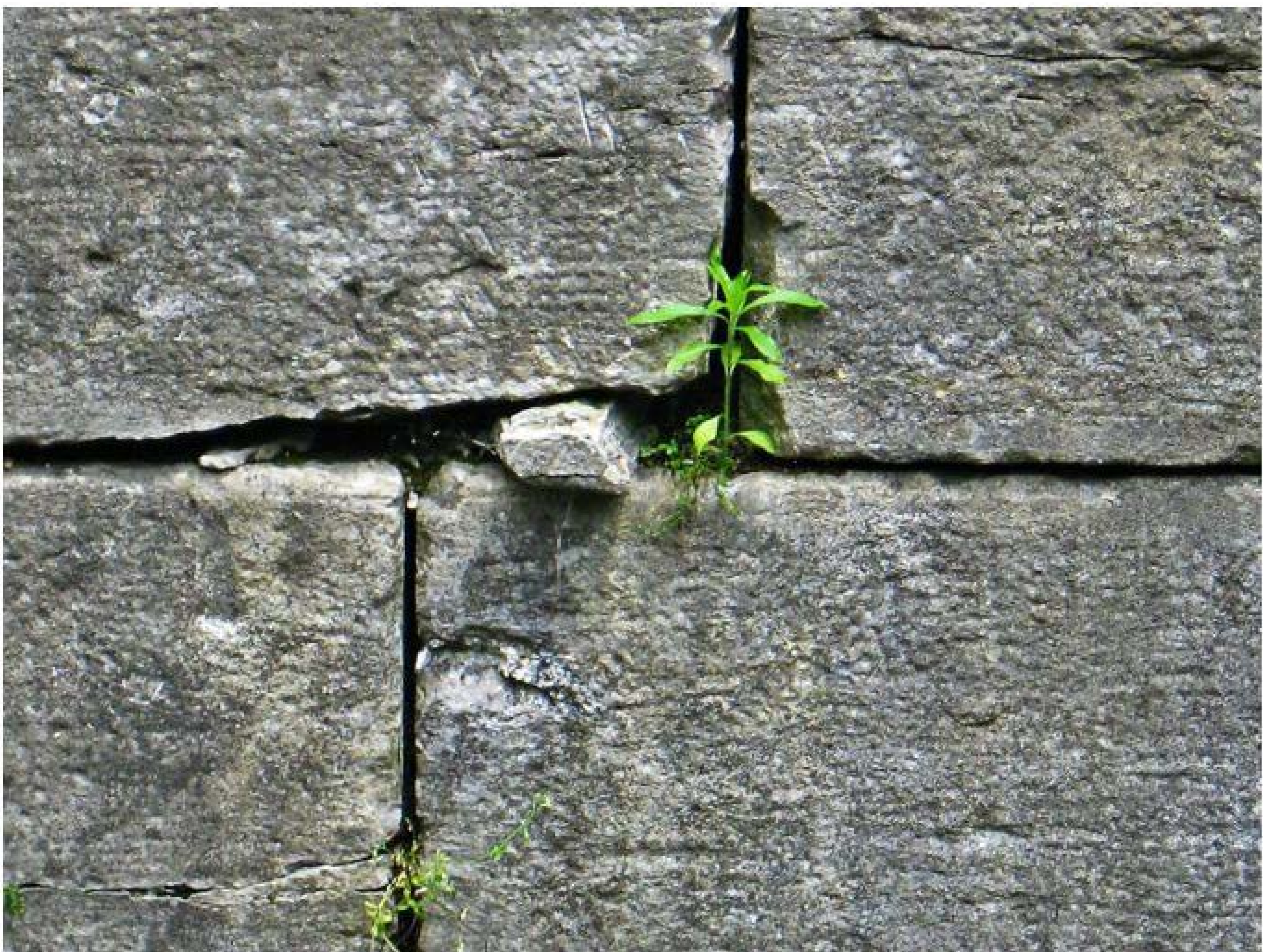


The Point, Peter MacQuarrie
Pen, pencil, paper
Edited on Adobe Photoshop

Man at St. Elmo Bar, J Alfier
Digital photography



Twelve Dozen, Timna Tarr
Fabric
Photographed by Stephen Petegorsky



Cracking, Louis Staeble
Photography

Unlocked, Louis Staeble
Photography

Delaware River, Laura McManus
Acrylic and Ink on Canvas

Riverside Red, Laura McManus
Acrylic on Canvas

Como Marsh, Jim McManus
Acrylic on Canvas

FICTION

The Blood in Your Body

Joe Baumann

On Thanksgiving, three weeks after his father died, Tesh and I stood in our kitchen, he about to baste the turkey while I sliced potatoes. He stopped, turned to me, and shut the oven door. The turkey baster dripped broth onto the floor, tear-shaped blobs that hovered on the linoleum.

"I'm not hungry."

"Well," I said, "dinner isn't for a few hours."

"No, you don't understand. I won't be hungry." He set down the baster and rubbed his eyes.

"Okay," I said. "No problem." A potato rolled off the counter and I ignored its mushy thump on the floor. Tesh looked about to cry, as he had for three weeks. I touched his jaw, my hands flaky and oozy with the filmy slick from the watery potatoes. "Give me a minute," I said.

In the living room, Pauline and Ana were languishing on our matching microfiber couches, the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade on the muted television, Underdog bobbing between skyscrapers while being chased by Felix the Cat.

"Tesh isn't doing so hot," I said.

Pauline, blonde from one bottle and plump from another, yawned and stretched. "It was only a matter of time. What do you want us to do?"

"I don't know. Call Jack. See what he suggests."

"On it," Ana said, flopping on the couch like a seal to pry her cell phone from her back pocket. The size of a small computer, she held it to her mouth like a walkie talkie and instructed it to call Jack. Then she held it to her ear and waited, speaking in muffled whispers so Tesh wouldn't hear from around the corner. When she hung up, she said, "He'll meet us downstairs in thirty minutes."

I found Tesh standing over the oven, staring at the turkey, the baster aimed at it like a magic wand. Pressing a hand on his shoulder, I took the baster and told him to get ready. Jack was on his way, finally, and we were going out.

"Out?" He said it like a foreign word, something Slavic or African that didn't fit in his mouth.

We snaked scarves around our throats and trundled down the hall to the elevator in a line, staring at our watery reflections while waiting for the steel doors to open.

"You probably don't need those scarves," Jack said when we poured out of the elevator. "It's warm."

Wearing only a thin, long-sleeved t-shirt that accentuated his broad shoulders and strong chest, Jack was the most attractive of the five of us, blonde and fit, a former baseball player who hadn't lost his upper breadth and tight trunk. Jokes abounded that all four of us found him attractive, and he often laughed and blew clownish kisses in our direction.

I took Tesh's hand. It, too, was warm, and bigger than mine. Everything about Tesh felt bigger.

Although we'd already had sex, it wasn't until our third date, miniature golf on a spring afternoon heavy with breeze, that Tesh talked about his parents and I felt the crush of intimacy and the sharp realization that I was falling in love. He was my first boyfriend; I'd had two girlfriends in college and had professed love to them because everyone seemed to think those were the things I was supposed to do, but Tesh was different, not in his maleness but in his carriage, his throaty voice that sounded like a folk singer after a set on stage. He had deep-set eyes that looked over my shoulder as if something important were happening back there, but when I would turn I would just see the world as familiar as always.

Tesh started talking on the fifth hole, barely pausing to square his shoulders or line up his shots. I stopped keeping score, letting the tiny pencil clatter in a bush somewhere, and listened, ignoring the off-line of my own putts. He told me that his mother had been hit by lung cancer after three decades of smoking from the age of seventeen through forty-seven with only one break.

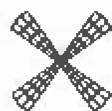
"To gestate with me," Tesh said. "That was her word for it, by the way."

She disappeared into a hospital bed in a blinding flicker. When it was clear there was no saving her, his father started sneaking her out for cigarettes, and at the very end he took her home, ripping out IVs that leaked fluid on the floor like urine drops and plucking off the electrodes stuck to her chest, sending the circus of machines around her into a dinging mess. Before anyone could stop him, he drove her to

the park they'd spent every Sunday of their marriage walking through, even after Tesh was born. She died there, in his arms, while they stared at ducks skimming across a pond.

"He didn't take me with them. Didn't call," Tesh said on the fourteenth hole, finally pausing and looking past me. This time I didn't look away from him. "Can you believe that?" He lowered his head and sunk a putt. "I haven't seen him since the funeral, three years ago."

I nodded and leaned my putter against a tree. I took his hand and squeezed it, then kissed him on the mouth.



Jack said he would take care of everything, that we should just start driving around the closest neighborhoods. In the back seat he, Ana, and Pauline rummaged through bags while I drove. Tesh stared out the window, squinting against the hot air blasting out of the vents until I turned the heat down.

"This is a nice neighborhood," I said, turning right. The brick houses adorned with columns that looked like glue sticks resembled small castles with steeples and bay windows that reminded me of beehives, yards the size of tennis courts separating neighbors from one another.

"Someone's having family over somewhere. Maybe we'll see a front-porch fight," Jack said. He was Tesh's best friend and first college roommate and knew him even better than I did, and he was the one who pulled me aside at a party and told me Tesh had once been diagnosed

by a therapist with Seasonal Affective Disorder. He'd tipped his head down, raised an eyebrow in warning, then told me that the diagnosis was a bunch of shit, that there was a lot more to it.

Jack's arm thrust forward from the back seat. He was holding a scented candle the size of a mason jar.

"Hold this, would you? And be careful." The candle was already lit, warmth radiating from its flickering wick.

"That's going to be you, Tesh," I said.

"What is that smell?" he said, turning so the light from the candle bounced off his eyes. Tesh hadn't shaved for a week and the shadowy stubble on his chin and neck was thickening into an unkempt tangle. This happened every November, yet I still mentioned it in bed, running one finger along his jawline and feigning injury, thrusting my finger in my mouth like I'd suffered a paper cut. Tesh, as always, offered a bleak smile and asked if I was finished reading and whether he could turn off the light on his night stand.

"Mashed potato," Jack said, leaning back in his seat. The scent, buttery and fat, distilled through the car, and I felt a tingle at the back of my tongue. At the same time I slowed the car; the street was wide but crowded by expensive cars on either side like the walls of a clogged artery.

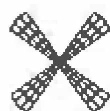
"Hey, up there," Ana screeched from the back seat, her voice pitched high like she'd swallowed down a balloon full of helium. "Look."

An older couple, both with grayish peppery hair, tottered up a walkway—three long steps chiseled into a perfect carpet of grass—toward a two-story house with green shutters pressed

against the brick. Four thick columns spun up under the second-story balcony that probably had no access point from the inside. I maneuvered the car down the street choked with parked vehicles whose bumpers were sniffing at one another, the only breaks between vehicles, the entries to long driveways flagged with bulging, swollen, brick-encrusted mailboxes. As we passed the old couple, I glanced through the Plexiglas storm door and caught a flash of bodies milling about in a spacious open living room.

"They look like they're marching to their deaths," Pauline said.

"Family Thanksgiving," Jack said. "They might as well be."



My parents divorced when I was three years old, and my only memory of that split is of me sitting in my mother's sedan, the car packed to the ceiling with our possessions, clothes spilling out of moldy, chewed boxes, my toys and stuffed animals' snouts poking up through the unsealed flaps. The heat sat thick and unmoving, the air conditioning having given out some weeks prior and going unrepaired, and my legs chafed against the seat, itchy on the undersides of my thighs. My mother had long stopped putting me in a car seat, and the passenger's bucket chair felt like a king-sized bed.

"I never really knew what the custodial situation was, not for a long time," I said. Tesh and I were sitting at a round table near the miniature golf course's concession stand at a mesh table

with diamond-shaped holes threaded across the surface so that spilled food would slip right through. I was sliding my fingers in and out, and the greasy smell of fryers hung in the air, smeary and thick. “Every now and then my dad would show up, with a gift or something, and we would sit in my mom’s apartment and I’d play with it. She would stay in the kitchen, peering in on us. I think she thought she was being discrete, but she wasn’t.”

“Weird,” Tesh said. “Did you ever ask her what the deal was?”

“No,” I said. My father had disappeared shortly thereafter, his visits becoming more staccatoed and irregular until he stopped coming altogether. My mother never offered any explanation, and I never asked.

“You don’t wonder why?” Tesh asked, distracted. Since telling me about his mother’s death he’d become vague and distant, as though someone high in the sky was yelling out to him and he was straining to hear. I tried to reel him back, to get Tesh to look at me square and solid, but his gaze was blank, as if he’d been hypnotized, an expression I would come to recognize any time Tesh spoke about either of his parents.

“I think my dad got in legal trouble or something,” I said. “But like I said, my mom and I have an understanding.”

“You don’t want to think about it. Neither does she.”

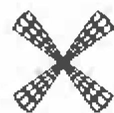
“I guess so. Something like that, maybe.”

“But at least you still have her,” Tesh said, snapping to attention. He didn’t say it as an accusation or admonition; no bile or anger crowded his voice. I took my fingers from where they

were laced through the table and set my hand over Tesh's and nodded.

"You're right. I'm lucky. What about your dad? Does he at least call?"

"Well," Tesh said, turning back to the sky. I'd lost him again, as I would many times over.



The car smelled like a feast, thanks to an array of candles Jack had pilfered over the last several weeks from the store he worked at in the mall, one of those soap and scrub and candle joints that smelled like an overly-sweet pie and could make your nose tingle and your eyes water if the combination of smells was wrong or too potent. We often gave Jack grief for being the only male employee.

"I can't believe this," he said once, looking from Tesh to me and back. "You guys know you're the two dudes sleeping together, right?"

"You wouldn't believe some of the aromas people have a hard-on for," he said when I raised an eyebrow toward the rearview mirror when he lit a green bean-scented candle. A small cloud of smoke hovered in the back seat until I lowered the windows just enough for it to dissipate, but not before leaving sooty circles on the cloth ceiling that Jack reached up and wiped away. When the old couple had gone inside the house, the heavy oak door slammed behind them, and the house was cinched up tight: the curtains in the bay window were drawn, the Venetians peeking into the living room lowered into a rippled mass.

“Not very warm and welcoming,” Ana said.

We went cruising through a different neighborhood and found our way into one of its lost, lonely cul-de-sacs, where a ring of four houses sagged. Half a dozen cars were parked at an acute angle to the curb in front of a lawn where three young boys, no older than ten or twelve, were shrieking and running around the yard, followed by two huffing, pot-bellied men, one completely bald and the other in denial about his similar fate. They were wearing festive green and red sweaters that matched.

“Look,” Jack said. “It’s you two in ten years.”

“Oh please,” I said. “That’s at least fifteen or twenty away.” I looked toward Tesh. He was staring at the scramble of what was perhaps touch football, but he said nothing. He caught my glance and flashed a weak smile.

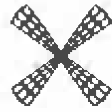
“What is it with football?” Jack said. “My family never did that. Of course, my dad was busy hitting my mom, and there was no one else around, so that would have been tough.”

One of the things that joined us was the minuteness of our familial networks; growing up, we’d all be parts of small groups, nothing like in the movies or on television. No extra planks in stretchable dining tables necessary, no unfurled card tables for the kids because there were never enough kids. The only one in the kitchen was Mom and the occasional intrepid daughter. Football games were watched on television for no other reason than the lack of anything else to fill up the time.

“I didn’t even know what a fucking cornucopia was until *The Hunger Games* came out, and I’m still pretty sure I have the details wrong,”

Pauline said, rapping her fingernails on the window.

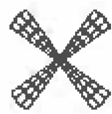
I looked at Tesh, who was still paying us no attention, his focus on the football game. I reached out and gave his shoulder a squeeze, but he gave no indication of feeling anything.



Weeks after the third date, when that was no longer a number to keep track of, Tesh told me that his father had always loved holidays, particularly Easter, Halloween, and Christmas. He went all out, decorating the front yard and the columns on the porch and even dangling lights from the gutter above the back deck even though their house butted up against a soggy, miniscule forest separating the neighborhood from a noisy highway a hundred yards away, so the only people who might see any of the bright icicle lights whose colors changed depending on the holiday—pink for Easter, orange for Halloween, white for Christmas—would be those passers-by who happened to glimpse the glow through the branches at just the right moment. In spring the yard was dotted with oversized eggs that Tesh's dad had hand-painted himself and that he touched up every few years, inflatable pumpkins and a straw scarecrow in the fall, and then, in winter, a massive light display, complete with wire trees and Santa pulled by his reindeer atop the roof and so much glow that Tesh sometimes couldn't fall asleep from the ambient pulsing light shining through his bedroom window that faced the front of the house, so he had to sleep in the basement.

But Thanksgiving was something else. Tesh never knew why, but his father hated that holiday, refusing to buy a turkey or turn on a football game. One year, Tesh's mother hung a pair of autumnal corn cobs on the door to the garage and, upon seeing them, his father yanked them down, pulling the hook off the door with it and a shower of sawdust and paint. He stepped into the garage and tossed them into the empty garbage can, the cobs rattling it like a steel drum. Without a word he walked back through the door, Tesh and his mother frozen and edgy like a pair of harried animals, but Tesh's father just walked to the fridge, looking for something to drink. Then he patched up the door a day later, offering no explanation.

Finally, just a year before she died, his mother told Tesh that Tesh's grandparents were killed in a car accident two days before Thanksgiving while on their way to pick up Tesh's father from college for the long weekend. Instead of sitting down at a table with his parents and sister and a handful of visiting cousins, Tesh's father had spent that year's holiday at the hospital filling out paperwork and numbly listening to doctors explain what had happened to his parents. He spent the weekend holding his sobbing sister, forcing himself not to cry for both of their sakes.



"Okay. Now let's play a game," Jack said. He, Ana, and Pauline had blown out the candles in favor of popping open a bottle of white wine, the sweet-sour smell pushing against the savory scents that still hung in the air. They drank

out of Dixie cups and offered pours to Tesh and me, but we declined. Jack shrugged and downed his like a shot, then refilled his cup and made his proposal. “I call this game ‘What’s Wrong in That House.’”

The rules were simple: find a house hosting a party and determine what was fucked up about the family inside.

“After all,” he said, lifting the bottle from between his legs to refill Ana and Pauline’s cups, “every family is messed up, and anyone who tells you their family isn’t is either delusional or a liar. Or possibly both.” He took another deep swig of wine, his lips glistening from the liquid. Some dribbled down the corner of his mouth.

We were bonded, the five of us, by this very thing: varying combinations of grief and rage and discontent that permeated our families. Our small holidays had, at various points and in different ways, fallen apart completely. Jack’s mother finally took off after his dad pushed her through a window and left her with a long gash down the back of her right arm; she was so broken and welted that she thought nothing of Jack, who was seventeen at the time and on the cusp of college, himself leaving weeks later and never going back. Ana’s parents divorced when she was a teenager and each remarried, finding new loves, making new families, and setting Ana aside like she was an outdated television left to gather dust. And Pauline, at sixteen, had run off with a college boy, told by her parents in a moment of rage and frustration to never come back, and she took them at their word, giving them no chance or way to apologize or say they’d been rash in disowning her.

We started the game with the football players.

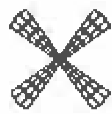
"The dad's unemployed," Ana said. "It's made the wife hate her husband and she starts saying so when she drinks a lot of gin, which is most Tuesdays."

"And the kids are doing poorly in school, which pisses off the dad so he starts yelling and then gets angry because he has to play bad cop because mom is loaded all the time." Pauline finished her wine and pushed her cup toward Jack. "Speaking of which." She nudged at him and he lifted the bottle.

"And the boys actually hate football," Jack said as he poured. "And they hate their dad for convincing them to play, but they know they have to if they want to avoid a fight." He reached forward and wagged the wine bottle between us like a conductor's wand. "You sure you don't want any?"

I wasn't sure, but I knew Tesh wouldn't approve. He said nothing, still, but was no longer looking past me toward the strangers on the grass; Tesh had turned away, curled toward his window, looking at himself in the side mirror.

Jack shrugged and filled his glass. "See, I told you. Isn't this game fun?"



Tesh's mother, it turned out, had lied. On the last Thanksgiving his father was alive, Tesh called him. Though they never saw each other in person, they did speak on the phone from time to time, grumbling at one another; Tesh had me

sit and listen as some kind of witness. To what, I wasn't sure, but every time he switched to speakerphone I remained silent so that his father didn't know I was present. Tesh never told him about me, but this didn't bother me; it wasn't out of shame, I knew, but a defiance, keeping a part of his life veiled from his father just as he had done to Tesh for so long.

"That's what she said?" Tesh's father said. I pictured him baring his teeth at the receiver.

Tesh said yes, and then recounted the story of his grandparents' gruesome death. His father started laughing, a riotous gurgling noise like something a Bond villain would do right before giving a henchman the signal to kill 007 in some needlessly convoluted, unsuccessful way.

"Your mother was a good woman, Tesh, but she lied to you." Tesh's grip on my hand tightened. "For your own sake, I guess."

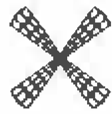
When Tesh asked what his father meant, the whole, real story came out: when Tesh's father was fourteen, Tesh's grandfather left his grandmother for another woman on Thanksgiving, during dinner. His grandmother had loved to cook a steaming, perfect meal, the smells of butter and garlic and roasting meat emanating from her kitchen, the burners on the stove and the oven working overtime from the early morning, her arms achy and leaden from all the mixing when she finally sat down, skin blanched and sweaty. But her cheeks always glowed, her eyes content. Until the year Tesh's grandfather stood up and walked out, dropping his cranberry-colored napkin atop his plate, saying he was tired of the life he was living. Tesh's father never saw him again. His grandmother had a breakdown,

spent the next three days crying despite the comforts Tesh's father and aunt tried to offer, and she refused to eat. She was bedridden, lost weight, and withered away to the point that she had to be hospitalized, eventually dying from malnourishment. The only true part of his mother's story was Tesh's father holding his sister, refusing to cry.

Tesh said nothing. I could see his jaw clench and unclench, the tiny muscles in his temples flexing and popping. His father had to ask if he was still there, and I squeezed Tesh's hand, which had gone limp. This seemed to give him some life, and he said, "Oh," then told his father he had to go.

"I have no idea why she'd tell you that made-up story," his father said, then hung up as if they'd talked about nothing more important than the pleasant weather.

Tesh wouldn't speak to him again before he died.



Ana, Jack, and Pauline left us to go to a bar, someplace smoky and sticky, the kind of dive that would be open on Thanksgiving night and would attract, as Jack said with a wry smile, "the most perfect, awful kind of people."

"Like us," Ana added with a wicked smirk as they piled out of my car and into hers, Pauline teetering from too much wine.

"We could go with them," Tesh said.

I dragged him upstairs.

The turkey sat on the kitchen counter, half-raw and dried out, cold and unbasted where

we'd left it, as were the potatoes, half of them diced, the rest lonesome and spotted and lolling on a cutting board that was slick with their watery sweat. Despite having not eaten, I wasn't hungry.

"Ignore it all," I said. "We can clean tomorrow."

"If we ever have kids," Tesh said, "can we just drive around with them on Thanksgiving?"

I peeled off my coat and tossed it over the back of the couch.

"That's a long way off, don't you think?"

Tesh grunted and made his way down the hall toward the bathroom, and I watched him go. I had a deep admiration for Tesh, his physical stature; he filled up the narrow hallway, and I had a hard time imagining anyone ever being able to scoot around him. His shoulders were wide, his neck long and muscular. I wondered whether one could develop a neck like that on purpose, or if it was just something that happened.

Tesh had taken off his shirt and was brushing his teeth. In the mirror I watched as the striations of muscle in his arm and shoulder twitched as he brushed.

"I'm going to say no."

"To what?" Tesh mumbled through foam and his toothbrush, which sat on his mouth like a tongue depressor.

"We're not going to drive around with our kids—should we ever have any—on Thanksgiving. We're not doing that."

Tesh gave his mouth one last quick brush and spat out the slough of toothpaste and saliva.

"Why not?"

We weren't looking directly at each other;

I stared into the mirror, looking at Tesh's reflection, who looked at mine. I never met Tesh's father, only seeing him in person for the first time when he was laying in his casket, and I imagined the eyes staring at me were the same ones Tesh had seen when his father ripped down the corn cobs from the kitchen door. I wondered how hard it was for Tesh to look at himself in the mirror every day.

I stepped forward and pressed a hand against his shoulder blade, the muscle tensing under my touch. "Because we're not our parents. We may inherit some things from them, but we're not them."

"I know that."

"I'm not sure you do." I gave the knot of his shoulder a hard poke, leaving a reddish imprint on his tan skin. "This is your skin, not theirs. The blood inside you, in your body, is all yours. It may have parts of them floating around in it, but it's all you. Only you." I pulled on Tesh's shoulder and turned him around and tugged him close. "You're not either of them, and I'm not my parents. Jack, Ana, and Pauline aren't either. We deserve to enjoy the lives we have. We don't owe anything to them, okay?"

I could smell the minty spark of Tesh's breath as it hit my earlobe and could feel the sag in his carriage, like he might melt into a puddle.

"Here's what we do," I said. "Tomorrow, we throw out that awful turkey and go buy another one. We cook it, we call Ana, Jack, and Pauline, and we have a goddamn Thanksgiving dinner, okay? And then we'll do it again next year, on Thanksgiving, and the year after that."

"That's also a long way away," he said. His eyes were wet.

I pulled Tesh closer, tucking his chin against the hollow between my neck and shoulder like a violin. "Well, then let's just agree on tomorrow. Okay?"

I felt him sigh, and he wrapped his arms against me to hold himself up, his hands linked against the small of my back. I pulled, leading Tesh from the bathroom, and turned off the light.

Joe Baumann's fiction and essays have appeared in Zone 3, Hawai'i Review, Eleven Eleven, *and many others. He is the author of* Ivory Children, *published in 2013 by Red Bird Chapbooks. He possesses a PhD in English from the University of Louisiana-Lafayette and teaches composition, creative writing, and literature at St. Charles Community College in Cottleville, Missouri. He has been nominated for three Pushcart Prizes and was recently nominated for inclusion in* Best American Short Stories 2016.

Diving

Jenny Belardi

At the rest stop, Steph scooped mint chocolate chip and fudge swirl to small, cranky children in the early afternoon, to men and women in wrinkled suits returning home in the evenings, and to truck drivers late at night. She was sure ice cream dripped into the laps of her customers as they drove away, but business remained steady.

Steph's break came at two, when there was a bit of a lull post-lunch. She grabbed her backpack from behind the counter and walked quickly to the bathroom to wash the congealed ice cream from her wrists. Despite her best efforts, some always seeped into the thin plastic gloves. She took a seat at one of the tables amongst the families eating greasy slices of pizza and the young couples drinking lattes from Starbucks.

She took out her phone and as soon as the message board came up on the screen, the rest stop around her disappeared from her consciousness. She had a new private message from him, as she'd hoped.

"Does March 17th work? I can arrange the boat and get you a wetsuit so you don't have to travel with yours."

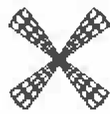
This is what she had wanted all along, and now it was here. She hit Reply and typed, "Yes. Can't wait."

He was online. A new message came in quickly. “George’s Marina. We should leave early. 6 A.M.?”

“Yes,” she typed and meant it. Yes to an adventure, to meeting him, and to seeing something no one else had ever been able to find.

She pulled up Expedia, which she knew about from its many popup ads. She booked a flight to Miami on the morning of March 16th and a return ticket for March 23rd. Even if things went wrong with Fishman324, she could always spend a week on the beach with a cold beverage in her hand. Nothing with ice cream, though.

It would be the second time in her life she’d been on a plane. The first had been when she was five. Her grandmother had died in Orlando, where she’d moved many years ago. Steph had never really known her grandmother, but she and her father had flown to Florida. They’d then flown the body back to Pennsylvania to be hovered over by loved ones at a funeral that smelled like too-old carnations. She knew her father was grieving, so Steph had tried to hide her wonder as the plane lifted through the clouds.



She had stumbled across the board by happenstance. After work, she ate dinner with her father and her two sisters; her mother had died of cancer before Steph was out of diapers. Steph’s older sister, Janice, cooked old standbys: homemade mac and cheese that stuck to the pot, pork chops, ham. Afterwards, Steph sat in the living room with her father while he watched *60*

Minutes or *Frontline*, playing on her laptop while he drank tea.

Steph liked to read message boards. She liked to learn about what shoes were fashionable, which didn't much matter where she lived, and what backpacking in Europe was like.

The scuba diving message board immediately felt like a place she was meant to be. It was like Christmas Eve, relaxed and comfortable with people who were her people. Yet, she didn't know any of them, and she hadn't even shared their interests before finding the site.

The two broadest categories on the navigation bar were "Old" and "New," simple. "Old" toggled to a menu that read: Plane Crashes, Shipwrecks, and Other. "New" toggled to Species and Cities. She immediately jumped to Plane Crashes, because who wouldn't? There, she found threads about histories, some confirmed and some merely theorized about. There was a poster named Amalie who claimed she knew the location of wreckage from a WWII-era Japanese plane. No one answered, and Steph quickly figured out that Amalie was an outcast and that no one believed her theories.

Steph toggled back to the broader menu, between "Old" and "New." Which kind of people would search for old things and which for new? New would be more optimistic, she decided, and she was right. Under "New" and then "Cities," she found wild theories that sounded wacky yet appealing. They were versions of Atlantis, some shared by many minds, others receiving only rebuttals. There were gold and diamonds and rubies, and also things we couldn't even know about yet, strange ways of communicating and new forms of wealth.

One poster put forth an idea that was both old and new (though filed under "New"). His username was Fishman324. Steph pictured a man with the face of a fish. He thought there was a world underwater, which held all of the species we thought we'd killed off.

Fishman324: *Maybe it's dark. Maybe the other species can barely see each other. We definitely can't see them.*

Sailor57: *If they can't see, how'd they all end up in the same place?*

Fishman324: *There's a beacon. It's not something you can see.*

Sailor57: *That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard.*

Fishman324 never bothered to answer the trolls.

Macandcheese: *Do you think there's something like this on land? In a jungle somewhere?*

Fishman324: *It'd be harder. Planes would see it.*

Macandcheese: *Maybe the planes don't know where to look.*

Fishman324: *Something to think about.*

Fishman324 wanted to find this underwater haven. Steph scrolled through old threads, trying to find ones he'd commented on,

or particularly, the threads he'd initiated. She found one from three months earlier.

> **Fishman324**: *Position is likely. I'm planning to check it out. Who's in?*

No one. There were no replies. There were several threads like this, all unanswered. Steph wondered if Fishman324 was someone other people merely toyed with or if there was anyone out there who thought he was as smart as she soon began to think he was.

She'd learned that what she was doing was referred to as lurking, when someone regularly checks a message board but doesn't make themselves known or contribute to the community. Occasionally, a poster would put out a call for lurkers to identify themselves. Steph wanted to answer, but it felt like emerging from the corner of the girls' room in high school, where she could remain anonymous trying on various shades of stolen lip gloss with her best friend Amber. She liked the corner— until she met Fishman324.

> **Fishman324:** *Think about on land. There've been times when we thought something was extinct and then years later, we discovered it wasn't.*

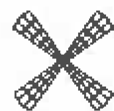
She agreed with him, and she thought, we're still finding new species. One day a cat walks out of the jungle, and it's discovered. But it was probably there all along, right? For years and years. What are the chances we found the cat as soon as it arrived on earth?

She decided to out herself. She held out for weeks, afraid of the repercussions both online and offline. Steph didn't want her father to find out. He'd be offended she was looking for life elsewhere. He'd never left their town, and though he must know that Steph didn't want to live his life, neither of them had ever said as much out loud.

She also fretted over her screen name. Fishgirl seemed too aggressive, as if she'd only created the name to respond to him, which of course she had. Was something with mermaid in the title cool or cliché? She wanted optimistic, and mermaids were optimistic. But they were also Disney-fied.

In the end, she went with PurpleAnemone. She'd always loved the way anemones waved and fluttered. She found the most recent thread where Fishman324 had tried to organize an excursion, to zero replies. It was from two weeks ago and she had to scroll through eight pages of threads to get to it. She wondered if she should private message Fishman324, but that seemed too forward. So she opened the thread, typed, erased, typed, erased. Ultimately, she went with "Tell me more."

And he did.



Now, on her flight to Miami, she looked out the window and watched the clouds. She had worried she'd be frightened to fly, but it was exhilarating. Steph felt like she could've been one of those women from the rest stop, wearing a pencil skirt and traveling with a smart

black rollerboard. She wanted to think that she could jump into scuba diving just as easily, but she knew that required more skill than sitting in an airplane seat drinking a can of ginger ale brought by a doe-eyed flight attendant.

She couldn't afford a hotel on the beach, but even several blocks away, she could smell the cool, clean saltiness of the sea. She bought tacos from a roadside stand and ate them sitting on a bench while tourists and locals streamed up and down the street. Everyone seemed to be in a better mood than they were back in Pennsylvania, and looking around at the palm trees and all the bare legs, she understood why.

She hadn't told her father about the message board. She'd told him she was going on a girls' trip to Miami with coworkers. Steph thought he'd ask questions, but looking at him as she told him, it seemed like he didn't even know what questions to ask. Mostly, he just nodded while she shared too many of the details she'd decided previously in her head to make her story sound convincing. She told him fake names of coworkers who didn't exist and all of the activities they had planned, a list she'd memorized from the website of a hotel much nicer than the one in which she was actually staying.

She didn't sleep. She was too excited. At 4 A.M., she dressed in her shorts, t-shirt and flip flops over a bathing suit and ate a granola bar. She'd bought a navy blue two piece with a ruffle at the chest at Target the week before the trip. She took a taxi to the marina, arriving ninety minutes early.

Fishman324 was early, too. He showed up around 5:30 A.M. and she watched as he passed

her and walked down a pier to one of the boats. He fiddled around on the boat for a few minutes, readying things, glancing back at her a few times. Then he hopped back up onto the pier with a bit of a flourish and walked towards her. "Anemone?" he asked.

She laughed. "That's me. Steph," she said, standing and stretching her hand out.

He took it. "James." He had a warm smile. He wasn't very attractive, but he had a familiar look about him. He was the kind of person you didn't notice overtly and yet she felt like she saw twenty people who looked like James at the rest stop in any given day. She liked that about him instantly. He let out a quick laugh at the absurdity of the situation and she joined in as they walked to the boat.

"Have you ever met someone from online before?" Steph asked.

"Online dating, yes. This, definitely not. Didn't you see the lack of replies?"

"I guess you don't tell people you think there's a secret world underwater in your online dating profile?"

"Definitely not."

He offered Steph a donut from a white paper bag. She poked her hand inside and grabbed one filled with jelly. He ate a chocolate frosted one while they watched the sun come up. James turned serious after his last bite. "The strange thing is, I don't think it's that far out. I think we've just been missing it. We can be there by lunchtime."

Lunchtime sounded pretty far to her. Didn't boats go fast? Did she really want to go that far

out into the middle of the ocean with someone she'd only met online?

Yes, she did.

The boat was loud, which saved her from having to talk constantly. She watched as he maneuvered with ease, clearly in his element. His voice was definitely higher than she'd imagined, that was one thing she hadn't expected. What had he thought she'd be like?

When they reached what seemed to her to be a random point in the ocean, he turned off the boat and threw out the anchor. "Moment of truth," he said, both awkward and endearing. He grabbed two wetsuits from the cabin and threw one to her. She looked at it confused for a moment before figuring out how to slide her body into it. She wondered if he'd noticed. He threw her an oxygen tank and the rest of the equipment she'd need and she knew now was the time to tell the truth. Before she could though, James dove off the boat, underwater. She knew he'd be back when she didn't follow, but just for a minute, she let herself take it all in. James was the most expectant person she'd ever met in her life. He made her think that there might really be a secret trove of species just below her feet. She thought of James diving down, looking back for her, and she waited for his head to break the surface.

Jenny Belardi *is a writer and Margaret Atwood devotee. Pittsburgh, PA is her adopted hometown, where she is the Director of Development at Carnegie Mellon University's School of Computer Science. She is currently putting the finishing touches on a speculative novel about a woman unwittingly ridding the world of modern-day technology.*

Life Spring

Jenny Bhatt

The day I first met Charlie, he showed up unannounced before 9 A.M.—no text, or call, or pre-scheduled pickup. Hulking in my doorway, he dripped from the morning downpour and a large puddle of dirty water collected under his feet. How could someone walk about in Mumbai monsoons without an umbrella or raincoat?

It was the year I had finally decided that baking, much like life itself, did not have to be a prescribed science. Till then, for the couple years since my divorce, I had been making boxloads of the standard varieties of chocolate chip, oatmeal and raisin, and peanut butter cookies my customers expected and enjoyed.

True, baking is all about the chemical reaction between carefully measured and skillfully blended ingredients with the right temperature applied as catalyst. Also, for me, the control and predictability of working with well-tested recipes had always been relaxing and meditative. Somehow, though, adding the odd, surprise substance into the mix and yet managing a decent end result gave me a new, more intense pleasure.

My first experiment was a simple customization of the traditional nankhatai from my hometown, Surat. A secret: I dry-roasted the suji to a pale pink hue before adding it to the flour. My recipe yielded an American-sized soft

and crumbly version—encrusted with pistachios and aromatic with saffron, elaichi, and nutmeg. To date, it is the most-demanded cookie by commercial and private customers alike.

This was the batch Charlie was collecting when I mistook him for one of the peons Audrey sent for pickup. Before I could finish speaking, he corrected me sharply: "I'm Audrey's brother, Charlie. Prasad's basti is flooded today. Are the boxes ready or not?"

"Well, no," I wanted to tell him, "my pickup time was always after 12 P.M." Here I was, in my night clothes and barely finished with breakfast, while this rude man-boy with a wet animal smell ruined my doormat.

Lacking the energy to argue, I let his rudeness pass. "I need ten minutes to pack. You're early."

He shook his head, rolled his eyes, folded his arms, and leaned against the door frame—all of which I took as further signs of disrespect.

Across the hallway, Madhu's flat door opened for Nayana, the maid. Both women stared at the young man and, beyond him, at me in my thin, faded kurta with no bra underneath.

"Hi, Heena," Madhu's voice resonated through the empty space, "I want Nayana to do my fans also today. She'll be late coming to you."

Madhu took such liberties often. If the situation had been reversed, she would not have hesitated in telling me I was inconveniencing her, and that too without prior notice. I gave in, as usual, without a word.

Hurrying with the packaging, I called from the kitchen, "Have you brought anything for waterproofing?"

"You don't have that in the packing materials we send?"

"The peon usually brings the big plastic bags so they can be reused."

No reply.

I found a few large grocery bags under the sink to make do. Then, I carried the boxes to him and placed them on the floor. "Five boxes. Five hundred cookies. I'll get the book."

"Five hundred? I thought we were doing a thousand?" As he asked this, he opened one of the boxes, ripped open a paper pack, picked out a nankhatai, and bit into it.

I showed him the book. "Five hundred per batch since last month. Ask Audrey. I'm happy to do a thousand every batch. She said they are not selling well in this season. People want hot, fried snacks."

He signed where I pointed and, mouth still full, said, "Fine. I'll talk to her. So, payment is Rs 5 per cookie, right?"

"Rs 7 per cookie," I corrected him now. "Rate changed a few months ago because of the cost increase for pistachios and cashews."

He frowned, crumbs stuck to his wet chin. "I didn't know that. We haven't changed any of our prices."

"Why don't you call Audrey if you don't trust me?" His gaze, resting several inches below my face, heated up both my temper and my skin under the kurta.

"Did I say I don't trust you?" He lifted the boxes. "You both have changed arrangements and no one has bothered to tell me. As if I'm the peon."

Was it my job to keep brother and sister informed of each other's doings in their business? But I did not say this out loud.

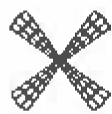
As he waited by the lift, I got a wet mop and started on the puddle he had left behind. My arms moved so rapidly and fiercely, they ached.

His barking laugh made me glance up. Against coffee-dark skin, his teeth glinted white as sugar, and his eyes shone chocolate brown. "If I was still standing there, you would have mopped me up and squeezed me out into that bucket too."

I paused and could not resist smiling back. "Change into some dry clothes or you'll catch a cold."

"Yes, Madamji," he winked, stepping into the lift.

As the doors closed, I shook the mop threateningly and he laughed again—a less unpleasant sound.



A couple of days later, Charlie showed up again. In that time, I had wondered why I had not heard from or met him earlier. All my dealings at Organica Foods had been with Audrey, his older sister, and the peons. I had also thought about how his restlessness, like a wild beast threatening to break from its cage, had made me jumpy. Since my divorce from Yogesh, I had tried to forget what it was like to be around that kind of man—the kind that is offended easily and unable to control and manage his own emotions, so everybody else has to control and manage theirs.

This morning, I had baked for my building society residents. Their orders were sporadic and small, but helped me stay on the good side of the society committee, especially after the many early threats of shutting down all home businesses. I had tried an eggless version of my cinnamon cardamom snickerdoodles. They came out just right: light and pillowy, with crackled tops, crisp edges, and chewy centers. The entire flat was fragrant with, as some of my evening tuition students often said upon entering, "Sugar and spice, and all things nice."

Charlie came at the usual pickup time and the boxes sat ready by the door, so I simply motioned to them.

This time, I noticed more about him. The long green snake—or was it a dragon?—tattoo on his right arm, its head disappearing under his sleeve as he ran a hand through his overgrown, curly hair. The thick gold cross shimmering against his matted chest. The garnet on his left ring finger as he held out a small, flat package. His grin revealing how one of his front teeth crossed over a neighboring one.

The package turned out to be a CD with a cover showing a group of men in bright-colored suits, holding or playing brass instruments. The words "Bold as Brass" and "Mumbai After Dusk" were scrawled across the top and bottom respectively in red lettering.

"My friend's band," Charlie said.

I nodded my head slowly.

"You had jazz playing when I came last," he continued.

The edges of my lips curved up slightly.

"This is their first album."

My heart filled with warm, liquid sunshine at the gesture and the prior attention, despite all his sullen posturing then.

Charlie gathered up the boxes. "Anyway, uh, let me know what you think."

"Wait." I ran back into the kitchen to grab a warm snickerdoodle from the baking sheet. Returning, seeing his hands full, I raised it to his mouth. He took it carefully between his lips so it would not break, and nodded.

He was gone before I could remember to get his signature in the book.

That night, as I sat and listened to the CD, a lightheadedness came over me. It was not the music, which was too jangly for my taste, nor was it the vodka—a secret ingredient I often added to some recipes to intensify dried fruit flavors—I had been sipping for a while. It was the memory of him filling my doorway again and how tenderly he had accepted the cookie with his mouth.

Just like that, another image flashed across of me offering a double chocolate chunk cookie to Yogesh after I had baked for the first time ever. We were in our rented one-bedroom flat in Santa Clara in the Bay Area, married a year or so. Earlier in the day, I had gotten an analyst job at a financial firm. It was close to his tech firm, which was ideal as we only had the one car.

I had driven that car to Safeways after dinner and picked up some grocery items, including a box of Betty Crocker cookie mix. As I had never owned an oven back in India, even following easy numbered baking instructions had been exciting.

The cookies had turned out as the picture on the front of the box promised. The entire flat

had filled with a homely warmth. I had piled them onto a plate and taken them to him as he sprawled on the couch, watching TV.

After eating one, he had kissed me, his tongue sweet and velvety against mine, and said, “So good, yaar. You should bake more.”

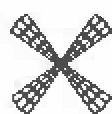
Near bedtime, he had opened the fridge and, seeing it freshly and fully stocked, lost his temper. After he went to bed, I had swept and mopped the entire living room and kitchen clean from all the food, milk, and juice he had flung around, shouting all the while about how recklessly I spent his money.

I had not been able to go lie down beside him, I was shaking so much. Instead, I had gone out to sit in the car. When an elderly neighbor had knocked on the driver window, I realized I had been crying hard on the steering wheel.

Rolling the window down, I had reassured him, “I’m sorry. I’m fine. It’s okay.”

He had peered kindly at my swollen, red eyes, pointed at the night sky and said, “The moon, dear, see? It shines beautifully, no matter how many clouds try to cover it up.”

I had an urge for that moon again, as if I had not seen it in a very long time. Something opened and swelled up in my throat as the music sped up. I turned the volume up a bit, threw open the sliding windows to my little balcony, and leaned over the railing. Though it was not the full white orb I expected—more like a yellow lemon with the top sliced off—I stared at it till the CD played out.



The text message the next day from an unknown number asked "Liked it?" It was Charlie.

I had been rehearsing my response, saying it out loud a few different ways and finally messaged back "Loved it. Reminded me of Mahavishnu Orchestra. Tell them congrats."

His next message came hours later, during which time I worried if the reference to a particular band had been the problem, or my gushing "loved it," or the flippant congrats, or if I had not sounded complimentary enough. "Wow. Thanks. They love MO."

Later yet, while I was giving my early evening tuition class, Charlie texted me back. "Heyyy. If you want to see them live, they're doing weekends at a buddy's bar."

Was this information or an invitation? I put the phone away to focus on the squabbling schoolboys before me and the upcoming mathematics test they were not going to pass.

After the boys left, I decided to clear my mind by creating something more involved and untried: jalebi cookies with saffron and nutmeg flavors and a sweet rosewater glaze.

It was quite a project to get the dough consistency right (secret ingredient: rice flour). Lay out careful rounds of thin coils like the traditional, deep-fried mithai. Adjust varying combinations of baking temperature and time as needed. Finally, color the rosewater glaze the right shade of orange (secret ingredient: carrot juice).

After a couple of decent batches, I sent a photo of a plateful to the women in the society and sat back for the orders to come in. If this did well here, I planned to send samples to my commercial customers too.

When the doorbell rang, I thought it was one of the neighbors wanting to pick up some cookies. It was Charlie with two other men.

"Come on, Auntie, we're taking you out on a date," said the thin one with a rolling chuckle.

"Does she look like anyone's Auntie to you, idiot?" Charlie slapped the back of his head. Then, in a more cautious tone, he said, "These nutcases are Neil and Loy. We were passing, thought you might like to see the band playing at Loy's bar. My girlfriend, Sandy, has her car below. Come, *na*?"

Why had they shown up without so much as a call or message? I hardly knew Charlie and these friends—probably also Koli Christian like him—were strangers. I should have declined politely. But a bubbling, suggestive anticipation rose inside like foam flowing over from a champagne glass.

My voice shook a bit as I said, "Okay. Give me a few minutes." As I left them in the living room, I added, "There are fresh jalebi cookies on the dining table."

Riffling through my wardrobe, I heard their easy, teasing banter rising and falling as they walked around discussing my books, wall hangings, and the balcony view.

"Madam, this is not some five-star venue. Jeans will do," the serious one, Loy, called out. Immediately, I heard Charlie telling him off too.

Buttoning a black silk shirt over my jeans, I brushed my hair out, applied eyeliner and lipgloss lightly, spritzed some perfume, and slipped on rather worn-out black espadrilles. With a floppy handbag hanging from a shoulder, I stared in the full-length mirror and rearranged my facial features to be less clenched.

Back in the living room, Charlie's friends glanced me over as he moved to the door. "Ready? Cool." Next to them, he was a man who knew exactly what the world expected of him.

In the lift, Neil worked through the handful of cookies he had grabbed on the way out. "Amazing," he repeated between morsels.

At one of the lower floors, a woman and a boy got in and stood in front of us. The woman swiveled with a look of recognition. "Heena?"

"Hi, Gunjan." I smiled, hoping she would think the men were not with me.

Her son, whom I had tutored last year, turned slightly to me. "Heena Miss, I got fifty on fifty in history."

I patted his back. "Proud of you, Kabir. Drop by for some cookies tomorrow."

"Here, try this." Loy took one from Neil and handed it to the boy.

Neil whined, "Hey. . ."

Charlie hit the back of his head again, as if on cue.

Gunjan's glance bounced sharply from the three of them, to me, to the cookie, to her boy. She raised her eyebrows as if to speak when the doors opened and the boy skipped out, cookie already in his mouth.

Outside the society gates, the girlfriend sat at the wheel of the recently launched neon green Beat—waves of blond-streaked hair, eyes encircled thickly with kajal, lips and nails splashed cherry-red. Charlie held the front passenger door open for me. They all squeezed into the back.

I made a sound, something like 'hello,' taking in her long, bare legs in cutoff jean shorts and pert breasts in a pink tank top. She sighed

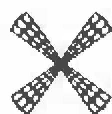
and leaned past me to reopen and slam my door shut again.

"Anyone else we need to pick up, Charlie?" she said loudly, over the scuffling and muttering in the back. "The luggage rack and the dickie are empty."

The car quietened down. "Sandy thinks she's funny," Charlie said to no one in particular. Then, "Just drive, Sandy."

"Sandy's sexy when she's sarcastic," Neil proposed cheerfully.

"Shut up or I'll tie you to the luggage rack," replied Loy.



Memories are strangely blended things, made up of many details, and, as with baking, they rise in expected or unexpected ways.

With Yogesh, I recalled the same few ones, mostly. They churned up unbidden and random, leaving behind traces of sweet, sour, or bitter emotions for days. The shock on his face after his hands had savaged my body, as if they acted without his permission or knowledge. The resounding footsteps, even on carpeted flooring, as he strode away when he did not care to hear me out. There had also been, however, the sweet patience and care to help me research baking classes and workshops after the analyst job had not worked out. He had always come gallantly to my defense when I had been unsure of what to say or do around his friends, looping an arm softly around my shoulders and saying, "She's still adjusting to American life."

His fury-frozen face when I had driven the car away one evening and left him standing in a mall parking lot still gave me nightmares. He had said something particularly stinging—words that carried the assured promise of another hurtful, sleepless night. I had raced off, shaking with fear and excitement, to the airport.

Where had I found the courage to do it all: book the India flight weeks before; get to the airport on schedule with only the clothes I had on; have the presence of mind to switch my phone off so he could not track me; manage the restraint to message just enough at take-off so he could pick up the car and know I had left him? Would my own scalding anger and, yes, shame never stop scarring me?

My recollection of that evening with Charlie and his friends is also a blend of many details: the jazz band on a badly rigged platform as we sat on dirty plastic chairs in a shack-like bar with barely any elbow room; the Diwali lights strung around a corner table from where Loy served drinks; the sweaty buzz I had from my vodka cokes; Neil ruining someone's white linen pants by vomiting on them; Sandy rushing after Neil as men dragged him outside; Charlie's voice breaking as he yelled after her; Charlie whispering in my ear that he played the jazz trombone; Charlie asking me if I was ready to leave; Charlie's hand on my waist as the night air hit me like a splash of cold water; Charlie. . .

Then, the empty construction site, with flickering shadows and just enough light from the street so we could manage our buttons, hooks, and zips. Our hands and mouths attacking each other's bodies. The feral dogs lurking in

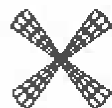
the shadows, though the noises could have been our own ragged breathing and crying. A pungent smell of rubber burning somewhere.

How the visceral ache uncoiling and spreading inside me was much greater than the physical hurt he was causing on the outside, branding my inner thighs with bite marks while I beat his back with curled fists. How I knelt before him in sandy rubble and had him gasping and weeping softly, even as his palms slammed into the wall behind me and his head fell back to the sky. How he got me shuddering and screaming in an agony-ecstasy, bare back slipping against the wall from my own sweat, legs arching further over his shoulders, fingers clutching his hair so tight strands came off in my hands.

When we released each other, it was as if we also released something from within ourselves, letting go with both relief and sorrow.

The only time we looked each other in the face was when the auto pulled up in front of my society. His was scratched in several places and mine, I discovered later, was streaked with dirt and tears. His lower lip was badly cut. Carefully, I ran a thumb over it to wipe the blood away.

As the auto drove him off, an inky black cloud stole across the full moon, which glittered like a giant sequin pinned high. After the cloud cleared, a dazzling silver light washed over me—soothing, cooling, almost healing.



The following morning, India's Independence Day, I was up early to bake several batches of tricolor cupcakes for the society's celebration. Weighing the sugar, sieving the flour, kneading

the dough, mixing the icing—all these activities helped me avoid thinking about the reckless exchange of bodily fluids the night before.

As I readied to leave with my filled cartons, I saw Madhu's door open. She was dressed in flag colors: perfectly fitted white salwar-kameez and casually draped green-orange leheriya dupatta. Her hair hung down her back like a black veil.

Various-sized metal trophies were constellated around her on the floor as she polished them. Raising the one in her hand, she said, "Independence Day games. No one cleans them before returning." Then she beckoned me in. "It's early. Let's have coffee. I made the filter style you like."

I was not in the mood for much talking today but the coffee smelled good. So I went across, placing my cupcake boxes outside her flat.

Handing me a cup, she said, "You know, Heena, my motto in life is that I should never give anyone reason to say anything bad about me. Let people say only good things. Never give reason to doubt or mistrust. Even when I have no bad intentions, I know people are people. They want to think the worst of their neighbors. Best not to give them any excuse to do so." A red-taloned hand played with the delicate gold and diamond pendant of her mangalsutra.

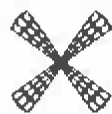
For the first time since I had known her, I did not allow the implied insinuation to slide by. "Madhu," I said, leaning back on her imitation leather cream-colored couch, "what are you trying to say? Please tell me clearly if you or anyone else has a problem with me."

She put her cup down and said, "I don't like to gossip. Don't mind, but you're a divorced

woman. Strange men, especially from lower-caste communities, coming and going at all hours is making some of our society women talk. You have to live in the water. Why make enemies of the crocodiles?"

A set of wind chimes I had not seen before hung in the window. For a few seconds, the morning breeze made the copper pipes and brass bells tinkle together, carefree and happy. In the following stillness, I said calmly, "Madhu, I live and work for myself. This 'crocodile morality' does not work in today's world. There is another saying about how those who suffer from jaundice see the rest of the world as yellow. People who see the world like this may also find their loved ones turning away from them."

This last was a cruel blow. I had learned from Nayana that Madhu's husband had been having an affair. Madhu had confronted him when his clothes gave off a perfume that most certainly wasn't hers. My words hit their mark nicely though, because she compressed her lips, poured us both more coffee, and changed the topic.



When baking bread, a process called "oven spring" happens. The high heat of the oven releases the water from the dough as steam and yeast help release carbon dioxide from the sugars. The steam and carbon dioxide cause a rapid expansion in the loaf's volume. I think, sometimes, of what happened that night with Charlie as a kind of oven spring for my life.

My baking adventures grew to include cakes, breads, pies, and savories. After the monsoons, I hired a part-time helper, Tasneem—a school-going teenager with a clubfoot and a touching eagerness. She made up for her slow gait with quick learning and a knifelike wit and kept me on my toes.

One afternoon, as we made mango-nut biscotti, she picked up the roll of dough she had been shaping and said, "This is what my future husband's thing will be like." We could not stop giggling, setting each other off again every time we thought we were done.

Tasneem told me about using Facebook to get more business and pushed me to sign up. For Raksha Bandhan, we got so many online orders for our rakhi chocolates that we were sold out within hours.

Facebook was how I found that Yogesh, in rimless glasses now, had recently remarried. She was pretty and pot-bellied, simpering and posing sideways in every photo. I could not tell if the grime of reality had set in yet. Her low forehead reminded me of my mother—a woman who submitted to all my father's wishes, voiced or not. Every relationship, I now knew, involved its particular flavor of suffering for both the man and the woman. It never truly ended as, in some dark corner within, memories kept fermenting and forming a jagged, permanent hardness.

I applied for a business loan to set up a licensed commercial kitchen in a light-filled space bigger than my flat, near Mira Road Station. Besides multiple work surfaces, it would include industrial stoves, ovens, mixers, kneaders, sheeters, slicers, proofing cabinets, and even

a couple of display cabinets for a small retail front. I spent days designing my ideal layout and arguing over cost estimates with suppliers and contractors. Nights brought dreams of custards, soufflés, and meringues oozing endlessly from every appliance, or the whole place going up in flames.

When the bank executive asked if a husband, father, or brother could be a co-signer or guarantor, it was like a familiar rock grinding into my chest. A single woman on the wrong side of thirty was always a suspect liability, more so if she was divorce-damaged or unfortunately widowed.

I told him I had given up on an arranged marriage after two years, so my family had given up on me. My only sibling, my younger brother, did not even acknowledge the rakhi I sent him each year. For good measure, I added how my friends had found my married years away in the US a long enough duration to forget my existence. Spreading files across his desk, I showed him page after page of my two-year income history, customer references, and business plan till he agreed I might not be a high risk.

As I left, the executive wished me luck and offered to bring the Mira-Bhayander corporator for the ribbon-cutting ceremony. That crowd-pulling politician's chipkoo hands and his party's shenanigans both made my skin crawl, yet I fed him large pieces of honey-date fudge for the cameras.

At the grand opening, I served selections of my signature items and Madhu, who came with wayward husband in tow, won the enormous raffle basket. The husband got me a discounted

membership at their gym club, where a lycra-trussed yoga sisterhood drew me into their fold with movie nights and Tupperware parties. Those gatherings also brought more regular customers.

I never saw Charlie again. I knew he was definitely gone from my life when the grizzled, grey-bearded Prasad resumed pickups after that night.

In December, Audrey told me about Charlie getting married. Not to Sandy, who I imagined cruising around in her Beat with Neil cracking jokes by her side. Charlie's fiancée was an up-and-coming Bollywood singer named Frieda. That is how I got into the wedding cake line.

The wedding cake I made for the newlyweds was breathtaking. Five tiers; buttercream confection; alternate layers of yellow cake with dulce de leche and caramel filling and chocolate cake with chocolate-mousse filling; black fondant icing for jaunty musical notes around each tier; a glossy chocolate guitar on top; and a custom set of wedding figurines, where the groom played a jazz trombone and the bride held a microphone.

Of course, I declined payment. For me, it was a debt settled.

Jenny Bhatt's writing has appeared in, among other places, The Atlantic, Eleven Eleven Journal, Lunch Ticket, Gravel, Amazon's Day One, *and many more. She is currently finishing her first short story collection. Find her at http://indiatopia.com.*

South Memphis Medusa

Joyce Henderson

It was one of those thuggish, new-generation storms, the kind that'd become more and more frequent over the last few years. Low clouds came rolling in at sunset—aggressive and threatening. Sullen winds came in ahead of the rain, guiding unwanted change. Pompous, settled old trees shivered while sunflowers and elephant ears swayed in a sort of stoned-out dance. Lightning, the first crash of thunder, and everything went to hell.

It was after three in the morning before Cassandra was able to rest. Even to herself she would not admit to being afraid of a storm. Instead, she let herself fret about cucumber vines just beginning to creep down the rows and cannas still rolled up against stems. And her car. The neighbor's oak was more than fifty years old and planted in shallow soil. If it fell, it could take down part of Cassandra's roof and the carport. She forcefully cut herself off before she started to dwell on the frailty of bedroom windows and walls.

Eventually the outdoor roar settled into the patter and slip of drops on the leaves of still-standing trees. She slept.

The next morning, Cassandra stood on the back stoop dressed in one of her gardening outfits–a bleached out pair of sweatpants, an

oversized tee, and sneakers in their fourth or sixth year of yard duty. With her skinny body and graying locks frizzled in the damp air and pushed up any old way on her head, she thought that she probably looked like a scarecrow out protecting her patch. But the wooden privacy fence was six feet tall. She could be herself out here.

It'd been some storm. The portable grill lay on its side halfway across the yard. The old wrought iron table had inched over into the bed of phlox bordering the patio. Other plants stood tilted one way or another, filled up with the night's drinking.

The scent of honeysuckle drifted up from the bottom of the hill. Cassandra clicked her teeth, shaking her head. There was an ongoing battle between her and honeysuckle. The stuff was obnoxious and audacious. The pseudo-demure flowers spread everywhere, not at all shy about invading spaces Cassandra had set aside for other vines. The scent was invasive, riding on every wind, obscuring every other smell. She couldn't blame that on the storm. That problem had started years before she'd moved into this house, with people going after what they thought they wanted, giving no consideration to what they were cultivating.

She began with the table, slowly pushing it back up into position. Her broken-over shoes sank into the squishy ground, water running in through the sides and tickling her feet. The phlox was okay. There was some bruising, but no broken stems that she could see. Half of the tomato plants lay uprooted on top of the soil. Those could be replanted. The pole bean seeds

hadn't yet sprouted and now lay uncovered on top of the soil. A rosebush had lost some limbs, but that happened every year.

The morning went on like that. After a couple of hours of straightening and salvaging she decided that she needed a break. That table had been heavy. She was sitting on the swing with a glass of iced tea when somebody called her name.

"Miss Cassy?" She looked over at the gate and a baby girl was looking back at her over the pointed slats. The toddler's face had the open, searching look of someone who hadn't yet learned about good manners. Her arms were wrapped around the neck and head of a man about Cassandra's age.

"How are you today, Cassy?" He was the only one smiling. She hadn't looked at him closely in a few decades, but she remembered him as constantly cheerful. Up until that last little bit.

"What do you want, Percival?"

The smile took a step or two back from the man's eyes, but it didn't disappear. "Well, for one thing, I want you to meet my granddaughter."

Cassandra looked hard at the man and child. Neither one of them moved. Percival continued to smile. The little girl kept on staring. That might be Brenda's youngest. Brenda was about the same age as Cassandra's boy, Daniel. The tea glass shivered a little as she banged it down hard against the table sitting beside the swing. Percy's mouth flexed a bit, but he held his ground. She remembered that about him too. He was the kind to stand strong in the face of opposition. A significant part of his life had been

uprooted by that last squall, the one that passed through Cassandra to ravage him, and even that he'd survived.

Finally, Cassandra snorted and started towards the gate. When she was on the other side, she repeated her question, "What do you want, Percival?"

"You still like to get right to the point, don't you?" He jiggled the baby who'd started to squirm. "Some of us old timers around here are starting a neighborhood action committee. We want to do something about all the hold-ups and shoot-outs we're seeing nowadays." He looked more serious now, watching Cassandra's face. He was looking for something. Something that she wanted to keep buried, deeply planted.

"I see you still have those political ambitions," Cassandra spoke thoughtfully.

"What I still have is a home in this neighborhood. I'm just trying to protect what's mine."

"Protect what's yours." She repeated the words, staring at him.

"Yes, that's one thing you and I have in common." He stared back, not looking for anything now. He was trying to tell her something.

She didn't want to hear it. "You've gained a little weight, Percival."

His face blanked out, trying to get a handle on this complete change of topic. Then he smiled again, armor back in place. "Well, you're looking good, Cassandra." He spoke in a low, flirtatious tone that the child in his arms refuted immediately.

"She's a witch, Pop-Pop. She's going to eat us up." The youngster laid her face against her grandfather's. "I want to go home now. I want to

go home." She let out a frightened, frightening wail that would have broken Satan's heart.

Collins juggled the baby-holding arm a bit faster. "Look, Cass, I really am glad to be talking with you." Cassandra knew that this bit of conversation was referring to something more than the neighborhood association. "I'll come back again later," Percival added.

"Whatever." She watched him walk off with the crying child and then went back behind the fence.

It was close to noon. The air was heavy and humid after last night's rain. Standing on the patio, head achy and tired, Cassandra decided to pull up some of that honeysuckle. It'd be nice if she could get rid of that intrusive, invasive weed once and for all. She got the trowel and fork out of the shed and began the attack.

That night she stood in the shower until the hot water was gone. By June her back and knees would be used to long hours bent over or kneeling down. Right now, she ached. Toweling herself off, she remembered that somebody had called her a witch that day. She sat at the vanity table naked, looking in the mirror, trying to see herself through the youngster's eyes. Her pointed chin sat below a narrow face with a used-to-be generous mouth, and, of course, there were those salt-and-pepper dreadlocks riding wild in the air on days like this.

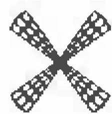
Ah. Over thirty years since she'd seen Percival Collins, and this is what she'd looked like. After her husband, Alonzo, left her, she'd closed herself off from just about everyone. She knew what most of the women at the church thought of her. Some had tried to contact her, but she

never responded. She finally found work across town and did most of her shopping there too nowadays. She knew that a lot of people considered her a witch with a capital B. That was fine. But she didn't want a face that frightened children.

Thirty years. Half a lifetime ago. Back then she'd thought herself good-looking. Hell, she'd been good-looking. That was the problem. The young Cassandra Johnson had been candy-sweet even in the low-key attire proper for a pastor's wife. A honeyed walk with a bit of fire and too vain to remember the Scripture's caveat concerning the antecedents of a tumble.

She had fallen, like Lucifer cast from heaven into a long, lonely descent. When her lover's wife found out about things he'd broken up with Cassandra, going back to the wife, and eventually a new home in one of the bedroom communities. Her own husband had been heartsick, eventually responding to Althena Collins' sympathy and moving with her up to Chicago.

Emotionally, Cassandra had pulled away from everyone else then, including her four year old son.



She saw Percival again a few days later. She was near the edge of the front yard, trying to get her mailbox standing straight before others on her street began returning home from work and school.

"Cassandra." Not thinking, she turned towards the sound of her name. He was coming

from the neighbor's house. The sun was behind him and she was blinded for a moment, caught out in an open space.

"Twice in one week. I'm a lucky fellow." He walked over to stand beside her in the yard. "Can we talk for a minute?" He placed a hand under her elbow, guiding her. Still a little confused, she turned and went with him back to the porch. She pulled away from his hand when they got there. Easing into a chair, she looked up at him. "This campaign of yours is really getting serious now."

He sat in the other chair, smiling. "Oh. You think because I'm wearing a suit I must be running for office again." It was one of the things that Cassandra remembered best about him; Percival Collins standing at the front of her husband's church, dressed like he belonged in the altar. His language was always a bit salty, but the people didn't mind. They seemed to like that kind of talk. They surely liked what he had to say about city hall, the police department and things like that. His wife, the woman that Cassandra's husband had left her for, would be in the first pew, leading the clapping and cheering.

Another thing that Cassandra remembered about Percival was the depth of her own husband's love for him. The two men had grown up together; they'd been like brothers. After she'd been married to Alonzo for a while, Cassandra had accepted Percy as her brother, too.

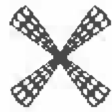
Leading a church had been hard on Alonzo. There were constant in-house feuds. Boys he'd known since birth went to jail. People died. Some who'd encouraged Alonzo at first began to doubt his message. He'd spent a lot of time

with Percival, relaxing into and depending on that brotherhood.

Yeah. He'd depended on Percival because he hadn't been able to depend on his own wife. Cassandra had loved her husband, but she'd been selfish. She was still learning to be a minister's wife and she wasn't very good at it yet. Needing her own support, she'd found someone who smiled at her. Someone who told her good things instead of needing to hear them nonstop. Who looked at her with desire.

Yeah. Now she knew that courtship, like any other love, should sprout into something more nourishing. But she didn't have anyone to share that information with.

Percival leaned towards her now. "What if I were, Miss Cassy? What if I were campaigning for something? Could I get your vote?" He looked at her eyes for a few moments and then turned away, laughing. "Probably not a chance in the world." He looked at her again. "Presently, I'm only part of a campaign to save the neighborhood. I came to invite you to be a part of the group that the long-term residents are forming." He was smiling, but winter had settled into the lines around his eyes and lips. She knew that at least a part of him was remembering the last time that they'd been on this porch together.

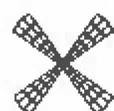


Alonzo had been stuffing Althena's luggage into the car's trunk alongside his own. All four of them had stood there, not looking at each other. Alonzo had rattled on as he packed.

The deep, enchanting tone that the church ladies loved, the voice that Cassandra had once been in love with, was saying things that she didn't want to hear. He'd talked about when he, Althena, and her children would probably reach Chicago and what they'd do when they got there. The money that he was leaving in the bank, where he'd stashed the payment book for the mortgage. When Percival and Cassandra might expect to hear from lawyers.

Finally, Alonzo had slammed the trunk and looked up, silent. Percival had wobbled into the house rubbing his eyes. Cassandra had followed him. She didn't have anything to say to these two who were escaping the mess that she'd managed to make. And her child was in the house.

As turned around as things were, she'd wanted something to seem normal for him. "Go say bye-bye to your Daddy," she ordered. But before the boy reached the door there was the sound of the car engine starting and moving away.



"We're the ones who own this neighborhood." Percival was staring down the street where a group of teenagers stood in a yard, laughing. He slumped down in the chair, pushing his legs out to the edge of the porch. It reminded her of the times that the two couples had sat out front like this, watching Daniel, Brenda, and other neighborhood children running and tossing things.

"Hey. I heard that you're a grandparent too." He was still staring down the street.

She'd heard that herself. "Yes."

"Boy or girl?"

"A girl." So her cousin-in-law had said.

"You got pictures?"

"You know, Percival, you have always been one nosy bastard." She went inside then.

She sat on the patio that night with a Mason jar half-full of cognac, Pepsi and ice. The scent of honeysuckle warred with the scent of insect repellent. She took a sip from the jar and thought about her son.

Daniel had been her reason to endure. He'd needed a home, some kind of normalcy. For him, she'd tried to prune back the pain and shame, but that had been almost all that there was to her. The rest was emptiness, anger and resolution.

In Daniel the emptiness became isolation. Soon after his father left, Daniel had said that he didn't like the Cub Scouts anymore. Neither of them attended church or any related functions. There were never friends over for play or homework. Daniel didn't run up and down the street any longer, screaming and fighting with other children.

Cassandra's determination was also echoed in her son. Daniel became a top student. He was sixteen when he graduated high school. Cassandra had known that she was only background to her son. He'd been compelled by something unrevealed to her.

Cassandra rubbed her finger against the cold tears running down the side of the jar. Escape. Her boy's driving impulse all those years ago had been the need to get free.

He'd chosen a college across the country, near some of her in-laws, staying with them during school breaks. She went to the graduation and didn't see him again until his first wedding. He'd looked hopeful then, his face reminding her of her lost little boy's.

Cassandra hadn't known about the second marriage until the strange car turned into her driveway four years ago. She hadn't meant to open the door; she'd gotten good at ignoring the bell. Then the phone had rung. She let the machine answer and it'd been her son calling from the front porch.

He'd been a grown man by then—close to forty with a doctorate in something that Cassandra hadn't understood. He looked like his father.

The new wife was with him. She was two years older than Daniel and seemed to enjoy almost everything. When the newlyweds looked at each other, their friendship was evident. Cassandra had been happy for Daniel.

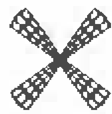
There hadn't been anything else until an April evening two years ago. The I.D. box on the ringing phone had shown a number in Daniel's area code and Cassandra had answered. It'd been Alonzo's younger cousin. She'd wanted Cassandra to praise God because the baby had been born healthy, even though his Mama was getting on up there and had refused to let them perform that prenatal test. Almost eight pounds and the doctor said that everything seemed to be all right. Wasn't it a blessing?

Using her preacher's wife voice, Cassandra had asked the other woman whether or not her own son had ever managed to complete a rehab

program. The call had ended a few minutes later.

Cassandra tilted the jar, getting the last sip and one of the ice cubes. She didn't blame Daniel. Being around his father's people, he'd probably learned about his mother's ability to destroy healthy families.

But who needed Percival Collins reminding her of all that?



He was getting to be like the honeysuckle. Universal and unavoidable. Pleasant enough. Sweet, if you wanted to think that way. She didn't.

"I like your hair like that." She was in the Kroger's. He'd walked up behind her, startling her into almost dropping a cantaloupe.

"I don't arrange myself for your enjoyment, Percy Collins."

"I know that." He was dressed in blue jeans this time. Blue jeans and that ever-present grin. "That's one of the nice things about it. Good or bad, you're always yourself."

"Good or bad?" She felt something cold in her gut.

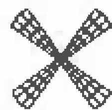
"Hey, it's all good to me." He burlesqued the old slangy expression. "And I'm enjoying it whether you mean for me to or not."

Her belly thawed a little and she could feel the corners of her mouth beginning to turn upwards. She clamped down and began pushing her cart away from him.

"Hey Cassy." She paused, looking down at the apples now. "Let me ask you something. That neighborhood group I mentioned? We're trying

to plan a tour of some of the homes in the area. Why don't you think about showing off your garden?"

Everything felt normal then. He wanted something. She shook her head without bothering to look at him or open her mouth.



Two weeks later he opened the gate and walked into the yard. She'd never bothered fastening it with anything more than the built-on clasp. It'd been awhile since anyone had wanted to be near her. Now she was kneeling down in front of the geraniums, muddy with jolts of fire in her knees and back. She'd been humming to herself, a church song about everlasting glory.

"Hey, you look like you're having a good time. Like a little girl making mud pies or something." He stood in the middle of the patio, careful about not getting his white sneakers or creased khakis muddy. The smile was in his voice, and there was a stack of flyers under his arm. Even with the grey around his ears and on his chin he looked young in his happiness.

Cassandra caught hold of the table and began to pull herself to her feet. Percival seemed to be thinking about helping her. But she had mud on her. When she'd gotten up she snatched the bundle from under his arm and tossed it back out through the gate.

"Woman..."

"Get the hell out of here, Percival Collins. Get off my property before I call the police."

"I just came by to..."

"I don't care why you came by." She didn't try to keep her voice down. "I just want you gone. I don't care about your neighborhood association. I don't give a damn about going down memory lane with you. Get the hell off my property."

The boyishness was gone now. Face to face, she could see the creases around his eyes and the sagging pouches around his neck. He looked heavy-hearted too, like somebody forced to acknowledge extreme unpleasantness. He looked the way that Alonzo had looked when he found out about things. The way Daniel had looked sitting on the couch watching Percival cry. The way that Percival himself had looked right before the tears. She felt like choking him now, like killing somebody.

"Do you think that I want to be a fucking freak show?" She was yelling. "Am I supposed to hand out tickets and let the entire damn neighborhood pass through, knocking over the hibiscus, pointing at the woman who shamed her church home and ruined poor little Percy Collins' life back in the Stone Age? Is that what's going to make this neighborhood a better place?"

Listening to herself, she knew they could probably hear her on the next street. It didn't matter. A little more gossip wouldn't make them think any less of her than they had for the past three decades. She just needed him to leave before she raised her fists to him.

Maybe Percival saw the danger. Maybe he was embarrassed. Or disgusted. Whatever. He left without trying to tell her anything else.

Vandals visited her on Memorial Day. She had gotten used to seeing their work now and then. Territorial claims, declarations of love,

professions of hatred. She'd also seen tired women in front of hourly rate motels and high school boys on corners offering something unseen to passersby. She knew there were things like that around. But not a lot of it, and not close to her.

"A Ho Live Here." She'd been out to pick up the morning paper. When she turned to go back into the house, she saw the writing on the back fence. She stood there at first, staring at it as if it were some new language. Something other than what she was used to. Then again, it was something she'd always known in her bones. Something nasty and low class, not deserving of good spelling. It was in her, a part of her home, suitable for publication on the fence surrounding her crucial space. "A ho live here."

Feeling old and dirty, she went back inside, back to bed. She lay there for the better part of three days. On the afternoon of the third day, she was thirsty and began to think, vaguely, about food.

She was in the kitchen pouring juice when she heard a noise outside. Pushing aside the curtain, she saw Percival's back. He was using a machine to blast away an area of red paint that had spilled on the edge of the driveway. She let go of the curtain thinking that this was probably part of his effort to improve the neighborhood. That was what concerned him.

He called the next day. She hadn't gone back to bed after drinking the juice. She hadn't gone outside either. She'd cooked something and then cleaned the house a bit. She'd also plugged the phone back in and turned up the volume on the answering machine. She was mopping when she heard his voice.

"Cassy, some of that paint got under the gate and onto your patio. I'll be over tomorrow morning about ten to get it up." He paused. "Otherwise you'll have to hire someone."

She stood there beside the pail of graying water, staring at the phone. After a while it occurred to her that being inhospitable was one thing, being uncivilized was something else. He was doing her a favor. Unsought, maybe, but not wholly unwelcome. It wasn't the cost of hiring people that would bother her. Percival might be sort of foolish, but he wasn't stupid. After the way she'd acted when he entered her property, he knew how she'd feel about strangers in her garden. He was doing her a kindness and she'd have to acknowledge it somehow.

She'd been out in the yard for a while when Percival showed up the next Sunday. Almost a week of neglect had made changes in the yard. Grass was everywhere— in the flower beds and the cracks where the patio trellis met the concrete, along the edges of the walkway. There were also blossoms on the okra and tomato plants, and baby cucumbers where blooms had been.

She was in basically the same position that she'd been in the last time he'd come into the yard. This time the gate was already opened and while she didn't smile when he entered, she didn't throw things and pitch a fit either.

"Morning."

"Morning."

He didn't smile when he saw her this time. She didn't smile either, but she'd expected him to.

He had the same odd-looking machine with him and she helped him hook it up to the outlet

and faucet.

"You might want to go on in."

She stood inside the back door watching him work. His back was to her and his feet were braced, fighting the buck and jump of the machine. She could see the muscles in his shoulders straining to keep control. She let her mind slip, wondering why Althea had chosen Alonzo.

When it was over, when the last of the stain had been blown away, she opened the door and called out to him, "Wait there a minute." By the time she came outside with the lunch tray, he'd unplugged the machine and sat down.

He did smile when he saw the tray. "Thank you." He picked up a glass and took a long drink of tea.

Cassy arranged the plate and soup bowl in front of him. For herself, there was tea and fruit. "You've helped me out today. I owe you something."

"You think so?" He went over to the faucet and ran water over his hands, putting some on his face too. He sat back down, dried his hands on a napkin, and bit into the sandwich before he spoke again. "I always thought I was the one who owed you something."

She lifted the tea glass to her mouth, not looking at him, not asking what he meant. He began explaining anyway.

"I knew about Thena and Lonz for a good six or seven months. If I had told you about it, you might not have been so shocked. You might have been able to handle things better."

Cassy was thinking that Percival really did remind her of honeysuckle, determined to go into areas where he wasn't wanted. She was

putting herself in the mood to tell him about it, wiping her mind clean of the friendliness, when she realized what he had said. "In addition to everything else you can't count. It wasn't any six months." Alonzo had found out about Cassandra's affair in April and left town in August.

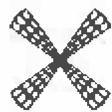
"It was at least that long. You remember those French cigarettes that Alonzo liked? I first noticed them in the bedroom wastebasket around that November before they left. I should have told you and let you decide how you wanted to handle things. But I didn't know how I wanted to handle things. I wanted... I wanted. I don't know what I wanted."

The look on his face reminded Cassandra, again, of the frightened Daniel, and Percival's crying. She didn't get angry now.

Alonzo hadn't waited. One day he'd seen her across the state line with another man. That evening he'd asked her about it, told her what he thought about it, the kind of woman he thought she was—a ho live here. For Cassandra everything after that moment was reaction to the pain that she'd caused.

She stood up and began stacking dishes back onto the tray. "I'm really sorry, Cassandra. I know how you must be feeling."

"No, you don't." She carried the things back into the house.



It rained that night. Not a crazy-bad storm like the other one, but heavy. Cassandra sat up late, not thinking about the weather.

Alonzo had said that his church members needed him. Not only were there the services,

but also hospital visits, couples to be counseled, silly contests to be judged.

She'd felt wicked. There'd be days when she wanted him to stay at home with her, comfort her when the baby was difficult or somebody said something mean, or go to bed early some evenings, glad that the two of them were there together. She'd known that she was his wife and that she had rights. But she'd felt ungodly wanting her husband to think about her.

She'd forgotten about all that. What she'd remembered all those years was how good it had felt being a loose woman. Somebody'd started telling her how he enjoyed the rhythm of her walking and she'd begun to put extra sway into her steps. She'd sit in the front pew, flushed from nasty words shared in the vestibule earlier. And those times, those few times they'd been together. Sinning had been joyous until it caused the world to explode. That was the thing that she'd remembered.

She sat in the front room, staring at the ceiling. She'd turned to somebody else because Alonzo had almost never been home. He hadn't made it a habit to compliment her, comfort or caress her, tease her, touch her, take her out. Unless Percival was lying or crazy, Alonzo had been saving that part of himself for Mrs. Collins. And Cassandra had taken responsibility for all of it.

A while before dawn, she went to bed listening to the water beating down into her flowers and vegetables. She fell asleep wondering what new life there'd be after the deluge this time.

***Joyce Henderson** was born in Memphis, TN. She received her bachelor's degree from Spelman College in Atlanta, GA. Her master's is from the University of Memphis. Her work has been published in various journals throughout the South.*

A Little Breathing Space

Mackenzie Hurlbert

Leroy Smolen rode his tractor past the horizon of last year's corn field, left it idling by the Cooksons' old stone wall, and sat at the base of the old oak far off in the field where Mayor Charlie's baby brother fell and broke his neck some years ago. He sat down against the roots—damp from a midwinter thaw—lit up his pipe and closed his eyes. That's where they found him—dead as December, cold with dew, and swaddled in spider webs. It made sense for Leroy to die that way, riding his tractor into the sunset.

That man was always on his tractor—riding to the feed store or stopping by the post office. He'd ride it yearly in the Old Homes' Day parade as a makeshift float and throw candy from a pouch in his lap. Lucy thought maybe that's why he was so heavy—or at least that's what her mom had always said. But her mom had also said that the moon was made of cheese and inhabited by orange gophers, and when they drove by the graveyard her mom had always asked, "Why do they put a fence around the graveyard?" She'd pause for effect before delivering the punch line. "Because people are dying to get in there!"

Now, decades after a stint in the city and a failed marriage, Lucy was back in the manure-scented air of her hometown, spending

every weekday afternoon schlepping her mother around from appointment to appointment. On Wednesdays, she would drive her mom to the oncologist in the next town over, passing the graveyard on the way. Her mom now asks that age-old question but forgets the punch line, and when Lucy fills in the blank, her mom just stares as if she too is dying to get in there and has just realized that the joke had never really been all that funny.

But anyway, everyone in town knew Leroy Smolen was a very heavy man. He was so heavy, he earned the nickname Leroy "Swollen" from the neighborhood kids. He was a blimp of a man, and while all in town knew him for his size and though the nickname weighed in the back of their minds, no one, other than the troublemaker young ones, would use it. He deserved more than that. Leroy Smolen was regional royalty, a descendant of one of the town's founders, and the largest landowner in Middlesex County. So, though he was fat, people paid him the utmost respect and ignored the awkwardness and embarrassment of his size for the sake of manners.

When Donna Luckra's oldest boy found Smolen propped against the oak's roots, gray as the tobacco ash in his pipe, the town's first concern was what to do with such a large body. Other than the logistics of it all, there was a surprising lack of hushed speculation. The ladies in the feed store refused to gossip about whether it was suicide or the effects of the weight. Their talk, instead, turned to other topics of interest: the new family, the Shoemans—what kind of name is Shoeman, anyway—from the city and their short-haired, tattooed daughter. They talked of

what recent crimes the white trash Hyges committed, what lurked in their converted trailer on the outskirts of town, and their reputations as drug dealers, kleptomaniacs, and heroin abusers—all traits passed down from generation to generation.

But no, there wasn't any gossip in regards to Leroy. He was above it, but he was also above ground. When an old cow died, its farmer burned it so the carcass wouldn't draw the attention of coyotes. Though Leroy didn't have any family, no one wanted to think of him out there being torn up by gnashing teeth, especially after all of his years throwing candy to kids at the Old Homes' Day parades. Burning him out there like some cow seemed unkind. Too impersonal. The funeral parlor in town said it would be too expensive for them to order a coffin for someone of his stature—though Lucy's mom thought they were just making excuses—and since he was one of the few remaining old-fashioned farmers, the likelihood of him having life insurance was slim.

So the town left his body out there and covered it with a heavy wool blanket that smelled of horse noses and hay. Young Walter volunteered to stay the night with his shotgun and a flashlight. Though the coyotes had moved down from the mountain, they were skittish of human scent. The December cold would keep Leroy preserved, at least for the night.

They held a town meeting in the high school auditorium to discuss how to deal with the predicament. Everyone who mattered and who wasn't tied to their beds attended. It was their civic duty.

They all met after their evening supper, sleepy from potatoes and meat. Some people were in an uproar over Leroy's abandoned cadaver, others settled on folding chairs and knit Christmas scarves. The Hygels weren't there, of course, and when Old Walter mentioned their absence, the Sheriff sniffed and made a comment about taking out the trash, said something about no respect, and then huffed one final retort, something about being strung out on a couch. Lucy could barely hear his grumblings, but she watched his chapped lips purse and smirk from her perch against the wall. Her mom had insisted on attending and sat with her hands in her lap, waiting for the drama. She couldn't hear much anymore, but she could guess. Meetings like these were always good entertainment.

Mayor Charlie, a pudgy man who was never seen in anything but khakis and a button-down, entered, followed by the town representatives. Charlie ran one soft, pale hand through the nest of red curls on his head. "Calm down, calm down!" he commanded, as if this was only another budget meeting and not a forum to discuss how best to respectfully dispose of a 500-pound body.

"So we have three choices," Mayor Charlie said. "One, we can cremate Mr. Smolen out by the oak and hold a service on his behalf. Two, we can all pitch in, order a coffin for Mr. Smolen, and donate a plot for his resting place. Or three, we can bring him back here and Mr. Bellini has offered to take care of his remains for a small fee."

Someone in the rafters shouted, "Tax break!"

The crowd burst into murmurs and hushed discussion.

"But how will we move him?!" Donna Luckra shouted from the front row. "I'm sorry to have to be the one to say it, but the man was just so big. Imagine heaving all that dead weight. He was the only one in town with horses to pull weight of that kind and they all have one hoof in the grave already."

That caused an even louder wave of discussion.

"The weight..."

"Too much..."

"I just don't think we could do it, no matter the number of men."

"What if we took a tractor?"

"You kidding? And what, ride it over the Cooksons' stone wall?"

"Oh yes. That's true. But the weight though..."

Mayor Charlie waited patiently at the podium and watched the town deliberate. They were good people—a humble, farming community holding tight to its roots, who elected him despite his inexperience and youth. They took a chance on a moppy-headed boy straight out of community college, and six years later, Charlie still felt obligated to prove himself worthy of their support. He looked to a young girl in the second row. She smiled at the girl next to her and he could see a large gap in her teeth. The innocence of that gap-toothed smile reminded him of a church mixer, where the boys and girls danced an arm's length apart. "Leave room for Jesus," the pastor would say. There was room for the whole trinity between those gapped teeth.

What a darn shame, Charlie thought. But what innocence.

Lucy saw Charlie's distracted gaze and stood up to speak. Her mother clutched at Lucy's sweater sleeve and tried to pull her back down with knob-knuckled fingers. "No, Luce. Just let it be." Lucy brushed her off like a horse fly.

"Excuse me, Mayor Charlie, but I think there's another option we aren't discussing."

The crowd in the town hall hushed and turned in their seats. They knew she had come back, smelling of divorce and city water.

"Lucy. Glad you're back. Yes?"

Lucy took in a large breath and dove. "What if we bury him where he is—at the oak? It's on his land, we can do a service, and he can rest in peace. He was never a religious man anyways... his land's his church."

The crowd murmured in agreement, and Lucy sat back and rested her hands in her lap. She couldn't help but be pleased by the outward show of support from a town that thrived on suspicion. Mayor Charlie felt sweat soak the back of his collar. He didn't have to look up from the gap-toothed girl to recognize that voice. Lucy, who as a kid would wrestle him in the cornfield, thrashing her blond braids against his face, and win. Lucy, who tutored him in their after-school program and who never failed to clear her throat before each quizzing. Lucy, who turned him down when he asked her to the SnowBall Social in fifth grade. He still remembered how her soft, doe eyes looked at him with laughable pity as he stammered out the question. Now she was bring-

ing him back to that oak, past the Cooksons' old stone wall.

Charlie should have suggested they bury Smolen where he sat. Lucy did, so he grasped for a reason against it.

"Ok… well we would need diggers."

A handful of men including the sheriff stood and volunteered to shovel out Smolen's grave.

"And what do we bury him in? We don't have a coffin."

Old Walter, Young Walter's dad, stood up and said, "I've got a mess of horse blankets in the back of my shed and no horses to warm 'em. I think Leroy would be more comfortable meeting his maker in blankets instead of a box."

The crowd murmured consent.

"When, then?" The Mayor held up his hands.

"Tonight!" shouted the gap-toothed girl in the front row. The crowd laughed but Donna Luckra stood up and spoke.

"Yes, tonight!" she said. "Why not? It's early enough and barely dark. We'll bring some lanterns and build a bonfire. It would be a suitable, community send-off for Leroy who loved his people and land above himself." The crowd clapped consent.

The Mayor looked down at Lucy and tried to smile. She grinned back up at him and shrugged, as if she'd just been trying to help. Oops. She had a tendency to do that, to make him feel bad about his actions. To make him regret. He cleared his throat, ready to give orders, but the auditorium was already a jumble of movement and retreat. A man in the far corner, that Smith boy, Charlie guessed, shouted at those filing out, "Meet at the oak in a half hour!" Children begged

their parents in a piercing whine to delay bedtime, and mothers tsked incessantly, dismissing the children and telling neighbors they might be a little late to the oak if "the little ones give them trouble." Mayor Charlie remained at the podium until everyone had exited, and then he hung his head and left to change his shirt and grab his shovel.

Walking to the oak was an experience in itself for Lucy, who had left her mother at home, tucked into bed with a cup of chamomile tea in hand. She was the first one out there as far as she could tell, and she had forgotten a lantern or flashlight. Using the milky light of the moon, she stepped over the mounds of fallen corn stalks and shredded husks.

The ground was hard beneath her feet, compacted by November's heavy rain and frozen by December's cold. She climbed over the Cooksons' stone wall, where as a kid she used to play with Charlie. She thought of that Indian summer day, months after his brother passed, when Charlie had gotten scared and killed a large rat snake, crushing its head with a rock while it was lazy with the sun's warmth. She'd thought maybe Smolen could save it, because he had the big farm and knew animals, and all, so she threw the snake over her neck and ran to his place. When he saw her there holding the snake like a jump rope, he almost lost himself. He scolded her for handling such animals then noticed the tear tracks on her dirty face. They buried the snake by his tractor shed and hung their heads for a moment of silence. After, he patted her on the head and gave her a soft caramel.

Lucy thought back to that pat on the head

and Smolen's ever-flowing supply of candy. She knew he was out there under the oak with Young Walter standing guard, and it hit her like a fly swatter, sharp and stinging with the knowledge that Smolen was gone. All that remained was his weight and the large, empty space where his spirit had been. She sat on the Cooksons' stone wall and let the cold seep through her jeans. She wasn't ready to be out there alone with Smolen's silence and Young Walter, who didn't talk much to begin with. Lucy adjusted her position and looked up to see the sway of flashlights and lanterns in the distance—an erratic waltz of battery-powered fireflies.

Young Walter woke up just in time to hear the thud of approaching boots. He held his shotgun tight, wondering how coyotes could have such heavy feet. Getting up from the roots of the oak, he shook off sleep and peeked around the side of the tree to find his dad, Lucy, and some other folks from town laying down their shovels. Far off in the field, Young Walter could see more lights and silhouettes swaying toward the oak.

"What are you all doing here?" he asked, trying to suppress a yawn. While his dad pulled him to the side to explain, the rest of the men got to digging. The going was tough. Just to break through the topsoil was a chore. On the first try, the diggers didn't even get two inches in before hitting roots as thick as a man's arm. They shuffled out a few feet and returned to digging, and after three or four relocations, they finally found a spot where the ground seemed to soften and the roots were finger-thin—easy to chop through with the side of a shovel. Occasionally one of the diggers would look up to

acknowledge the humped shape of Smolen silhouetted by lantern light, but the glances were quick and secretive. After making a small fire out of cornhusks, stalks, and scavenged sticks, a few women took the blankets Old Walter brought and began to wrap Leroy, carefully maintaining the placement of his current shawl and working their way under his legs and behind his back. When they were done, they tucked in the edges as one would tuck a child into bed. Each time the fire died down, the women shredded the extra blankets and fed strips to the flames.

As they worked, the men chucked dirt into the air and hummed tunes beneath their breath. A few struggled with the oak's roots and hacked away at the twists using the side of the shovel. After a couple feet, a few younger men got in the hole the older ones had dug and began heaving dirt out in buckets. When the shovels broke off from their handles, the handles were thrown in the fire and the spades were tossed with the lanterns. Donna Luckra and Lucy stood above the working men, handing them rags to wipe away their sweat.

Mayor Charlie arrived late but lowered himself into the pit upon arrival, joining his people and their buckets of dirt. He put his back to the oak and focused on shoveling, not on the dead body behind him or the rough-barked arms of the tree that had once cradled his brother. Charlie tried not to think of the waxy, pallid skin of a too-still cheek, framed by polished wood. Instead, he tried to concentrate on the soil and how it would ruin his khakis and shoes and how he'd need to scrub under his nails in the shower later. Charlie tried to focus on the dense layers of clayish dirt,

but he thought about Lucy standing at the edge of the pit and wondered if she remembered that snake he killed and if she hated him for being such a coward. Charlie was fine focusing on regrets and filth until the wind blew through the oak's branches and the rustling noise sounded almost like a breath, and he remembered something he had worked hard to forget: the soft whisper and sigh of a sleepy child in John Deere pajamas and cow-licked hair. He shuddered and kept digging.

When they had burrowed to Young Walter's height, a decent six foot five or so, the men heaved each other out of the grave and stood around its mouth panting like draft horses in the cold, winter air.

"Well, I guess that's good enough," Old Walter sighed. "Does anyone want to say a few words before we lower him in?"

The sheriff stepped forward and read a few lines from his pocket Bible. As he spoke, Lucy stood rigid, curling her hands tightly in her coat pockets. The men took off their baseball caps and dipped their heads while the sheriff's voice hung in the air. When he had finished, Donna Luckra wiped the corners of her eyes and shook the sheriff's hand. It was only then that the group realized Smolen was 20 feet or so from the grave and they had no way to lower him in.

Old Walter asked, "What about the extra blankets? We could make like a hammock and lower him down easy."

Mrs. Barber shook her head and shrugged. "We burnt 'em."

The crowd started to murmur and pretty soon folks began slinking into the darkness,

bequeathing the problem to others, claiming obligations at home, and craving the comfort of their beds.

As their forms meshed into the darkness, Lucy could hear whispers.

"So what now? His land goin' to the state?"

"Shut up, would you? He's barely cold and you're worried about his land."

"That's good crop soil. I'm just being practical..."

In moments, the group of thirty or so was down to twelve, and seven of those still in attendance were women while another three were on the wrong side of sixty. Lucy groaned and Charlie rubbed his right eye with the heel of his palm. Watching their breath in the lantern light, the group circled Leroy's shrouded body and stared.

"We might be able to lift him if we all use a little muscle," Lucy said.

"Yeah, I guess," Charlie added.

Lucy shot him a warning look, sensing the doubt in his voice.

"Hey, at least I'm here, Lucy."

Old Walter cleared his throat and spit out a wad of phlegm. "Well let's get to it then. Wally, you grab this side here. Be careful, now, these blankets should stay nice and tight. Susanne, you go in the middle here next to me. Charlie, you take that leg around there and Lucy, you help the sheriff there with the shoulders, ok? You're a strong woman, you can do it." Old Walter directed the rest of the townsfolk to different sides of Smolen's shape, and on the count of three, they managed to lift him from his nook by the oak. Shuffling in small, steady steps, the group shifted towards the grave, arms quivering. At

the mouth of the grave, the sheriff's wrist locked up and they lowered the body with a heavy thud. Rubbing arms and wrists and elbows, the townsfolk eyed the hole and the six foot plus drop.

"Any ideas?" Lucy asked. Everyone stayed silent.

Charlie massaged his forearms. "We can have some of us in the hole and others could lower him down to us?"

No one stated their skepticism, but silence said it all.

Old Walter nodded. Charlie, Lucy, and Young Walter volunteered to go in the grave while the others lowered Smolen from above. Once all three dropped in, the space no longer felt quite as large, and the looming horizon of Leroy Smolen's corpse at the edge of their vision made it seem even smaller. Those above grasped fistfuls of horse blankets and tried to keep a steady hold on Smolen while Charlie, Lucy, and Young Walter braced themselves for the weight.

Lucy stood next to Young Walter and locked her elbows to hold the heft of Smolen's shoulders, while Charlie grasped at what he presumed to be Smolen's thighs. Old Walter, the sheriff, and the others slowly lowered the body down until they could no longer hold on and released their grasp with a collective exhale. Lucy's arms shook as she strained to hold her share of Smolen's weight. Though Young Walter was a big man, he could only carry so much and Charlie kept jostling his hands to get a better grasp.

Lucy tried to ease her hand further under Smolen's body, but the blanket shifted and she lost her grip. Before she knew it the body was tipping in her direction and then Young Wal-

ter was shouting "Oh, oh oh!" and Charlie was cursing, which was not very Mayor-like of him. Smolen's blankets came loose and his ashy face rolled her way with its half-closed milky eyes. Lucy thought she was screaming, but she didn't hear anything come out. Her knees buckled and Smolen landed on her legs, pressing her back into the wall of the grave. Some dirt trickled down onto her forehead and Lucy thought for sure she was going to end up with Smolen and the rat snake and her mother and all those people who were dying to get in the graveyard.

Young Walter and Charlie wedged themselves around Smolen's corpse, which lay twisted and half covered in horse blankets, while hands reached down toward Lucy. She stretched her arms up and brushed fingers with Donna Luckra who just kept saying, "Don't look, Sweetie. Just look at me. Don't look, Sweetie." Shifting Smolen's limbs and throwing loose blankets over his face and chest, the men wiggled their arms under the body and lifted him just enough to free Lucy's legs. While Young Walter shoved Smolen's torso, Charlie helped Lucy to her feet and brushed the dirt from her hair.

Lucy looked up to Donna and the sheriff.

"Get me out of here."

Each took one of her arms and Young Walter gave her a step up off his knee. Charlie rearranged Smolen's limbs to make him look less disheveled and avoided touching the horse blanket covering Smolen's face. By the time all three were out of the hole, the only evidence showing that Smolen had fallen was the large, Lucy-shaped impression in the corner by his head. Saying nothing, the men quickly shoveled the dirt back into the

earth and Donna Luckra stomped out what remained of the fire. Lucy leaned against the oak, rubbed the soreness from her legs, and looked up into the branches. She watched the moonlight sift through and tried to slow her heart with deep, even breaths.

Charlie approached and sat in the dirt at her feet. He didn't care that his pants would be ruined. He would most likely throw them out.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

Lucy slumped to the roots and met his gaze. "Kind of. Yeah."

Charlie let a few moments of silence pass by. The sky was lightening and Cooksons' wall was a line of shadow stretching across the distant field.

"You remember that black snake I killed way back?"

Lucy rolled her eyes and flicked a clump of dirt from her shirt. "Yeah?"

"I still regret that." He looked at his feet.

"Yeah, me too." Lucy said. Her voice turned hard and cold like the ground, but when she saw Charlie's face she tried to change her tone. "It's ok. We were kids. And you had just... your brother..."

Charlie shrugged.

"You know," he said so quietly Lucy had to watch his lips. "This tree was..."

"Yeah, I know," she said hurriedly. She hadn't talked to Charlie much since high school, and his brother's death had been a taboo topic around town.

"I forget what he looks like. I just remember John Deere pajamas and how messy his hair was." Charlie started to cry. "I remember his

cheeks. At the wake. That wasn't even him! So pale. He was never that pale."

Lucy looked off to see that the rest of the group had packed up and were getting far away from the oak and the plot of loose earth. They had left them a lantern, at least. Charlie sobbed big kid tears and wiped the snot from his nose with his knuckle. He looked up at the oak stretching high above them, and Lucy did too, and the two just sat there watching the sky like they used to as kids. Once, Lucy thought she heard a breath, or maybe a whisper, but it was only the rustle of wind among the branches.

*An all-around word nerd, **Mackenzie Hurlbert** studied English, creative writing and journalism at Southern Connecticut State University and has been published in* Five2One, The Gambler, Fresh Ink, We Walk Invisible *anthology, and a few other magazines. When she's not writing, Mackenzie can be found with her nose in a book or crocheting cozies for her tortoise.*

The Rain and How to Repent

Heather Whited

The others have gone. They went days ago into the water, and we are alone.

We've come to the attic, Emi and I, and whatever is going to happen is going to happen here. Day by day we've gone higher as the rain keeps on and the waters rise and now this is it; we have nowhere else. Our world has shrunk to this, to a windowless attic, the old furniture, the boxes labeled in Rory's handwriting. Our world has shrunk to only each other.

We can't see anything from the window because there isn't any light anymore. The houses are dark or buried by the water and the moon is covered by the clouds that pour down this rain. It's getting cold, too. I want to ignore that I can see my breath, but I can't.

Emi sits cross-legged on our lumpy, make-shift bed and she rests her cheek on her knee. Her hands are wrapped in the too-long sleeves of her sweater.

"I'm sorry," I tell her.

Emi has no response. I decide to light another candle. I should be more concerned about saving it since we don't have many, should be more concerned about what might come in the days ahead. But in the moment all I can think of is getting Emi through this night and that a little

brightness might cheer her. She looks up at the strike of the match and watches me light the candle. It works and she smiles; at the light I think, and not exactly at me.

We're dirty, the two of us, after four days here in Rory's house without power. I don't even want to think about what I look like. Downstairs, we had mirrors and I was confronted with my reflection often, but thankfully there are none up here. Emi looks fine, though. Everything is soft in this light. Looking at her, the thick dark curls around her ears, cradled by layers of too large clothes, she seems so young that I could almost think no time at all has passed since we met, though it's been over ten years.

I approach with the candle and Emi turns away, towards an artificial Christmas tree in the corner, still fully decorated in the middle of September. The light catches her pearl earrings and a red metallic ball swinging from a branch on the tree. The tinsel shines.

"It's too cold for us to sleep apart," I say.

"I never said I wanted to."

I move to the pallet on the floor we've created from old clothes and musty pillows and sit next to Emi. She puts a hand on my knee and moves closer, puts a cheek against my shoulder. We are quiet and there is no noise but the rain and the water at the stairs.

If I shut my eyes, I can imagine that I'm at the ocean. The sound the water makes at the top of the stairs is peaceful at first, though with each lap it threatens. The water reminds us, knocking softly against the stairs, that it will come for us soon and that even if it never so much as lays a finger on us that it could still have us for its

own if it only stays long enough. We are playing a waiting game and the water has time that we do not.

Emi coughs a sparkling, white cough that dissolves until it is just another part of the air.

"We'll need more layers," I tell her.

Day by day, we add. Her blue dress, the one she put on Friday for the party that is the only reason we're here and not at home, is still visible under all the layers, poking out from under sweatshirts and too short pajama pants we found for her.

Emi stands up from the pallet and follows me to the stacks of boxes, where we each pull out a sweater. Hers is crimson, mine a festive one in bright red and green, the outline of a tree on the front. These used to be Rory's, like the house used to be his, but Rory is gone now. I am not sure who anything really belongs to at this point. Everything is so quiet. It feels like Emi and I have inherited everything, just on the basis of being the last ones here, a set of reverse Eves.

We put the sweaters on and walk back together across the attic. We lay down and cover ourselves with the coats we've brought over to use as blankets. I don't really know what time it is, but dark is dark. Emi doesn't resist when I hug her to me. The warmth is lulling and I nearly fall asleep.

Emi wakes me to ask how long I think we have.

"Probably a few days at least. A few good days."

"Think it'll be enough?"

I am the one to not answer this time. I think that we will be the last two people we will ever

see, but it's too hard to say. I close my eyes and let myself think that we're sleeping on the beach, imagine a wintertime camping trip. My nose at the nape of her neck, the skirt of her blue dress balled in my hand. After days, she still smells like aloe shampoo, if only faintly. The fantasy does not come easy though and I struggle to hold on to it.

"I know Peter is gone too," she whispers.

It is gone now, any hope I had of slipping away in my mind. Agreeing with words is too difficult and I remain quiet.

"How do you think it happened? Do you think Peter was scared? Do you think your dad was still-"

"Emilia, I don't want to talk about that. I really don't."

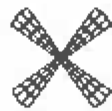
She lays quietly after that, holding my hand.

"Sorry," I say again. "It's just a bit much for me, to think that Peter is really gone. That they're gone."

I see Emi's breath before I hear the word she eventually speaks.

"No."

I don't know exactly what her no means, but after it, we let the day end to the sound of the rain on the roof.



It is close to Christmas. We've left buying a tree until late and there are only days now, but the weather is so warm we can hardly imagine it's Christmas at all. We ride to the tree lot with the car windows down, music loud but barely audible over the wind in our ears.

"Hot cocoa," I tell Emi. She shakes her head, reaches out to stroke the branch of an evergreen as we pass. The air smells of the trees and the fried food at the end of the lot. Funnel cakes and grilling hot dogs: fair food that fits the warmth of the evening. A bell rings loudly and again, a call for donations.

"God, no. Not today. How could you even think it?"

"It's not that hot. It's just hot for December."

We hold hands walking through the tree lot. There is still plenty of tall trees, plump with needs left for us. They remind me of old fashioned ball gowns, dances where everyone lines up in rows and bows to one another. We walk the lines, gazing, touching branches here and there.

"What do you say we decorate the cactus?" Emi asks. "I think it would fit this year, don't you? A little string of lights around it?"

I laugh and kiss her on the forehead. We say it's a plan and leave the tree lot whispering.

We see him as we leave and Emi grips my hand, stopped in the middle of a step she has to remember to finish.

Her father stands across the street, his sign in his hand. He's aged, more gray now than I've seen him before, his clothes shabbier. The sober colors have washed out and cannot chide any more with their sharpness. I notice that the ends of his pants have frayed from standing on them, and then I think the clothes seem a little bigger than they should. Has Sal shrunk? But as I think it, he stands straight and lifts his sharp chin. He seems then as big as he ever has.

He senses Emi and turns toward us. His message does not change for her. It is the same for

his daughter as it is for the rest of us. His green eyes are as bright as they ever have been. There is no fading them.

"Repent."

The same as the sign. The one word. Behind us, the Christmas music plays.

"Let's go, Em."

"You must repent," says Sal through the crowd to his daughter. "Turn away and come back to me."

I pull Emi in the other direction, but he shouts after us.

"Repent, daughter."

While Sal watches, Emi takes a step back from him and she bumps into me. I catch her in the moment before all the color drains from her face. She rights herself quickly as she pushes away from me, runs a few steps, and gets sick into the dirt. I no longer care about Sal, not in the slightest, and crouch with my hand on the small of Emi's back. When she's ready, we stand together and walk away. Emi's father sneers at us in triumph. We stumble away from the lot, Emi holding my arm. In the car, she cries and for a while, we are both quiet.

"He looks terrible," she says eventually, trying for a smile, to break up the heaviness that followed us back. I hand her a paper fast food napkin from the glove compartment for her eyes.

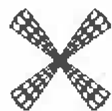
"He does."

She shakes, gripping my hand. I wonder if she's going to be sick again, but she isn't.

"How did he find us?"

"He didn't. He's a lucky bastard. He always has been. Nothing more than chance."

But she doesn't believe me, I can tell. She's quiet on the car ride home and when we get there, I learn the reason for her fear. In about seven months, we're going to be parents.



We don't see Sal again but a card comes in the mail when Peter is a month old. His handwriting is on the front, so it goes in the garbage before it's even opened, as I am sure he knew it would.

Later, there's a phone call. I'm home alone with our son when the phone in the kitchen rings. The person on the other end doesn't speak, but I know it's Sal. I curse at him and hang up.

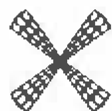
I don't tell Emi.

We see him on the news once at some protest he's leading. He holds up his sign, like he always has and always will. The camera lingers on him and he shouts.

Repent.

"Oh my god," says Emi. Her fingernails dig into the palm of my hand.

I shut off the television and leave the room.



She tries to hide it at first. I don't go to the basement often and the boxes are well hidden, stacked behind an old wardrobe and covered with blankets.

It takes me months to finally stumble on them, the cans and bottles of water, first aid kits

and batteries. It's quite the hoard. I see diapers too, and formula, and I know this could not have started before Emi found out she was pregnant.

Emi's home and she knows when she sees me come upstairs that I've found her collection. She's in the kitchen feeding Peter and nearly drops the spoon in her hand when she sees me.

"Emi. What the hell? What is all that stuff?"

"June. Junie. It's just-"

She puts down the bottle of baby food and the spoon on the high chair. Peter gurgles at her and reaches out for them.

"It's weird, Em. And you hid from me. No more, please."

"Junie-"

"Please. I'm worried about you. What's this even about? Are you worried something is going to happen? Is this your dad? All that end of the world stuff?"

Emi nods. Her hand shakes as she wipes a bit of food from the side of Peter's mouth.

"Okay. Okay. I won't any more. It's just-"

"I know."

"It's hard. It's hard not to be scared."

I sigh. I can't be mad at her like this, when she looks so small, when our son is sitting next to her frowning the same frown.

"We still need to talk about this. I want to help."

"Okay."

Peter screams then and Emi turns to finish giving him his lunch.

The next Sunday I wake to our son crying. There's no rustling in the bed next to me of my wife waking. Emi is gone and I know she's started going to church again.

Emi does not want to come to the party. She has begun to dress, slowly, but she does not really want to go and she sits on the bed with the baby in her lap.

Peter has the smallest of fevers and whines against Emi while she dresses. His forehead is a bit sweaty, his fine, blond hair stuck in a damp clump at the front of his forehead. While I watch, Peter yawns and scowls at the same time. He's got Emi's face but I've never seen that expression on her. I wonder if I should be worried too. Peter nestles his face into Emi's neck.

"Do we have to go?" Emi asks, stroking our son's hair as he begins to fall asleep.

"No, not if you don't want to. Not really."

She fiddles with the buttons of her dress one handed, Peter swaying in her arms, and I reach out to do them for her. When I'm done, she looks down at her fastened dress.

"I guess that's that."

My father arrives and we hand Peter over to him while we finish getting ready. The baby is asleep already when we leave the house and Dad is in the kitchen, helping himself to leftovers. Nothing at all feels wrong. Emi's dress is blue, her hair down. She's put on her little pearl earrings. We've agreed we won't stay long and Emi talks wistfully of a glass of wine when we get home, of a long night of sleep.

"Peter is coming down with something."

"My dad is there. He knows what to do."

Emi cheers up on the drive to the party, glad to be out of the house after all. She sings softly to the radio and rests a hand on my knee. It has been raining all day and it gets heavier as I drive, but I think nothing of that. I don't even

think anything really when it pounds down so hard I can hardly see and the radio switches to mostly static and then shuts off completely. We make a run for the door to Rory's house together, and Emi laughs when I throw my coat over her head.

The heat is turned up high. There isn't a large group at the party, but the noise of the music and the laughter fills the spaces between the people and it seems crowded.

Rory comes to greet us. He's fairly drunk already, which I know Emi will find tiring. She's calm though, as she always is. She reaches for my hand and together, we find a place to sit.

I have a glass of the champagne and sit with my hand on Emi's knee. More people arrive, and the room becomes warmer and louder. Emi leans against my shoulder and yawns. She even closes her eyes for a moment. I think that I should take her home but she's being so patient.

The lights flicker first around 8:30 PM, just after Emi asks me if we can go soon. I tell her we can, in just a little while and she nods.

The lights flicker again, for longer this time. The chatter in the room becomes nervous. We hear the rain in the second of quiet when everyone stops talking. It's louder than rain should be, much louder. I hear my phone buzz in my purse, then Emi's in hers after mine has stopped. Other phones begin going off as well and the talking starts again; people to each other, people picking up phones.

"That's probably Dad."

"Home?" asks Emi.

"Yeah."

We stand together and as I reach to put my hand on her elbow the room goes dark.

There's quiet at first, just quiet. I clearly hear the first person exhale and then we all do. It's seconds after that when the murmuring starts, like that breath broke some sort of seal, and not longer after that until they escalate.

I pull Emi toward the door.

I hadn't thought that there were this many people here, but it feels like we have to push through a thick crowd to get across the room. I step on toes, touch a bare shoulder. I want to get Emi out. One of Rory's friends bumps into us, curses, and the front of my shirt gets wet. Champagne.

I hear a scream from outside and the room gets quiet again. Lightning flashes and Emi gips my hand when thunder rattles the windows. The two of us are pushed back by the crowd further into the room. We, all of us with our heads turned as one, see an orange glow from the window. I wonder if something has caught on fire.

In a few minutes, Rory finds the candles and lights them. With light in the room, the tension in the air goes down, but only for a moment. As one, we run to the window.

It's the house across street that has caught on fire. Smoke tumbles out of the windows and into the rain, where it disappears into the darkness. We can see, thanks to the orange light of the fire, that the road in front of Rory's house now has a current. There is another flash of lightning. Emi's palm against mine sweats. She whispers our son's name.

"It wasn't supposed to be this bad," someone says from behind me. Thunder. The crackle and drowning hiss of the fire.

I shiver and Emi grips my hand tighter.

"Peter." She speaks louder this time, a few heads turn toward her.

"I know," I say.

A man opens the door and steps outside into the rain. He walks a few yards into the driveway and is nearly pulled away by the water. By the time he gets back inside, gasping and dripping onto the carpet, we know we are not leaving that night.

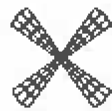
We stand together at the window and continue to watch. There is nothing to do for the house across the street or the people in it. Someone wonders if we should go to them, but we know it's not possible. From the kitchen, there is a loud pop. We all jump, but soon, the smell of champagne reaches us. The woman who opened it passes the bottle around.

"To the neighbors," she says.

"They're Patty and Kevin," says Rory. He's very drunk and having trouble focusing his eyes. "Were. I don't know."

"To Patty and Kevin," says the woman with the champagne.

By the time the bottle is gone, the first car has floated down the street.



Rory has a radio. We take it upstairs with us. He sits it in his bedroom with the door open so we can all hear. He fiddles with the dial until we hear a human voice.

No one wants to be alone. Rory has three bedrooms upstairs and we divide up into them.

Our phones are still working, then; my father answers and tells us that he and Peter are fine. The rain will stop. We'll be home soon.

"I got a little spooked," he says. "Shouldn't have called twice. I've worried you, now."

"Can we talk to Peter?"

Emi puts her face up to the phone with mine.

"He's still sleeping. But I'll call when he wakes, okay? You girls enjoy the party."

"Dad. Dad, can you wake him now, please?" I ask.

"Okay, Junie, if you insist."

There is little noise as my father walks up the stairs; only his breath, the door opening.

"Pete? Pete, it's your moms."

He isn't happy to be woken and he starts to cry. That's most of the rest of the conversation and it does not last long.

"Girls, I'm going to put him back to bed. Goodnight."

"Goodnight," we say.

Around us, people make different versions of the same call. The room gets quieter and we listen to the static of the radio.

A few hours later, we watch the first person realize that someone he loves likely hasn't made it. He sits alone in a corner of the spare room our group has picked. This man is a friend of Rory's; I have seen him at other parties of his, a quiet man with a lot of brown hair. He calls and calls: twenty minutes of calling with no answer. His hand starts to shake.

Between each one, a curse muttered under his breath.

More static. The names of cities, streets, rattled off, cut off when the connection goes bad. The man looks back at the radio.

He puts the phone down and tries again several minutes later. The names on the radio are repeated with the static. This goes on for some time, until the man finally begins to cry.

"June?"

"Yeah, Em?"

"I want to go to sleep."

"Okay."

I lie down on the floor with Emi in my arms. She cries a little.

"Are you mad at me? That I made us come here?"

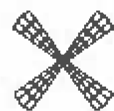
She doesn't answer.

We sleep on the floor with a group of the other people who left their houses that night and came to Rory's party.

As we fall asleep, I hear Emi's phone chime.

I know it can't be Sal that is calling, but I think of him and then of his sign. Repent.

I wake to silence, the radio in the hallway dead, and I think how cold it's gotten.



There are fewer people in the morning. The curly haired man with the phone from the night before is gone. So are a few others. We look through every room on the second floor of Rory's house, but they are nowhere to be found.

"Shit," says Rory. "Do you think they went for it?"

None of us know. We only know that they're gone.

Rory is still Rory. On the way upstairs the night before, he grabbed several bottles of wine,

which he brings out when we go back to his room. We sit on his bed drinking the wine to pass the morning. Rory's husband had equipped their home with a small emergency kit, stashed in the top of their closet and so we even have protein bars to pass around, flashlights, and a battery operated radio.

"No one ever tell Harry about this," Rory instructs us, waving a bottle of wine. "When he gets back from his trip, he can't know how useful this was. I'll never hear the end of it."

He does an impression of himself telling his husband that the kit is a waste of money, then he laughs forcibly. Soon, he's asleep again.

We find a radio station after a while. Cataclysmic, they say. Widespread destruction. The names of destroyed places is endless.

"God, is there anything at all left?" someone asks.

We all listen, faces falling when we hear of some place we know.

"We're here," mumbles one of Rory's friends, the woman who last opened champagne to toast the neighbors after their house caught on fire.

Later, the adjectives the radio uses change. Apocalyptic, they say. Goodbye, they say.

A text from my father manages to come through mid day.

I love you, June. So does Peter. Tell Emi we love her too.

"It doesn't sound good," Emi says.

"With Dad or in general?"

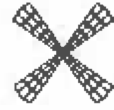
"Either."

Rory wakes and declares a party. He puts on his husband's robe and hat, tries to talk us into dressing up as well. No one wants to though and

we drink telling ghost stories until we all fall asleep.

In the morning, there is more static than normal on the radio, and the voice that speaks to us is tired.

Emi and I hear the name of our hometown. I hold her after.



Plans for escape fall through over the next few days: plans to make a raft to float away on, plans to climb to the roof and signal for help. People give up. There is some bad luck. So it happens that we're alone.

There was one more broadcast, the second day. We heard one word.

"Nothing."

By the time it's down to me and Emi, only the attic is left.

Heather Whited *graduated from Western Kentucky University in 2006 with a BA in creative writing. She lived in Japan and Ireland before returning to her hometown of Nashville, Tennessee to get her graduate degree. She now lives in Portland, Oregon.*

A Conversation with Margo Jefferson

Interviewed by Gary Duff
Edited by Jung Tae Hwang

Photo by Michael Lionstar

Margo Jefferson's memoir *Negroland* chronicles her experience growing up as a member of the black bourgeoisie in 1950s Chicago. A meteoric meditation on race and power, the *New York Times* bestselling book won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Autobiography and was named a *Washington Post* "10 Best Books of 2015" as well as one of "31 Best Nonfiction Books of 2015" by the *Los Angeles Times*.

A Pulitzer Prize-winning critic, Jefferson has written prolifically on theater, fashion, books, and culture for the *New York Times* and other publications since 1993. Her first book, *On Michael Jackson*, examined the rise and fall of the King of Pop in the music industry. She has received a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Rockefeller Foundation/ Theater Communications Group Grant and teaches creative writing at Columbia University's School of the Arts.

Jefferson sat down with *Windmill* editorial staffer Gary Duff to discuss the first time she saw an African-American on television; the way in which skin complexion, the shape and sizes of black noses, black faces, and black bodies, separated her from her black brothers and sisters; and an inner identity crisis she faced when the black power movement came to prominence. A podcast version of the conversation is available on HofstraWindmill.com.

GD: I'm very excited to talk to you about your book. I was wondering if maybe we could start by sort of unpacking the title of the book. There is a layer of irony in *Negroland: A Memoir.*

MJ: Yes, indeed. First level, memoir, certainly suggests personal. *Negroland* is clearly however else a reader is interpreting it. It is clearly a larger, group space and place. It's a cultural memoir. The personal and the cultural are constantly collaborating but fighting each other. That means the form is doing the same. I also chose, clearly, a contested word: negro. I wanted it to signify a very particular historical time. Negro used to be the word of choice, capitalized. It was capitalized in 1947 first. I wanted that reminder of our status as people being so unstable and so contested. One of the signs of that is that the chosen... I'm not even talking about the insult name. The names that we choose to identify ourselves by keep changing as our status and demands change. I wanted that since people remember this constantly moving history. Land

is a strange word. It's literal, yes. Yet it's mythological. You can be thousands. You could be a refugee or in exile, yet speak of your homeland. Even in literal terms there is another irony. You talk about say the geography of Chicago. When I was growing up, and it still is, it was almost entirely segregated. Quite literally I was living, until we moved into the one integrated neighborhood in the city, in a land of all and only Negros. I ventured out to go to school but everything else was quite literally an all Negroland.

GD: It's something that you've written about over the years. I remember reading a James Wilcox piece that was in *Vanity Fair*. How long did it take you to put this book together? It seems as if it's a culmination of your work.

MJ: Yes, interesting that you say that. I went official with it when I applied for a Guggenheim with this as a proposal and got it in 2008. Other things intervened. I was working full-time. Life has its own complications. But that was my main project from then on. I had started publishing little excerpts from it probably by 2010. I had aired portions of it in a couple of theater pieces I'd done in 2002, but then they lay nascent. That gave the first sense of, "Wait a minute. This I can go public with."

GD: So, you finally have this book deal. What was the intention? There's a proposal and things that you have to lay out. What was the intention of the book for readers?

MJ: Hmm… I guess I'll start with the simplest. It was to document and reimagine, therefore reinvent, a world that does not advertise itself yet has only wanted respectful attention, but is therefore very little known. I wanted a varied point of view. Like I say, I'm a chronicler. I'm a dissenter. I'm an admirer. I'm a critic. I'm an exile. I'm a member. I wanted to use all my writer's tools to bring that world and all its complications and contradictions to life. To do that meant also bringing a complicated social and cultural landscape. That includes politics in many senses of the word. It meant bringing back to life. That's really what I wanted to do, really get at the intricacies of how power and privilege are so conditioning but also conditional. It's my character and this world. We are in the center of the party but we're also on the side. We can be very privileged. We can be exiled and looked down upon at any minute. That to me was very interesting as a subject and how it manifested itself. It can be very crude. It can be very subtle. It's full of tensions and of performances. That has fascinated me.

GD: Was there a book or reference point that contextualized your experience to some degree before *Negroland*?

MJ: I found that more in fiction and memoir. I took from it a lot. I did a lot of historical research. I read all these books from DuBois to Graham that we've been talking about. But in terms of the character, the interior life, the reimagining of this world, I would say that the books that probably mattered most to me

were Nella Larsen's Harlem Renaissance novels, *Quicksand* and *Passing*, and Adrienne Kennedy, the playwright's plays and memoir, *People Who Led to My Plays*. They really got inside. They were doing the psychic life as well as the social.

GD: You prompt the reader with questions several times in the book. When you ask the question about the compass of privilege, to what were trying to point the reader?

MJ: I would have to put them all together. It's a kind of a Holy Trinity. It would be education, a certain amount of respectable economic security, but not without education which is why it would come first, and achievement, which is both professional and social. That is why I think I also used the word comportment at one point, how you carry yourself, how you speak. That you move with dignity through the world. Your behavior countered stereotypes of how negroes acted and spoke.

GD: Why was that important?

MJ: Those were the standard white, dominated by Anglo-Saxon, upper middle-class standards. That was how every group and individual was judged. There were certain definitions of what represented culture and civilization. Those are the big words, but then within it there are the achievers, the people who deserve attention and prove that they are in fact cultured and civilized. This comes down centuries as you know. But that's why it

mattered. You were living up to what the ruling power, white… Again, it has to be upper-middle class or above. They're also dictating to poorer white people what a successful white society deems worthy. That's European as well as American, but we are talking about America.

GD: In terms of skin color, nose size, and hair, are we talking about whoever looked whiter, whoever looked a particular way, would be more successful?

MJ: Looked at as more desirable, in every way. Quite literally desirable in terms of your looks, and if you were a woman, your marketability, but also culturally desirable. That's why I offered those opening pages of context, those distinctions and demands. There was some variety permitted, and I'm speaking now of the women. Men always had more room. You could look Mexican or Latin American. You could look Mediterranean. But none of those are looking Sub-Saharan African. There was some admiration even for Ethiopians because Ethiopians tend to have narrow, fine noses and small lips. Those were the standards. You were not to look Sub-Saharan African. I mean, if you had to, you had to. But you had to then compensate by your achievements and other things, your manners and education. You had to excel in other ways to compensate.

GD: But it seems quite a weight to bear?

MJ: It was. I think, again, if I speak specifically for women because in terms of these physical codings that's really what I'm focusing on, this is an intensification with that additional race challenge of a world of demands that really virtually all women have imposed on them. In a way, a part of me took it for granted. You're supposed to dress well. You're supposed to be cute. You're supposed to know how to flirt. But there is that additional, "But wait!" You just can't look like Cybill Shepherd or Grace Kelly. If you're white, you can fantasize more reasonably that you might. There was that dreadful cutoff point that really is racism's bottom line. You can't. This will never be possible. You can do everything possible. You can get almost to the finish line but here is where it's impossible. Looks are like that.

GD: Early on in *Negroland*, you write about the glee of watching Sammy Davis, Jr., Lena Horne, and Dorothy Dandridge on television for the first time. What was the community seeing, that you in fact saw?

MJ: In those days, it was huge because we were just starting, we, meaning Negroes and black people, we were just starting to appear on these shows. Yes, we'd been on radio shows. But people of color were appearing in these glamorous, popular shows! They were appearing to the entire nation! They were our stars. My parents had been listening and watching and seeing them at all-black events for years. They were our stars moving as we were moving into this larger white world. It was incredibly

exciting. They were very talented, but it was nerve-wracking too because we were always asking ourselves, "How will they be presented? Will they be asked to sing something or make a joke that's belittling? Will they do something themselves? Will they be too clownish?" It was a triumph when Nat King Cole got his own television show, "Oh my god!" Once again, it was the race. It was the individual excitement. "The race is moving forward," we would tell ourselves. Today, people call it all the manifestations of respectability politics. You know, that's true. But it was also the way things were.

GD: Was there ever the thrill to step on the grass when someone told you not to step on the grass? Did you ever have that adrenaline rush from doing something outside of what the definitions were?

MJ: I think for an individual there always is. My sister and I would love, everyone in my world, would love to talk our version of what we thought of this hip-street black vernacular. It was gorgeous and thrilling, and also a little dangerous because we were supposed to behave and speak like standardized white Americans. I would say though that the real sense of it came in the sixties in center from the larger world with Civil Rights, Black Power, the Women's Movement, the New Left. They all made, internally as well as externally, so many things possible. Rebellion, taking yourself apart and thinking of new ways to be. That was the way of the world and it was wonderful. I feel incredibly

blessed to have been coming of age during that time, to have been stimulated and allowed to remake myself in certain ways because of that.

GD: And the impact it had on your parents, on you, on the next generation, the cultural shift. There must have been some tension, a struggle for power, no?

MJ: Oh sure. My parents were firm civil righters. But they had their problems. Everyone in that generation did. Everyone in their generation did with Black Power. My mother later came to consider herself a feminist, but she and her generation were more defensive. They were defensive about their choices when I emerged as a feminist. Yes, nature of the thing. We challenged each other. Did they like my afro when I first got it? Of course, not! No.

GD: In retrospect then, what did it mean in 1995 to receive a Pulitzer Prize?

MJ: You know, the first thing I was aware of was my tendency, the way I was brought up and, again, black history has so functioned, was the chronicle of firsts and seconds. Who was the first person to do this? Who followed them to break this ground? The first black and the first black woman to receive a Pulitzer at the time was Isabel Wilkerson, who had gotten it a couple of years before I did. I remember being, at first, just "oh my god." I then remembered being very quickly aware, "oh my goodness." I'm early in the lineage and I'm part of what can become a line. There was that social, racial sense

of maybe it's not so different? It's journalism. It's a literary journalistic prize. But is it so different from what I was saying about, "Oh my god! Lena Horne or Sammy Davis, Jr. The first to appear on this show!" You were very aware of that. I knew how proud my parents would be and all their friends. It then becomes, after that, personal. It's how you cope as a writer with the rewards and prizes, handling your nervousness, your stage fright, anxiety, and all of that.

GD: And how has that shaped your writing process? Growing up you were part of the new journalism movement, or at least you were influenced by it?

MJ: Oh, I loved it! I was very excited by it. I was at Columbia Journalism School in 1970 to 1971. Some of the new journalists were coming to speak to us. We were reading them fervently. I was very interested in the possibilities. I became a critic which was a more traditional choice in some ways. I wasn't a reporter like Didion or whatever. But I was excited about all the literary possibilities, you know? Voice, tone... all those things that they unleash. I was so very excited about essayists like Baldwin, of course, and Mailer for that matter, and Mark McCarthy. I was reading all of that and thinking, "What can I do?" I think probably, ultimately, all of that helped push me towards wanting to not only stay within the beat, first a book and then a theater, but to kind of roam through the culture at large. I think that work certainly influenced Michael Jackson.

GD: Because you wrote a book on Michael Jackson. I'm curious what you think of other cultural figures like Bill Cosby and President Obama and what they mean to our society. How do they stand up to the questions we talked about earlier? How do they stack in your grading system?

MJ: Cosby... it's another situation entirely. He has utterly disgraced himself. I wouldn't compare him to Obama at all. He, as Cliff Huxtable, and his show were pop emblems of the chipper, utterly successful and happy. The ideal American family translated into Black upper-middle class. That was Cliff Huxtable. Bill Cosby has turned out to be something quite different and awful. That's as far as I'm concerned. Obama, well my God! He became president. He rose to the absolute top. Of course, it would not have been possible when I was growing up and my parents were growing up. There was no way that the sheer fact of that, or his intelligence, could accomplish all that we wanted and dreamed. And, the backlash and the various forms it takes, subtle and brutal, fascinating and awful. So reminiscent of what parents and grandparents would say is the average white person, by which I mean the Senate and Congress and House of Representatives. They'll always find a way to thwart you. They will be pleasant to you but they have extra resentment because you are black and either equal or superior. That has been pretty awful to see reenacted, but it's a new landscape. Everything on the landscape in many ways has either shifted or made room to shift. I think it helps enable more radical voices

to emerge. It makes all kinds of things possible. It's not just his appearance and achievement. They're a catalyst. You're not limited to only what he achieved or doesn't.

GD: There was a *New York Times* piece that came out some time ago, which echoed some of the sentiments found in your book. It spoke about Black Lives Matter and how, I'll read the sentence, "Black Lives Matter might just as easily have been the mantra of America's black elite, as far back as before the abolition of slavery, so to establish themselves in communities characterized by privilege and extreme class consciousness." What's your opinion of Black Lives Matter?

MJ: I am impressed and excited. I just want to keep... you know, it's unfolding. That's very, very exciting to watch. Oh, no, I'm very impressed and exhilarated by their presence.

GD: There was tremendous hardship in your story and after everything that you have seen and been through, is there still something that gives you the greatest happiness?

MJ: You know, I can't answer that. It changes day by day. A good writing day is fabulous. Some incredible political move or change can be extraordinary. Something delicious in my private life like going to see some fabulous piece of art. They're all part of what gives one a life and gives one happiness. But like the book, I have a lot of mood chips. It

depends. A good day of writing always counts but not alone, not without those other things and a sense of the world moving and shifting. Especially that you love and are loved by people you've chosen to be part of your world.

GD: Is there something you don't have that you still want to go out and get?

MJ: You know, like most writers, I am thinking and kind of dream spacing about what the next project will be. I've got a few possibilities but I don't know yet. I just don't know. I want to move further and experiment more rather than just follow a very straight line from what I did. We'll see! Try more, be more varied. See where the voices lead me!

Margo Jefferson's books:

On Michael Jackson

&

Negroland: A Memoir
(Winner of the 2016 National Book
Critics Circle Award)

are available now wherever books are sold.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

A Theory of Substance

Jericho Parms

Concrete

In 2007, at the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, the artist Doris Salcedo installed a crack in the floor. In an exhibition space normally filled with architectural sculptures and towering constructions—once a model of the sun—no one was quite sure how the crack was made. The installation, titled Shibboleth, began as a hairline fracture in the concrete slab floor and gradually, and then all of a sudden, deepened into a three-foot crevasse (ten inches at its widest point) that meandered and branched out through the space.

Sand

I think often about that line, which had no apparent origin. I think, too, about all of the seams and perimeters we contain, like the line my brother marked down the center of our shared bedroom as kids, the way certain streets partition entire neighborhoods—the 125th Street divide between Harlem and the Upper East Side, peace lines segregating urban streets in Ireland between Catholic and Protestant—how a line painted on a city bus could fuel protests and

arrests in Birmingham. On one side is the physical world where we meet our desires with propriety and control. On the other, an abandonment of intent, a surrendering to what lies beneath the surface. The roughness of sand can smooth the hardest marble. The texture of a nylon stocking gets caught on the smallest inconsistencies of skin, like the wrong direction velvet contains. At the Villa Borghese in Rome, circling the bare ass of Apollo, I can see the single moment that defines the young god's pursuit of Daphne, two figures captured at the brink of their fate—he reaching her at the very point she turns forever into a tree, both rooting and leaving before him.

Flesh

I imagine the last summer we lived together on San Juan Island as a slow splintering of edges we tried again and again to smooth. Those days I woke early, stepping outside our small trailer with its peeling blue finish, into the early dampness, stretching like an animal—sinewy, unkempt—my hair coiled and blonde, my skin the shade of late June, when the darkness of my tan made highlights of the faint scars along the inner bend of my wrist. Bedding down in the sunspots of the wooded clearing, I felt warm pine needles brush beneath my back. I had heard of a new fawn seen isolated in the woods while the doe mother foraged nearby. In a half sleep, I listened for them, imagining the fawn trying to blend into the world until it grew stronger and gained strength to stand.

Cedar

Joe dragged a stack of shingles from the shed. I grabbed the tools.

We were reshingling the side of an old garage barn for his mother in order to make extra money before we made our way back east. With most of the lower sections already complete, Joe and a neighbor had rigged scaffolding so we could reach the upper walls. Earlier that summer we had begun adding row upon row of cedar shingles, working from the bottom up, adorning the existing siding with a fresh wooden skirt.

"You have to consider the edges," the man in the building shop outside Seattle had said when we asked about the difference between shingles and shakes. "Shakes are split, not sawn," he said, loading a bundle into the back of the truck we had borrowed. I ran a finger along the edge. The tiny splinters caught against my skin.

Salt

That summer we talked about having our own place. "Build the whole thing up with our own two hands," Joe said, measuring the exposure on each corner of the wall and then reaching for the chalk line to mark the level row. And I said, "Sure. Somewhere by the ocean," and reached for a sack of nails. One at a time positioning the shingles against the wall, a half-inch seam between them, we secured each piece with two nails. Nearby an air compressor growled and

groaned. When our hands tired we switched, our arms tangling as we exchanged nail gun or hammer, nails, the slick saltwater of the skin, wondering how to make it three thousand miles from San Juan Island to New York City before August.

Skin

It is difficult to reconstruct the experience of depression, where the flesh and body of a story fragment into its mere skeletal frame. But there are definitive landmarks, the femur and tibia of memory, which are easier to recall: visiting the doctor, all slow-voiced and gentle, when I was a girl; the fits of laughter blending into an abyss of hysteria; and later anxiety attacks, insomnia, the tiny cuts I made like chisel marks following the lifelines and creases of my skin, the dull purple ring below my palm after I banged my wrist against the wall, the pain washing over me like a drug. Bruising took to my body like a lover—all roughness and whispers. It is difficult to recount the way these things begin, how (gradually and then, yes, all of a sudden) I started noticing objects for their sharpness.

Marble

I have stood for hours before the work of Bernini, fallen in love with the baroque genius who built the city of Rome, smoothing one marble surface at a time. I have studied the bust of Costanza, the lover whose face the sculptor

scarred out of rage. And, too, the Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence, being burned alive on a gridiron, writhing like an animal. Or the Ecstasy of Saint Teresa, pierced by her visions of a heretic, captured in euphoric madness.

Sugar

"Berserk," my father used to say when laughter took hold of me as a girl and my small body appeared as a "jumping bean on a sugar high." Those days my mother watched me closely—the way I binged on sweets and sadness, complained of an itch beneath my skin, grew hysterical with laughter—knowing something of the open pore that I was, and the mercurial border between my extreme seriousness and wild frenzy. Even my brother, inured to my vicious tantrums, my flailing body, learned how to make a cage of his arms as a boy, how to be a good brother, to pin me down so I wouldn't hurt myself, to hold on tight.

Soap

At day's end, Joe and I returned to the woods, to the outdoor shower behind the trailer. Joe traced a bar of soap over my back where the sun had left shadows on my shoulders. He washed my hair, tugging at it gently as I pulled him close. I could sense the play in his touch, somewhat restrained, as he handled me with care. In 1993 Janine Antoni created Lick and Lather, a series of fourteen life-size self-portrait busts, seven

cast in chocolate and seven cast in soap that she resculpted using the very methods the title promises—her tongue lapping over the forms, her hands washing herself clean—resulting in an array of partially effaced portraits. I wonder how it would feel to hold myself that way, cradling my head in the bend of my arm, taking the pulse and temperature of a body that I want to devour like Godiva or bathe entirely away.

Bark

The deer has no sense of self, yet Artemis deemed all deer sacred, harnessed them to her chariot as she reigned deity of wilderness, childbirth, and virginity, protecting young girls, relieving women of disease. Daphne, loyal follower of Artemis, refused lovers and wished only to be alone. As she ran from Apollo's pursuit, her feet turned to roots, her flesh to bark, hands and hair to the leaves of a laurel tree. I've read that Daphne's leafy fingers were so delicately carved that Bernini's marble swayed in the wind and chimed like crystal. Is art and mythology so different from reality—where simple substance carries divine subtext?

Chalk

Most days we worked through morning. Holding each end, we steadied the chalk line before snapping the center. When the dust cleared, a faint line scarred the wall. We lined up the shingles, alternating large and small to

overlap the seams of the previous row. I held them straight. Joe hammered at the nails. Every other row we switched position, the chalk disappearing beneath each layer, like all the drafts for architectural achievements, the burned sketches that informed baroque masterpieces, charcoal marks left on marble before it is cut, lines between insecurity and intent, all gone.

Rust

After a month on the island, we found an ad in one of the local harbor newspapers that read, “1988 Chevy Nova. Brown. Free,” and took it as a sign that it was time to move on, head back. And all I could think about was rust and burnt coffee, the metallic taste in my mouth before panic strikes, or the dull bellyache after a chocolate binge.

Chintz

About that time, somewhere in New York my mother was writing poems about fragility and the fear of losing a daughter. Maybe that has something to do with why I stayed away so long. I hadn’t seen her in months, since she flew to Colorado, where I was living that year, to be “close by” because I was drinking too much and had grown wary of the kitchen drawers and the sharpness they held. We ate take out and watched old movies with men in overcoats and women with misty eyes. I slept curled in a queen-size bed in her room at the local bed and breakfast,

surrounded by stale potpourri, wishing I could blend into the doily surfaces, staring at the uneven seams of wallpaper and trying to will the flowers in line.

Iron

With each row we moved higher up the wall. We were edging closer to the end, which was less about completing a summer job than about the precipice that seemed just out of reach. I felt stripped of my own edges, my siding refurbished into something new, a pattern I couldn't fit in, couldn't breathe in. I thought about how I used to singe my skin with a hot iron when I felt strange and lonely, which was most of the time—a mark on the timeline that I could never bring myself to reveal. Instead, I hid the scars beneath the covers of sex and oversized sweaters. Joe was somewhere by my side asking about where we would stay in New York, if there was work, how we would eventually get back to Colorado, finish college, maybe live for a while in Manitou Springs.

We moved higher. The scaffold, little more than a tower of wrought iron beams and a plane of driftwood, wobbled beneath us. The sun grew hot on my shoulders and simmered my skin . . .

Fire

Hammer. Nail. Hammer. Nail. The dust of cedar and chalk felt like sand in my eye, cutting along the cornea, beneath the lid. But it was my

hand I was pinching instead, pinching and then raising. Raising and cocking to yield the interior of thin veins. Cocking and hammering against the wood plank of the scaffolding. I pummeled my wrist against the surface, the bone ignoring the line of skin, which grew pink and raw. I heard Joe shouting. I heard him stumble on the mess of tools, catch and tangle in the chalk line, trying to reach me as my arms hurled toward the wood plank, like hot steel against an anvil—glowing, burning. Joe braced himself behind me and pinned me down (he had learned along the way to do this, too), his voice pleading in my ear.

Gauze

I once overheard a police officer asking a woman if her missing boy had any identifying birthmarks, any scars, and I wondered if he recognized the knife in his own hands, the razor blade that his tongue had become, carving into her skin. After my transgression with the iron—after the burning, that is—I was sent to a therapist whose surname was Dove. He had a Bob Ross way of speaking in a hum, which unhinged me from the start. So I holed up with my silence, fingering the bandage on my arm and thinking of soap commercials and white birds—how we market them as symbols for peace, as if some shackle or cross they must bear—the way once snow gets dirty there is little one can do except wait for it to snow again.

Glass

Twice I saw the doe that summer. When I looked up she stood motionless a few paces from the porch, the fawn grazing by her hind legs. She bent at the neck, craning toward the dry grass at her feet. Her coat was a pearly beige against the white of her tail and spotted haunches, the glass marble of her eyes. Her ears perked and she reset her stance. From a distance I heard Joe's steps rattling the ladder and the angry clamor of a hammer—angry because I had done it again: lost control in that way he could never understand because I would never let him. A day would pass before he would look me in the eyes again. When I turned back, the deer were gone. Or rather, leaving. Had I wanted to catch them, they would have already reached the trees.

Hide

At night, while Joe slept, I slipped into the soft skin of one of his old shirts. Outside, the dry ground was cool against my feet. The air licked at my legs and stirred the hair on my arms and neck. On the island, darkness always made me think of the animals it held. Sometimes I think I could enter the woods and never return, give up everything—all human preoccupation—for the camouflage of hide and instinct. The damp grass stuck beneath my thighs as I reached over my outstretched legs to grab my toes. And then I felt Joe behind me again, his torso bending along my

back, his fingers threading along my ribs, kneading my hips. His breath warmed my ear as he whispered something about a junk car and a free ride.

Fossil

The car was a beater, too. The rusty brown 1988 Chevrolet Nova, listed in the ad we had found, had two missing windows, a cracked windshield, and a broken taillight—and that, just the body of the beast.

The engine had logged over 188,000 miles. "At this point it's just clutter in the field," the owner said. As he spoke, the old man, who lived in a cottage by the shore, pointed to the far end of the yard where you could, if you craned your neck a bit, make out the shape of a car beneath the overgrown weeds. Joe started unearthing the vehicle in a skilled excavation, firing off a strand of questions, noting the state of the tires "after all this time." The man smelled like whiskey and chickens, and he kept muttering on about second chances. How "she" could use another stab at the open road.

Dew

I sat on the porch with a cup of coffee, watching Joe clear the car's interior and wash the body. In another minute, the cold spray of water startled me. Wiping my eyes, I heard Joe laugh and I ran to him to wrestle the hose away. For the first of many times we kissed on the hood

of the Chevy. Looking up at the garage, Joe said decidedly, "Let's finish this today." He started on the shingling. I rinsed down the car before joining him. I circled the body of it, which even in its dull matte finish glistened in the morning light, the water beading like dew or the faint mist left on the skin after sex. Years later I would find a photograph of Joe from the end of that same summer, having made it not only to New York, but elsewhere on the east coast. Bare-chested in a pair of khaki shorts, he stood on a wooden dock threading a fishing line. The sky was overcast. His shoulders were wet with lake water or sweat. He bore the same smile laced with hope and anticipation that he often did—a smile that buoyed us, that, for a time, likely kept me alive. On the back side, I had inscribed the words "at Bumpy's house in Maine" and, smaller in the top left corner, "I love this boy." Standing before the Chevy, I wiped sweat from my neck and arms, blotting the skin on my wrist, which was stormy and sore. I leaned my forearm flush against the lip of the car door, the same way Joe and I used to compare skin tones, and noticed the crack in the car's windshield, trailing through the glass from one side to the other, creating a crooked horizon.

Deer

And there, the second sighting: the doe, with fawn in tow, stood upright by the side of the car. Her smooth coat nearly matched the dusty brown of the dented car doors, where soapy spots had begun to dry into a gauzy web. The deer's

eyes were dark, forgiving. She stood just for a moment, and then turned and stepped—stepped and then bounded, her hooves pounding softly on ground, pounding and then fading away.

Cells

Nearly at the roof, Joe motioned to where a bare spot marked the crested point of the wall's peak and said, "The last shingle." He scanned a batch of half-size shakes. Weeding through the larger scraps, he felt the face and sides of each piece, as if they held their own cellular composition, like fingerprints or snowflakes, until he found the right one. His eyes were wide and clear as he chalked the wood scrap with the correct angle of the eaves to create a triangle and lined it up to cut. Sitting on the deck of scaffold, with the unearthed Chevy below, Joe slid the utility knife through the cedar with exact swiftness and perfection before the blade jostled free. Before adhering it with nails, we scrawled our initials on the back of the final shingle, where they would remain, another inscription that may have been my idea—so desperate was I to leave an impression on the world—secure in the unseen grains of cedar at the peak of a structure we hadn't built, but had resurfaced.

Tissue

In order to capture the expression of Saint Lawrence, Bernini reportedly thrust the flesh of his own thigh against fire. Studying his image

in a mirror, he chiseled the details of a solitary figure in a visceral emotional state. Beyond the anatomical precision—the twist of the body stretched liked an animal—the life study led to years of scholarly inquiry into the immediacy of human expression, caught between physical agony and a perverse calm bordering on rapture. Perhaps Bernini's gift was an intrinsic understanding of surface. In the same way, Salcedo capitalized on the properties of concrete to create a crack in the floor. When asked how deep the fissure went, Salcedo said, "It's bottomless. As deep as humanity." When I think of that crack, with its rough edges and unknown nature, when I think of Antoni consuming and cleansing her self-portrait busts, I think of the self, how we come to know the materials of the body and the brain: the substance of being alive.

Bone

This is not an endorsement. Nor is it a primer for pain studies. But perhaps a plea for a greater tolerance for rage, and the myriad ways our human impulses are unearthed and revealed: in a rusted tailpipe, in the smell of cedar or soap. Sometimes I still itch beneath my skin, drink too much and sleep too little, grow thin like a stray, think I hear things in the dark, but generally I'm okay. Sometimes I find myself writing the words doe-eyed to describe my first love. A particular shade of beige, a certain make and model's tan interior can instill calm and chaos, ecstasy and madness, which makes me think that love must have something

to do with bodywork—carburetors and gaskets, bucket seats, and radio knobs. In the junkyard of learning not to hurt myself, I found pliant flesh, the surface of skin, the scaffold of bones, even as the stubborn impulse to damage crept close, sidling up like a deer I knew one summer—or felt I knew, the way she seemed always to be there, tsking at me to stop with all the pain and hurting—before she leapt toward the tree line and receded into the woods.

Jericho Parms *is the author of* Lost Wax *(University of Georgia Press), from which this essay is reprinted. Other essays from the collection have appeared in* Fourth Genre, The Normal School, American Literary Review *and elsewhere, and have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, noted in* Best American Essays, *and anthologized in* Brief Encounters: A Collection of Contemporary Nonfiction *and the forthcoming* Waveform: Twenty-First-Century Essays by Women. *Parms is the Associate Director of the MFA in Writing program at Vermont College of Fine Arts and teaches in the Professional Writing Program at Champlain College.*

Not So Glamorous

Ronit Feinglass Plank

It was 1998. Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky had dominated the press and the threat of Clinton's impeachment loomed. I was twenty-six years old and working in Manhattan as a telemarketer, taking acting classes, and going on auditions like I had been doing for five years with mediocre results. I had performed in summer stock, been in some off-off-off-Broadway shows in little black box theatres, starred in student films, and landed a supporting role in an independent film or two, but I had no agent yet and no good leads on one. Derrick, a guy I'd met in acting class and who I'd dated for a year, had recently broken up with me and I was pretty wrecked.

My life wasn't turning out the way I had planned.

I was supposed to be on a TV show, or on Broadway, or making movies in LA by now. And I was supposed to still be dating Derrick. I hadn't really ever felt at ease with him, but that was beside the point. I thought we were getting serious. He had even introduced me to his mom and dad.

Crying in my bed at night, I replayed the events of our relationship over and over. When I thought about his parents I'd break down again, pounding my fist into my pillow and sobbing,

"But I know they liked me!" As if that alone could make the breakup untrue.

I was aware I didn't have a handle on my life the way I imagined I would when I first moved to the city after college, but I had no other plan.

Maribel, a girl I met on an audition, knew of a promotions company that hired spokesmodels; she told me I could get paid $25 an hour for representing Chivas Regal at various New York City bars. I had a telemarketing job in the daytime, but it seemed like dressing up and mingling at night would distract me from the break-up and make me feel better about myself. It would be fun to be the center of attention, and being busy and feeling pretty would be a good way to get back at Derrick. Maybe I'd even find a boyfriend.

All I had to do was wear a black dress and black pumps and present the product in an appealing way. And go to Chivas School. I had already been to Estée Lauder School several years back; just after graduating from college, I worked as a makeup counter salesperson at Lord & Taylor, so I wasn't unfamiliar with this kind of product education. For Estée Lauder School, Lord & Taylor gave me the day off from the counter and I got to go to the company headquarters with other makeup counter saleswomen ranging in age from their early twenties to mi,d-sixties. We sat at circular tableclothed tables where servers poured us iced tea and we nibbled on salad and quiché. We watched Keira, a put-together, thirty-something product specialist trainer, demonstrate the best ways to apply moisturizer to customers' skin and how to wear our pink Estée Lauder scarves the right way. She peppered her instructions with humor

and the counter ladies around me tittered and exchanged knowing glances at the inside jokes. But I didn't laugh along with them. I thought: I could do this woman's job. I knew I wasn't like the other cosmetics counter women. I was an actress temporarily making a living in this job while I waited for my life to change. I was an audition away from stardom, a chance meeting away from a long-term relationship, moments away from my real life.

But four years later, I was in Chivas School.

Again, I sat with other women around tables and learned about the product we were selling and how to approach our customers. We tasted different scotch whiskeys for comparison. We learned about smokiness, peatiness and depth, the importance of oak barrels, and we sampled the Chivas in little plastic shot glasses.

The next week, I began working with Maribel. I knew the job was kind of silly, but it got me out on Thursday and Friday nights, and I was getting paid to dress up and be social. When Maribel and I got to the designated bar, we checked in with Scott, the promotions manager, then headed into the women's restroom to freshen up. We'd inspect our makeup, scan our pantyhose for runs, dab clear nail polish on any runs in our stockings that had begun, and fix our hair. Walking out of our individual clouds of aerosol hairspray—mine AquaNet Extra Hold—we approached our customers.

There weren't a lot of women at these bars, mostly guys: the kind of guys I never talked to in regular life, the kind who worked on Wall Street, who had gone to prep schools in the city, the ones who I believed thought they were

better than me. But as a spokesmodel I got to decide who I spoke with and I liked that. I knew Maribel and I attracted attention and I enjoyed being noticed; I felt I had control.

We approached men we didn't know and offered them samples of Scotch, explaining its complexity of flavors. And, while I was standing with these men, if I sensed they doubted my intelligence or my authority on the subject, I'd be sure to drop in a technical term like peatiness. And I still kept telling myself that maybe I'd meet someone. I shook off my father's advice that a bar was not a place to meet a nice guy. His suggestion, repeated every few phone calls, was that I sign up for JDate.com, the Jewish online dating service. I was fine, I told him. I was fine, I told myself.

I still thought about Derrick. In fact, in a move I think even then I understood was self-destructive, I orchestrated Derrick and I getting paired together for a scene in acting class. I went to his new apartment to rehearse, one he had begun to rent after he'd broken up with me. I wore the perfume he'd given me for the holidays before he'd broken up with me, listened to him tell me about his recent auditions and his new small role on a soap opera. I pretended not to care about him anymore, while secretly hoping we would get back together again. If he understood my desperation, he didn't let on.

The second time I went to his apartment to rehearse, I excused myself to use his bathroom. I shut the door and checked my makeup in the mirror. I applied fresh lipstick and blotted it with a tissue. I glanced at the counter and froze. There were two toothbrushes nestled in his toothbrush

cup. Two. I came home to my roommate and best friend Lauren that night bawling. Derek had a girlfriend. He must. Why else would there be two toothbrushes? Lauren came to my rescue and said, as if it was a widely-known fact, "Oh, everyone has two toothbrushes." And because I wanted to believe her, I did.

I kept rehearsing at Derrick's apartment, and I kept my job as a spokesmodel. The gigs got less appealing, but I kept saying yes. Maribel and I were sent to Queens, out to the clubs where the guests only spoke Spanish, when I only knew high school French. Another day we trekked out to New Jersey to help with a car giveaway event. One Sunday, I worked a street fair in midtown Manhattan and spent the eight hours feeling sorry for myself, in my golf shirt and khaki pants as I plunged my numb fingers into tubs of ice water to fish out freezing cans of juice for a crowd of New Yorkers barking for free samples.

Spokesmodeling was not shaping up to be the way to find a new life or a new boyfriend. But I continued.

The promotions company took Captain Morgan on as a client. Maribel and I had to dress as a Morganette and pass out samples of Captain Morgan. I was tall and had a big frame and had no business in the tiny getup they handed us to wear. I tugged on the short flouncy skirt, the puffy pirate blouse, and the fishnet stockings, tied the Morganette bandana around my head, and walked toward our assignment: a lesbian bar in the West Village. Men on the street watched me pass. I wondered, was I still getting back at Derrick? I didn't feel glamorous. I didn't feel good. That night was my first time

in a lesbian bar and the attention Maribel and I drew from the women there was similar to the other bars we'd been too, only heavier on the bedroom-eye stares.

The last time I worked with Maribel was at an upscale bar on the East side. Maribel and I had on our high heels and black cocktail dresses and were the only women in the dim wood-paneled room. I had gotten a few guys to sample the Chivas and several more had come up to me for a cocktail. I was smiling and chatting with them and the night was going well. I dropped by a group of three men standing together and after I moved on I saw them gesture in my direction. I heard two of them laugh. This thicker man, maybe in his late-thirties, was eyeing me when I passed again so I stopped at his group to chat with them, my drink tray balanced on my right hand.

"You know who you look like?" the thick guy said.

I ran my fingers through my hair and moved a little closer, welcoming his interest in me, pleased he chose to include me in his conversation, bracing myself for flattery. Maybe he was thinking Marisa Tomei. I'd heard that before. A friend of mine had even mentioned to a guy she was trying to set me up with a while ago that I reminded her of Liv Tyler. I would definitely take that comparison.

I was still smiling, eager with the confidence of an impending compliment.

His eyes darted to his buddy on his left and then he said, "You look like Monica Lewinsky."

I stared at him. I could feel the many layers of lipstick I had spread across my lips in

the bathroom an hour ago, the sticky lipgloss I had slicked over it, the three coats of mascara I had applied to my lashes. I could smell the AquaNet I had sprayed onto my hair.

At the time, Monica Lewinsky was on the cover of every newspaper. She was Monica Lewinsky of the blue dress, the cigar, the Halloween costume; she was Monica Lewinsky, the President's plaything, the young intern victimized in the press and by the American people.

When he said I looked like Monica Lewinsky I heard, you are an object, unrefined and probably lacking in dignity, why else would you be doing this job? What I heard was, you're not worthy of respect.

I knew if I was living the life I had imagined for myself I would not remind him of Monica Lewinsky. Moreover, I knew he wouldn't think he could say something like this to me.

If I were a different person, I would have told him to screw himself. I would have flipped him the bird or accidentally dropped my drinks on him. But I wasn't that person. I wouldn't be that person for many years.

In that moment, I couldn't kid myself any longer about some of the decisions I was making. This job wasn't good for me. Derrick had two toothbrushes because he had a serious girlfriend. I had lied to myself because the alternative—being alone, being patient while I went through harder times with the faith they wouldn't always be this way—was out of my reach. I didn't know when choices I thought were temporary had begun to define me. When had I lost control over my life? Had I ever had control?

I was done with this job. I was done with Derrick. I was done with New York. The thick guy and his two friends looked back at me with these grins on their faces, waiting to see how I would respond.

I turned my back to them and walked away.

Ronit Feinglass Plank's *essays and short fiction have appeared in* The Iowa Review, The American Literary Review, Salon, Proximity Magazine, Lilith, *and* Brevity. *For more about her and links to her work visit ronitfeinglassplank.com*

Disorder

Laura Gill

When I was seven, my mother and I were in the minivan on one of her trips for Meals on Wheels when she suddenly turned and asked me: "If your father and I ever split up, who would you want to live with?" I had never considered their splitting up as an option. In retrospect, I realize her question indicated that she didn't really think it was either. The car smelled of peas, mashed potatoes, and meat, probably undersalted and overcooked, and we kept driving.

I answered as diplomatically as possible: "Well, I like Dad's food, but you are more organized." I suppose I was smart enough to know that you didn't choose. And yet I couldn't help but think about it—would I lose the Fourth of July? The chill of the midnight air as my father made the back of his Taurus into a kind of bed and then woke me and my sister up, carrying us into the car and driving us to the pier where we watched fireworks shoot into the sky?

My parents did divorce, but not until I was nineteen. At that point, we had already moved from Los Angeles to Connecticut, thereby losing the July 4th fireworks and the visits to the woman to whom my mother delivered meals, the one who lived in the dark house with the maroon chairs and brown table, the one who left only one light on over the stove. We moved when I

was eight because my father lost his job as an art director at J. Walter Thompson. We left our minivan in L.A., and even though we gave it to my older sister—and I was happy that it was going to a family member—I was sad about giving it up. I had a feeling that the crushed chips and empty McDonald's wrappers held meaning, even if I didn't know exactly what kind. The car also held that terrifying memory of my brother playing a trick on us, the one where he hid in the back without saying a word, making us all believe he'd run into the woods of Beverly Hills and been eaten by a bobcat or coyote. The car also held the smaller memories: falling asleep on the way home from gymnastics, making faces out the window to people in traffic, singing along to *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*.

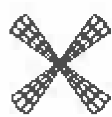
We kept my father's Taurus and took that across the country when we moved. We drove through Reno and the Dakotas and Niagara Falls. We listened to *Les Miserables* much of the time, singing "Do you hear the people sing?" loudly as we dodged storms—or tried to, mostly unsuccessfully. One time, in South Dakota, we spotted a storm coming from what looked like miles away. We had a tarp that we used to protect the suitcases strapped to the top of the car, but my father thought we could beat the rain. He sped forward. On the straight road, with lines of dead grass on either side, he attempted to game the system, to challenge the weather and take it on. The dark sky took over. I don't remember if I was in the back seat, the one that faced backwards, giving the passenger the view of the road they'd left as opposed to the road ahead, but whoever sat there must have gotten the first and the best

view of the black moving in on the flat sky. It soaked all of our clothes. We spent a night in a motel, and my mother spent hours at the dryer, throwing one load in after another.

After we moved to Connecticut, we begged my father to get rid of the Taurus, which he had started to refer to as "Old Blue," for a bigger, better, more four-wheel drive kind of car. He chose to drive Old Blue each day when it was his turn to drive the carpool. He'd reattached the sunroof control to the actual roof with duct tape and stains were everywhere, leaving us embarrassed to carpool in it, even if he always gave a Snickers bar to the person who predicted our arrival time. He says it was one of the saddest days of his life when he drove Old Blue into the school parking lot with the smoke billowing out of the front, the day the mechanic told him there was absolutely nothing left that he could do. At eleven years old, the embarrassment of driving a rundown car trumped my empathy for him, even if moving to Connecticut had taught me that change was sometimes terrible and that exchanging something old for something new was quite possibly one of the saddest things you could ever do.

Years later, I thought I was going to therapy to work out my feelings about my parents' divorce, but if you were to ask my mother, she would tell you that when we moved, it really was the beginning of the end for me. My whole life I've been told about how I was the "happiest kid," and about how, when we arrived to Connecticut, something shifted. My mother tells me that I've always "wanted to be sad" and that the move to Connecticut gave me good reason to be.

The act of displacement is to move something from one place to another. It is also the act of shifting emotions; psychologists say that sometimes, for example, we unconsciously take our anger about a loss of a parent and direct it toward the loss of our keys. The word describes both an intentional and accidental action. We choose to move our keys from the table, but we don't know if what we will feel when we misplace them will be about the keys or something else entirely.

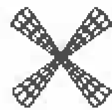


When my father was young, he had undiagnosed appendicitis for a few days before he went to the hospital and had emergency surgery. He always told us that he almost died that time—*really, kids*—because his mother let the symptoms go for a couple of days. He described writhing in pain on the floor, and then finally making it to the hospital just in time. After the story, he would show us his scar on the right side: it was still purple and long and indented.

My brother was taken to the hospital once because he was also writhing on the floor in pain. My mother thought my father was being crazy when he thought it was appendicitis, but when my father saw my brother holding his bony knees up to his chest on the carpet of the T.V. room, he couldn't bear it. My father got my brother up and into the car and off to the hospital. It ended up being nothing, but I can relate to my father's urgency: what ends up being nothing is often a sign of something, even if that sign is displaced, moved over, shifted, and slightly disconnected from the rupture itself.

In one of our first summers in Connecticut, we went to the Canaan Railroad Days Carnival to see the fireworks. We parked at the McDonald's across the street, and carried our blankets in. The rides sat on top of what was most of the time a baseball field. The Ferris Wheel was bright. The smell of fried dough gathered. Games. Raffles. Tons of red tickets: some on the ground, some passing from hand to hand, some falling through a pocket hole, another ripped. I wondered whether I'd have to use the Porta Potty or if I could just go back to the McDonald's to use the restroom, which would then bring me closer to the car and therefore closer to home.

A few years later, I'd go again and demand they stop a ride I was on. The ride looked like a boat, and it swung higher and higher every second. I started to scream, and then shouted to get off.

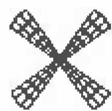


"I can't believe I didn't catch this earlier," the doctor said, staring at my back. I was twelve and my back had been aching on and off for a few months. "Scoliosis," he told us. In the car, I thought about the worst-case scenarios: having surgery, and not being able to move for six months. Then, second-worst: a back brace. Tears gathered as my mother told me how much worse it really could be. "Some kids have cancer," she said. "Think about Lily with her diabetes."

The worst never happened. I never ended up in my bed with metal poles in my back. I didn't develop the bedsores I'd feared or the atrophied muscles I'd been anxious about. Instead, I wore

a brace, and bruises formed on both sides of my torso. The side of my left hip pressed inward, and the plastic was unforgiving; it pinched and compressed me.

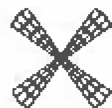
Two years later, when I was told to wean myself from the brace, I was surprised by the word “wean.” Why would I need to wean myself from something that I’d never wanted? As I started to wear it less, I began to understand. A part of me missed how it felt—the pressure had become comforting—and another part of me missed the routine—the days were a series of hours that I counted and understood. Twenty-three on. One hour off. There was consistency in the discomfort and a bliss in the release; even now, I remember the way my undershirt stuck to me as I peeled off the brace, and just how good it felt to let the air touch my skin. I liked being held in, and I relished being let out. Beyond the physical, it made me stand out. Without it, I had no way of letting people know that I was going through something that they couldn’t possibly understand.



“You’re the most risk averse person I know,” said a friend when I told them that I wasn’t interested in parasailing. We were talking about an upcoming trip to Miami, and even though I said the words, “Well, I’ll happily get on a boat,” I was simultaneously thinking about the risk inherent in that: could I go overboard? Was it hurricane season? What if I got seasick and there wasn’t a bathroom?

Before my parents were divorced but after we'd moved back to Connecticut, my father made us laugh for what felt like hours driving home from Thanksgiving dinner. We were leaving Bronxville and listening to the radio, and we happened upon a show where people were calling in about medical ailments. My father started to provide commentary. The moment people would call in and mention their blurry vision or the pain in the lower right part of their head, he would say "Oh, no! Not another one!" and "Please, can you call someone else? I don't want to hear it!" and we'd laugh while the person on the other end expressed their anxieties about the time of day it occurred or how the pain persisted. He would yell at the radio, "No, no, didn't you hear me? I don't want to hear it!" and we couldn't stop laughing and laughing, enjoying the surprise of his response every time.

A few years later, my father's mother and his best friend died within a few months of each other. Looking back, I can see the point on his graph so clearly—it moves the line up from the loss of his job to another point on the y-axis. A change occurs that cannot altogether be illustrated through the fact that those jokes stopped, but might be understood through the knowledge that even when we begged, he would not do it again. He could not mock another's pain.



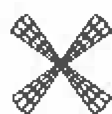
I used to joke in high school about the fact that my parents weren't divorced but might as well be because they lived fairly separate lives.

Perhaps it wasn't as much of a joke as a mantra or belief system, one of which I was fairly proud, thinking that it was the answer to a perfect marriage. When my friends would meet my parents, they would think much the same. They thought it was healthy the way they never fought and didn't demand much from each other. By the time I was in high school, my mother was spending her weeks working in Boston and my father was mostly in New York.

Even before that, though, they moved through the house at a different pace and on a different schedule. My mother's pattern changed every day. Some days she took us to school, grocery shopped, and cooked dinner. Other days, she was at a board meeting for the library or practicing a play or driving to watch my sister's lacrosse game at Miss Porter's. My father's days, by contrast, were routine. He woke up every morning at four A.M. and went to his office in the house to work. When we first moved to Connecticut, he was working on building his company, Michael Gates Gill and Friends, and he worked for the Rams and Rembrandt, and wrote a book about becoming an entrepreneur called *Fired Up*. The book was full of advice about building a life outside of a company, and yet, after the book project was over, his work life started to deflate and he was off to New York doing jobs that didn't involve free football jerseys and endless amounts of toothpaste.

One day, I was home from boarding school and my parents decided to take a walk. When they didn't come back within the hour, I started to panic. This was the first time I remember

sending myself into a tailspin without any apparent reason: no injury, or surprise, or sudden shift in environment. I stared at the clock and hyperventilated and burst into tears. When they returned, they stared at me baffled. I sat at the island in our kitchen and eventually stopped crying. I don't know how I could have conjured up the reality that I did—that they died walking on a quiet, country road—but I had. I genuinely thought I was an orphan.



When my father's mother died, my cousin and I were the ones to find her. We had just performed a Christmas concert in the center of Norfolk, and were planning to have a sleepover with my grandmother afterwards. We didn't notice that she hadn't shown up at the concert. We were focused on the lit candles and the descant and whether or not we would be invited to a party afterwards.

We did go to a party, and then back to the car around eleven o'clock to go back to grandma's house. The body of the car nearly shook as it warmed up, and we headed through the empty streets to the bungalow, feeling every bump.

Lights hit our windshield when we arrived. We squinted at first, and then started to panic. Was it a stranger ready to kidnap us? Neither one of us wanted to jump out. In retrospect, I realize that parking in the middle of a driveway with your lights on would not have been a great tactic for a kidnapper, but because I was

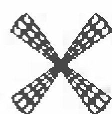
fifteen and because I often imagined the worst but didn't want to imagine the actual worst—my dead grandmother in the car—I formed an image of who I thought was in that car instead: a white middle-aged man with scraggly brown hair, ready to shove me in the back of his Honda, lock the doors, and drive.

We decided that we had to get out and that we had to get out together. We hesitated as we walked forward, and as we saw my grandmother in the car, a grin plastered itself to my face that I could not remove. Kate responded differently. As she opened the door, she yelled "Granmére! Granmére!" and when there was no response, she started to cry. The heat was blaring, and a recording of the Bible was playing from the tape deck. Her hand was clutched around the gear shift. A full moon was perched in the sky and her car was intact.

We ran inside to call our parents, and my mother said, "Okay, okay, Laura, just breathe," and she asked us to go back and check to see if she was "really dead." At the time, we were stunned. What was she thinking, asking two teenagers to check and make sure that their grandmother was really dead? Now, I think I can understand. The response came from the same impulse that lead her to tell us to "get over it" when my siblings and I cried. Some might call it callousness, but I don't think it's the same thing: it's shock in the face of no control. It's the smile that pinned itself to my face.

We did check. We went to the car, and opened the door again. My cousin pressed her shoulder, and we called out again: "Granmére,

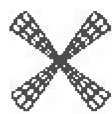
Granmére, Granmére." She did not move. Her earrings hit her shoulders. Her wool hat covered her head. We called my parents back and in minutes they were there and so was Kate's mother, who hugged the body in the car and rocked with it, back and forth. I wondered: how did my grandmother know to stop? Did her heart start jolting back and forth? Or pound harder into her breastbone? Perhaps it called out to the ribs, the liver, the thorax and the stomach: I am speeding. I am about to crash.



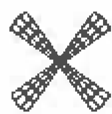
Once, a friend of mine was asked, after her experience with leukemia: *What happened in the year before you were diagnosed?* I sat there somewhat shocked. It wasn't that I'd never thought of the fact that her cancer was diagnosed almost to the day of the anniversary of her father's death, but when the question came, it seemed insensitive and reductionist. My friend didn't acknowledge an emotional correlation, perhaps because the experience of watching her father die seemed less immediate than what she had just lived through: spinal taps, blood transfusions, a month at the hospital, and losing thirty pounds in a matter of months.

The year that my friend was diagnosed with cancer was the only year in recent history that I couldn't remember imagining the worst in situations that were not the worst. Being so close to actual pain allowed me the opportunity to get over my own, invented or otherwise. I went with

her to the hospital more than once. During her blood transfusions, she sat in a beige chair, separated from other patients in other beige chairs. The bag of blood hung from a metal pole that looked like a coat rack. She said the transfusions felt good; they brought her energy. I always wished I could see the energy physically. I wanted her cheeks to become fuller and pinker as the blood moved in. I wanted her hair to grow and her legs to bulk up. She slept as it happened, and she slept on the car ride home. When we got to her apartment, I'd carry her bag of snacks, books, and cords behind her as she went up the stairs. She was too weak to take more than herself.



One time Granmére told me that I shouldn't wear anything to sleep that was tight around the waist because it would bring me nightmares. I don't. I wear nightgowns and t-shirts. I avoid pajama pants and underwear and anything that squeezes me in the middle.

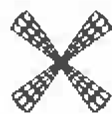


Soon after the announcement of my father's affair and around the time that my mother told me that I should see an adult doctor, not a pediatrician, I had another panic attack. I didn't know that going to an adult doctor meant that they'd have to take blood that day, but because

I'd never been scared of needles, I thought I could sit and watch the blood going from my arm to the glass tube. Instead, I stared at the needle and thought of what I could no longer do. I couldn't move my forearm up to my bicep because that would squeeze the needle, and then press it further into my vein. I couldn't stand up because if I stood up, the needle would fly out of my arm and blood would go everywhere. My heart bounced in my chest, and I started saying, "Please stop. Please, please stop. I need to get out."

The nurse undid the band, unscrewed the tube, and removed the needle from the skin, as I was brought into a dark room where they could have me lie down while they took my blood. But I wasn't willing to have them do it then either. The second I heard the tubes shaking in their container and the nurse's voice, I imagined the arm, chubby and soft, ripe for the needle to go in, and I couldn't do it.

That evening, I went to a friend's house and told the story and her mother said: "That's gotta be about more than the needle."



The therapist I asked my parents to help pay for was not a good therapist. Every time I left his office, I felt heavy and sad, and I would wander into Saratoga Springs with my shoulders hunched forward and my self-esteem plummeting with every step. Perhaps, as my mother had said, there was a part of me that felt comfort in

being sad, but I didn't like feeling despondent.

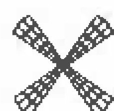
On the fourth visit, I told him about a nightmare in which my foot had become a mangled mess, a mixture of blood and ooze and purple bruises. He had nothing to say about this dream. Nothing about what the foot could mean or should mean or might mean. Nothing. He simply stared at me—hoping for what, exactly? I put my jacket on—the one with the toggles, the one I'd bought on my year off—and I shuffled, or it felt like I shuffled, to Uncommon Bagels, the dream still bright and vivid and violent in my head. I never went back.

I had assumed the therapist would want to figure out a way to help me move through the experience of having a father who had an affair with a woman from the gym, with whom he now had a child. I was excited to actually have an issue that any therapist would deem acute, and I was waiting for my big moment, My Emotional Therapy Breakdown, where I'd have uncontrollable tears and use up every tissue. But it never happened there.

That didn't mean I wasn't sad and anxious, but I don't know if any of the sadness or anxiety was new or if it was just a recycled version of the sadness I'd always felt or, as my mother had said, had wanted to feel. I was found crying to a tall, bald bartender at four in the morning at Desperate Annie's, forcing him into saying that I was worthy of love. I took long drives toward the canal locks near Saratoga Springs. I'd sit and stare at the still, controlled water and wonder just how long I'd have to sit there to become one of those people who heads to places to contemplate

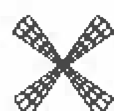
their lives and then, miraculously, gets better. I had unprotected sex with a gambling addict who loved Townes Van Zandt; he left right afterwards to play poker in New Jersey.

I also went to visit my favorite misanthrope, who smoked too much weed and drank too much. His apartments were filled with cigarette butts, and glasses with whiskey caked on the bottom. I never knew if his sheets were clean.



When I was twenty-four and living in Philadelphia, my father came to Philadelphia to give a talk about his book, *How Starbucks Saved My Life*. At that point, the outing of his affair was four years behind us and the divorce was three years old, and yet, it was hard to hear him talk so enthusiastically about his "new life" and the way that it had been "saved" since leaving us, our mother, and the opportunity to crack jokes on family drives. We left the talk and got in the taxi and I thought about this life now, the one he was reporting made him happy. He worked at Starbucks and lived in an attic apartment with lawn furniture and blank walls. I asked him: "So, were you unhappy the whole time you lived with us?"

If you go on his website, you will see it: "Late in life I have found a simpler, happier way to live. I don't intend to mess it up again."



Before I ever went to therapy and just after the announcement of my father's affair, I met a man in a hostel in Spain. He had long hair and thick, tan skin, and I met him while I was walking El Camino de Santiago, sitting in one of the nicer hostels on the path and drying my socks. He asked me what day I was born, and though my gut response was to walk away and avoid this conversation, I answered: January 18th. He looked concerned. He said it explained a lot, what with the date being on the cusp of Capricorn and Aquarius. It was clear why I was in pain, he told me, even though I hadn't told him that I was in pain. In fact, I had barely said more than "Nice to meet you" when he was telling me that my soul was in a constant battle: "The Capricorn in you loves control. The Aquarius in you wants freedom. You are always stuck in between." I stayed sitting even though I wanted to move. The walls of the hostel were pristine and so was the floor: shiny, cold and white. Where was everyone else? He asked about my family. I told him I was the second girl in a family of three, and he immediately said, "Ah, yes. This is why you can't accept the love from your father." What? He kept going. "Your family wanted you to be a boy. You haven't ever felt wanted."

I looked around the room. I wanted him to stop talking to me, and to stop taking himself so seriously. Stars? Birth order? I'd never felt so strong an aversion to such a handsome man, even though I thought I wanted just what he was delivering: a justification to feel sad. And yet, somehow, in the way he was so sure about it, I

detected artifice. After all, I was on a pilgrimage. I knew what it meant to take on something and label it. I'd planned to walk the path before I learned of my father's affair, but once I was surrounded by all these people who were there for reasons—a death of a friend, a show of faith—it felt like the only thing I had, the only reason I could use to sit on top of a hill in Galicia, alone, and cry. It's not that the tears were fake. I wondered about the way the hills formed so evenly and thought, at the same time, about how my father had lied to us for years, but I can't say if it was the beauty of the green hills or my father's lies or the way my tendons throbbed that really caused the outpouring. Maybe it was, as the Brazilian said, the fact that I could never accept the love from my father.

I stayed just long enough for him to tell me about the rock pile I'd encounter the next day, the one that I was supposed to plan for. I needed to pick up a stone and put it in my pocket. That stone would symbolize something in my life that I needed to get rid of. Then, I'd carry it to the pile and I'd toss it in along with thousands of other pilgrims' rocks that had been tossed over the years. The millions of fears.

It snowed the next day. The flakes were small but constant, and I set off toward the rock pile thinking about the Brazilian astrologist's assertions and just what I wanted to throw away. I decided I'd get rid of "inhibition" as I grabbed a small stone, rubbed off the snow, and put it in my pocket.

The town right outside of the hostel was completely abandoned. Dark buildings huddled

under the white flakes. Gaping holes gave way to rotting wood. Doors swung open and then shut again. And I wondered: where had everyone gone?

Laura Gill is a teacher, writer, and photographer living in Washington, D.C. She recently graduated from the Bennington Writing Seminars, with an MFA in nonfiction. Her essay, "Release," appeared in The Blue Mesa Review, *and "Disorder" was featured in her graduate thesis titled, "A Type of Legacy."*

Bises

Katie Machen

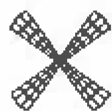
The orange city tram stops directly outside my apartment, and in the morning I peer through the tall French windows in the kitchen, the kinds that open all the way, to see when the next one will arrive. Two minutes. I gather my things, lock the door, and hop on just in time for my commute to the French high school where I now teach English. It is my third time living in France and the language finally fits well between my ears and most of the time on my tongue, but I arrived in Le Mans only a few weeks ago, and I try to memorize my surroundings with the attentiveness of a newcomer.

"*Asseyez-vous, allez, asseyez-vous là-bas*." A man of about 40 leads another man twice his age to one of the seats designated for the elderly, directly across from where I stand. I question their relationship: they aren't father and son, because they use the formal tense, the *vous*, rather than the *tu*. The older man wears dark glasses and may be visually impaired. He is dressed in a suit and hat; the younger man wears jeans and stands apart from him. They stare in opposite directions out the windows, exchanging no further conversation.

I move my gaze from the men and look out at my surroundings. Yes, now we are four stops from my destination, now we are three. As the

tram slows, a man even younger still, 20 maybe, comes forward from the next car over. Without saying a word he leans down to the man in the suit and dutifully kisses first his left cheek, and then his right. He straightens up and nods to the guide from before, and as the door opens both he and the older gentleman exit the car.

I can imagine they are neighbors, cousins, uncles, a community within a community, that they correspond their daily routines to match those of the others. I lean back against the felt backrest, recognize a bakery I've seen before, pass the Parti Communiste Français and almost laugh to myself at its conspicuity, its presence so unremarkable, so unlike in America, my own country, where a residual fear of communism lingers ominously. Similar to the pedestrians that cross purposefully in front of oncoming traffic and the cars parked on the sidewalks, the blatant Communist headquarters strikes me as a further example of the audacious French attitude.



Almost every Sunday afternoon of my childhood, my family would go to visit my father's parents at their apartment. They had lived there for as long as I could remember, having moved when I was a year old from their fabled house with the swimming pool to the sixth floor of a retirement complex only miles up the road. The apartment was filled with antique paintings, books, and oriental rugs; *New Yorker* magazines and pages from *The Baltimore Sun*; impossibly

difficult wooden jigsaw puzzles and bottles of scotch.

Visits with my grandparents fit into a schedule, the hour after church and before homework or play practice, the only time in the week when my whole family would pile into the same car. Usually it was my father's pickup truck from work, the back seats almost miniature, where my brother Jack and I would sit tucked away, legs curled up on the seat.

We'd meet my father's brother, and after a quick knock on the red door, we were immediately offered glasses of ginger ale. There'd be talk of what I was reading in school, and then I'd sit back half-listening to discussion of politics, history, and family gossip. It was a pleasure to see my grandparents because I knew they liked seeing us, enjoyed mine and Jack's presence, even if we were not fit for the conversation, which generally went above our heads. Lifelong lawyers, my grandfather and uncle loved to debate, and while my father had not followed in their footsteps, he always had something to add. The three would shout over each other, my grandmother snorting with laughter. In the presence of her in-laws, my mother changed somehow; she was not false, but was almost too polite, quick to fill glasses and peer over pillowcases she'd take home to mend. She too was an immense reader, listened to NPR in the kitchen and in the car, but here she was quieter, affected a different persona. I wondered if this too was part of the adult world, the parsing of self.

I liked being at my grandparents' but sometimes felt a bit lost for words, as if there was so

much I could ask and so little I did. Sometimes I would nestle on the sofa, straightening the slanting cushions, opening my *Harry Potter* book and continuing where I had left off in the car. More often than not I went over to Granny Rose to look at the puzzle, always a work in progress, the image a famous piece of art, carved into intricate figures: a ballerina, a boy and his dog, a horse and carriage. I was lucky if I fit five pieces together in the hour we were there. Jack, two and a half years younger and better suited to the activity, always made headway and was applauded for it.

When the hour was up, we would make way to leave, lined single file to bid my seated grandfather and grandmother farewell in turn. It was the moment I dreaded. Perhaps it was the formality, the way only they would kiss my cheek, they and no one else. Perhaps it was their age, the way they leaned on their walkers to stand up for a hug, the skin of their faces that folded softly. I had only ever known them old, and the stories of their past selves seemed impossibly separate from the crosswords in the bathroom, the jigsaws in the living room. I felt apart from this oldness, did not know how to relate to it, to imagine how it would be to inhabit it. I wanted to get away without offering my cheek, but I never did, though finally I disobeyed in one small way: "Kiss your grandmother." She would kiss me, but my lips avoided her rouged cheek week after week. On the way home, I sat in the back of the pickup with lipstick smudged on my face.

When I studied abroad in the south of France during college, I remember disembarking from the airplane to meet my host parents, Martine and Philippe, apprehension of the unknown plunging deep in my stomach and in my throat. I relaxed in minutes as each of them, smiling, kissed me on the cheeks in greeting. "They told us you were tall." I rode in the backseat of their sedan trying my best to make small talk and gesturing toward the mountains in the distance, "*C'est belle, c'est belle.*"

"*C'est beau,*" Martine corrected me quietly, the first of much instruction.

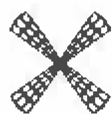
My American classmates and I were told to "*observez et imitez.*" Cross the street without a blinking pedestrian sign. Sidestep piles of dog shit littered on the street like fallen leaves. Greet the bus driver with "*Bonjour,*" but not the strangers you smush up against on the crowded morning bus, unless you should meet a friend or acquaintance, in which case, assess the situation and know whether or not to *faire la bise*. But it took time, and by the end of the four months I was there, I still found myself uncertain, would forget to kiss the cheeks of my peers and would stand awkwardly, afraid to slip up, my body not accustomed to the rituals that make up every French day.

Now three years later, my students don't understand why we do not greet each other with kisses on the cheek in the United States. "What do you do?" they ask. I go through potential relationship scenarios: boss, colleague, friend. Handshake, verbal acknowledgment, possible hug.

"You hug your friends every time you see them?" To them such an action is excessive, too sentimental. They will hug their significant others and will console an upset friend. But to hug all willy-nilly, to give hugs away to just anyone, this may be understood as more intimate than a kiss on each cheek, the entrance into the space of another, face against face.

It is intimacy, then, that is not to be taken lightly.

My norm is to them exceptional, their norm is to me nonexistent, or perhaps more exceptional still. To kiss my grandmother on the cheek, or to allow her to kiss me, felt utterly separate from the bise I see in the street, partake in in the staffroom. My grandmother's kiss was an expression of love, and while this *bise* can remind me of that kiss, they ultimately have nothing to do with each other. This *bise* rarely feels like love, is a different sort of ritual altogether, lands somewhere between courtesy, custom, and friendship. I can forgive myself for being uncertain of which side of the spectrum to land upon.



Growing up, I attended a small private school in the countryside. Several of my classmates also attended the Episcopal church next door, and on Thursday evenings we would stay after school for teen choir, preparing for Sunday morning. Rehearsal didn't start until six, so my friends and I roamed freely after finishing with sports and music lessons, permitted finally

to sit unsupervised in the eighth grade lounge, to which we were not, as seventh graders, granted entry during school hours. We arranged the chairs and stools in the lounge to create a nook, a fort, really, though we were too old to build forts, our shoes discarded in the corner. For a group of already overcommitted children, our time before choir practice and on Sundays at church was sacred, laid the baseline for friendships that would outlast our braces and school uniforms.

One Thursday, upset by both my lack of athletic prowess and my loathing of lacrosse, the sport almost everyone played, I came after practice to find Erin in the music room playing piano. Already she was a sort of prodigy, and she rehearsed for hours every day. I crept into the room in my cleats to find her with a furrowed brow, staring fixedly at the sheet music in front of her as she repeated the same line over and over until it was just right. She turned from her music with a smile and made space for me on the piano bench.

"Oh, what's wrong?" she said, her brow furrowing again, this time in concern. She put her arms around my sweaty shoulders as I sniffed through my nose and finally permitted my eyes to tear.

"I hate lacrosse. It makes me feel so stupid. I've been playing for three years and I still can't catch the ball—I don't know why I waste my time."

"Oh, Kate. Cry, just let yourself cry," she said, comforting me in a way she would for years to come. Her family was more physically

affectionate than my own. My parents would hug me and kiss my head, but Erin's family would snuggle up together on the couch; they held hands to say grace at dinner. While my brother and I spent most of our time in squabbles, Erin's siblings spoke in continuous streams of "I love you," wrapped their arms around each other and sang duets in the living room. At thirteen, she possessed an emotional maturity that my other friends did not, looked after others with a love both sincere and maternal.

Having dried my face on the sleeve of my t-shirt, I went with Erin to the eighth grade lounge to join the others like we did every week. My face brightened as we laughed and did homework, and once it was time, we sped up the hall to join Mrs. Smalkin, who was both our school music teacher and church choir director. We sat cross-legged on the floor eating delivery pizzas and splitting lunchbox leftovers, carrot sticks and snack-sized bags of sour cream and onion chips.

There were maybe ten of us on any given Thursday, and after dinner we sat in rows of grey foldout chairs with black metal choir stands in front of us. Feet firmly on the ground, backs straight, breath from the stomach, not the chest. And above all, eyes glued to Mrs. Smalkin to receive our cues, her own turquoise blue eyes staring wide and waiting.

Diction-is-done-with-the-tip-of-the-tongue-and-the-teeth-and-the-lipsssssss, our lungs puffed up like bagpipes, only allowing the air to escape in measured breaths.

Mama-made-me-wash-my-M&Ms, aaaand up a half-step.

Someone would distribute the music. Sopranos, altos, a couple timid tenors, and no basses, not yet.

After about an hour, once we had something we really liked, we got to go to the round crossways by the entrance of the school with ceilings that reached thirty feet high, windows at the very top. Someone had nicknamed the space as "the well" and it stuck; we imagined ourselves at the bottom of a great source, crying up. We let our voices rise like air, swimming around our heads, somersaulting in a way that made us giggle afterwards, in awe of the way it would echo, and proud that familiar custodial workers would emerge from the rooms where they were cleaning and lean against the walls of fat white bricks, their eyes closed and heads relaxed back. As if our hymns to God made it all the way up, as if each of our spirits might also float at the top of the well.

One such evening, after the rest of the group had been fetched by their families, only Erin and I remained, the ones with the tardy parents who lived only three miles up the road. As each of our fathers pulled up in their matching tan pickup trucks, Erin turned and kissed me on the cheek, saying, "I'll see you tomorrow."

An act both mature and solidifying, the kiss was something that felt like trying on a grownup version of ourselves, like parents at dinner parties. My cheek warm, I thought, let in on a secret, *this is what it means to be with people in the world.*

Now in France, I kiss many cheeks. With friends, colleagues, and new acquaintances, it is an almost daily occurrence, and in its ritualistic nature it draws me to greet a different side of myself, the I that sees the culture of another and takes it on for a while. I have finally reached a place where I need not wait to be kissed, where I shuffle uncomfortably; it is almost natural, and though I still slip up every once in a while, it makes me feel as if I have understood something important.

In a way it makes things easier. There is no question of how to address the other, no question of definition or intimacy; the action is universal. It is efficient in its inefficiency, in the way it takes whole minutes to address each individual at a party and to clink everyone's glass before drinking. It is warm but not too warm, not so warm as to last, necessarily. To adapt, to *faire la bise*, denotes an ease with French surroundings, to have observed and imitated, and it is this aspect that I crave. In some ways it feels merited. To have paid attention. To have integrated, at least partially, in a country where it is notoriously difficult to integrate. But the *bise* does not mean I will see you again sometime soon. Maybe I will, but maybe not. It is capricious.

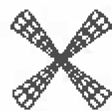
Last year during a winter break away from a different French school in a different French city, an American friend, John, and I visited Prague. It was New Year's Eve, and at 11:45 we left the bar where we had been with our large Pilsners to join the bundled up throng in the Old Town Square. Light snow had just started to fall, as if even the sky anticipated the new year. As we put

our heads together for a picture, a man of our age asked in accented English, “Would you like me to take your photo?” We gratefully accepted and asked where he and his friends were from.

“We’re from France,” he said. John and I looked at each other.

“We both live in France this year!” we said, excitedly switching languages.

As we counted down to midnight, our new acquaintances passed us small plastic cups filled with shared champagne, and shouts of “*Bonne année*! Happy new year!” passed through the air, creating a microcosm, allowing us to tune out the Czech and Russian and Spanish and Italian voices that surrounded us. Shoddy fireworks exploded overhead, ashes mixing with the falling snow, landing on our hair and our hooded heads. John and I hugged, and then were kissed on the cheeks by the group of French whose first names we had already forgotten. Minutes later we were swept in opposite directions, overtaken by the crowd, by the call to different bars filled with different fluorescent lights, refuge from the snow and the ash and the piercing cold, never to cross each other’s paths again.



I last saw my grandmother in September of 2015, just before moving to France for eight months, the longest I had ever been outside of my home country. She was 91 at the time, in a motorized wheelchair and with tubes coming from her nose, connected to a tank of oxygen

that followed her around the apartment like a puppy on a long leash. She had full-time aides that would come in shifts to bring her lunch, help her use the bathroom, and to be there, just in case. She went to the beauty parlor every week to fluff up her hair and wore the same lipstick as always. My grandfather had passed away two years prior. My mother, ready for a change of employment and looking for a next step, decided to stand in place of one of these aides and to work with my grandmother three days a week. Together they would eat cucumber sandwiches and watch cooking shows, their mutual favorite Jacques Pépin. A French chef in the United States, he often cooked alongside his young granddaughter, his English accented by his native tongue, hers flawlessly American. When I called my mother on Tuesday mornings, I knew she would be there working on a puzzle or reading the paper.

"Hello, Katie Machen," she'd say, a message to my grandmother that I was on the line.

"Send my love to dear Katie," I'd hear, from the other side of the room.

More than once on the phone Granny Rose told me, "Your mother is the light of my life." It was clear their relationship had strengthened, turned into friendship. I could visualize the apartment where they sat perfectly, the same as it was in my youth, one half of its former inhabitants now absent.

After I finished my teaching job, I volunteered at a Swiss farm for a few weeks before flying home. One afternoon, I received a message from my mother telling me Granny Rose

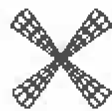
had fallen ill, to say big prayers for her. I sat in the middle of an empty rugby field overlooking the Jura Mountains and let my chest heave, having never before felt so far away.

If she can just hold on for two weeks, just two weeks, I'll be home then.

Two days later, having finished the morning's work at the farm, I walked the long way back to the cabin where the volunteers stayed, following the periphery of Lake Geneva up a great hill. On the way I crossed the border from Switzerland into France, stopping to chat with the border guards along the way, soil caked into my skin. At the top of the hill I called my parents again, and knew straight away from my mother's voice.

"She hadn't slept properly in days, so the doctor gave her medicine to help her get a good rest. She slept through the night and drifted away at about seven this morning. She really needed that sleep."

The clouds straight ahead mixed together with the mountains, layer upon layer, all reflected in the lake below.



To navigate a foreign land, and especially in a foreign language, is to navigate oneself in that other place: how am I portrayed, do my actions carry the same meaning they do at home? And slowly, after months and months in a place that starts to belong to me a little bit, I find that parts of myself replace; I hear little sounds I

didn't used to make come from my own mouth. I kiss people on their cheeks without waiting for them to kiss mine first.

After Granny Rose died, I would return to help my family clean out the apartment, would be given the gold bracelet she wore every day. I would look at my home and wonder why people poured wine at dinner and forgot to say cheers, why the formalities that carried so much weight in one place meant little more in another than the sound of a passing tram. And then I would come back to France again, would start all over in a new city, transient, but here for a while.

In the middle of the afternoon when my classes have finished for the day, I sit at my tall kitchen table to read. At the tram stop below, I may watch passersby wrapped up in scarves waiting, disappearing every six minutes into the long orange caterpillars that scoot through the city. The travelers are replaced only minutes later by a whole new batch of strangers, they themselves staring in expectancy just as the group before them had. Sometimes they can see into my apartment too, can stare at me unabashedly with my morning tea, and sometimes the glare of the sun turns the windows into two-way mirrors.

In addition to those who come and go, there are two elderly men who arrive like clockwork each afternoon to sit side by side on a bench. We face each other, the rest of the city passing between us. It fits together like a puzzle, its patterns repeating. My upstairs neighbors with the noisy toddlers go to and from work, daycare. The tram follows its illuminated schedule. Lights go

up on trees and lampposts for Christmas, then come back down again. I kiss the cheeks of my coworkers in the morning, and even as I am here I am also not, body in one place, the ritual I now know transporting me elsewhere, to the smell of Granny Rose's Chanel No. 5 and to rural Maryland dew and sky, to lemon cleaning product, a bit of the there mingled in. And still the men sit, even in rain and cold, returning day after day and perhaps recognizing me as I pass, comfortable in the routine of each other's presence.

Katie Machen *is from Baltimore, Maryland and has spent the last two years teaching English in France. She is looking forward to returning stateside this summer to greet the things she has missed most while abroad: her dogs, her people, and Boston.*

Unwilling

Patricia Feeney

2001

Jim dropped the news of Marian's secret child with the ease of a sneeze.

We were seated in the stiff-backed chairs of Mercy Hospital's waiting room while a surgeon probed my father's liver. My mother and Marian, her best friend, went to the cafeteria for coffee, leaving me with Jim, Marian's husband. He recognized a captive audience and launched into a travelogue about their recent trip to the Southwest. Jim's deep voice delivered the banal details of the narrative with authority.

"And then we stopped in to see Marian's daughter and grandkids in Texas." Jim took a breath and barreled on.

"What did you say?" I blinked my glazed eyes and snapped to attention.

"We stopped in Texas."

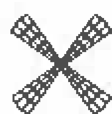
"No. The part about Marian's daughter."

"Oh. Yeah. Lisa." Jim uncrossed and recrossed his long legs, settling his lanky body for a better view of me, saying nothing.

"I thought Marian never had kids," I prodded. Jim was Marian's second husband. She hadn't had kids with either spouse.

"Oh, she was young," Jim said matter-of-factly.

I spotted Marian and my mother crossing the long waiting room, each carrying a styrofoam cup full of coffee. They spoke in quiet mumbles, leaning toward one another as they walked, nodding. I always picture them like this; they created a canopy that covered their private world. Marian was my mother's roommate in nursing school and best friend for nearly 60 years. The two of them shared a lifetime of whispers and wit.



That evening, my mom and I had a late dinner at my house as my father recovered in the hospital. It was a muggy August night in St. Louis, and though the air conditioner hummed non-stop, I could smell traces of the day's humidity on my skin. The sun dropped almost to the horizon, but I was too tired to get up and turn on a light. We sat in the shadows of the lamp that shone outside the back door.

"Mom, why didn't you tell me Marian had a daughter?"

"Who told you that?" Her threatening tone pushed me back in my chair. She straightened her spine and glared at me. I didn't recognize my mother, eyes lasering me from across the table.

"Jim told me," I said defensively. My mother didn't budge, holding her stare. "And Marian confirmed it," I added. "When you were at the desk checking on Dad, I asked Marian if she'd had a child. She said she had—and that she put her up for adoption."

My mother's shoulders relaxed, but the lines of her face knotted, aging her. She didn't look at me.

"If Marian told you, that's fine. No one knew. Ever." She sighed.

"No one knew except you," I said.

My mother sipped her coffee and drew her lips together in a thin, tight line.

"Yes. I knew. She told me when she got pregnant."

"Jesus. When did this happen?"

"Let's see." She furrowed her brow and looked to the ceiling as she consulted her mental calendar, aligning events with the birth of one of her eight children. "Matt was just born. It was 1957 when she found out she was pregnant."

"How could no one have known she was pregnant?"

"She went to Kansas City to have the baby." She fixed her attention over my shoulder. I saw grief in my mother's eyes. "She worked in a hospital there. We wrote to each other. I sent her a little money whenever I could." My mother's mind was far from my kitchen. She continued to talk over my shoulder, as if she were addressing someone else. "But I didn't have much. We had five kids at the time." At age five in 1957, I was the middle of those five kids.

"Who was the father?" I asked.

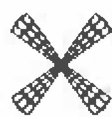
"I don't know. She never told me."

"She's your best friend and she didn't tell you who the father was?"

"She said too many people could get hurt if word got out. He was married. Someone from work."

Though I knew my mother would never break a confidence, Marian's secrecy made sense to me. The women of that era didn't share the underside of their lives the way my generation does. Mavis Gallant, the post-World War II short-story writer, said it eloquently: "…these are the things women keep to themselves."

I nodded agreement and my mother looked across the table at me, her body at ease. I saw the woman I knew. She nodded too, as we silently acknowledged the pain of Marian's secret.



As the days passed after that dinner, I tried to reconcile the Marian I knew with the pregnant Marian who ran away to have a baby. I'd always considered my mother's best friend to be straight-laced and just this side of dull. I eyed the two friends from a distance and missed the defining details. I saw my mother—brunette, voluptuous, gregarious, and impulsive—juxtaposed to Marian's fair complexion, unremarkable shape, shy manner, and plodding personality. My imagination failed to nudge me beyond the stereotypes.

My mother championed Marian. She bragged that her friend brimmed with common sense, something my mother held in short supply. She made similar comments about my father, describing his "good mind" and how he balanced it with the practical facts of life. My mother appreciated a strong intellect, but she admired pragmatism. She said Marian inherited her good sense from her parents.

"They were so practical, sometimes it seemed a little weird," she told me, then related the story of how Marian learned her brother was killed in the Second World War.

"Marian's parents got word in the middle of the night. But her mom insisted they keep it to themselves until the family finished breakfast." My mother's brown eyes were wide with wonder.

"What did Marian say about it?" I asked.

"Marian said it made sense. She told me her mom knew they needed their strength, so it was just as well to find out after they ate."

I knew my mother wanted me to agree this was a startling story, so I widened my eyes too. I couldn't decide what I thought, though I wished I'd met Marian's mother. I didn't think I'd ever known someone that self-contained.

Though my mother considered Marian's parents to have an overdose of common sense, she relied on Marian, whom she seemed to think had just the right amount. Shortly after my parents married, my father broke his leg playing soccer and my mother had to drive his car home. She called on Marian to help her, even though neither could drive.

"We can do this," she'd told Marian, likely depending on her friend's judgment to temper her confidence. Together, they bumped along the streets of St. Louis, the gears of the manual transmission screaming and jerking until they pulled in front of my parents' apartment.

Though the two friends' lives took them in different directions—my mother, married and raising a large family, Marian, single and tackling myriad nursing jobs in hospitals around the country—the women never lost the thread of their friendship.

Aside from Marian's attachment to my mother and her expansive nursing skills—she even did a stint as an industrial nurse at my dad's company—there seemed little to recommend Marian to my father. He must have accepted her as a permanent fixture in their lives, though it was clear Marian disapproved of my parents' marriage. My father was used to people's judgment of the marriage, beginning with my maternal grandfather, who opposed my mother marrying "the big shot."

Marian told me she'd refused to stand up at my parents' courthouse union because the marriage violated the Catholic faith the three shared. My father was married and divorced, and committed a mortal sin by remarrying and dragging my mother to Hell with him.

"What did my mom say when you told her you wouldn't witness her marriage?"

"She understood. I couldn't do it because, you know, the marriage wasn't accepted by the Church."

Perhaps my mother respected her principled friend for speaking up, something Marian rarely did. According to my mother, Marian was so reluctant to make waves she could go mute, even when silence brought a dire consequence. When they were in nursing school, Marian failed to force a point when the charge nurse ignored her warning of a postoperative complication in the making. The patient was rushed to a second surgery two days later, and Marian was blamed.

"Teeny, I tried to tell her," Marian explained to my mother. "She ignored me."

"But you should have told her again. And again, until she heard you," my mother said. She didn't think Marian could fathom this. Such pushiness wasn't in her playbook.

Marian's retiring nature conveyed her signature quality, one that aligned with a one-dimensional image of the era: a spinster who lived with her parents, attended Mass on Sundays, and reinforced her faith with membership in the sodality, Catholicism's collection of female helpmates to the Church.

Her spinsterhood concluded when Marian wed Bernie, a middle-aged pharmacist who made his life with his hard-headed mother and made his living filling prescriptions in the medical building where Marian worked. They married in 1963 when Marian was forty. She packed her bags, left her parents' home, and lived with Bernie and his mother for twelve years until Bernie's death.

Marian told me she'd had a single date with Bernie ten years before the courtship that led to their marriage. They'd gone to dinner and then to a drive-in movie. Marian had eaten something at dinner that caused an explosive case of diarrhea, which she washed from her clothes in the drive-in restroom. When she returned to the car, she insisted Bernie take her home. She gave him no explanation. Marian said she didn't date Bernie again for ten years.

"Did you ever tell him what happened the first time you went out?" I asked.

Marian smiled. "Yes, I told him. It was so silly. At the time I just couldn't say anything."

In the decade between their first date and their eventual marriage, Marian gave birth to her daughter. She never told Bernie about the child.

2005

My father's liver biopsy was benign, and he lived another four years, dying at eighty-three of a convergence of old-age factors: weakening lungs, heart, and bones.

My mother, who teetered on the edge of dementia before he died, fell off the cliff and landed in full-on, ditzy confusion. Though her sense of humor never failed her, and she continued to beat everyone in the family at Scrabble, she couldn't remember if she'd taken her blood pressure medication or if she'd eaten breakfast. Without my father's intact mind, my mother's intact body was at risk. My two sisters and I decided to share the care of our mother.

When my mother lived with me, we hosted her poker club, a tradition of fifty years among her friends from nursing school. Though the club's composition changed over the decades, my mother and Marian remained its charter members. The first time Marian arrived at my home for the poker club, I was struck by what I considered a change in her. A hidden beauty had emerged. Her blue eyes seemed bluer, her smile broader. Her unremarkable shape hadn't changed, a feat for a woman her age.

"Marian never seems to age," my mother explained. "When we were young, she never quite looked like a young woman. But she hasn't changed much in years, so she looks really good now."

The poker ladies no longer met in the evening. They had once swilled Falstaff beer and snacked on sandwiches and Fritos. Now

the octogenarian club met in the afternoon, and the ladies drank coffee with a rich dessert, the higher the sugar content, the better. The tradition of a play-for-pennies stake remained. Poker chips were out of the question. Each player arrived with a bag of change pulled from oversized purses I couldn't believe they lifted. My mother often rolled pennies into paper bank sleeves after dinner, passing the time until she wound down to sleep.

Though my mother was always exhausted at the end of an evening, the sight of her bed could awaken the storyteller in her.

"Dad and I were coming home from a party," she said one night as she turned back her covers. "We were feeling romantic. But you kids were all home. So we stopped at a motel. I better go to the bathroom."

"Mom, you just got back from the bathroom."

"Did I?" She laughed at herself, as she often did when facing the truth of her short memory. "I probably did. But I better go again." She stood up and left.

As a child, I was my mother's echo chamber. She spoke, and I reverberated back the sentiment of the story: grief, anger, joy. As a middle-aged woman, I now listened to salacious accounts of my parents' sex life and hoped my mother was so demented she didn't recall telling them. I couldn't find a way to echo the gist of these X-rated tales.

My mother returned from the bathroom with new vigor, as if she'd gotten a second wind during her trip. For once, her short-term memory hadn't failed her. She picked up the story as if she hadn't left.

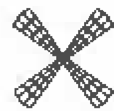
“When Dad signed us in, the man at the desk looked at us like he didn’t believe we were married.”

“OK, Mom, it’s getting late.” I steered her to the bed.

“It was so funny,” she continued. “We sure did like sex.”

“That’s great, Mom. Here are your eye drops and here’s your water,” I said, arranging the items on her nightstand. I could hear my voice cajoling a young child into bed.

“And we had plenty of it.” She organized her pillows and pulled back the blankets on her bed. “Sex.” She looked straight at me as she said this last word, making sure I hadn’t lost track of the theme.



Sex was the thread that knitted and snagged my parents’ marriage.

They grew up in the same neighborhood and became good friends when my father was home on leave from the Marines. They met for dinner and discussed books, finishing the meals in time for my father to meet his girlfriend, Lorraine, for late-night sex. Shortly after his leave, Lorraine declared herself pregnant; my father secured an emergency return home to marry her. I don’t think he returned when his wife announced her miscarriage.

Though Lorraine bagged my father, she failed to cut short his interest in my mother, whom he tried to see, but my mother refused. My father ended his brief marriage. I imagine my mother knew what she was doing when she refused to date a married man.

She remained on high ground during their brief courtship, refusing to have sex with my father until they married. The marriage came quickly and they both got what they wanted.

Though Marian declined to witness my parents' marriage because of their faith, she may have felt an instinctive concern about my father's commitment. According to my mother, the first two years of married life were idyllic, a state that ended abruptly when the children began to arrive, and my father took up with a series of girlfriends.

This didn't seem to cool my mother's interest in him. In a remarkable act of selective Catholicism, she refused to use birth control with the divorced man she married. My mother's fertility ensured my parents would never divorce. My father had no reason to leave my mother. My mother had no way to leave my father. As the family multiplied, so did my father's infidelities with what my mother called "floozies." She thought my father was a case study of the man who married the nice girl and enjoyed flashy barflies and loose coat check girls on the side.

My father was not like the fathers of my friends. No tossing children in the air, no reading stories, no physical affection, hardly a word spoken to his children during his erratic appearances in our home. Aside from the physical connection to my mother, his life existed largely outside the home. He built a lucrative career that he leveraged to support black workers in the steel industry, taking small but disruptive steps to right inequities in the workplace.

When my father was off the clock from his job, he logged countless hours with his friends in

a hole-in-the wall tavern, The Topper, where he talked politics and business with the men of his youth—pipefitters and teamsters—and charmed the women who came his way.

As a child, I'd watched my father at our backyard parties, his lean body suntanned, shirtless, and sweaty. He sucked on a bottle of Falstaff beer, his blue eyes lit with laughter, his smile at full blast for his guests. He strutted across the patio he and his friends had poured; this block of concrete was an unusual accessory to a post-World War II tract house. Though the other men and their families lived in similar homes, even I could see my father was different than his friends. In addition to looking different—I later likened him to Steve McQueen—my father was treated differently. The other men laughed loudly at his jokes, quiet remarks that made no sense to me. The men clustered around him and sought his advice.

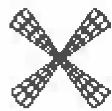
"Tom, do you like Nixon for November?"

"Hell, no. Kennedy. It's Kennedy." My father displayed a sureness I could see but couldn't name.

He was the kind of man who could make a woman believe anything.

The family life of my childhood was peppered with high-octane explosions that ended with my father's clothes on the front lawn, my mother's whispered phone calls to attorneys on the basement phone extension, and marital separations so sudden they seemed to fall from a guillotine. At the time, my mother didn't tell me what ignited these blasts. Rather, she confided generalized disappointment in discovering my father wasn't "the man she thought he was."

During one of the separations, she told me she was divorcing my father. She delivered this news with a mix of grief and stoicism. I could barely contain my joy, but arranged my eleven-year-old face in a sympathetic pose that I hoped mirrored her mood. This separation ended the way they usually did: my parents came in the back door, arm in arm, all smiles and a little tipsy. My mother never mentioned the divorce again.



Not long after my father died, my mother and I recited a litany of his virtues.

"He was generous," I said, recalling attendees at his memorial, people we never knew whom he'd ensured had a college education, a job, or a bag of groceries.

"He had an unusually good mind," my mother said. "And was well read."

"And he loved poetry," I said, a genre I generally can't grasp. "William Blake," I added, citing my dad's favorite.

"He always fought for the underdog," my mother said, sighing. I heard regret in her voice and thought her mind was on the short shrift my father gave his family.

I thought of my father's drunken rages when he punched holes in walls and conjured justifications to beat my oldest brother. If he felt regret later, it came in references to his childhood, one he claimed built a good foundation, but the one-liners left his family leery of our grandmother. *My mother beat the hell out of me for burning*

supper when I was eight years old, he'd say. *My mother put me to work on the corner selling newspapers when I was six.*

I responded to what I assumed prompted my mother's sigh. "He could be mean."

"Mean?" She looked puzzled.

"Yes, Mom. Mean. He could be mean."

"No." My mother shook her head. A deep crease ran across her brow. "No, he was never mean. He just wanted to be single."

"What?" I'd miscalculated. She hadn't given a thought to my father's rages.

"He just wanted girlfriends. That's all."

That's all. My mother believed my father had a single flaw: girlfriends. And at the end of her life, my father's ceaseless infidelities ceased to matter.

2009

After my mother died in 2008, I asked Marian if they'd ever talked about problems in my parents' marriage. She said no, that she always thought her best friend was very happy. I don't doubt they never discussed my parents' marriage. Marian and my mother kept secrets from each other. The secret they shared—Marian's child—they buried, each shoveling layer upon layer of protective cover.

After my parents died, I learned they had never met Marian's daughter, who'd reunited with Marian twenty-five years earlier. I learned Marian withheld the identity of Lisa's father from Jim. I learned she withheld his identity from Lisa for years. And I learned the depth of Marian's contradictions: she was my father's mistress.

The news of the 1950's affair hit my family in February via Facebook. My sister, Kathleen, called me at a California hotel where I was staying while my daughter visited a nearby college. Kath had gotten a Facebook message from a woman who claimed our father was her father.

"I'm surprised we haven't heard from someone before now," I told Kath. As the oldest remaining child—and my mother's confidant—I considered myself an expert on our father's infidelities. I was on a roll. "Hell. She may not be the only one to contact us." In a twisted way, I thought the Facebook notification was funny.

Kath didn't pick up the banter.

"She told me Marian is her mother," she said.

"Mom's Marian?"

My sister's voice dropped to a whisper. "Yes."

The next morning I sat parked in a rental car, waiting for my daughter as I squinted through the windshield, trying to locate the door to the admissions building through a torrential downpour of rain. I checked the time. I had at least twenty minutes before my daughter would emerge. I punched in Marian's phone number and waited for her voice. Her recorded message answered. I wasn't sure what I would say if Marian was at the other end. I was even less sure what kind of message to leave.

"Marian, Kath called me last night. She told me my dad is Lisa's father. I don't know what to say." I didn't ask Marian if this was true. I knew the answer. As I fumbled for words, I worried how Marian would receive my message: An eighty-six-year-old woman called out on an affair from a half-century ago. I added a conciliatory conclusion. "I don't know what happened.

I don't understand any of this. But I know this must have been an awful secret to carry. Please call me."

I thought I should be outraged at the many versions of wrong in the affair: Marian's hypocrisy, Marian's betrayal of my mother, Marian's fifty-plus years of friendship with my mother after she'd had a child with my father. I thought I should be furious. I thought I should feel betrayed. I was the best friend's daughter who sat with Marian and Jim when my father was in the hospital, who snapped countless photos of my mother and Marian, who attended Jim's funeral, who cut slices of cake for Marian at the poker club. I thought I was entitled to outrage. But I felt nothing.

Marian called me the next day. I was in St. Louis, this time in my own car, but again sheltered from a torrential downpour as I waited for my daughter after school. Marian said she was sorry. I could almost feel her shame pinging through the cell towers. But that day, sitting in my rain-sheeted car, I wasn't interested in an apology.

"How long were you involved with my dad?"

"Several years." I felt my throat tighten. I expected to hear "once," or perhaps "months," not years. I imagined "several years" was Marian-speak for at least three years, but likely more.

"How? How did this happen?"

"We were together too much. I was the plant nurse and your dad was personnel director. We worked alone in an office. No one came in for hours at a time. We just were together too much," she repeated. Then she told me about the magnetic pull my father had on her: his good looks, his intellect, his wit, and of course, his charm.

I asked Marian where they had sex. I knew she lived with her parents and as bizarre as all this was, I doubted it got so crazy they had sex in my childhood home.

"We checked into motels," she said. Of course. That was my father's style. I wondered if my parents ever used the same room as my father and Marian.

"What did he say when you told him you were pregnant?"

"He offered me an abortion. But I couldn't do that. I just couldn't."

The affair ended.

Marian said she and my father never spoke again. She turned to her parents, whom Marian described as "very supportive." It was they who arranged for Marian to live in a convent in Kansas City until she delivered the baby. I silently wondered how this could have been supportive. Maybe finding a safe hiding place was the most a girl in trouble could expect in 1957.

"Were you in love with my father?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Was he in love with you?"

"He said he was." There was a beat of silence. Then Marian added, "But I don't think he was." I considered the possibility that she added the second line to make me feel better. Or, perhaps she felt so ashamed she couldn't admit she'd been loved. In either case, I thought Marian believed my father loved her.

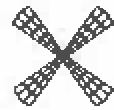
"I think he loved you, Marian." As I said the words, I knew I believed them. She didn't respond.

In the silence that lay between us, I considered how my father must have felt about Marian, the gentle soul who offered my father a maternal kindness he likely never experienced. My

stomach knotted. I felt the need to protect my father's mistress.

"Marian, if he told you he loved you, I think he did. I can't imagine his taking the risk he took to be with you if he didn't love you."

Marian said nothing.



In July I traveled to San Francisco to meet Lisa, almost a year after my mother died. I thought my newfound sister deserved something from the family she never knew, if nothing more than our father's medical history. That was the altruistic side of my cross-country travel. The other side is not so pretty: I was morbidly curious. I felt giddy. Just when I'd thought I'd seen everything, my crazy family had reached a new low. I owned bragging rights in any cocktail conversation about fractured families.

Lisa and I structured a choreographed visit, the kind a couple arranges when they meet online: lunch on neutral ground, cut the losses if it doesn't work out. I connected to Lisa from the moment she approached the restaurant, our father's erect Marine posture signaling her identity. She unknowingly channeled his wit at the lunch table, disarming me with a quiet, irreverent comment. And she left me breathless when she mentioned her favorite poet, William Blake.

Marian had told Lisa her father's identity in 2004, six months before his death. Marian said he was in poor health and she didn't feel right hiding his identity any longer. The news troubled Lisa. Marian had spoken of my family and shared our photos with her for decades.

Lisa wrestled with the consequences of meeting her father. From a distance she'd known of him for years. She'd known of Marian's closest friend. She'd known of all of us, including the sorrows that visited our family when two of my brothers died. Before she could decide what to do with the information of her parentage, she received our father's obituary in the mail attached to a note from Marian: "Your father died."

After that, Lisa decided to do nothing until after my mother died. For that, I'm indebted to her.

2015

When I left San Francisco, the drama of my father's affair with Marian faded. Lisa sobered me. I hosted a new demon—one that shattered the coherent picture I'd constructed to explain my family. I started over. I began to lose sleep at night and for years launched talking jags about the affair to anyone who would listen. But no amount of talk could exorcise the demon of my new past.

My father's affair with Marian stretched the limits of a family I thought had broken all boundaries. Like the character of Garp, I'd assumed I was "pre-disastered" by all that came before in my life. I sought a context, an explanation, anything to help me bring reason to my family's amended history.

I hit the Internet for information about 1950s out-of-wedlock pregnancies (the term of the era). Several hours in, I found little aside from a website and Wikipedia page on the "Baby Scoop Era," which refers to the period between

the end of World War II and the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision. The "scoop" described the pressuring of white, unwed mothers to surrender their children to an escalating market demand for white babies.

I wasn't satisfied with the broad sketch of the era and attacked the stacks of the public library with the vigor of an over-achieving college student. I discovered a handful of contemporary social scientists who completed most of the credentialed research in this field: a remarkable body of work on adoption, reproductive rights, and unplanned pregnancy, most published since 1998. Many photocopies later, I located a title, *Unmarried Mothers*, published in 1961; I purchased a very used copy on Amazon.

This book, which detailed an exhaustive study of unmarried mothers and their characteristics, shed light on the time in which Marian gave birth to Lisa. The social forces to surrender her child were nearly insurmountable. A white woman who was educated, practiced a religion, and came from an intact family had little choice but to give up her child. Her chances of ever marrying, or of even enjoying a life free of judgment, were close to nil. A context for Marian's decision took shape. An affair such as my father's and Marian's was not the first or last of its kind. But the era in which the pregnancy occurred couldn't have been more toxic to white, unmarried mothers and their children.

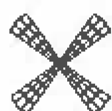
Shortly after I began the research, Lisa shared letters Marian wrote to her, starting in 1978 after Lisa had found her. This stack of

correspondence confirmed the anguish of a loving, unmarried mother in 1957.

> *...to your questions about the time of my pregnancy, the most difficult part was being away from home and my family. I felt very lonely and forsaken...I guess the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays were the hardest times...I mostly thought of the pain I had caused my aging parents and of how to stay healthy and support myself and you until you were born.*

Tears filled Marian's eyes when I offered her a recent book comprising stories of women who share her experience. She continued to suffer guilt and shame for her past. This pain bleeds through the reflections of a 1978 letter to Lisa.

> *If the time had been now instead of 20 years ago, I'm sure I would have kept you.*



Despite my mother's whitewash of her life, it was nothing compared to the heavy coat of paint Marian applied to hers. I couldn't fathom how Marian held up her end of the friendship while she was sleeping with my father. I asked if my father ever talked about my mother.

"No. Never," she told me.

"Did you?"

"No."

"Did you know my father had affairs with other women?"

Her voice dropped. "No, I didn't."

I learned this was a lie, probably told to protect me. Marian told Lisa the truth.

I let men take advantage of me. That's how I became involved with your father. I know it was not all his fault. But I knew he was a philanderer and I shut my eyes to the fact that he was married to my best friend.

The quiet woman who appeared to know nothing of the world recognized my father for who he was before he ever touched her.

I visited Marian one afternoon, telling her I wanted to come by because I had questions about the affair. We sipped coffee in her kitchen and smiled politely at each other. Then, she told me I could ask her anything.

"What about when you came to our house to play poker?" I asked.

Marian looked at me blankly.

"What was that like if my dad walked through the kitchen?"

Marian looked like she was going to speak. Then, she shook her head. "Oh, it was so crazy."

We giggled like kids who were unsure if something was funny or not. Our tentative reaction morphed into full-throated laughter, fits and starts of breathlessness. As we calmed ourselves I asked, "How could you go on all those years with my mother? How could you be friends with her after what you'd done?"

Marian looked at me without a trace of apology. "I wasn't willing to give her up."

That statement was not lost on Lisa, to whom I told this story.

"But she could give me up," she said.

For a moment, I wished I'd omitted that part of the conversation with Marian. But Lisa and I knew Marian's choices were limited. She lost my father. She lost her child.

I was struck by Marian's words: "I wasn't willing to give her up." She didn't say "I couldn't give up Teeny," or "I had to keep up a front with Teeny," or another blame-shifting explanation. She purely and simply wasn't willing to give up my mother.

2017

I'll never know with certainty why my father and Marian engaged in their dangerous affair. Either could have found someone else, but they chose each other.

I'm sure my mother knew. Marian's description of her lover—someone from work who's married—were the only clues my mother needed to conclude he was my father. Had she confronted the affair, it certainly would have ended both her marriage and her friendship with Marian, apocalyptic unravelings.

"I'm sure my mom knew," I told Marian during a recent visit to her retirement home. Marian tilted her head, her brow knitted in confusion.

"You all but told her by not telling her, describing the father as a married man who worked with you. How could she not have known?" I said the words kindly, though I don't know why I said them at all, why I wrestled the iota of peace Marian may have held from the affair. She wanted to believe my mother never knew. I wanted her to understand she must have known.

Marian nodded resignation, sadness filling her blue eyes. "Yes, you're probably right. She must have known."

"And you and my dad must have known she knew," I added.

A long silence filled the apartment.

"Yes, I guess that's true," she said, her eyes fixed on mine in surrender.

In 1957 Marian did what she had to do: she left St. Louis to endure an isolated pregnancy and gave up her child for adoption. At the time, this was the best option, for herself and for her child. She couldn't have raised Lisa alone in the climate of the era. Because of her decision, my parents' marriage and Marian's friendship with my mother survived. And because of her decision, I have a sister I doubt I would have known had Marian taken another path.

Wherever my mother is, I imagine she admires her friend's pragmatism.

When Marian told me of her pregnancy in 2001, I never considered the possibility my father had been the object of her affection. Like my mother, I knew my father's wandering habits, and I knew he and Marian had worked together early in his career. Yet, I didn't put these facts together. I never ventured a guess about the father of Marian's child, not even in the secret tunnels of my mind.

Like Marian, there were things none of us was willing to give up.

Instead, decades after Lisa's birth, on a warm August evening, my mother and I sat across from each other at my kitchen table, our heads bobbing in understanding. We agreed to understand the pain a much younger Marian experienced.

And we agreed to deny the rest.

Patricia Feeney's work has appeared or is forthcoming in The Lindenwood Review, Shifts Anthology, Bayou Magazine, *and* Inscape. *She is a 2016 Pushcart nominee. Feeney lives in St. Louis and is a founding member of The Crooked Tree Writers.*

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