[THE HOFSTRA JOURNAL OF LITERATURE & ART]

CONVERSATIONS WITH

JOHN MCPHEE KELLY MCMASTERS

TWYLA THARP JANE WONG

FICTION & CREATIVE NONFICTION BY

AMY BENSON AKIKO BUSCH

FLOYD SKLOOT MATTHEW MCGEVNA

HEATHER WHITED & OTHERS

WINDMILL

[THE HOFSTRA JOURNAL OF LITERATURE & ART]

A collaboration between Hofstra's
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Publisher's Note

In this, our third printed edition of *Windmill*, we continue to learn lessons.

Since our staff is an odd amalgamation of MFA students, undergraduate volunteers, and a one-credit publishing studies class, some of those lessons are obvious, and the questions posed along the way are usually voiced in a slightly annoyed tone: Why isn't Submittable letting me write notes on this piece? Why does the printer keep talking about signatures? Why can't I add a second line to the title in this InDesign template?

But other lessons are more subtle, and longer lasting: How to find beauty in writing, and how to discuss the merits of different types of work? How to find consensus? How to take disparate pieces and create something whole, something organic, something even—dare I say—beautiful? And perhaps the most important: how to continue to love writing and art and this literary magazine when you've spent the last several hours making small windmill-shaped section dividers for the book that should have been at the printer last week?

This is the part of the unseen work, along with the opportunity to comb through the pages of emerging and established writers line by line, word by word, and work with them on perfecting and publishing their art. Along with these short stories and essays, it is also our charge at *Windmill* to explore the relationship between creativity and art through our narrative features and interviews. In this issue, we learn about poet and teacher Jane Wong's craft and highlight a selection of her poems. We also hear from vibrant personalities who visited us at Hofstra this year, including renowned choreographer Twyla Tharp, who shared her thoughts on the creative habit, and the illustrative John McPhee, who discussed the painstaking process of writing, and rewriting.

We even spend some time with our founding editor, Kelly McMasters, who normally writes this letter, but stepped away from much of the day-to-day process of putting this book together this year to tend to the publication of

another: *This Is the Place: Women Writing About Home*, an essay collection she edited with Margot Kahn. In this issue's Faculty Spotlight, we see Kelly through the eyes of her MFA student, Lily Vu, and consider the twin crafts of creative nonfiction and editing.

Much of our fiction has a distinctly dark and dystopian feel to it, led off with the familiar-yet-postapocalyptic world that colors previous *Windmill* contributor Heather Whited's "Things Read by Moonlight," and the darkly real suburbia in Matthew McGevna's chilling "The First Few Steps." It's in the nonfiction that we feel the immediacy of the natural world, the poetry of the every day—our hometown, the nature we surround ourselves with—whether in Jen Fitzgerald's meditation on loss and solitude in "Shuttle Launch" or through Akiko Busch's memory essay "Home in Seven Acts."

And so the art we chose for this collection reflected the frenetic nature of our written selections: homey yet unfamiliar, beautiful but with dark and foreboding shadows. The otherworldly tulips of the cover, *Russian Red Really* by Bear Kosik, illustrate this sensibility––natural, yet false; something so familiar and every day that seems just a little off, in a way we cannot quite define. Perhaps this, then, the collected works of friends new and old, of writers and artists, is in its entirety a reflection of our times—the shadows that line the unfamiliar road, the acknowledgment of a work-in-progress, the promise of tomorrow, the beauty of the everyday moment. In days both dark and light, perhaps that is all we can hope for. Perhaps that is what art and writing provide.

Lessons learned.

Melissa Connolly
Publisher

Great Writers, Great Readings: A Q&A With John McPhee and Kelly McMasters

edited by Emily Porter

Hofstra University's Great Writers, Great Readings series aims to connect with writers of every archetype in discussions regarding their written work and the expertise they have to offer. It explores their writing in depth, using first hand accounts from the guests themselves as prime examples of creativity at its peak. This year, the 14th annual Great Writers, Great Readings series consisted of various stimulating discussions, all with influential authors, poets, and translators. Those who sat down for a Q&A with the English Department faculty were seasoned professionals in their field, equipped with the knowledge and ability to answer both hard-hitting questions of craft and questions of personal journeys. During the fall semester of 2017, American writer and essayist John McPhee visited Hofstra for his second time since 2006 to partake in a riveting discussion regarding creative nonfiction.

In many ways, John McPhee is considered the founder of creative nonfiction. His work at *The New Yorker* is widely regarded for its descriptive qualities—something that was previously only thought to be found in fiction. The topics he uses as the basis for his work are eclectic, and each one seems to have no relation to the one that came before it. But, that is John McPhee; he writes passionately about his wide array of interests, giving each one the same amount of attentiveness and care. McPhee teaches creative nonfiction at Princeton University, and it is in his classroom that the next generations of influential writers find their start. In the

years since the publication of his first book, *A Sense of Where You Are*, he has published over 30 works of nonfiction and received multiple prestigious awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction. In his most recent work, *Draft No. 4: On the Writing Process*, McPhee tells about the insight he has gained from his extensive career in writing, specifically his fact-checking experience for *The New Yorker* and how those facts come to life on the page.

This discussion with Kelly McMasters, assistant professor of English and director of publishing studies at Hofstra, delves deeper into John McPhee's processes of writing and teaching, including the struggles he faces in his literary endeavors and the techniques he uses to overcome them.

Kelly McMasters: I was hoping that we could start with just talking a little bit about how this book [*Draft No. 4: On the Writing Process*] came to be since it is so different from your other books—it came out of essays. Can you give us a little bit of the bio and the behind the scenes of the book?

John McPhee: Sure. Well, I feel a huge debt to *The New Yorker*'s fact-checking department. I'm a factual writer—a nonfiction writer—and it rests on that. I had an experience with one story which was about nuclear energy, but there was a story in it that turned out to be a really amazing fact-checking story about the Japanese incendiary balloons that came over on the jet stream during the Second World War. Sara Lippincott, who fact-checked this long story, did just an amazing job finding out about a given fact that I won't go into right now. But the point is, I wanted to write something that would enshrine Sara's work on that particular thing, and then, in general, pay homage to the fact-checkers that I had been working with for 45 years at that point.

And so, I wrote a piece called "Checkpoints," which started with this long anecdote about Hanford, Washington, but then went on to all kinds of things about fact-checking. And that was just a piece and it ran in *The New Yorker*, but it gave me the notion that maybe there were other pieces in related veins about the writing process. And, you know, I'm 86 years old now, I was 84 then, or 82 or something, and I wanted to write something that described various experiences I've had as a writer. So, I went on and did seven

more of those pieces, all of which were in *The New Yorker*, and [now] have become this book. And I didn't want to finish it. I said for a long time, "I don't want to publish this, I'll let it go," because I love having those pieces to do and I'd rather have pieces to do than finish the [book]. Joel Achenbach, one of my former students at Princeton, said, "That's easy, just call it Volume I." So, this is Volume I, [although] it doesn't say so.

KM: I know often my students think that I'm crazy because I draw these nutty diagrams on the board where we take essays and we do anatomy scans on them and try to figure out what the writer is doing and when they're doing it. So we have lots of numbers involved, and spirals, and arcs, and things like this, a lot of similar things that you have running through [Draft No. 4]. But structure is one of your hallmarks looking at your books, at your pieces. Can you tell us, because it seems—and also, it's funny that you talk about a massage parlor because structure seems very unsexy when thinking about writing—

JM: So did the Swedes.

KM: [*Laughs*]—but can you tell us why you feel structure is so important?

JM: Well, it's important because it just informs the whole piece. I got into it originally just being in a total swivet because I couldn't figure out how to put together a lot of miscellaneous things for a 5,000-word story that I was trying to write for *Time*. And what I remembered—I worked for *Time* magazine before *The New Yorker*—was Mrs. McKee at Princeton High School, whom I had as an English teacher for three years, assigned a disproportionate amount of writing versus reading: three themes a week, week after week, and each thing had to be turned in with a structural outline of some sort. It could be a doodle, it didn't have to be Roman numeral I, II, III, but you had to show—to submit with your [piece] what your idea of the structure of the piece was.

Well, three years of that, every week for [an entire] school year had implanted that in me and that's what leaped to mind when I was having trouble with this longer piece I

[was working on for *Time*]. And so, for one thing, it just gets you through the story. You know when you start writing, where you're going to end and where you're going in all the different stages in between because you're a nonfiction writer and your material has been collected; you know what the material is. What structure then yields is, in putting it together, the juxtapositions of different sections, different parts, and so on, then will come in on each other only because there's A and B and there's white space in between. And maybe you don't want to say what's in the white space, but the white space says it because these two things are right near each other. This is the most fascinating part of writing to me when I'm building the structure for a story.

KM: Do you always follow your outlines? Do you write the outline first and then you write the piece?

JM: Yeah, I do. I follow it. I almost never change much of anything [once] I've figured out where I want to go. Mr. Shawn, the editor of *The New Yorker* for many years, used to say, "Your pieces seem to have about three endings." And I think it's the result of putting all these things together and figuring out where I wanted to go. There's one very important thing in addition to say to this: It sounds mechanical, getting all this together and then going through it, but what it does is just the opposite. It frees you to write. When I go into my office and try to do something like that, I know exactly what I want to do that day, what material I want to cover, and I'm hung; I'm there. I can't do anything. I know exactly where it's going. I can't fuss around; I have to do this. So, I sit there for six or eight hours doing nothing. I mean this is still really true. It's funny, but it's also true. And then I get going. But following the structure is liberating; it liberates you to write. It [writing] takes as long as it takes. It takes 20 years or 20 days.

KM: Has it ever taken 20 years?

JM: *Annals of the Former World* did. I got into this thing—I was going to write a talk piece about a rock outside of New York City and tell about its prominence. One thing led to another, and 20 years later, *Annals of the Former World* was done.

KM: When doing the math, it averages out to be a book every 18 months; it seems very consistent and, like you said earlier, mechanical. And yet, in this book, throughout the book, you show us the daily struggles. It is very organized the way that you—when you're teaching you don't write, when you're writing you don't teach, and things like that [...] and your organizing system—everything is very methodical. And yet there's this part that you can't control, that Mr. Shawn talks about: the idea of "it takes as long as it takes." And I wonder if that's also a kind of juxtaposition that draws you to writing, because of that kind of A and B relationship where you can be completely organized and yet the magic might not happen?

JM: Yeah, I guess so. I don't know that it draws me to writing. You know, I've never wanted to be anything else, and I had this sort of thing [for writing] from grade school and so on. But the contrast that you mentioned certainly makes sense because, in the end, when you are liberated by it and you're sitting there trying to work, what happens is that you're knitting words together in your head that relate to the materials you're trying to cover, and those things are much harder to define. I mean they're just there, that's what happens. Maybe it takes five hours to get going, but when you do get going things start clicking along, and once in a while it's pleasant.

KM: I mean, something must be propelling you to keep writing for as long as you do.

JM: How about sending daughters to college?

KM: [*Laughs*] I guess that's pragmatic.

JM: If you're doing this, you just do it. The economic motivation is considerable. A *New Yorker* staff writer is an unsalaried freelancer with a good relationship with *The New Yorker*. That's going to keep you writing pieces, or getting them done, anyway.

KM: In your book, you talk about times that you have experienced [writer's] block, or that some of your students

have experienced block. I think as writers we imagine that the greats, like John McPhee, do just arrive at their desks and it just comes out on the page the way that we see it. And, for me, anyway, it was wonderful to read you [writing] so frankly about it and to give us a way around it. How often do you need to [write "Dear Mother"]?

["Dear Mother" is a writer's block technique used by John McPhee. It involves writing "Dear Mother" at the top of one's work, forcing one to write a piece as if it were a letter to their mother. In the end, erasing "Dear Mother" usually leaves behind a piece to start with.]

JM: Fairly often. Whether I write "Dear Mother," or not, the thing is that there comes a time when you get so frustrated cause you're not doing things and you can't get going with what may be the 17th part of a story of 34 parts or whatever. So you sort of just start flinging words at what used to be paper, and you just heave it—you chuck it out there. Calvin Trillin talked about this very thing, because, if you do that, however gross and awful it is, you've got something lying there on the paper that at least relates in gibberish to what you want to do. You have something you could work on in a second draft and so forth, and that's the effect of "Dear [Mother]" on me.

KM: It's funny, in our last round of workshop in the class that I'm teaching right now, one of the students—before we discussed your book—turned in her workshop piece with the title "Draft 38," I think it was. And I thought yes, this is a success, because the idea of exactly what you're saying is getting over the fear. At least if you have something on the page, you have something to work with. Also, you dedicate the book to your students and they're woven throughout this book. I'm interested in how being a teacher and thinking about these things, and worrying over strategies for other people and [how to] help other people with their writing—how does that actually reflect on your own writing and your process? Or, when you stop teaching, do you close the door?

JM: Pretty much that. I have never written a line in a teaching semester. I teach in the spring semester, not in the

fall, and when I took this job [at Princeton], I was filling in for somebody who quit right before the semester. And I just automatically said, “Yes, I would like to do that.” This was at a point when I had been writing for *The New Yorker* for 10 years. And somebody told me, an old teacher of mine from Massachusetts said, “Teachers are a dime a dozen, but writers aren’t, and you shouldn’t do this.” Well I would say to him, if he were still alive, that I can’t measure this exactly, but I think I’ve written a good deal more as a result of teaching than not, because it’s like crop rotation. The point is, there’s three months where I’m doing something closely related to writing. It’s the students’ writing and we’re going over it, and the core of the course is one-on-one conferences about every comment on a piece. And when I go back into my own writing, I’m refreshed and ready to go and so forth, and I kind of think that over time I’ve actually done more as a result of this relationship with students.

KM: Do you actually make them edit the Gettysburg Address?

JM: Yes. Well no, not edit it, not exactly. We do this exercise called “greening.” When I was at *Time* magazine, we went through the whole rigmarole of the piece you were writing and then you came in on the last day and somebody [would say] “Green 8” or something of a piece 60 lines long. Pick eight of them out, because it won’t fit [in the magazine] unless you do that, but do it with a green pencil so they know they can put it back. And so, I have a greening exercise in my class, including a piece of their own that I give them, plus about 10 things—[Joseph] Conrad’s “Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world,” and so on. And one of these pieces—I use different pieces every year, but I also use some of the same ones—is the Gettysburg Address, which is not unreadable. I tell them to green two lines, or something like that. I can’t say any more about it without reciting it, but it’s interesting.

KM: Well, continuing that idea about the classroom and the way that writing and teaching can be reflexive: Something that I run into in the classroom a lot is, even in personal essay writing, students often feel that they’re a fraud, that they don’t have the authority to write. I like the idea of giving

them the authority to green the Gettysburg Address, but a lot of times they feel like they don't have the authority to even write about themselves, or about anything that isn't about themselves. Your work has spanned oranges, truck driving, nuclear energy, Pine Barrens… It's not that you have one beat that you're steeped in—unless it's humanity, but that's not a topical beat. When you go into these projects, what is that process like? Do you collect books, and experts, and articles, and make trips, and then you start writing? Or do you write into it and then figure out what you don't know and what you need to collect?

JM: I do it very much segmentally, and I urge other students and everybody else to do that. But, you know, sometimes people keep on doing their research while they're writing, and you can see what can happen: You get a convoluted situation which tumbles forth through time and, in some instances, you never finish it at all. So, I try and find a cutoff point where I've learned enough, I've been around the barn three times, I've been out in the field and done the reading I'm going to do, and I say, "Okay, that's it," because you can keep researching anything forever. You have to stop somewhere.

But when I stop at the "somewhere," the next thing is that I write a lead. Because this is a great priming moment. With all the knowledge and these notes that I've typed up—I've typed up all the notes from beginning to end and all the rest has been in my head in miscellaneous form—if I can get together a beginning for this story that makes sense to me and feels right as the lead, the start of the piece, then turn around and look at all the notes and everything else, once you've got that thing written and polished and [you can say], "yeah, that's where I want to start," that helps a great deal in making the structure—looking at all your miscellaneous notes and gradually sorting them into groups and themes and the rest of it until you've got your whole structure going. And then I go back to that beginning and write on through the piece. That might be the process for something as short as a "Talk of the Town" piece for *The New Yorker* or as long as a book.

KM: The other morning my 8-year-old son was asking me a question about space that I knew at some point I had known the answer to, but I didn't know the answer to at that moment. And I was sort of feeling my way around it, trying to make my brain wake up and connect back to wherever that fact was in my brain, and he looked at me with mild contempt and said, "Just Google it." [Laughs] And I wonder, as a writer who has written deeply reported pieces, pre-internet and now, with this easily Googleable everything on hand, do you find it easier to research with things like Google and the internet? Or what was sort of your sweet spot for researching where you felt confident? Do you like technology, or do you not like it?

JM: I always liked being out in the field and that aspect of research of being with a dog team in Alaska or with a geologist in Cyprus and learning as I go. And of course, Google isn't with the dogs [in Alaska], but Google and the internet are a great beginning. The fact-checkers all might start there, but they don't end there. It's a useful thing, but it hasn't changed much. I use it all the time, but I'm getting irritated with it now. The other day I called on Google for some fact, and up came a Walmart ad as the top hit! I want to write a piece called "Eutrophication of Google." That'll be popular with Google.

KM: Speaking of the fact-checkers again, you do a beautiful job, especially in the "Editors and Publishers" section, of showing the collaboration that goes into work, and one thing that I hadn't thought about was titles. You have a really interesting section where you talk about the title of *Oranges* in particular, and I wondered if you could talk a little bit about titles in general and why they mean so much to you, but also that push and pull of the editor relationship.

JM: Right, and the push and pull of the editor relationship is that idea that editors have the prerogative to change and to rewrite your title for you, to knock it off and put theirs on it. And that doesn't settle well with my sensibilities. Titles are hard to come by and so if one comes by accident sort of early, which does happen, it's a boon and a half, because otherwise—I mean, I've spent as much as two weeks

trying to figure out a really appropriate title that would shine down through the piece like a flashlight. So, I go to Alaska and I spend two and a half years making journeys up there and so forth. Up in the bush, in the upper Yukon Valley and elsewhere, people kept describing so-and-so, you know Jack Boon or something, and when he came into the country: "She came into the country in 1974. He came into the country..." This phrase is all over the place. I knew that the title of "Coming into the Country" was "Coming into the Country" before I wrote a word. Now, that is really unusual. It's very often the other way around. But I take titles really seriously and therefore I'm not happy when someone wants [to change the title]. David Remnick has given up trying. I had a couple of tiffs with him. I called something "Rip Van Golfer." He didn't like that, but he backed off, thank heaven.

KM: And Remnick was a student of yours, right?

JM: Remnick, the editor of *The New Yorker*, he was a student of mine in 1981 and so, this is a strange relationship. I mean, he's my boss. It's really fun.

KM: He's also one of your fishing partners, isn't he?

JM: He is.

KM: Good to know. That is an interesting relationship. In terms of titles, it makes sense as a writer why you would want to have a say and feel that it is important because of that flashlight idea that directs the piece before you even enter into it. I find in my classrooms, too, a lot of times the students turn in pieces without titles and frankly, for me, they're one of the hardest parts of the piece. And I think that also comes from the drafting. You have to know what you're writing about and who you're writing to. You talk about, in "Frame of Reference," the idea of language and how important the language is, and that even a word as simple as "oranges"—what that could communicate about what we're about to read is important, as opposed to the "Green Lanterns," or what was it?

JM: "Golden Lantern in a Green Night."

KM: I mean, that is speaking to and about what would feel, to me, a different piece than the one that you wrote. I was hoping that you could talk about "Frame of Reference" and about a particular word that troubled you.

JM: "Frame of Reference" is—I did a whole piece on it because it's so important in writing if you allude to something. If you say New York City, people know what you're talking about. If you say Grover's Corners or something, they don't know where it is. You're guessing at their frame of reference, or you're reversing it and sort of teasing them into the subject. It's just very interesting because the whole structure of the frame of reference is that it just runs around the edges of the piece, like bobbles around a mirror or something like that.

KM: I feel like no matter what genre people write in, language of course crosses those boundaries, and the importance of language. The next section [of Draft No. 4] goes on to talk about your playful love of writing and defining mustaches, and the different ways that you've done that on the page, including "insincere mustache," I think was the beginning of that.

JM: That was the start. My editor, Robert Bingham, who Shawn had turned me over to, was my editor for 16 years. Bingham had a mustache, so I started describing mustaches in weird and odd ways to taunt him. [*Laughs*]

KM: When you're writing nonfiction in particular, your frame of reference becomes incredibly important because you want to make sure that you bring your reader along with you. In many of your books, I think the beauty of it is, as we read about oranges or the Pine Barrens, we're reading a story and so we don't realize that we're learning as well. I think that the frame of reference and the way you use language is a way to sort of "put the spinach in the brownie." Is that something that you consciously think about in terms of frame of reference? And even thinking back to the title and why that original title would have been wrong, about, even though there might not be an "I" on the page, who the "I" is that's telling a story in nonfiction and how to get the

information across without feeling like a teacher. How does language play a part in that?

JM: Well, frame of reference plays a huge part because you depend on the reader reacting to certain things, and so I'm thinking about it the whole time. There's all kinds of little things that go with it. You don't want to point out the obvious to somebody; you don't want to, in effect, take hold of their lapels and say, "Get it?" Never do that. You don't want to sort of have a punchline and then explain it. That's just one little component of all of this and the selection of these things. Also, as I mentioned a while ago, you can turn it on its head. It depends on the situation, but you can deliberately get into something where you want to exploit the obscurity of something for humor. So, it's something that you are sort of playing with, fiddling with, and thinking about all the way through a piece of writing. And this is at the point beyond the structuring and everything else, when you've put in your time just sitting there staring at the monitor.

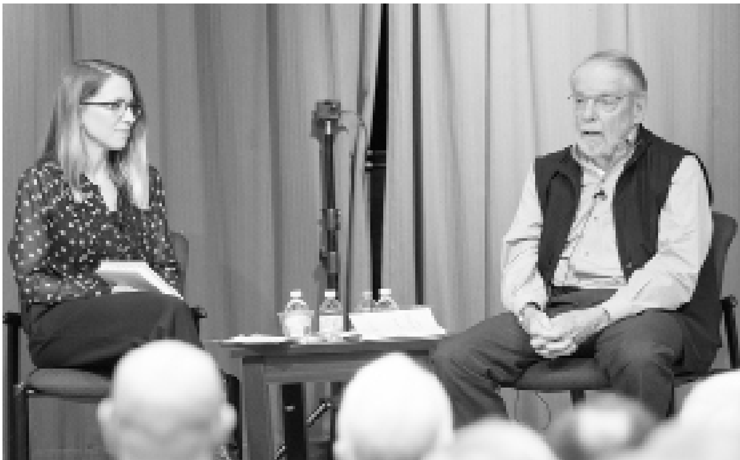
KM: And do you ever change the way that you write from magazine to book, or when you're writing for a different magazine? When you made that shift from *Time* to *The New Yorker*, for example, did you also shift the frame of reference you used when you were writing?

JM: I don't know. I guess not because I'd be thinking things that—I mean this is in an illustrative way, it's not based on what the research was. It's just metaphors and images and trying to bring things across, and these illusions aren't part of the factual stream. I don't think, in that sense, there was a change from *Time* to *The New Yorker*. From the time I was in high school I wanted to be related to *The New Yorker*, but it took until I was 31 years old for this to happen. And, meanwhile, when I worked at *Time* in my 20s, I kept sending things to *The New Yorker* that they kept rejecting. But at *Time*, nearly all of what I did was assigned to me—a very high percentage. I just got the assignment and did it. Whereas, *The New Yorker* has never given me an assignment and never suggested anything to me, except for one or two small exceptions, which I actually didn't do anything about. [*Laughs*]. Tina Brown wanted me to write about a

murder in the Strait of Malacca, and I was working on my geology books and I didn't do it. And Shawn wanted me to write about health care; he wanted me to do some kind of economic analysis of costs in New York City hospitals, and I tiptoed back out of his room. And so anyway, the time at *The New Yorker*—it's 100 percent stuff that I got into in the first place. But I think that coming upon metaphors and stuff like that while you're writing—I'm pretty sure that'd be a consistent stream across the two magazines or any other magazine that I wrote for.

KM: As a creative nonfiction writer, I was hoping that you would talk a little bit about why nonfiction is for you. I talk about it in my classrooms as this sort of wild frontier that is just so exciting because I can't see the end of it; it's so flexible. You do a beautiful job of writing just about what creative nonfiction is in the "Omissions" section.

JM: [Quoting "Omissions" from Draft No. 4] Creative nonfiction is not making something up but making the most of what you have. I say that every year to my students. I hope they listen.



FICTION

Things Read by Moonlight

Heather Whited

I remember fireworks pretty well, as it turns out.

Laying in the warm grass on an early summer evening. Pops and bangs above me. Blooms of color in the sky turning to cascades with a gentle fall. The smell of beer and my Dad mumbling to my Mom about being tired and wanting to go home. My fingers greasy from junk food.

Fireworks.

This is not like that at all, though I can't stop thinking of them as I watch the lights of the bombs outside the window. So far, there are only white bursts, pin holes or rips in the dark. The noises flash as well, brief shaking booms. Eli and I jump at each one. There's nothing orange and savage to eat up the night. I'm thankful, I guess, that nothing's been set on fire.

Our building rumbled lightly once, rattling the windows, but nothing serious, it seems. Eli and I are much more shaky. On the street, I can still hear the soldiers calling to one another, but their voices are getting fainter as they finish their work and slowly leave the neighborhood.

My head feels like it weighs a ton. Though I struggle to keep my eyes open, I can hardly keep them closed either. Each time I try to sleep, or even shut my eyes for a second of relief, another noise or burst of light pries them back open.

"You okay?" asks Eli. He knows I'm not asleep. All the little sounds of his body have been keeping me sane for hours now. Every creak, every sigh, every sniffle.

A chill has settled over the apartment. I hug him to me. I have rarely been more thankful for anything than I am now for Eli's skin against mine.

"What time is it?"

"Just two-something," says Eli.

I think I'll feel better when the sun comes up, but it's November, so that's hours off.

The neighbors are quiet like we are. The walls are thin so normally we're all entertainment for each other, or annoyances at times, but everything is graveyard still tonight. Eli's breaths are measured out like a recipe, purposeful and even, like he's trying to stay calm.

I think of piano lessons, a metronome.

I don't ask what time it is when the bombs finally stop. The silence drops with a thud of its own. After a long stretch of quiet, we turn to each other. I bury my face in Eli's neck and he buries his face in my hair. We finally sleep.

Darkness. I am grateful for that too. A heavy curtain of sleep that blocks everything else out.

It's not long after the bombs stop and we fall asleep that Eli wakes up and starts to get breakfast together for us. My heart pounds when I realize I'm awake again. The sun is just barely starting to rise and Eli, while my eyes adjust, is ghostly in the dark. He is made more of sound than anything; rustling of clothes being pulled on and stifled coughs. The pallid light is just about right for November sun trying to rise, but it's far too quiet. I don't move from the bed. Eventually, I can make out Eli well; thin chest bare as he chooses clothes in the dark.

Eli washes at the sink, shaves, and finishes dressing before he starts some water to boil for coffee. I don't take my eyes off him.

"You've still got to go to work," Eli says. He pours hot water into a cup and his glasses steam.

He pours a splash of milk into his coffee and returns it to the refrigerator. I watch his long body move as he walks across the apartment, the way his feet hit the floor, the lift of his arms as he takes off his glasses and how he wipes them on his shirt. All of it comforts me. I start to wonder if I could tempt him back to bed and spend all day warm and groggy here with him. I give the thought up quickly though. Eli has a determined look on his face, ready to stare the morning down until it isn't so bad.

"Yeah, I know."

"Might have to walk if the buses have stopped."

"I know, love."

He stops on his way back from the refrigerator, kisses me on the forehead, and lets me stay where I am. I close my eyes again and listen to him finish his morning routine. I map

the rest of it by the scrape of his chair being pushed away from the table, by the washing of his cup, and the jingle of his keys.

"Bobby."

"I know, love."

I get up when I hear the door close; dress and take a bite of bread. It's all I can handle. I stand in the middle of the room and listen. The quiet is so dense and powerful. It feels like an undercurrent pulling me in. We're all afraid to move after last night, but I'm desperate for someone to let me know they're there.

I work up the nerve to peer out the window. It's not as bad I'd thought. We didn't get hit too harshly. A few knocked out windows. A few buildings with charred sides, the black creeping up like vines. More a show of force than a real desire to do damage, like the soldiers were careful to make a lot of noise and do a performance of ferocity and nothing else. They want to scare us because the resistance group in this part of town has gotten showy and the soldiers have tracked them. It's a sign to them, to all of us guilty or not. The government knows they're here.

I open the blinds and leave them open, reveling in even the small bit of light the morning has to offer. There is a smudge of orange flowering just under the skyline that shows promise.

I poke my head out into the hall for signs of life. Tiny old Mrs. Stone is peeking her head out too. When she sees me, she starts sobbing.

"Oh, thank God," she says. "I haven't heard a soul move all morning."

"What's wrong? Did your nephew come back last night?"

"No, but his girl put a call in at the bar across the street before the soldiers came to let me know where he was. Said he'd heard about the raid and couldn't come home. Wendy was working there last night. She took the call and came and told me."

She wipes at her eyes with the sleeve of her saggy cardigan. Mrs. Stone is a proud little thing. I gather that she hates me seeing her in a moment of vulnerability, but I can't leave her alone. We all know that Kit is part of the resistance. Mrs. Stone is likely much more worried about him than she's letting on.

“Want to come over here?” I ask. “Would that be better? I mean, I’d love the company if you wouldn’t mind.”

She nods and skitters down the hall and into our place. Once inside, she straightens herself and tries to regain some composure. She raises her eyebrow at me briefly to show me that I haven’t fooled her at all.

I offer her the rest of the bread and turn on all our lamps. The brightness dispels a bit of the residual gloom clutching onto the morning.

“Are you okay over in your apartment?”

“I just want Kit to come home,” Mrs. Stone says. She takes a large bite of bread. Her appetite hasn’t been affected by last night’s bombing, it seems. Then again, Kit could have been bringing their dinner and she might not have eaten anything. I pour a glass of milk for her and make a cup of coffee from the cooling water on the stove.

“I know,” I say. “He’ll be here soon, I bet.”

“Where’s your Eli?”

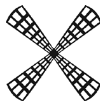
“Work.”

“Oh, good, he’s safe then.”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t he be?”

There’s a pause that I hardly notice at first because I am in the process of looking for my tie. I realize how quiet it is and look up in time to see Mrs. Stone quickly avert her eyes.

She finishes her breakfast and I lead her to the couch so that she can rest. I cover her with one of our blankets before I leave for work.



Eli was right. I do have to walk.

The school where I work is far from our neighborhood, so my commute gets more lively the farther away I get from last night’s bombing. None of the anxious silence, no neighbors peeking out from behind curtains. There are people sitting on stoops here, a few shouting across the street at each other in a happy way that nearly makes me forget what the world is now, or at least our part of it. I finally start to uncoil from the tight knot of anxiety that I spent the last nine hours in.

I am late after all, arriving after the bell has rung. I sneak

up the back stairs and into my classroom. Only five students this morning though, all sitting and waiting for me.

"Morning, everyone."

"Morning, Mr. J," says Al. She's the only one to speak. She's a beautiful young woman, taller than everyone in the class with black hair down to her elbows. She looks as worn out as I do this morning, but she's young so she wears it well, almost proudly. Her clothes, the school's choice of a white blouse and blue skirt, are rumpled. I think she might be wearing two different shoes as well, but she still looks elegant.

I can smell, even from here, the cigarettes she had on the way to school, and I suddenly want one. Specifically to share one, to pass a cigarette back and forth and breathe the same smoke as someone else. I smoked a lot more when Eli and l first met. He'd have one sometimes at a party with me, or in bed. I try to blink away this craving and the memories it produces.

Sometimes, I feel too old for this job; other times, I feel too young. The students are taller than I am, every one of them, their skin smooth. They're hardened from having so few memories of things before, from having comfortable childhoods snatched away. But I stand here unable to let go of a memory of a lighter flashing in the dark, of Eli's laughing cough as I teach him to smoke. I can't let the kids see me fighting back tears, though part of me wonders what would happen if I cried now. If they'd hug me and assure me that everything will be okay. I'm nearly as desperate for a hug as I am a smoke.

I write a few listless things on the board about the book we're reading. Some of the students copy what I've written. I'm still surprised they do this. Joey falls back to sleep. I assign the students the next chapter and drop into my seat.

Strangely, I miss last night. It happens suddenly as I daydream away the time until lunch. I need to push away the harsh morning so I let myself drift. I think of Eli's calm breaths and the way our skin warmed each other. I want to be back in bed with my feet against his calves, feeling his fingers in my hair, feeling his yawns and stretches as they moved his muscles underneath me.

"Mr. J?" asks Al.

"Huh?"

"We're all done. Next chapter then?"

I wave my hand, which is as much effort as I can manage to tell her yes. Al puts her head together with the girl next to her and they read. Their hair falls forward, creating a barrier between me and their grinning faces. I think it grossly unfair that they get to be 16 and I do not. Joey begins to snore and someone covers him from the neck down with a coat.

This gets us through until lunch time. I wander downstairs to the teacher's room after the students are gone. It's empty but for one person. The long sleeves of her sweater fluttering past her fingertips. She turns when the door opens, and my presence lights up her face.

"There you are," she says.

As if she could read my mind, Mats has made us two cups of instant coffee and is waiting for me. I take one of the mugs.

"Forget your lunch?" she asks. She walks to the rickety table in the middle of the room.

Mats is small, all her colors jeweled; heavy hair too red, eyes too green. She comes hardly to my chest and reminds me of a hummingbird.

"Yeah," I say. "Rough night."

"I heard about your neighborhood."

"It wasn't too bad."

She pushes half of her sandwich over to me. I've calmed down enough that I'm starving now and I eagerly start to eat.

"There's this play…" says Mats.

"Government thing?"

"Nah."

"Tonight?"

She nods. She's got a large hunk of homemade bread as well, and I get half of that without question. The invitation she hasn't quite issued me settles into the lull in the conversation as she begins to fidget when I don't immediately pick it up.

I want a cigarette. I want to sleep. I want a hot bath, something that I haven't had in years. Hot water covering my body. The drip-drop of the faucet. Watching my skin go red and the feeling of my puckered toes and fingers. Echoes against the tile.

Eli, what are you cooking?

Eli, get in here.

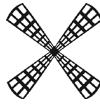
Knees against mine when he first joins me and we face each other. Eli laying back against my stomach, his head on my shoulder. Our toes poke out of the white bubbles. He rolls his ankle and there is a pop.

“Want to come with me?” asks Mats.

I unwillingly come back to the conversation. By waiting, I’ve made her say it, made her bring to life the question she had only hinted at.

I know it’s Eli’s late night at the clinic, so I say yes.

Mats gives me an ivory smile.



We went away once, for a weekend, just before.

I was the one who thought it up and got to watch Eli’s face as he went from shocked to smiling at the idea.

Okay. Okay, sure.

A kiss, his gift to me, that ran as deep as a river.

I thought I was so grown. Almost 20 years old, going weak for this long kiss and this man, sweeping him away.

We’d only been on a few dates then and three days away together was a bit of a leap. But when he said yes, I booked us a room without a second thought, and we drove off the next day. No place special, just that it was the two of us and no one else.

We spent the first night drunk, drunker than Eli had ever been. He woke a few times during the night to be sick, and I followed him to the bathroom each time. I sat next to him on the floor, the both of us naked. I massaged his shoulders and got him sips of water, and in the dark, we let ourselves reach for hands to hold.

I can’t see. Bobby? Where are my glasses?

The next day, we didn’t move from the bed at all. He slept off and on. Waking to remember that I was there and where he was and smile at me.

I think about that night all afternoon while I should be teaching.

Brushing Eli’s hair from his face. Wiping his forehead. A trickle of sweat racing down his spine. The strong mint smell

of the mouthwash I made him use each time he was sick.

Sorry, he said over and over. Trying not to cry.

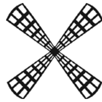
He didn't know I was already in love.

That's what I think of all afternoon. My five students have dwindled to four. They scratch at their papers, looking at me sometimes. I nod comfortingly as I feel I should, being an adult. It's not true though. Much more of me is still the young man from 10 years ago, sitting drunk on a bathroom floor with his new boyfriend and consumed by exhaustion and love and want. That's who I want to be, not a teacher of 30, tired and jumpy.

It was only weeks later, after the trip, that the fighting started to get serious in the major cities, and I'm so grateful now for that night. It was that night that made it so natural for us to stay together. It was sitting next to him on the cold tile and watching his hair fall into his eyes.

Sorry, Bobby. I'm so embarrassed.

Quiet now. It's fine.



I know this play.

I'm not surprised it's survived, boring as it is, but it's a balm to hear words from before, even ones this innocuous. It's also heartening to see all of the people who come out, to hear how happy everyone is. Everyone is as dressed up as they can be. Expectation hangs in the air.

We find our seats and settle in. I hear a contented sigh from Mats. She wipes a bit of chalk dust from the shoulder of my shirt and moves in close to me.

She slipped in a flask in the pocket of her coat and we both sip throughout the first act of the play.

The actors blur. I blink trying to make them sharp again, but they won't go into focus. A small hand on mine. Mats' cheek on my shoulder and whisky-smelling breath in my ear.

"Cut out early?" she asks.

I'm sure we make a scene sneaking from the theater, me trying to keep Mats standing and quiet. She stumbles, grabbing at my coat to keep from falling to the floor.

"Bobby. God, Bobby."

I put my finger to my lips. She's speaking too loudly and people turn to us. A young woman glares and I move Mats to the door. She stumbles into the brightly lit lobby and laughs at herself, drawing a huff from the soldier waiting there.

"Sorry," I say. Mats giggles again. She nuzzles against my neck and I push her away with as soft a touch as I can manage. It still nearly topples her. Her mouth opens in shock but she rights herself. A second after she realizes she isn't going to fall over, Mats erupts in laughter that echoes in the lobby. I flinch and put my hand on her shoulder to get her attention.

"Take her home," says the soldier. "Now."

"Okay. Sorry." I pull Mats towards the exit without any further incident, though the soldier does roll her eyes at us.

The street smells of rain and of fried food from a rickety cart across from the theater. I hadn't realized how hot I was, and the cold air on my face is a relief.

Mats playfully takes hold of my tie and looks up at me.

"Almost like the good old days," she says.

Mats' place is smaller than ours. She lives alone. Her bed is child-sized, pushed against a yellow wall. There's a faded rug in the middle of the floor and her shelves are lined with books. It smells still of baking.

Mats drops her shoes to the floor and totters to the bed, yanking at her dress, frowning at particularly troublesome buttons. I don't hesitate to join her when she drops down to the mattress.

I don't know why I do this.

"Hey," she says. She touches my cheek and then gently puts a cold palm onto it. A sloppy and radiant smile. It tugs at me, this smile, the feeling of her hand on my face.

"I've missed you here."

The dress droops off her arm. I reach for Mats and kiss her.

Her body is familiar now. Freckles on her shoulders. Even the smell of alcohol lingering on her breath and pushing up through her skin. She quivers when I touch her.

She throws up seconds after we're finished, after she lets her sweaty body drape over me. She's sick and runs back to bed, away from the cold. It's too late though. The shaking has already begun. Mats presses herself against me for warmth. My name affectionately slurred as I wrap myself

around her, as my eyes close.

Holding her to me feels like the worst thing. I do it, though. There's a huge emptiness, a chasm, that I fill with seconds like these, or try to fill. But the moments are only grains, tiny. They will never be enough.

"I was so worried about you last night," she says.

"It's okay."

Tears on my shoulder. I push her hair from me and find a knot that I fight the urge to work through with my fingers. That sort of intimacy would be too much. I want it though, and I feel in some way that I deserve it. To hoard her love and Eli's, even though I really only want his. Hers is just an extra layer of protection against the world. Mats tries to blink away the tears and pretend like they aren't there, but it's not possible.

"It's okay," I say again.

"I love you, Bobby."

"Mats…"

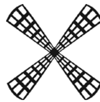
"Whatever. I know you're not leaving him."

"Mats."

"You're too chicken to tell him either, and too weak to stop coming here. Look at me, though. I can't even kick you out right now."

Mats is asleep seconds later. Her tirade against me has exhausted her. I slowly move her and pull her quilt over her before dressing and leaving.

I've never told her about my wedding, or anything much about Eli. He's like a piece of china we've kept out of reach. Or a ghost we don't want to summon.



The notices of removal had been sent. One month for people who didn't support the new government to register as dissenters and receive a placement in the camps outside of the cities, which would be reserved for supporters.

Twenty of us were married at the same time that day; 10 couples in the hot sun. There was another ceremony just like it across the park, and I'd heard of others. Ministers doing their part to help as much as they could. Many of

us being very young, we struggled for something to grasp onto. I stood next to a woman in a blue dress and white high heels that sunk down into the grass. Across from me was Eli, squinting into the sun.

I just assumed that something terrible would happen to stop it all and was surprised when the ceremony ended and my husband took my hand. So surprised, that I burst into tears. Eli gathered me into a hug and I felt other people pat me on the back.

There was a party afterward, all of us drinking and eating in the park. Someone brought a kite and flew it for a while before it got stuck in a tree and we all laughed. Its owner climbed up eventually to retrieve it. When he had it in his hand, we cheered as one, just as we had laughed.

The woman in the blue dress kicked off her white shoes and stood in her bare feet. The heel of each of her pumps was covered in dirt and grass stains where they had dug into the earth.

Soldiers dotted the periphery of the park but let us be until dusk when we were dispersed back home with shocking gentleness.

A long walk home. Sweaty clothes on the floor. A gentle exploring of sunburns.

The next morning, we had a huge breakfast of bacon and eggs. Eli had gone out and bought me flowers before I woke. A ridiculous amount of roses that sat in a vase on the table between us. Eli's glasses glinting between the petals. I was almost thankful for all that happened in the country just so I could be here in this moment.

In the afternoon, we went to the office where we would have to petition as a married couple to be moved together. Several couples from yesterday were there too, and soon, we were reminiscing like we'd been married for years.

"We should––" said one woman. She stopped before she let herself speak of any sort of future where we might see each other again or be friends.

After, Eli and I went to a museum for what we figured would be the last time. No one knew much about the hastily erected suburbs where the defectors would live, but we guessed there wouldn't be much art there. I tried my hardest to memorize the faces in the paintings while I clutched at Eli's hand. It was so easy sometimes to forget that we'd only

known each other a little over two months.

We were the last ones there when they closed. I have never forgotten that the security guard, an older man lumbering with a pot belly wiggling in front of him, cried.

I made up a story about him on the way home.

“His daughter is a resistance fighter-”

“Go on,” said Eli.

“Her name is Stella Scarlet—”

“Good name.”

“Five foot ten, black hair to her waist. A real femme fatale.”

“Go on.”

Action. Adventure. Diversion. He reached for my hand.

“Stella hasn’t been seen in months. Presumed dead. His wife took to her bed in grief. She wants to die before her home is taken from her too. She’s begged him to support the government so that she can live her last days in comfort, but he refuses.”

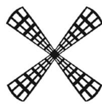
Eli stopped in his tracks, dropped my hand, and stared at me.

“Jesus, Bobby,” he whispered.

I blushed. I hadn’t lost anyone to the war, didn’t have anyone to lose but him, and it wasn’t the first time he’d implied I was far too cavalier.

“Sorry. It was just a story.”

A week later, the letter came with our assignment and a date to report for relocation. But our names were on the letter together, so we told ourselves it would be fine.



I have to stand on the bus ride home because there are so many people trying to get where they need to go before curfew. It’s nice though. There’s a quietness to the crowd that settles me. Sobers me. I am much more drunk than I planned. There’s a sweet kid, a baby with bright cheeks, who wiggles her fingers at me. Another grain to fill the chasm.

I push my way off the bus at my stop and step out onto the almost empty street. The neighborhood is still reeling from last night’s bombing and it’s long enough after dark

that people have retreated for the evening. In a pool of light, a soldier stands. I nod good evening to him in a way I hope conveys my sarcasm. I'm close to home now and bolder than I was at the theater.

I'm surprised to see a light shining under the door at our apartment. He shouldn't be home yet. I hear a tense stillness as I approach. Eli says my name as I put the key in the lock and I hear footsteps. By the time I have the door open, he's standing there.

"Oh, thank God," he says. "There you are."

"Everything okay?"

He takes me into his arms.

"Yeah. I just...after last night. Just tired and jumpy, I guess. They arrested Kit Stone when he came by to check on his aunt. It's been terrible here."

"Shit. I didn't know. I was with Mats. From work."

"What?"

I've missed him all day; his height and his slender heft and the feel of his hair. The word comes as a sharp intake of breath that I feel against my cheek. I feel him pull away an inch or so. This is the worst chasm, worse than the one inside me. It's here, very real, and it feels like the ghost of Eli's shirt, the place where my face rested only seconds ago.

"I...there was a play. Sorry," I say. "I didn't mean to worry you. God, don't you miss cell phones?"

I place my head against his chest again. There is tension between us that doesn't entirely go away when he returns his hand to where it was on my back. A musical pounding in my ears. He's gotten dinner ready and it's waiting on the table. I would do anything to move there, to have this part of the night be over. I wish I hadn't gone to Mats. I always do. I lift my eyes and find Eli staring down at me.

"Have you been drinking?" he asks.

"Um. A bit."

He holds me for a few more beats of his heart. I put my hands on either side of his face and pull myself up for a kiss, but he turns away, wrinkling his nose at what I guess is the very strong smell of alcohol on my breath. I lower myself and my eyes. I want to puke, and to cry too. I'm sure I'm going to do one or both. My hand, now swinging next to Eli's, starts to shake. I grip at the hem of his shirt. Eli doubles

in my vision momentarily as I try very hard to not look as drunk as I am.

Eli grumbles a curse under his breath, but kisses the top of my head.

“Forget it,” he says. “Let’s eat.”

Dinner is quiet tonight. We decide to leave cleaning for the morning and retreat to the warmth of the bed. Eli falls asleep nearly as soon as we curve together under the covers.

The night stays smoothly dark.

I only doze fitfully. After a while, I ease out from under Eli and go to the sink for a glass of water. I’m still drunk and parched now too. I feel better after the water, renewed.

I hid a pack of cigarettes under the bed. If I don’t have one, I know I’ll never sleep. While rummaging for them, careful not to wake Eli, I find in the hiding space a small notebook. I take it to the window to read by moonlight.

There’s a small map folded inside, and I take it out. It’s of the city, marked up, buildings circled, crossed out. Names, at least what I think are codenames, maybe for people I know, crawl like ants in the margins. The writing in the notebook is in code too, but it’s Eli’s for sure.

I see several dates and times scrawled in the lines of the book and I scramble to remember those days, where Eli had said he was. My breathing is fast and I know now that I will vomit, and I do, right into the kitchen sink.

I return the plans and the map to their place after rinsing my mouth out. They, without a doubt, belong to the resistance. I stand at the side of the bed for a long time wondering if I’m going to get back in. How can I move on with this information?

We were never fighters. All we wanted was to be together. We said that ages ago, when we decided to get married so that we wouldn’t be separated. We held hands, figured out what could fit in the two suitcases we were allowed. We rode the bus here, hands still clasped, always clasped, with all the other dissenters being moved and we spent the first night in this apartment curled into this too small bed.

Together and safe. That was all we wanted. Just those two things.

Eli stirs in his sleep. I push back the covers and position myself under his arm.

He stays asleep and I close my eyes again.

We were so young when we met. On our first date, Eli still had braces. He showed up without them on the second, every smile covered by his hand because he was so nervous about his new appearance. If I concentrate hard enough, I can remember the feeling of those braces when we had our first kiss, can remember discovering the new feeling of his smooth teeth on the kisses that happened after.

Eli mumbles a little, rolling over in bed. I try to hold both those men in my mind; the 19-year-old Eli, skinny, soft, who kissed me outside of a bar, and my 30-year-old husband, a resistance fighter, who buzzes with secrets.

I hear crying from Mrs. Stone's apartment, and it only makes me hold Eli tighter.

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In Spite of Everything

Elizabeth Trueblood

The wind pulls at my collar, sneaks under my scarf to chill me all the way through. I shiver and stamp my feet, but I don't go inside. I can feel Ian's eyes on me as he peers out from behind the front curtains. I try to ignore him. This isn't for him, or about him.

The minutes tick by and I stay at the end of the drive, waiting. He was—no. He was usually on time. She made him late.

The sun sinks towards the tree line, but it never disappears completely—at first, the 24 hours of daylight had been difficult. "You'll get used to it," Mom had insisted. And I had.

A flash of yellow light catches my attention—headlights down the road. They've arrived. I jump when I feel Ian's hand on my shoulder; I hadn't heard him approach.

"That's them?" he asks.

I nod. "I'd guess so." His hand trails down my arm—he's going for my hand. I shrug him off.

"Not now," I murmur.

Ian doesn't respond. My father pulls up in front of us. Dad climbs out of the driver's seat and he's almost exactly as I remember him—the silver fox. A comb-over gleams above a serious brow. The knee-length black pea coat, a charcoal gray tie peeking out at the collar. His sly, I-love-you-and-could-kill-you grin. I smile in spite of everything. Five years is a long time. I open my arms to him and—

"Hello! Oh, hello," a voice drawls from the passenger seat of the sleek black Cadillac.

He crosses around the front of the car to help her out. I feel my smile become fixed, and I lower my arms. I doubt he noticed I put them up in the first place. Stephanie has managed to haul herself out of the car—damn, those are some high heels. Did I wear shoes like that when I was 35?

Did I ever wear anything like that ever? It's a good thing the ground around here never really gets soft, or we'd be pulling her out of the lawn by her armpits. She sees me and grins, her teeth chemical white in her alabaster face. As the Alaskan light fades, her presence is blinding. She swoops in for a hug, which I return, curly blonde tendrils making their way up my nose as her head settles against my shoulder, still so much shorter than me despite her stilettos.

"Caroline! It's so good to see you. I'm so sorry we had to get up here for a visit under—uh—" she falters. "With, uh, under, that is, um—"

I look down at her as she stutters. I'm not really sure how to help her. Ian reaches around me and takes Stephanie's hand, shakes it warmly. "Hi! Stephanie, right?"

"Oh—yes! That's me," she says.

Ian smiles. "It's lovely to meet you. I'm Ian."

"Much obliged," Stephanie titters.

I feel an older, heavy hand clap down on my shoulder. "Hey, Ladybug." My father's gruff voice pulls me back to sunny Saturday afternoons on a swing set, Mom laughing on the veranda while Dad plays with me in the golden glow of a Louisiana afternoon.

"Hi, Dad."

He pulls me into the aftershave-and-pipe-tobacco hug I've longed for since I was sitting in her hospital room and the heart monitor let out that long, low death whine that declared the end of everything.

"How ya doin'?" he asks. He pulls back to search my face. I shrug.

"Okay, I guess." I glance up the drive at Ian and Stephanie. Ian carries Stephanie's velour suitcase up to the house; he will probably give her the tour. The pinkish roan of twilight highlights the gabled roof of the mansion, bathing it in half-light. This was mom's favorite time of day—the sun won't get much lower than this.

"Should we follow them?" my dad asks.

"I reckon."

He snorts quietly, eyebrows raised. "'Reckon'?"

"Yes?" I quip, unable to keep a defensive note from my voice. Dad shakes his head as a smile quirks his mouth.

"Just haven't heard you talk like that since Harvard, is all. It's nice."

Okay. “Can I help you with the bags?” I ask. I walk around to the back of the car.

“Maybe,” he replies, “but I think there’s only one or two left.” He trails off as he pops the trunk and I look back at him, my own eyebrows raised now. There’s his simple black case, and two more sizeable cases in the same champagne color of the one Ian had already taken up.

“Really?” I say. My dad shrugs.

“It’s only a few,” he points out. I sigh and haul out the two velour cases, leaving him to take his own as I start to trudge up to the house. She’s only gonna be here for the weekend. Why does she need so much crap?

“Did you and Stephanie eat?” I ask over my shoulder.

“Not yet, no, but—”

“You hungry? We waited on dinner, just in case.”

Eyebrows up again. “Dinner? It’s 9 p.m.”

“Time becomes irrelevant when the sun never goes down all the way, Dad. I’ve seen people in town mow their lawns at a quarter to midnight.”

He laughs. “Whatever you say, Ladybug.”

I lead the way to the front door, hook it open with my little finger and step into the foyer. Dad trails in my wake. I can hear Ian’s and Stephanie’s disembodied voices echoing from the third floor, Ian giving the tour with Stephanie “oohing” and “aahing” appropriately.

“You can take your shoes off and put them in the closet if you want, Dad—” He stares up at the lofted ceiling, down at the impeccable hardwood floors, at the sweeping staircase that ends in shadows on the second floor.

“Wow,” he murmurs, looking at me in wonder. “Did Lorelai—did she do all this?”

I shrug and toss my own short boots in the closet, hang my windbreaker and scarf on a hook next to the door. “They asked her to do the historical restoration,” I explain. “This house belonged to an oil baron in the twenties. As payment, they let her live here.”

I stride into the kitchen before he can reply, check on the meat in the oven and the rice on the stove. “Dinner should be ready in about 10 minutes.”

Dad wanders after me into the kitchen and studies every inch he passes. He sits at the table and shakes his head. “In all the years I knew her, I had no idea that she liked this sort

of thing," he admits, more to himself than me.

This bothers me. "Yeah," I say, "it seems there are a few things you didn't know about her, huh?"

My father sits very still for a moment. I almost regret what I've said.

"Caroline," he sighs and shakes his head. He's got that tone now, the one he always uses, and I know what comes next—the admonitions, the denial, the "let's not do this honey, please."

I shake my own head. "Lawrence," I reply, an imitation of his tired tone.

He gives a tired laugh. "How old are you, again?"

"Don't try to sell me that same line, Dad."

"What line are you referring to?"

"You know," I snap. I slam the lid down on the rice pot a little harder than necessary. "About how she changed after the divorce. There were things that she always loved, you just didn't pay attention. Like historical restoration, for instance. Alaska, for another."

"It *was* a close marriage for a while, Caroline."

"Oh yeah? Is that why you brought one of your legal aides to Mom's funeral, because the two of you were so close?"

"Caroline!" My father barks; anger tinges his voice. I don't care.

"Why did you bring her here, Dad?" I ask, my voice low. "Really, is nothing sacred?"

My dad slams his hand down on the table, and I jump. "Caroline Anne, I swear to God, I—"

"Oh! Something smells *good*," Stephanie crows from the top of the stairs. My father and I both stop, still staring at one another. As I meet his icy gaze, though, I can see his façade fall back into place—see the wrinkles vanish from his forehead, the hard edge smooth out of his mouth. He's the pleasantly neutral Lawrence Meyer, Attorney at Law. Derision bubbles up in my throat—God forbid Stephanie ever see him as anything other than the charismatic big shot, her knight in shining armor.

I busy myself at the stove as she clip-clops down the stairs—if she scuffs the floorboards in those stupid shoes, I'm going to scream. Ian pads along in her wake. She slides in next to my father and looks up at me with a grin. "Caroline,

I absolutely love what your momma did with this house," she gushes.

I offer her a tight smile. "I'm sure it would make her happy to hear that." If it came from anyone but her. I check the meat again. "Roast's done." I pull the pan out of the oven.

"I'll set the table," Ian volunteers. He joins me behind the counter and looks at my father and Stephanie. "I think we'll eat in the dining room. Please go on in, we'll meet you in there."

"Sure thing! C'mon, honey," Stephanie says. She pulls my father to his feet and leads him away. Ian and I work silently. There was a time when quiet was comfortable in this house, but I think that feeling died when my mother did. I jump when Ian puts a gentle hand on the small of my back.

"I hope," he murmurs, careful to keep his voice down so Stephanie and my father don't hear, "that I didn't hear you and your father yell at one another."

I sigh, slice the roast (it cuts like butter, thank you very much) and slam the slabs of meat onto the serving platter. "You could hear that over her yammering?"

"Do you want to talk about it?"

I glance at him over my shoulder. Yes. No. Maybe? No. Yes. "No." I walk away from him to get out a dish for the rice. He doesn't move for what seems like an age—I, on the other hand, don't stop, because if I do, I'll have to acknowledge that I hurt him. I grab the dish and start spooning rice into it. "There's a veggie platter in the fridge," I say. He goes to get it. I finish the rice and grab the meat platter.

"I loved her too, you know," he mutters. I freeze, and turn to look at him.

"I know."

"Just making sure." He slides past me into the dining room.

I swallow my anger and follow him. Ian hurries around, sets the table, makes small talk with Stephanie, who declares everything from the silverware to the window panes "darling," and my father watches Ian, pointedly not looking at me. I set down the platter and sit. When Ian does the same, I clear my throat. "Well. Help yourselves!" My attempted joviality falls flat. Stephanie flashes me a platinum smile.

"Don't mind if I do, Carrie," she drawls.

I flinch. “Caroline,” I whisper.

“What’s that, honey?” She spears a slab of elk for her plate, then my father’s. I bite my cheek. Honey?

“Caroline,” I say, loud and clear. “I prefer to be called Caroline.”

All action around the table stops, everyone’s eyes on me and Stephanie. The standoff has begun, daughter versus dad’s new wife.

My father’s dry chuckle breaks the tension. “Really? Since when? I seem to remember someone insisting we call her Carrie for the better part of her life.”

Stephanie laughs as well. “Oh, yeah, I remember it was always ‘Tell him Carrie is here’ at the office, never ‘Caroline’—”

They banter back and forth like this, and all the while my fists are clenched in my lap, *trying* not to lose what’s left of my temper, that short fuse that’s the only trait I got from my father—

“That’s really so interesting.” Ian’s voice, though not raised, cuts through the cacophony.

“What was that?” Stephanie asks.

“I said I find that interesting,” Ian replies, “because in all the time I’ve known her, I’ve never known Caroline to go by anything other than, well, Caroline.” He smiles and offers a bottle of wine to my father. “Chianti?”

My father nods gruffly and Ian fills his glass. “Thanks. So, you’ve known my daughter a while, have you, Ian?”

There it is. I knew it would come, that possessive “my daughter.” Goddammit, Dad.

Ian shrugs. “As long as she’s been here, I’d guess. I was Lorelai’s design partner for the restoration of this house. We worked at the Historical Society together.”

“Is that so?” my father murmurs, as he swirls his wine in his glass.

“Oh, no wonder you know so much about this darling place!” Stephanie says; she takes the wine from Ian and pours herself a generous measure. “Thank you so much, again, for the tour. So knowledgeable!”

My father remains unimpressed. “So you knew Lorelai well, did you?”

Ian nods. “As well as I could, I guess. I knew her longest—before Caroline got to town, that is.” He throws me a warm

look—something he usually saves for when we're alone. I glance away. Not now.

"Is that right. When did you get to town, Ian?"

"Oh, I was born here—I left to go to college in Seattle. I got back two years ago."

"Seattle, huh? Decided to see how the big city treated you?"

Ian laughs, unaware of my father's condescension. "It treated me just fine, but I think I always knew I'd end up coming back. There's something about Alaska, I guess. Once it gets you, it never really lets you go. Do you know how that feels?"

For a moment, my father's face softens. "Yeah. Lorelai said something similar."

Ian smiles. I'm stunned. "She was really something, wasn't she?"

Ian's pushed my father's good nature too far. He changes the subject. "Don't typically see such an interest in history in someone your age, Ian," he remarks. "How old are you, by the way?"

I choke on the bite of carrot I've just taken.

"You okay, Carrie?" Stephanie asks. To her credit, she seems genuine, concerned, but I wave her off.

"F-fine." I take a sip of wine and glare at my father, whose attention is still on Ian.

Ian's benign smile holds steady. "I'm 23," he says, as he pops a bite of meat into his mouth.

"Oh, 23, 23." My father shoots a glance my way.

"Yes," I snap, acid in my voice. "He's 23, Dad."

"Right, of course. Just very interesting, is all." We eat in silence for a moment. "So, where are you living these days, Ian?" my father asks.

Ian's eyes flick towards me, his glance a little worried now—I know there's no way my father missed it. I take over. "He lives here," I retort.

Stephanie's penciled eyebrows go up at this.

"Here? He lives here?" Stephanie asks.

"Yup," I say, as I spear my meat, "He lives here."

"Oh."

That 'oh' from her is the most loaded syllable I've ever heard. I close my eyes and pray for patience.

"I see." My father addresses Ian once again. "And how long have you lived here, son?"

Ian chews his bite of elk deliberately, shoots me another look. I wave a hand at him. The fat's really in the fire now.

"About four or five months, Mr. Meyer," Ian replies. "I came to stay with Caroline after Lorelai started getting sick."

"Ian," I warn. My father's face falls. I'd never told him how long Mom had been sick for.

"Four or five months?" he repeats. Stephanie drops her fork and reaches for my father's hand, giving it a squeeze. I watch him squeeze her hand back, grip so tight his knuckles turned white. I should have said something. After a moment, he regains his composure.

"So," he says, that superior countenance back, "You're a 23-year-old man, living with a 38-year-old woman. Alone." He takes a sip of his wine. "Interesting."

I slam my fork down on the table, making Stephanie jump. "Are you serious?" I demand, my voice dangerous.

"Caroline—" Ian cautions, reaches for me, but I snatch my hand away and rise from my chair. Any affection, pity, or regret I'd felt for my father is gone now.

"Are you serious, are you fucking serious?" My voice rises with every word. "You, of all people, can sit there all high and mighty and look down on me for *living with someone younger than me*? Is this—I mean—are you—" I sputter, anger making my tongue thick. The wind picks up outside—is there a storm coming? I laugh. "I mean I thought you'd be *proud*, Dad! I followed in your footsteps, after all." I shoot a hot glance Stephanie's way. "Though I admit I wasn't married when I met Ian, so maybe we're not quite cut from the same cloth."

Stephanie stares down at the table, hands clasped in her lap. I feel a savage triumph at the sight. "But see, here's the thing," I continue when my father opens his mouth to speak, "here's what I really don't get, is why the hell you thought it was *appropriate*," I jab a finger at Stephanie, "to bring your *mistress* to my mother's *funeral*."

My father rises from his chair. "She is not my mistress," he growls. He puts a protective hand on Stephanie's shoulder. "She's my wife."

I roll my eyes. "So, you didn't fuck her before you divorced Mom?"

The air goes cold. Stephanie gasps, the sound so tiny I almost miss it.

"Caroline!" Ian cries.

I ignore them both, and my father does too—but he doesn't deny it. At least he's not lying to me. I shake my head. "Once a mistress—"

"Caroline—" my father interjects,

"—*always* a mistress," I finish.

"Goddammit, Caroline Anne, that is enough!" My father roars; he slams his palm down on the table with such force that I'm sure he's fractured the wood. Stephanie begins to cry, and to my chagrin, I can feel furious tears well up in my own eyes. My father notices Stephanie's sniffles, sits down and offers her his handkerchief. She refuses, and stands.

"Excuse me," she whispers hoarsely, and hurries from the room, as fast as she can in those boneheaded high heels. My father runs after her, and that's the nail in the coffin for me.

He never chose us. He always chose her.

I turn and storm out of the dining room, head for the foyer. I don't give two shits about the wind, or the rain that pelts a staccato beat against the windows. I have to get out of here. Ian leaps up to follow me. I slam my feet into my boots and shove my arms into my coat, Ian hovering behind me.

"Where are you going?" he asks.

"For a walk."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"No."

"Are you sure? Because if you need to talk—"

"Goddammit, I said no!" I yell. "I don't want to talk, about this or anything else! Now will you please, for the love of God, just *fuck off*?"

The instant the words are out of my mouth I can read the hurt on his face, but I'm too furious to care. He turns and vanishes up the stairs. I storm out the front door; the crash of its sharp slam hurts my ears. I honestly have no idea where to go—I didn't plan my big exit very well. I can't go down the road; I could get hit by a car. No going into the woods—wolves are a very real threat in this part of the state. The rain is coming down harder. In the end I wander into the backyard, past the patio and a little way up the small hill that swells at the back of the property before it trails off into dense alpine forests. There, on the side of the hill, is a tiny pine gazebo—the last part of the original property

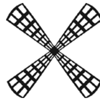
that Mom restored before she got sick. The only thing she had to rebuild completely from the ground up—the original structure had been torn down years before.

Of all the places on the property, this is where I feel closest to her.

I walk inside and lock the door behind me, enveloped by the smell of pine wood and new varnish. No electricity in the little gazebo—"It'll mess with the authenticity," Mom had insisted. It's just me in the cool, piney darkness.

I scream and sob and carry on like a child, the same three words flash through my mind, over and over, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry.

I'm not really sure who I'm apologizing to.



I trudge back down to the house in darkness. The storm has moved off, dissipated over the mountains, that weird late-night twilight giving the wet land an eerie glow. I let myself in and kick off my boots, throw off my coat, leaving it all pell-mell in the corner, too tired to care. A hard, leaden lump sits in my chest now; my rage has cooled into a stone. I climb the stairs and throw open my bedroom door—the king-size bed inside is, thank God, quite empty. I don't change before I crawl under the covers. I feel flat, empty, and hollow. I lay there motionless, waiting for sleep to come, when I hear a timid knock on the door. Ian.

No, thank you.

I roll over. The door creaks open and I hear gentle footsteps slowly enter the room. I sigh and roll back over, squint at the indistinct figure in the darkness.

"Don't you think," I mutter, "that it would be more prudent for you to stay in the guest bedroom tonight? Given the circumstances?"

"It's—uh, it's not Ian," a quiet voice whispers. "It's Stephanie. Do you mind if I come in?"

I go rigid where I lay. Part of me—a very large part, I admit—wants to tell her to fuck off. But a tiny voice in my head tells me to let her stay. It sounds like Mom's.

"Come in," I murmur. She enters, silent, and closes the door. After the racket she'd made all evening in those

stilettos, not being able to hear her move is somewhat off-putting. I sit up in bed; she's framed by the chinks of twilight around the edges of my heavy curtains. She shifts from foot to foot, anxious.

"Do you mind if I sit down?" she asks.

I pull my knees into my chest and she perches at the foot of my bed. Silence, and it's awkward.

"So. What can I—?"

"I didn't want to come, you know," Stephanie says, abrupt, the words all rushing out at once. I close my mouth and stare at her. She's got her hands folded in her lap, ankles crossed—ever the proper Southern lady—but I can see her shake, whether with fear or something else, I'm not sure.

"Here," she continues. "To Alaska. For the funeral. I thought—I felt it was inappropriate." She shakes her head. "And I said as much to Lawrence, after he got your phone call that Lorelai had passed away. 'I'll stay here,' I said, and do you know what he told me?" She laughs, shakes her head. "He said, 'Absolutely not. I can't do this without you.'"

She turns and looks straight at me in the darkness. In the faint light her eyes shine with tears. "He wanted his mistress at his ex-wife's funeral. Can you believe that?"

I don't speak. She wipes her eyes. "I've hated that word for so long. 'Mistress.' I wanted to deny it more than anything, but in the end I knew it was true. Mistress. It's an ugly word, don't you think?" She continues without waiting for an answer. "Ugly and pretty at the same time. You've never been somebody's mistress, have you, Caroline? No, I bet you haven't." She pushes a hand through her hair, mussing the tidy blonde curls. "It's great, for a while. This little secret, just between him and you. And it's all quiet meetups and private looks—you feel like a spy, you know, like from one of those James Bond movies? In the beginning, it's really easy." She shakes her head. "And it was. Lawrence is really easy to love, you know."

I nod.

"But everything changed when I met Lorelai."

I'll bet it did.

"We met at a work party. Maybe, a year before they got divorced? I think you were still at Harvard. And she was vibrant. And vivacious, and smart, and funny, and kind—everything I fancied myself to be. But I couldn't hold a

candle to her." Stephanie snorts. "She was shrewd, too. From the moment she took my hand for a shake, I knew she knew. It was the beginning of the end. And God, the more I got to know her, the more I hated myself. The reality became clear—'I am stealing this woman's husband, and she knows.' The grace with which she treated me. Her capacity for kindness. And it wasn't that Southern, bless-your-heart bullshit, that passive aggressive niceness. It was real."

I smile. That definitely sounds like Mom.

Stephanie goes on, "I liked her. And—I want to think that she liked me too, maybe a little. In spite of everything." She shakes her head. "But I couldn't give up Lawrence, either. I didn't want to. So I stayed, and we carried on, and when all was said and done, your mom left for Alaska, and Lawrence married me within four months of the divorce going through." She shakes her head. "I should have felt good, shouldn't I? I mean, I'd *won*. I came out on top, got to the finish line, attained the prize. I was Mrs. Lawrence Meyers now. Something that I wanted more than anything." She laughs again, sounding a little more crazed this time. "And even though—even though I love him, and I'd do anything for him—that's why I'm here, for God's sake—I will never shake that little bit of guilt that hovers around me 24/7. That I'm…a mistress, and I always will be." She gives me a pointed look. "You hit the nail on the head with that one."

A blush, hot with shame, crawls up my cheeks. I wonder if she can see it. "Stephanie, I'm—"

"Don't apologize," she cuts me off. "Please don't. If I was in your shoes…I'd probably feel the same." She looks down at her knees. "Tomorrow's going to be hard for him, you know."

"I know," I murmur.

"And it's going to be hard for you too. Maybe—I don't know." She pauses. "Lawrence loved Lorelai. A lot." She stands suddenly and walks back to the door. "And I kind of did too," she whispers. I almost don't hear her. She leaves. The door clicks shut.

Alone in my room, my mind is blank; I try to process what the hell just happened. My mom had a better heart than I could have imagined. So does Stephanie, I have to admit. I wonder, for a brief moment, if I should go after

her and apologize. She's right, tomorrow's going to be hard enough as it is.

I don't get out of bed.

I toss and turn for the rest of the night, but nothing more than fitful sleep comes to me. When the light gets stronger outside, I get out of bed and get ready for the funeral—splash water on my face and put on makeup, don a somber black dress and sensible shoes. As the sun continues to climb in the sky, I hear the sound of stirring from elsewhere in the house.

Breakfast is a silent affair, catered by Ian—eggs over easy with sourdough toast, venison bacon on the side. I can't look at my father when he walks into the kitchen, but I do lock eyes with Stephanie when she trails in after him. We eat slowly. My father finishes first, and stands. "Well," he says, looking down at Stephanie and taking her hand. His hands shake. "Shall we?" Stephanie nods and rises too. My father looks past me, doesn't quite meet my eyes. "We'll follow you in our car, then, huh?"

For the first time, I really look at him since he arrived last night. Are his eyes swollen too?

"Uh, sure. Yeah, that's fine," I mutter.

He nods, and they both leave the kitchen. I stare down at my breakfast, largely untouched.

"Go."

I turn around and Ian is looking at me, stern. "What?" I ask.

"Go after them. Ride over to the cemetery with them. Now. You'll never forgive yourself if you don't."

"Why?" I ask, my inner petulant child brought out by guilt. Ian shakes his head, exasperated.

"You wanna hear something wild? Something Lorelai told me before she died?" He doesn't pause, doesn't allow me the chance to answer. "She told me that, in the end, it's not worth being angry anymore. That it's so much easier to forgive." He stares at me, so intense I wonder if he actually looks at me, or if he sees something else. "She never wanted you to hate him. Because she never did." He shoos me with a flick of his hand. "Now get going!"

It's the most assertive I've ever seen him. "I—okay," I say, and he smiles. Quick as a flash he swoops in and kisses me on the cheek.

"I love you," he whispers in my ear.

"I love you too." I get out of my chair and hurry to the foyer. My father and Stephanie are about to step out the door. "Dad!" I cry, maybe a little louder than I'd intended. They both turn to look at me, and I balk. I should have thought this through.

"I—um—" I stammer, my father and Stephanie looking at me, expectant. I take a deep breath. "I'm really glad you're here. Both of you."

They glance at each other, surprised.

"I mean it. Mom—Mom would be really glad you're here," I finish. "Thank you for coming."

Stephanie smiles. "I'm glad we came too," she says, looking up at my dad with a smile. He nods. Stephanie looks at me. "Do you—would you like to ride with us, Caroline? I think," she glances at my dad, whose composure seems to slip, "I think we'd like that very much."

I smile at her, and then at my dad, and he smiles back, and even though it's sad, it's real. "Sure," I say. We walk out the front door and down to the car, Stephanie on one side of Dad, me on the other. We've each got one of his hands.

The breeze picks up behind us, and I shiver, but it's not from cold this time—at least not completely. I can feel her, with us; she walks in front and behind and all around. I think she must be smiling. "Me, too," whispers the little voice, the one that sounds like Mom. "I'm glad, too."

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The Wolf in Locust Grove

Gary Reddin

I've seen him once before. It was a few years ago at one of your out-of-town games. He was skulking beneath the bleachers on the home side, all leather and huff like James Dean. In my memory I had painted him as a caricature, the paradigm of cool that I had stored in my mind for future reference. Now he was here, skulking again. This time, he was in the shadow of a mausoleum far enough away from the mourners that no one would ask his name. I don't know what he hoped to see. Your body was too gone for a proper funeral, lying in a million scattered pieces across the Iraqi desert. The government sent us what was left of you in an official U.S. Army shoebox. It came complete with a commemorative letter from the president, thanking us for your service, as if we had anything to do with your decision to join the military.

Mom laid a wreath next to the fancy cement block they had bought to hold what few ashes the cremation process could draw out of the 10½ pounds of flesh, bone, and sand that used to be you. Dad cried. I said a few words about what a great brother you were. I couldn't muster much. Not because you weren't, but because you were no longer. He watched us from the shade of that tomb, chain smoking. The homilies were said, and your life was pared down to a few edifying moments. I bowed my head for the Lord's Prayer, and when I looked up, he was gone.

"That," Colin said, on our way out of the cemetery, "was The Wolf. I don't know why he was there. Last time I heard anything, he was in prison."

"The Wolf?" I asked him.

"He's bad news. They say he tore a guy's throat out with his teeth once. That's how he got the name. It's probably a load of bullshit. But either way, he isn't the kind of guy your brother would have been messing around with. People like that, they just like hanging about in graveyards, you know?"

We said goodbye in the parking lot as I got in the van with Mom and Dad. There was no reason for Colin and I to talk about our plans for the evening; they had been settled for days now. Besides, I was going with or without him. Dad was still teary-eyed. Mom had been silent since my speech. We stopped by a drive-thru and halfheartedly ordered dinner. I counted the streetlights and ate cold french fries.

When we were finally home, I went straight up to my room. Thirty minutes went by with no unwelcomed guests. I listened to The Strokes while I waited for the sun to go down. I knew every word. I knew it would annoy the shit out of you if you were here. Me, pining away with a record on, like some college dropout bumming around campus looking for someone to argue politics with. Mom stopped by my room to say goodnight. She looked tired but relieved that it was all finally over, and for her it was. I was happy for her, and for Dad. But there was one final act left. One I'd set in motion two days after we got the news.

When the time came, I locked my bedroom door before taking the flask out from beneath my pillow and slipping it into my bag. There it came to rest alongside your dog-eared copy of *The Outsiders*, the bottle of whiskey you kept hidden under the loose floorboard in your room, and three shot glasses. I went out the window and down the old flagpole—just like you had taught me. Colin was already waiting with his headlights off. I climbed in and tossed the bag in the back seat. We didn't say a word as we drove east into no man's land. I know you wouldn't approve of me going and doing this. But you know what, you're dead. So, that really doesn't matter anymore, does it?

"You know we can still turn back, right? Just say the word and I'll flip this beast around and we can go get 3 a.m. tacos and pretend like we never agreed to this."

It was the first words Colin had said to me since we started driving. I didn't know where we were. We had left the main highway an hour back and were steadily trudging down a gravel road, but he claimed to know the way and you had trusted him, so I would, too.

"I know," I said.

He looked over at me with a hint of concern, or maybe it was relief. If anything happened out here and he hadn't said it, then he would have felt guilty. This was his way of

absolving himself. I couldn't fault him for that. I knew guilt. I had felt it for months after your death. I wouldn't wish that on anyone.

The road ended abruptly. Colin pumped the brakes and pulled over next to some hay bales. I opened the door and looked around. There were no houses or fences; just trees, gravel, and the darkness.

"Is this it?" I asked.

Colin came around to my side of the car and lit up the trees around us with his phone, mumbling to himself for a moment.

"Yeah, this is it."

"How do you know?"

He pointed his light to a group of brambles that had overtaken a faded sign.

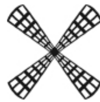
Locust Grove Baptist Church 3 miles.

"Three miles, Jesus Christ," I said, hefting my bag over my shoulders.

I lit up my own phone and shone it over the derelict sign.

"No lights," Colin said, turning his own off.

"You've got to be kidding."



"Is this the only way?" I asked, catching my pant leg on a thorn bush for the fourth time.

"Nope," Colin replied from somewhere ahead of me.

The darkness and the woods had swallowed up his form. I was following the sound of his footsteps through the undergrowth.

"Then what the hell are we doing? There has to be an easier path."

I walked into something and fell backwards. A hand reached down and hefted me back to my feet. It was Colin. He had stopped. Even through the dark, I could see the seriousness on his face.

"This isn't a game. I respected your brother, and I respect what you are trying to do for him tonight. But damn it, this place can be dangerous. I've told you that. The kind of people that come out here are dangerous."

"What, people like you? People like my brother?"

"I was careful. I knew the risks. And your brother, he was perfectly capable of taking care of himself. That's what I've been trying to get through your thick skull," He said, thumping me gently on the head.

"Risks? Colin, you came out here, you drank a few beers and you smoked a few joints; I'm not an idiot. The only risks out here are the damn thorn bushes."

He curled his lip up and cocked his eyebrow.

"Look, just keep your head down and stay quiet until we get there, okay? We don't take the simple paths out here. No one does."

We marched on. Eventually, the trees started to thin and we came into a clearing. There, I caught my first glimpse of Locust Grove; a burnt-out church in the middle of the woods with a single wall still standing. There are easier places to get drunk. You always did like to make things difficult.

Colin put a hand on my shoulder and a finger to his lips. The orange glow of a fire was burning in a steel drum, and it was casting a long shadow against the old church wall.

"Let's go," he whispered, backing up.

I pulled the straps on my bag tight to my chest "No, I'm getting this done. Tonight." My body clenched so tight I could feel every muscle straining against me. It was as though my physical body had separated from my will and the two were fighting for control. One screaming, "go back!" The other, "push forward!" I walked quickly across the clearing, trying to make as much noise as possible, hoping whoever was there would hear me coming and bail, but they didn't move. I glanced over my shoulder and saw Colin slowly pulling up the rear. I knew he wouldn't be much help in a fight, if it came to that, but I was glad he was sticking with me.

I stepped up onto the cracked foundation. I could feel the heat from the barrel fire now. I could see the back of his leather jacket and the thick heel of his boots.

"Well, if it isn't the youngest McEntire brother," The Wolf said. His face came into view, illuminated menacingly by the firelight, his voice a low growl. Fear ran through me like electricity, every nerve burning.

"I'm the oldest now," I said, setting my bag down at my feet, amazed at my own coolness.

"And who is this?" he asked.

“We aren’t looking for trouble,” Colin answered.
“Then why are you in Locust Grove.”
“We’re burying a friend.”
“My brother,” I added.
“Your brother is already dead and buried, kid.”
I stepped a little closer to him. He was older than I thought. With a nest of thick, black hair and a scruffy beard, he looked less like James Dean and more like a wild animal.
“You were there, at his funeral. I saw you,” I said.
He cast his eyes to the void behind me. For a moment, I could see a heat rising in his face that had nothing to do with the fire. I took another step toward him, plot lines unfurling in my brain.
“Why?”
“Why what?” he asked.
“Why were you there? Did you know him?”
He turned around and stared at the wall.
“Tell your friend to take a walk.”
“I’m not going anywhere,” Colin said.
“Colin, it’s fine.”
He looked at me with that curled lip again for a moment.
“I won’t go far; you need me, just holler.”
“Thanks,” I said, as he trudged off into the darkness.
“Alright, he’s gone. What is it?”
He motioned for me to come stand next to him. I obeyed. That’s when I noticed the writing for the first time. Names, crude rhymes, gang tags. Every form of graffiti imaginable on that half-burnt church wall.
“You see it?” he asked.
His voice had changed. The growl was going out of it, cracking like a dying fire.
“What, the graffiti?”
He shook his head.
“There,” he said, pointing to the upper corner.
I walked up and examined the tiny scrawl. No one would have seen it if they weren’t looking for it.

Allen T. / James M.?

“Your brother.”
“I don’t get it,” I said, turning back to look at him.
He put a hand inside his jacket. For a moment, fear rose in me again, thinking he was about to pull a knife.

“That should be all the explanation you need,” he said, handing me an old polaroid. I took it in disbelief.

“I know it’s a lot to take in, kid, but you can’t be mad at him.”

“I just…why wouldn’t he tell me? Did he think I would be upset? Did he think I gave two shits about something like this?”

“It wasn’t you, kid, I promise.”

He stepped past me and placed his hand on the wall just below the names. I stared at the picture for a while. You looked so happy. Happier than I’d ever seen you. I guess you had your reasons. I know how Dad can be, how this town can be. But you could have told me. Of all people…you could have told me.

“Do you know what they call me?” he asked.

“The Wolf.”

“And do you know why?”

“I’ve heard rumors.”

“Yeah? Did you hear the one about it being my nickname from fourth grade? When I played the big, bad wolf in my school’s musical production of Little Red Riding Hood?”

“What?”

He laughed.

“The Wolf, he’s just a character. One of many I’ve played over the years. He kept people out of my life. Kept people from asking too many questions, getting too personal. The Wolf is just a mask, but it was the mask that James fell in love with. I wore it one last time today, for him.”

Colin came into the light of the fire, I waved at him. He looked warily at The Wolf, and then back at me.

“Are you ready to do this?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said, opening my bag and taking out its contents. I poured three shots of whiskey and handed the third one, the one we had meant to leave for you, to Allen.

“I think he would want you in on this toast,” I said.

Colin was clearly confused, but said nothing. He came over and joined us with our raised glasses.

“To my brother, James. You were the bravest, stupidest man I’ve ever known. Cheers.”

“Cheers,” they repeated.

I took out your copy of *The Outsiders* and flipped it to the last lines you had highlighted. “Asleep, he looked a lot

younger than going-on-seventeen," as I read, the forest and the fire quieted themselves in honor of you. In honor of what the three of us were doing. "But I had noticed that Johnny looked younger when he was asleep too, so I figured everyone did. Maybe people are younger when they are asleep."

I closed the book and dropped it back in the bag. Only one thing left now. I unscrewed the lid, raised the flask into the air, and scattered the handful of your ashes that I had siphoned from your urn to the wind. I watched the last of you mix with the dust and ash. He watched you, too. Watched you settle onto the floor of Locust Grove. I remembered in that moment what mom used to say to me whenever I complained about you.

"Your brother is the one creation that God can never take his eyes off of."

I never knew what she meant by that. I still don't know. But seeing the way he smiled as your ashes hit the air, I think The Wolf knew.

Gary Reddin *is a writer from southern Oklahoma. His work has most recently appeared in* Stoneboat*,* The Oklahoma Review*, and* The Dragon Poet Review.

We Wait to Be Seen

Briana McDonald

I listen as the doctor's footsteps shuffle through the hall, toward any patient's door but mine. I turn my attention to the single poster tacked to one of the four bare walls. It's a cartoonish depiction of a child with Crohn's disease. The boy's head is lopsided and I am concerned there's something growing in his skull.

I am more concerned about the thing that's growing inside me. Those white smudges on my MRI, off-season snowballs near the base of my spine. Dr. Jenkins murmured mm-hm before trapping me in this windowless room as he tended to other patients.

I reach for my phone. I've debated calling my mother since the pains started. Since I vomited blood.

I scroll past a text from the date I had last week: an IT manager I met on the least offensive dating app I could find. I mentally promise to reply and tap my conversation with mom.

My last text reads *headed to the dr. stomach pains*. It fits all too well in our conversation feed, which has recently felt like my mother's version of an obituary blog.

From last week:

Barbara Wilson's son was in an accident.
Fell asleep at the wheel and is in ICU.
We should send her a bouquet.

Barbara who?

You know her.
She visited when you were a girl.

She brought you that teddy bear.
The one with the red bow.

I don't remember a teddy bear with a red bow. I don't remember much beyond last week.

From three days previous:

John LeBlanc passed last week.
Heart attack. So unexpected.
Call me.

At work, can't.
Our old neighbor, right?

Mailman.
Up until you were thirteen.
You don't remember? Call me after work.

It went on like that as far as I could scroll. Riddled into conversations about work and debates about the latest episode of *Jane the Virgin*, these morbid anecdotes were littered across the landscape of our relationship.

The doctor knocks on a door down the hall. I imagine him knocking at each wooden panel, listening for my voice.

I lean back on the exam table. It curves upward, pressed against my spine. I envision the tumors bursting like balloons, sending cancer through my back.

I sit back up and watch the door.

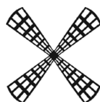
I scroll through half a dozen Facebook posts featuring my college friends and their ruddy-cheeked babies. I debate opening Google and letting WebMD be my new doctor. I open my mother's number, exit, and open a blank text.

I deleted Cole from my contacts a year ago, but I remember his number by heart. I press my fingertip against the blank space for the message. The cursor blinks impatiently. I start to type:

I thought you should know–

I need you to know. I want you to need to know.

A knock at the door. I delete the message and answer, “Come in.”



I wait until I’m back at my condo to call my mom. When I unlock my phone I’m greeted by a message from an unsaved number I recognize as Cole’s.

Can I see you?

I press the power button on and off so the screen blinks back at me, as though I might extinguish his message. Extinguish every little thing between us, every piece that should have died but squirms its way through any cracks in my resolve.

I didn’t cry when I threw up blood or when the doctor said I would need surgery. I didn’t cry when he suggested a localized shot treatment to shrink the tumors to an operable size, or even when he warned me that they’d probably come back, probably always be with me, even after the surgeon tried to cut them out.

But I want to cry now, at the mixture of desperation and hesitation in Cole’s text. He drove me to the hospital when I had my appendix removed junior year of college. Swerving through traffic he gripped my hand, he murmured gentle assurances between curses at other drivers. When I woke post-operation, drunk off of anesthetics, I told him I loved him for the first time in front of my mom and all of the nurses. With my eyes droopy from the drugs, my speech slurred, and an incision in my abdomen, he’d kissed my forehead and said he loved me too.

Home now, I reply. Meaning my home, not our home, because it hasn’t been our home for almost a year. Perhaps since before he moved out, back when he took that marketing job last spring, drinking with coworkers he never introduced me to, and texting that chubby saleswoman he never ended

up dating, but who was enough to prompt the “we’re headed in different directions” discussion.

“I agree,” I’d said, and we both cried, as though disappointed the other had given up so easily.

Be there after work.

I wish I’d received that a year ago,

The tumors have made me the girl in one of my mom’s morbid text chains, and now he remembers.

Since there’s nothing left to lose, I call mom and tell her the whole story. She asks more questions than I did the doctor. It’s as though she’s gathering notes for whatever morbid mass-text I’ll star in, delivered to acquaintances I know the same way I know them: through my mom’s stories.

I imagine the message going viral amongst her fellow empty-nesters:

Remember me mentioning Carol from work?
Her daughter has tumors by her spine.
Twenty-six years old. Can you believe it?

“Who’s going with you to your next appointment?” mom asks.

I swallow. “I thought you would.”

I hear her huff. I can almost feel her breath against my ear. “That’s a hard drive for me, especially on a weekday. And the Sonata’s been making these noises lately––”

“Okay.”

“I don’t know when this thing’s going to give out, and the last thing I need is to be stranded on some side street in the city during rush hour––”

“Okay.”

“The doctor told me to watch my blood pressure, and just thinking about driving in the city on a weekday during rush hour––”

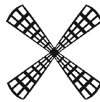
I rub my finger against my temple. “Don’t worry about it. I’m sure I can find someone.”

She lets out another huff. It sounds like a thousand eager excuses evaporating against my reassurance. "Are you driving up for the wake this weekend?"

John Le-Something. The mailman from my adolescence. I want to remind her that I have no idea who he is, and how strange I'll feel surrounded by people who loved him for more than that he delivered my *Teen Vogue* through blizzards.

I think of my tumors, nestled like eggs at the base of my spine. For the first time, I wish I remembered someone from her stories.

"I'll be there," I say. "Text me the address."



When Cole parks by the curb, he leaves his headlights on. It could be a mistake, but I take it as a message: he won't be staying for long. He won't *let* himself stay for long. If he does, the battery will drain and die. We will have our conversation and he will leave.

I'm disappointed that he will be leaving. I'm relieved that he has to incentivize leaving.

I busy myself at the kitchen island. I cock my head in surprise when he knocks, as though he could see me through the door. "Come in," I call, making no move to let him in myself.

The door opens and a burst of cool air sweeps through the condo. Cole staggers in, his thick, wavy, dark hair tussled from the wind. He walks with that same slanted posture, like a boy still adjusting to his tall, post-puberty body.

He scrapes his boots against the welcome mat on instinct, head tilted down as he watches flakes of dirt scatter from his heels. I remember last winter when he came in, caked in snow up to his knees, shovel in hand. The tip of his nose was a bright red dot. I'd kissed it and smiled.

He brushes his hand through his hair, pushing back the long curl that falls by his right eye. "Eva," he says, and somehow it's enough.

"He thinks I can avoid chemo." My gut reaction is to comfort Cole, always. Even now. "I'm getting these shots once a month, and they're hoping the tumors—" he winces at the word, "—will shrink enough to remove through surgery."

The skin between his eyebrows pinches with concern. He unzips his jacket but doesn't remove it as he makes his way toward the island. I remain fixed behind the slab of granite, forcing him to decide our proximity. He leans his elbows against the adjacent corner, closer than he would have been across the island but not directly beside me.

"When will you know?"

"I have another MRI in about eight weeks."

His jaw tightens. "What does your mother say? Will she be with you?"

I lean my elbows onto the island, mimicking his pose. "She…"

I can already see his teeth clenching.

"It's over an hour drive, and you know how she—"

"You're her *daughter*, for god's sake." He straightens up, one hand running back through his mess of hair. His eyes sweep the room as though she's there, and this rant is directed at her. "She's in perfect health. You're not. She can make the damn drive." When his gaze finds mine again, he finishes with, "You shouldn't bother telling her how it goes. If she wants to know, she can come."

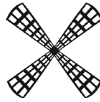
I stare into his narrow black pupils, watch the way his chest rises and falls behind his plaid button-up. I can't help but chuckle. "You always get so worked up when she's like this."

He lets out a shaky laugh and it sounds like an exhale. *You always*. I love how the phrase tastes on my tongue. Like a memory with eternal life. Like something permanent between us. There isn't much permanent between us, anymore. I hold on to two simple words as though they're pinkies locked together in a promise.

His stance shrinks back down, as though he's a cobra coiling back in on himself after a strike. His teeth catch his lower lip and his gaze flicks between me and the door before he murmurs a soft, "Hey," and gestures for me to come closer.

I sink into the embrace, cheek against his collarbone. He smells like mint toothpaste. The kind that clung in globs to our bathroom sink, that I'd dislodge with splashes of water while playfully reprimanding him through the open door.

I close my eyes and inhale. Then I let go.



I wear a black dress to my childhood mailman's wake. Mom's heels stab through the snow as she charges up the walkway to the funeral home's entrance.

"Sheri Buckley said she'd be here," she says, holding the door open for me. "You remember her, right? She lived on Flynn, by that house that kept their Christmas decorations up year-round."

I remember driving back from the beach, 16 and bikini-clad, as the Virgin Mary ogled me from my neighbor's porch. So I say, "Yes."

We hang our coats by the front door and follow the smell of moth balls and cologne into the viewing area. A sea of strangers in black flood the space. There's a line leading into a separate room and I sense the body of the mailman I don't know.

Somehow the renowned Sheri from Flynn Street spots us through the crowd. She and my mom embrace like old friends. Perhaps they are. Perhaps I've heard a thousand stories about Sheri from Flynn Street but, without knowing her myself, allowed them to slip through the lazy cracks in my mind.

Sheri gestures to a woman hunched over a walker. "That's the wife."

Mom shakes her head in remorse. "Such a shame. This was so unexpected."

Sheri nods solemnly.

He was 74, I think.

My tumors remind me I'm 26.

"We'll go introduce ourselves," my mother says, nodding for me to follow.

"Come find me after," Sheri calls. "You have *got* to try the brie and spinach spread his daughter put out."

Her words drum in my head as we approach my ex-mailman's wife, Mrs. Le-Something. She stands in front of a collage of photos, ranging from her husband's birth to old age.

I wonder if she took the photos, and who orchestrated the ones featuring both of them. I avoid photographs. Almost every picture of me—even the one mom sent out in her holiday email—was taken by Cole. No matter how the wind whipped and frizzed my hair, or how lack of sleep circled my eyes, he insisted I pose.

"What else will you remember this by?" he'd ask, holding up his phone. I'd see him smile just before the flash blinded me.

Looking at the collage of the mailman's life, I wonder how many moments in my history were framed by Cole. Snapshots with him out of view, but backed by his presence.

Even now, without him physically here. Even in the future, years after he left.

Cole, the spine of my memories.

The widow's neck cranes upward as we approach. She looks like an owl woken from a nap.

"You knew John?" she asks, her purple lips straining to a smile, each movement in slow motion.

She extends a veiny hand. My mother grasps it in her strong, square fingers. "He was our mailman back in the day."

The woman's eyes light up. "And you remembered him?"

A proud grin sweeps across mom's face. The widow's eyes flicker to me expectantly and I try to conjure an image of her husband in my mind. All I manage is a very young Emma Watson smiling beside a headline about teen survivors of Hurricane Katrina.

I nod anyway.

My mom releases her hand and the woman reaches for mine. Her skin feels like tissue paper, as though a twitch of my finger could tear her open. "He'd be happy you came," she said.

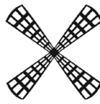
I want to believe her.

We head to the open casket. I watch my mother make a show of praying on her knees beside it, lips moving in silent prayer. She rises and gestures toward it, a wordless your turn. Then she leaves to find Sheri and the cheese spread.

I position my hands on the lip of the casket. Inside lies the stiff body of a man I don't know. The hands that delivered my *Teen Vogue* rest folded on his chest.

Makeup cakes his purplish skin. Mom said he died of a heart attack.

My pulse rises. I feel it flutter at the base of my spine.



They take another MRI after I receive the third shot. My phone buzzes as I'm listening for the doctor's knock. It's the man I'd met from the dating app, replying to my request to reschedule dinner for another day:

I've actually started
seeing someone.

I wonder if it's true. I wonder if I've been so absentminded in recent weeks that he got bored and moved on to someone quicker, easier.

I realize I don't care and delete the message chain.

A knock comes on the door. "Come in," I call. My voice shakes, my vocal chords like rattling pipes.

The door opens. Cole stands where I expected Dr. Jenkins, wide shoulders vaguely hunched as always. His glazed eyes fix on me.

"They said I could come in." He says it like a question.

I wonder if he's with someone. If she's tidying her condo as she waits for his return, lying to herself about how often she checks the clock by the stove.

I nod and he shuts the door behind him.

Wordlessly he moves toward me, fingertips brushing my elbow. I scooch across the exam table and he lowers himself beside me. I turn my back to him and he holds me against his chest. It reminds me of the first time we shared a bed––his dorm room twin––folded together like spoons in a narrow cabinet.

Heat radiates from his body. I used to joke that he lowered my gas bill each month. I haven't done the math to see if it was true.

"You're trembling," he says, arms layered over mine.

"So are you," I say.

He's silent for a moment. Outside a nurse calls a patient's name.

His grip tightens. "I don't want to lose you," he says.

What he means is I don't want you to die. What he means is I want you alive, but not with me. I want to know you're out there in the world, somewhere, existing on the same plane as me, but never crossing paths.

It's the cruelest thing he could have said.

Another knock, the doctor this time. I focus on Cole's heat until he vaporizes into a warm cloud. Closing my eyes, I look inward toward my spine. I watch the snowballs melt.

Briana McDonald*'s fiction has appeared in* Rozyln: Short Fiction by Women Writers*,* Marathon Literary Review*,* The Stonecoast Review*,* Glassworks Magazine*,* The Cardiff Review*, and* Belletrist Review*. She is a prose reader and reviewer at The Literary Review and an annual first reader for CLMP's Firecracker Awards.*

The Tomb

Jeff Fleischer

We first noticed them in the spring.

Rhonda and I had moved into the third-floor walk-up in late February. Her mother had suggested we would find a better deal if we changed apartments in the winter, when fewer renters would be willing to let snow and sleet dictate which days they could tour empty spaces. She was right, and we found a lovely vintage building whose owner had let it sit vacant for too long. He was so glad for tenants to stop the bleeding that we paid well below our target price.

The building had to be nearly a century old. Some of the interior had been updated, but it was mostly functional; someone had blocked the fireplace flue to render the piece merely decorative. Like many buildings its age, ours had nowhere to hang a light fixture in the living room, but the windows overlooking the courtyard would keep the room well-lit in summer. When we moved in, though, the days were still short, and the standing lamp we installed by the door provided only a warming aura. As it was, with both of us working long hours and still in the afterglow of moving in together, we spent most of our time at home in the bedroom anyway.

On a Sunday morning when the ground was starting to thaw, we decided to air out the stuffy apartment. When we went to dust one of the oversized windows opposite the bookshelf, we found one of the largest wasps either of us had ever seen.

Rhonda instinctively shrieked and jumped backward when she saw it. For good reason. In college, she'd been stung on her way to sociology class, and only a classmate's quick thinking had gotten her to a clinic before the anaphylaxis swelling her throat caused permanent damage.

I waved my arms to startle it away, but the wasp couldn't reach her. It was inside the window, caught between the two

panes of glass. Up close, I could hear short bursts of a buzzing sound, but the thick glass muffled it even a few steps away. The wasp crawled its way up the glass, and flitted around the enclosed space, but couldn't get out. The other windows were empty, so we let the breeze in, making sure not to even loosen the latch on the one housing the insect. I drew the cloth drapes, just so Rhonda wouldn't have to see it moving about.

If we lived in one of the garden units, I could have covered myself and released the wasp by opening the window from the outside, assuming I could get it open through the bars designed to keep would-be burglars away. To reach our floor, though, would take a ladder of a height I'd only seen at construction sites.

We called the maintenance guy, who assured me he would take care of it next time he was at the property. From my previous interactions with him, I wasn't optimistic that would be anytime soon.

We checked on the wasp almost every day. I'm not exactly sure why; maybe Rhonda just wanted to make sure it hadn't found a way to get loose in the apartment. Part of me wanted to let it in when she wasn't home, to find a way to catch it and put it outside. Another part thought I should give it a quick and definitive end, rather than a drawn-out demise between the window glass. I realized I didn't know enough about wasps to guess whether it had enough air or food, or if it could live as long in its current position as anywhere else.

About a week after we first saw the pest, we were watching a movie in the living room with the drapes drawn back, when it occurred to me that I hadn't seen any movement from the window near the bookshelf all day. After Rhonda went to get ready for bed, I checked the window and found the wasp dead on the slat of wood sill inside the window.

It wasn't alone.

There had to be at least a dozen dead wasps in a pile. I must not have looked at the bottom of the sill since the wasp appeared, but this clearly wasn't a new problem for the apartment. I should have swept their remains into a trash bag that night, but the weather had been unseasonably damp and windy, and rain kept pelting the building. Rhonda was waiting for me, so I decided to clean up the mess in the morning.

The next day, there were more wasps. I don't know if the one we'd seen had been a queen, or if they came from some nest I couldn't see, but two small wasps occupied the window. Rhonda was worried; while I was stuck in traffic on the way home from work, she covered the perimeter of the window with silver electrical tape to make sure these smaller wasps couldn't fit through some space we hadn't noticed. When I got home, I called the landlord and demanded that the maintenance guy bring a ladder and remove the wasps.

I was right not to expect much. The surly caretaker showed up a week later to diagnose the problem, but didn't bring a ladder, and just gave the window a once-over before disappearing. I left him a few more messages about it, but eventually gave up.

All spring, our window filled with wasps. From a few at first, it soon teemed with a whole colony. The pile of dead grew as generations were born, lived their short lives in the gap between our glass, and fell into the same mass grave of tiny bodies. Rhonda kept the drapes on that window closed, because of the way the sunlight cast strange shadows in the living room, and the elongated wasp shapes that never failed to unsettle her.

As the insects multiplied, their sound became harder to ignore. The buzzing lasted all day and night, but it was the quiet bumps that most upset Rhonda, the dissonant symphony of wasps slamming into the glass. The noise came at irregular intervals, and sometimes many wasps hit the side in quick succession. They didn't seem strong enough to crack the glass, but we didn't have any way to know for sure, and Rhonda gradually covered the window itself with crisscross patterns of shining tape.

She spent less time in the living room, and avoided the courtyard windows altogether. I still felt the need to check on the wasps, and every day found anywhere from a few to a dozen or more fighting for space within their glass mausoleum. The maintenance man never returned, and I felt helpless to solve the problem. There were enough wasps that even if I wanted to remove all the tape, I doubted I could pull up the glass without spilling the dead ones all over the floor. Let alone the biblical horde that would invade our living space.

By the time we broke our lease in August, nearly half of the window had filled with black and yellow shells, the survivors ever louder as they lost their limited real estate to the encroaching dead. Years later, Rhonda still checks the windows in the new house from time to time, though we've never had wasps here, or anything but the occasional spider. Sometimes in quieter moments, I still hear that awful buzz of dozens of trapped insects muffled by glass. Most nights now, we set the sleep timer on our old clock radio before we fall asleep.

The rare times I'm in the old neighborhood to pick up a pizza or get coffee with a friend, I never stop by to check on the third-floor apartment the way I do other former homes. I don't want to know how full the window got, or the fate of its disquieting tenants.

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The First Few Steps

Matthew McGevna

In summer we drown rabbits. It happened twice, now that I think about it. It makes perfect sense. My son writes these things for school assignments. Two minutes ago, he walks into the living room with a note. He has no idea what it says, but it's from his teacher, and skipping all the mumbo-jumbo about diligence for the health and welfare of children, the teacher wants to know what's up with this. I have no idea at first. And then, ah yes, I suppose it's true for him. In summer we drown rabbits. I make a note to correct his grammar. In the summer we drown rabbits.

It happened for the first time two summers ago when they got into the old horse trough and couldn't get out. If this was back when Turnbull had trees and good fences, the trough would have been uncovered and our horse, Mayfield, would have been drinking from it. But the town filled up with little houses and those little houses sold off their back yards for even littler houses and everybody was squeezed onto tiny lots and eventually they passed laws that said you needed an acre of property for a horse. We had to sell him. But my husband Jeffrey kept the trough in back of the house in case they repealed the law. I let him have his fantasies. With Jeffrey, I have to choose which bubbles to pop and which to let float beneath his feet to keep him standing.

The trough stayed and collected leaves until Jeffrey finally covered it with a piece of plywood. Then one day we busted a water pipe in our basement. We were off to our friend's wedding reception when it happened. Jeffrey looked like the Little Dutch Boy, yelling nonsense while the water sprayed out and soaked him. "Rags! Tape! Tie…Water!" he yelled. "Ahh!"

At length, he duct-taped a garden hose to the hole in the pipe and fed the hose through the basement window. But then the grass was getting soaked, and it would be some time before Allen Lebow, Jeffrey's friend from NA, would

show up to fix the pipe for free. We had a wedding to attend, so Jeffrey stuck the hose under the wooden cover of the horse trough and let the trough fill up with water to buy some time until Allen got there.

When we got home the hole was crudely plugged with an ugly soldering job. But it was free, and it worked. The next morning we slogged through the wet yard to assess the damage. I had Jack trailing behind me. He was only 4.

We set to the task of cleaning up the mess. Jeffrey used buckets of dirt to absorb the marshy grass. I rolled up the hose and brought it back to the basement. I got another look at Allen's plumbing work—it sure was a pig's ass of a job. I could only be grateful. I was on the verge of tears when I saw that pipe spray water, and was just about resigned to tear up the wedding check. And wouldn't that have been something to explain to my friends. But in Turnbull, people can only hope for good friends but busted pipes. Allen's pig's ass of a job let us, at least for a while, have good friends and working pipes, so I was grateful.

Upstairs I could hear Jeffrey telling little Jack to stop splashing in the grass. I went up to help him just as he lifted the cover of the trough to drain it. There were five rabbits, including the mother, and they were rolled into tight little balls. It was as if they'd curled up to protect their vital organs, not understanding. Jack was immediately to the edge of the trough.

"Look at that," Jeffrey said to me, "they're curled up in a ball floating; it's like bobbing for brown apples."

I was falling into my sorrow when Jack dropped to his knees and tried to bob for one. I yanked him back. He must have remembered Claire's birthday party the month before.

Jeffrey threw the rabbits into the woods beside our house. He said the dogs would get them, the ones that were really hungry at least, and there were plenty of those. Strays that find each other and travel in packs, scouring the earth for food. Jeffrey said the rabbits would be gone by morning. I never checked, but he was probably right.

The second time might be what sticks in little Jack's mind the most. Sentimental, or industrious, whichever—last summer Jeffrey decided to finally clean out Mayfield's stall. He pulled our pitchfork from the rafters of the loft and started to toss the old hay.

When he got to the corner of the stall he heard a cry, like a baby's cry and he stopped what he was doing. He felt around with his hands and found a stray cat.

We let Jack name her. He named her Barney. I kept telling him it was a female cat, but he looked like he was about to have a meltdown, so I gave in. But Barney the female cat was to stay outside.

There was a bad night later when I kept calling her "Barney the Female Cat." He wanted me to say it was a male. I wasn't about to do that. In the end I sent him to his room because he wouldn't let it go, and he melted down.

I snuck into his room after and watched him sleep. His cheeks were ruddy from crying. He was curled up in a ball and calmly breathing. His hairline was wet; his neck a little splotchy. He'd missed out on dessert and story-time. All because I couldn't call a female cat a male. Crazy son of a bitch.

After a while, though, Jack lost his enthusiasm for her, and Barney the female cat just became a passing nuisance mewing at the back door. Sometimes we'd remember to bring her food, sometimes we'd forget. Sometimes we didn't have the extra money for food.

It must have been late summer, around the same time as the horse trough incident the year prior. We heard dull thumps coming from a small woodpile in back of our house. The pile was at the edge of a narrow strip of woods before the neighbor's house took over. We looked, and a wooden slat from an old picket fence was moving with each beating thud. When Jeffrey and I got closer we saw it was a rabbit kicking at the slat like it was death. Her guts were hanging out—a multicolored sack of slime. Its red and beige stomach sat in the dirt like spilled vomit.

She was consistently kicking the slat with even intervals, like marking time. Jeffrey reached down to scoop her up and she died. Its one petrified eye dilated and it kicked more hurriedly when it saw Jeffrey reaching down for her. Her heart must have given out from fear.

Moments after, I saw Barney poke her head up from a low shrub in the woods, guilty as Eve. I stamped my foot and she bolted away, leaping above the brush—showing me her pink little asshole with every bound. I stepped a few feet toward where Barney had been hiding when I noticed small

pink bodies squirming about blindly in the leaves. They looked like mice, but I knew they were the dead rabbit's kits. They were only days old.

Jeffrey told me they'd never survive without the mother, but he couldn't bring himself to stomping on them, or hitting them with a shovel. We went through all the gruesome methods of execution. We didn't have the money to spend on some vet to put them down. In the end, I gathered them up in the tail of my shirt and held them close to my body. I carried them inside. I filled our bathtub halfway. Then I dropped them into the water and held them under with my hands.

Jeffrey was supposed to be guarding the bathroom door, but he must have wandered off at some point, because Jack came in and peeked over my shoulder. He understood when I told him. They were real sick. And their mommy couldn't fix them.

Two summers in a row, I suppose, qualifies as a tradition. I place the letter on our kitchen table and make the phone call to Jack's teacher. It's a fast conversation, but right at the end he says something that really sets me off. He uses the word "we" when he talks about raising Jack, and he says, "We can never be too careful about what we allow our children to witness."

Can't we, I think. But I don't say it. Is he saying I'm a bad mother? So I call my mother, who herself was a bad mother, to ask. She was the principal at Turnbull Elementary up until last year, so she has both sides of the picture. Am I a bad mother? Melanie says I'm not. But then she tells me how the secretaries at the school once barged into her office when I was younger because I had fleas on my scalp. And she laughs at how crazy the school nurse reacted, and she says she had no idea how I managed to get fleas.

"You mean it wasn't because of the mangy, disgusting dog you had, or the fact that you thought shampoo was vanity?" I ask. But Melanie is not in the mood, so we leave it at that.

Jeffrey comes in after work and sees the letter. He chews an apple in his left hand while he reads the letter in his right. It's a short letter, but as usual, he takes forever to read it. He's such a slow reader it drives me nuts. Plus, I'm convinced he's not really reading because sometimes I'll watch his eyes and they're not moving in an orderly, left-to-right fashion. They're

all over the page. This time is no different. He's chewing on his apple and his eyes are moving—up...down...right. He's not saying anything. He's not reacting. Then he holds the wet, open white apple about a half inch from his mouth and keeps it there while he reads for a really long time. I watch his lips move. His eyes are all over the page, but his lips are moving as if he's reading along. Then a soft whisper emerges from his lips and I can hear it. 'To the parents of Jack Willis,' he keeps repeating. 'To the parents of Jack Willis, to the parents of Jack…" Then he goes, 'Hmmmph,' and his eyes move down toward the bottom of the page. In a moment, his eyes move back up to the top of the letter. A whisper slips from his lips. 'To the parents of Jack Willis, to the parents of Jack…' I snatch the apple from his hand and he looks at me with hurt in his eyes.

"Read the fucken thing!" I scream.

"I was reading it, Kimberly," he says. "Give me my apple." But at this point I'm so furious I hurl the apple out of the kitchen, across the living room and into the front room. It bounces against the front door and comes to a rest. He starts to laugh, which makes me want to laugh, but I can't because it will diminish the seriousness.

One of the first things he says to me after he reads the letter is, "So is it illegal to drown rabbits or something?" I tell him that I took care of it already. He doesn't get that we're bad parents now, and that I have to face these teachers at conferences. He doesn't go to them, I do. He doesn't have to sit under the lamps of the teacher's eyes and try to laugh it off like it's all one big misunderstanding, while knowing full well the teacher is leaving the room thinking, "Only in Turnbull do you have to tell parents not to drown wildlife in front of their 6-year-old." He doesn't suffer their politeness.

That night, while I lay on my side, Jeffrey leans over and says, "It's really none of his business. We could yank open the door to Noah's Ark for all he should care; he should stick to educating our son." I roll over and kiss his lips in the dark. Moments later he's snoring. The deep slumber of someone who thinks he's said the right thing.

The next day Jack comes home from school crying. I'm in the kitchen but the moment I hear him sniffle I know he's weeping and I rush to him. He tells me he got sent to the principal's office. It was all because of Roger (bless his heart;

he thinks the world knows who Roger is because *he* does). I'm still checking him for bruises even though he doesn't seem physically hurt. He tells me Roger pulled his chair out from under him and he fell. So he got up and he jumped on Roger, raining down a drum session on his head, and the teacher pulled him to the principal's office.

Jeffrey comes home and can't understand. "If he won the fight, why's he crying?" he asks.

"He's gentle," I say. "He feels bad that he hurt Roger."

"Roger has lessons to learn too," Jeffrey says. I'm just glad that Jeffrey doesn't go into Jack's room and give him the "atta-boy" speech I hear fathers sometimes give. Instead, when Jack comes out of his room Jeffrey tries to look stern and half-heartedly tells him that he shouldn't hurt other people. Then he looks at me like I put him up to it.

Things get worse. A few days later the school calls me. Jack had an accident in his pants during recess. Can I come down with a change of clothes? It becomes a routine after that. He pisses himself every day in school and his classmates are on about it. This is when Jeffrey gets involved and he sits Jack down in our living room and asks him why he wets himself. Then Jeffrey acts surprised when he doesn't get an answer. The school's response is to let him go to the bathroom whenever he wants. It doesn't work. He wets himself in gym class outside. The school summons us on a day we're both exhausted from work and we don't want to speak to them or each other for that matter. It's times like these when I kind of, only sort of, wish my mother was still principal. The teacher tells us it could be psychological. The other day Jack's classmates decided to be nice and when they noticed he hadn't wet himself, they all clapped. This story is too much for Jeffrey to handle; he leaps up and leaves the room.

"Is he bat-shit?" Jeffrey asks that night to the ceiling in our dark bedroom. I tell him it's his first year in school and the world is changing in front of him. Jeffrey is silent for a while. I can sense he's turning this inward. I can hear his brain asking if this is perhaps the beginning of things. Of Jack's inevitable, hereditary addiction. If this is just a short 10 years before we're rushing him to the hospital, as his parents did, for some injury incurred while high on something. I know he still sits up some nights with my mother's voice echoing in his ears.

When we first told my mother I was pregnant with Jack, she pursed her lips and turned her head away like she always does. Then she stared at Jeffrey and asked if he wasn't worried he was bringing an addict into the world.

"That type of thing doesn't go away, you know," she said. "Just because you stopped doing drugs doesn't mean your children won't pick it up."

When Jeffrey didn't storm out of the room I'd asked how he could sit there. I wanted him to tear her down. But he said that he'd deserved it.

While we lay in bed, he eventually says, "I feel like I should lock our bedroom door. My mom started doing that after a while." His childhood is cupped in his closed hands like a firefly, and occasionally he lets me have a peek. I'm supposed to be appreciative of this new revelation he's given me, but I want to call him an asshole. Instead I roll over and kick free the corner of my blanket that's pinned under the mattress.

Melanie's answer is discipline. "You don't spank that child enough," she says. "Children this age are like monkeys, nothing more." She breezes in and out of our house like a state inspector. Every time she tries to menace Jack into doing what she wants, he giggles. She blames me for his insolence and she claims the fact that I'm 13 years older than Jeffrey is the reason why we're not on the same page about Jack. She makes little digs whenever she can about how I have two sons in the house, and how I adopted Jeffrey back when I was his manager at Coles. I insist that times have changed; he's on his own two feet now, and I'm no longer a manager of anything except this house, but she starts to smile at the whole arrangement as proof. "Jeffrey's walking now, on his own feet?" she'd said once. "You must be so proud. They get so big, so fast."

There's a lot of advice for me, from every direction, but I can't get Jack to stop wetting himself. Jeffrey thinks he's too wound up and takes him outside to teach him football. Since Mayfield is gone, the small corral is vacant, and the fence is starting to decompose, so Jeffrey grabs the ball and draws some lines in the ground with a stick. I watch them from the kitchen window. Jeffrey is pointing to the ends of the corral and Jack looks to where he points. Then Jeffrey hands him the ball and backs up a few feet. He tells Jack to try to run

past him, but Jack runs a few steps toward him and then just launches the ball into the air. Jeffrey catches it. He grabs Jack's wrist to tell him he's supposed to hold the ball and run past him. They try again and get the same result. I walk outside to watch them, and Jeffrey is scratching his head. I can tell he's trying to be calm.

"Let's try this," he says. "The new goal of the game now is to run around for as long as you can without throwing the ball, okay? No throwing the ball." Jeffrey backs up again. Jack is grinning at him and he starts to run. Jeffrey closes the gap between them and makes like he's about to tackle him, when Jack suddenly kicks the ball away.

I start to laugh. "You said don't throw the ball, you didn't say anything about kicking it," I joke. Jeffrey shoots me a look. He's out of breath already, and his hands are on his knees. It's been years. And even back then he wasn't much of an athlete. "It's rugby," I say as a word of encouragement.

"I'm not teaching him rugby; this is America," Jeffrey says. "I wish Chris was around; he could teach him to play lacrosse."

Chris, Jeffrey's brother, is a politician in Massachusetts. He's also a lawyer, but back in Turnbull he was a lacrosse player and the homecoming king and a good boy.

Jeffrey tries once more. Jack grabs the ball, runs toward Jeffrey, who holds his arms out to tackle him, but Jack turns around. Runs the wrong way. Jeffrey yells after him, but he keeps running to the end of the corral. Then he spikes the ball and does a touchdown dance. Jeffrey's had enough, and he storms toward me. I can't help it; I'm laughing so much my ribs are bouncing. Jeffrey says to me, "You have fun teaching him to do something and I'll sit around and laugh, cuz he's half a retard," as he walks away. Jack is still in the end zone, dancing in place like king victorious.

Jeffrey's response after I approach him with new ideas is the same since the football game. "If he doesn't care, I don't care," he says. But he agrees to look into a therapist who specializes in these things. Physically, the school nurse, and the doctors at the social services clinic say there's nothing wrong with him. No weak bladder, no infection, no neurological issues with his sensations; in other words, he knows when he needs to pee. In bed, I hand Jeffrey a sheet of paper with some information about a therapist in the

area. He holds it up to eye level and takes forever to read it. I leave the room until he's asleep.

Every day for the next week I harass Jeffrey to find out whether we can get his health insurance to cover the therapist. The other day Jack's apparent nemesis, Billy Wiggins, ran over to the sink during art and splashed water on the front of his pants. Then he ran around the classroom yelling, "I'm Jack, look at me, I'm Jack!" Since then Jack has been hanging around me asking if there's a cure. Asking me if I can fix him. I tell him sometimes these things fix themselves. He asks me again if I can fix him and I level with him. I tell him I didn't think so.

The same evening that Jeffrey comes home and tells me his health insurance doesn't cover mental health for minors, a woman from the school calls. Jack wrote a new story for class. I was going to drown him in the bathtub because he wets himself and he can't be fixed. I have no idea where he gets this from. I tell the woman it's his overactive imagination and she tells me she assumed so, but just in case, there's free counseling available for young mothers who might feel overwhelmed. After I hang up I feel like I need it, and I tell Jeffrey. He's hysterical laughing, glorying in my embarrassment.

"It's a whole 'nother bag of hammers when Jack messes with you, isn't it?" he says. I'd been waiting for him to feel vindicated after his football debacle.

When Jack gets home I tell him he mustn't write such things about Mommy, and he's looking at me almost petrified. Like he's waiting for me to drag him into the tub.

Days later Jack takes first place in tag. No one can catch him, and when he comes home holding his first-place ribbon Jeffrey does this dumb little dance and throws Jack into the air. I keep telling him he's getting too close to the ceiling fan, but he's too busy blasting out, "We Are the Champions." Jack whacks his head on the way down. The blade startles and dust cascades into Jeffrey's upturned face. He drops Jack and spits. I can tell Jack wants to cry, but he doesn't dare.

"You'll see, everything is great now," Jeffrey says in bed. He tries to roll over and make love to me, but I'm not in the mood. We both have to get up early. I tell him it was just a game of tag.

“It was a tag tournament,” he corrects, “and it’s not just, honey, it’s the beginning of everything. His first fuck you to the universe. Not everybody gets the chance to do that.”

But to me it’s just a game of tag, and when Jeffrey tries once more to slide his warm hands under my nightgown, I shove his hands away. I fail to see Jack’s future run for president. Instead I’m sitting up in bed lamenting how far away Jack is when he’s at school and how much further away he’ll get as time passes. That’s the way it’s supposed to be, Jeffrey would tell me, and I’m supposed to be like those moms who imagine all the wonderful things he’ll see and do and invent in his future. I hope you dance, and all that, but I’m not that mom. I’ve become the mom who’s relieved when Jack comes home and tells me his day, his life, is quite ordinary.

When I fall asleep, he’s on my mind because there’s a lot of water in this dream I have. Jack’s just on the other side of our little slatted fence, and I’m under the grass and I can’t get to my cell phone. I don’t know why I need the phone, but I can feel Jack’s breath on the other side. I’m kicking the slats to get to the phone and more water is pouring in as I do. I’m kicking at the slats, trying to loosen them. The pressure on my bladder mounts and I’m kicking and kicking the slats, but the slats won’t give.

A boy named Kevin Ferraro saves the day for Jack. Winning the tag tournament does not make Jack the celebrity Jeffrey thinks it should. He went three days without pissing himself and my nightmares were beginning to fade into abstract dreams. Then on the fourth day, we get a call from the school that Jack had an accident again. Only this time when Jack comes home he’s too excited to speak about it. I keep asking him, but he’s more interested in telling me the aftermath.

When he was coming in from recess with his jeans soaked through, Billy Wiggins and two of his psychopath friends started to chase Jack down the hallway. They were going to tie a leash around his neck until he got housebroken, they said. Jack ran for his dear life, and when he turned the corner he bumped into a fifth-grader named Kevin Ferraro. Kevin sized up the situation pretty fast and he went after the three boys like the alpha male of a gorilla enclosure. The whole of the first-grade class is either petrified or captured under the spell of Kevin Ferraro and now Jack is under his protection.

This tidies things up for Jack and he goes back to staying dry all day. I'm not comfortable with the idea that Jack is indebted to Kevin like a mafia don, but Jeffrey shrugs and talks about all the different forms of justice in this world. He's for whatever works.

I hate the shrug. I hate his letting go. I hate how much he embraces this idea that you can't control things. It's touchy, because it's the very thing he's being taught in NA. Since his recovery, he's always on about accepting that he has no control. It reminds me of Socrates, who said something like 'true knowledge is knowing that you know nothing.' It's very Zen, but fuck that guy; I want steps and I want outcomes. Jeffrey's steps are like stairs to nowhere, to nothing. They're endless and they're deliberately designed to help addicts stay within themselves. I love that he's recovered, but I hate that he's in recovery, and his recovery is teaching him that you can't find a way to have Billy Wiggins and his friends leave Jack alone by appealing to their better angels. Jeffrey is willing to accept Kevin Ferraro's solution because, after all, he can't change it, and it pisses me off.

My mother visits us again and inspects the house. Jeffrey isn't home from work yet, so she sits at our kitchen table and talks about paying for Jack's school lunch. Jack is on the reduced lunch program and my mom isn't happy.

"I've witnessed the insanity of that system," she says, but she won't go into details. She wants us to get Jack off the program and pay for his lunches with the allowance she gives us every week. Her hair is completely gray and now that she's retired all she does is create a crisis in her mind that she needs to fix. I made the mistake of telling her about the wetting incidents, and ever since, I've been getting the sense of her presence, looming like a cloud of judgment.

"If you think kids are cruel about him pissing his pants, wait until they get on him about being reduced," she says. I offer her a cup of coffee, but she knows Jeffrey is coming home any minute and she'd like to be able to make her exit soon after.

Perhaps paying for lunch is something we can control. Perhaps even my Zen husband can embrace the idea that if we do the little things to avoid confrontation, maybe we can nudge Jack's future in the right direction. I tell her I will need to speak to Jeffrey about it, but he enters on cue.

He crosses the house and comes into the kitchen to find my mother gathering up her purse.

"Kimberly will fill you in, but I just want you to consider one thing," she says to Jeffrey. "It takes humility to accept help. And humility is what your kind of people teach at every meeting, no?" With that bit of cryptic nuttery, she leaves the house and I fill Jeffrey in while we lay in bed that night. He's running his hands all over me while we talk, and eventually he agrees to accept my mother's offer.

There should be a saying in Turnbull. Turn north, you'll get run over by a truck. Turn south, a bus.

Things get worse for Jack. After my mom started paying full price for his lunch, he got invited to sit with another group of kids that also paid full price. Before long he was getting targeted by the kids who are reduced because he wasn't sitting with them anymore. They thought he was being a snob. He was hanging with kids who picked on the others.

Jack comes home one day and is silent at dinner, when he suddenly stops eating, pulls his knees up to his chin and starts to cry. He has no friends, he says after I prod him a while. Jeffrey has a look on his face like he could have predicted this, and I want to punch him.

The nightmares return. I'm not drowning rabbits, I'm drowning children. Swarms of them, but they're advancing like ants, crawling all over me, filling the tub and crying in my ears.

On a Thursday afternoon I have to pick up Jack. The school calls me—apparently he kept lying to the lunch lady by telling her he was reduced. She knew he was full price and wouldn't give him the reduced tray. He was hungry, but he kept insisting he was reduced. Then he melted down. This is taking needed resources from our school, the voice on the other end says to me.

"Is this how every year is going to go?" I ask Jeffrey that night. He shakes his head silently and says that it's just the first year, but I can hear the tone in his voice. He doesn't know for sure. He can only guess.

In the middle of the night I hear an awful sobbing. My dream is about wrapping myself in a dozen blankets while sitting at a table with my mother, and there is no sobbing, so it wakes me. I roll over and Jeffrey is sitting on the edge

of our bed, with his feet on the floor. I see the silhouette of his tattooed arms holding his head and he's the one sobbing.

"I wanna pick up," he cries. "I need to pick up, this is too much."

It's because of Jack; I can tell. And now it's my turn to tell him what I don't know: that everything with Jack is going to be alright. He'll make friends. He'll find his niche. It was probably a mistake to try and protect him the way we did. But he shakes his head and wipes his eyes with his forearm.

In the early stages of recovery Jeffrey tried all sorts of tricks to stay clean. He hung around his old friends to test himself. He watched hours of television to stay distracted. He spoke to his parents about past deceptions so they could detect if he ever lied again. Most of the ploys didn't work. He discovered it was a lonelier process than that. He was still moving through the steps, ignoring triggers, cutting off his contacts, and avoiding the places he used to get high.

Dropping his head, he tells me that Jack is using the same coping techniques. My mother is right; he has passed it on to Jack.

"I haven't wanted to use this bad in a long time," he says. He begins to cry again and I'm seized with fear. I've felt this fear with him before, and I've suffered through a couple of his relapses. He has made me feel the powerlessness of being trapped, and he is not the only one to feel my mother's stinging words as prophesy. Somehow I know if Jeffrey picks up again he may never put it down. My son's wetting will return.

I reach my arms around his neck and pull him back down to the bed. Then I straddle him and I begin to kiss his neck in the spot he loves the most. I run my tongue down his chest toward his navel and pull off my nightgown.

In the morning I'm surprised to learn that Jeffrey called in at work. He fixes Jack's breakfast and tells him he can stay with him for the day.

It petrifies me. Spare time petrifies me with Jeffrey, but I allow it when they leave the house together and Jack clutches his dad's hand. They go to the William Taylor Estate. They visit the old graveyard, and the slave cemetery, where Jeffrey once told me he used to sneak at night through a hole in the fence. Still on the estate, they take a stroll down to Floyd's River and Jeffrey jumps in with his clothes on.

Jack stays put and laughs, so when they come back home only Jeffrey is drenched to his socks. Jack tells me the whole story. I tell him he made the right decision staying on shore, but he promises next time to jump in with him.

Sent home from school one day, plus truant the following day, equals a fresh visit from my mother, only this time she doesn't care if Jeffrey is home or not. I ask her how she knew Jack had gotten into trouble, but she ignores the question. Once an administrator, always an administrator, and I start to wonder who my mother's moles are within the school. She's really upset that we asked her to stop paying for Jack's lunch.

"What kind of chaos goes on in this home," she says. "I can only imagine. This boy is headed down some path and you're allowing it."

"Jack will be fine," I say. "He has to find his own way to cope."

"Oh, is that what you've discovered? Now you have a PhD in psychology? You've been blind to the future your whole life. You couldn't see a train coming at you if you were standing in a prairie."

"Am I that train, Ms. Willis?" Jeffrey asks. His question stuns me and I whirl my head around as if to make sure he was the source.

"I didn't say that," my mother says.

"No, you never say anything. You imply. You let the dogs out of the gate and sort of hope they attack."

"I want better out of my grandson," she says. It's a statement she's said before, and it cuts us down to size. We all want better, and we're not setting him up to give us better. We're grasping in the darkness. But Jeffrey sidesteps.

"He's not going to give you better, *Melanie*." (He actually calls her Melanie!) "He's as good as it gets. He is what he is, and we are what we are, and we do our best every day and we don't try to control what happens."

"That's very recovery of you, Jeffrey—,"

"Stop talking about recovery, Melanie, you don't know what the fuck you're talking about, and you never have. This isn't about Jack's safety or any stigma, you wanna pay for his lunches so you can control him. So you can control us. All these years I've known you I'm convinced that every move you make is a manipulation to get other people to do what you want. You're a sociopath."

“Where were you for Kimberly when she needed you through the years?” she asks.

“Where were you?”

“All of this is full of sound and fury signifying nothing,” my mother says, and she adjusts her pocketbook further up her shoulder to make her retreat.

“Jack will be fine,” Jeffrey says. “Or he won’t be fine. You just said Kimberly is blind to the future, but we’re all blind to the future. Who cares? Jack will be fine because there’s two people here who won’t ever stop trying to rescue him.”

“Poor Jeffrey,” my mother says as she pulls open the front door. “He speaks his mind and he thinks that’s going to solve the world.”

“Poor Melanie,” Jeffrey answers. “She tries to protect everyone around her and she thinks that’s being a mother.”

The door closes and I believe we’ll never see her again. I look at Jeffrey for the first time ever. When he looks back at me it’s as if he’s on his ninth step. He’s made amends to me.

There is a Thanksgiving play and Jack is the cutest, funniest turkey that ever gobbled its way across the stage at Turnbull Elementary. I get to meet Kevin Ferraro. Jack’s classmates hug him at the end of the performance.

There is a winter concert when Jack sings off tune and I see some of the dads in the audience wince and make fun of him. A week later he slips on the ice outside the school and a classroom full of kids laugh from the window as he tries to rise.

In March Jack wins the spelling contest and his prize is a Cadbury Egg. He gives the Cadbury Egg to Tara Saccomanno, who came in second. Tara’s mother tells us at the spring concert that Tara blushes when she sees Jack. Tara calls the house one day and starts reading a story to Jack. Jack listens dutifully. He’s self-conscious of it because Jeffrey is staring at him and making faces. I pull Jeffrey away.

In April Jack wets himself during library time and I have to pick him up. The night before, Jeffrey picked up again. He and Allen Lebow met up and went for a drink down the road at Majick’s Pub. They felt safe drinking alcohol; it wasn’t drugs. Multiple drinks later and it turned into drugs, as they both wandered out of the pub and found a score. The cops brought Jeffrey home and Jack woke up to all the chatter. Jeffrey had flagged the cops down to give him a ride because he was lost and he was in recovery and it was getting late. I

thanked a pantheon of gods they didn't lock him up, for we had no money that week for bail.

In early May Tara Saccomanno kisses Jack right before he gets on the bus home. The school bus stuffed with eyes sees it go down and they coo. Jack is shy but he's king of the bus. Two weeks later Jack catches the winning touchdown pass in gym and he waves a certificate when he gets home. It's too much for Jeffrey to compute. How did the kid learn to play football; he couldn't play for shit in the back yard. But there it is. He throws Jack up into the air, and Jack is also better now at ducking the ceiling fan.

This morning we notice a burrow of rabbits have set up beneath the overturned trough in our back yard. At some point this year, Jeffrey had flipped over the old tub so it couldn't collect rain water. It created a perfect spot to build a burrow.

Jeffrey pulls me sleepy into the back yard to see. My robe is half open and my coffee is spilling as he leads me around at a safe distance not to scare them off. Jack follows quietly behind me. The adult rabbit notices us and her head is erect with attention. Her unblinking eye is upon our every move. The kits gather near the opening of the trough, but they go no further. She stares at us, and when Jack moves suddenly, she retreats back inside.

Kevin Ferraro comes by to play with Jack. An unlikely friendship, but it's fun to watch Kevin teach Jack how to get around in life. Jack shows Kevin the rabbit's burrow and they both eat sandwiches in silence and watch the family travel back and forth between the trees and the burrow. On this score, Jack has more to teach than Kevin, about rabbits.

In July, who knows? In August, who knows? The first year is almost up and September will begin the second grade. I allow myself the delicious lie of imagining how it will go. Stories Jack will tell. Perhaps a story that goes:

In summer we house rabbits.

Matthew McGevna *was born and raised in Mastic Beach, NY. His debut novel* Little Beasts *was listed as one of Book Expo America's "Books That Buzzed" in 2015. His short stories have appeared in numerous literary journals. He is currently a New York City high school English teacher, working on his second novel.*

Faculty Spotlight

Kelly McMasters: Charting Home

Lily Vu

When stepping into Kelly McMasters' office, expect a few things: a photo of her son angled perfectly to be seen on either side of her desk, a clear jar filled with Hershey Kisses and SweeTARTS sitting next to a small clock that doesn't work, and an abundance of manila folders decorated with sticky notes. She is a former bookshop owner, author, essayist, badass mom, editor, assistant professor of English and director of publishing studies at Hofstra University. McMasters earned an MFA in nonfiction writing from Columbia University and is the recipient of an Orion Book Award nomination and Pushcart nomination. Her essays have been featured in *The New York Times*, *Washington Post Magazine*, *Paris Review Daily*, and more. Reading any work of McMasters feels a lot like having a conversation with her: intimate, honest, and homey. Growing up on Long Island in a town that's described as both "atomic" and "nuclear," McMasters' presence on and off the page is effortlessly filled with a transformative energy.

Welcome to Shirley: A Memoir From an Atomic Town is, at its core, a story of sublimation. It's in this memoir about a small town devastated by a leaking nuclear laboratory nearby that we become open to the possibility of reaching light and comfort in places where those two things seem

impossible to find. The book was an Orion Book Award finalist and inspired the 2012 Sundance Film Festival Selection documentary *The Atomic States of America*. McMasters' work is rooted in memory, articulated artfully, and full of awareness. In a haunting scene in *Welcome to Shirley*, she recalls a moment that evokes images of horror and true perception:

All that was left standing was the brick chimney. Some of the bricks had been knocked out of place—still attached to the chimney but jutting out—so that it looked as if the pile of smoldering black debris had a ghostly staircase sprouting up from its middle, leading the way to some place out of Shirley.

It's within the pages of this book that her recollection of certain moments and memories are so clear and trustworthy, one cannot help but feel a sense of familiarity, hopefulness, and pride within such foreign boundaries.

Kelly McMasters is the co-editor of *This Is the Place: Women Writing About Home*, a collection of essays that urge the exploration of the meaning of home and the feeling of belonging someplace. In a Great Writers, Great Readings installment at Hofstra University featuring a conversation with *This Is the Place* contributors Lina Maria Ferreira Cabeza-Vanegas, Sonya Chung, and Kelly McMasters, McMasters proposes a narrative to the foundation of what exactly nonfiction writing, essays in particular, is:

I think so much of essay is about my story and I think it is storytelling in the best way, and it's feeling in the dark for the truth as opposed to fact or figuring out what is fact… I think the personal allows space for the reader on the page and it's exciting for me to see that it can be anything as long as you're being honest about it to your reader.

The book navigates the stories of 30 female writers' (poets, playwrights, song writers, fiction writers, nonfiction writers, etc.) idea of what makes a home, through essay. An excerpt of the introduction by Margot Kahn and Kelly McMasters reads:

Like the rooms within a house, the essays in this collection inhabit the inner space: the thoughts, memories, emotions, questions, and meditations with which we envision and embody the idea of home.

Serving as an exploration for truth and comfort, *This Is the Place* embodies much of what the art of the personal

essay stands for: a quest for the understanding of the human condition through voluntary self-disclosure.

Sitting in a classroom taught by McMasters is like sitting in a classroom with a friend eager to share and learn all at the same time. Whether she's handing out freshly printed and warm copies of excerpts of her favorite essays to inspire her students in class, or trying to munch on french fries for her first meal of the day while having a conference in her office, Kelly McMasters is a woman who both encourages and radiates dignity and purpose in all that she does, both on and off the page.

Lily Vu *is an MFA graduate from 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.*

The Creative Habit Coming to Life: Twyla Tharp

Stefanie Oskowsky

Twyla Tharp is an unrivaled expert on creativity. The Tony Award-winning dancer and choreographer formed her dance company, Twyla Tharp Dance, in 1966. The company gained momentum in the 70s, touring around the world performing their original works. In her career, Tharp has choreographed over 129 dances, as well as various television specials, Hollywood movies, Broadway shows, ballets, and figure skating routines, receiving two Grammys and the Vietnam Veterans of America President's Award in the process. Yet she remains pragmatic when it comes to creative process.

"The mythology that art is only for artists is garbage," leveled Tharp on a Monday afternoon in April 2018 in a packed auditorium at Hofstra University. Her lecture was based on her most recent book, "The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It For Life", and during her talk she shined light on the idea that every individual being has the ability to be creative. Tharp explained that while the creation of a habit can often become frustrating and hard to start, the more you work toward it and take responsibility, the more the habit will stick. "All it takes to make creativity a part of your life is the willingness to make it a habit," she promised.

Tharp discussed her broad definition of art, pushing beyond her own craft and including painting, singing, and writing. This art, she stated, is "the boundary between order and chaos." She reminded the audience that in order to start thinking outside of the box, or in a creative way, you have to have a box and know what the box is. Once you gather information about your box, or in this case, the real world, and once you give it a sense of order and purpose, you can

begin to think outside of this box and become a creative individual.

Tharp structured her keynote presentation by summarizing each individual chapter in her book. The name of one chapter, for example, is simply the word "Spine." Tharp stated that "spine" means focus. She believes that everyone must take the responsibility to focus on what they are doing. This focus is essential for striving toward creative excellence. Referring back to the belief that creativity is a habit, she stated that this focus and determination must become habitual, no matter how many failures one is faced with. Tharp underscored that failure is indeed a good thing.

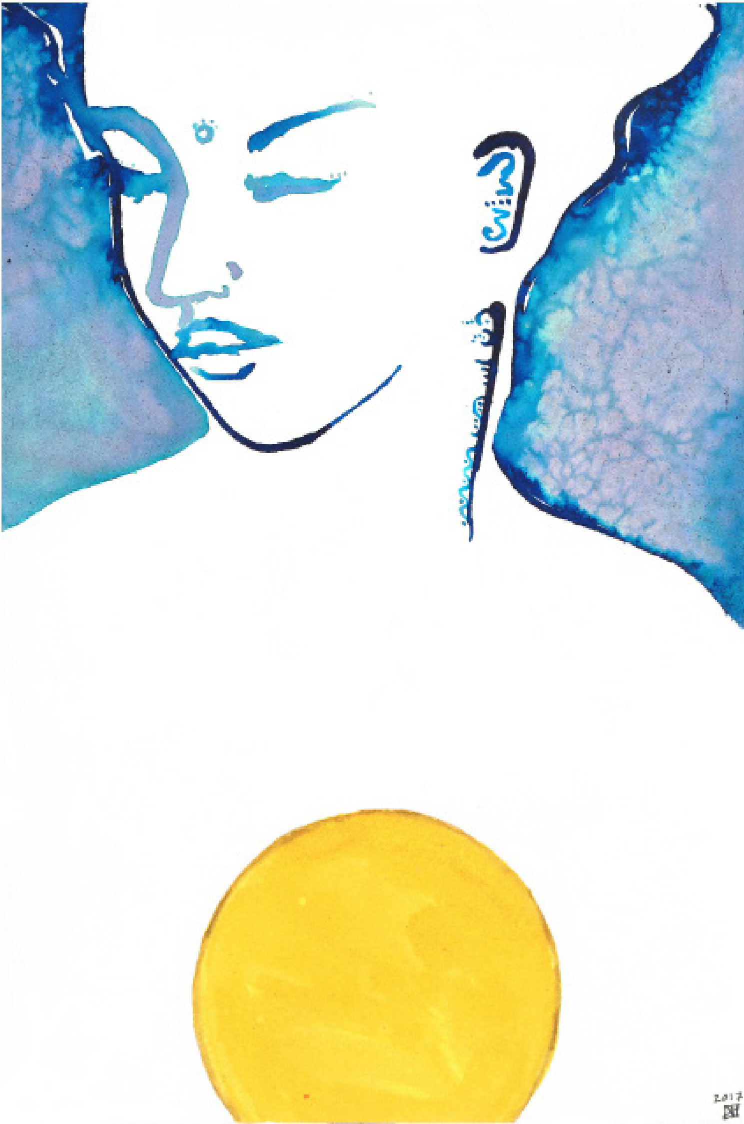
After discussing and sharing the content of her book, companioned with experiences she has faced throughout her career, Tharp opened up questions to the audience. Audience members had a plethora of questions to ask, both about her own experiences, and about her thoughts on certain topics. One audience member asked Tharp, referring to her unique creation of choreography, "Does music come first or does movement?"

"Trash the music," Tharp replied. She proceeded to explain how she had worked without music for the first 10 years of her career. She placed importance on the concept of movement during the creation of her own choreography. She shared that, when creating choreography, she always thought about how she could gain people's attention with movement as well as how she could lose their attention. "I was very serious about movement," she stated. When creating choreography, she recalled, she would often think about how movement could either counter the music it was placed with or align with it. This is one of the many things that she had to take into account when creating her masterpieces.

An indisputable legend in the dance world, Tharp has spent the past 50 years making creativity her habit. Although no one can hope to rival Tharp's brilliance, her reminder that creativity is less about skill and craft and more about habit made her lessons on creativity that much more in reach.

Twyla Tharp, renowned writer and world-famous choreographer, speaking at Hofstra University. Her lecture, The Creative Habit, was part of a symposium on creativity and was held at the Helene Fortunoff Theater in the Monroe Lecture Center.

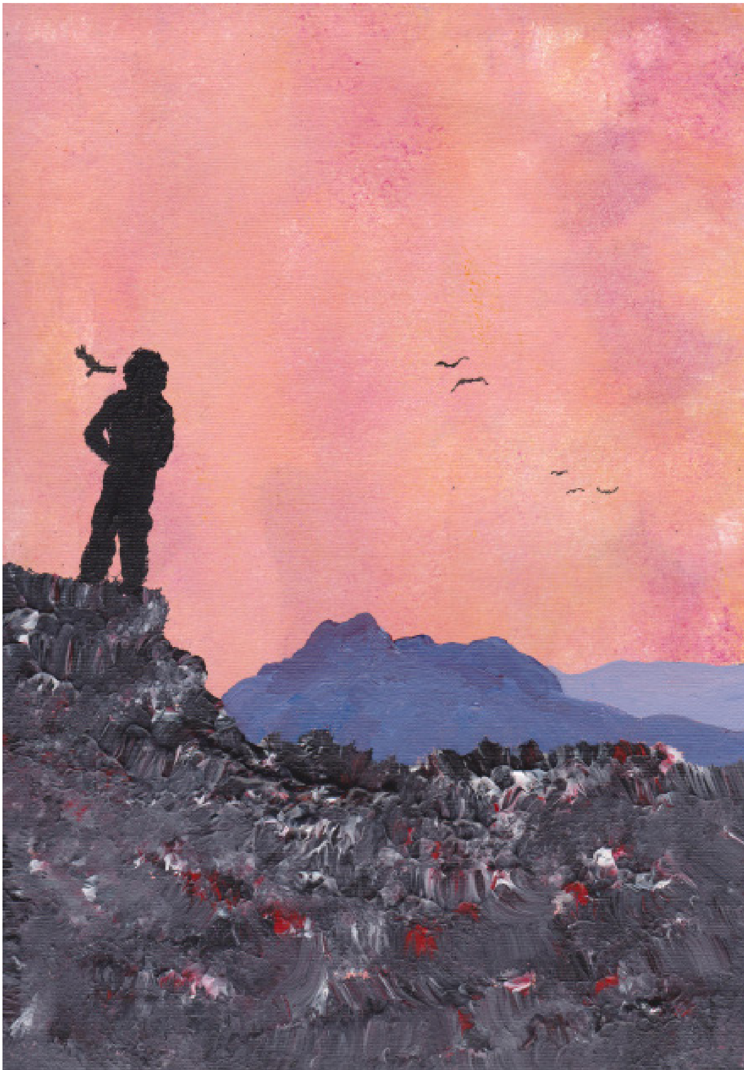
ART



Encoded Protection, Alexandria Heather,
mixed media on paper

Front Yard Tomatoes, Rees Nielsen, acrylic

Float, Betsy Lester, acrylic on canvas



It Had Taken a Lifetime to Get There,
Walter Savage, acrylic on paper

The Window in the Garden, Meghan Podimsky, photograph

Mystic 1, Kyle Hemmings, photograph

Some Days Are Better Than Others,
Steven Ostrowski, acrylic

Pensive Blues, Charles C. Kim, photograph

How Did We Get Here?: A Conversation With Jane Wong

Sophie Herzing

I'm going to give you 10 minutes. Sit down at your kitchen table with your plates from breakfast still stacked on the placemat, or curl up in your bed with your down comforter, or on your second favorite bench in the park because some person took your first favorite bench, unaware that you claimed it to be your bench long ago. Come prepared with your laptop, tablet, notebook, back of a receipt, or whatever else you prefer. Write in pencil. Write in pen. Type in your usual font (Palatino linotype, if you're me). I'm going to give you 10 minutes to write down whatever you feel like writing down. Come back to this when you're done... You're back? Good. Now tell me what that looks like; tell me what those first 10 minutes look like.

Poet and professor Jane Wong wants to know what those 10 minutes look like too. Jane Wong — a native from the Jersey Shore, now a West Coast inhabitant — has been writing since she was a child at the library down the street from her parents' Chinese restaurant. This is the library where she first encountered fiction and novels, and she ended up working at that same library later in her life. Poetry came later. When she went to pursue her undergraduate degree in upstate New York, she took mostly fiction classes. Only when her fiction professor, Matt Johnson, approached one of her stories and said, "you know, nothing really happens, Jane," did she realize her characters belonged in poems. "It doesn't have to be clear. It can be lyrical," Jane comments about the differences she found between poetry and prose. Something about the playfulness of poetry drew her in, and I'm sure I can speak for a mass amount of people when I say, I'm so glad it did.

Wong teaches at Western Washington University in Washington, living outside of Seattle, and despite the time difference and our conflicting schedules, I was able to have the absolute joy of talking to her about poetry over the phone. What I find most interesting about conversations from poet to poet are the discussions on craft. What makes a poem? How does each poet come to a poem? What struggles are easier than others? I found Jane and I speaking mostly about craft. "Craft is just the tool one needs to engage in curiosity," she says. Wong's first collection, *Overpour*, a stunning collage of ghosts, history, language, and voices, came out two years ago. When I read *Overpour*, I found each poem to be a new layer. Yet, when I reached the end of the collection, it didn't feel like a finished piece; it is better than that. It is something that I can peel and re-glue over and over again. And each time I do, I see something different.

Some of my favorite pieces from the collection are in the voice of her mother, which Wong describes as being very transtemporal. Wong has worked specifically on the poetics of haunting in the past, which is the focus of her dissertation, "Going Towards the Ghost: The Poetics of Haunting in Contemporary Asian American Poetry." She describes this aspect of "going towards the ghost" as being "transpecific and transtemporal," and constantly moving, which is what happens when she takes on her mother's persona. In one of my favorite poems, "Forty-Three," she writes in the "I" of her mother:

> I open the refrigerator
>
> and scoop out the cheeks
> of a fish. I call the fish
>
> my husband. I call Jane
> in Hong Kong but she doesn't
>
> answer.

What I admire about this piece so much is her willingness to distance herself from her own being and dive straight into the voice of another person, especially someone so immediate to her. Currently, as she works on her second

collection of poetry, Wong is working to delve even deeper into the idea of haunting. Her grandparents lived during the Cultural Revolution in China, including the Great Chinese Famine of 1959-1961. "Going towards the ghost' is trying to read between the lines of what my family says. They never actually talk about it [the famine]," she says. What she has to do now is be a "ghost detective," as she calls it, and listen closely to the stories of her family that are not about that history but are about what they did during that time. This provides her with more information about how the time period affected their personal lives. "*Overpour*," she mentions in relation to her second collection, "was a crevice that opened up something else that I'm falling into fully now." Her second collection also highlights the fear she feels as a Chinese-American in this part of history. These poems deal with matters of race, gender, and fear. In fact, one of the poems she's working on is called, "How to Not Be Afraid of Everything."

In the MFA program at Hofstra University, Professor Kelly McMasters has us seek our "north star" piece in her workshop classes, meant to help guide us in whatever we are writing. When I asked Jane who/what was her "north star," she explained that she teaches something very similar in her own class, called the "unicorn poet." Who is that poet you just can't get away from? "Pick an author you identify with," she says when asking her students this same question. For Wong, it's Korean-American poet Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and her collection *Dictee*. "I realized poetry doesn't have to be what you think it is," Wong says thinking back to the first time she read it. The way that Cha incorporates history, culture, and art is something that Wong mirrors in her own work. For Wong, Cha is that connection; she is, as Wong says, "other timely."

As someone who wants to be a teacher, I asked Jane if she always wanted to be a professor, to which she responded, "if asked as a kid if I wanted to be a teacher I would have said 'no!'" As a child, Wong kept to herself mostly, never really speaking out as she was terribly shy. In fact, she was put into ASL for two years. Even though she could speak fluent English, her teachers assumed that her muteness stemmed from a language barrier. Yet, when she went to graduate school in Iowa, Wong realized that teaching was the same

as reading, "with more responsibility." What she loves about teaching is the communication over literature. You can walk into a classroom and discuss the text no matter who you are, especially in regard to poetry. "I don't think it takes some innate talent, and it's not elitist." Her classroom is a place, I can imagine, where everyone can have an opinion about the piece, and rather than teaching you what the piece means or what the poem is about, she teaches you how to read. Because, as all writers know, you can't be a good writer unless you read.

Now, remember those first 10 minutes? Go back and remind yourself. Take a picture if you have to. In fact, that's exactly what Wong's students did in one of her classes. She set up an Instagram for her students that was purely to document their writing process, with the first 10 minutes being the prompt. "We don't really think about the process enough. How did you get there? How did you get to this draft?" she says. Instagram became a place for her students to document their poems, whether those first 10 minutes had multiple stanzas, only one word, doodles, or nothing at all. Again, it's all in the craft.

When I looked back at the first 10 minutes of writing this profile, it mostly contained phrases such as "it was my honor to," or "spectacular imagery," and "chilling lines" when describing my conversation with Jane and my reaction to her poetry. But, even though all of those things are true, what I took most out of our talk was that no matter if you've had three chapbooks published or are still writing poems about boys who suck, all poets have one thing in common: the process. We all have a process, and what matters is not always the end product, but how we got there. As for the rest of you, you can get back to your table, your bed, or your bench, and feel the unfolding of your brain and heart. See where it takes you.

Sophie Herzing *is a poet and teacher from Saint Marys, PA. She is currently a student in the MFA program at Hofstra University.*

POEMS BY JANE WONG

How to Not Be Afraid Of Everything

How to not punch everyone in the face.
How to not protect everyone's eyes from
my own punch. I have been practicing
my punch for years, loosening my limbs.
My jaw unhinged creates a felony I refuse
to go to court for. The fat of spam pools
in the sun, reminding me of my true feelings.
My feelings leak from my ear like a bad cold
in a bad storm. Stars huddle in a corner,
little radiators sweating out their fear.
A possum reaches his arm up from a porch.
I hold onto his arm for a little while, for
a little warmth. At night, my subterranean eye
begins to rove. Song of the underground,
song of the rat tribe. I see my mother in
an apron splattered with viscera I will eat
for dinner. To gut her work out, to work
her guts out. Can we talk about privilege?
Can I say I always look behind me? I always
look behind me. I always take a step forward
like I'm about to save myself from toppling
over. The bare bones of it: some of us know
that spoiled meat still counts as protein.
That a horse's neck snaps from the weight
of what it carries, from the weight of what
we give it to carry. I bundle up a sack of
clouds, empty of rain and fear and lightning.

(*Entropy*)

Another day passes
by without certainty –
certainty running late, a train
dragging its luck. When is
enough, enough?
Forget love, my mother says,
go home, learn to cook for one.
Horrible to set a plate
in the center of an echoing room:
Jane, Jane, Jane – to
kill that noise, to arise in
love again. Repeat, repeat –
my whistling train stunned and stuck.
Now, rolled over to a stop –
oh what is there to say?
Paralyzed in fog, in the eye of a steamed fish.
Question nothing, my mother says.
Return to yourself, time and again.
Selfishness, make yourself comfortable.
Turn not in bed, moored by no fat moon
under no star wrestling for no light.
Victory, victory, the fish cheers with its pinpricked gape.
Wear loneliness like a chrysalis, a crown.
Yoke your ribs to language instead, i.e.
zyzzyva, zyzzyva, the last word: my own.

(*Figure 1*)

Lessons On Lessening

I wake to the sound of my neighbors upstairs as if they are bowling.

And maybe they are, all pins and love fallen over.
I lay against my floor, if only to feel that kind of affection.

What I've learned, time and again:
Get up. You can not have what they have.

And the eyes of a dead rat can't say anything.

In Jersey, the sink breaks and my mother keeps a bucket underneath to save water for laundry.

A trickle of water is no joke. I've learned that.
Neither is my father, wielding a knife in starlight.

I was taught that everything and everyone is self-made.

That you can make a window out of anything if you want.
This is why I froze insects. To see if they will come back to life.

How I began to see each day: the sluice of wings.
Get up. The ants pouring out of the sink, onto my arms in dish heavy water.

My arms: branches. A swarm I didn't ask for.

No one told me I'd have to learn to be polite.
To let myself be consumed for what I can not control.

I must return to my younger self. To wearing my life like heavy wool, weaved in my own weight.

To pretend not to know when the debtors come to collect.

(*Adroit Journal*)

This Morning, a Hummingbird Knocked Itself

into my window and I felt the thud in my ribs,
sudden and warm like cracking the caramel of

crème brule. I ran to it, pleaded to no particular
god or star: get up. It lay it on its side, its small

body stunned and heaving, metallic in the sun.
I worried it was hot and so I draped my hair over

it, a shadow. Its left eye milked over, a thin veil,
a plastic jug. Get up. I did not want to feel so

responsible. My mother at twenty-five, bandaging
my burnt elbows. Ants began crawling over its wings,

testing for death, meat. I hated them more than
I've hated most things. I want to kill you, I told

the ants, but then the bird's beak hung open,
a lever in need of pulling. It made no noise and

I thought of its organs, ticking and trumpeting –
an engine trying to start in a snowy, Iowa mound.

How could I hold its heart between my fingers,
a strawberry too red to eat? It was awful to hear

nothing. When I turned away, desperate for help,
it disappeared completely. I touched the ground

where it once was. A feather once. A hearse. I felt
ashamed for believing in its death. How do we know

if, knocked over, we will wake and go on? How do
we let ants crawl over that which hurts? This is

about a bird and its nectar-quickening wings. About
scavengers, organs, the bewildered. This is a poem.

(*Wildness*)

Spoiled

To tell the truth, I have forgotten
which year goes with what.

My memory: as good as milk.
My family: spoiled through

and through. Pure as mold
on a September nectarine,

we refuse to announce defeat,
death. In this house, the margins

of mourning are tucked in,
pleated to the neck.

In August, my uncle dies
and no one tells his children.

He crosses his arms
in a blue suit in a coffin

where the ants
want in. In December,

my brother and I bundle up
for a storm that goes

through another town.
What were we preparing for?

My mother warns us:
Beware of well-lit places.

Beware of fires burning
in the dark. If there is a spider

under your cup,
what will you do about it?

(*Seattle Review of Books*)

And leave a bit of ankle to show.
I take off my shoes and make myself
comfortable. I defrost a chicken
and chew on the bone. In public,
I smile as wide as I can and everyone
shields their eyes from my light.
At night, I knock down nests off
telephone poles and feel no regret.
I greet spiders rising from underneath
the floorboards, one by one. Hello,
hello. Outside, the garden roars
with ice. I want to shine as bright
as a miner's cap in the dirt dark,
to glimmer as if washed in fish scales.
Instead, I become a balm and salve
my daughter, my son, the cold mice
in the garage. Instead, I take the garbage
out at midnight. I move furniture away
from the wall to find what we hide.
I stand in the center of every room
and ask: am I the only animal here?

(*American Poetry Review*)

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Home in Seven Acts

Akiko Busch

GRAND PIANO

When I was in elementary school, my parents had the idea that I should learn to play the piano. To that end, they installed a grand piano that had belonged to my grandmother in a small room in the back of the barn. Because the room was not heated in the winter, they also put a small electric heater in the room, and I would go out there on weekday afternoons to practice.

Looking back on this, I know it is inconceivable that it ever happened. It would have been impossible to move a grand piano through the series of small doors leading to that little room in the back of the barn. Doors and walls would have had to have been removed, and this never happened either. But I am just as sure it was not an upright piano because I remember exactly how the light falling through the window illuminated the thin blanket of dust covering the vast lid of the grand piano. I had no ear, my fingers were cold, the dust in the back room made me sneeze, and even an exercise so simple as practicing the scales produced a sound that was almost impossible to identify. So maybe, I think, it was the gargantuan task of trying to learn to play this piano that caused me to so magnify its size; and that occasioned me to translate my monumental efforts into a monumental instrument.

I know that places exist in memory almost entirely differently than they exist in the material world. And that the houses in our recall are furnished not only with pianos that can move through walls, but floorboards that shift, light that adjusts magically, windows that alter their position. I am certain that the stone path leading to our front door in the house we live in today is original to the old farmhouse, but my husband swears to laying down the stones himself,

placing them just so.

Like the keys of the piano have come to reflect octaves of fabulism, the arrangement of stones manages to reflect different sequences of conviction. Perhaps I associate the path with some kind of domestic history or legacy that matters to me, while in my husband's mind it is connected with the way we laid out our own route to the house. What seems certain either way is that the tenacity of the material world is nothing when it comes up against the tenacity of human memory.

SWANS

He was a friend of our parents and was doing research at Stanford then, I think, and when he came to our house in San Francisco, he would always bring me and my sister a box of Russian jelly candies. I remember liking the orange ones the most. Years passed and then when I was 11 or 12, I remember seeing him often at the house on East 91st Street where we would stay when we went to Manhattan. It was owned by a widow named Helen Simpson, whose husband had been a congressman. Mr. Kerenski, as he was called, was a permanent houseguest there. In the late afternoon, my mother would sit with him in the library, and because he was all but blind, she would read the newspaper to him, sentence by sentence, cutting it up for him in little bites. He retained a great interest in world affairs. Later, at dinner, Mr. Kerenski would sit at one end of the table and Mrs. Simpson at the other. She was deaf, so notes would be passed up and down the table during the duration of the meal to keep the conversation flowing. The dining table itself was a gigantic white parsons table, with a dark blue glass inlaid surface. A Calder mobile fluttered above it all.

The blind revolutionary, the brilliant and deaf hostess, the notes, the Calder—all of these remain vivid in memory and imagination. It seems funny to me that I cannot now remember what we ate, the taste or aromas of the food that was served. I can recall none of those ephemeral things that are said to fasten experience to human memory. What I remember, instead, are the coordinates of those evenings,

that is, the objects: The little white notepads, the black shards of the mobile, the blue ocean of the glass table top, the small white ceramic swans set at each place, even mine, filled with cigarettes fanned out to form the tail feathers of the bird. At that time, the fact that I was offered a swan full of cigarettes was more amazing to me than the fact that I was sitting at a table with Alexander Kerenski, a man who had almost changed the course of world history, but such a confusion about the facts is not unusual, I now know.

HOUSES

When my husband and I moved into our farmhouse over 30 years ago, it was its scale, the antique layout of rooms, the twelve-over-twelve windows, and the wide chestnut floorboards that all sparked my imagination. This sense of history matters to me still, but in the years since then, I find my ideas about home now, in fact, look to other models. Or rather, that there are other housing prototypes that seem more true to me now. What's odd is that these are houses that have been designed to engage children, and what's even more strange about these housing types is that the ideas they project are not about comfort or security, but about disquiet and fear.

There was a treehouse I had as a child. Furnished with a green child's chair with a straw seat and a small table with a red Formica top that had been fashioned from a piece left over from my mother's kitchen counter, it was positioned in the crook of an old maple tree. Its floorboards were fastened to branches that shuddered in the wind. Just as memorable was an octagonal glass house at an animal sanctuary I visited when I was 10. The interior walls, also transparent, were only partial walls, but for the most part the interior was wide open. Inside this house was a reticulated python that was stretched from room to room, winding through the entirety of the glass house; it occupied every room, and the children would walk around this house, staring into it, examining how the snake's body inhabited different spaces. Many years later, when a woman I knew described the atmosphere in her house during the time her daughter was addicted to heroin

by saying, “It felt as though a huge snake had wrapped itself around our house in a stranglehold,” I was certain she had visited the same wildlife park as a child.

And then there is the playhouse for kids often called a Bounce House. A little inflatable cabin, it is constructed of PVC vinyl and anchored to the ground with sand bags. It can be specified to resemble a cottage or a castle, can come with columns and turrets, a trampoline for a floor, piped-in music, and even a little swimming pool. Despite such amenities, the thing about it that makes it most real to me is that if its anchors are of insufficient weight, the house will tumble and blow across the landscape and if a particularly strong wind is blowing, they are sometimes even carried airborne, into the clouds and away.

LANDSCAPES

My friend Brooke could easily be described as an outdoor person. She is drawn to untended landscapes and has been known to ride ponies across Iceland’s lava fields, bicycle across the Dutch flood plains, hike across the English Lake Country. But the thing is, she cannot abide reading about the natural world. She teaches literature to college students and would much prefer to read Henry James, Edith Wharton, William Thackeray, George Eliot, Jane Austen, drawing room conversations, accounts of social manners, and all varieties of other interior narratives.

I try to imagine the opposite: a woman who owns nothing but cocktail dresses and is thrilled most by museum openings, dinner parties, literary theory, and the history of architecture, but who reads nothing but essays by Robert Macfarlane about all the words that may exist for the pebbles on the Scottish moors, John Wesley Powell’s accounts of the unforeseen eddies and rapids in the Colorado River, Aldo Leopold’s contemplation of why he favors the white pine over the red birch and his thoughts on how there is “skill in the exercise of bias.” I wonder if such a woman exists.

I also wonder whether the literary imagination and the material world have anything to do with each other. Maybe they do and maybe they don’t. But what I wonder most is

whether it is the contrary nature of human behavior or simply our own native skill in the exercise of bias that enables us to parcel out the real estate of our sensibilities to such distant and different countries.

THE CRACKED TILE

It doesn't necessarily have anything to do with ownership. It just has to do with living someplace. Because as soon as you do, you realize how many things remain unfinished. The door frame that needs paint. The window that doesn't quite shut. A light fixture that needs to be rewired. These things that never quite get done and that never get forgotten. I learned recently that there is a name for this, which is the "Zeigarnik Effect."

The term comes from the psychologist who researched the way in which a waiter in a cafe spent the greatest time and attention on those customers who had not yet paid their bills. How obvious, you must be thinking, of course, of course. But when you look this up in Wikipedia, you will also encounter the phrase "advantage of recollection," which is about the way we remember things best when they have been interrupted and how students who take breaks in their studies will remember what they have been studying more clearly than those students who do not take a break.

I was a waitress once in college, so all this makes sense to me. I think back to that time and try to remember what I remembered. But it just turns out to be a silly Russian doll exercise of human recall. Sometimes I remembered customers, but I am not sure it had to do with whether they had paid their bills.

And now when I look at the dripping pipe beneath the kitchen sink or the pane of glass that needs to be reglazed, I no longer even consider repairing these things, but wonder instead if it is an advantage or disadvantage of recollection that whether it is a cracked tile on the kitchen floor or a letter half written or a conversation in a bar on a June evening, those things we remember most clearly are so often those that remain interrupted, incomplete, undone.

FURNITURE

A friend of mine came to dinner the other night. She is a good friend and is in and out of my house fairly frequently. This time she admired a walnut cabinet in the living room, admiring the way the new piece of furniture fit the room. I told her it had been there for the last five years. There is a name for this which is change blindness, that phenomenon that prevents us from seeing what is right in front of our eyes only because it is not what we expect and not what we have seen before. Our memory encodes the familiar at the expense of what is actually there.

I don't know that there has been any research on this, but I suspect that it is a condition that occurs most often on home territory. Sometimes it is about the walnut cabinet, the oak end table by the sofa, or the metal spice rack over the stove, but more often, it's not about any of those things, but about human behavior. It is in our nature to form abiding attachments to the familiar, and it is why so many families argue at the fourth of July picnic or fall into conversational chaos at the Thanksgiving table: it is almost impossible for family members to recognize change in one another although it is there right before them, and we are all likely to treat people close to us the way we treated them two years ago, or five or ten. Which is to say, like furniture.

THE SCREAMING TREE

It is an autumn morning, and by 8:00 I am on my routine walk. With its shining white branches, vast canopy, and 90-foot height, the sycamore tree that stands in the meadow at the end of my road is a good destination. When we moved here 30 years ago, my neighbor told me it was a rare species that had been imported from the African savannah. I believed her then but am no longer sure it is so. What I do know is that we often build up elaborate myths about certain features of the natural landscape to which we are drawn. On this particular morning, the tree is alive with sound. In fact, it is freaking out. It is screaming, all of its bright leaves

rampaging with noise. It is not the harmony of early morning birdsong, but a racket of rasping, rattling, screeching, a chaotic and furious orchestra tearing up the morning quiet. I know it is the starlings, hundreds and hundreds of them, unseen, hidden in the leaves of the tree, making this awful sound. The sycamore is not in agony. It is just a lot of birds gathered here in their fall migration in the branches of a tree, which on this morning, in fact, stands as a silent and immobile monument to that difference between what we see and what we know.

Akiko Busch *is the author of* Geography of Home*,* The Uncommon Life of Objects*,* Nine Ways to Cross a River*, and* The Incidental Steward*. Her collection of essays,* How to Disappear*, will be published by Penguin Press in spring 2019. She lives in the Hudson Valley.*

A Tale of Two Tables

Amanda Noble

Dinners in Phoenix were sad, one-act plays laying bare the truth about my family. Mom hated cooking. She had no confidence and no interest. She hissed at us when we entered the kitchen, where the tortured preparations took place. She had been on stage and on screen since she was 9 years old, until she married Dad. She was stuck in Phoenix with a horde of kids, few show business opportunities, and a pervasive cultural belief that women stayed home with their children.

"Get out!" she'd shout. "I can't cook with you in here!" Laughing a little she acknowledged her own anxiety about Dad's arrival and whatever drama might play out at the table that night. The kitchen was an important place for the three younger children to inhabit or at least visit because Mom was there. As if she could protect us from him. She never challenged him, but she was nonetheless Mom and she was the only other adult in the house. Still, she kicked us out every time we careened into the kitchen, warning, "Your father will be home any minute. You'd better start calming down."

We were restless, anxious about Dad's appearance. The three youngest, including myself, ran from room to room trying to distract ourselves. Meanwhile, my older brother, Johnny, who was 5 years older than me, holed up in his room, the door closed, probably locked. Strains of jazz music at very low volume leaked from the seals of the door to his room. Sometimes he seemed to occupy a different world, as if he were of a generation far different from ours.

Dinner was at six o'clock straight up, no exceptions. When Dad came home, he made a beeline for the table, after kissing Mom, taking his place at the head of the table. A large piece of paper was taped to the dining room door so that when it was open, and it always was, the table's occupants could see it. Dad had compiled a list of possible table

manner infractions and the fines attached to them: Elbows on table, 5 cents. Fork scratching against teeth, 4 cents. No napkin on lap, 3 cents, and so on.

The room was tense with worry about Dad's mood. If he'd made a real estate deal that day, he might be happy, but over time I grew less and less convinced that making money made him happy. Sometimes even if he had made a deal, he would be angry. Who among us had a target on their forehead tonight?

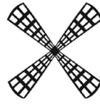
And the food! My God, the food was awful. It was canned or packaged, nothing fresh, save for iceberg lettuce and tasteless unripe tomatoes. We all force-fed ourselves the overcooked canned asparagus and peas, charred burgers, "hamburger helper" concoctions, Chinese food boiled in plastic bags served with instant rice, and bad packaged desserts, often featuring Jell-O.

Melissa and Michael, the youngest, tried to break the tension with humor. Sometimes it worked, but their jokes often had a desperate edge. Dad mostly disliked their humor, which often got them excused early from the table. Smart–those two were smart alright, and tough; they didn't seem to care about alienating Dad. They were already in front of the television with the sound turned low; in space aboard the Starship Enterprise, far from the dining room of shame.

Johnny was a classic geek who shared no interests with Dad. He loved math and jazz, not sports. On top of that, he was physically small and wore thick glasses. Dad rode him relentlessly. He was disappointed that he hadn't spawned a brute who loved to beat up other boys on a football field. Johnny was the image of victimhood: shoulders hunched, eyes on the table avoiding our faces. Every night, he waited silently for the onslaught of Dad's hostility.

Then there was me. As the second oldest and the only other kid to stay at the table, eventually Dad turned on me. He was frustrated by my older brother's passivity and seemed to know I would fight back, which was exactly what he wanted. Our fights were mostly about politics. It was the 1960s and I was liberal. He called me pinko and commie, when really, I was just an ignorant kid who was against the Vietnam War, like nearly everyone else my age. My parents, however, chose that period to attend a John Birch Society meeting. One morning, they left a printed diatribe at my

place at the table claiming that the peace symbol was the symbol of the devil. Before I left the house to attend school, Dad measured the length of my skirt, making sure it was only two inches above the knee. The year after I graduated from high school, they relaxed their rules and allowed girls to wear pants.



My husband, Bruce, now dead, adored cooking. When he retired, he spent long mornings in his overstuffed chair, reading cookbooks and the food sections of newspapers in preparation for the evening meal. In the beginning, it was something I was unprepared for. I was my mother in the kitchen: anxious, uptight, and waiting for a catastrophe. It took time to understand the warmth and caring his meals represented. He fed me love. Bruce, how I miss him and those meals.

My parents were unprepared for Bruce. He took over their kitchen when we visited, once making delicious green chili from a recipe that was labor intensive and used a lot of greens. It didn't help that the unused greens found their way into their garbage disposal, and because of their elevated water table, caused it to overflow. Mom paced around their den, glancing occasionally into the kitchen, wringing her hands, offended a man might just be ruining her kitchen. They misunderstood him, didn't realize that the food he prepared was an expression of his fondness for them, not a criticism of Mom's cooking.

He had other shortcomings, so far as they were concerned. He didn't watch sports on TV, for example. Bruce never dressed up and Dad never gave up his business attire except for ties. When I was out of earshot, I was sure they talked about Bruce being a slob. He often wore rags: T-shirts with gaping holes, shorts with oil stains, socks in need of darning or a hot water wash. I tried to manage his appearance around my parents to no avail. But more than anything, it was Bruce's domesticity that shocked them.

In California, our dinner table was made from a huge walnut slab from a tree taken down to put in an Interstate 5

freeway exit in Sacramento. Everyone loved the table even though it was far too big for the room; it crowded toward Bruce's study, which contained several years' worth of those food sections from newspapers, piled precariously. Thinking about shopping and preparing food took up a large part of his day. He delighted in presenting me with his concoctions. I looked forward to coming home from work, knowing he had created something special.

It was not unusual for us to have dinner parties with many people spilling around the table, laughing, telling stories, drinking wine. Meals became a dance, an entertainment full of light. Bruce was a warm, friendly, and generous host. He loved to tell the story of his acquisition of our dinner table.

"Well, a former student of mine called me late one night. He had noticed a huge walnut tree that several men and machines were taking out. He knew how much I loved wood and that I liked to scavenge as well."

"Even though it was the middle of the night, I went out there and looked around. They didn't really want me there because of the danger – really the liability. They were about to load part of the trunk and a large limb into a huge dump truck. I kept my distance until the truck was loaded, approaching the driver when they were finished. He told me his name was 'Dallas Doody.' I had to stop myself from laughing." Bruce giggled a little at the recollection.

By then the crowd was laughing with him, refilling their wine glasses. I laughed every time he told the story, his voice deep, his delivery slow, his right hand stoking his big white beard.

"I asked Dallas where he was taking the load. He said he was planning to take it to the dump. I put a hundred-dollar bill in his hand and said, 'Dallas, I know that dump. It's in Davis, California.'

"Dallas followed me here, and when he dumped the tree, the concrete driveway exploded. We found a guy with a portable mill and worked on that thing for a couple of weeks. All the older men in the neighborhood would bring chairs and watch us work."

Two beautiful tables were made from that tree, along with benches, counter tops, and more. And the food he put on our table was amazing. Love was grilling: goat cheese

pizza, salmon fillets atop tortillas with black beans and crème fraiche, grilled eggplant and asparagus, even a grilled Caesar salad. Love was crisps filled with all the valley fruits that grew in our and our neighbors' yards. Love was making a better peanut brittle than See's. Love was the honey from his hives. Love was salivating in anticipation and the slow sweetness of each bite.

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Formosa

Jaime Green

I can see a park from my window if I crane my neck and squint. Two or three green puffballs of tree, slivered between buildings, over there past a brick wall and several roofs. My apartment building turns in on itself in a U, with my window at the back of the dead-ended chute. Something happens to the air in this confinement—the weather at my window is never the weather in the rest of the world.

I've crammed three potted plants into the sill of my kitchen window, the only place in my apartment where they can get enough sun. When I repot them, I cover my kitchen table in paper and dig a measuring cup into a bag of dirt I bought from a store. I always wonder if, in respite between uses, waiting under my sink, the dirt might grow bugs, little grubs or worms. It could be spontaneous generation or the siren call of a bag of earth sequestered in my kitchen. But nothing yet.

The city grid in this neighborhood is twisted and shrunk, skewed off its ordinal orientation. Northerly streets reach off to the east, avenues that are western everywhere else in the city slice here to the eastern edge. The island starts to interfere with the plan. Broadway is the same street here as the rest of the city, stretching the length of the island like an artery, connecting this remote neighborhood with all the humming hubs of the city.

I once tried to walk the length of Central Park, but I tired my feet out too quickly on cobblestones. I took a bus the last 20 blocks, fighting motion sickness the whole way.

I live far away from the heart of the city, but still on its island. Still cars, still concrete. I walk on asphalt and tile

floors and subway platforms. Underground I'm sealed into tunnel tubes. I go days without seeing the river. I go too many hours without seeing the sunlit sky. I forget, at night, to look for the moon. When I remember, I confuse it with a streetlight.

"Every explorer names his island Formosa, beautiful. To him it is beautiful because, being first, he has access to it and can see it for what it is."[1]

This was the first city I knew. I remember the sidewalks sparkling with stars.

I know every bridge and tunnel point of entry, every way out of this city ringed with shore. And I have never understood cities without water boundaries. Where does the city end if not at the river? Other cities blur into their suburbs, into farmland, into woods. Here everything is compact and contained, discreet. Rather than expanding, spilling over city limits, the pressure simply grows. But we forget the water. The river here is salty, but it has no seawater smell.

Across the river, the bank is buffeted in palisades. To the south, apartment buildings jut up like reaching barnacles, but going north the cliffs are almost pristine. Trees clump at the foot of the cliffs like gravel that's tumbled down a hill. There are towns inland, but all you can see from the city is trees.

In the summer there is free kayaking from a boathouse on the river at the edge of the northernmost park. I sign my waiver and cinch on a life jacket and slip into a boat. My tiring arms press through a paddle into the river, and my chest catches the wind like a sail. The kayak is just the right buoyancy that I feel like I'm sitting on the surface of the water, not floating or swimming but sitting with the water as it flows.

The only natural woodland on the island of Manhattan—not virgin forest, there is none of that here, but woods not manicured into a park—hugs the island's northwest edge, just a few blocks from my home. This is where the Dutch bought the island of Manahatta, bought or stole. It is where

I learned the names of birds, shorebirds and sandpipers, warblers and wrens, sitting on a bench by a low-tide inlet in the largest city in the country. The birds seem to walk on top of the water, but they're standing on the mud below that we can't see.

Every so often a magazine or museum will publish an illustration of the island before we buried it under slabs of sidewalk and roadway and buildings built suffocatingly close. If you peel back the human work of the centuries, the city breathes again, stretching into swells of hills and stands of trees, seeping water back into its marshland. Canal Street was once a canal but what was the land before that? Stones and dirt crumble again at the bank of the river, rock and water commingling at the edges like they should, like they want to, like we never let them anymore.

In winter I glimpse the river and it looks like a stranger. I miss the warm months when I know it.

When the city had an earthquake, I was in a ninth-floor office in a building downtown. I looked idly out the window and observed that the building seemed to be swaying, but no one reacted, so I kept it to myself. Who knew this city still had living bones beneath it?

The closest I come to touching the earth is veering off the paved path when I run. I skirt the sidewalk and feel the dirt giving under my feet. But in spring men come to roll up the ground and lay down new sod, skinning the earth and smothering it in nothing real, another manmade wrapping.

Buildings slice the air, partitioning sky. False sun hits the street in the wrong direction, reflected off high windows, giving bodies and trees the wrong shadows in the street. The river's northern bend was artificially dug, the whole course of the thing redirected, invisible but in relics of borough boundaries that flout the waterline.

Two hurricanes have come since I've lived here. The first time, I walked through the baseball fields by the river. I layered jeans over leggings, sweatshirts over sweatshirts, swaddling

myself so the rain might not soak through the layers to my skin. I walked up a hill and looked down at the river. The cliffs on the far side were grayed out by the rain. Waves lapped over the boathouse deck, as if the dock weren't even there. The next year's storm breached the barriers of the island. Men pumped water out of the underground arteries for days, hoses snaking out of the subway entrance, water pounding out at full blast, as if the city were a person saved from drowning, coughing up water, but the flow of water from her lungs doesn't end.

It's just a myth that the skyline tells a story of the bedrock. The skyline tells the story of where businessmen wanted to build big towers, that's all. But Long Island is a giant moraine, left at the leading edge of an ancient glacier. Boulders break through the lawns of Central Park like the backbone of a sleeping dragon.

A fault line separates the north of the island from the rest of the city, but it shows itself as a street. Faults here are not great schisms or crevasses, but feathery things. They are features of the land; the city grid submits and bends. Where the island's land was too unruly, a moraine or outcropping of schist, parks were built, where ridges of bedrock could not be leveled, where land was too rocky for construction. The highest points in the city are in parks. Sometimes if you look toward the river, you won't see any buildings at all.

When I was just a few months old, I slept through an earthquake here. My mother woke up and said to my father, "I think we're having an earthquake." He told her to go back to sleep, that it was just a big truck rumbling over the bridge.

"The direction of the movement paused, sat silent for a moment, and reversed. From that moment, vastness was the start, not the finish. The movement now began with the fact of two hundred million, and the movement was toward a unit of one, alone."[2]

Running, I see the rain in a puddle before I feel it at all. By the time I reach the field at the edge of the woods, my skin is damp. Rain comes heavier and heavier; the downpour

starts when I am half-way through my run, the farthest point from home. I hold my glasses in my fist and run blurry-eyed through the water. Trees loom, bright and green, a canopy against the rain, fat drops falling off their leaves. I take out my headphones and bundle them in my hand, and run in the park, surrounded by the sound of rain, the smell of rain, the trees as deep as far as I can see, up the hill and lining the fields, and I stop listening to my ragged breath. The river is whitish-gray, like the clouds. When I get home I am soaked to the bone.

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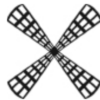
[1]*Walker Percy, "The Loss of the Creature"*
[2]*George W.S. Trow,* **Within the Context of No Context**

Guys and Dolls

Floyd Skloot

No doubt they were an unlikely pair of lullabies to sing for my young daughter: A perky nightclub dance number originally performed by a group of showgirls, and a rousing revival-style pseudo-gospel blaster. Forget "Baa Baa Black Sheep" or "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." Rebecca and I had "A Bushel and a Peck" and "Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat."

Even as a child more than 40 years ago she loved the unexpected and freewheeling, the exuberantly unorthodox. If lullabies were supposed to be lilting and soothing, I knew she'd prefer hers playful and feisty. So one night when the bedtime stories were done I introduced those two showstoppers from *Guys and Dolls*, the classic 1950 musical comedy of love and redemption among the gamblers, singers, and soul-saving holy rollers of Depression-Era Broadway. She'd never seen or heard *Guys and Dolls*. But those songs, which had long been part of the unsung soundtrack playing in my brain, became the ones she wanted me to sing every night, both of us happy, smiling as the final verses softened and slowed toward heartbeat tempo.



I had the original cast album stuck way back in my record cabinet along with *South Pacific*, *The King and I*, *Camelot*, *Fiddler on the Roof*. It was the oldest album I owned, a hand-me-down from my brother Philip, who was eight years older than me and had bought it in the spring of 1958, when he decided to audition for a community theater production of *Guys and Dolls*. We'd moved from Brooklyn to the small barrier island city of Long Beach, NY, the year before. He

was nearing 19, knew few people on our little island, and the local theater—he'd been in a production of *Kismet* a few months earlier—had turned out to be a good way to meet young women. Or dolls, as he called them after being cast as the good-natured, Coca-Cola-swigging, small-time horseplayer and crapshooter named Nicely-Nicely Johnson, a man who earned his moniker by telling people he was doing *Nicely, nicely, thank you*.

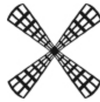
I remember Phil coming home during the first week of rehearsals and humming as he walked into the bedroom we shared. Framed by the doorway, he wiggled his hands and did a jazzy little kickstep. I'd never seen him so ebullient. "This show's a blast," he said, singing a couple of lines from the title song. *When you see a guy reach for stars in the sky, you can bet that he's doing it for some doll*. Then he shook his head, which was high praise, and said as though awestruck, "Crazy, man."

It's an opinion widely shared. *The Oxford Companion to the American Musical* says *Guys and Dolls* is the most durable American musical comedy: It is so tightly written, has such vibrant characters, and the score is so splendid that the show is practically indestructible. Critics have called it "an icon of the American theater" (Ross Wetzsteon), "the show that defines Broadway dazzle" (Frank Rich), and "the apogee of twentieth-century American theatrical songwriting" (Ben Yagoda). Among its enduring songs, besides "A Bushel and a Peck" and "Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat," are "Luck Be A Lady," "I've Never Been in Love Before," "My Time of Day," and "If I Were a Bell."

The show's plot involves a pair of intertwined love stories set against a wager between the gambling pals Nathan Detroit and Sky Masterson. Nathan operates a floating crap game in the Broadway neighborhood and has run out of venues. Old sites like the school gym, the bar, the cigar store, the funeral parlor, and the back of the police station are no longer viable and the only possibility is the Biltmore Garage whose owner demands a thousand dollars in advance. Since Nathan hasn't got the money, he wagers his friend Sky Masterson ("Why do you think they call him Sky? That's how high he bets.") a thousand dollars that Sky can't convince the beautiful and righteously restrained Sister Sarah Brown, from the Save-A-Soul Mission, to fly with him

for lunch in Havana. As this bet plays out, and Sky and Sarah fall in love, Nathan's 14-year engagement to Miss Adelaide, a singer at the Hot Box Nightclub, reaches a crisis point. Will he agree to stop running his game and marry Adelaide at last? Will Sky and Sarah—the inveterate gambler and the dedicated missionary—overcome their differences and find a way to be together? Will anybody's soul be saved?

In the world of this show, romantic love, familial love, and even friendship were linked to salvation. It was a link that found full resonance in my imagination as an 11-year-old and remained a kind of touchstone. The main characters and their stories suggested that there was an aspect of love that involved healing, a force that claimed and then reclaimed you.



One night Phil assigned me a task: help him get ready for his performance by providing backup vocals to the big rollicking song of deliverance he'd be singing near the end of the show, "Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat," about a sinner's redemptive dream-journey to heaven. It's one of the show's signature songs, a joyful glory of a number that's meant to elevate the audience's spirit, and Phil wanted to catch its full force. So I listened to the track until I learned—and for 60 years now have never forgotten—all the song's ensemble backup lines, a mishmash of phrases, incomplete on their own but blending with and supporting my brother's story. "Said to himself, Sit down," "People all said, Beware, beware," "Sit down, you're rockin', sit down, sit down, sit down your rockin' the boat." Eventually, after weeks of rehearsing with him, I memorized the rest of the song too, but have never been able to sing it without also singing my own backup vocals. *For the people all said, Beware, you're on a heavenly trip (People all said, Beware)*.

Phil would come home from his work selling pressure-sensitive adhesive envelopes in New York City, change his clothes while grumbling about the commute and swearing he would have to move out soon, race through dinner, and begin singing with me during the brief time available before

rehearsal began. Standing in a dark corner of the living room, he'd remove his eyeglasses so he couldn't see and be distracted by me or by anything else beyond the imaginary stage lights. I remember him waving his hands as he sang about being washed overboard by a great big wave, the veins in his neck bulging as he reached for the highest notes. He would snap his fingers and open his eyes wide when he wanted my backup phrases to arrive more crisply. *Thank the Lord, thank the Lord*. If we got it right, he wanted us to do it again immediately. "Act 2, Scene 5, from the top! You ready, Floyd? A one and a two and *I dreamed last night I got on a boat to heaven*." It was like a game and I loved playing it with him, blending my voice with his. I loved being able to make him happy with me. I think I could already feel his looming absence, the time when he would finally move away and begin his extended travels to customers throughout the Northeast. When he would be gone from me. This sense of impending sorrow has always infused the most jubilant musical moments in *Guys and Dolls* with an undercurrent of urgency—a reminder of loss that only intensifies the power of loving at the show's core.

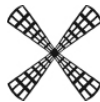
After he felt comfortable with "Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat," Phil said we needed to work next on "Guys and Dolls," the title duet that Nicely-Nicely sings with his good friend Benny Southstreet about men falling hopelessly and foolishly in love with women. Once I'd learned Benny's part, we practiced a few times, but Phil wasn't satisfied because the harmonies weren't right. He wanted to hear his voice blend and balance with his partner's, wanted to feel the harmony suffuse his body.

"Here's what I want you to do tomorrow after school," he said. "Listen to all the Everly Brothers records we own. That's what we're going to sound like, okay? By the time I get home, I want you to be ready. Instead of Phil and Floyd Skloot, I want us to be Phil and Don Everly till we nail this song."

For hours I sang along to "All I Have to Do Is Dream," "Devoted to You," "Bye Bye Love," "Wake Up Little Susie." The Skloot Brothers! Later that night, the look on Phil's face when we blended perfectly at the finale of "Guys and Dolls" is the look I see most often when I dream of him. *The guy's only doing it for some doll, some doll, some doll, the guy's only doing it for some doll!*

With the approach of opening night, he wanted to work on the song that worried him most, “A Fugue for Tinhorns.” It was the show’s first number, setting the tone for the rest of the evening, and Phil felt his lines needed to be cleaner and sharper than they’d been at the last few rehearsals. “A Fugue for Tinhorns” is an intricate, difficult, three-part round that required us to recruit my friend Johnny Frank to provide the third voice. With each singer simultaneously touting a different horse for the day’s betting, it took Johnny and me three days to learn our parts and be able to sing our overlapping lyrics without flubbing or laughing.

I never attended rehearsals. So I knew by heart many of *Guys and Dolls*’ songs long before I knew its story. Before I’d seen the flashy characters with names like Angie the Ox, Big Jule, Rusty Charlie or Harry the Horse, heard their strangely formal streetwise dialogue, understood the reasons why Nicely-Nicely sang about being on a boat to heaven. But I felt immersed in the strange world of the show’s music anyway. I told my teacher I was doing *Nicely, nicely, thank you* when she asked how my book report was coming along, and—borrowing a phrase from “A Fugue for Tinhorns”—told Johnny *Can do, can do, can do* when he asked if I could come over to shoot baskets with him. In the year of The Coasters’ “Yakety Yak,” The Silhouettes’ “Get a Job,” Jerry Lee Lewis’ “Great Balls of Fire,” and Danny and the Juniors’ “At the Hop,” I was an 11-year-old boy walking around singing “Sit Down, You’re Rockin’ the Boat.”



I attended all four of the community theater’s performances, struggling not to sing aloud during the songs I knew so well. I sat in the back row on opening night; moving closer to the stage on subsequent nights mimicked my sense of deepening absorption in the action, the way it drew me more powerfully each time.

Seeing live performances was a new experience. I was surprised by how much I liked the show and enjoyed the songs, including the ones that weren’t Phil’s, even after sitting through it four times. I was stirred by the unlikely

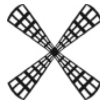
and—even to the pre-teen I was then—sizzling love story between Sky and Sarah. Their songs were full of passion and allusions I was just beginning to grasp. *Well, sir, all I can say is if I were a bridge I'd be burning*. Near the end, when Sky reveals to Sarah that his real name is Obediah, it felt like the most tender intimacy I'd ever witnessed. And I was moved as well by the affection, patience, and frustration inherent in the bond between Nathan and Adelaide, their enduring faith in each other, despite Nathan's failure to marry her as promised.

When the curtain parted to reveal a recognizably midtown New York street setting, and characters sashaying on and off stage during the opening ballet scene, "Runyonland," the atmosphere felt at once familiar and exotic. The mix of melody, lyric, choreography, dialogue, emotion, humor, and narrative energy all worked on me as no form of entertainment had done before. By the final night of the show, just hearing certain parts of the Overture—*I've never been in love before; now all at once it's you*—evoked in me such strong feeling that I had to fight against crying. Just a dozen notes and I was overwhelmed.

While I'd memorized Nicely-Nicely's songs, I also loved the silliness when Adelaide sang and smooched her way through "A Bushel and a Peck" with her backing group of six chorus girls. It was a song I'd heard before, when my mother sang it along with Doris Day on the car radio as my frowning father drove through the streets of Brooklyn. Day's version seemed darkened by my volatile parents' suffocating combination of cigar and cigarette smoke. The version I heard in the community theater and on the record was bright and clean and full of the promise of love. By the end of the run I had "A Bushel and a Peck" memorized too.

My whole experience of *Guys and Dolls*, from rehearsing with Phil through repeated viewings of the production and then continuing to listen to the soundtrack over the years, turned out to be an intense exposure to love in various forms. It got to me, became part of me and gave initial shape to my expectations for what was possible in relationships. I'd never worked so seamlessly or congruously with my brother. I'd never witnessed such open expression of passion, such tenderness between couples. I'd never grasped the magic of singing to those we love.

At 11, and without comprehending what was happening, I also accepted both notions of adult love at the core of *Guys and Dolls*: the smitten-at-first-sight chemical explosion (Sky and Sarah) and the trusting, enduring connection (Nathan and Adelaide). Something about the music and lyrics, about the coherence of the show's resolution in which both couples marry and accept each other for who they are, also made me believe that passionate love and enduring love could exist together, could be part of the same story. That there was tender love unlike the kind I saw at home, which was angry, tormented, full of mutual disappointment. This response to the show, and especially to its songs, has remained with me ever since: What happened in *Guys and Dolls* was love worth risking. I believed that it made perfect sense to stand there and sing about it, even if that meant singing, as Adelaide does in "A Bushel and a Peck," the sheer nonsense of *Doodle, oodle, oodle, doodle oodle oodle, doodle oodle oodle-oo*.



Now, 20 years after my brother's death, this quest for finding harmony together remains one of the most vivid memories of my childhood and of our time together preparing him for *Guys and Dolls*. I've come to see that this opportunity to harmonize with Phil—like the opportunity to sing backup vocals for him—enabled us to express feelings for each other that we had no other way to communicate.

The show's songs have remained close to me. In 1961, auditioning for a production of *West Side Story*, I was asked to perform an impromptu a cappella solo. The first song that came to mind was "Guys and Dolls." Though it wasn't written as a solo, I sang it anyway, imagining my brother harmonizing with me. Deeply associated with love, "A Bushel and a Peck" and "Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat" were there for me when I needed lullabies to sing for Rebecca in the mid-1970s. "I'll Know (When My Love Comes Along)" was there for me in 1992, when my wife, Beverly, and I first got together. I actually sang it to her (and she actually didn't laugh) one night as we planned our first trip to New York, where I would introduce her to my family and visit the places

in Brooklyn and Long Beach that were part of my childhood. And where we would see the Broadway revival of *Guys and Dolls* on February 20, 1993.

As we entered the Martin Beck Theatre on West 45th Street, I couldn't stop smiling. It felt so right to be seeing this particular show at this point in my life and I was elated to be there with Beverly. But I was also as jittery as if I were part of the cast in the final half hour before the curtain would rise. Would she like it? Would this cast be as good as the original cast whose singing I'd been listening to for 35 years? I knew who the lead actors were—Nathan Lane, who had taken his stage name years ago in honor of Nathan Detroit, a character he'd dreamed of playing; and Peter Gallagher, whom we'd seen recently in the films *Bob Roberts* and *The Player*, but had never heard sing. The lead actresses, Faith Prince and Josie de Guzman, were new to me. An understudy would be replacing Walter Bobbie as Nicely-Nicely Johnson—would he be good enough in the role my brother had played? I realized my expectations were excessive. I was too wrapped up in memories, associations, and anticipation. So please forgive this helpless haze I'm in.

Yet this revival of *Guys and Dolls* exceeded all I'd hoped for. As Frank Rich said in his review on WQXR-AM/FM, "Here is a dream come true—as close to perfection as you can wish. This is simply a freshly imagined, rousingly staged and extraordinarily well-designed production." In the very first moments of the show's opening number, "A Fugue for Tinhorns," as Nicely-Nicely and Benny Southstreet and Rusty Charlie sang their gorgeously complex round, Beverly looked at me and smiled with such exuberance that I felt released from my thoughts and anchored in the moment. She'd studied and played music all her life, and knew instantly we were witnessing something extraordinary. We held hands as the song moved on and the Save-a-Soul missionaries entered the scene.

A few months later, we married and I moved from Portland to live with Beverly for the next 13 years in the small round house she'd built on a hillside rural western Oregon, in the middle of 20 acres of Douglas fir, oak, maple, and wild cherry. I knew I had to be rigorous in deciding what to move into this small space we'd be sharing. It was time to jettison my ancient turntable and the few vinyl albums

that remained in my collection, including the scratchy and overused copy of *Guys and Dolls* that I'd assumed from my brother.

By then, Beverly and I had bought a CD of the revival, its voices the ones we'd heard together, and I felt ready to move on from the earlier version. I told myself that if I missed it, I could buy a re-mastered CD of the original 1950 monaural version. But I never have. When I listen to the 1992 version, it not only contains Beverly's smile but also all the memories I retained and brought along to Broadway with me 25 years ago and, in a moment, learned to move beyond.

Floyd Skloot*'s work has won three Pushcart Prizes and the PEN USA Literary Award in Creative Nonfiction, and has been included in* The Best American Essays, Best American Science Writing, Best Spiritual Writing, *and* Best Food Writing *anthologies. His 21 books include the memoirs* In The Shadow of Memory *and* The Wink of the Zenith: The Shaping of a Writer's Life *(both from the U. of Nebraska Press), and the poetry collections* Approaching Winter *and* Far West *(both from LSU Press). He lives in Oregon.*

The Octagon Room & The Explorers Club

Amy Benson

The Octagon Room

It looked like a temporary shelter preparing for deluge. That is what we saw when we walked into the gallery—a little structure built from unadorned plywood, buttressed by two-by-fours, and shored up with sandbags. There was the suggestion that, despite the reinforcements, one jostled beam and the whole thing might fall open like a blown flower. When we stepped inside the room, however, we were in the implacable nineteenth century, stranger to compressed wood and polypropylene bags.

It was, in fact, an octagon room, fad of the mid-to-late 1800s for people who liked a wall so much they wanted a new one every time they shifted. In the middle of this octagon room was an octagon settee, one wedge of dusky rose upholstery facing each wall. Sit, it said, and study. And there was much to study. Part genteel office, part Wunderkammer, part natural history museum, the room was a fistful of lists. Maps, antique desks, drawings of fish and birds, excavation tools, specimen jars, card catalogue bureaus. Taxidermied animals; shards of pottery dredged from riverbeds; bookshelves with Spencer, Conrad, Machiavelli; and notes and sketches, some of which appeared to represent a nascent version of the room itself. Every item hinted at a history, a field of study, a way of framing the question, as if, 150 years ago, a net had been dragged through the northern European forests, rivers, libraries, and museums, the bounty hauled home and painstakingly organized.

The imagined proprietor of the room was a gentleman scientist, natural historian, collector, archaeologist, environmentalist, humanist, and colonialist. A Victorian intellectual who wrote a book for every idea he had, easy in his anticipation of mastery.

But the artist who created him was wise about that desire to label and preserve, about the assumption that collecting equals knowing. And he had a wicked sense of humor. There was a shadow box lined with labeled keys, the handsome script on which suggested some keys might open real gates or doors or boxes, and some might open imaginary museums or even portals to other worlds. Deer heads mounted on the wall looked as if they'd been shed from the Exxon Valdez spill. A map was hung so high above the doorframe that it became entirely unable to inform or direct.

After a while, we zeroed in on a favorite: a taxidermied turtle. It was posed as if in mid-step, and piled high on its back was a conglomeration of shell, stone, sand, and human artifacts—teacup shards, buttons, fragments of antiquated children's games. As if it had hibernated for several centuries in the mud and, at last, risen up through the layers, its shell an archaeological dig. Turtle was, breath by labored breath, hauling it all into the future.

If we could have taken the turtle home, we would have. A reminder of the weight of human history crawling across our coffee table. Our guests might focus on the turtle's front foot poised to step and politely ignore that it was stuffed by the very same instinct for preservation that says: I'll kill you, but I won't let you go.

We stayed as long as we could, itching to thumb through the card catalogue and contents of the roll-top desk. We had the strong impression that the room was telling us something essential, something we needed to know before we could move on. We had come in from the street, where we were learning selective sensing—how could we notice every noise, every threat, follow the news feeds scrolling 360 degrees around us, and still get where we were going? We had grown up learning how solutions became problems and order became greater chaos—how cats brought in to catch mice themselves needed catching; how spent nuclear rods piled up in the no-longer-cool cooling baths; how a war to end all wars scattered the seeds of a thousand more; how there was something in the water no matter the well. Now here were eight walls of sincere collection and its brilliant critique. We thought we might be able to absorb the Octagon Room's modus operandi. See everything, including the limitations of our sight.

We stayed until our attention became strained, a performance, and then slipped outside and looked back. We were shocked to see, once more, the plywood, the sandbags, shocked at how, inside the room, we would have disavowed any memory of the raw and flimsy present. It was a blow but not a surprise to learn from a gallery attendant that the show would close in another week. The room would go into boxes, and then...where?

Before the week was up, we returned with a digital camera and, without considering the irony, photographed every inch of all eight walls—180 pictures, at which we have never looked back.

The Explorers Club

There is a feeling that we're getting away with something. The exhibit is open to the public, yes, but it's in a club in the toniest part of town, and we find, when we arrive, that we must wait in the foyer to be escorted up to the room on the sixth floor that holds the artist's work.

As we wait, we approach the threshold of a room into which we can see but may not step. It is paneled in the wood of nut or fruit trees, slow-growing trees, the felling of which requires sacrifice. The room is filled with books and tusks, and in the amber light from a floor lamp we can see a man's ankle crossing his knee, a serious newspaper lifted between us. The scene does nothing to dispel the caricatures the name "The Explorers Club" had conjured: a history of moneyed dilettantes in felt hats; assorted charming social climbers—novelists, doctors, entrepreneurs—looking to plump the virility of their biographies; and seekers unable to distinguish between curiosity and conquest.

But they let us in, and they let in the artist we had come to see. This is the same artist who made The Octagon Room, the same artist who took a large fallen tree from deep in a Pacific Northwest rainforest and transferred it to a city art museum, where he built a massive, mechanized structure so that the tree (and every organism it hosted) might continue its decomposition as if it lay in the forest still. An artist who understands that everything eats something else, and that

humans have a special passion for naming and organizing the things they devour.

Our docent arrives, a self-possessed young woman versed in the artist's materials and aims. We suspect, however, when she ushers us into the wood-paneled elevator, that her main function is to keep us from wandering into other rooms, onto other floors, the secrets and privileges of which are for members only.

On the way to the Trophy Room, where the exhibit has been mounted, we pass oil portraits of men in their middle age—notable members, one presumes—as well as photographs of men with one foot on the ribcage of a felled animal or one hand on a mode of transport—prop plane, yak, ship, sled. The only non-white males pictured on the walls are native guides carrying burdens or the reins of beasts of burden. The only women are the docent in front of us and the receptionist downstairs.

We imagine what it must have been to give yourself, at the dawn of the twentieth century, the title "Explorer." How available the world must have felt—still large but no longer frightening, with colonies on every continent and no sea monsters at the edge of the map. "Explorer" was a release valve from an orderly home, a celebration of extremity—it said, As a subject of study, my home has been exhausted. The data required cannot be found in the vicinity of my habits and my neighbors. To make discoveries, I volunteer to vacate the social contract. Then they would disappear into a map and return eventually with fertility totems and necklaces made from the claws of lions, the teeth of men.

But when we enter the Trophy Room, our eyes are instantly so busy we forget our bitter critique. Most of the items in the room are old and appear in their original colors: an elk's head in shades of brown, a primitive pot in black and ochre, the silver of swords and rifle barrels, cabinets and furniture of deeply stained wood. And then, the exceptions—there are items scattered throughout the room that appear to be made of stark white plaster. The efforts of our eyes to sort and connect feels like pleasure falling in a mist across our faces and necks. Many of the white objects are spread on a long, substantial table, and the eye registers that they are in the shape of antiquated tools: awl, pulley, coil of rope, lantern, saddlebags, broken-in boots. They are stark

replicas of work-bearing tools laid out as if in preparation for an expedition to a futuristic past. Beyond the table, a white boar hangs from the ceiling by its bound feet. There's a white flagpole in the corner, white moth, white campfire on the floor, a cooking pot suspended over it with white sticks. A plush rat-like creature, also white and the size of an eight-year-old child, is pinned on a table as a specimen. Our eyes are hunting and gathering. Our brains are pitched into a colloidal suspension of past and present, respect and irreverence. We are, it occurs to us, explorers in this Trophy Room.

We feel we must be strict with our delight, though. After all, the mere existence of the Trophy Room says, When members of the club leave home, everything they close their fingers around is a trophy, a victory for them and their kind. No other taxonomy is required.

The artist has inserted himself into the expeditions, however, and rendered the tools useless and otherworldly white, the quarry comical. This isn't the white of a casual assumption of power, but a cartoon white, an untouchable white, a white that's going to fall to pieces. More importantly, perhaps, the artist suggests a way in, a certain kind of extrapolation that we visitors might take up. We start to follow the lead: We see white objects in the room that aren't actually there—horse bit, crampon, tent. We see the white dust radiating into other rooms, other journeys, into vaults and cabinets with ornate keys. We wonder how the room looked before the artist was invited in. We wonder what happens on the floors from which we are barred. We wonder how many other Trophy Rooms there are in the city and what sorts of stark white objects they might contain. We wonder who might be considered an explorer now and what he might bring back as a trophy. We wonder what sorts of humble tools might now be the means to conquest.

We keep extrapolating on the way back to the elevator, when our time in the Trophy Room has expired. What would the Explorers Club's version of charity be? Would they hope to teach the next generation how to increase their comfort and dominion at home by taking risks abroad? Perhaps they would host a Future Explorers Camp for children in the city whose lineage is unlikely to include a club member of any kind. They would scour the foster child rosters, troll the

parks and intersections with the worst crime statistics, and hand out fliers and then scholarships.

When camp begins, club members stand the kids in a circle for trust-building exercises, blindfold them and send them into a room, hands forward. They sit them in a circle to tell them about frontiers—"A frontier is a place that needs you to discover it. Your home is a known quantity, it's over. Where can you wield the instruments of measure?" They bring the kids to the Trophy Room to have them study the animal heads on the wall and Explorers Club flags that have been planted on every continent and even in space. There is a quiz after, but the only question they must get right is: What should people fear more than the gun? Answer: The caliper.

We thank the receptionist sincerely on our way out. We have been given the chance to consider that mounted animal, the gentleman explorer. And consider, too, what frontiers remain—deep space, DMZs, the anaerobic blooms in the oceans, the sites of test bombs, strafing, detonations. Or to consider if the word "frontier" itself is perhaps too slow-moving, might be headed for its own mounting.

That is what the exhibit gave us, but we managed to take a little something, too. Back on the street, we pass addresses that require a household staff—thresholds, archives we will never breach. But in one of our shoulder bags is a pickaxe from the Trophy Room, shedding white plaster dust onto a hairbrush, a whistle, gum wrapped like a pharmaceutical. It has two satisfying points and a handle that could not have been denied. We wanted this irony in our hands: a tool for exploration, for survival, that, if used, would crumble to dust.

And if we have left something, it is the void where the pickaxe should be. The next visitor might see that void and extrapolate from it. This is what happens when the public is allowed in.

When we get home, we will hang the pickaxe, the first item on our brand-new trophy wall. Plenty of room for more.

Amy Benson *is the author of* Seven Years to Zero *(Dzanc Books, 2017), winner of the Dzanc Books Nonfiction Prize, from which these essays are reprinted. Recent work has appeared in journals such as* Agni, BOMB, Boston Review, Denver Quarterly, Gettysburg Review, Kenyon Review, PANK, *and* Triquarterly. *She has taught creative writing at Columbia University and Fordham University and joined the writing faculty at Rhodes College in Memphis in the fall of 2016.*

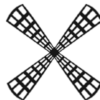
The Neighbor

Dori Cahn

I hang tight to the back of a moto taxi as the driver veers sharply off the main thoroughfare onto a narrow, rutted dirt lane that I would not have recognized as a road. He takes me on a bone-jarring ride that twists through the neighborhood, bumping along past small houses built of found materials, piles of burning garbage, lush gardens, vendors' carts, and vacant lots filled with debris. Mostly it is debilitating poverty, occasionally punctuated by well-kept houses of the Cambodian middle class.

Navigating the roads of Phnom Penh requires patience and persistence. Typical of many Asian cities, there are few stoplights and no lanes, crowded streets and chaotic traffic, scores of vehicles and pedestrians. Finding a destination among the roadside vendors, parked cars, clusters of people and tightly packed houses, all almost within arm's reach of the traffic, can be nearly impossible.

For an outsider, however, maneuvering through the mayhem of the streets can be simpler than trying to read the Cambodians themselves. Recovering from three decades of civil war that included one of the past century's most horrific genocides, survivors have had to work through the trauma and shame of families and neighbors turning against one another. Many people still carry the lesson that they must hide the truth, out of fear that it be used against them. A road map for the Cambodian psyche is no more available than one for the chaotic capital city.



The moto taxi drops me off under a large shade tree across from my destination, a salmon-colored house where

I teach English to the Cambodian staff of a local NGO. The project works to prevent domestic abuse and the spread of AIDS by teaching young Cambodians about healthy relationships, with the additional goals of improving family dynamics and empowering women. In a country weighed down by its past, the project imagines a future where caring and respect replace deeply-seeded mistrust and contempt.

A small group of bright and energetic young Cambodians staff the NGO. Ranging in age from mid 20s to early 30s, the oldest among them were children during the "Pol Pot time," the reign of the murderous Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979. The youngest of the NGO's staff were born after the Khmer Rouge were forced from power by the Vietnamese, and only know what they have been told, which often is not much.

By this time, when I was teaching English in 2005, the Khmer Rouge tribunals were mostly in place, and it looked like the top leadership would be indicted and brought to trial under the auspices of the United Nations. It had taken more than 25 years to create a system of justice for the Cambodians' suffering. Pol Pot had died some years before, but the last surviving leaders of the regime—Nuon Chea, Khieu Samphan, Ta Duch, Ieng Sary and his wife Ieng Thirith—were still living quietly in the country and, though quite old, were about to be charged.

Over the year I'd worked at the NGO, I realized teaching English was not just a matter of explaining grammar and vocabulary, but also a way to give Cambodians access to information and ideas that were otherwise unattainable. The Khmer Rouge's annihilation of Western, educated thought had left the country with very little literature or academic work being created and published in the Khmer language. Ideas could move the country forward, I believed, if in the hands of thoughtful young people like these.

On one of my last days teaching, I brought a quote from Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist teacher, to inspire a conversation: The ability to make peace with another person or in the world rests with the ability to make peace within oneself.

We were sitting on pillows arranged in a circle in the room they used for their workshops, a blackboard covered with English and Khmer words stretching along one wall. With the windows wide open and fans spinning overhead,

we discussed Nhat Hanh's words. A spirited discussion unfolded about the group's work teaching communication and understanding between genders, and the relationship between peace and anger.

The talk eventually came around to the Khmer Rouge, as many of our conversations did. Cambodians may not like to talk to each other about what happened to them during the Pol Pot time, but most seemed to want to explain their country's history to outsiders.

Among the oldest in the group, Sochet was a young child during the Pol Pot time, and he often told stories of his experiences. Tall and good-looking, his usual joking manner would turn dark as he started remembering. These childhood memories seemed to trouble him deeply, and he admitted that he always relaxed after he would tell us his stories. English class as therapy.

That morning, he told us how he remembered sitting on the steps to his family's house in the work camp, and someone came to tell his father that he had been chosen for work on a dam-building project. His mother started packing a bag for him with extra clothes and things he would need while he was gone. His father let her pack, and took the bag with him when he left. Sochet's uncle later told his mother that her husband had been taken off to be killed, but she didn't believe it until she saw another person wearing the clothes that she had sent away with him that day.

As he told this story, everyone else was silent, somewhere inside their own heads. I decided to raise a question that had been on my mind for some time, since my time living in Cambodia was coming to an end and this might be my last chance to ask.

"What do you think about the tribunals?" I prodded. "Will the trials do any good? If everyone is able to tell their stories and finally find someone guilty, will people be able to put some of their memories to rest?"

The silence settled in more deeply. Sochet stared at the floor.

I tried to confront the discomfort in the room. "Will it let people make peace with their neighbors? Lots of people still don't talk about what they know or saw."

Finally Dara challenged me. Always the most passionate one in the group, she was angry at my question.

"Do you know how much money they are spending on that?" she fumed. "It's a lot of money, maybe 13 million dollars. Or more. Spent on the trial of a few people. Look at how many people are starving and homeless, uneducated, sick. Look at this country. We have so many problems. That money could help so many people instead."

I remained silent, just listening.

She continued heatedly. "The few who are on trial are so old anyway, and in a few years they will be dead. So it doesn't matter."

The group was mostly nodding in agreement.

Dara pointed towards the window. "Ieng Sary, he is very old, it doesn't matter," she said, and waved her hand dismissively towards the window again.

I couldn't understand her body language, and wondered if I'd missed something. I asked, "Why are you pointing toward the window? Does he live near here?"

"Yes," she said, flapping her hand again.

I looked through the window, and contemplated. "Next door?"

"Yes."

I thought I must have misunderstood. "Are you serious? Ieng Sary lives next door?"

"Yes, he lives next door."

Why didn't you tell me that before, I wanted to shout at her. I've been coming here every week, how could I have not known this! I wanted to peer out the window, through the giant mango tree that separates the houses to get a look at one of the masters of this country's brutal destruction. I had heard his name so many times, I wanted to see him in person: Does he look like someone who would have ordered the executions of thousands of people?

The group stared quietly.

A chill slowly spread through me like a sip of ice water: People in this country have had to find peace with the fact that they may live next door to someone responsible for mass murder. They have to go on with their work and their belief that their country has a future, when specters of a horrific past lurk around every corner, and no one knows where or who it is. The old lady who sells rice down the street, what was she doing during the Pol Pot time? The toothless taxi driver? Who isn't culpable?

The bonds that hold communities together are sometimes fragile. No one knew if the tribunals would help strengthen those bonds by airing the grief locked in people's memories, or tear them apart as individuals confront the reality that their communities are filled with people who may have been responsible for terrible things that most would rather forget. And how do you reconcile the desire to hold people accountable for their responsibility in cultivating such horrors with the desire to have peace in your heart?

Sitting with this group of young, passionate, dedicated people who are trying to help lead their country out of the darkness with their hope and optimism, I realized no one could tell me: Will the guilty verdicts of five people help them do that?

I left the class that day as though unsure if I had swallowed a bug: Should I feel disgusted? As I walked out to the street to find a moto to take me home, I turned around to see if I could make out the house I had been looking at through the upstairs window. Behind the NGO's salmon-colored facade, I could see a few flashes of white concrete peeking out between the large, twisted branches of the mango tree. I had never noticed it before. The house was indistinguishable from the layers of houses tucked tightly together along the street.

Ieng Sary died in 2013 before his trial at the Khmer Rouge tribunal was completed. He was 87.

***Dori Cahn** is a writer and educator in Seattle, Washington, and has lived and worked in Southeast Asia and Central America. Her work has appeared in* Z Magazine, New America Media, International Examiner, *and* Race, Culture, Psychology and Law, *among others. She is co-creator of Voices of the Immigration Station, a permanent installation at Seattle's historic immigration building honoring many decades of immigrants and refugees coming to the Pacific Northwest.*

Shuttle Launch

Jen Fitzgerald

I see Wanda walking the narrow streets of our section of Snug Harbor. In the beginning, she walked with neighbors or visiting friends. Now I see her only by herself. Her thick, long gray hair hangs straight down her back. She has lost weight, but that is expected.

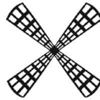
I see Wanda only when I am heading to or from the elementary school, to or from the grocery store, to or from one of my daughter's many after-school activities. I stay inside. I am not a "shut-in" per se, but no one would call me a social butterfly. If I am found on my deck, passers-by wave on their daily walks around this idyllic place. I've only ever walked this neighborhood while dog-sitting, showing friends around, or trick or treating with my little one. It would be cathartic, I am sure, if I had the nerve to leave this shell. But I don't. The walls of windows that encase me make me feel expansive and involved with the sunrises and sunsets, animals, water fowl, shipping barges, and cloud cover. Over the past five years—much of my daughter's life—my world has collapsed behind walls that contain.

If I had forgotten to swing by the mail box after picking up Elizabeth from school, I would open the front door, march out on to the porch and before I could hit the pathway, the sun and warm breeze thick with humidity would run over me. Hello, I would think. Hello to all things I cannot feel, only see from my desk or perch or passing by the double-paned glass insulating me from the windy peninsula.

Wanda walks to get out of her small bungalow. I imagine it feels smaller now, not larger—even after visitors stopped coming regularly. I imagine her in there alone.

If Jack were still alive, they would be in the garden by now. The small and densely-packed patch in her front yard—tilling soil and feeding the earth with her leashed cat nearby; the only cat I've ever known to affably walk on a leash.

They were always together. I don't say this as hyperbole—I never saw one without the other. I envied their bond, wondered how they could stand to never be apart, living in that tiny bungalow, going everywhere together, even into the front yard. I relegate that sort of relationship to "another time," or "possible codependency," so that I do not have to accept any irregularities about my own autonomous marriage.



With the four, tightly-packed houses on either side of the street, the ambulance could have been for anyone or anything. I didn't know he was having a heart attack. There was an ambulance in front of my house nearly every other night before an elderly neighbor was taken away for the final time. It was her ambulance that first lulled me to sleep when the overwhelming silence of this place kept me awake. If I had known, I could have—what? Done something? Does it matter what something I could have done if I wouldn't have done anything but let possibility sustain me?

A kind neighbor told me a few days later that Jack had passed that day. She has a very matter-of-fact demeanor that I find comforting.

"You know, Jack was the only one who drove, so now she has these two trucks sitting in the driveway and doesn't know what to do with them."

I thought of this every time I passed the trucks in the driveway. The thought of Wanda, alone in that bungalow, became an apparition for me. I thought of making her food and bringing it over. I thought of what I would say or what any neighbor could say, or if it would be strange that we had only ever really acknowledged one another with waves and now I was baking condolence muffins and hand-delivering them. Or a grand gesture of, "Come over every Wednesday and I will make coffee and we will talk and keep one another company." I know what it is like to be down here all by yourself.

I should have just said, "I am so sorry."

Jack was the first person here to engage me in

conversation. He walked in front of my house for a better view of the Bay, smoking his cigar as I've seen him do off and on. With his thick Bronx accent, he welcomed me to the neighborhood.

"You'll like it a lot better here. It's so quiet. I've been here for 10 years, never regretted the move."

I didn't have the heart to tell him this was a temporary move. I preferred to sit in the camaraderie of two New Yorkers who had to get out. I'd found the silence maddening so far. Being so alone with my own thoughts was torture.

He went on to tell me, "This is a clean neighborhood. No problems with drugs like some of the other places." Jack was a drug counselor and knew a few things about recovery. I especially didn't have the heart to tell him about my numerous experiences with drug rehabilitation and own decade clean from heroin—now living within constant reach of anti-anxiety meds.

My practiced march-step was distraction, distraction, retreat. But there were no distractions in this permanent retreat.

A few weeks before his heart attack, Jack and Wanda walked up the street, then stood, facing south east, waiting. They were in front of my home, so I invited them to sit on the deck with me and my daughter. Elizabeth called out to them, "Are you waiting for the shuttle launch? You'll be able to see it right over the Bay!"

Elizabeth had wanted to watch the launch from our neighbor's home across the street to continue playing with the twin boys, her friends from school. They had a fire going in their backyard, which borders an inlet our community uses as a marina—the water was often so high that it became an extension of the grass. I had met my stimuli quota of sound, people, and conversation and politely declined their offer to stay and watch it with them. She sulked, but knew it was futile to argue once I passed this threshold.

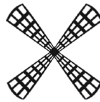
Jack and Wanda accepted our invitation and joined us at the small table on the far side of the deck, snug between a side entrance to my home and a "bramble-rose bush", as my grandmother called it. My interest in Jack and Wanda outweighed my desire for quiet, but I did not know how long it would last. We made conversation, looking out over

the water, our faulty compasses steering us south when we should have been looking east.

"Surely it must have gone off by now," Wanda said, starting to look concerned. We checked our watches, we looked over the bay. "You see anything?" Jack looked over to Elizabeth who scanned the sky and dark horizon. "Nothing yet."

Small cheers from the twins across the street let us know that we had missed the faint green light of launch heading skyward. I looked across the table at our guests, "Oh, my goodness, I am so sorry! I thought we were looking in the right direction. I feel awful."

Jack shrugged his shoulders. "No big deal, we'll catch the next one. It was nice sitting with you anyway." They got up from the table slowly and walked home, hand-in-hand.



I want to take gains and losses in stride, as Jack did. I want to move on into the quiet and know peace will surface. As I stand in front of my expanse of windows, I prepare for my own failure and launch. The windows open over the same swath of bay where we searched out the shuttle light. There was such an ease with disappointment that night. But now I find myself balancing view and reflection, possibility and reality––can anyone really prepare to be alone? She, at my back, two houses down, wasn't given the choice or time to prepare. She walks through her new life to learn it, while I do mock-ups of my shifting day-to-day. In the long pauses between what was and will be, we both recognize the faint outline of Jack against the Bay and swear we can smell his cigar.

Jen Fitzgerald*'s first collection of poetry,* The Art of Work*, was published by Noemi Press in 2016. Her essays, poetry, and photography have appeared in outlets such as PBS Newshour,* Boston Review*,* Tin House*,* Salon*,* PEN Anthology*,* Colorado Review*,* Harriet: The PoetryFoundation Blog*, and* Best American Poetry Blog*, among others. She is a poet, essayist, photographer, and a native New Yorker who earned an MFA in poetry at Lesley University and a BA in writing at The College of Staten Island (CUNY).*

Woodland Bound

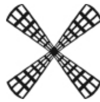
Emily Arnason Casey

In the summer, my husband, two sons, and I drive cross-country to my parents' home on a lake in Northern Minnesota. They live in a log house, decorated like a lodge. The boys insist on swimming naked in the shallow water of the lake. Though I worry over their pale skin burning, it seems a pleasure I can't deny them. They are four and almost two years old. I know that soon enough they will grow wary of their nakedness, and stumble into that moment of physical shame that so often coincides with an emotional turning inward—the body simultaneously becoming a thing to be hidden and hiding place.

Late in the afternoon I run the forest trail alone. The pines in the field have grown since last summer; the brush has begun to fill in around them. Soon the field will turn to forest and I will lament the erasure of this open space where bees pollinate and dragonflies hover. Wildflowers abound here: bull thistle, aster, and common yarrow. Harebells hang their dainty purple heads as though in sorrow. Gumweed and black-eyed Susans congregate amid my favorites, which are just beginning to bloom: the common mullein, a hardy flower that looks like a torch, its leaves as soft as flannel. Standing beside one on the path, the plant reaches the tip of my nose. They can grow eight-feet tall. A native European plant, some believe it protects against evil spirits and acts as a guardian to the lost.

In the distance, a flood of ox-eye daisies gathers like fresh snow. I turn and run into the thick woods for a short stretch; the grass grows to my knees here. I crush clover beneath my feet. The smell of pine presses close. I clap my hands now and then to ward off the bear that has recently been sited along the trail. But I am not worried. Alone on this trail in the summer heat I turn to mist, breath, sound of footfall, echo of clapping hands. My body becomes a litany of light angled through trees with a near religious dedication to

grasping beauty. The trail turns to sand and curls on towards the rows of planted pine I estimate to be 40-year-old growth. Little brush grows beneath these pines; rather, the floor of the forest here is mossy or thick with shallow clumps of blueberries. Always a black bird or robin here, lifting from ground to branch to raspberry bramble as though urging me to follow her in, and I walked slowly beneath these pines a few years back with my baby son and my sister, nine months pregnant with her daughter. We wandered off the trail together. My sister, so close to birth, seemed shrouded in a numinous glow.



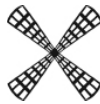
As an adolescent girl, I hid so much from my parents and the world that hiding became a part of me—a comfort, really. I nursed sullen shames and secret disobediences. Painting my face with skin toned cream from my mother's bathroom drawer became a private ritual of summertime boredom—a secret, as well as a way of hiding the dark circles that already bloomed under my young eyes. The smell, a sharp scented perfume, and glow of my skin, delighted me. I loved also to smell my grandmother's cold creams or to touch the various bottles of pink-hued nail polish in her mirrored cabinets. But there was more than just this. More too than secret cigarettes smoked during lunch break while driving the back roads out of town or stolen jars of mixed booze—a little from each bottle in someone's parent's liquor cabinet—sipped in the back seat of cars or around a bonfire beside the open pit iron ore mines of my hometown. I wanted a secret life, silent as the trees to which I spoke stories, tale after tale featuring young women and adventure. Now I detect this compulsive itch to imagine in my four-year-old son when he hushes as I near and turns away, irritated by the interruption of his private world.

My husband, a kindergarten teacher, calls it *creative play*: stories acted out, scenarios conceived, often fears mollified in the process, a certain relief attained. I have my own version of this—stories that come as I run, unravel with a force all their own. Perhaps story is of the body, homed

there in the flesh, waiting. As children, we must have known the way the body, and thus the self, belonged to the natural world or to solitude.

In her book, *Upstream: Selected Essays*, the poet Mary Oliver writes of three selves: the childhood self, the social self, and the otherworldly self. This last self exists beyond time. “It,” she writes, “hungers for eternity.” Children, I would argue, live attuned to the otherworldly self, particularly when allowed to grow bored. Reality and imagination coalesce in their young minds. In adults, the otherworldly self comes most readily to the artist and it, Oliver argues, prefers open spaces and solitude; it concerns itself with the edge of life, the periphery, a place of formlessness and uncertainty—a place that in me feels acutely alive and aware while running this forest path, through the landscape of my youth.

Now, as I run, story lifts its wild heart from the trees, stringed together on the wings of black birds, of berries, of dreams.



We abandoned our part-time jobs as baristas, bar maids, hostesses, vegetable farmers, landscapers, nannies, lifeguards, and retail specialists. We left behind our full-time jobs as painters and sculptors, poets and essayists, puppeteers, musicians, and circus performers. We left town for a country of prairie grass and junipers, of oceans lapping deserts, of great islands of sand and sunset. We took our children, wrapped against our backs, cuddled in wagons and wheelbarrows, walking at our sides. We left our cars in the streets with the windows rolled down and the keys in the ignition. We left our credit cards and tip money, our rolls of cash and bank accounts; we left our designer jeans, red lipsticks, and shaving creams that smelled of cinnamon and shoe leather and lavender; we left our student loans and master’s degrees.

We carried dried beans, loaves of bread, books as old as grandmothers. We packed knives and wooden bowls, blocks of butter, and bottles of virgin oil. We carried hatchets and spades wrapped in burlap.

As we walked, our hair grew long and our children dirty. Our hands became strong and our fingernails hardened. We found forests of fir with moss floors where we lay our heads and our babes to sleep. We listened to the owls cry in the night and held each other in a different way, from a different fear—corporeal yet transcendent. Our children curled into us and sighed in their sleep and we dreamed of great mountains with rushing streams filled with fish. We dreamed of the untethered ocean, strong like a god. We dreamed of a home somewhere deep in the earth, thick with the smell of mud and grass, with vegetation, where we lived women and men in collusion, green as earth. Round and happy with need.

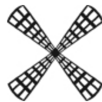
We had read Thoreau and the Nearings; we had read A Sand County Almanac and Silent Spring along with Rita Dove and Adrienne Rich. We believed in homesteading and self-sufficiency, in wood cabins with saunas beside the pond or the stream or the lake. We longed for gardens and chickens and farms with apple orchards, with trees like the characters of dreams. We wanted our children to live freely of the land and we knew it would be hard, but we believed in a better life, as though we might be separate from the rest of the world, free from the need to belong. We believed we could change from the body out, and that sweat and muscle would bloom and bear the fruit of our labor.

We stood in clearings and watched deer; we cried out at the sight of geese flocking home overhead; we lay at night under the blistering stars of a deeper sky and listened to the wolves howl. We learned the names of trees and flowers and birds and mushrooms. We pointed out the constellations we had never been able to see before and taught our children the old myths and made up new ones because history felt necessary and imagination vital.

We built cabins on the sides of mountains and barns in the valleys, and stood in the bluffs naked beside the sea, filled with the sound of the waves as they crashed and as the water shoaled, filled with the distance of the horizon, the sky lipping there. Swallows built their nests in our barns and we welcomed them. Our children grew strong and wild, romping through the fir forests, the birch groves and rivers that coiled through

the land as they made their way to the sea. Fear left us as we stood in pastures beside sheep, on the tips of mountains looking out letting the world beyond us come in, move through us, form us as it saw fit. We let the weather dictate our lives, the sun our sleeping habits and when we returned to making art, writing stories, puppeteering, and drama, we felt content with mediocrity, we were lazy with our craft, our sentences floundered and burst, letters fled the page, women stood on stage and forgot their lines, and no one cared. Paintings looked like replicas of the depicted and sculptures stood lifeless in the fields. We had made art of our lives; it was all we needed.

Soon our children grew up and left us for the cities, the wars, and the streets of commerce. We grew old alone, together. We walked to the sea and listened to her song when our eyes no longer worked. We lay down on the moss of the fir forest and waited for the owls to cry out, for the sound of the wolves howling, full with longing. Naked, we found wonderment in our bodies, old as they were, and did not want to leave them behind, though we must. We climbed the mountainside and sat among the wild sheep; they nuzzled our furry chins and dry lips and curled up at our sides. We held them. We told each other stories of how we had made this life, of who we were. The night dropped like water spilling and when we slept we dreamed of our children, full and round like the moon, sleeping in tiny rooms in the city, driving cars and riding subways, sitting in cubicles dressed up in neck ties and heels, sipping cocktails with red-eyed green olives and lime wedges after eight-hour days, kissing and making babies, and filling their bank accounts with numbers under a smoggy sky, filled with angst and love and hope and dreams of their own.



Now in the woods, running, I recall not so much the specifics of my imaginary world as a child, but the feeling of joy that arose from the industry and purpose of play, and the knowledge that grownups would not understand. In this same way I create a litany of beauty as I run this trail—a flower gone to seed stands in solitude, its white orb on the

cusp of flushing in the wind, perhaps I will be the last to see it. The smell of pine like a sweet, brisk honey, the give of the sand beneath the sole of my foot, the lift and bounce of the black bird alight with mischief. I leave the woods and turn back towards home, running the paved road past my sister's house, past a couple in their late sixties crouched in a blueberry patch. My body turns inward, thoughtless in physical meditation, slick with sweat and breath heavy.

Ulysses, in the Greek myth, allegedly carried a mullein stock to ward off the evil magic of Circe, who turned others into swine. The Romans dipped mullein in tallow and carried it as a torch in funeral processions; Native Americans may have laid the soft leaves of the mullein in the soles of their shoes. Perhaps I am drawn to the myth of this stalk flower torch, its yellow rosettes of light and wooly leaves, its angular disruption of the northern territory. Or can I sense the way they stand apart from the landscape, not quite belonging. In them my secret selves find a momentary home—the otherworldly selves that want to live in, and indeed arise from, the physical world.

And here is what I sometimes wonder: Do we make art from this feeling of apartness, separation, and discontent with the social self, the social world? Is our work an attempt to assuage this wound of dividedness by giving life to the force of the imaginary? Or, are we made to feel apart because we are born with the composition of this artist self: malcontent, forward looking, bored if not horrified by the triviality of the mundane routine of abstract commerce, dead-end consumerism. Born rebels, as though bone and breath defy conformity. And how do we reconcile these many selves? How does the girl made of secrets marry this woman running and sing into being her forest litany?

The light is carving out the road; all the magic in the world rests there in the shadow. I record each observation without words—seeded in the body. Each secret beauty caught and held summons prayer that tugs at the knotted coil of my grown-up self—quelling angst, soothing worry, anointing me again in the mystery of all that is possible.

Emily Arnason Casey*'s essays have appeared in* The Rumpus, The Normal School, Hotel Amerika, Mid-American Review*, and elsewhere. Her essay collection* MADE HOLY *will be published by CRUX: The Georgia Series in Literary Nonfiction in 2019. She's an editor at* Atlas and Alice Magazine *and lives with her family in rural Vermont.*

The Masthead (from left to right)
Emily Provost, Nicole Dykeman, Peta-Gay Clayton,
Melissa Connolly, Kira Turetzky, Emily Sahli,
Stephanie Oskowsky, and Emily Porter