

PONDER REVIEW



PONDER REVIEW

Volume 1 ~ Issue 1 Spring 2017



PONDER REVIEW

Managing Editor Tammie Rice

Editors Xenia Dylag, Kathleen Galvin, Ashley Hewitt

Sally Lyon, Robin Murphy

Advisor Kendall Dunkelberg

Ponder Review is published annually by the low-residency MFA program in creative writing at Mississippi University for Women. The views expressed herein are those of the writers, not the editors or Mississippi University for Women.

Ponder Review considers New Media, Visul Art, Creative Nonfiction, Fiction, Flash Fiction, and Poetry twice a year December15 – March 15 and June 15 – September 15. No previously published material will be accepted. See our website for full submission guidelines: PonderReview.com

Single copies are \$12 and subscriptions are \$20 per year for addresses within the United States. Foreign postage is additional. For submissions and subscriptions use Submittable: ponderreview.submittable.com

All rights revert to the authors after publication; however, we reserve the right to reprint online and in anthologies of the magazine. For the rights to perform plays or to reprint any work published in Ponder Review, please contact the author. As a courtesy, the editors are willing to assist in establishing contact whenever possible.

We request Ponder Review be credited with initial publication. Queries or other correspondence may be emailed to: editors@ponderreview.com. Queries and subscriptions sent by mail should be addressed to: The Editors, Ponder Review, MFA Creative Writing, 1100 College St., W-1634, Columbus MS 39701.

Cover Photo: Ashley Hewitt

ISSN 2572-6455 (print) ISSN 2572-6463 (online)

Copyright © 2017 Mississippi University for Women

From the Editor

Firsts.

Such a simple word, delineating spaces, marking moments in life, places in the world. In the hands of a writer, however, Firsts embraces a range of emotion, meaning and interpretation: a first kiss, a first child, beginnings, and often endings, transitional moments of recognition that some part of life has come to an end because another has begun.

The Ponder Review staff believed Firsts to be the appropriate theme for the inaugural issue of the literary magazine produced by the new low-residency MFA at Mississippi University for Women. For some, working on Ponder Review served as an introduction to magazine production, reading submissions, making the difficult decisions about which works to select for publication. Others, having worked on undergraduate publications, appreciated the opportunity to once more showcase new stories, poems, plays, and art. During the time required to bring this magazine to life, moving from a dream to the final pages you now hold in your hand, we marked progress by our own firsts: waiting patiently for the first submissions to arrive, choosing our acceptances, and sadly, identifying those which we could not fit into the limited pages of our magazine.

Issue 1 of Ponder Review represents a first and last for me. Having completed my thesis, I will graduate from the program this summer. My first issue is my last, but I have no doubt that this issue is the beginning of many issues in which readers will find strong voices from established and emerging writers. We hope you enjoy reading about the firsts from writers and artists ranging from the east to west coast, as well as Canada, England, and Australia. We are thrilled to have a global reach in our first issue, and look forward to discovering more new voices that the upcoming call for submissions will bring.

Tammie.

Tammie Rice

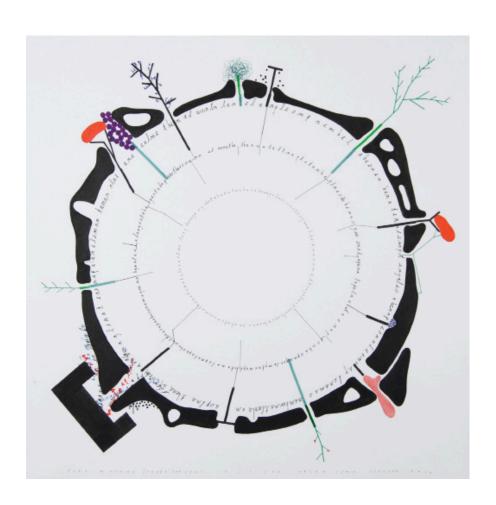
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Poet Working	1
MILTON BATES My First Deer	2
KRISTA VARELA POSELL Mother's Day	4
ASHLEY HALL The Things that are Left Behind	11
MARY CHRISTINE KANE When we became trees	
To my darling girl 1	3
COURTNEY MELVIN Yard Sale	4
BRYN HOMUTH My Newborn Gets An IV	8
HELEN BURKE Vanishing Point2	0
THOMAS LOCICERO Port Salerno	21
RALPH BOUSQUET, JR. cancer	2
MORGAN GOVIER Roseus	3
BETH SHERMAN Damage	4
FRANK DULLAGHAN Doing the Deed	6
CHRISTINA ROBERTSON The Unadorned Year	8

ALEX NODOPAKA Visual Diffraction Beauty
CAROL BARRETT Waiting on My Daughter's Night Class
PATTI SEE Boy and Dog
SHAHE MANKERIAN Harlem Renaissance
Monopoly with Arény39
NICHOLAS SAMARAS First Laughter
JV BIRCH Endoscopy Unit42
JOE COSTAL The First Thanksgiving43
EUGENIE CARABATSOS Seven Minutes in Heaven49
KENNY ROUTT Muse
JACK STEWART Adam's First Farm
First Whistle
AMBER COLLEEN HART
First Marriage58
BETH SHERMAN Honeymoon Picture
KALI LIGHTFOOT First Day With Hearing Aids66
On the Occasion of Hearing that our Grant Proposal was Declined by the National Science Foundation 67

SHIRLEY NELSON Housecleaning68	
JOANNE ESSER It's Not Time69	
MM SCHREIER The Uninvited House Guest	
HOLIDAY GOLDFARB My Backdoor Step, 1971	
JEFFREY TUCKER November, with Rain Turning to Snow76	
STEVE DALY The Self-Contained Critic78	
JOHN MCCAFFREY Senior Spin	
ROSEMARY ROYSTON First Moon87	
LINDA CONROY First Catch	
Runaway - A First Attempt	
DARIN WAHL Passing Time	
LYNN B. CONNOR Sparrow's Song	
JEANNE JULIAN Leaving the Ceremony	
RICHARD DAVIS, JR. Joseph Receives Unsettling News95	
SAMMY PARKER In The Dachau Museum, Winter 1972 101	
DARIN WAHL Dawn at Volcán Tajumulco104	

STEVE DALY



POET WORKING

MILTON BATES

MY FIRST DEER

He pulled trigger and Sam Fathers marked his face with the hot blood which he had spilled and he ceased to be a child and became a hunter and a man.

—William Faulkner, "The Old People"

First Deer, the caption says beneath the photo. The rest is all about the boy of thirteen, maybe fourteen, who steers the antiered head into the lens. Its tongue spills from one side

of its muzzle. The camera's flash has gouged the pupils from its eyes, turning them to glass. It's a generic shot, a seasonal staple of small-town newspapers. Another kid,

another carcass. This boy's buck is like the one I might have killed when I was his age. I'd hardly slept the night before, awake for every *whoosh* of the propane

heater kicking in, the riot of mice above the ceiling, the death-rattle snoring of the grizzled veterans. By sunrise I was on my stand, my 30-30 ready.

I pictured my first deer gliding across the creek and into range. It would present its profile and await the consummation of a bullet. My father would slit its throat

Poetry

like the old hunter in Faulkner's story. He'd smear my face with blood, and I'd become a man. That's how it was supposed to happen, that simple, provided my deer chose the trail

I watched. Which of course it didn't, not that fall nor any that followed, so I had to muddle through to manhood without the sacrament. It was a messier way, though bloodless.

Yet I hope that first deer in the photo gives the boy as much in death as mine gave me in life, year after year until it fell to winter, wolves, or another hunter.

KRISTA VARELA POSELL

MOTHER'S DAY

Imet my grandmother for the first time when I was eleven. Here's what I remember:

It was the end of May, about a week after school had let out for the summer. It was a time of transitions: my first year of middle school was over and my parents were in the middle of a divorce.

It was clear to me from the time Dad moved out a year ago that there was no chance of them getting back together. Things were calmer now. Now that my father was gone, I didn't wake up in the middle of the night to Mom yelling at him for coming home drunk again. Dad would usually be stumbling home from the bar he owned, The Wooden Nickel Tavern, where he poured pitchers of Budweiser for blue-collar workers and listened to them sing out of tune Bob Dylan karaoke. Before closing time, my father sneaked shots of tequila behind the bar to help make the night go by a little bit faster and the customers' voices sound just a tad smoother.

Now Dad staggered into his own empty apartment at four in the morning and passed out in his living room watching M*A*S*H reruns. Mom hid her pain, stealing sips of chardonnay when my brother and I weren't looking from mini-bottles stashed in a corner kitchen cabinet.

Dad missed out on many pivotal moments that first year he was gone—my first straight-A report card, my first basketball tryouts, my first date.

Even still, life was full of possibilities. I had a crush on a blonde-haired, blue-eyed boy, and he liked me, too. Innocent dates to the movies were such a tease—holding hands across the armrest, sharing a soda with one straw instead of two. Before our dates, I'd go with friends to the mall to pick out the perfect shade of pink lip-gloss, something to bring a little color to my pale lips.

The boy and I blushed *I love you*'s over the phone and passed notes in class that talked about things like *forever*, because I wanted so desperately to believe that such a thing still existed. Although he would break up with me in the fall before we ever shared our first kiss—my first kiss—the anticipation

was almost just as exciting.

Almost.

The end of school already meant summer was in full swing in southern Arizona. Escaping the hundred-plus degree heat was a hobby. Tucson didn't yet have the sweet relief of monsoon season—my favorite time of year in late summer that gave the desert most of its annual rainfall. In a month or two, thunderstorms would start rolling in almost every afternoon, washing away the heat and humidity for the rest of the day, granting just a small reprieve until the sun rose the next morning.

But until the rains began, we had to suffer through uncomfortably high, muggy temperatures. Unlike most of my friends, our home didn't have a swimming pool. We didn't have air conditioning, either. Both of these luxuries came with my father's new apartment; my brother and I enjoyed them on Friday afternoons while my father slept: first by the side of the pool reading the newspaper trying to get tan while we swam, then inside on his recliner while my brother and I raced each other on our Nintendo 64. But for the rest of the week, when we were at home, a swamp cooler recycled hot damp air throughout the house while we slowly boiled inside.

Here's where things get a little muddled in my memory:

That particular May afternoon—it may have been a Tuesday or a Saturday, it's hard to tell in the endlessness of time that is summer vacation—I was waiting at home for someone I'd never met before.

Just a couple months earlier, Mom's brother had died (though in my mind, it had only been a few weeks—the newspaper announcement tells me otherwise). His obituary also only mentions that he "died suddenly," and to this day, I'm not really sure how. It's difficult to talk about death in families, especially it's masked by strange circumstances like cocktails of pain pills with whiskey chasers. The last person in my life who'd died was my grandfather. But I was only a toddler then. Both men remain imprinted in my memory only in mere glimpses, like photographs.

The way I recall it, I wasn't allowed to go to my uncle's funeral. Perhaps Mom didn't think it was an appropriate place for children, wanting to protect me from feelings she didn't want me to experience yet. Maybe she wanted to grieve in private, not wanting her children to see her in a vulnerable state after already feeling so exposed from the divorce. Or maybe she just assumed I didn't want to go and never asked.

Death sometimes has a way of bringing people together. Mom hadn't spoken to her own mother since shortly after I was born, for reasons I did not (and do not) understand. But at the funeral, they reconnected, and perhaps

[PR] Spring 2017

the moment encouraged them to start over, reminding them of the finiteness of life.

Since it was over two months from the funeral to the day we met, they must've taken things slowly, testing the water before getting my brother and me involved. But finally Mom decided that it was time. So that May afternoon my grandmother came over to our house, and I'd be meeting her for the first time in living memory.

Some of the particulars of that day are where my memory really begins fails me:

I can't recall our wardrobe. My mother probably asked me to wear a nice blouse, or maybe even a dress. Mom didn't say much about her own childhood, but she had told me that she wasn't allowed to wear jeans—she used to have to sneak a pair of pants in her backpack and change at her best friend's house on the way to school. I wouldn't have fought my mother on this request, knowing how she must have been nervous. I probably wore something I only would've worn to church or another special occasion. I'm sure that the latest shade of lip-gloss I bought at the mall that week was sitting unused on top of my dresser.

When I picture my grandmother now, I imagine her wearing a housecoat. The few times I went to her house after that hot summer day, a housecoat was what she wore, perhaps one with a floral pattern or special stitching. Or maybe I'm thinking of my father's mother, the only grandparent I ever really knew, who wore a robe all day every day as she shuffled around her house, eventually falling asleep to *Judge Judy* in her living room chair with a Coors in her hand. But of course my grandmother wasn't wearing one the afternoon that we met. She was probably wearing a dress the day we met—I don't ever remember seeing her in pants.

I also can't recall the moment she arrived. There was probably a knock at the door, or maybe the doorbell rang. I had been waiting in my room while the afternoon sun poured in through the window, causing little beads of sweat to run down my legs. I wondered what this new relationship would be like. Maybe I'd start going to her house on Sunday afternoons, where she'd have homemade chocolate chip cookies waiting for me on the stove. Perhaps she'd teach me how to sew or knit. She might even pull out old photo albums and tell me stories about how her family immigrated to the United States from Serbia. I'd only known one grandparent growing up, and everything else in my life at the time seemed so atypical; I thought maybe this would be the start of something almost normal.

Almost.

Even if I don't remember what we were wearing, the setting still stands out in my mind:

We sat down in the family room to visit. I took a seat in a miniature reclining chair—a child-sized one we'd gotten when I was four years old. Nearly eight years later, I was far too big for it by that afternoon, and my adolescent limbs hung awkwardly off the sides. My brother was too big for the chair then too, but we continued to hold on to it—a memento of the smallness, simplicity, and fragility of childhood.

My grandmother sat in the regular recliner next me. There was an identical twin of this chair in my father's new apartment, where he was probably sleeping at that very moment, resting up for another late shift at the bar. My grandmother smiled at me, and I smiled back at her, trying to be the granddaughter she expected me to be. I noticed the way her butterfly eyeglasses wrapped around her face. I thought about how my mother had just started wearing glasses, and wondered if I too would need them when I got older.

One other detail is severely lacking in my recollection of this day: where was my brother? I don't remember him being home that afternoon: for some reason, I only seem to imagine the whole event being a girls-only affair. But surely Mom wouldn't have invited her mother over without both of us. Maybe he was there, hanging around in the background, trying to get our attention, wanting to bring out his boom box to dance and sing for us out in the living room. Maybe he had been so bored by our conversation that Mom excused him to his room to play video games so he wouldn't get restless. Maybe my mother brought us out of our rooms one at a time to visit. None of these scenarios really seems to make sense, but I can't account for his absence in my memory any more than I can account for what I was wearing. As an adult, he gives me no insight to this either. My brother, someone who has nearly every punch line from every hit 90's sitcom memorized, remembers nothing about that day.

I do remember the anxiety—what was I even supposed to call her? Grandma? It felt too casual. By her first name, Helen? That was too formal.

There was also the feeling of wanting to impress my grandmother. How do you catch someone up on almost twelve years of your life in one sitting? How do you explain to someone, whose blood runs through your veins, the kind of person you are when you yourself aren't sure? She probably asked me about school. I'm sure I told her I was a straight-A student, because that was the only way I knew how to convince others I was a good person. *Did I*

[PR] Spring 2017

have many friends? she might have asked. My mother probably said that I had a boyfriend. I undoubtedly blushed at the mention of this. What is his name? my grandmother likely inquired.

But how to tell her what I was really like, I wasn't sure. How I could tell her the little things, how could I show who I was past the report cards and school yearbook pictures? How could I tell her things a grandmother should already know, things like I loved mushrooms and hated avocados?

Nine years later, I'll be sitting at my grandmother's kitchen table, answering many of the same questions she asked me as a child, while she looks at me tiredly through an oxygen mask. I'll fly out to Tucson from my new home in Northern California because my grandmother will be dying and it will be my last chance to see her, this woman I barely know. I'll return home because it feels like it's the right thing to do, the thing that I'm supposed to do as a good granddaughter, but really I'll be saying goodbye to a stranger.

It will be Mother's Day, and I'll hug and kiss her goodbye politely. She will say *I love you* and I'll say *I love you too*, but it feels unnatural and forced. I'll think about that afternoon when we first met nearly a decade before and wonder if she remembers it too. She will die two days later, and I'll be back in San Francisco, already forgetting what she looked like.

Here's what I remember:

On that hot May afternoon when I was eleven, my grandmother and I had only been talking for a short while when I began to feel sharp stomach pains. I didn't know I was experiencing my first menstrual cramps.

It was a time of transitions: I'd been wearing a bra and shaving my legs for nearly a year while waiting for the last of my baby teeth to fall out. It was the first year I knew the truth about Santa Claus. I'd also been stocked with a supply of feminine products in my bathroom cabinet for months to be prepared for this very moment. Some days I went to the bathroom nearly a dozen times, just to check my underwear for the first signs of blood.

But I wasn't thinking about it that day. I was thinking about working up the nerve to call my boyfriend that evening, hoping neither of his parents would answer, so I wouldn't have to ask for him, hearing one of them say through a muffled receiver, "It's your *girlfriend*." I was hoping he'd ask me to the movies soon, wishing he'd work up the nerve to kiss me.

When my stomach started to hurt, I tried to fight through the pain. I sat through the conversation as my grandmother asked me more questions. Did I like to read? Did I play any sports? I sat with my knees pulled up to

my small, barely budding chest, trying to keep myself covered with whatever dress or skirt I was wearing. I wondered if things should have been going better, if I should have more of an instant connection to someone so closely related. I was beginning to shed the blood lining my tiny womb, my body knowing better than I did that the life force that bonded us was not enough.

I didn't know if it was the heat outside, or if I was fevered, but my face flushed. The warm air circulating throughout the house felt more brutal than ever.

Then there's my mother: how did she feel that afternoon? She must have seen the pain in my face, because she asked me if I was all right. I told her my stomach hurt. I tried to sit through the conversation for a while longer, but my insides felt as though they were being squeezed and wrung out to dry.

Maybe Mom was disappointed the meeting hadn't gone better. Maybe she was relieved it had to be cut short, an excuse for my grandmother to leave early so that she could return to the bottle of wine she had opened earlier that afternoon to calm her nerves.

I wonder what my mother remembers of that day over fifteen years ago. Does she remember the day her daughter got her first period, a moment for mothers just as important as a baby's first tooth or first words? Does it stand out for her as a beacon in a cluster of memories surrounded by so much pain: losing her marriage, losing her brother, and eventually losing her mother again? Or does it blend together with my other firsts of that era: first bra, first time shaving my legs, first date? Or does it simply no longer exist, absorbed in some abandoned neural pathway?

My mother doesn't remember much of anything these days. At only 54 years old, she can't get through the day without writing most things down. Doctors told her that if she quit drinking for good, her memory might improve. Just a year after receiving her one-year sobriety chip, she still can't remember if my dog is male or female. At one time, she was convinced she had Parkinson's disease; at another, Alzheimer's. After an MRI, no one is any closer to understanding why most things slip out of her brain like water from a cupped hand.

I don't know what Mom will continue to remember, or for how much longer. Memories of her own mother are still deeply embedded and continue to replay themselves over and over as she tries to sort them out and make sense of them. Most of the problems come from forming new memories. Years from now, will my mother be able to remember the day when she meets her own granddaughter for the first time?

[PR] Spring 2017

Here's likely how things played out:

After Mom told me to go lie down, I'm sure I said *nice to meet you*. I'm sure I gave my grandmother a hug and kiss on the cheek. I'm sure I apologized for not being able to visit longer. I probably thought that I'd see her again in the near future.

I probably didn't expect that I'd only see my grandmother a dozen times in the next decade before she died. I know I didn't anticipate the fact that my mother and grandmother would cut ties once more, for more reasons I didn't understand.

I know I didn't think that as an adult I'd only remember meeting my grandmother, a memory which is muggy and obscure in the way that Arizona summers are, because it was the day I got my first period.

I hobbled down the hall to my room, where I lay on my bed, clutching my stomach. I listened to the soft voices of my mother and grandmother down the hall as the front door opened and then the hum of my grandmother's Oldsmobile back out of the driveway.

Just a few miles down the road, my father snored from his reclining chair in his apartment, missing yet another momentous occasion.

My mother came to check on me shortly after. She probably gave me something for my stomach, thinking it was indigestion. But when the pain persisted, she wasn't surprised when I went to the bathroom later and told her my underwear was spotted with blood, the same blood that bound me irrelevantly to a woman I'd just met but would never know.

ASHLEY HALL

THE THINGS THAT ARE LEFT BEHIND

When we moved into this house, it was the first time in my life I'd ever owned a set of curtains. Fifteen years of barely living at all made me weary of desire—years spent by your side, a hedge of sonoma-hued walls and windows as bare as the cupboards in our pantry. I don't want to leave my curtains.

We painted the walls in this house with our children. Each room promulgating adventurous natures and wistful smiles; I will keep those memories with me and I will leave these walls, but I will also feel a tender ache when they are no longer there to speak of joy. They cannot be replaced.

A mahogany piano sits in the room that was solely mine, a room that has bookshelves stacked with books and French doors that reveal cardinals fluttering about in their bath. This place, where comfort permeates the air, will be lost to me like forgotten lyrics from a song I never wanted to end.

There are other things within this house I will leave behind: trinkets and photographs, the fear of never knowing, some of our sons' first somethings, the portrait of our family hanging in the den, the necklace you gave me for our first anniversary, pots and pans, and the patio furniture I wanted for so long.

These are material things that fade and rust and fail and break. But I will weep over them still because I know what it is to go without and what comes from working so hard to have. It cannot be helped but to mourn not only for the love we lost somewhere along the way, but also for the things that are left behind.

MARY CHRISTINE KANE

WHEN WE BECAME TREES

We saw them first on our walk. Bodies, once apart reached toward each other until limbs wrapped, roots kissed two trunks twisted into one. We took a picture sat with them awhile.

Back at the cabin: my branches into your trunk your leaves into my mouth
You nestled into my hair heard the rustle.
We swayed and reached and fell into earth, then past it
I said, We are trees now.

They said we were gorgeous together.
We should never be apart.
Until the day them came with their axes.
You will die anyway.

When our first leaves fell
I didn't know yet we were dying
Petrifying
until two phantom trees,
a graying picture.
I hear the trees now
out my window.
They will all die:
storm, disease, lack of water.
I forget this

every time I feel the rough bark against my still soft hand.

TO MY DARLING GIRL

Love,

You cannot imagine the choices you'll have. Or how quickly you'll need to decide, lest your bursting days be thrown away with your yellowed newspapers. And you cannot imagine how many days you'll throw away despite your longing to keep them, how many will turn to stone you pile in your garden.

First: peanut butter, ham; pigtails, pony; barbies, bike. Then the red chairs which go so beautifully with the green wall but also makes you feel like a fraud, because this is no longer your life and so you cancel plans so they cannot see who it is you want to be now.

Every time you pass the man asking for coins you will feel the rough edges in your pocket as you pass by. His toothless smile will stay with you.

Then one day when the daisies bloomed and hastas lush, sky crisp like a painting that could only be made with a handful of crayons, a man will ask whether you love him enough. You will consider this word along with mornings born of silence and watch as the wind takes him away.

You'll circle for doorways you've misplaced, ache for the leaves to tighten to their branches, want to eat strawberries on the patio with your love at the same time you are napping with your cat curled between your knees. You'll learn how to let go.

Love, you cannot yet imagine. Please feel the warmth of your kitty as she spills over your small body. When she asks, give her love. When she wants milk, say "yes."

COURTNEY MELVIN

YARD SALE

The sign in my suburban front yard read, "Post-Divorce Yard Sale. He cheated." I had to write small so it would all fit on the flimsy neon paper. Behind the sign, crumpled up next to other stray pieces of him, lay the blue sweat pants that he bought when we vacationed in Perdido Key two years prior. He forgot to pack pajamas for that trip, so we went to the nearest souvenir shop and he purchased the ones that said 'Surf Dude' on the back. He found it funny, because he was generally a stylish man with no surfing experience. He was educated, too. But he fully relied on being ironic to prevent getting bored. His name was James. I liked the broken bridge of his nose and the way he spoke with dramatic hand gestures. His hair was blonde, but his eyes were gray and thunderous, the strongest storm I had ever encountered as a twenty-five-year old English major. He was thirty. I was thinner then, innocently freckled and had long enough brown hair to distract from the small flaws of my face.

James was my professor. On the second day of class, I impressed him with a sarcastic spoken sonnet revealing my disdain for Shakespeare. After class, after wine, and after a couple of months, we got married beside Faulkner's grave in Oxford, MS. His favorite writer. On the drive back home to Birmingham, I told him I never liked Faulkner, but I liked how excited the idea of getting married there made him. He didn't mind my faking it. He never minded as long as it benefitted him. I would have married him in a public restroom.

Now I held a neglected copy of *As I Lay Dying*. With the tip of my finger, I etched the letter 'J' into the dust of its spine. It was his, after all, until it could be someone else's. I placed it in the grass next to some old first editions that he left on the bookshelf when he said, "I'll be back for my things in a week or so." That was sixty-seven days ago. The books were strewn across the yard in the shape of a rainbow or, from where I was sitting, a fat literary frown.

Buyers were sparse at first. A few local collectors stopped by to rummage through James's record collection, but I guess they were looking for something he never got around to buying. As I stared at the towering stack of music, I was interrupted by a small framed Latino man.

"Your man has good style. I want this shirt for fifty cents." In his tan left hand, he clutched a white collared shirt with blue stripes that I'd priced at two dollars. It was the shirt James was wearing the day I told him I'd miscarried. I was fifteen weeks along and not ready to be a mother, but I wasn't prepared to lose the chance. We had been married a year or so. Four years ago. Next to me that day was an empty wine glass. Bleeding down our newly painted front door were crimson streams of cabernet. I'd thrown the bottle against it in a fit. He kissed my forehead and picked up each piece of glass, assuring me coldly that we would try again soon. We just needed time to heal. We didn't.

"You can have it for a quarter," I said with a distant tone. The Latino man gave me a quarter, and I gave away the memory. I didn't want it anymore.

Throughout the morning, visitors included an elderly couple who bought the television that used to hang in his study, a woman wearing a Taco Bell uniform who took the throw pillows that his mother gave us on our third anniversary, and a teenage girl who scoffed at my junkyard of nostalgia, among other strangers. As noon began to approach, the summer heat was warning me to call it quits. I walked around my own inventory, unintentionally searching for something. I saw his shiny brown dress shoes, the ones he loved too much to wear more than twice. I kicked off my flipflops and slipped my bare feet in behind their leather tongues. They were much too big, but I walked around in them anyway, sweat lubricating their soles. He would be angry to know I was wearing them in the grass, that my wide feet might be stretching them. Deciding that there were still too many things left to be taken, I went back to the folding chair where I'd been sitting, and I collapsed with defeat onto its sun struck metal. The backs of my thighs were glued there now, my blue jean shorts just a casualty of the murderous Alabama temperature that would keep me stuck. I looked down at my feet and I loved him.

When the woman with the fanny pack showed up, I could tell she wasn't at the yard sale to buy anything. Her eyes didn't stay fixed on anything long enough to reveal interest or a lack of it. The loneliness she carried was so thick that I feared I might inhale it. She was just there to talk to a human, to escape a house that I imagined sat on a plot of land in the country, decorated interiorly with cherub figurines and wood paneling. Her accent whined of blue collar backwoods when she sat on the ground beside me and said, "Even Dolly Parton got cheated on, ya know. And she's an angel straight from heaven. You have to be the homemaker and the whore if you wanna keep a man these days." I couldn't look away from the blue tangle of veins

[PR] Spring 2017

on her legs, the only color I could find on her skin. Above them rested the knee length hem of khaki shorts. Below them were a pair of white Keds, bruised over time. Her hair was thin and beige, abruptly cut just below her ears. Wearing an oversized white Pidgeon Forge, TN t-shirt tucked into her shorts, she was reminiscent of a theme park enthusiast from the nineties.

"Yeah, but I wonder if his mistress was a twenty-one- year-old bird watcher," I said, bitterness wetting the corners of my mouth.

"Your husband cheated on you with a bird watcher? Couldn't have been a stripper or something? I guess every man has his weakness."

"Prothonotary Warbler."

"What?"

I sighed. "Exactly. That time of year, it could only be seen out in Alabaster. She followed the bird around and offered local colleges the chance to come with her and learn about it. It's endangered or something. It's yellow too. My favorite color."

She nodded. "And then?"

"He chaperoned the trip. That bird was all he talked about when he came home that day."

"Which bird?"

"The Warb-..." I stopped, catching her small joke.

For the next few hours, I told the fanny pack lady all about James. I mimicked his laugh and verbally painted an image of his whiskey-blushed cheeks after a night of watching football. She told me that her name was Darlene. She lost her husband to cancer, but she thought he had it coming. She nagged him every day for seventeen years to stop smoking the Marlboro Reds that he stored in the front pocket of his t-shirts. When he got cancer, he started digging a hole in their back yard. He wasn't going to die in a hospital if he could help it, so he told her that when he died, she should just drag him out to that hole by his feet and bury him herself. That's not the way it happened, though.

"He stopped swallowing food one day, so I started praying. God told me I didn't just need to sit there watching him die, so I sent him to the hospital. He died a week later." She shifted her weight, uncrossing and re-crossing her legs. "Turns out, though, you can't just bring a body anywhere you damn well please. He's buried up in Sumiton now next to his mom and dad."

"What about the hole?"

"Well, I kept getting scared I was gonna fall in it. But when I'd go inside, I just looked around at all of his things and remembered that he wasn't there. So, in a way, I gave him what he wanted." She paused, staring

straight ahead. "I buried him in that back yard. Six feet beneath the yellow patch of grass by the oak tree, there are baseball cards, a half-smoked pack of Marlboro Reds, some old sneakers, the TV antenna, and all the other things he liked more than me."

Darlene left as the sun went down. I slowly cleaned up the yard, object-by-object, each one attached to a memory. Because I was tired, I grouped it all together in a corner of the garage. It was temporary storage until I could decide what to do with five years-worth of relationship relics. Before I turned off the light, I looked at the shadow being cast from the corner, James's shadow. I hit the switch and went upstairs to sleep in the guest room where I'd been sleeping since he left. Tucked beneath the violet sheets of the twin bed, I thought about the warbler until I fell asleep. It was a singer, yellow-headed with black eyelines, everything I wasn't.

When morning lit the window, silence and sunlight illuminating the walls, I climbed out of the small bed. The smell of coffee peacefully clouded the air, as it did every morning. The timer was set for 7:00, and it never wavered. He used to say, "That coffee maker was the best fifteen bucks I ever spent." From the cabinet, I pulled down the mug labeled 'Hers' in a red italic font, filled it with black coffee, and walked out onto the back porch. In the slight breeze of the waking day, my long hair, now decorated with subtle gray strays, danced in front of my eyes. It was a small reminder that it still sat on top of my head, untouched by his rugged fingertips, ignored by whatever was left of my former vanity. I brushed it aside and stared past the lingering strands into the backyard. The once green half acre of land lay like a fading blanket. Near the dead tree by the fence, Chloe was buried. She was a French Bulldog, the only dog we owned together. James went out to buy a shovel while I held her stiff body in my lap. A futile, eagerly purchased baby sock clogged her small intestines. He laid her to rest back there when the tree still lived. To the right, we once imagined a swing set. But now I thought about the shovel.

It took time to retrieve each memento from the garage. When I was finished, the evidence of my broken marriage formed a pile on the land that would have held squeals of, "Look how high I can go, Mommy!" Darlene's story replayed itself on a high volume in my head. Then, with both of my hands gripped around the handle of Chloe's shovel, I started digging.

BRYN HOMUTH

MY NEWBORN GETS AN IV

I stand at the incubator and hold her toes—still purplish-blue as blood ferries oxygen to her extremities.

Nurses gather at her sides clipboards, cords, latex gloves. They bend squeeze press turn poke. She cries.

They call me: Dad.

Frowns, no vein, and the lead nurse tells me the head can sometimes work.

They pinch a flap of forehead blue slivers show like stripped wire. I watch a needle enter her scalp, skin bulbous like a root rupture. Another miss.

She bleeds, they dab with gauze.

Can I call this her first wound?

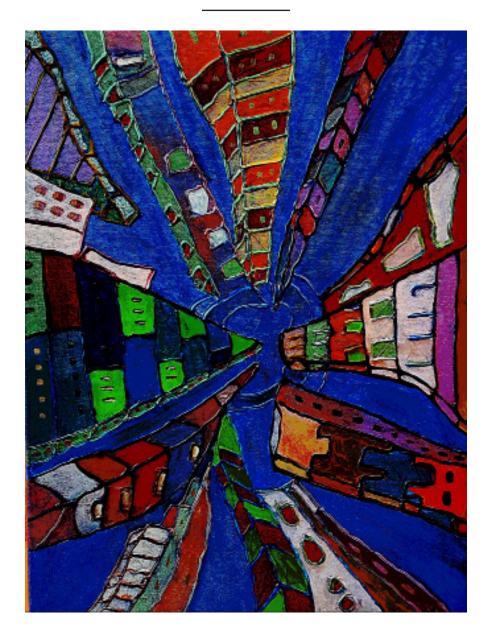
Infrared light next as search becomes hunt, but—no danger, they said; low glucose, routine, but—what is she now animal or girl and—I'm her protector, she like prey so I pray.

Tube fast to her arm, swaddled, sugar water drip, monitor pinging vitals,

Poetry

we spend our first father-daughter minutes rocking—
she to sleep,
me adrift with the oars of parenthood,
rowing out of a storm
she will never remember.

HELEN BURKE



VANISHING POINT

THOMAS LOCICERO

PORT SALERNO

I am seventeen, exiting my cottage for the first time into a party thrown in an adjoining screened-in porch by my neighbor, who took the time to build a bar. Pretty Girl refers to me as "the new kid in town." She takes my hand and leads me through a field and into a barn and pulls me to the hay. She forces my hand into her jeans and, although I am not quite there, still my fingers slide. I hear footsteps and am relieved to see that it is only a horse. I pull her to her feet and we return to the party. Pretty Boy begins his accusations. He does not give me time to refute. The music has screeched to a proverbial halt, but everything is about to begin. I look at my neighbor, a Florida transplant from New Jersey. He still has the accent. He tells me I have to fight. The dance floor parts and we start the "you start-no you start" routine. Pretty Boy has one rule: no hitting in the face. He puts everything he has into my stomach. I do not flinch. As his eyes widen, I break his rule. His head hits the floor before his back does. I am from New York. Later, Pretty Girl lies to his bloody face and Pretty Boy apologizes to me. I wonder if her scent is on his wound.

RALPH BOUSQUET, JR.

CANCER after Lucille Clifton

the first time you hear the word your partner crumbles on your shoulder at the dinner table, the dead dial tone of the sort of phone we don't use anymore hanging by the obsolete receiver's obsolete and tangled cord

the second time it is Christmas Eve the last that will mean anything you want it to mean, the last night you'll remember wanting to remember any of your dreams

the third time and you are present tense to its relative past tense what it is now being called is remission which means *get ready son* i hear lucille whisper the future tense is just as quick just as fresh just as shit the second time around

MORGAN GOVIER

ROSEUS

When we first met I was a salmon sky flushed fuchsia on a rose-petalled bed, white mixed with dots of red You've turned me many colours since we first met I see love in your eyes I see black clouds; my blood runs slow, I slur with thoughts of you and I in blue Your lips always kiss my cheek before your knuckles do and if we make games out of love you're winning and oh how badly I want to lose to you.

BETH SHERMAN

DAMAGE

The rock sailed through the air and hit Emily smack in the forehead. Her eyes hitched open a notch wider in surprise and then she let out a loud wail. Karen ran inside to get ice and I remember thinking, I should be the one doing that, I should be helping. A lump had formed on Emily's face, a red cartoon lump.

"Why would he do that?" asked Liane angrily, rushing over and folding Emily up in her arms.

It was a Friday afternoon like any other. Play group was at our house that week. The kids had been on the swing set. I remember glancing over at Jack. His glasses had slipped down his nose and there was dirt on his pants. His shirt, which once belonged to Andrew, was too big on him. I was wondering whether Jack would like a computer class, if it might help him focus, or if he would pound the keys too hard and damage a computer at the YMCA like he'd done with the one upstairs and that's when the rock hit Emily.

"Why did you do that?" I said slowly and loudly, the way I heard Miss Barbara talk to him when she wanted to get his attention.

I was suddenly furious. Not at him, at myself. He would lurch through the halls at school, bumping into other people on purpose, roll around in the sand at the beach until every inch of him was covered in a pale coating of grit, make buzzing sounds under his breath for hours at a time until it drove me nuts. But this was the first time he'd ever hurt anyone. We were only in the playgroup because these women were my friends. Jack didn't have any friends.

"Why'd you throw the rock?" I yelled.

Jack didn't answer me. He was kicking at the grass with the toe of his sneaker.

Karen came back with ice. She'd wrapped it in a dishtowel I'd hung on the refrigerator.

"Are you okay, sweetie?" she said, kneeling down and handing the ice

to Liane, who applied it to Emily's face. The twins clung to Karen's knees, holding on for dear life.

Liane had her phone out. The doctor had put her on hold. "One inch lower and she might have lost an eye."

"But she didn't," said Karen. "She's going to be fine."

Liane lifted her head up and stared at me. "They weren't even fighting," she said. "I saw the whole thing. She was waiting her turn to go down the slide and he pitched that rock at her like he wanted to kill her."

My throat had gone dry. Jack was kneeling in the grass, yanking the blades out one by one. He was making buzzing sounds again.

"I'm sorry," I said, realizing how lame I sounded, what an ineffectual parent I was.

"We're going to the emergency room," Liane said, snapping her phone closed. One of the twins tittered.

I watched her carry Emily across the yard, heard the fence slam behind them.

"We should probably get going, too," Karen said. "Unless you want me to help you clean up."

She gathered sippy cups and stuffed them in her tote bag, where she kept extra diapers. One twin wasn't potty trained yet and the three of us had spent months trying to brainstorm possible solutions. It seemed like such an innocent problem.

"I'll call you later," she said. "Don't worry about Emily. She'll be fine."

None of them ever came back to our house. It was the end of playgroup and the beginning of everything else.

But on that May afternoon when Jack hurled the rock at Emily I didn't realize that yet. I sank down on the grass next to him. When he was born, I counted his fingers and toes, just like I'd done with Andrew, and it made me happy. He was our second and last child, the baby of the family. If he wasn't as well behaved as his brother, it was to be expected. The second one was always different from the first.

"Jackie," I said, cupping his chin with my hand so he had to look up.

His eyes were dark flat stones at the bottom of a river. I wasn't even sure he knew it was me. He went back to pulling out the grass and I joined him, ripping each smooth blade out of the ground, watching them slip through our fingers.

FRANK DULLAGHAN

DOING THE DEED

Dundalk, 1966

I was almost twelve, she was eleven. But her sister was fifteen, a woman, and chaperoned us. It had all been set up by her friends. I was following a script I'd rehearsed for days in my head. It was my first date and early evening, the park just beginning to lose itself in shadow, winter nipping at the bud of spring. I shivered. Still, I held her hand. The daffodils were crowding the trees, birds seemed overly raucous as they settled into branches, my tongue stumbled heavy-booted in my mouth. We stepped into the bandstand, stood behind a post. Even that young, I knew that this was the kissing part. Her sister sat on a bench some way away but I felt we were being watched from underneath that fringe. When I leaned in close to whisper we should move someplace else. something in her triggered, some waiting impulse that tilted her face up, closed tight her eyes. I kissed her mouth. She kissed me back, a small hard-puckered, close-mouthed, kiss. So that's it, I thought, disappointed. But when I stepped back and watched her eyelids lift, saw that sudden brightness fill her eyes, the smile that burst across her face. I needed to stand close again. But she broke free, ran to her standing sister – I did it. *I did it, did you see!* –and was hugged.

Poetry

Without another word they walked away, curled around their conversation, leaving me with a need to hug myself, wonder what had happened.

CHRISTINA ROBERTSON

THE UNADORNED YEAR

Backstage Bruce Springsteen was smaller, more compact than I'd thought, but no less a presence. His voice sounded like a rasp against wood and at the same time, smooth and delicious, chocolate syrup. He turned to me. I was in total awe, with barely a human thought in my head let alone something intelligent to say. God may know why, at seventeen, I'd chosen to wear an oversized sweatshirt embellished *by my mother* with an applique of Dopey to this concert. I'm at a loss. I looked like I should have been putting on an impromptu show for preschoolers or embroidering hats at an amusement park. I think I managed to say the concert was "great" or offered some other earth-shattering evaluation. His "thanks" was more of a sniffle than a word. He moved on to his next gawking fan, then stopped and looked back at me—at my sweatshirt—asking quizzically, "Hey, is that . . . Dopey?" This humiliation was my brush with Almighty Bruce.

What does that have to do with my Christmas tree sixteen years later? The embarrassment comes back to me on a train of memories as I sip a cognac, my feet up on a cardboard box packed with ornaments. I am studying my naked tree one last time. It will be dragged down the stairs and out onto the cold street tomorrow. It will become trails of dry needles. Tomorrow it will be less than obsolete. It will be anonymous. No one will admire its character as I did. It will be trash.

I picked the tree out because it smelled so good. It seemed like the treasure box of the little tree lot. When lifted and the snow shaken from it, the aroma of pine forest was as bright as the gleam of gold coins. I pirated the lovely, icy spruce home where it defrosted by the radiator and perfumed the whole apartment, filling it with a sense of vastness. Its boughs dripped and when they slowly opened, a tree so perfectly imperfect was revealed that it almost made me cry.

Of course, it doesn't take much to make me cry these days, being newly divorced, this, my first Christmas alone.

The tree had a real effect on me, kind of as if I had a new friend. Neither

of us were where we expected to be. Good fortune had had nothing to do with us, yet we'd found each other. I didn't have to force anything, I didn't have to smile or converse, I could just share my place with her. She was purely and quietly magnificent, not boastful, but not retiring either. In her shadows she *knew things*, ancient things, simple truths, beautiful secrets, and I got to share in them because there she was, in my living room. She was absolutely arresting.

Not especially symmetrical, she was more of a Picasso than a Rembrandt, more like a Beethoven symphony than a Strauss waltz. In every angle I could detect movement: in her crooked branches and hollows and all her shadowy recesses. Her broad, needled hands could have belonged to the queen of the Mountain King.

As I said, I was a little crazy at the time.

My mother dropped by, as she sometimes did, to check on me since I'd moved out on my own. She always brought something sweet to eat. She always said it was for me, but if I didn't crack it open right away, she'd ask what I was waiting for and head directly for the dessert plates in my cupboard. I presented the tree to her. I really didn't need to since it was in plain view when she walked in the door. She gave a nod of approval as she took off her coat and gloves. Never a slave to sentiment, she said it smelled nice and fresh and didn't I want a little coffee with the cheesecake?

I was disappointed that my mother didn't see the brilliance of my tree, but the cheesecake was good. We talked, slicing thin slivers (we called them "encores") as if the calorie god wouldn't notice. After a while, when she was putting her coat back on, she casually inquired as to when I was planning to trim the tree. I told her I'd decided not to decorate this one.

A passerby would have thought I'd just confessed to robbing a bank. "Look at it," I said, thinking a second look at my tree would explain everything. She glanced, but her worried eyes were back on me lickety-split.

She said, "You're kidding." She could see I wasn't. "You might change your mind...." She tucked her pants into zippered snow boots. "You always do such a pretty tree."

"It is pretty," I had answered.

Once I closed the door on my mom and the wedge of cheesecake I'd sent her home with, the tree seemed to look at me sadly, dutifully, resigned to being adorned. *I will do it for you*, she seemed to exude in her quiet, dignified way. I picked up the phone. I called my friend Charlie in Los Angeles and laid out my philosophical dilemma for him. I knew he would think I'd finally cracked, but he responded to my question plainly, as if it was built on logic. He said if I didn't want to trim the tree, I shouldn't, and to hell

with everybody else. This is why he is my friend.

I liked that. To hell with everybody else. I acknowledge the sentiment was not in keeping with the spirit of Christmas, but it made sense this Christmas, of this year, of this new chapter of this particular life. I was getting over the abrupt departure of my handsome Prince Charming—the one who, only two years ago, held my hands and made a vow that was apparently too good to be true. I had just reached the stage where I could sideline my agony for thin stretches of time. I hadn't achieved anger yet. What I felt was similar to the sensitivity of a bad tooth. I hadn't the courage to rip it out yet, but I knew that was inevitable. Right now I didn't want any disturbance. I wanted transcendence, and cheesecake. Something I could trust was real.

The call came in the evening. "Have you changed your mind about decorating the tree?" I could tell my mother was masking concern in a nonchalant tone of voice. I restated my position, but my esoteric observations were doing nothing to convince her that I wasn't suffering a depressive breakdown.

The truth was that looking at the tree made me feel good. It was as if my recent life was the scene from *North by Northwest* when Cary Grant is trying to evade the police in a noisy, crowded Grand Central Station. He hadn't committed any crime, but he found he was the target nonetheless. The din of the uncaring world engulfed him, giving him anonymity, but also taunting him, accentuating his other-ness. When I gazed at my tree everything went still. I could take off the dark sunglasses I'd been hiding behind and risk being Roger Thornhill.

When I was growing up, the ritual surrounding the Christmas tree had involved bargaining for a lower price, tying the tree to the top of the car with the same piece of fraying twine year after year, and always lots of swearing, eruptions from my father as he burned his fingers on ancient lights or was apprised of the fact that he had screwed the tree into the stand without setting it straight. Each year my mother and I would go to Marshall Field's together to choose a new pair of ornaments, my father happy to stay home reading books about the good old days in British Colonial India, when a man was a man. No one told a British soldier how to put up a Christmas tree.

My mother always chose an ornament pretty traditional in color—gold. Mine were more whimsical, things like birds or folkloric creatures. She broke with tradition only once, for a delicate glass globe with a fanciful fruit tree suspended in its center. It looked like a child's dream floating inside a bubble. I'm not sure what got into her that day, but it is still one of my personal favorites. I always put it front and center.

Apparently, I was in the midst of a holiday crisis. My mother picked

me up and with half-baked optimism we set off for Marshall Field's. She was convinced this would jumpstart the proper spirit in me. I hoped a little keeping up of tradition would relieve her anxiety and get her off my back. Field's was full of loud, pushy, obnoxious holiday shoppers and crying children. The holiday décor section resembled a kind of horrible bargain basement. Tiny shards of broken ornaments glittered on the floor. The place was a battlefield of opened boxes and torn tissue paper. An ill-tempered line shifted from one tired leg to another waiting for the register. All in all, not exactly *Joyeux Noel*.

I'd roamed around, and eventually picked up a tiny felt pinecone. My mother couldn't understand it but must have decided not to challenge me and add to the awfulness of our surroundings. She would take her battle of wills with my inertia to the parking lot. She was losing patience.

On the way home I got what passed for a pep talk, but was essentially a lecture with rounded edges. The gist was that it was important for me to fight the urge to emotionally shut down. The obvious method to battle the loneliness and grief of rejection was to buy shiny ornaments and hang them from a tree. I didn't disagree, at least about the importance of not giving up. Words, however, are often feathers falling on an anvil, when the anvil is despair and it has crushed you. She continued efforts to salvage my outlook, coaxing me to leaning on old comforts. She kept asking me if she should be worried, why was I insisting on this. I could only respond to her with the truth: I didn't know why, except I liked the tree the way it was. Who knows why any of us do what we do? And why we always seem to get caught at it.

The next evening, as I was making myself an egg sandwich for dinner, the phone rang. My father was at the other end. My father never called me. He didn't know what to talk to me about. He wasn't really much of a talker at all. He was an artist—he drew funny cartoons and dark graphic novels. The phone was always passed to my mom as soon as possible, or it was my mom who called. It was obvious she was behind this outreach manoeuver. She was sending in the big guns. He started by clearing his throat (he was a smoker). His tone then was suspiciously supportive, the way you might speak to someone standing on a high ledge. He groped around for conversation, but he couldn't conceal his general irritation with the mission he'd been sent on for long. He threw the meat and potatoes on the table.

He began by complimenting me on my vision. "Who needs to decorate a goddamn tree. It's *nature*. Nature needs no improvement as I see it." He snapped, I'm sure for my mother's benefit. Then he got to it. "Now I understand you're going through hard times, but please," he went on, "please hang some goddamn ornaments, just a couple, for your mother, all right? She thinks you're depressed. She's really upset and she's driving me crazy."

I sighed and knew I had to surrender. I didn't want a UN summit called over my refusal to decorate a Christmas tree. My interlude with true beauty had ended. I gave a parting nod to honesty as it glared back at me. I would turn from the wild truth and invite convention back into my life. Maybe I needed it, I told myself. She'd had her mystical moment, and I my transcendence. The restorative effects of her rich, primeval scent were a respite. I'd looked into her depths and listened to her stories of the wind through the North woods, where answers weren't necessary. She had filled my borrowed space with raw vitality. I had been AWOL. Now it was time to return to my platoon and resume my place in the trenches. I turned for a look as I unlatched the door, before heading down to the storage locker and my box of trimmings. She stood, proud and ready.

When I came back, she was just a tree. It was a transformation that made it easier for me to tuck lights deep into her and hang things from her. Steering away from anything kitschy or cute, I chose seven of the best ornaments I had. Just seven. I hung the fruit tree in front and slid the little felt pinecone into an exposed knothole on the trunk. Lit up, the tree looked nice, if not to my mother's holiday standard, cheery. I was moved by the metamorphosis, her silent sacrifice. I stoically packed that emotion away along with my values, relegating them to a dark corner where my wedding dress hung. I put on Christmas music. I wrapped a few gifts and stowed them beneath the lower branches. The appearance was indisputably festive, everything looking about the way it was supposed to. The balance of the goddamn universe has been restored, I could hear my father saying . . . if only for a week or two.

Now it is the New Year. The Christmas tree has been properly admired, gifts properly exchanged, resolutions . . . resoluted. I sit by myself, remembering things. I drink and study the empty tree, despoiled, lonely, and so beautiful. I catch faint drifts of pine, even through the hot poker perfume of my cognac. Tomorrow I will take what's left of her out to the curb. I'll dispose of *all* my crazy, romantic notions. Things like abiding love and happy endings, like essence and virtue. I must not give in to a life hung quietly on poetic bones. I will dress up, stay in step. I will not mourn the soul of a tree, I will make sense, make jokes and clever platitudes, adorn myself with a happy face. My eyes close. My mind roams and as I doze, I dream I am lost. Seven singing dwarves beckon me deep into the wood, to their outpost, offering shelter in their little home.

ALEX NODOPAKA



VISUAL DIFFRACTION BEAUTY

CAROL BARRETT

WAITING ON MY DAUGHTER'S NIGHT CLASS

The silversmiths assemble, basement workshop where the rumble of polishers

does not disturb paramedics in uniform T-shirts, or mechanics in greasy garb.

I settle in, worn naugahyde couch in the hall, the comfort of humming

vending machines, finger my options. Unshaven students come, sip Coke,

and go. Some even risk *hello*, or lament the lack of work, hands in their pockets,

or tilting a blue cap over raised eyebrows. Once that young, I was taught to say *yes*

to the first man who asked me out. He'd summoned the courage. Fairness

insisted you went where he led. Beyond the open classroom door, I hear

the rhythmic tug of rock music, and know, despite a migraine, my daughter

will not complain to her young teacher, blue denim shirt sleeves rolled

to the elbows. He coaxes companion artists—all women—in the contours

of blue wax. One is etching the lines of a leaf, a real leaf in her lap.

They carve and file, brush, and smooth. He will mold imaginative jewels,

then fill singular anticipations with molten silver, pale as first light.

My daughter has formed her first ring. I hear him admire its balance, its weight,

sundance plane that will glide on her finger, lift to bluing skies ahead,

carry the knowledge she can leave any man she chooses.

PATTI SEE

BOY AND DOG

We saved our son's baby teeth in a margarine tub on top of the microwave, at first as a holding area each time we collected another tiny relic from under his pillow, a what-to-do-with-them-till-I-figure-out-what-to-do-with-them-spot.

Losing a tooth is scary. How to explain to a little one that part of you falls out and grows back? Or worse, coax a child into tying a string to a loose tooth and the other end to a door knob.

My husband and I were divorcing. I spent each after-school afternoon with my son in the "marriage house" where I no longer lived. Ten years old and his parents resided in different places. This was a tragedy to me. Fifteen years later, my son is a successful man with no visible emotional scars. You'd think I would feel better.

One of these afternoons I was wiping off our microwave and this tub of teeth tumbled to the floor. Our dog, dead many years now but back then a hungry, hungry pup, heard them sprinkle onto the worn linoleum—a treat?!—and gobbled as many as she could. I scooped up a small handful.

The Labrador was a compromise. I didn't want a dog; my husband did. When I moved out, my son asked: Can we get a dog *now*? In some weird way she replaced me. I loved her for what she gave my son. A distraction throughout a dreadful time. A dog! Years of joy.

Dogs were new to me. I screamed, "Open." I wanted those teeth back. Somehow I believed if you said any command slowly and with authority, a dog would understand; it seemed so on TV. My son laughed hysterically at me with his dog. "Open," he said. He laughed and laughed. "Open." He couldn't get the word out without roiling on the kitchen floor.

I pried apart her lips, but she would not give up any morsel. Later—after checking one last tooth like an unwanted pill—she spit out my son's second molar in two pieces. I saved them, dog spit and all.

Sometimes the metaphor of these baby teeth is years, like rings of a tree. My son's childhood scattered across the floor. Sometimes this is an allegory for what a dog will eat: anything that *sounds* like a treat. Or this: how much shit can one person swallow? My marriage ended years earlier; I held on as long as I could.

Our dog bit in half one of my son's molars. A bitten tooth. What is that even like? A bullet pierced by a bullet? A pocketful of pockets? Scar tissue cut away?

Baby teeth are lost so new ones can grow. Twenty out; thirty-two in. As we age our capacity for teeth and compassion increases.

Now I store my son's impossibly tiny teeth in my jewelry box. Each time I look inside for a necklace or a bracelet, there is my boy. There is his dog.

SHAHE MANKERIAN

HARLEM RENAISSANCE

On my first visit to the city, I rode the bus. At one of the traffic lights, the driver pointed

at the Apollo marquee. No one cared to look. A pigeon roosted inside the neon of the second O

that flickered like a red halo. The bus rolled on a manhole coughing steam. "This is Dante's Inferno!"

hollered a man missing his soapbox. A chestnut roaster with a portable radio pushed his cart over a pothole.

I heard the crackle of zydeco music from the belly of Apollo. A cocoa streetwalker fixed her nylon stocking

and made the driver blush.

MONOPOLY WITH ARÉNY

She reaches for the thimble, the racecar, the top hat. It's her first time,

and she doesn't trust me as the banker. My fingers tremble when I place

the \$500 bill in front of her. She thinks she can buy a doll, a candy bar,

ballet shoes from the mall. Behind bars, Jake the Jailbird smiles;

his mug shot forces her to detour. She doesn't know the power of Boardwalk,

Park Place or Water Works. The cookie crumbs on her nose have more meaning

than the stack of Community Chest. When she passes GO, she collects

\$200 and walks away.

NICHOLAS SAMARAS

FIRST LAUGHTER

I didn't mean to drop her. But a 4-month-old baby can be wriggly

and my parental grip was still new. Sitting in my own father's chair, I was holding her up, smiling into her face,

when her body fell out of my hands for a second—a second. In the worst slow motion, my hands dove

faster than her falling, scooping her up in my grasp again before she could hit. And in that moment, she shrieked out her first laugh—

a burst of delight that stunned me, flooded me with half-terror, half-wonder. So, I dropped her again

and she swooped with laughter. Into that morning of our lives, into each new world

of fatherhood and daughterhood, we dropped, dove, and flew, laughing past fear and union.

FIRST LOGIC

In public places, grocery stores, movie houses—I winced to see the fathers who screamed "No" to their children

or shook them, dragged them, still screaming "No." I saw the cringing, hurt look on each child's face.

When Anastasia asked me to play with her every morning, right as I was leaving for work,

I didn't say "No," not even loudly. I held her in my arms and said, "Forgive me, my daughter,

but I have to go to work. We are poor people, and I have to work to get us food."

The next morning, she opened and closed the fridge, and asked me to play with her.

When I said, "I'd love to, but I can't. I have to go to work,"

she said, "No, Papa, we have food already. Now, play."

JV BIRCH

ENDOSCOPY UNIT

Pyjamaed in greens I quickly learn what to do.

How to thread steady when taking a biopsy not change expression when bad news is found sterilise equipment for the next insertion calm the patient who didn't sleep last night clean up the one who had breakfast that morning search for polyps in waste before lunch.

But a DNR is tricky. I remember my first to be also my last.

The death mid-scope the final time call prepping the body then informing the family.

This they can't teach

JOE COSTAL

THE FIRST THANKSGIVING

You call him Uncle Bobby.

The whole family calls him Uncle Bobby, but he's a second cousin.
On your father's side.

Uncle Bobby has Dracula hair, '70s Dracula, high and poofy in the middle but peaked and gray-streaked up front. He loves old country music and older rock 'n' roll. He is a United States veteran. Vietnam. If people forget that, he reminds them. Or his bumper stickers do:

"Freedom Isn't Free."

"If You Haven't Been There, Shut Your Mouth."

"He was just a cook," Aunt Jean, who's not really your aunt, told you once after too much Anisette. In fact, she's less your aunt than Bobby's your uncle because she's his third wife and not really related to anyone. But you call her Aunt Jean, anyway.

"He made casseroles in a Da Nang cafeteria," she says. "Only action he saw was in the mess hall closet, if you know what I mean?"

You don't know what she means.

Today is Thanksgiving. Your first Thanksgiving without me. Uncle Bobby and his wife are coming to dinner. This pisses you off.

"They're family," your mom reminds you. "What do you want me to do, leave them alone on Thanksgiving?"

If you're being honest, yes, they should be left alone. But you're never honest with your mother.

Their coming is a bigger deal than your mom lets on. It means good plates and dish washing. Trading pajama pants and inter-family mockery for polite laughter and small talk. They're "family," but not family enough. They're still guests. Now Thanksgiving dinner will be an "affair" instead of you licking pie filling from your fist, braless, in a high school t-shirt.

You wake so psyched to see the Macy's parade. You even tear up and

clap when Al Roker and that top-hat lady cut the ribbon. You told your parents you wanted to stay over last night to see the parade. Truth is, you hate sleeping alone, especially on holidays.

It's a week, now, since you left. You ignore my calls, my texts. Before you left, you said to me, "I know you love, but I'm not sure you like me."

I said, "What's wrong with that?"

They're reviving *Bye Bye Birdie*. A Geico float has a lip-syncing boy band, and you remember how hard the Macy's parade sucks. You go back to bed. When you wake, again, after noon, your mom is already yelling about "unrinsed wine glasses."

You rinse wine glasses. You dress, and then the baby arrives, so you sit crisscross applesauce on the couch. It snuggles into the crook of your legs and stares up at you. You finger its fist while your sister moans about how much your brother-in-law works, and how he's lost all his patience. Her eyes get dusty as she describes the baby's cries, and how her husband wants it to cope "on his own," and how two nights ago he held the baby upside down, by its feet, but just for a second, a "half a second" really, because he wanted it to "effing stop."

You gasp and demand she leave her husband. She and the baby can live in your apartment in the city. You'll walk the baby in a carriage down to the park, and you'll eat lunch someplace new everyday. You call it "perfect."

She calls you "stupid," besides, her husband's the family's only lawyer. She wipes mascara from her face as she goes off to help your mother who is calling your father a "barbarian" for putting a "whole bottle of Coke right on the table."

"Jesus Christ . . . it's THANKSGIVING," she says.

No one responds.

The baby cries when Uncle Bobby presses the doorbell no fewer than thirteen times. He ambles in looking much older than you remember. He hands your dad a brown overcoat and fur-trimmed hat. It's 67 degrees outside. He is wearing a full suit. Hanky-in-pocket, tie clip, and all. Aunt Jean wears stretchy pants and a Lane Bryant floral top. You use the baby as a shield when you say hello. This way, no one can hug you or kiss you. Instead their closeness translates to cooing and fingering the baby.

Operation Baby Shield works like gangbusters. You want a baby so bad. You can feel a sensation where you think your ovaries are.

Uncle Bobby reaches, with intense flourishes, for the armrest of a soft beige recliner in your living room. He lowers himself with the careful calculations of a lifeboat descending the side of a steam liner. Once settled, he sighs deep declaration of his intent to stay in the chair for the day. Then he smiles and stares straight ahead, his eyes the half-moons of a bored pharaoh. Bags hang from his cheeks, and his mouth never fully closes. He calls out to your mother. "Maria, where's the bread?"

Then, "Maria, where's the antipass-?"

And, "Maria, you got Sprite? I don't drink the cola." He's the only person in the house who calls your mom by her first name. Even your dad calls her "Mom."

"Maria, howsabout more shrimp for me?" Uncle Bobby beckons. Your mom shuttles him small plates from the kitchen. At one point, Uncle Bobby exclaims, "The shrimp. They're good, right?"

"Oh yeah, Bob, that's good shrimp," no one's Aunt Jean yells back at him.

"Very good, right? You know where I got that shrimp? Dorian's. You know, on Fifteenth?"

"Oh sure. They got fresh shrimp, heh?"

"Sure. The freshest in the city."

"You drove through the tunnel for that shrimp, huh?"

"Sure. 'Cause it's the best. So fresh. You can see the boat they come off! If those shrimps were people, Trump would send them back, heh?"

Uncle Bobby and no one's Aunt Jean bought the shrimp. They have no need to discuss the particulars. Still, they persist in recounting the glory of the shrimp purchase right here in your living room. You're disgusted, so you must whisper the annoying truths of this exchange to your sister.

"They're old. Give them a break."

You wonder why she's being such a bitch and return to the kitchen to find no one's Aunt Jean at the refrigerator, staring at the magnets through caked purple eye shadow. Her silver icicle earrings dance at her neck, even when her head sits completely still. She picks off one of the South of the Border Pedros your family collected on countless summer vacations to and from Florida. She studies him. She turns him over in her hand, squinting where his butt would be were he a real man and not a one-dimensional kitchen magnet. She puts him back and pries off another. When she sees you watching, she asks, "What's with all the Mexicans?"

You stammer and say something about "silly souvenirs" and "oh, you know Dad," and when Aunt Jean says nothing back, you add a comment about keeping Pedro behind a Donald Trump wall. No one's Aunt Jean smiles and walks off, and you can't believe yourself. You pandered. One comment

from a walking heap of Revitol and Dr. Scholl's, and you lose your entire fucking identity? You become some raging racist? You voted for Hillary. You were vice-president of Amnesty International in high school.

Uncle Bobby keeps his suit jacket on through dinner. It creases caverns under his arms when he pushes himself up to eat. He puts the food on his fork with his index finger. You can't stop watching him. He has missed a spot shaving. A patch of long hair extends from the right corner of his mouth, past his jawline. Your older brother points this out, seconds after your niece finishes saying grace. "Whatya shave in the dark, Uncle Bobby?"

Uncle Bobby responds with, "Heh?"

Your brother's an asshole. Uncle Bobby asks someone to repeat what your brother said. Then your father calls your brother an asshole. No one's Aunt Jean repeats the shaving crack to Uncle Bobby. Your mom says, "Ignore him." Your nieces ask you three questions at the same time. Your brother holds his arms to his sides like someone's pointing a gun at him. Uncle Bobby laughs this wheezy, gagging laugh and repeats your father's name as if your father, not Uncle Bobby, were the butt of a joke.

"He's got you there, heh?" Uncle Bobby repeats this as he taps your father's forearm repeatedly with his fork hand. Your niece asks, "What's asshole?" Your mother rises from the table muttering about wine. Your other niece laps champagne from your flute like a dog. Her father swipes at her arm too hard. The flute falls. She cries. And that's when you escape.

And now's my chance.

I calculate all of this will come to full fruition at exactly 4:52 p.m., Eastern Standard Time.

You'll leave the table and check your phone, first. See if I called. I didn't, but you'll wish I had called. You'll switch to your camera roll and stare at a picture of us. The one from last summer. The one by the lighthouse. You'll write me a text: "Hi."

Now. Maybe 4:53 p.m. I rise from my own hellhole Thanksgiving dinner and stare at my phone.

You didn't press "send." But when you sit back down, you keep your phone in your hand. The holiday is young.

Uncle Bobby chases his mouth crease facial hairs with his tongue. His tongue is more beige than pink. It moves in circles like a snake in a fish bowl. Above the chase, you notice his nostrils teem with tufts of bristling nose hair, like hay hanging from the Dutch doors of a barn. And you feel sick.

Sick enough to pull up from your mom's stuffing, even though it's your most favorite thing in the world. Even though you talk about it all year. You curse Uncle Bobby. His tongue. His hairs. His lack of holiday options.

After dinner, you're still hungry. You ask Siri if Burger & Barrel is open on Thanksgiving. It isn't. You wash, dry, and stack until your fingers prune. Uncle Bobby is back in his chair, watching your dad play Uno with his granddaughters. He notices you staring, so he looks back at you. He smiles big, dark and wet. He seems older when he smiles. It scares you. You should smile back, out of politeness, but you can't force the corners of your mouth up. Uncle Bobby breathes with both shoulders and his whole chest. Extra skin moves around his face in faint rhythms, like a canvas tent flapping in the wind. The darkness inside Uncle Bobby's mouth pools until it seems ready to drip, like honey, from his open lips. The dark inside his mouth like a shadow that could flood the room, burrow deep dark holes into the spaces between you and him.

His stare turns to a squint. You can't look away. You can't tell what he's thinking. Is he checking you out? Committing you to some sick old man spank tank? File you away with youthful memories of Vietnamese pin-up girls tacked inside a locker door? Are you today's cover of the secret magazine squirrelled into the sock drawer of his mind? Maybe he's an even bigger perv. Maybe in his mind you're in a ball gag humming Christmas carols.

It's not lust on his face, you decide. Maybe compassion. Maybe even love. Could he look to you like the daughter he never had? Maybe he feels close to you. Maybe it is okay, and you're just a miserable bitch who can't muster enough human decency to pity an old, lonely man. Uncle Bobby leans his turkey neck against his upper chest, as if to better examine you. Like he's reading fine print on your face. You fade right before his eyes.

Maybe Uncle Bobby pities you. Maybe he knows how jilted and shattered and angry you are under your Max Mara dress and boots. Maybe he feels bad that so much silent loneliness lives and breathes and hides in a girl so pretty and so young.

Uncle Bobby's pharaoh eyes slip closed, and his breathing grows loud enough to hear. And all at once you realize he has fallen asleep. And everyone in the room has noticed Uncle Bobby fell asleep. His snores ring out. Your nieces laugh. Your sisters scold. Your mom pleads to "leave him alone." No one's Aunt Jean tsks and rolls her eyes at her prosecco, and Uncle Bobby wakes, much quicker than he fell, with a "heh" and bubbly spittle falls on his lapel.

You look around to make sure no one noticed you staring at sleeping Uncle Bobby.

"So what's new, Spaz?"

Your brother sits on the countertop beside the dishwasher and takes the Pyrex bowl from your kitchen-toweled hand.

"What the hell are you doing with yourself?" he asks.

"Nothing. You?"

"Working."

"Yeah, me, too."

"Where's your boyfriend, anyway?" he asks.

You need to bounce. You need to go. You need to get away from your family and back to the city. You need, you decide, to disappear back into the city where the faces don't look back, and the shrimp are all still alive, still waiting at the docks, all fresher than fresh.

You start your excuse to leave. You blame the cat, which is fucked up because the cat is mine and not even at your apartment anymore. When you kiss Uncle Bobby good-bye, you have to stoop toward his chair. He sits erect and pushes a fleshy cheek to your lips. You're awash in off-brand aftershave. Probably CVS. It's on you. CVS and death smell stuck on your clothes now.

Is it in your hair? There's no one to ask. You swipe at it as you bound down the driveway. The click of your heels on the pavement makes you self-aware.

You sigh aloud once you get to your car. You miss my Amazon Music subscription. You look for a song to play on your iPod, but you can't choose. You can never choose. I always choose. From literally thousands of songs on your iPod, you feel sick of them all. And so you pull down the street in a panicky silence. You dread the traffic waiting between you and the tunnel and the city and its gridded, alternating street directions. You feel sick from these thoughts, and yet, better, as home fades in your rearview.

And that's when you call, your face giant and smiling on my screen. I smile back for a ring or two, before I swipe my thumb over the red circled "X."

EUGENIE CARABATSOS

SEVEN MINUTES IN HEAVEN

CHARACTERS

FREDI: 14-year-old girl

MARTIN: 14-year-old boy

LOCATION

A closet

MARTIN inches closer to FREDI.

FREDI: Don't even try.

MARTIN: Sorry.

FREDI: I have no interest in you.

MARTIN: Okay.

FREDI: looks at her watch.

MARTIN: What are you doing?

FREDI: Counting down the seconds until we can get out of here. I can't

believe Kayla made me come to this stupid party.

MARTIN: Okav.

FREDI: I would never have come if I knew we were going to play seven minutes in heaven. It's seriously disgusting. And totally a relic from the 80s

or something.

MARTIN: Yeah?

FREDI: Do people even kiss for seven minutes? That seems like a long time

to kiss someone.

MARTIN: It doesn't seem that long to me.

FREDI: I think it would be super boring. I'm sure I'd start thinking of

something else entirely.

A knock. MARTIN and FREDI look at the door.

FREDI: Is it over?

MARTIN: Six minutes left. You mean like sex?

FREDI: What?

MARTIN: Because I totally think of sex when I'm kissing.

FREDI: Ew.

MARTIN: It's normal to think of sex all of the time. That's what my dad says.

FREDI: No it's not.

MARTIN: It's probably weird that you don't. It probably says something

about you.

FREDI: No it doesn't.

MARTIN: You're just a prude.

FREDI: I'm not a prude. I'm just... busy.

MARTIN: Busy?

FREDI:Yeah. Busy. With school. Doing homework, something you know

nothing about.

MARTIN: Hey, I do my homework.... Sometimes.

FREDI: Well I do it all of the time. And I think about things, like real things.

MARTIN: Like what?

FREDI: Like, you know, science and presidential campaigns, and, like,

space, and vegetarianism and stuff.

MARTIN: You think about vegetarianism when you're kissing?

FREDI: I... I don't know.

MARTIN: Oh.

A knock. MARTIN and FREDI look at the door,

then away from each other.

FREDI: It's not that weird, you know. I mean we're only in ninth grade.

MARTIN: I didn't say it was weird. I think about real things too.

FREDI: Sports don't count.

MARTIN: First of all, sports are real things and definitely count, but that's

not what I meant.

FREDI: Fine. Then what do you mean?

MARTIN: Well... sometimes... when I'm sitting in the classroom, I look

around at everyone and I see them as... as...

FREDI: Naked?

MARTIN: No.

FREDI: Because I do that. Even the teachers, sometimes, but only the hot ones... okay that's not true, I think of all of them naked, even the very clearly not hot ones, even the old ones, even Mrs. Henderson who looks like she might die tomorrow. I picture her naked a lot. Too much. Actually.

MARTIN: I was going to say I see them as skeletons.

A knock, FREDI and MARTIN look at the door. FREDI looks at MARTIN.

FREDI: What?

MARTIN: Yeah.

FREDI: That's so weird.

MARTIN: Whatever you said you picture Mrs. Henderson naked. You're a

perv.

FREDI: I mean you're seriously weird.

MARTIN: Whatever.

FREDI: So, like right now, do you see me as a skeleton?

MARTIN: I don't want to talk about this.

FREDI: Don't worry. You can be honest with me. I am so not picturing you naked right now, but if I were, I would totally tell you. I would totally tell you if I was picturing you naked right now.

MARTIN: Okay.

FREDI: So-

MARTIN: So?

FREDI: Am I a skeleton?

MARTIN: No.

FREDI: I'm serious. Take a good look. Am I a skeleton or a person?

A knock. FREDI looks towards the door.

MARTIN keeps his eyes on her.

MARTIN: You're not a skeleton.

FREDI: Cool. And you're not naked.

MARTIN: Cool.

FREDI: So are you like... obsessed with death or something?

MARTIN: I think I'm obsessed the normal amount.

FREDI: That's good.

MARTIN: Are you obsessed with nudity or something?

FREDI: The normal amount.

MARTIN: That's good.

FREDI: We're not going to, you know, tell anyone about this....

MARTIN: Absolutely not.

FREDI: Okay good because it got kinda weird for a moment there.

MARTIN: Super weird.

FREDI: And I just don't need the whole school knowing...

MARTIN: Neither do I.

FREDI: It could freak people out.

MARTIN: Definitely would.

FREDI: Okay. Cool.

MARTIN: Yeah.

FREDI: Martin...
MARTIN: Yeah?

FREDI: I lied. I'm kinda picturing you naked. I'm sorry.

MARTIN: That's okay. Your face is a skull right now.

FREDI: Awesome.

A knock. MARTIN looks at the door.

FREDI: Sometimes, I don't want to think about real things.

MARTIN: Okay.

FREDI: I mean not usually, but sometimes, I like to think about, you know,

frivolous things.

MARTIN: Like?

FREDI: Like... cake.

MARTIN: Cake?

FREDI: Or, like, Taylor Swift.

MARTIN; Okay.

FREDI: Or, like, love.

MARTIN: Oh.

FREDI: But not a lot. I don't like to think of it a lot, because, I mean, I have other things to think about.

MARTIN: Yeah you're going to cure cancer or walk on Mars or something.

FREDI: Do you really think I will do those things?

MARTIN: Totally.

FREDI: Thanks.

MARTIN: Sometimes, when I'm making out with a girl, I think about other

things.

FREDI: Yeah, I know, you think about sex.

MARTIN: I think about how gross kissing is. Like how many germs there are in the human mouth and how slimy kisses can be and then I think of salamanders. And before I know it...

FREDI: You're kissing a skeleton.

MARTIN: Exactly.

A knock.

FREDI: Maybe it's only weird because she doesn't know you're picturing her as a skeleton. Maybe it's only weird because you know you have this big secret and you feel guilty or something.

MARTIN: Maybe.

FREDI: Maybe if she didn't care, maybe if she thought it was kind of awesome you were picturing her as a skeleton, it wouldn't be gross, it wouldn't be germy and slimy and you wouldn't think of salamanders.

MARTIN kisses FREDI. After a moment, they pull away.

FREDI: Was it gross?

MARTIN: No. Did you think about presidential campaigns?

FREDI: No.

MARTIN: Space?

FREDI: No.

MARTIN: Vegetarianism?

FREDI: No.

MARTIN: Cool.

FREDI: Cool.

They hold a gaze.

The door opens. They don't notice it right away.

After a moment, they notice, and turn away from each other.

END OF PLAY

KENNY ROUTT



MUSE

JACK STEWART

ADAM'S FIRST FARM

Maybe the snow will soften the ice
that barbs the wire of the fence.
The cold keeps out more than
angels, keeps in more than the sparse
animals that usually graze
along the yellow distance.
The wind won't blow his footprints
back open. Maybe in a few days
the sky will unfold itself,
but right now his breath expands
the emptiness. In collusion
with the cold, thoughts unform
themselves in clouds he can't breathe back in.
Is it possible to unsay the unsaid?
For speech to slowly flush like his skin?

The air couldn't be drier.

Between now and the horizon
he can figure out if anything
is missing, and if it is, how
to name it. Winter's not quite
familiar. He doesn't know yet
what it means to trespass or
escape, only that beautiful bits of snow
are caught like tufts of hair upon the wire.

FIRST WHISTLE

Take off the acorn's little newsboy cap and hold it between your thumbs. Just barely touch your lips to the wood. Just barely touch the scent of wood. Do not blow hard. You can imagine Adam. Bored, alone in the woods, startled to learn his breath could be so loud. Then repeating it to show the trees what they were capable of, and again to call the birds and deer to come hear what he could do. And once more, a short, urgent note followed by a long, lazy one, to tell the bluebells in their slender skirts how beautiful they were.

AMBER COLLEEN HART

FIRST MARRIAGE

Lused to spend an inordinate amount of time considering what other people were like in bed. The scenarios I imagined were not poetically beautiful moments between two loving souls, but more a desperate collection of limbs interspersed with bodily functions and guttural noises—pornography without choreography.

I asked Todd if he ever thought about what other people were like in bed.

"What, like other women?"

"No, like anyone."

I don't think he got what I meant, so I explained. The obese physical education teacher who constantly rearranged his balls while he divided the kids into teams? I had him pegged as a two-minute man, one who didn't bother to take his socks off in bed. The kind of guy who belched right after he climaxed. The scrawny little librarian who passed her age-speckled hands over the covers of my loaned books? I had her figured for a dynamite lover. A sweet lady who whipped up wicked good scrambled eggs the morning after and patted you on the hand as a kind of thank you. When I got to the bagger at Kroger—the one you can tell is a little different—Todd cut me off.

"Jesus, Melinda. You're fantasizing about a retarded guy?"

"He's not retarded. And, no, I'm not *fantasizing*. I'm just ... curious, I guess."

"It's weird."

"How is it any different than you looking at your magazines?"

"It just is."

Maybe he was right. Maybe I didn't know where to draw the line. In my case, everybody—or every body—was fair game.

I can see now that it was more than a casual curiosity that drove me to these thoughts. I can't remember a time when I didn't feel completely empty

inside. When I look back at childhood photos, I squint to recall the event that prompted the picture, all the while recognizing the emptiness that hung over me like an invisible friend no one else could see and I could go nowhere without.

Attempts to fill the void involved food. As a baby, when I was hungry, I cried. When food wasn't brought fast enough, I shrieked. In between shrieks, my parents would shovel food into my mouth and I'd suck it in and aspirate. The pictures don't lie. There I am on my first birthday—a cloth-diapered behemoth surrounded by a pile of unopened gifts—gutting and devouring a cake with both hands and wearing an expression of *presents be damned!* That kind of thing is cute when you're a baby, even when you're a toddler.

But when, as an adult, you purchase and eat every last crumb of your birthday cake by yourself, no one cares what the reason is. No one cares about your struggle to quell an insatiable loneliness.

Just before I met Todd, I'd had some luck on a new diet. One of those fad diets—eat all you want every other day, go meatless on Monday, skip carbs Tuesday, stand on one leg and squawk like a chicken Wednesday. You get the picture. I got the hang of it enough to lose thirty pounds.

At first Todd's presence took the place of food. I gorged on the thought of him and "us" to the point of intoxication. However, when the newness of our relationship wore off, the emptiness returned. So did my love affair with food.

I made secret plans throughout the day as to when and where to have my next snack. Sweet? Salty? Both? Before I knew it, I was back in my "fat clothes," telling myself it was only temporary.

From either the guilt of not being able to control myself, or Todd constantly asking, "Are you going to eat all that?" I dropped into a pit of shame equal to being caught cheating. Which, in a way I guess I had.

One night after Todd and I had just finished up a sexual interlude, an image came to me. A new second grade teacher had been hired at the elementary school where I taught. She had this malformed, child-size arm that dangled from her torso. Nice lady, really. Not deserving of my libidinous thoughts at all. I'm sure she had enough struggles in her life already. Anyway, for whatever reason I started thinking about her and that tiny arm.

What would her lover be like? The word selfless came to mind. Someone who wanted to make love to her so badly he'd see beyond her flaw, maybe even embrace it. He wouldn't be afraid to touch her arm. In fact, he'd plant delicate kisses all over it. Then he'd take her face in his hands and tell her how beautiful and unique she was, and mean every word of it.

I tried to put the beauty of the scene into words but Todd didn't want

to hear it.

"You're crying over some deformed chick's sex life? Goddammit Melinda, what is wrong with you?"

The talk escalated from there. Ironic, Todd calling me a pervert. I kept my thoughts to myself after that. No sense in letting Todd down any more than I already had. I worked on concealing my meanderings. The hardest part was trying to hide my facial expressions, which Todd claimed were a dead give away to my "sick" thoughts.

I didn't bother to explain to Todd how whenever I thought about the sex lives of others it filled me up inside. How could I explain something I barely understood myself?

Often times I try to picture some man I run across acting like Todd. I can't seem to find anyone who looks the part; who might pull my hair a little too hard, push himself into me a little too deep even after I've quietly said, "ow." One guy I saw pumping gas at the Kwik Sak seemed capable of coming home with a magazine and some accessories and pleading for things that I'd never even heard of before. But, other than him, I can't recall any others.

So, I snacked on those bite-sized images instead of food and ended up losing a few more pounds. Weird how something that pissed Todd off so much could also bring me success. You can't win for losing. Or maybe you can't lose for winning?

About a week before Todd's annual work party, I still hadn't made up my mind whether to go or not. Though Todd hadn't asked, I told him I was concerned about how all the major players of the company were going to be there. My real concern: I didn't know anybody. I'd feel lonely. I'd do something to fill myself up. Something Todd didn't like.

"I always end up saying something incredibly misplaced when I'm in a pressure cooker situation like that," I told Todd.

"Yeah and I can't be babysitting you all night. If you're going, you need to keep that in mind."

"I don't need baby sitting." And with that statement I locked myself into going.

That night Todd toured the crowd acting like the model employee while I hovered near the food table. I'd just shoved another jalapeno popper into my mouth when some guy backed into me. He apologized all over the place then introduced himself and his wife. Brett and Alecia McSomebody. I introduced myself, garbling around the scalding, cheesy mess in my mouth.

"From the North Street office?"

"No. I'm Todd's girlfriend."

Alecia cocked her head at me as if to ask, who?

"LeFevre. Todd LeFevre," I said.

"Oh, oh," Alecia said. "LeFevre's had a terrific year. Absolutely banner."

"If he keeps it up, he'll be in the running for our Agent of the Quarter," Brett added.

I wondered how many years of marriage it took for them to perfect their one-two punch way of talking. They were otherwise so mismatched.

Alecia stood about five inches taller than Brett and towered over me. Her legs were long and sinewy, like pulled taffy. I imagined those legs wrapped around Brett, squeezing the life out of him in a candy hug. Brett would be the one on top, sweaty. His face buried just below her manly shoulders until he satisfied her.

Stop! I pleaded with myself to switch gears entirely; consider their statistics. Summer home: 5,000 square foot ranch overlooking Lake Tahoe. Education: Ivy league. So-so grades. Car make and model: Matching Lexus LS460's—something big enough to accommodate Alecia if she felt like getting frisky in the back seat after a PTA meeting.

"So, you both work at Krieg?" I asked in a desperate attempt to move on.

Alecia and Brett laughed as if I'd just delivered the punch line to a very long joke. I could feel my face turning red and my throat constricting. If I laughed along with them it would mean I was in on the joke. If I didn't laugh, they'd know how big of an ignoramus I truly was. Put in this position, I resorted to more *comforting* thoughts. By the time Todd showed up I'd just concluded Alecia would most certainly make Brett sleep in the wet spot. No post-coital cuddles for her.

My face revealed my thoughts. Todd pinched the back of my neck in what might've appeared to be a loving manner, but signaled to me that I'd better, *Cut this shit out. Right now*. He smiled a smile I'd never seen before, like he'd just let out a bad fart and was waiting apologetically for the stench to reach them. Todd asked about their flight in and the conversation seemed to go on forever in a ridiculous amount of detail. I excused myself and headed to the dessert table. He stood there and talked and laughed. At one point all three of them were staring at me. Alecia and Brett grinning, Todd giving me the stink-eye. We left a few minutes later.

Todd drove home NASCAR-style without uttering a word. I could tell he was mad at me. Had my eating embarrassed him? Or pissed him off? He

jerked the car to a stop in the driveway and said, "Get out." I did as he said. I barely got the passenger door closed before he backed down the driveway, ran over the mailbox and peeled out.

Once I got inside and my hands stopped shaking, I opened a new pint of ice cream; dug out chunks of chocolate and ate them in the dark, binged on sea salt potato chips, M & M's, and leftover chicken potpie. I went over and over the conversation I'd had with the McWhoevers. What had I missed?

I came to around four in the morning to Todd stumbling in through the front door. One whiff and I could tell he'd been at Dooley's Pink Palace giving his money away again. He smelled like Mad Dog 20/20 and vomit. When he came in he didn't say anything to me, just looked at me like *see what you made me do*, and headed to the bathroom. I heard the toilet flush and the shower come on. I knocked on the door and waited. When Todd didn't answer, I went in and stood beside the mirrored shower door.

"Todd," I said.

"Not now, Melinda."

"Please, just tell me what I did wrong."

Several minutes went by. The bathroom fogged up some and I lost sight of my reflection in the mirror.

"They're the owners, Melinda. *The owners*. You can't remember that without an org chart?"

He was right, of course. A good girlfriend would commit certain names to memory.

"I bet if I gave you an org chart you'd just use it to think up a bunch of sick shit."

He was right again. I probably would consider what kind of things each one of those self-important morons said to their wives during sex. The meaningless words that stream out of their mouths during what's supposed to be an act of love. According to Todd, the things that get said during sex don't mean anything.

I sincerely hope he's right about that.

"I'm sorry," I said over the squeal of the shower turning off. I unfolded a towel and held it out for Todd. He raked back the shower curtain and snatched the towel out of my hands. He dried all around his torso and down to his crotch. His penis looked like a recoiled party favor, inching away from me in disgust.

"Yeah, well, *sorry* doesn't cut it this time. I've had enough of your bullshit." He threw his towel down and pushed past me.

My first thought: is he leaving me? Then: look at yourself. Of course he is. You're a stupid cow. I crumpled onto the bathroom tile and cried, sobbed right into his wet towel. I grabbed the extra fold on my gut, got a good handful of fat and squeezed. Moved down to my thighs and slapped the excess gathered there.

Todd came in. He stepped over me to the sink and brushed his teeth. As soon as he left, I climbed into the bathtub, pulled the shower curtain around me and let the hot water roll over me, wishing it would melt my skin and boil my bones down small enough to get sucked into the drain.

Next thing I knew, I was in front of the medicine cabinet counting the Vicodin pills again, entertaining how nice it would be if I wasn't around anymore; if I found a black hole and slipped into it forever. I wallowed for a few minutes, imagined Todd's remorse when he'd find the empty bottle of pills next to my lifeless body. As usual, as soon as I pictured the part where Todd might actually put words to his regret, all I could hear him say was, "You took all my Vicodin!" No, it wasn't quite time for Vicodin.

I changed out of my wet clothes, washed my face and wrapped my hair in a towel. If I couldn't kill myself, I'd kill Todd. With kindness. I made corned beef hash, dicing up the onions real small the way Todd likes. He didn't eat with me but I heard him moving around the kitchen after I went to bed.

For a few days I walked around like a ghost, quietly hovering in the shadows near Todd, trying not to be seen. Eventually he stopped avoiding me, stopped glaring at me. When he came to bed instead of sleeping on the couch, I knew we'd be okay. Sex was the next step in his forgiveness. I forced myself to relax and go with the flow. I didn't flinch, not even when he got to the rougher stuff he liked. Intimacy comes at a price, I told myself.

Everything was sailing along in the right direction until last night.

There I was, in the living room alone with my Doritos, when an update came on TV about Camille Hixson, who, at age sixteen, had made headlines for being a concubine of fifty-six year old cult leader Freddy Lovar. The mini documentary focused on how Camille's life had turned out in the years since Freddy had been arrested for statutory rape and she'd been deprogrammed. The national news played and replayed the footage of Freddy getting cuffed and Camille clawing at the police while they dragged her away from him. The story got so much airtime it became America's pet fish in a glass bowl.

I considered turning the TV off but something about this woman drew me in. She wasn't a half-bad looking girl now. Back when the world first caught up with her, though, she'd been used and abused by Lovar and then fileted by the media. I remembered her as disheveled and angry, like a wild

animal. Now, here she was this calm woman with zero chance of bashing an interviewer over the head to get to her "master" like she'd reportedly once done.

The interviewer recapped past events for the audience and then asked Hixson about her current life. I opened my bag of Doritos and leaned back into the couch.

All right, I thought. Fill me in.

Hixson said before she'd hooked up with Lovar she'd considered herself an average girl. She'd had normal hopes for her future like passing her driver's test, finding a boyfriend, and going to prom. She'd never even heard of cults prior to meeting Lovar, and had no idea she'd been recruited into one until she learned of it in the deprogramming process.

"I didn't believe it at first. But, slowly I began to see just how vulnerable I was back then. I liked anyone who liked me. And here was this *man* who liked me. Unfortunately, that man was Freddy. He honed in on my vulnerability and was able to lure me into being his," she hesitated, "...sex slave. It's still hard to believe."

The interviewer asked Hixson how she was doing now, *emotionally*. The camera zoomed in on her face. Her smile was easy. Her eyes, confident. I'd never seen her look as beautiful as she did then. She straightened up in her seat and stared right into the camera as if she'd been waiting a lifetime to answer the question.

"Here's what I've figured out in these past years. There's a big disparity between the life we think we're living and the life we're actually living. I mean, I thought Freddy loved me and I believed I was in love with him. But what we had wasn't love. It was an illusion."

"That bimbo's still around?" Todd's voice startled me. I hadn't noticed him come into the room. He reached one hand into the Doritos bag on my lap and held out his other hand for the remote.

"We all live in some kind of illusion," Camille continued. "It's just that some illusions are better than others."

Todd rolled his eyes and sighed. "Give it here," he said, motioning again for the remote, "I can't stand to hear this freak talk anymore."

I didn't budge.

BETH SHERMAN

HONEYMOON PICTURE

The first picture ever taken of my parents together was in Bermuda. My mother's legs taper from her shorts, below her poppy spattered blouse. She looks like Grace Kelly. Blonde, slim, impossibly beautiful. At twenty-six, marriage came late. She hand delivered invitations to the wedding, ignoring the glimmer in her belly. Now she gazes at something to her left. A cruise ship? A warbler? The life she deserves—untarnished and smooth as her wedding band?

My father's arm is around her waist. He's been engaged once before and broke it off. *Dear Ellen, I hope you don't take this the wrong way*. He's ten years older, a committed bachelor, feeling the steely bite of a trap. He takes long solitary walks on the beach, is prone to sulking, picking apart a decision he can't unmake. She has to coax him out of his bad moods. Both of them are wearing golf shoes without socks. The sky is bleached white, with tendrils of weird exotic plants in the background.

Forty-one years later he will get leukemia. She couldn't pry the ring off his finger and buried it with him, refusing to forgive him for leaving her. She would say they were happy together. But no one ever asked. His smile is so broad, the lines around his mouth crinkle. He leans in towards her curls. Palm trees rise above their heads like frothy green stars.

KALI LIGHTFOOT

FIRST DAY WITH HEARING AIDS

out of the muddle of vowels piling up in conversation behind me step consonants and words I recognize

women laugh sharply into the cacophony of birds overhead

tote bag strap whispers against my nylon jacket

the newspaper plays a concerto of crinkles

I grin and listen to my hair brush past my ears

hear myself whistle in subtle stereo

ON THE OCCASION OF HEARING THAT OUR GRANT PROPOSAL WAS DECLINED BY THE NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION

What is the color of disappointment? A neutral beige perhaps, trending toward a bilious *puce* from the French word for flea, or squashed flea, or Pennyroyal flower whose stink wards off fleas. In any case related to fleas in the 14th century, when fleas were our constant companions

as disappointment is our constant companion, attested to by the number of people climbing to within sight of the top of Mount Everest who are thwarted by windstorm, or weakness. And what of the climbers who summit the mountain only to perish on the way down? No celebration hails their frozen spirits.

People speak of disappointment as the taste of ashes – not the kind that adorn a juicy steak, I suppose, but more the soot that blows in on a dry wind making you wish for a drink of something cool and comforting. It is suggested by gurus and lamas that disappointment grows from expectation,

that life is best lived in this present moment. That having no expectations, no desires nor intents will prevent the pain of knowing that we are all flea-bitten travelers who spend our lives in the lower realms, hoping just this once the clouds will lift and everyone will make it safely home.

SHIRLEY NELSON

HOUSECLEANING

My mother wanted her home to be clean.
She wanted her two small daughters to learn to keep a house clean.
She set us the task of washing kitchen woodwork on a Saturday morning.

Armed with rags and cleaning solution we attacked the doors and drawer fronts we could reach. After a while we stood and my sister said, "Maybe that will satisfy the Old Girl!"

I froze as Mother came from another room, just in time to hear the remark. To her credit and our relief, the "Old Girl" burst out with a great shout of laughter.

JOANNE ESSER

IT'S NOT TIME

At sixteen I wore a pale yellow polyester top, easy to launder, and soft-soled white shoes, a pin-on name tag. Each afternoon after school when I walked through the nursing home doors, that familiar smell grabbed me: wilted flowers, soiled sheets, bleach, something vaguely beefy that had been cooking a long time. Metal carts shelved sharp-folded white linens. The moaning lady waited for a bus in the hallway outside her room, perpetually wondering why it was late. The white-haired women who still wore lipstick called me *Dear*. My job was simple. I brought up trays of dinner from the kitchen, domed bowls of purees, brown, greenish, orange, or soft meatloaf, mashed potatoes, Jell-O. I spooned it into the mouths of those who could not do it themselves. I changed beds, made crisp edges, tucked corners in tight. Listened to the talkers, talked to those who had no more words. In the smoking lounge, I lined up wheelchairs, passed out cigarettes, lit them up for residents (not allowed to keep lighters) while the TV, always on loud, blared The Price is Right. They were already so old, no one worried about the health effects; no one there was ever going to quit. We were supposed to use Reality Therapy, tell the gray man searching for his cap, No, Henry, it's not time to go to the Brewers game, you're at Bethesda, you live here, remember? It's almost time for your juice and crackers, sit back down, no one's coming today to pick you up to take you to the game, no one will be coming.

MM SCHREIER

THE UNINVITED HOUSE GUEST

There was a chipmunk in my bathtub. He was bedraggled and soggy because the old shower head was dripping again. He appeared more than a little angry, a miniature striped devil hurtling back and forth. Tiny claws scrabbled against the porcelain as he launched himself in a desperate bid for freedom. The sides were too steep and smooth; he slid down and chattered angrily. Beady eyes glared at me as if it were somehow my fault.

"Well, you're the one who came in uninvited. Serves you right." Excellent. I was talking to a rodent.

I sighed. This wasn't how I pictured my life as the big Four Zero loomed on the not so distant horizon. I had been on the expected trajectory — I moved out of my parents' house directly into the dorms. After college there were a string of roommates and live-in boyfriends. Next on the list: wedded bliss. I met The One and checked off the fairy tale wedding. As things do, it eventually derailed. The marriage turned out to be a decade and a half long mistake. That's putting it charitably. When I finally admitted there was nothing left to save, I packed my bags. For the first time in my life, I moved into my very own place. I felt too old for that kind of milestone.

After scouring the listings, I congratulated myself on finding a country cabin that fit my almost nonexistent budget. It also afford me some much needed solitude and a great view of the stars. A night sky sparkling with pinpricks of light, four and a half light years away, lent perspective. The bucolic setting was serene and even better, neighbor free. For five hundred dollars a month I could rage and cry and heal in privacy. I didn't begrudge a cent.

The cottage was cozy, if on the downhill towards shabby. Who was I to judge? It seemed apropos for I was a train wreck myself. The carpet was 1970's beige shag and the linoleum peeling. There was a distinctive slant to the living room floor. However, the rustic, exposed beams of coffee colored wood reminded me that despite the décor, the bones were sound. It gave me hope. Perhaps I, like the little house, would prove to have a solid foundation

beneath my cracked exterior.

Most of the rooms in the cabin were on the small side and well-worn. The floor in front of the kitchen sink was polished smooth, where someone had stood time after time to wash dishes. There were divots in the carpet, echoes of heavy furniture. A dog had gnawed on the molding. It was oddly companionable, knowing that countless feet had walked there before me. It made my alone less lonely.

There was one oddity. I opened a door off the kitchen and was shocked to discover the toilet. Just the commode. In a closet. To sit, I had to tuck my elbows tightly to my sides to avoid banging the walls. On the opposite side of the house there was what I ultimately dubbed the "Shower Room." It housed a sink and the bathtub that became unintended playground for the enraged chippy. Uninvited house guests aside, it was an odd arrangement at best. It was also endearing, this ugly little duckling of a home. And it was mine.

I was too exhausted to appreciate my first night on my own. I had bullied the furniture in place and dug unsuccessfully in boxes for essentials. I had no pots or pans, as my ex and I were still in that stage of arguing over who got what. It was like two kindergartners squabbling over the same toy that neither really wanted. It didn't matter for the fridge was bare. It seemed dinner was out of the question. I sucked down a beer, called it good, and turned in. The box I had packed the sheets in was nowhere to be found. I was too tired to care.

That night I fell asleep quickly, overwhelmed by physical and emotional fatigue. It was the unsettled rest of a troubled mind. My dreams haunted me, disjointed images that agitated and confused. It was late when I jerked awake, uncertain in the dark, unfamiliar surroundings. I breathed, willing my racing heart to slow. Instinctively I reached for him. My questing fingers only found pillows on his side of the bed. I hated myself for the habit.

A faint scratching interrupted my self loathing. I wasn't sure if I was annoyed or grateful for the distraction. Listening intently, I tried to pinpoint the sound. Convinced it wasn't the groaning complaints of an old house, I flipped on the light. Silence. Motionless, an eternity passed before I gave up and turned out the light. I laid back down. Silence. I was heartbeats from falling back asleep when the gallop of tiny feet thundered past my head. From inside the wall. It was official. I had mice.

The squeamish might shudder at the thought of sharing their home with vermin. I'm not faint of heart. We had a comfortable agreement. They stayed out of my things and I didn't actively evict them. It worked surprisingly well. I never saw a dropping, a whisker, or tail. Nothing got nibbled unless it was by me. The only evidence that I wasn't alone was the nocturnal scurrying

in the walls. After a time, even that faded into the background, part of the familiar nighttime symphony.

Fall transitioned slowly, the maple trees dropping their jewel toned party dresses. As the seasons changed, so did I. I had known living alone would require adjustments. I acclimated. Forgoing anything labeled "gallon" or "family size," I learned how to shop and cook for one. I started sleeping, sprawled in the center of the bed. Out of necessity I fixed bits and bobs, eventually becoming moderately handy. I stopped crying while watching dish detergent commercials. Liberal amounts of wine were poured as I celebrated the small victories. They were markers of newfound independence. What I didn't expect was a frantic tamias stratus in the tub. I guess it wasn't mice in the walls after all.

The chipmunk glowered at me. With no maritally obligated support team I was going to have to do something about this myself. That or stop showering. I wracked my brains, struggling to recall high school biology. Chipmunks were rodents. Rodents had long, sharp incisors. The likelihood of getting bitten by Angry Chip was high. Reaching in and fishing him out seemed like a poorly conceived plan.

I finally decided the first step would be to contain the little bugger. I'd just pop an overturned pail over his head and that would be that. Trouble was, this was one speedy little chipmunk. I hadn't played sports since high school soccer and my reflexes were rusty. Too slow, too slow. I swore he was laughing at me. Just as I began to wonder how many days I could go with dry shampoo and perfume before offending my coworkers – success!

Giddy in my triumph it was time to initiate phase two. Armed with the dubious protection of an oven mitt, I slid a piece of cardboard under the bucket and flipped it right side up. I peered in. From the bottom of my pink mop-pail he stared up at me, dark eyes bewildered the sudden change of scenery. Safely contained in the bucket, he was sort of cute.

"Gotcha." I was too pleased with my achievement to admonish myself for talking to a chipmunk.

I pride myself for my intellect. When I can't button my jeans or say something socially awkward, I always remind myself – at least you're smart. However, what happened next was not well thought out. The reasonable thing would have been to carry the bucket outdoors and turn the intruder out. I reached in.

Angry Chip took one look at the red checked oven mitt headed his way and leapt. With the taste of freedom in his nostrils, he scurried up my arm, jumped to my shoulder, and buried himself in my hair. I shrieked. Flapping my arms and hopping in circles didn't help matters. Chippy held on for dear

life.

It suddenly occurred to me that if I was able to dislodge the hitchhiker, he'd be free range in my living room. The horror. I headed towards the door, as fast as an almost-40, slightly chubby lady could sprint. The chipmunk had had enough. I could suddenly feel him zipping down my shoulder. The race was on.

It turns out a panicked divorcee that doesn't want to spend the winter with a rodent in the living room is a highly motivated creature. I ripped open the front door and launched myself off the front steps. Just as my stocking feet crunched down in dry leaves, the chipmunk hurled himself from my elbow. He disappeared into the underbrush.

I collapsed in the front yard, flat on my back. Chest heaving, I stared into the the blue expanse above. I hadn't signed up for this. I could handle dripping faucets and ugly carpet. I had made my peace with sleeping alone. I drew the line at rodents in my hair. The temptation to blow off steam in a childlike temper tantrum proved too much. I screamed and drummed my heels on the ground. Cried angry, frustrated tears. Eventually the outburst burned itself out.

I got up and sheepishly dusted myself off. A three ounce chipmunk had driven me to tears. How embarrassing. I was never so appreciative of the lack of neighbors. Not a soul to witness my infantile behavior. This living alone adventure was supposed to have forged me into an independent woman. Shouldn't the pilgrimage of self reliance bring competence and poise? Maybe next week. Better late than never.

HOLIDAY GOLDFARB

MY BACKDOOR STEP, 1971

This is the exact spot my backdoor stone-hewn step where Mark Carter kissed me

hard, my first kiss, forced unwanted that summer night pinned between him and the screen door.

Backing away my bruised lips bloomed iris, deep purple, yellow lightning bugs blinking caution

my own arm an oak beam strong straight pushing him away, the other

a golden garden snake squirting across a pollen-flecked pond searching for safety,

the doorknob to darkness, back hall quiet, cool in its rush to comfort.

I stumbled to her bedside dared to wake her, my mother away from her world

my tale so true it demanded her attention, now like the slap of anger and hurt I felt, the crush when you discover fireflies die in glass jars overnight.

She woke groggy gowned in dreamy lace, offering an empty apology, turning away to sleep.

As for Mark Carter he whip-stitched a story so grand, that summer night

blushed starless, a wildflower garden filled with tight firm roses, buds wrapped wet naked wanting

JEFFREY TUCKER

NOVEMBER, WITH RAIN TURNING TO SNOW

Night's cirrus ceiling is low and more clouds come still, weighted, gray. The plum tree's leaves dropped tonight, a maroon halo on the lawn dulling black. Wind off the east mountains, thrashes the tin garage door like crumpling paper. I pile acrylic quilts five thick and stretch them to my nose.

Don't cry. Don't make me leave this small warmth, turn my arms to gooseflesh pinballing along hall bannister and wall to your room. And I apologize:
You took so long to arrive, I shouldn't waste two blinks on windows unsealed, curtains flowing with invisible draft. I should welcome nightly wail, beg for plump diapers primed to launch bolus into the damp cups of your bent knees, if that was part of the accord that brought you here.

There's a rattle in your neck. The ladder of green monitor lights climbs and falls with your chest. Reflections on the dresser are sunrise through smog.

Before the frost, I gathered the plums, small as cherries. I bit through oozing skin into syrupped bloody pith, hit clingstone pit, glazed tongue in tacky liquor. I picked all I could. Try them, I told my wife—who knew they would be so rich! She ate, and we cut slivers for you, leaving hemic pits staining the porcelain sink.

The high, unpicked plums are with the leaves when I rake the yard in the morning, smearing across the withering grass.

The water is turned off. A yellow rose, large as two fists last week, lolls into knots of stems gone to wood.

The eastern mountains look like an Indian sleeping, locals tell me. All I care is that the wind has stopped.

One day, you will do this. You won't be raking, maybe, and you won't grow plums, maybe. I pray your house is warm. But you'll stand outside, and the air will stick to your face. Your pulse will box in your ears, and everything will be the same, except it won't be, and you'll wonder if it's the frost, or the extra hour of sleep you got the night before, or something else, and just keep going.

STEVE DALY



THE SELF-CONTAINED CRITIC

JOHN MCCAFFREY

SENIOR SPIN

Senior Spin was held at noon on Thursdays at the YMCA. Edward, at 30, was nearly 40 years younger than anyone else in class. He stumbled in one day looking for a lunchtime workout and enjoyed it. He was welcomed back and became a regular.

Edward liked the relaxed approach to Senior Spin. Pedaling speed was up to the rider, and overexertion was highly discouraged. This was different than his other spin experiences, where he felt intimidated by shouting instructors and even more so by class participants, mostly taut-bodied men and women in matching exercise outfits, who gulped energy drinks while pedaling maniacally to techno rock.

Today, the class was grooving to Tone Loc's "Funky Cold Medina." The instructor, Lydia, a woman with a gentle face and legs like cannon barrels, favored mainstream eighties rap music such as MC Hammer, Run DMC, Bobby Brown, Jazzy Jeff, and The Fresh Prince. She taught from the front of the room, on a bike that sat on a raised platform overlooking the others.

"Everyone lift their right arm to whatever height it wants to go," she encouraged after the initial warm up phase, her voice amplified by a microphone headset. "Move it around like this," she continued, swinging her arm as if mixing cake batter.

Edward raised his arm and mimicked the motion, as did the others, except for Ruth, a 77 year-old woman in a pink sweat suit and matching sun visor, who at the end of the song fell off the bike and landed on the floor with a thud.

"Broken hip. Two places."

It was after class and Edward was in the sauna. A towel was draped around his waist, his feet in tongs. Sweat rolled off his nose in rhythmic bursts. He cupped a stream of perspiration in his palm and rubbed it around his face.

"Do they know why she fell?"

"Probably just got tired, that was a tough class. Some good jams, though."

The two men he was talking with in the sauna, Ray and Saul, were also regulars in Senior Spin. Edward noticed they often used rap lingo in their conversations.

Ray ran his fingers, swollen at the joints from arthritis, across his freckled scalp.

"Did you check out Lydia's outfit today? Pretty hot."

Sal nodded. He was barrel-chested with a great rolling belly that looked even larger connected to his spindly legs. He had a flat face and deep-set blue eyes shadowed by out-of-control black eyebrows. He shot Edward a sly grin.

"You should ask her out. She's single."

"I'll leave her to you guys."

"I know I can't handle her." Sal slapped Ray playfully on the knee. "And this guy would have a heart attack before they even got started."

Ray flexed his right bicep. It looked like a boiled noodle.

"You're dope, dog," he said. "I still got it."

"You got it all right," Sal exhaled, his body jiggling with laughter. "But she doesn't want it."

Edward maneuvered past the old men and opened the door.

"Take care," he said. "See you next week."

"Out," said Ray.

"Peace to your mother," chimed Sal.

Edward was eating a meatball hero. Bits of sauce dripped from the roll and onto a paper plate. He brought the sandwich to his mouth in one motion and took a huge bite, sending a stream of marinara squirting out the other end and onto his pants.

"I can never eat one of these without getting it all over me," he groaned.

His co-worker and friend, Ken, facing him at the small wooden table, pushed across the napkin dispenser.

"I forgot to tell you," Edward said, removing a few napkins and using them to wipe his pants. "A woman keeled over in class today."

Ken was also working on a meatball hero, but in a way that minimized the chance of spilling, cutting the sandwich into small squares and eating it with a fork. He speared a piece of meatball from the bread. "Is she okay?"

"She broke her hip. That's usually the beginning of the end for old people."

Ken nodded. He lowered his voice.

"What's our friend doing now?"

He and Ken had been coming to the same pizza parlor for weeks, ever since they idled in one day and took a look at the woman working behind the counter. She appeared to be in her late 20's, had flawless olive skin, long brownish hair with hints of blonde highlights, and breasts that filled nicely the colored T-shirts she wore while working.

Edward peered over Ken's shoulder.

"She's stuffing a calzone." He jerked his head down and stared at his sandwich. "I think she caught me looking."

"We're so pathetic."

"Tell me about it." Edward shook his head. "One of us has to say something to her today. We can't show our faces in civilized society if we don't. This is ridiculous."

"Ask her for more napkins," Ken suggested. "Say you spilled sauce on your pants. It's the perfect in."

"Spilling sauce on my pants is the perfect in?"

"I bet she'll feel sorry for you."

"She should." Edward took in a long breath and exhaled. "Okay, it's now or never." He stood and went to the counter. The woman had her back to him, placing pepperoni slices on an uncooked pizza.

"Excuse me."

She turned and wiped her hands on an apron. Bits of flour dotted her cheeks.

"Yes."

Edward's ears flushed. He looked over her shoulder and focused on a yellowing poster on the wall that depicted the Last Supper. Jesus, halo over his head, looked to be digging into a bowl of Fettuccini Alfredo while the 12 Apostles swilled wine.

"Can I have some napkins, please?" He cleared his throat, continuing to look away. "I spilled sauce on my pants."

She reached under the counter and pulled out a stack of napkins and set them on the counter.

"Take as many as you want."

"Thanks."

Edward grabbed the napkins. He forced himself to look at her.

Anything else?" she asked.

Edward hesitated, flushing deeper.

"No, I mean, the napkins are great."

"Okay. Have a good day."

"You too." He watched as she returned to her work on the pizza, dealing out pepperoni like a casino croupier with cards. "Okay," he said. "Got to go." He moved fast to the door and stumbled outside, where Ken, with a smile, was waiting.

Lydia was late to class the next week and people were pedaling lightly on their bikes waiting her arrival.

"Hey Edward," Ray called out from his bike. "Did you keep Lydia up all night?"

Edward shook his head. Candy, on the bike in front of him, turned around and smiled sympathetically.

"Don't let him bother you," she said. "I know you're a gentleman."

"And I'm not?" Ray turned his attention to Candy. She was a bit younger than most of the woman in class, and very buxom. "I'm nothing but gentle."

"That's not what I hear," Candy returned, mischievously.

"Just give me the chance to show you."

Lydia walked in with a rush.

"Sorry I'm late," she said, rolling her eyes. "Traffic."

She set herself up on her bike, put on the headphones, and adjusted the music.

"Any questions before we begin?" she said over the beginning refrains of a Beastie Boys song.

No one answered.

"Okay, let's go. Everyone raise your arms and stretch to your right."

Edward watched as arms went up and bodies leaned over. It took a long time for everyone to get to the same position, almost resembling "the wave" done by crowds at sporting events. He exhaled and dropped his shoulders. A thin film of sweat enveloped his skin. He felt good and loose. And then Saul fell off his bike.

"Saul collapsed today."

Edward and Ken were at the pizza parlor again, this time eating chicken parmesan sandwiches. The woman behind the counter was not there. Edward took a careful bite from his sandwich. He had asked for two paper plates, one for the table, the other to cover his waist in case of spillover.

"Saul is Ray's buddy, right?"

Edward had told Ken enough about the class that he knew the regulars.

"Yes. They're tight."

'What happened?"

"He fainted. The paramedics came and took him away by ambulance."

"They're dropping like flies."

"Tell me about it."

Edward got up and went to the counter to get a soda refill.

"I wonder where she is today?" he said, sitting back down.

"Maybe she saw us coming and took off out the back door."

Edward sighed.

"I don't blame her after my last display....sauce on my pants."

"I still think it's a good opening."

"You would. Anyway, you should have seen Ray after they took Saul away. He was crying like crazy. They had to take him to another room to calm him down." Edward sipped his soda. "I bet if I passed out right now, you'd just eat the rest of your sandwich like nothing happened."

"Probably." Ken looked at his watch. "Ready to go?"

They reached the door the same time the woman from behind the counter was entering. Ken's face blanched and he stepped back to let her through. Edward did the same. They both watched her walk through the restaurant and take her place behind the counter. Then they went back to work.

Ray and Edward were in the sauna. Saul was no longer in the class, having dropped out when it was discovered he had advanced diabetes.

"He'll probably lose one leg, maybe both," Ray said.

Edward lowered his head. It was stifling hot in the sauna, and he was dripping sweat. Ray barely had a drop on him.

"I told him for years to get his sugar checked out. But he's stubborn. Always has been. Do you know we went to the same high school? He was

fat even then."

Edward blew out his cheeks.

"It's hot in here."

"It's good for you. Sweat all the bad stuff out. I've taken a sauna every day for the past thirty years." Ray slapped his stomach. "And I watch what I eat. Want to know what I have for breakfast every morning?"

"Sure."

"V8 juice. No eggs. No bagels. No donuts. Just V8."

Ray reached for a wooden bucket holding water. He ladled a handful ontoza pile of charcoal gray rocks atop the sauna's heating system. A puff of steam rose into the air, and the water popped and hissed as it boiled atop the rocks.

"You got to take care of yourself now," he continued. "Don't get out of shape. I'll be 81 in two weeks and look at me. V8 juice in the morning, and at night I eat a rotisserie chicken. No barbecue sauce. No potato on the side. Just chicken. That's my secret: V8's and rotisserie chickens."

Edward felt light headed and reached for the door.

"Later," he said. "It's too hot for me."

Ray waved a hand.

"Remember what I said."

Edward staggered to the shower and let cold-water rush over his body. After a few seconds he turned the nozzle to warm and soaped up and washed his hair. When he was done, he grabbed his towel and dried off. He wrapped it around his waist and walked toward the lockers. He passed by the sauna. He didn't see anyone inside. He stepped closer and looked through the small square window centered at the top of the thick wood door. There, lying on the floor, face down, was Ray.

Ray's memorial was held at a funeral parlor near the YMCA. All the regulars from Senior Spin were there. Ruth and Saul were in wheelchairs. Lydia sat in the front row. Candy was directly ahead of Edward. She was wearing a black leather mini skirt with metal studs, a black turtleneck, black-fringed vest, and black pumps.

The service was fast. A cousin gave the eulogy, talking mostly about Ray's time in the Navy, when he served aboard a destroyer in World War II. Saul finished up with a poem he prepared.

"To Ray," he started:

"We met in school,
Me timid, you cool,
Our differences so vast,
How did we last?
But over the years,
With you by my side,
We always managed to laugh,
No matter how rough the ride.

I will remember your smile, Your wit and your guile, The way you told a joke, Every word you spoke. It is memories now for me, Until I too will be free, To meet up and see you again, My homey, my partner, my friend."

Saul's voice broke at the end. He tucked the poem back into his pocket, bent his head to his chest and sobbed. Lydia was at his side immediately, rubbing his shoulders. After a few moments, the manager of the parlor appeared and addressed the audience.

"Ray's family would like to invite you now to join them for lunch," he said with smooth solemnity. "It will be held at the YMCA, in Room 2A."

Candy looped her arm through Edward's as they walked to the YMCA. "That was an interesting poem," she whispered.

Edward did not answer.

"Maybe Ray was sweeter than I thought," she continued. "I wish now I took him up on his offer. You know he had a thing for me."

They reached the YMCA. Room 2A was on the second floor.

"I have to use the men's room," Edward said, easing out of Candy's grip. "See you inside."

The bathroom was down the hall. Edward washed his hands and face in the sink. He slicked back his hair and peered into the mirror. He studied, as if seeing them for the first time, the scattering of thin wrinkles spreading away from the corners of his eyes, the long lines crisscrossing his forehead, the thinning of his hair. He realized, with a start, that he was getting older, that his body was following a primitive blueprint he could not stop, moving forward without let-up, inching, imperceptibly so, toward a final end. He

tried to wash away the thought with more water to his face, but he could not escape the idea of his own mortality. Finally, he toweled dry.

Edward walked down the hall, drawing closer to the murmur of voices within the room. He stopped at the door. The caterers had set up food on a long table set in the back. He saw the woman from the pizza parlor dishing out meatballs to people on plates. She looked up and smiled at him. Edward smiled back. He walked through the door and got in line. When it was his turn to get served, he held the plate with shaking hands, determined to say something.

"Excuse me," he said, after the woman had laid the last meatball on his plate. "But can I ask your name?"

She blinked, and to his surprise, blushed.

"Angela."

"I'm Edward."

She nodded. He looked behind him. There was no one else in line.

"I recognize you from the pizza parlor," he said.

"I know."

He paused, gathered his courage.

"I know this might not be the best place to ask, but I was wondering, if you're free sometime, would you like to have coffee with me."

Angela did not speak, but she nodded.

"How about later? I don't have to work the rest of the day.

Her blush deepened.

"I have to go back to the restaurant. But I get off early. Around 3 pm."

"I'll be waiting outside."

She smiled.

"So it's a date?" Edward said.

"Okav."

Edward returned to a table with his plate of meatballs. He could not help looking over at Angela as he ate, devouring her with his eyes. It had been a first for him: asking for what he wanted, and he hoped he could maintain this confidence later, when they had coffee. Regardless, the meatballs at the moment were delicious, and when he was finished he joined the others at the table in telling stories of remembrance about Ray, while thinking, secretly, that his own life had just begun.

ROSEMARY ROYSTON

FIRST MOON

Even though the rule is to knock she does not. She bursts into my room, greeted by my scowl, which morphs from annoyance to shock as she tells me she thinks her period has started.

She's only eleven and I want this to be a special day, I want to be the mother who is neither cool nor detached so I gather her in my arms, ask questions, give her a book in a pink box, bought for this very moment.

When she asks to bathe in my large tub I say *yes* and, as requested, head to the kitchen to make her favorite tea (chamomile). While it steeps I watch as a leaf falls from the poinsettia onto the white table-top,

its silent splash leaving everything changed.

LINDA CONROY

FIRST CATCH

Say "fishing" and you think of Father and the dewy grass of early morning as you climb into the wagon with your sister or your son and make certain that the gear is carefully stowed and that Dad has put in sandwiches as well as bait and poles.

My sister and I walked from our childhood home down Sutton Passey's Crescent to the roundabout, past the church and nearby cobbler shop to a narrow path alongside the canal.

We'd stop and squat on muddy banks, smell weeds and dirt and dip our nets for tadpoles, tiddlers and sticklebacks, and scoop them into jam jars brought from home with string around the neck to make sure they don't slop.

Like you, I think of Father, always with us on these jaunts though rarely did he play on other days. Back home he says we need to set those jam jars on the outside window sill. We watch the fish swim round and round until the next week when Mother says we have to take them back.

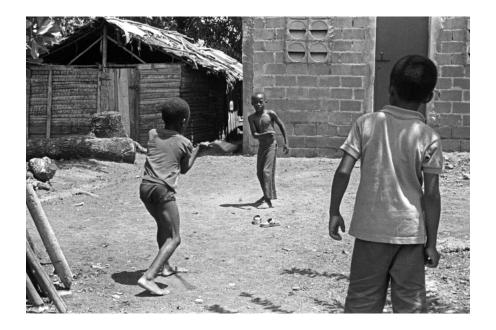
RUNAWAY - A FIRST ATTEMPT

I thought I'd be alright if I ran 'til I disappeared from view.

Mother wouldn't see which way I'd gone and wouldn't know I'd left unless she looked and saw me dashing past the last bush on the gravel path across the shining crescent of the beach where I'd slide behind the rocky bank that separates the wildlife from the wind.

Once away from line of sight I'd climb onto the highest rock and sit and bask in evening's sun and watch the breakers crashing on the shore and wish they'd wash me clean of stain, of supposed sin. I'd hear the pebbles rise and rumble dragged by water's rush, content to settle where they're put accepting their cold fate until the next wave catches, reels and rolls them in repeated rearrangement of their lot.

DARIN WAHL



PASSING TIME

LYNN B. CONNOR

SPARROW'S SONG

I only knew Sparrow for one short summer when I was twelve. Sparrow stole my heart and brought my first encounter with grief and self-doubt.

Dogs and cats were the pets of choice for most kids. Not for me. It was birds. I had three— two small Java ricebirds, just six inches long from their beaks to the tips of their tails, and one large rooster.

One ricebird was pure white, the other gray. I named them Snowflake and Raindrop. They had a cage in the house, but the door was left open. They flitted about, gathering crumbs from the kitchen floor and perching on the telephone table as if they were waiting for the telephone to ring.

I named the rooster Gawky. Gawky lived in the barn, woke the family in the morning and spent most of his days strutting about the yard. When I called him, he came and perched on my arm. Gawky often joined us for dinner. I put a chair with a big fat book on it at the table for Gawky and tied a napkin around his neck.

That summer my interest in birds expanded. I learned to recognize the songs of the birds that visited our yard, then to mimic their tunes. I was like the mocking bird —tut-tut-tuting like the little wrens, cawing like the big, black crows, and even learning the "quany-ka-ree!" of the redwing black bird. The robins seemed to be singing "cheer-up, cheer-up," and birds to be singing their own names — "bob-white, bob-white," and "whip-poor-will, whip-poor-will."

But it was the "happ-i-ly, happ-i-ly, happ-i-ly" of the plain brown sparrow that I loved and whistled often. A sparrow sat in a tree and watched me. Perhaps it would be like Gawky and come when I whistled its tune. I placed breadcrumbs on the ground, whistled, and waited. Sparrow came, grabbed the crumbs, and flitted away. Each day I made a trail of breadcrumbs that came closer to me. Then whistled the Sparrow's song. And each day Sparrow followed the crumbs closer and closer, until one day Sparrow took the crumbs from my hand. From then on, Sparrow appeared whenever I whistled "happ-i-ly, happ-i-ly."

Sparrow trusted me. She was no longer afraid of people. One day I heard two boys yelling, "Oh, look at the tame sparrow. Let's see if we can hit it with our sticks."

I ran towards the voices and found only a silent bundle of brown feathers on the ground. What had I done? Never, never again would I train a wild bird, I vowed. And I haven't, but sometimes I whistle, "happ-i-ly, happ-i-ly." I do not want Sparrow's song to die.

JEANNE JULIAN

LEAVING THE CEREMONY

A black sweater's draped in the cleft of a dogwood. You'd think the tree would shake to shed it as did the young passing pilgrim in this Saharan afternoon, unseasonable for May in New England.

I cross the famous campus to the awards ceremony, where parents of the winners sit in rows upon our floor, freshly stripped and waxed and buffed, fanning themselves with programs — the list of offsprings' names potent as a hymn. Haruko Ogawa to Sophie Zygadlo, these scholars unknown to me already, like the heat teased ornamentals on the lawns to blossom. Afterward, my pals will pick up the scattered trash, retrieving a battered mortarboard or two.

For more years than these kids have lived, I've cleaned and sanitized. Then from the shadows watched the pompous, joyous, academic rituals; a bird on the back of a grazing beast. My toil here mattered, I believe—had its place and purpose and effect for the intellectuals, just like a chalkboard, the carillon, or a brick in Standish Hall, with an impact like a prayer's, maybe: obligatory, unmeasurable, temporary.

But better to work here, where people talk and think, than in a circus or a supermarket.

The work goes on but it's over for me.

I'm steady as that tree, lost as that sweater, proud mother of myself, and I'm every hopeful graduate; my yonder as young and empty as theirs.

Yes —I'm all of that, and none of it.

As for the first time in all these years of careful drudgery, I slip out early. I won't be back.

Taking my broom, making my rags into a burnoose; I'll soon learn whether out there the ignorant desert harbors pagan caravans and revels.

Professors, explain this.

RICHARD DAVIS, JR.

JOSEPH RECEIVES UNSETTLING NEWS

a comedy in one scene

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Joseph: A carpenter, husband to Mary.

Mary: Wife to Joseph. She has some unusual news.

SCENE

Nazareth, morning. 2017 years ago.

SUMMARY

Mary tells Joseph she's going to have a baby. He's taken aback.

Note: Each time the bell rings, the actors stop and return to the blocking of the first line after the bell. This will be perfectly clear as you read the script ... or if you know David Ives' All in the Timing.

SETTING

A work room in a cottage in Nazareth.

AT RISE: JOSEPH examines a table HE is building. Mary enters to him.

MARY: Good morning, Joseph.

JOSEPH: Mary. Hand me that mallet, please.

MARY: I have news.

JOSEPH (As HE taps with mallet.): Is it about the census?

MARY: In a way, yes. Do you like children?

JOSEPH: I love children ...

MARY: Good because -

JOSEPH: ... which is why I can't see bringing any into this corrupt world. Herod stealing every piece of silver he can get his greedy hands on. Wars everywhere, disease, crime ... Why do you ask?

MARY: Never mind.

(Bell.)

MARY: Good morning, Joseph.

JOSEPH: Mary. Hand me that mallet, please.

MARY: I have news.

JOSEPH: Is it about the census?

MARY: In a way, yes. Do you like children?

JOSEPH: Yes. ... As long as they belong to other people.

(Bell.)

MARY: Do you like children?

JOSEPH: I'm sterile.

(Bell.)

MARY: Do you like children?

JOSEPH: I love children.

MARY: Good because -

JOSEPH: These are exciting times. That thief, Herod, will soon be dead. With all these wars, there will always be opportunities for soldiers. And Heaven knows we'll always need doctors. And policemen. We really need policemen. Did you like that bookcase I built yesterday?

MARY: Like it? I loved it. I think you have a real future in carpentry.

JOSEPH: I'm pleased you liked it, but it's been stolen.

MARY: That's terrible! Could you build another?

JOSEPH: Certainly.

MARY: Could you build a crib?

JOSEPH: Certainly.

MARY: Good. I'm with child.

(JOSEPH bangs HIS finger, howls. Bell.)

MARY: Do you like children?

JOSEPH: I love children.

MARY: Good because -

JOSEPH: These are exciting times -

MARY: I know, I know. Cops, soldiers, doctors.

JOSEPH: Did you like that bookcase I built yesterday?

MARY: Like it? I loved it. I think you have a real future in carpentry.

JOSEPH: I'm pleased you liked it, but it's been stolen.

MARY: That's terrible! Could you build another?

JOSEPH: Certainly.

MARY: Could you build a crib?

JOSEPH: Certainly.

MARY: Good, I'm with child.

JOSEPH: What?!

MARY: I'm going to have a baby.

JOSEPH: A baby?! That's impossible. We haven't ... you know.

MARY: No worries. You're not the father.

(JOSEPH bangs HIS finger, howls. Bell.)

JOSEPH: A baby?! That's impossible. We haven't ... you know.

MARY: Stranger things have happened.

JOSEPH: I'd like to know when.

MARY: Last February. My due day is October 25th.

(Bell.)

JOSEPH: A baby?! That's impossible. We haven't ... you know.

MARY: Stranger things have happened.

JOSEPH: I'd like to know when.

MARY: Last March. My due day is November 25th.

(Bell.)

MARY: Last April. My due date is December 25th.

JOSEPH: I didn't meet you until June.

(Bell.)

MARY: My due day is December 25th.

JOSEPH: (HE counts months on HIS fingers.) I was at the Carpenters

Symposium last April. In Galilee.

MARY: No worries. You're not the father.

JOSEPH: (HE bangs HIS finger.) Oww!! ... How could you do this to me?

MARY: I begged you to take me with you.

JOSEPH: You told me you were a virgin.

MARY: I am a virgin.

JOSEPH: That makes no sense.

MARY: It's a miracle.

JOSEPH: (HE brandishes mallet.) It better be.

(Bell.)

JOSEPH: You told me you were a virgin.

MARY: I am a virgin.

JOSEPH: That makes no sense.

MARY: It's a miracle.

JOSEPH: It better be.

MARY: Don't hit me! ... An angel came to me in a dream and –!

JOSEPH: You saw an angel?

MARY: Yes, last April. In a dream.

JOSEPH: You never mentioned any dream -- Wait. An angel made you

pregnant?

MARY: Of course not.

JOSEPH: I'm confused.

MARY: He told me I was going to become pregnant.

JOSEPH: Did he say by whom?

MARY: You'd better sit down.

(Bell.)

MARY: Good morning, Joseph.

JOSEPH: 'Morning, dear. Hand me that mallet please.

MARY: I have news.

JOSEPH: Is it about the census?

MARY: In a way, yes. Do you like children?

JOSEPH: I love children.

MARY: Good because -

JOSEPH: These are exciting times. That thief, Herod --

MARY: Please. No more about Herod. ... Where's the bookcase you built

yesterday?

JOESEPH: Did you like it?

MARY: Very much. I think you have a real future in carpentry.

JOSEPH: I'm pleased you liked it, but it's been stolen.

MARY: That's terrible! Could you build another?

JOSEPH: Certainly.

MARY: Could you build a crib?

JOSEPH: Why in the world would we need a crib?

MARY: I'm preggers.

JOSEPH: (HE bangs HIS finger.) Ow!! ... What?!

MARY: Preggers. I'm going to have a baby.

JOSEPH: A baby?! That's impossible. We haven't ... you know ... done it.

MARY: Stranger things have happened.

JOSEPH: I'd like to know when.

MARY: I just said. Last April. My due day is December 25th.

JOSEPH: I was at a carpenter's symposium last April. In Galilee.

MARY: No worries. You're not the father.

JOSEPH: (HE bangs HIS finger.) Oww!! ... How could you do this to me?

MARY: I begged you to take me with you.

JOSEPH: You told me you were a virgin.

MARY: I am a virgin.

JOSEPH: That makes no sense.

MARY: It's a miracle.

JOSEPH: (HE brandishes mallet.) It better be.

MARY: Don't hit me! ... An angel came to me in a dream, Joseph.

JOSEPH: You saw an angel?

MARY: Yes, last April. In a dream.

JOSEPH: You never mentioned any dream -- Wait. An angel made you

pregnant?

MARY: Of course not.

JOSEPH: I'm confused.

MARY: He told me I was going to become pregnant.

JOSEPH: Did he say by whom?

MARY: You'd better sit down.

JOSEPH: (HE sits.) I'm assuming you understand the procedure.

MARY: The what?

JOSEPH: The procedure. The method. ... You know. Like we discussed.

MARY: Oh. That. Well ... There was no procedure. There was no method.

JOSEPH: Wait. I'm confused again.

MARY: It's really quite simple, Joseph. When I went to bed, I wasn't pregnant. Then an angel visited me, he whispered in my ear, and in the next moment, I was pregnant.

JOSEPH: Oh my God. MARY: Yes! Exactly!

TO BLACK

END OF PLAY

SAMMY PARKER

IN THE DACHAU MUSEUM, WINTER 1972

(dedicated to Itzchok Mayer Weller, my wife's great-uncle, who died at Auschwitz)

PROLOGUE

he stood beneath
the dented dirty-silver sheet metal
of staggered showerheads
then touched
the chipped surface
of rust-and-blood-red bricks—
my god
they're
only
metal and bricks
my god
only
metal and bricks

I.

On the dull-gray wall, inside a battered picture frame, an old man, diminutive, gaunt, stares blank eyed with many others. Outside, the leaden sky spits early-morning snow, slowly whitening the gravel paths, and hard-ice sleet, pinging off the pebble paths, filling the camp's thick, heavy air,

sparse, numb, austere, cold far beyond cold—

II. six million?

six million
are the number
of soft, white flakes and icy pellets
falling in dense Bavarian forests and
the number of lines etched
on this old man's Jewish face,
silent, trapped here under glass.
What were they waiting for,
this one old man, his brothers
—beyond abject, shorn of hair,
eyes cold dark blanks—
on that one day in 1944? and where,
O god, where were the women? children?

(outside
towering ancient peaks
blurred chilled grayness
inside
this wall
screams silence of screams
unbearable weight of stillness
jagged sense of loss's magnitude
steely unimaginable threads of resilience
terrible sanctity hallowed space
shrouded alpine beauty barren
stripped of consolation)

III.
He stares
at the old man's stooped, rigid dignity,
captured here forever before, forever afterward,
the most human of men.
In the wrenching silence

he realizes how desperately
he wishes, somehow,
to share,
to know,
to stand beside him,
touch his stark, ravaged face,
stare with sunken eyes like his
into the tiny camera lens—
but

bitter cold thickening snow crunching gravel beneath tourists' feet remind him that he knows onlu lines and curves inside a picture frame shower room stark brittle dru coolwith Zyklon-B memories rough chipped bricks blackened steel doors oven archways his shoe soles touching ground and wooden floors and warped cracked tiles on which they trod and stooped and wailed and fell forever the air and space where cries were stilled where they waited and waited and ceased to wait and now the open gate rusty metal and wire that do not restrain him and never will the air then the air now

DARIN WAHL



DAWN AT VOLCÁN TAJUMULCO

CONTRIBUTORS

CAROL BARRETT

holds doctorates in both clinical psychology and creative writing. She coordinates the Creative Writing Certificate Program at Union Institute & University. Her books include Calling in the Bones, which won the Snyder Prize from Ashland Poetry Press. Her poems have appeared in many magazines and anthologies including JAMA, Poetry International, Nimrod, Poetry Northwest, and The Women's Review of Books. A former NEA Fellow in Poetry, she lives in Bend, OR.

MILTON J. BATES

is the author of nonfiction books about the poet Wallace Stevens, the Vietnam War, and the Bark River valley in Wisconsin. Five Oaks Press published his poetry chapbook "Always on Fire" in 2016 and nominated one of its poems for a Pushcart Prize.

J V BIRCH

lives in Adelaide. Her poems have appeared in anthologies, journals and magazines across Australia, the UK, Canada and the US. She has two collections – Smashed glass at midnight and What the water & moon gave me - published by Ginninderra Press, and is currently working on her third. She blogs at www.jvbirch.com

RALPH BOUSQUET JR.

works in construction on Cape Cod, MA, and graduated from Hampshire College in December 2016, where I studied poetry, American Literature, and Religion. Ponder review is honored to be the first to publish his work.

HELEN BURKE

is an artist and poet based in York, England with a Master's degree in literature. Among her credits are Collected poems out with Valley Press, an art exhibition in Leeds, previous exhibitions in galleries and in France. She also does a radio show in Leeds.

EUGENIE CARABATSOS

has won the Kennedy Center Harold and Mimi Steinberg National Student Playwriting Award, the Trustus Theatre Playwrights Contest, the Mountain Playhouse Comedy Writing Competition, the Venus Theatre Festival, and the University of Tulsa's WomensWork Competition. Her plays have been produced by Trustus Theatre, iDiOM Theatre, and South Park Theatre, as well as in a number of

festivals and development programs, including the Great Plains Theater Conference. She graduated with her MFA in Dramatic Writing from Carnegie Mellon University in 2016, and received her BA from Wesleyan University in 2010.

LYNN B. CONNOR

with degrees in East Asian history, Lynn planned to be an academic. That idea was short-lived. She realized sharing stories that explore other times and places with children (and grownups, too) is what she enjoyed. LanSu Garden published her first book, THE STONES AND THE POET. www.lynnbconnor.com.

LINDA CONROY

lives Washington State and believes that poetry serves to honor the complexity and simplicity of human nature. In the process of writing it we discover the unexpected in ourselves and others, the ordinary and the unique.

JOE COSTAL

has fiction and poetry forthcoming in THE MAINE REVIEW, and has been published by PIF MAGAZINE and THE AVANT. Joe blogs about books and movies (Quirk Books and Jersey Ghouls), and he writes 'Daddy Film School,' on JoeCostal.com in which he subjects his small children to old films and records the ensuing hilarity or abject confusion. His writing has won distinction from Wesleyan University and Black Heart Magazine. Joe teaches writing at Stockton University and volunteers with Murphy Writing Seminars, He lives at the Jersey shore with his wife, four kids, and plenty of pain meds. He's also a Twitter addict, connect with him @JoeCostal.

STEVE DALY

was born in NYC and raised in northern CA. He attended Cranbrook Academy of Art on scholarship. Studio practice has continued throughout an academic career. Current academic status: Professor Emeritus. Exhibited internationally, honored with Tiffany Foundation grant, Prix de Rome fellowship.

RICHARD DAVIS, JR

has had plays produced Off-off Broadway and in theaters across US, Wales, and England—even full lengths, 12 children's musicals, 22 one-acts. His ten-minute piece, "Henry's Ear," was a finalist in the 2016 Claremorris Fringe Festival in Ireland. He writes: "I seem to return again and again to themes of self-imposed loneliness in a constantly evolving, increasingly complex world, which drives my play people into an endless cycle of evaluation, doubt, reevaluation. It's a world in which their goals, assumptions, values seem fragile, easily broken."

FRANK DULLAGHAN

is an Irish writer living in Dubai, UAE. Cinnamon Press in the UK have published 3 poetry collections, the most recent being 'The Same Roads Back' 2014. In 2016, Eyewear Press published his pamphlet 'Secrets of the Body', a selection of poems about the semi-mythical Pope Joan.

JOANNE ESSER

writes poetry and nonfiction in Minneapolis, Minnesot and has also been a teacher of young children for over thirty years. She earned an MFA in Creative Writing from Hamline University and published a chapbook of poems, "I Have Always Wanted Lightning," with Finishing Line Press in 2012. Her work appears in The Sow's Ear Poetry Review, Water~Stone Review, Iconoclast, Temenos and Under The Sun, among other journals.

HOLIDAY GOLDFARB

hails from Missouri--but please don't hold that against me: I did not vote for Todd Aiken or any of his uninformed-about-women's-reproductive-"abilities"- pals! I plan to graduate with an MFA in Writing from Lindenwood University in Saint Louis, MO at the end of March, 2017--finalizing my thesis at this very moment.

MORGAN GOVIER

is a current English Literature student at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. My work has appeared in six anthologies by Polar Expressions Publishing.

ASHLEY HALL

has a Bachelor's in English from Clemson University, where she also works as a communications coordinator. Ponder Review is honored to announce that the poem, "The Things that are Left Behind," is her first publication.

AMBER COLLEEN HART

has had short stories in Neon, Cheat River Review, Gravel, Storgy, The Danforth Review, and LUMINA. She is a graduate of Middle Tennessee State University's creative writing certificate program, WRITE, and serves as assistant editor at Compose Journal. Her debut collection of short stories, "No Landscape Lasts Forever," was published August 2016 through Excalibur Press.

ASHLEY HEWITT

was born in Jackson, Mississippi, and grew up exploring the creative phenomenons that arise from the cultural struggles of her home state. Influenced by seeing Muddy Waters as a child, she attended Millsaps College where she specialized in Southern Fiction, began writing

song lyrics and continued her fascination with the photographic image. An interest that began in portraiture, she has an inherent fondness for nature that shapes her identity and is present in every aspect of her work. She lives in historic Algiers Point, where she enjoys the international appeal of New Orleans, but takes the train back home whenever she can. Pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing at Mississippi University for Women, when she's not writing she raises her teenaged son, tends to her bloodhounds and rabbits, steals chances to perform with her band, and incessantly photographs what others tend to overlook.

BRYN HOMUTH

has had poems published in The Tishman Review, Jabberwock Review, and The Turnip Truck(s), among numerous other print and electronic journals. His work has previously been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and for the Best of the Net Anthology. Bryn lives in Minneapolis, MN and is working on his first full-length collection of poetry while teaching English courses for Crown College.

JEANNE JULIAN

had a chapbook, Blossom and Loss, published by Longleaf Press. Her poems have appeared in many journals, including Bindweed, Naugatuck River Review, Poetry Quarterly, Kakalak, and Prairie Wolf Press Review, and are forthcoming in The Main Street Rag and The Lascaux Prize 2016 Anthology. Her work also won awards in competitions sponsored by The Comstock Review, The North Carolina Poetry Society, The Lanier Library, and the Asheville Writers' Workshop.

MARY CHRISTINE KANE

born in Texas and raised in Buffalo, New York, Mary Christine Kane now lives in St. Paul, Minnesota where she earned an MFA from Hamline University. Her work has been appeared in numerous publications including Burner Magazine, OVS Magazine, the Vermillion Literary Project magazine, Right Here Right Now, The Buffalo Anthology and is forthcoming in Hospital Drive.

KALI LIGHTFOOT

grew up in Michigan and lives in Salem, MA. Her poetry has appeared in Illuminations 29, Split Rock Review, the anthology The Wildest Peal, and received an Honorable Mention award from the Science Fiction Poetry Association. Recently, her reviews of poetry books have appeared in Bookslut.com and Green Mountains Review. Kali earned an MFA in Writing from the Vermont College of Fine Arts.

THOMAS LOCICERO

has had poems published in several print and online publications, such as Roanoke Review, Boston Literary Magazine, Riverrun, Omnibus Arts

& Literature Anthology, Long Island Quarterly, The Good Men Project, Adelaide Literary Magazine, and Quail River Magazine among other literary journals, and are forthcoming in Jazz Cigarette, Rat's Ass Review and Scarlet Leaf Review.

SHAHÉ MANKERIAN

is the principal of St. Gregory Alfred and Marguerite Hovsepian School in Pasadena, California, and the co-director of the Los Angeles Writing Project. As an educator, he has been honored with the Los Angeles Music Center's BRAVO Award, which recognizes teachers for innovation and excellence in arts education. His most recent manuscript, History of Forgetfulness, has been a finalist at four prestigious competitions: the 2013 Crab Orchard Series in Poetry Open Competition, the 2013 Bibby First Book Competition, the Quercus Review Press, Fall Poetry Book Award, 2013, and the 2014 White Pine Press Poetry Prize. His poems have been published in numerous literary magazines.

JOHN A MCCAFFREY

attended Villanova University and received his MA in Creative Writing from the City College of New York. He is the author of the novel The Book of Ash (October 2013) and the collection of short stories, Two Syllable Men (April 2016). He lives in Hoboken, New Jersey.

COURTNEY MELVIN

has recently appeared in Arc Stories. Currently, she is completing a Bachelor's degree in Creative Writing at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

SHIRLEY NELSON

is a retired elementary school teacher living on the Oregon coast. She has written poetry, verse, essays, interviews, and other work, mostly nonfiction. Some of her pieces have won prizes. She has published two small books of poetry, three books on local history of the southern Oregon coast; also many newspaper and magazine articles, particularly for the Oregon Coast magazine which publishes every other month.

ALEX NODOPAKA

originated in Ukraine-Russia in 1940. Studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, Casablanca, Morocco. Full time author, artist in the USA. His interests in the visual arts and literature are widely multicultural. However, he considers his past irrelevant as he seeks new reincarnations in independent films if only for the duration of a wink... ok, ok maybe two!

SAMMY PARKER

taught English at Western Carolina University and the University of

Tennessee, Knoxville and had poems published in multiple editions of the literary journals at both. He's a U. S. Air Force veteran and worked in technical publications at Oak Ridge National Laboratory. His poems have been published in multiple editions of Belle Rêve Literary Journal and in Red River Review, Appalachian Journal, and Muddy River Poetry Review

KRISTA VARELA POSELL

received her MFA from Saint Mary's College of California, where she is now an English professor. She is the managing editor for The East Bay Review. Her work has appeared in Toasted Cheese Literary Journal, Blotterature, Vagabond City, and Sugared Water.

CHRISTINA ROBERTSON

lives in Evanston Illinois. She has an MA in Clinical Counseling and has spent many years in the field of Psychiatric service. Her short stories "Damsels" and "Violations" have appeared in The Raven's Perch, and another, "Everything Instinct" is in the current Winter issue of Midwestern Gothic. Her YA novel was accepted for publication by an independent press this summer.

KENNY ROUTT

is an Illustrator from Florida now living in NY. His work is a blend of traditional and digital media. He likes to mix media and push his boundaries of image making.

ROSEMARY ROYSTON

the author of Splitting the Soil (Finishing Line Press, 2014), resides in northeast Georgia with her family. Her flash fiction and poetry have been published in journals such as NANO Fiction, Appalachian Heritage, Southern Poetry Review, Town Creek Review, *82 Review, and Razor Literary Magazine. She's the VP for Planning at Young Harris College and teaches creative writing and composition

NICHOLAS SAMARAS

won The Yale Series of Younger Poets Award with his first book, HANDS OF THE SADDLEMAKER. His next book, AMERICAN PSALM, WORLD PSALM, came out in 2014 from Ashland Poetry Press. Individual poems have appeared or are forthcoming in The New Yorker, Poetry, and New York Times.

MM SCHREIER

is a New England native who writes non-fiction drawn from those life moments that are just too crazy to make up if you tried.

PATTI SEE

has had stories, poems, and essays in Salon Magazine, Women's

Studies Quarterly, Journal of Developmental Education, The Wisconsin Academy Review, The Southwest Review, HipMama, Inside HigherEd, and many other magazines and anthologies. She is the co-editor (with Bruce Taylor) of Higher Learning: Reading and Writing About College, 3rd edition (Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2011) and a poetry collection, Love's Bluff (Plainview Press, 2006). She wrote the blog "Our Long Goodbye: One Family's Experiences with Alzheimer's" (https://ourlonggoodbye.wordpress.com/) which has been read in over 90 countries.

BETH SHERMAN

received an MFA in creative writing from Queens College, where I teach in the English department. My fiction has been published in The Portland Review, KYSO, Black Fox Literary Magazine, Sandy River Review, Blue Lyra Review, Gloom Cupboard, Panoplyzine, Delmarva Review and Rappahannock Review, and is forthcoming in Sou'wester and 3Elements Review. I've also been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and have written five mystery novels.

JACK STEWART

was educated at the University of Alabama and Emory University. From 1992-95 he was a Brittain Fellow at The Georgia Institute of Technology. His work has appeared in Poetry, Image, The American Literary Review, The Dark Horse Review, The Southern Humanities Review, and other journals and anthologies, most recently in The Gettysburg Review. He lives in Coconut Creek, Florida.

JEFFREY TUCKER

used to teach, as a graduate student and an adjunct, at The University of Southern Mississippi (along with one of your alumni, by the way!); now, he lives in Utah. His book, Kill February, was published in 2015 as the winner of Sage Hill Press' Powder Horn Prize. His work has also appeared in such journals as The Cape Rock, Poetry South, Inscape, and elsewhere.

DARIN WAHL

is a budding sustainability scientist, a teacher, and a wandering photostoryteller. His work is an exploration of the human-environment interface and the struggles of these intertwined worlds to live and thrive.