

RED EARTH REVIEW



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<i>Write in the middle of it all.</i>		

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Jeffrey C. Alfier

Death Valley Interlude: The Panamint Range

Into bonedust air, bright as spun glass,
I began my climb beyond Badwater Spring,
my relief map a broken web of elevations.
Nonhuman tracks over dunes of Mesquite Flat
could warn wanderers even ghosts die of thirst.

The cab of a '61 Dodge is a carapace of rust
shipwrecked in the sun. Desert holly walks
its silver shards of leaves up a dark lava slope.
Wind that slips crossbeams of shuttered gypsum
mines tastes of ancient salt and rainspouts.

Sun drops behind my last switchback
of the day. Constellations transpire one star
at a time, as if surfacing from the sea.
In a cold wind my campfire glows against
the foraged carrion in the teeth of a kit fox.

Its eyes follow my hands into the light.

Susquehanna Harborside

In autumn light that comes drowsy off the river
I linger at a table outside the only café open,
watch three farmhands from the overloaded bed
of their blue pickup shoulder strawberry pallets
up Union Avenue. They herald their harvest
in loud and urgent syllables to any sidewalk
wanderer within range. Their faces bear the look
of toys left beneath porches for decades.

They must be from out of town somewhere,
for most shops here are closed on Tuesdays.
But they persist uptown, even as their voices
fray, as determined as the deadbolts on shuttered
businesses. Knowing the holiday foiled them,
I buy a pallet—a loner who knows he'll never
finish it prior to rot—just before the men lose
themselves inside the café, each one slumping
into a chair, like a hand descending on a shoulder.

Molly Bonovsky Anderson

Meringue

Fitz left her in the middle of a meringue. He'd walked her through the crust, rolled out by hand, flour thrown across on ceramic table top. He'd zested himself in with the lemon, and she'd bandaged his thumb with goose-patterned paper toweling and Scotch tape. They'd beaten and poured the filling together, took turns feverishly whipping the egg whites in the noisy metal bowl, then he'd made the mistake of answering the phone. When the Banner Herald called him in to finish what he'd left to the hapless holiday rookies, because they'd botched the job, he crammed his hat on and looped his camera around his neck so fast he knocked the hat off. As he bent down in the kitchen to pick it up, he said to his wife, "Cady, your socks are full of flour."

She let the whisk drop and clatter in the bowl. "What can you take a picture of in the dark?"

"Crokey Gnome," he said. "I'll use a flash."

Thanksgiving tradition specified that the Sconsett Banner Herald place a photograph of local eccentric Delmar Crokey's three-foot garden gnome somewhere within the issue. DeeJays at 101.6, WSET waited on tenterhooks Thanksgiving morning for the first caller to properly identify the gnome's surroundings. The caller won a trip for two to next year's Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York City. Fitz had seen the parade fourteen times already—he grew up in New York, and told Cady that it wasn't much to see. He said he'd rather some lucky citizen of Sconsett, MN be blessed with something useful like a ten pound turkey.

"Why don't you just Photoshop the one from last year onto the roof of the Dairy Queen or something?" she asked.

"Cady," he said, "Aren't you the one always bitching about authenticity?"

"It's a friggin' elf," she said.

"It's a gnome," he said, smoothing the brim of his small fedora. She'd given it to him for his twenty-fifth birthday, ten years ago. No one wore hats anymore, but Fitz never left the house without one. "I'm European," he said. "We wear hats."

He'd been adopted as a toddler, he told her a million years ago, from "one of those Baltic orphanages where the kids bang

their head on the iron cribs. My folks chose one who banged the least—and I was a hard one to let go.” When she met him he was twenty years old with a fake ID, and, she decided, with his round blue eyes and curly dark hair, much too pretty to be called Borislav Fitzhugh.

“How’d the newbies mess it up anyway?”

“They just snapped a picture of the thing right in Crokey’s yard. Anybody who sees that whirligig farm’s gonna know it’s Crokey’s place. Double-you-set will have the whole Sconsett population on the phone.” He swiped his keys and wallet off the table and they left a trail in the flour. “I’ll be back in less than an hour.”

“Those idiots—the meringue—”

He stood on his tiptoes to kiss her where her hair parted. “Don’t let that pie burn.”

“We’ve got pumpkin as backup,” she said.

“I know,” he said, lit by pale orange in the kitchen doorway, “but I want meringue.”

“If Fitz wants meringue,” she said, “He gets it.”

If she’d known the sky was flinging ice she might’ve said something else—warned him to drive careful or said she’d always appreciated his company. Until she stepped out on the slippery front step with a bin of recyclables on her hip and a full garbage bag in her hand, she’d assumed the night was quiet and clear. No pellets hitting the window. The panes hadn’t been rattling. But once outside, winter slapped her in face like a manic mother. She flung the trash onto the boulevard and jogged back into the house, back to the meringue.

They’d met at the casino. She was working. Fitz was bumbling drunk on his low stool and had smiled at her with too-sharp incisors, his face lit blue from the slot machine.

“Gin and tonic,” he said, holding out a plastic cup of half-melted ice fused at the bottom. “Pronto, Tonto.”

She gritted her teeth but smiled at him—he wasn’t the first to call her that, but he was the best looking. She guessed he cut himself shaving; a slick of blood dried between his jaw and ear. Flickering playing cards reflected in his glasses, the jack of spades obscuring his eyes.

She took the cup. “Tonto means fool.”

He smiled. “I thought it meant friend.”

“Yeah, you did.”

And because she was nineteen and nowhere, she gave John Mullins, because that was the name on his driver's license, another drink, then another, told him to wait for her after close, and played waitress for him in his shabby little apartment on the highway. In the lightless dim she saw behind the jack of spades. Once sober, he was shy. He would tease her about it later, would say she'd been a slut. She'd say she was bored and just waiting for a man with all his teeth to proposition her. He was just lucky that night. Even after they married, she sometimes called him John Mullins.

The meringue wouldn't thicken. She beat it until her arm ached, then switched to the left, slow and sluggish. She broke a sweat.

At some unnoticed point in their marriage, she'd stopped wearing eyeliner and bangs, and started drinking beer while she cooked dinner in her flannel pajamas. The inverted triangle of her face had flipped, peak up. The red cummerbund she'd worn with her white tuxedo shirt and short black skirt at the casino no longer closed around her waist. She kept it folded under a pile of white socks and cotton underwear in her dresser drawer. It was too wide for a headband. Fitz still owned and sometimes wore the same black suit coat he'd worn that night.

They'd stood on the curb before the Banner Herald interview, six years ago, and she'd gazed up at the newspaper building, counting bricks out loud to calm his nerves. "Fitz," she said. "How many do you think there are?"

He hadn't looked up but stared at his scuffed shoes. One was broken—he'd considered duct tape but Cady said it wouldn't help him get the job. He had enough counts against him, with no college degree. "I don't know," he said.

"Two thousand?"

"More than that. Ask the bricklayer who's gotta push it up in a wheelbarrow."

"Fifty-thousand?"

"More than that."

"A million?"

"They're not going to hire me, Cady."

"Do you ever read those funny facts? Things like, 'there are four hundred thousand grains of sand in one square inch of desert,' or something like that. How would they know? Whose job is it to count?"

"A square inch or a foot?"

“I made it up,” she said. “I don’t know.”

He shrugged. “Somebody has to count the bricks,” he said.

“Maybe you,” she said, laying a hand on his shoulder. His only suit coat was smooth under her hand. “They might already have too many photographers.”

“I wouldn’t want to do it,” he said. “Count the bricks.”

“I would,” she said. She looked up and imagined a metal ladder against the wall, and her body at the top leaning on the grey sky. “You’d be closer to the birds up there. Nobody would bother you.”

“*Closer to the birds,*” he scoffed. “You know, you couldn’t just daydream up there. You’d lose count.”

“I think,” she said, “you could invent a little machine that clicked each time you touched a brick.”

“How would you know which ones you’d touched?”

“It would lay a little patch of color on them—a blue dot.”

He shook his head, frowning. “Tonto,” he said. “You’d have a building full of blue—dotted-bricks then.”

She shrugged and looked away.

But he’d gotten it—they hired him. She always said it was because he’d touched her cheek before he went in the building.

“Stiff peaks my ass,” she said, rubbing her sore arm. She’d been whipping half an hour. The egg whites in the bowl resembled marshmallow cream at best, and when she drew the whisk up, the meringue dripped off and rejoined the placid surface.

“Fitz wants meringue,” she whispered. Maybe it would thicken if she let it sit. She dropped the bowl on the table, went to the window, and pushed the curtains aside. The snow fell at a fast angle. A faint glow of streetlight tried to push through. Periodically a car crawled by, defiantly below the speed limit. She pictured Fitz’s little red Toyota fishtailing through the stoplights. Every time he left the house alone she braced for the police to bang on her door. “Cady Fitzhugh?” They’d say. She’d shake her head and say, “No, Mrs. John Mullins,” because when the cops said your full name, like they had when they’d found her father at the bottom of a steep rock face, one shoeless foot twisted under the opposite knee, you were a goner.

Fitz worked with a talcum powdered, ginger-haired girl called Lauren. She wore pale scarves and dangly earrings, and walked like she was late for an audition. Fitz said her name on a daily basis. “Did you read Lauren’s piece on the school board?”

“Why would I?” They had no children.

“Potato salad,” he said, sliding Tupperware from his work bag. “Lauren made it—the best I’ve ever had. Want some?”

“I’m on a diet,” Cady said. Lauren couldn’t possibly eat potato salad. She lived on wheatgrass.

“Bullshit,” Fitz said and handed her a cold bottle of beer.

Cady spread the runny meringue over the filling, shoved the mess in the oven and imagined it’d be cooked and cooled and ready to eat by the time Fitz walked through the door.

In the bedroom she looked in the full length mirror. A fleece sweatshirt pooled and gathered around her middle, streaked with butter grease. She turned and looked at herself in profile. The sweatshirt made her look pregnant—she yanked it over her head and tossed it on the floor. The t-shirt underneath did the same; she discarded that too. Standing there in her dingy white bra, she saw that it wasn’t the clothes at all. She kicked the door shut and pulled her clothes back on.

She went for a close-up in the medicine cabinet mirror. She coated her lashes twice in black mascara, lined her lids in kohl, then blinked. Two dotted lines appeared below her eyebrows and at the top of her cheeks. She tied back her hair and bent into the sink basin, ran hot water and scrubbed the makeup off with a soapy washcloth. When she came up and looked again, she looked beaten, with two shiners.

Outside, the wind whipped up a blizzard against the bathroom pane. She pushed the shower curtain aside and looked out the window above the bathtub. Fitz couldn’t take a photo in this storm—he must’ve turned around by now. It’d been over an hour. She stepped inside the tub and pushed her nose to the glass, breathing in the condensation like a menthol cigarette. Out on the side street, a State Trooper with a toy-like grill on the front end did slow doughnuts under the street lamp. She smelled heat.

“Damn it,” she said, bounding up, nearly losing her footing on the flourey porcelain. She raced to the kitchen and flung the oven door down. A thick roll of heat blasted her face. The white fluff on top had burned far beyond the desired cola-brown glaze. The acrid scent of hot lemon tore up her nostrils. The crust was black. She turned sideways and gagged, then slammed the pie back where it came from. She flicked the oven dial off and went back to the bathroom window. The State Trooper was gone.

Lauren would be there tonight at the Banner Herald, working overtime because she always did. She did more than anybody,

anywhere, with anything. She made care packages for soldiers overseas, taught violin to underprivileged children, led a yoga class every Monday and Wednesday, and still managed to work fifty hours a week. She rode a green Schwinn around town in her knee-length skirts, and traffic stopped to let her make illegal crossings. She'd wave, her green-gold eyes wide with kindness and milk-strong teeth protruding between dimpled cheeks, scarf flying behind her. One morning Cady had nearly mowed her down on the south side of town. Lauren had looked like gut-shot deer just before bouncing lightly off the front bumper. Fitz had stuck his head out the window shouting apologies while Cady drove on, swearing under her breath. "You could've killed her," he said over and over again, until Cady could say nothing at all. She didn't speak to Fitz until after supper, when he asked her if she'd seen his hat and she'd told him she burned it.

Cady had gone into the emergency room that night with bleeding and pains, and lost the baby she and Fitz hadn't even worked out what to do with yet. Fitz had clutched the brim of his hat, rubbing the suede so hard with his thumbs that Cady thought he could have set fire to it himself.

She wanted to be out in it now—in the wind and snow, to clear her lungs of the sour-sweet smoke. It didn't make sense to do the laundry; the basket was only half full with Fitz's whites. Still, she dragged the basket from the hall closet and clomped out of the house in her boots and coat, a knit stocking cap jammed over her eyes. She put her head down and walked briskly down the street, high-stepping over the drifts. Inside the Laundromat, she turned Fitz's sweaty socks outside-in. She checked his shirts for pit-stains and ring-around-the collar, rubbing the bleach-infused blue gel soap in with her fingers. She set the cycle to cold, leaned her lower back against the vibrating machine and looked out the large rectangular window. Nothing but white going sideways.

In sixty-five minutes, the clothes were clean and spun dry, and folded neatly in the basket. At home she tucked them into Fitz's drawers, though the whipping snow had dampened them. Her face and ears stung pink with cold and her nose ran. He'd been gone three hours.

Cady hadn't spoken of it—at four weeks along without a solid plan, to tell her mother would be premature, to tell Fitz's Catholic parents would mean her choice would be made for her. She'd told no one, and so when Fitz came home and tucked a

little white card under a magnet on the fridge, Cady had immediately yanked it off, pulling on Fitz's sleeve, holding him so he couldn't leave the kitchen.

"With sympathy," she read. A moon-eyed lamb, a red bow around its neck, looked at her from the paper. "Where'd this come from?"

"Lauren," he said.

"You told Lauren?"

"She asked how you were."

"And you told her I was fine."

"She said you looked sad lately. What could I do?"

"I looked sad? What does that mean?"

"Cady," he said. "Sometimes I need to talk to people. I can't just talk to you all the time."

She'd let go of him then, but he didn't walk away. He took the card from her hands and chose a magnet to fasten it, a glossy halved apple. When he let go, it'd slapped hard against the Kelvinator, the sound of metal on metal resonating. Cady had let it ring in her ears and die, and said no more about anything. The card stayed there, lost in a sea of Fitz's photographs and pizza coupons.

Cady couldn't imagine talking to anyone about anything. What would someone know, what could they have to offer, if they hadn't been there, hadn't felt the pain like the scrape of a rusty spoon, hadn't tried to hold Fitz's hand in the car and made a hard fist when he pushed it away in favor of curling around the steering wheel? How could she tell anyone how still, dry and quiet she'd sat while Fitz pulled over to the curb, his face red and wet as a newborn?

She entertained the idea of calling Lauren for a day or two, if only to tell her she wasn't a monster, that she had taken care of herself and drank milk and took vitamins even when she still wasn't sure. Then on errands one day, between the farmer's market and post-office, she saw them. Saw Fitz driving his little red car and Lauren in the passenger seat, her mouth and eyes open wide mid-sentence, Fitz's sharp incisors exposed and his eyes squeezed tight in laughter, Lauren's ten-speed crammed under the hatchback. Cady couldn't ever remember making Fitz laugh so hard in the car.

Now she slid open Fitz's dresser drawer, plunged both hands in and came out with her fists full of cotton, Lycra, polyester. His

whites flung out, seemingly on their own, flailing about like mad ghosts, her arms a blur among them.

Before she knew what she'd done, she sat in a pile of Fitz's clothes.

In the quiet of their bedroom, only the clock made a sound, ticking out the seconds. Cady often couldn't say how much time had passed between this event and that. Between meeting and occupying half his closet space, between falling in love and peeing with the door open, between skipping mother's wedding and spreading father's ashes, between bleeding and being sent home with pamphlets on grief that Fitz had thrown away, saying he didn't need to be told how to feel.

But when the clock ticked in their bedroom she knew exactly how long she'd been there. Exactly how long she'd been alone.

She was folding everything a second time when something pounded against the front door. With her own name sounding loudly in her ears, she stood up. She pushed it down, tried to forget it, and went downstairs to the door.

Fitz's breath curled from his smiling mouth like pipe-smoke. "Excuse me ma'am" he said in a bath of blue porch light, "Would you like to buy a gnome?" He wrangled Crokey's fat sprite under one arm like an unruly child, too tired to fight.

"Why?" she asked, surprised at the low pitch of her voice. She'd had bees in her lungs a minute ago; now she spoke only calm. He brushed in, patting himself down. "Didn't you get the picture?"

"I got nothing but stuck. Car's down a ditch on Tucker Street. It's a mess out there. Who needs parade tickets? Christ."

"Can't you take it here?"

"Take what where?" His nose went up. "What's that smell? That my pie?"

Cady knelt and untied Fitz's boots, her head down. "I immolated it," she said.

"Take what where?" he said again.

"The picture."

"In our house? Nobody knows our house."

"Then nobody wins," she said. She stood up. "Did you hear me? I ruined the pie."

"I don't care," he said. "We've got pumpkin. You okay? You're all red."

She nodded.

“It’s just a pie,” he said. “Here,” he handed her Crokey’s gnome. “Come on upstairs, we’ll make the pumpkin.”

She didn’t know how else to hold the thing, so she cradled it. “I thought you wanted meringue,” she said, trudging up the stairs after him.

“I like pumpkin. I love pumpkin. You know that.”

She followed him into the kitchen, where Fitz took Crokey’s gnome and stood it on the table-top. He dropped back, and after fiddling with the slick-wet camera around his neck, framed it in his lens. “Wait a minute,” he said. “Hold it again.”

“Hold it?” The air was still thick with burned lemon. If it bothered Fitz, he didn’t say.

“Like before.”

She stepped behind the table and lifted Crokey’s gnome into her arms. He was surprisingly light. She looked into his puckish painted face and her throat clenched, then opened in an unexpected laugh.

“That’s a keeper,” Fitz said, snapping the picture. “Now, let me get one with just you.”

She set the gnome on the floor and when she straightened, Fitz grinned and snapped her photo.

“Perfect,” he said.

“Is that for the paper too?” she said.

He shook his head. “That one’s mine. Now it’s pie time. You open the can, I’ll roll the crust.”

“Alright, Fitz,” she said. She picked up the gnome again. She wanted to look at him, just a little bit longer. They were both light, floating in the warm house.

Rebecca Aronson

Ruin

The door tight in its frame, weather measured
and fit so each missing hinge is

atoned for. Warning signs knocked loose or
dissolved by sun left lone nails, vacant

but for twisted strands which wave the wind in
through empty frames.

My face presses the fence like a window,
the view is sideshow, this untaming. Cracks

hid below flowering mustard weed, split screens
above a wrecked foundation. Everything

is entrance and weather-grown, varnished
with morning glorying and triumphant

puncturevine. Rush of bird song,
salutations of wing-beat and under-scurry ,

exodus of any small welcoming.

Caleb Beissert

George T. Lewis Academic Center

A blank page
the rest is well they say history
among the dead and scholars of war among
the ringing bells and endless paper airplanes
open windows in the spring
her majesty the teacher and holly bushes outside
the window that is wavy over the radiator
painted silver to warn
and small beetles come in after the rain
biology a subject I never had
the teacher mad barking like a dog on top
of a desk
the children blinking
in disbelief
the radon under the school
my English teacher had us read
Blake Coleridge Whitman
Dylan Thomas
Ginsberg—she knew someday I'd fall
in love

The Time Uncle Charlie and Granddaddy Came to Visit Me at School

They pulled up in some old person's car.
I'll always remember the eyes—
great golden hawks taking the sky.

George Bishop

Picture

Two hawks high on the dead
branches of a cedar, in the distance

thunderheads in bloom and between
it all a half-rainbow getting fat off

bogs and wetlands where mosquitoes
make their plans. The air's about

to be charged, nitrogen knows
just where to go, what to touch.

It's as close as promises can come
without turning to luck. Even the all-

telling-tech of weathermen can't
account for the motions of a man.

I've lost everything on a day so clear...
held the healing power of postponements,

slept with the snowbound where
all the white in the world won't add up

to a clear answer. The hawk's black eyes
are out of sight, but know exactly when

each one of my muscles move, even
my heart, especially my heart—

that sparrow or squirrel living on
what's not enough, a synergist

lust-lined, out of focus, always
too many steps away from home.

G.F. Boyer

The Dutch Tulip Bubble of 1636-37

For six thousand florins we bought the *Semper Augustus*.
I did not open my mouth.

Now I remember watching barn swallows gather,
dark flocks beneath clouds heavy with storm.

We kept our bulbs in a bank vault,
better to hold their dry promise,

wealth folded into capsules of impending beauty
nestled among gold coins.

I open the cupboard to bread and cheese, pour wine
in a blue glass. The sun tips a pitcher of light.

I turn to the window. In the fields across the road,
ten thousand red mouths gape at the sky.

Kevin Brown

Jack Hears What We Can and Cannot Carry

When Wendy went to bury
Bill, she wanted a graveside service—
though he would have complained
about the cost—wanted
her daughter and son to see

the cemetery, see where their father's body was
buried. As we tossed dirt
on the casket—an underhanded throw
no different than the one we used when we greeted

the groom and bride
with birdseed not a decade before—
Wendy turned toward us, talked
of how her boy believed Bill

was god, had worshiped him, wanted
to be him, wondered who he would be
now; how Bill's bad behavior could not
be redeemed, how he had demanded his daughter kiss
him when he smelled of piss

and despair, worried whether that girl's grudge
could find a grave; but most of all she spoke of love
now lost, the lives of love
they could not now live, lost to the grave
and the ground. Mike shook

his head from side to side, wiped away
Wendy's words, muttered to himself,
mumbled *no* before he said it simply
but clearly: *No*. He turned Wendy toward

the half-filled hole, *It won't fit*.
You have to let it live on here
with us. The coffin cannot hold it all.

Michael Campagnoli

The Death of Kings

after Leonard Cohen

I had a friend once,
who lived
in a riot of sound
and excess. . .
but died in mighty silence
one Tuesday night

He sang full-throated over-much,
and ran, at times, from life
but always
in the end
embraced it, smashed
his wholly-awed face
into it's terrible belly,

the perfume
of procreation, the
putrefaction of sweat
and glands.

"*None offend*," the old
King cried, "*None does*
offend."

In Tom's brevity
the belly was as far
as he could reach.

" . . . a man most poor,
made tame to fortune's blows
by the art of known and *feeling*
sorrows."

So I raise my arms
to the proud discovering skies
and cry,

"Ehret!"

then, sit upon the ground
and tell sad tales
about the death of Kings.

coda

I should have known,
that the Fool,
the precious Fool,

would go to bed
too soon
too soon
inexplicably
at noon.

In memoriam:
Thomas King Ehret (1933-1979)

S. Cawood

The Dance

I gave up dancing the first winter of my marriage, just months after Bill and I moved to Chapel Hill, North Carolina from Ohio without jobs or family, to a place we imagined might make us happy.

That year, at 29 years old, I had learned the art of letting go of things that mattered to me—some a little, some a great deal more: living close to my parents and sister (Bill didn't want to stay in my home state), having short hair (he liked long better), my admissions job (I still miss it), eating pretzels and frozen yogurt for dinner, and, eventually, dancing.

Not all were mistakes. Giving up dancing was.

The irony is Bill and I fell in love dancing. Our first date we had lapsed into uncomfortable silence as we faced each other at a table-for-two in Oxford, Ohio, where we both lived at the time: he working on a geography graduate degree, and I recruiting for Miami University. The restaurant, nearly empty, echoed with every sound—a scrape of chair, a fork clinked against tabletop—as if to remind us we had nothing to say.

After the date, I called up my best friend and said, “Well, that’s never going anywhere.” But then Bill and I met again at the Corinthian, a family restaurant that blushed into a salsa nightclub on Saturday nights in Cincinnati. I’d learned how to salsa dance there the year before. Dancing, in whatever form, had always served as a refuge for me, a place where I could shake loose fears and worries, an hour or two where rhythm and how my body moved overtook what clamored to keep me still.

“Come on,” Bill said, standing next to me in my chair and extending his arm toward me. He pulled me to the dance floor, and under the Corinthian’s soft lights—ones that muted flaws and flooded the space between us—we fell into each other’s arms that night as if we were meant to be and didn’t let go our entire courtship. We practiced turns, copas, and cross body leads until they felt like home.

After we married and moved, we found a bar in Durham, the next town over, where we could salsa. We didn't suddenly give up dancing. Instead we did it bit by bit without knowing we were as we sat more and more often in a black booth in the darkness and watched other couples writhe and spin and sway in the part of the room bathed in amber glow. The booth's vinyl stuck to our legs and the smell of smoke clung to our hair as we argued under our breaths about how I wanted to dance more than he wanted to but he didn't like me dancing with strangers, and how the steps we practiced now bored him and he wanted something new.

Three years later, this argument—not about salsa, but about everything else—would shout our marriage to its end, and when it did, I wept off 14 pounds of grief. Then I cut my hair, and started contra dancing.

* * *

I plunged into contra because it's the most forgiving dance: it requires no creativity or innate grace; you follow the caller and can walk the entire song with zero fancy footwork. I reveled in its freedoms: change partners every song; lock eyes to stave off dizziness. I could feel a man's arms around me without intimacy; I could feel momentary connection without the heavy emotion of real relationships. I forgot the distress that hunched my shoulders and the sadness that had sunk into my belly like cold stones. I started on the wrong foot, stuck out the wrong hand, but for once didn't lacerate myself over errors. Moving mattered more than mistakes.

You could tell a lot about a man by the way he contra danced. If he pulled you nose-to-nose into a swing and stared unblinking into your eyes, he was intense and flirty off the dance floor, too. If he cranked you in twirls—his hand clutching yours so hard you couldn't help but be propelled in circles—he was overbearing and cocky most, if not all, of the time. If he gave you no weight on your back when he held you, so that if you leaned away you'd fall, he was afraid in relationships—at best, timid. If he flailed on the dance floor, wild and unaware of boundaries, he flailed while dating you; he cared little about your space or needs.

These rules broke now and again, but mostly didn't, at least not at the Carrboro Century Center where I danced. No one told me this. I dated a cranker. I dated a flailer. No one told me, either, that dating in the dance community is only a good idea until the relationship ends. I wasn't in love with the first man who broke it off with me to date another dancer, but I curled up in bed and cried as if I were. I gave up contra for three weeks until it became bearable to see the two of them enter the hall together, so close that their backpacks bumped and their water bottles collided.

It took me much longer—years, actually—to return to salsa dance. My friend, Richard, a dance instructor who wanted to learn salsa well enough to teach it, recruited me to practice with him. Once a week, we crammed into his little home office and watched video clips of a man in tight black pants doing salsa moves with an array of female dancers in high heels and skirts that looked more like handkerchiefs. Richard scribbled notes; I tried to memorize. Then we'd emerge and step onto the honey-colored hardwood floors in his living room, furniture shoved to the edges. He would go to the stereo, push play, then rush back to me and stand straight, chin up, head high, and wait for horns to blare a beginning. With a gentle tap here, a slight touch there, Richard led me through sidesteps and twirls, and it was all fine until I anticipated the next move, which I was prone to do. Richard re-attempted the lead; I jerked in the opposite direction. He pushed harder; my hand resisted in a clench, my arm stiffened. Not because I didn't want to go that way, but because in my head it wasn't the right way. Richard let out a sigh that sounded more like a curse of air, dropped his hands from mine, and marched to the stereo. He jabbed the stop button, turned, and looked at me. Maybe if I'd been wearing five-inch heels and a tiny skirt I would have had the panache to blame him instead, but I stood there in jeans and jazz shoes, and we both knew.

It occurred to me one night—as I drove from Richard's house in Durham to my place in Chapel Hill, as I pulled into my parking lot, clicked off the engine, and looked up at the dark and lifeless windows of my condo—that maybe not knowing what's to come was better. Maybe the nexus of my heartbreaks had been an unwillingness to trust life when it veered from my

expectations. I always ached for whatever got lost in the swerving.

The next time we danced, I let Richard lead.

And the next time a man broke up with me, I didn't sob nearly as much. After a week, I painted my kitchen orange. The time after that, when a man told me, "I think you're more into me than I'm into you," I didn't cry at all.

Instead, I awoke early the following morning in the haze of an already hot May day to pack the car with snacks and water bottles and ride with friends to a 12-hour contra dance in the Carolina mountains. The highway turned from four-lane to two-lane then wound higher until we could see through treetops and catch flashes of sun washing the green valley below.

That day, I met a man on the dance floor with a steady swing and eyes as blue as a summer lake. When we danced a second and third time, and he told me he was Preston from Johnson City and later asked if I wanted to see him again, I didn't think about the fact that he lived four hours from me, that I didn't want a long-distance relationship, that he might want things out of life that I did not.

Ok, I thought about all those things.

But we danced, and I said yes.

Leah Chaffins

Summer of the Wild Pigs

Pig Pens

President Nixon was giving a speech on the TV when Dory's head hit the wall as she flew across the room. She fell to the floor and curled her four year old body into a ball as her mother began swinging her fists. Dory felt the punches land on the side of her head, on her back, her legs, everywhere. She tried curling tighter and tighter like a roly poly but there was no refuge from the impacts. "Pick up your toys is all I ask you to fucking do. Why? We will not live like pigs," Dory's mother said. Dory's mother shook Dory by the collar of her zip-up pink footie pajamas. The child fell back against the wall when her mother let go and began crying into her own hands.

"Go to your room. Go and don't come back out until your grandma gets here," her mother said. "I never want to see you again."

Dory ran for her room. She shut the door behind her and jumped on her bed climbing under the covers. She lay there for a long time listening to the silence of the house. The only time she heard anything was when her mother called her grandmother.

After what seemed like hours to Dory, the urge to use the restroom became unbearable and she opened the door to creep down the hall towards the bathroom. As soon as her foot crossed the threshold, a glass shattered on the wall next to Dory's head. The cold juice splashed off the wall and ran down the side of Dory's face.

Her mother sat on her hands and knees at the halls entrance. Her hair was out of place and black mascara ran down her cheeks. "Get in your goddamned room," she said. Her mother tore at her hair and began screaming. Dory slammed her door and realized she had wet herself.

She made a pile of her dirty clothes and changed into a clean pair of pajamas. Her stomach growled and her mother still screamed.

On the third day, Dory no longer needed to use the pile of dirty clothes in the corner as her toilet and she no longer felt hungry. She only lay on the floor of books and toys she no longer cared to read or play with. Every now and then, the child sniffled and said, "Daddy." She twirled a gummy strand of her hair around her finger repeatedly. Once, the juice had made it

sticky, but the sticky has given way to simple gumminess. Later that same day, her grandmother arrived.

When Pigs Fly

Dory looked out the window of the plane and saw the clouds below. “Are we gonna land and walk around?” The idea of walking on the clouds was more exciting to the little girl than meeting her mother’s family for the first time. Secretly, she was afraid they would all be the same as her mother.

Her Grandmother laughed and said, “No silly. You would fall through.”

Dory thought about the cartoon characters, like Porky Pig, where they would run around on the clouds. She had wondered what that would feel like. “Why would I fall through?” Dory asked.

Her grandmother looked at her steady in the eyes and said, “Sometimes things that appear solid really aren’t. Clouds are like that; they look solid, but really they are just colored air.”

Dory looked at the clouds real hard. She had always thought of the clouds as puffy whiteness, soft and jumpable; now she saw mostly grey. Sometimes, the clouds were thin; she could see the ground way below the wing of the plane as it passed through the wispy clusters.

Dory’s eyes grew heavier as she watched the clouds pass. At one point, she wondered if her father had flown in the same kind of plane when the army took him away to the war.

Wild Pigs

Dory pushed her peas around on her plate with her fork and began swinging her legs back and forth. Her Uncle had promised her she could help him with his garden after dinner. This was Dory’s favorite time of the day and the meal seemed an exercise in patience. Finally, he rubbed his belly and put down his fork.

“Ready?” he said.

Dory jumped up from the table and skipping followed her Uncle down the hallway. He stopped before a door that was always kept locked. Her Uncle fished a key from a chain around his neck and unlocked the door. Before pushing it open, he looked down at the four year old. “Remember, this is our secret garden. You must never tell anyone about it,” he said. Dory’s eyes were big as she nodded her head and crossed her heart.

Her uncle pushed the door open. Dory walked into the room full of tall green plants and hanging lights. In the corner, three plants hung upside down from the ceiling. He grabbed a watering can and headed to the backyard where he collected rainwater in a barrel. While he was gone, Dory ran through the dank jungle pretending she was an explorer whacking at the thick bush with a make-believe machete. She crouched low, watching for the exotic beasts who, she pretended, prowled amongst the trees. As she passed one of the windows she noticed the glass was covered with bakers foil. She stopped before the window and ran her fingers across the silver film with curiosity. When her Uncle came back with the water, Dory asked him why the windows were covered. Her Uncle chuckled and said, "It's to keep the pigs out."

Dory looked at the covered glass with fear in her eyes imagining the wild pigs that might be on the other side.

Ham's Hock

"I would like to apply for a credit card," Dory's Aunt told the pretty lady behind the counter.

"Are you married?" the Lady asked Dory's Aunt.

"Yes."

Dory looked up at the Lady and watched the women's face grow sympathetic. "I'm sorry, you will have to return with your husband so he can sign for it, or you may take it home and return it with his signature," the lady said handing a blank application to Dory's aunt.

Dory's Aunt's face grew stern and she said, "I am getting the card for me."

The Lady looked frustrated. She shook her head and said, "I understand that, but store policy requires the husband's signature on store issued credit cards."

Dory's Aunt was turning red and her voice had the same edge as Dory's mother when her aunt said, "I'd like to speak to your manager."

Dory walked over to the big plate glass window. She stared out into the parking lot looking under the cars hoping to see a wild pig hiding there. From the reflection in the glass, Dory saw a balding man appear behind the counter. "May I help you?"

Dory's Aunt cleared her throat and said, "I am trying to get a line of store credit and I have been told that I need my husband's signature."

The man smirked and replied, "That is correct." He looked over his shoulder at the lady behind the counter and watched the woman bend over to pick up her dropped pen.

He turned back to Dory's Aunt and continued, "You are welcome to take the application with you and return it with your husband's signature."

Dory's Aunt's face grew redder and she said, "I am the one who will be using the account, and I am the one who will be paying the bill."

The man smiled as he looked down his nose at Dory's Aunt. He said, "That will be fine. You still need his permission."

Dory's Aunt said, "That's discrimination." Her voice was loud and other customers turned to look and see what was going on.

The arguing voices were a blur in Dory's consciousness as she continued to scan the parking lot but all that was there were cars and the ladies out buying clothes and perfumes and jewelry.

"Fucking pig," Dory's Aunt said.

Dory's body jerked around as her eyes began desperately searching for this pig. Dory's aunt grabbed her arm and pulled her toward the exit. Dory tried vainly to turn around in her aunt's grasp so she could see the pig but she only saw the store manager.

"Parades"

"Hurry, Dory! You don't want to be late," called Dory's aunt over the record player where the smooth voice of Jim Morrison cooed, "Love me two times baby/ Love me twice today."

Dory slipped her feet in the flip flops her Aunt had brought over. "Aren't you just precious," giggled her Aunt as she tied a headband around the child's hair. Her aunt helped her get ready to sit next to her uncle in a "parade".

"Now, hold up two fingers like this," said her Aunt holding up her first two fingers.

"Like the number two?" asked Dory, holding up two little fingers.

"Just like that," her Aunt said. "Ok, now say 'Peace' real loud. That's what you do in the parade. No matter what, wave those two fingers at the people you and Uncle pass. Got it?" Dory nodded that she had it. She had memorized it and etched it in her brain. She had to. Her Aunt had said this could bring her Daddy home from the war sooner.

The pickup drove slowly through the people who lined the street. Dory sat on a stack of tires in the bed of the beat up brown truck proudly waving her two fingers at the crowd as she passed. Dory's Uncle sat on the wheel-well playing his guitar and singing. Everywhere along the road the people were holding signs. Dory couldn't read yet but thankfully most of the people were yelling and chanting. Over and over Dory heard the words "baby killers." Dory was glad all the people had shown up to tell the Baby Killers to stop. All of a sudden the air grew thick and smoky; people began screaming. Dory's eyes burned. Tears rolled down her face and she felt like an elephant had sat on her chest. She felt the truck suddenly stop and her head slammed against the rear window before she slid the length of the truck bed and banged into the tailgate.

Two arms reached from the haze and grabbed her around the waist. She heard her Uncle's voice coming from the person carrying her, "Pigs!" Dory tried looking through the haze to see the wild pigs, but the smoke burned her eyes. She was jostled in his arms as he coughed, gasping for air and ran blindly the opposite direction that the parade had been going. Every now and then he would turn his head back and yell, "Baby killer!"

Dancing with Grandpa

Dory's grandfather picked her up from her aunt's house. On their way back to her grandma's, her grandfather pulled over by a bridge. He got out and Dory followed. When they reached the center, her grandfather said, "Life flows like this river. It cannot be stopped or fettered because the current is too strong. Even this mighty bridge knows not to fight the river, but to ride above it."

Dory had no clue what he was saying but she smiled when he motioned her to come closer.

"Here, come stand on my feet," he said. Dory took her Grandfather's hands and climbed up on his shiny patent black leather shoes. Her Grandfather started dancing across the bridge and she giggled as his feet clomped on the wooden planks.

As her Grandfather spun around, Dory threw back her head feeling the cool breeze roll across her face and she looked up at the stars which sat like tiny gems on a black velvet background.

Something caught Dory's eye as she lifted her head back up. There was a movement on the slope leading down under the bridge. Dory strained to see what it was. "Stop, Grandpa. What's that?" She stepped off his feet and ran to look over the bridge

terrified and excited that she might finally see one of the wild pigs. A man dressed in rags and carrying what looked like a ratty blanket was walking down by the bank of the river.

“Ahh,” her Grandfather said. “He probably sleeps up in the girders of the bridge.”

Dory crinkled her nose and let out a haughty, “Oh.” She made no attempt to hide her disappointment at not finally seeing one of the pigs. She stood quietly for a moment and then asked, “Are you ever afraid of the wild pigs?”

Her Grandfather looked at her severely. He said, “There are no wild pigs here.”

The Hungry

Dory’s Grandfather said he wanted to take her to breakfast. He stopped at a doughnut stand and let Dory pick out whichever doughnuts she wanted. He ordered a couple of chocolate covered for himself and two dozen glazed which he dropped off at a church where the homeless sought shelter. Her Grandfather took Dory into the sanctuary and together they sat on the last pew. The two began eating their doughnuts watching as people occasionally walked through to the area where food was being served. The people’s clothes were disheveled and their bodies were sometimes dirty. One little girl with latte skin and tight blonde curls waved at Dory before her mother motioned her to be still. Dory smiled and waved at the little girl. The little girl smiled back before pressing her face into the side of her mother’s leg, shyly. Occasionally one of the people waved at her Grandfather and he waved back. “What’s wrong with their clothes, grandpa? Why are they dirty?” asked Dory.

“They’re poor,” replied her Grandfather. “Some of them have no home and therefore, no place to bathe. You know how some people are physically retarded and some are mentally retarded?” Dory nodded that she did.

“This,” her Grandfather continued, “is social retardation.” For just a second Dory thought her Grandfather looked mad. She listened, trying to understand what he was saying. “Anytime that a society has people who can’t feed their children or people with no homes, then that society is impaired.”

He looked down at Dory and she knew he was trying to tell her something important so she tried harder to understand his big people words. “Forty or fifty years from now people will look back and what do you think they will think of us as a people

knowing that we were willing to let some starve or live in a box next to a building?" He looked at Dory again and said, "Well, I think they are going to look back and think we were retarded," He said and took a large bite off his donut.

"What if everyone caught the wild pigs and we all ate them? Then nobody would have to be retarded or hungry," Dory said.

Her grandfather shook his head and chuckled, "Because, my child, that would be cannibalism."

Tobi Cogswell

Jena Skips Town

He picks her up in an old car painted
primer and crayon blue. One long
buffed-out scratch the shape of California.
Exactly like the map in school,
make no mistake.

His hood ornament, lifted off some ancient
Buick in the junkyard, points straight west.

How many signs does it take to move
a skinny fright of a girl, with nothing
of a future but to elbow the chickens
and collect their eggs

to sell on Main Street on Saturdays,
rain or shine and that'll be 50 cents please.

She gets to keep half—let's face it
she's a "chicken whore," being pimped out
by a mother too busy reading the bible
or just too lazy to get the eggs herself.

And so she tells him to *wait a sec*.
She doesn't pack much. A few shirts
and her lucky juice glass—promotion from
a fill-up at the Unocal in 7th grade

when she was with her dad. Before he
hightailed it to the border with a waitress
from the Lucky Strike...her mother
always said she was just like her father.

Why even bother to prove her wrong.

Julie Dill

Calvary

Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it.

—Proverbs 22:6

They taste 7up
In their minds
so we meet.

Calvary.
At the Calvary Baptist Church

Air cold
children squirm on pews
Miz Luper, will they?
Will they shoot at us?

It's asked
Unanswered.

I say
to Us.
Walk in
together.

Eyes widen,
Hearts pound.

And don't take your eyes off that stool.

Kelly DuMar
The Acolyte

He tries to slip into the back row as they enter the sanctuary, but his mother grips his arm, steers him up the aisle to this goddamned front row seat like she's placing him in the path of his very own miracle. She sits, pulling him down beside her. His old man sits on his left, so he's jammed between his parents like a prisoner on this wooden pew that's making his ass ache like it's being whacked by a madman. And the light, for Christ's sake, can't somebody dim the goddamned light? Preston reaches into the breast pocket of his shirt for his Ray Ban's, but his mother's hand swoops in, fingernails like talons. What the fuck? She looks at him, shakes her head slowly, gravely. Screw the glasses. He feels the sickly throb of his dry eyes banging around in their dry sockets. His head spins. His thirst is unimaginable. He stinks—there's no denying that. He just has the one shirt with him—the one he was wearing when they bailed him out yesterday—the one pair of khakis, and this pair of leather sandals he pulled out of his closet when he couldn't find his other loafer. At least he hadn't slept in his clothes last night after sneaking in from the party, and he hadn't puked in them. But, yeah, there was the beer spilled, and nothing to be done about that now. She can sit there sniffing him all she wants, he can't fix it, and she could've just let him sleep. It's not like they'd given him any time to clean himself up—they'd forced him out of a dead sleep for this nightmare. They'd let him piss and shave—insisted he shave. But no coffee, no cigarette. Couldn't she at least have brought him a cup of coffee? He figured he'd have a shot at taking a few quick hits off a joint—in the yard, maybe, or even out his bedroom window, which would have been stupid but worth the risk. But his old man sat on the edge of his bed watching every move he made. “Your mother and I expect to be there on time, Preston,” his old man had said, gravely, like they were going to a funeral, for Christ's sake.

Anyway, they weren't late, not by his watch. His parents ran theirs fast and wound too fucking tight—for what, just so they could show up early and make everybody feel like shit for being on time? This wasn't even his church, the one he'd grown up in. He didn't know a soul, and didn't care. He'd tried to kill any expectation he'd be joining them when his mother brought it up

last night—tried laying down the guilt, which usually worked, for just up and quitting St. Cecelia's when he was gone during his freshmen year. It wasn't like he even cared about St. Cecelia's, but ever since they'd joined this new one he'd played it like an injury when he was home on breaks—a perfect excuse to sleep in Sunday mornings, before he lost his leverage.

His mother's elbow jabs his rib. What now? She pushes a beat up hymnal onto his lap and turns the pages for him like he's an idiot. They stand, he doesn't. They start singing—way too loudly—they know the hymn by heart. His old man kicks him in the shin—fuck—did he break the skin? He leans down, rubs his ankle, throbbing like his head now, and sure enough, there it is on his fingers, the son of a bitch drew blood. His stomach cramps, seizing up, and he can feel the sweat bead on his forehead. His mother kicks his other goddamned ankle with her high heel, not hard enough to break the skin, but he doesn't think he can stand and he's sure he can't sing. He tries to lick his lips, tries to swallow, but his tongue's sealed to the roof of his mouth. Using his hand as a shield, he closes his eyes and prays to be released from this hell soon. Really, really soon. As soon as he can keep his eyes from closing, as soon as he can think without feeling his guts seize up, he'll come up with a plan.

He feels a sharp, two-fingered jab from his old man, right in the ribs, and opens his eyes, squinting up into the light. He blinks a few times and can hardly believe what he sees: Somebody has answered his prayer. A blue haired lady in an old dress is playing the organ, some sacred music he doesn't recognize or even care about, but it sounds better than he expects with the choir—it's a really small choir, nothing like St. Cecelia's, full of gray hairs, mostly—but they can hit their notes. Or maybe they suck, he isn't much of a judge of this kind of thing, but how they sound is what he thinks angels would sound like if they were backup singers to the Angel of Light. His main attraction, this acolyte in a long, white robe—(she's all robe, neck to toe, shoulder to hands, but her face is pure and holy—he can't find a better word—and her blue eyes are piercing, and her hair, blondish, long and straight and dark at the roots is charged with static electricity)—she's The Angel of Light. They've even got her back-lit, he thinks, but no, that's the sun, beaming through the stained glass behind her, and she's holding a chalice, holding it up in front of her, and the choir's singing, their voices high and mighty and pure as hell. He stands up, he doesn't know how, it's like he's

lifted up—and it's so bright all of a sudden, he's blindsided by a—what the fuck, a revelation? It's like he's struck by a lightning bolt of truth: She's the reason I'm here. Then he hears the metallic clang of the chalice hitting the floor, sees the splash of purple staining the hem of her robe and the wine pooling on the floor at her feet. His parents rise, and linking an arm in each of his, they guide him toward the doors of the sanctuary toward the blinding sunlight.

Faking a sneeze into his hand, Preston frees his arm from his mother's claw, looks down at the stream of blood running down his ankle under his heel and shoulders his way through the blockade of smiling parishioners crowding up the exit. He swipes hair out of his eyes, (his goddamned forehead's dripping), and limping slightly, heads up the weedy flagstone path to the gravel parking lot, trying to get far enough away to light up a cigarette without being hassled. He reaches into his back pocket and he's got the lighter, he's about to light up, but he hears the crush crush of his father's shoes on the gravel coming up behind him. Fuck. Fuck.

"Put that away. It's coffee hour." He cups the unlit butt in his hand, sinks it in his pocket. His old man doesn't sound mad—or friendly, but more like he's talking to him through a tunnel or a tube, like one of those long vacuum hoses he played with as a kid where a voice has to travel some crazy, distorting distance to reach somebody's ear. This is weird, and he's too fogged up to make sense of it, but it's pissing him off to hear his old man's voice with something essential missing, like he's talking to somebody else's son.

"Yeah, I guess I'll wait in the car."

"It's locked."

Shit. He can't tell if his father's lying. "Then I'll wait here."

"After coffee hour your mother and I have committees—"

He says, "Fine. I'll wait," like it's a challenge, even though he knows it's risky to cop an attitude—not strategic—but he's gotta find a way to shut his eyes. He looks around, sees there's nowhere to wait, nowhere in hell to go. It's a gravel lot full of locked cars in the middle of nowhere, bordered by poison ivy, tangled brush, trees. He cannot get what they see in this dump.

"Your mother and I want you to come to coffee hour, to meet someone."

"I don't feel particularly well."

His old man's staring at his own reflection in his sunglasses. "Your mother tells me you agreed to get some help."

"If she thinks I'm talking to some youth minister, she's crazy." Who knew what the hell he'd agreed to yesterday?

"Not the minister. Somebody who's been there—"

"Where?"

"To hell and back. Somebody who knows what you're going through—we're going to get you the help you need, Preston. No more excuses—"

"Can you just give me the car keys? I gotta lie down."

"Your mother has the keys." Preston kicks up a spray of gravel, turns, and notices a couple of kids, boys, in shiny dress shoes kicking a soccer ball in an empty space between two parked cars. They're watching, waiting to see what he's going to do next. What he would do, if he could get his head to stop pounding, is kick their goddamned ball into the poison ivy.

"We hope you mean it this time, and if you're not just saying what you think we want to hear, there's somebody inside who can help you get clean—"

Preston groans, picturing a big breasted, big assed, oily faced, uptight, off-duty nurse friend of his mother's and he just about gags, but keeps his cool 'cause that's the only way he's gonna get his hands on those keys. "Look, I really don't think I can meet anybody today, okay? I don't think I'll make a very good impression on anyone. I told mom there's a counselor at the university. I'll get an appointment, I promise—"

"That's not an option. We intend to get you the help you need here. Now."

"What are you talking about? Some youth minister? I don't see how—"

"You're not listening, Preston. There's a young lady who's been to treatment—"

"A young what?"

"Pastor Joan asked us to mentor her. She volunteers here at the church. It's part of her community service. We drive her home every week, sometimes we take her out to lunch. She opens up, you know, about what she's been through, and I guess we do too."

"Mom's crazy. You're both crazy—"

"You agreed to get help."

“I’m saying I wanna lie down, okay?” He can’t help raising his voice if his old man won’t take him seriously. “Just give me the goddamned keys, so I can—”

“You’ll have to come into coffee hour and talk to your mother if you want them.”

“Never mind, goddamnit!” he screams. Yeah, he’s screaming in the goddamned parking lot, and he doesn’t give a shit, because it’s working—it’s working. His old man’s not arguing, he’s backing up. Good—this is good, he knows he means business, knows there’s nothing wrong with him, he just got into a little trouble and he’s gonna clean up his act like he promised, and in a minute his father’s gonna take a deep breath and clap him on the shoulder and sigh and go tell his mother she’s worried about nothing, and get him the keys. He can’t help it, he knows he’s being a nasty shit, but he doesn’t feel well and his parents are pushing it too far. There he goes. There he goes.

His father has turned, is walking toward the Church, and Preston looks over at the boys and he can’t help it, he smiles. The boys just stare, their eyes following his old man. They’re all looking when he stops, turns, glares at Preston. “Like I said, we’re going to be awhile, so come in if you change your mind,” his old man says, his voice cool, detached, unrecognizable. Preston’s so dizzy he clamps his mouth shut and sucks a stream of air through his nose to keep from falling over as he watches his old man crunch crunch across the parking lot toward coffee hour.

Shit. Preston doesn’t look at the boys, but pivots in the dirt aiming toward his mother’s car, his feet kicking up chunks of gravel that creep between his sandals and soft flesh and pinch the soles of his feet. He checks the door and goddamnit it is locked. For a moment, he pictures himself storming coffee hour, ambushing his mother, demanding the keys, grabbing her purse off her arm and fishing them out himself. But the sharp pressure of her fingernails clawing his arm lingers like a warning, and somewhere in the mix of this memory a cloudy image floats—the mysterious threat of some strange girl his mother thinks can help him. Jesus Christ, it can’t get any worse, he moans, and kicks the tire with each of his feet knocking the gravel loose. He leans back against the driver’s side door, puts his sunglasses on, wishes there was at least a patch of grass somewhere in sight so he could pass out, ‘cause he knows it’s gonna be a long

goddamned wait, and he doesn't know how much of a wait he's got left in him.

The fluorescent lights are off and even though the basement is lit by only a rectangle of daylight from a narrow window, he knows it's the acolyte. Nothing like the blue rays of those electric eyes scanning him in the moment—heartbeat—before she turns her back on him. Dressed in all black—jeans, t-shirt, Doc Martins, hair knotted up and tied with a bandana, she's otherwise unrecognizable. Leaning against the wall by the stairs he's just descended he catches the rhythm of her slender back—lean, muscular shoulders—swinging the wet mop left and right across the crappy linoleum. With each push of the mop, as she backs a step closer to him, he feels a nauseating rush of anxiety. He needs to puke—and he needs a beer.

“You better watch out,” she says, stopping an inch in front of him, not turning around.

He manages to swallow, fighting an impulse to gag. “Yeah? For what?”

“Your feet.”

He looks down at the ugly black hairs sprouting from his dirty toes between the thongs of his sandals. He swallows again, smiles, steps aside. “Thanks for the warning, Angel.”

With her back still to him, she plunges the mop into the metal bucket and slapping it back and forth makes a dirty puddle of the spot where he stood a moment before. “Looking for something?” she asks.

He clears his throat and wishes he hadn't. “My parents said I should meet you.” He leans his shoulders back against the wall, crosses his ugly feet.

She stops mopping, and turns, facing him. “Since when do you do anything they tell you to do?”

“Ever since I laid eyes on you, I'm a changed man.” Maybe he actually means it, but he can't believe he says it out loud, like a goddamned ironic bastard, like the bastard he is.

“Hallelujah, my work is done,” she says, piercing him with those eyes.

He aims a smile without irony, but misfires. “I'm Preston.”

She looks him up and down. “Here you are, in the flesh.”

“My friends call me Press,” he says, sounding more like an asshole than he can believe he is. He wipes his hand on his khakis, extends it, but she just looks at it, keeps her hands on the mop.

“You’ve got the shakes, Preston.”

“I need coffee,” he says, running his hand through his greasy hair.

“Coffee hour’s over.”

“Let’s go get some.” Still, neither of them moves, and he isn’t surprised to find he’s not getting anywhere fast.

“I’m cleaning up.”

“You’re almost done—”

“I gotta do the floor in the sanctuary, you know, where Christ’s blood spilled for you,” she says, and he laughs, he can’t help it, but it’s no joke, he can tell.

“What a mess,” he says.

“You always make eyes at the acolytes like that?”

He knows he’s being an asshole, but he can’t seem to figure out how to talk to her and maybe if he could puke and swig a beer he’d get the hang of it. “Just you. Does it make you uncomfortable?”

“It makes me sloppy,” she says.

“Sorry,” he says, wishing she’d start mopping again so he could just make a clean exit.

“Sorry you were coming on to me, or sorry you made me spill the wine?”

“Both. Forgive me.” He’s grateful for irony—it’s there when he needs it.

“I would, if you meant it.”

“My parents were right—”

“About what?”

“You’re a lot different than you seem at first.”

“So, what do you want?” Her eyes are lasers, and he doubts he can keep this up.

“What my parents said—to get to know you.” He has no idea why, but it’s true.

She slides her hands up and down the mop handle. “You don’t want what your parents want from me.”

“You make me want to come to church—they’d like that.”

“Yeah, they would, ‘cause they don’t see what you’re up to ___”

“What am I up to?” he asks. If she could tell him he’d really like to know.

“Sitting beside them in the pew with the hymnal wide open on your lap, licking your lips, making eyes at me.”

He laughs, but his skin crawls and his forehead breaks out in a sweat he hopes is invisible. He has no idea what to say, so he says, “I like eye contact.”

“Yeah, right. Let me tell you a secret—” she says, leaning into him way closer than he expects, pinning him to the wall. “You’re not the first guy to give me that look.”

He can hardly breathe.

“Can I help it you’re so beautiful?” he asks, his voice weak, humiliatingly void of irony.

“—Or that line.” She backs up, turns away from him, and he can breathe, and he no longer feels like puking, but he doesn’t feel relief. His skin burns and the back of his throat feels cut open when he swallows. She picks up the mop, she picks up the bucket. Still, he can’t leave yet, and he’s afraid she’ll leave first if he doesn’t do something.

“Listen, I’m not as bad as you think. Give me a chance. Here, give me the mop—” he says, reaching, but she sets the mop and bucket down, sloshing water on the four-square of linoleum between them.

“Your parents warned me about you.” This surprises him and he feels stung by it—even more of a surprise—and hopes she can’t tell.

“They should’ve warned me about you.”

“They said you break a lot of hearts.”

“I don’t mean to—” he says, and he thinks he means it, or he used to mean it and he’d like to mean it, but it comes out sounding like bullshit.

“That’s what they said.”

He runs his hands through his hair again. He digs a chunk of sand from the corner of his eye. “They said they’d be happy to give you a ride home.”

“I don’t need one,” she says, and the truth is, he’s relieved. No way he could get in the backseat of his mother’s car and sit next to her, staring at the back of his parents’ heads. He has no intention of going back home with them, anyway, if he can help it—in fact he’s leaving as soon as he can get the hell out of here without a hassle—without anyone making a scene, which might be any second now. She hasn’t said how she’s getting home, but maybe he can bum a ride with her to his car so he doesn’t have to deal with his parents at all. His memory’s sketchy, but he’s pretty sure his spare key’s still duck taped to the inside of his rear bumper, and he’s pretty sure his old man drove his car to the

body shop in town yesterday morning after bailing him out. His mother didn't say too much on the long ride home in her car—wouldn't answer any of his questions. If they're taking back the car they haven't said it straight out, so, wherever, it is, it's still his.

“You live nearby?” he asks.

“Close enough.”

“You could be a little more specific—”

“But I don't have to be.”

“How come we've never met?”

“Just lucky, I guess,” she says, and he laughs. They have irony in common, for sure.

“I don't remember you from high school—”

“I'm not from around here.”

“Just blew into town in a cloud of mystery?”

“You could say that.”

“You live at that—what-do-you-call it—that half-way house?” That's why they want him to meet her—that part is obvious, he's not stupid. It's not the first time they've brought that goddamned place up.

“It's a sober house. Listen,” she says, slopping the mop around, “I've got work to

do, so quit asking me shit you already know the answer to.”

“No booze, no drugs, no sex?”

“Don't knock it 'til you've tried it.” Is this ironic? He can't tell.

“Seriously, I heard it's like a convent, or a prison—”

She stops mopping, looks at him. “Yeah? Well, don't believe everything you hear.”

“What should I believe?” he says, leaning toward her, and she lets him move in closer than he expects. Girls that let him get this close, they squirm, but they like it. She doesn't.

“The truth's in the eyes. That's where I look for it.”

“Yours are intoxicating,” he says, and for the first time he likes the way it comes

out—like he does mean it—he's not bullshitting—like he means it in a good way, like he can tell there's something special about her. He's not a total asshole.

“Yours are bloodshot,” she says, making a big wet circle around his feet with the mop, and he's sick of the way she keeps piercing him with those eyes. He looks at her bare arms swinging

the mop and the line of badly healed slashes climbing the white flesh of her forearms disappearing under the sleeve of her t-shirt.

“Those are some ugly scars,” he says.

“Yeah?” she snaps, not moving an inch, but looking him up and down. “So show

me yours.” He backs up a step, and thinks about getting the hell out of there, ride or no ride.

“Who says I have any?”

“Pastor Joan, your parents, the news—”

“Don’t believe everything you hear.”

“I don’t,” she says, rinsing the mop in the bucket.

“So, how’d you get put there—your parents, the court, or what?”

“Fate.” Talk about bullshit. She’s crazy. She should be locked up.

“How long you stuck there?”

“Until I save one soul.”

“Shit,” he laughs. “Good luck with that.”

“Yeah,” she says, looking him in the eye. “No doubt.”

“You want out? I can get you out. I’m going back to college tomorrow.” Yeah, that’s the plan. They can’t just get rid of him—not just for being arrested, and his parents will get him a good lawyer. Screw the dorm, he has places to stay.

“Your parents told me you burned all your bridges.”

“They don’t know everything. I’ll give you a lift to the city.”

“Really? How’re you gonna do that?”

“Soon as I pick up my car.” She wasn’t moving the mop, she was just standing there, looking at him, maybe thinking about it.

“You’re not afraid to be alone with me?” she asks.

“Are you dangerous?”

“Some would say extremely.” Yeah, he could see that.

“I like dangerous women. And you dig dangerous men, I can tell—”

“How?”

“Like you said—it’s in your eyes.” For a couple of seconds the pounding in the back of his neck lets up—he’s finally getting somewhere. Then, she leans the mop against the wall, puts a warm hand on his shoulder, and looks into his eyes with so much intensity his pupils sting and—he can’t help it—his eyes pool up.

“Huh. . . .” she says, “I’m trying to see what your parents see, but they’re so messed up, I can’t tell—”

“What—” he says, clearing his throat. “What can’t you tell?”

“If you’re a good boy pretending to be bad. . .” she lets go of his shoulder, “. . .or a bad boy pretending to be good?”

“Oh, that,” he smiles, lifting the mop from the wall. “That’s a secret.” He pushes the mop, right, then left, zigzagging across the linoleum floor. He feels her eyes burning into his back as he crosses the room.

“I like secrets,” she says when he stops, turns. “You should tell me yours.”

“Then it wouldn’t be a secret anymore, would it?”

“I can get it out of you.”

“I’d like to see you try.” He looks at her from across the room, hands crossed in front of her chest, rocking back and forth on her heels. He can smell the coffee they served and he wishes he hadn’t ditched coffee hour. His stomach rumbles and he can’t tell if he’s sick or hungry. A large wooden table has been pushed against a wall, chairs parked upside down on top of it, and he rests his weight against it watching her approach.

“People ‘round here, like you said, they talk—they wonder if you did it.”

“Innocent ‘til proven guilty, right?”

“That’s what your parents say. They still believe in you.”

“Yeah, well. . .” His head’s pounding again and he’s so tired he imagines knocking all the chairs to the floor so he can lie down on the table, just for a minute, close his eyes, get some relief. He pushes two aside and hops onto the table, his legs dangling over the edge. He can’t help it, he leans back, using his arm for a pillow beneath his head. She doesn’t say anything. He wishes she would pick up the mop, leave him alone. He closes his eyes, and, for a moment, he can breathe. He can breathe.

“They believe in you,” he hears her say, and then he feels the warm pressure of her fingertips on his knees beneath his khakis and his skin tingles. He opens his eyes, she’s leaning over him. He tries to sit up but her hand pushes on his chest, pushes him back down and he thinks, what the fuck, but he doesn’t resist. Her voice is husky, no more than a whisper—still, irritating, unwelcome. “They worship the God, their only son, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen, no matter all the bad things people say about him, it’s all a mistake—”

“Maybe not all of it,” he says, looking up at her, trying to force a smile. It’s becoming clear to him now. She’s hot, but she’s a total bitch.

“Oh, how they worship you—how it thrills you, and disgusts you—” she whispers and he slaps her hand away, sits up, but she doesn’t back off and he worries he might actually hit her, and whatever he does, whatever she says, he can’t hit her. “Bowing and scraping, laying their sacrifices at your beautiful feet—the finest clothes and schools—no expense spared for this gifted mind—the bail bond and big shot lawyer—”

“Cut it out—” he snarls, trying to get her the hell out of his way without being too rough, but when he pushes her shoulder, she pushes back, gets up in his face—she’s crazy. Why the hell didn’t he get the hell away from her sooner? She’s looking for a fight—she’s looking for something, and what he can see in her eyes—the truth is—she wants to do him harm. She’s running her hands up and down his arms and he feels a rush of arousal but he’s got to get her to stop—he can’t let her set him up for a fall.

“You’re such a good, bright boy, they say, if only you’d realize your potential—” He feels the tips of her fingers brush the back of his neck and he pushes them off. “Oh, how they sacrifice at the altar of your potential—”

“Shut up!” he yells, and he pushes, harder, this time. She steps backwards, holding her balance. His feet land on the floor. He tries to stand up.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Get outta my way! ” he yells, but she’s back on him, pressing him against the edge of the table. He’s breathing heavy, he can’t help it. She crushes her lips into his neck, her teeth, scissor sharp against his skin.

“You can’t leave a girl like this, all worked up. You’re as bad as they say, aren’t you Preston? You know you are—deep down, you know—”

“No—”

“You can hide the truth from everyone but yourself—”

“I’ve got nothing to hide—she never said no!”

“You didn’t hear her, is that it?”

“She’s lying—” She has to be. If she said no—and he doubts this, he really does—he didn’t hear her—that’s the truth.

“Because you were drunk—”

“She’s the one who was drunk!” They were both slammed, for Christ’s sake.

“So, you took advantage of her?”

“She was coming on to me!” The truth is this kind of shit happens to him all the time—when he wants, and when he doesn’t.

“She got you all worked up and you didn’t want to hurt her?”

“I didn’t mean to do it—why would I do it? Girls don’t say no to me—they don’t!” he yells, grabbing her shoulders, shaking her by the arms and he can’t stop, he can’t help it, and he’s shaking her hard, but she’s not putting up a fight. “Do you hear me—they don’t!”

“I’m not!” she says, and he feels the heat of her palms on his chest and his gut seizing up. “I’m not saying no! Come on—you want me, don’t you?” She’s crazy, crazier than he thought—“I saw that look in your eye with the prayer book open on your lap—you want me—right here, right now?”

“What? No—not here. . . are you crazy?” He lets her hands slide across his chest, melting his skin to wax. Then her hands are on his hips and he can’t believe this is happening, he doesn’t know what he wants, he can’t think, and he wonders what the hell kind of trap he’s about to fall into, but he doesn’t move, he can’t stop the thrill of her hands running down the outside of his thighs lower and lower until a cough rips up the back of his throat like an alarm going off.

“What’s the matter?” she asks, looking up at him, kneeling at his goddamned feet on the crappy linoleum.

“Get up! Get off the floor, for Christ’s sake,” but she’s just looking him straight in the eyes, pulling his sandals off, and, what the fuck, what the fuck is she doing to him and why is he letting her do it? She reaches up, pulls off her headband and dunks it in the bucket of filthy water. “What the hell are you—”

“You want me,” she says, looking him in the eye, and his eyes are watering, he can’t help it, they sting so bad, and he doesn’t know why unless maybe this is what it feels like to be scared of somebody you can’t hurt. He looks down at his foot, the one she’s holding in her hand, at the kerchief bunched in her fist scrubbing his heel so hard it burns. He gasps for breath. He swallows, feels the bite at the back of his throat. He lets his hands rest on top of her head, and closes his eyes.

Todd Fuller

Giving Memory an Address

—After H.M., who (unknowingly) sacrificed his memory to save his life (traded seizures for amnesia) and thus became a heroic character in numerous psychology dissertations and journal articles.

The universe is (after a blink
or 2) tinsel fabric made of
breath.

Elsewhere, the brain is its own
electric constellation full of
astral addresses

& impulses networking from one
forgettable moment to the next.

Now, my memory lives in a place
no one has seen.

And each crackle of sunrise gives
way to daily self-invention—
my name a mystery to the body
I carry around.

Likewise, down the street, I am no-
where recognizable—
with a man

who calls himself my son.
And the woman he calls his mom
resides in a moment

as fictional as starlight. That is
the way each day begins: and
these claws at the ends

of my arms are called digits,
and these talons at the ends of my
legs are toes, and
this entity at the top of my neck
contains eyes, behind which
are rooms known as the brain,

where lives memory. And they
tell me it is no where close to
the heart.

Out of the Stars: Meanwhile, the Sky is a Cultural Text

—on the occasion of July 13*

And all those constellations running
Free after nightfall.

All those celestial connect-the-dots.

And who among us hasn't hung their
Gods on the stars?

Even tonight, Van Gogh's Moonrise is
A returning goddess.*

Even tonight, my cosmological weakness
Is ancestral.

And taking flight is an un-earthly
Meditation on faith.

All those jets bisecting the universe
Into a vast checkerboard.

And all those satellites feeding us
Constant intelligence.

Meanwhile, down here against
The terrain, any (moment or) touch

Could well burst into flames.

On the occasion of July 13, 2003: the moon Van Gogh painted in his famous Moonrise made an exact spatial reappearance—so scientists at Southwest Texas State University determined after a year-long study.

Julie Hensley

The Last Season's Growth

It's hard to say whether Francesca Trigiani, as she was known back then, ever cruised Main Street or siphoned gas or stood around in a circle of headlights sipping wine coolers in some pasture. I know so little of her life with her grandmother. Likely, she did not participate in these activities—although she may have wanted to at times if, as she rinsed off the dinner plates, she heard the swish of tires over the wet pavement outside or, on a clear night, the clank of tailgates rising from near the river. Francesca never marched with a baton in the Annual Field Day Parade like most little girls in Shelby. But, then again, neither did my daughter.

As far as I can tell, Francesca was rarely allowed out alone except, of course, to trudge over the broken sidewalk and up the street to Cook's Laundromat with a wicker basket of soiled clothing on Saturday mornings or to cut across the vacant lot between her house and O'Dell's Grocery if her grandmother ran out of olive oil. More than once on my way into the office to meet a client for a weekend appointment, I stooped to help her collect the scattered handkerchiefs, the white cotton underpants with gaping leg holes and loose elastic. Twice each week, on Wednesday evenings and Sunday mornings, the girl and her grandmother backed out of the carport, which was scattered with dead leaves, and drove halfway to Garrison to St. Isadore's for mass. She went to and from school, her forehead against the clouded glass of the bus window, her fingers resting on a leather satchel. The one her grandmother claimed had belonged to her grandfather. She told me once that she liked school, but as far as I can tell, she did just well enough to escape reprimand while avoiding praise.

Francesca's life was uneventful until her eighteenth summer, specifically until an afternoon in July—an afternoon she once described to me when we sat together in the office basement, sealing and stamping envelopes for a bulk mailing. On this afternoon, she hurried back from O'Dell's, the jar of pepperoncinis she carried was slippery in her warm fingers, and grasshoppers hurled themselves up from the dry weeds, bouncing off her calves. She was careful to shut the screen door behind her, and she paused only a minute in the sitting room to

kneel in front of the fan, turning into the breeze and holding her thick braid up off the back of her neck. In the kitchen she found a pot of water boiling over onto the stove top, and her grandmother sprawled across the linoleum. The old woman's lips and fingernails were an eerie blue. So, three years after her confirmation and two months out of high school, Francesca found herself alone.

I'm afraid the insurance policy her grandmother had selected—not the one we recommended—covered the funeral expenses with little left. So the girl, who didn't want to sell the house but could hardly bear so many hours there alone, began to look for work. Janelle, the owner of J&Company, offered her a position immediately. Personally, I think she harbored plans to chop the girl's wavy black hair for a before and after shot, then enter it in one of those design shows she's always talking about. She set Francesca up as a shampoo girl, lathering and rinsing in the back of the shop, but she never gave her time to get the hang of it. The stylists were always hollering for her, "Frannie! Be a doll and run get me some sanitizer out of the back." Or worse yet, they'd send her across the street to the Valley Vista Grill for sandwiches and coffee.

Janelle fussed at the new girl for not rinsing all the shampoo out of customers' hair, for not making any conversation with the men, and for letting the towel snag on the women's earrings, but it was difficult to find a girl willing to sweep up hair and scrub the base of each chair with Pine Sol.

Never a graceful girl, Frannie was accused of breaking the air pump that raises one of the swiveling chairs and knocking over a 24 oz. bottle of coconut creme conditioner. The cats were the final straw. Frannie bumped the display shelf above the sink and sent Janelle's collection of 114 miniature porcelain cats crashing to the floor. Only about a third of them were broken—and I'd been after her to have them all appraised, so she could start thinking about our special collections insurance—but that was the end of Frannie's salon career.

That night she scanned the want ads and the next morning she drove to Walker Manufacturing Company. Frannie wasn't sure what exactly happened in a muffler factory. I don't think she even knew what a muffler was. She may have paused and worried as she took a deep breath, parked safely in the visitors' lot, but she did not dwell on such uncertainties. Someone was waiting at the entrance to usher her along with others, lured by

the printed offer of seventeen dollars an hour, into an air conditioned conference room with blue Berber carpeting. She watched a safety video. She allowed a rubber gloved nurse to snip a lock of her hair for drug testing. Two days later she went on the line spot welding metal doughnuts around pipes.

Frannie's new job wasn't that difficult. Really, she only had to set up the pieces and then push two buttons. But the man on the neighboring machine tossed the pieces into a basket at her feet quickly, and she was expected to keep up. There was a foreman who drove a little golf cart. He came around every so often to shake his head and mark his clipboard. Each line had a quota.

Frannie had a navy blue uniform with a clip for her plastic ID card. She had leather boots with steel toes, but she would have preferred to wear tennis shoes because standing on the cement floor all day made her feet ache inside. She was issued kevlar gloves, but they didn't let her fingers move fast enough, so she never wore them. By lunch time, she had a ring of blue-black metallic dust around her fingernails. On her obligatory ten minute breaks, she went to the ladies room, and the snot she blew into tissues was strung with the same dark powder.

Entering the cafeteria at noon was like surfacing from deep in the ocean. The room was clean and crowded, veiled in fluorescent lighting, not unlike high school. When Frannie pulled the plugs from her ears and left them dangling around her neck, she was immediately washed with voices. The workers lifted their thick goggles onto their foreheads or lay them on the table next to their trays, and suddenly, their eyes visible and blinking in the brightness, everyone looked human again.

Only a few women worked at the plant. They gathered at a corner table for their breaks, smoking and talking about KT's, a bar where they liked to meet for line dancing on Friday nights. Frannie sat by herself, grateful to be lost in the noise. Sometimes she would flip through a Readers' Digest if she could find one in the box of complimentary magazines next to the fountain drink island. More often than not, she would stare outside. It was still dark when she left her house in the morning, and the sun began sinking down behind Massanutten Peak as she drove home. Huge glass windows lined one wall, and after hours in the dark factory, she just wanted to drink her thirty minutes of sunlight.

Once, that I know of, another worker tried to talk to her on break, a boy from across the mountain in West Virginia. He sidled up to the cafeteria table.

“Hello there,” he snapped her ID card from its clasp on her breast pocket. “Miss F. Trigiani.” I imagine he stumbled over the name a bit.

Frannie made a grab for the plastic card, but the boy was too quick. “What are you doing after work tomorrow, Miss Trigiani?”

“Laundry.” This was not flirting. She had pulled the box with her winter sweaters out of the attic and was actually planning on washing them out in the bathtub with Woolite the following evening. She made another swipe for her card, and this time she got it.

“How about you go see a movie with me instead?”

Frannie looked at the boy and sighed, not the come closer-sigh of a typical eighteen-year-old. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t even know you.”

He took her right hand in his and tapped his name tag with his left index finger. “Sure you do,” he said pumping her hand up and down in a mock hand shake. “I’m J. Klawon.” I imagine she looked unamused and pulled her hand away quickly. “Seriously, I’m Joel, and you’re . . . ” he pulled back and studied her dark eyes, her hair knotted heavily at the base of her neck. “Felicia.”

She shook her head, and I’ll bet she smiled a little, giving Joel the mountain boy license to try again. “Fredrica? . . . Fayette?”

Something—a brush of the knee or shoulder—jarred her then, and sent her hurrying away to hide out in the bathroom. Once, she saw him again in line at the time clock, and he smiled and said, “Fern?”

Despite her job, Frannie still had too much time to fill. She worked twelve hour shifts but worked three days then had three days off. So, she planted mums in the boxes along the porch steps and meticulously weeded the herb garden the old woman had started around a solitary bird bath in the backyard. For the first time ever, the carport was swept clean. In the beginning of October she finally went through her Nana’s things. I saw her make three trips to the Shelby Area United Services Thrift Store in one day. She went right past my office window, lugging plastic bags of night gowns and old woman loafers. She walked for hours in the evenings—down to the boat landing, up to the

baseball fields. One person told me they saw her walking along old 340 toward Bear Lithia Springs. I felt a strange kind of connection if I passed her on my way home with Charlie buckled in next to me and bent over one of her comic books. After all, we knew something about loneliness. There were still nights when I didn't want to have to go home.

It was on one of her walks that Frannie met Wade Rogers. Every October, the Shenandoah Valley Independent Pentecostal Church throws a huge carnival in Stonewall Jackson Memorial Park. They don't call it a Halloween carnival because they don't want to participate in any kind of celebration that honors Satan or anything evil, even indirectly. Instead, they call it a Fall Faith Festival. They bob for apples and pop kettle corn, and some of the kids still wear costumes. Wade, a Shenandoah Valley Independent Pentecostal elder, was in attendance and he had invited my daughter to keep his boy, Nick, company. Charlie came home toting a plastic bag emblazoned with Biblical scenes and bursting with miniature candy bars and plastic spiders, so she and Nick must have hit the games as soon as they arrived, leaving Wade to wander through the booths alone. Eventually Wade climbed the hill overlooking the park and sat down on a bench, nibbling a caramel apple.

Wade, at 35, had vowed never to remarry, and as far as I knew, with the expectation of an occasional matinee with Charlie and me, he did not date. I'll admit, there was a time when I wanted Wade for my own. I had tried through subtle forms of persuasion to mold my relationship to him into something more than employee or parenting advisor. So, something must have shaped his mood that night. Perhaps, as he stared down at the picnic shelters, which were strung with Japanese lanterns and teeming with cake-walking youth, the indulgence and complication of it all overwhelmed him.

When he turned his face to the crunching of leaves and saw Francesca walking toward him, hands deep in the pockets of her brown barn jacket, she looked simple and familiar. Although Frannie had been in and out of the office a few times in the previous months, he couldn't remember meeting her there. He struggled to place this face, free of lipstick but dark and lovely beneath the street lamps, and his mind halted suddenly on an afternoon at the very end of the summer, on the sound of ceramic shattering and this girl's termination as he sat in the front room of J&Company awaiting his hair cut.

“Frannie,” he said, because that is what the owner had yelled after the shelves crashed down.

She was, of course, startled. She probably pulled her hands from her pockets and smoothed back the frizzies that fell from her braid, a gesture I have seen many times since, whenever she’s nervous. “Do we know each other?” she asked.

“Well, you used to work at the salon. You used to shampoo my hair before you . . . well before you left.” Although it may seem impossible in a town as small as Shelby, Wade knew nothing of the young Francesca, the one I watched trip back and forth through the vacant lot. His married life was so tumultuous that, from the beginning, his gossip was limited to keeping track of his wife’s indiscretions.

Frannie, able to remember only the most dreaded appointments—the old men whose limp comb-overs required two applications before she could even work up a lather—failed to place Wade’s carefully groomed head. She squinted at him and shook her head.

“I was there,” he insisted, “your last day.”

“Oh,” she stomped her feet against the cold that seemed to hang just over the grassy hill side. “I was fired. I found another job, though.”

This is how I picture them: facing each other, their breath coming in puffs, until Wade breaks the silence and points with his caramel apple to the swirling mass down in the park. “I need to find my son. Will you let me get you some hot chocolate?”

I have no doubt she hesitated at first, and he had to explain, “It’s a faith festival, not a party.”

That night Wade did not sit in his idling car, as was his habit, and wait until Charlie was safely inside and he could see me waving him away from the lit rectangle of the doorway. It was a kind of premonition of the months to come. The brief courtship that would bring the girl into the office on her days off. The afternoons when she would bend to remove the lids from steaming single-serving Tupperware containers and feed us—she always included me in these lunches—pasta with pine nuts and basil she had dried herself on her carport or sandwiches with thinly sliced roasted red pepper. The Friday afternoons when Wade would call and say, “Is there any way you could watch Nick for a few hours tonight? There’s a bluegrass festival I want to take Frannie to over in Luray.”

If you'll believe it, masochist that I am, I bit my lip and said, "Sure. In fact, why doesn't he just spend the night."

I think Frannie had some nerves before their wedding. The afternoon before the ceremony, when Wade had driven to Garrison to pick up his tuxedo, she showed up at the office. Years ago, when Wade set up shop down on Main Street, he went all out. People are anxious when they purchase insurance. He knew the atmosphere would have to make clients comfortable and trusting. The building is one of those tall ones with the façade fronts. It used to be a grocery store or something. He replaced the display windows in front with big bay windows that fill each of our offices with sunlight during the morning hours, and he chose a heavy, old fashioned door of solid oak.

The door swells whenever the dampness outside warps the wood. It sticks a bit, but if you are patient and put pressure in the right spot, it swings open without too much trouble. I was on the phone interviewing someone about a cracked windshield when I heard the familiar thumping, and I knew it was Frannie struggling to get inside.

I opened the door to find her breathless and flushed. I said, "Wade's not here. He had to run to town." Everyone here calls Garrison town.

She threw herself into one of the leather wing-back chairs in the waiting area. "I know. That's why I came today." She looked up at me imploringly. "I need you to do me a favor."

"Sure," I said. "I mean, if I can." My God, I thought, she's nineteen, Wade. Nineteen. Although I was younger when I married Larry.

"I want you to cut my hair." She pulled her braid over her shoulder and looped her fingers around the end of it where it was fastened with one of those plain rubber bands, the kind the newspaper comes wrapped in. "A sort of surprise for the groom."

I tried to imagine her face without that mane. When Charlie was born and I cut my hair, Larry came home drunk one night and told me what a grave mistake I had made. "Of course I liked it better long," he said with disgust. "All men like long hair. We want to smell it and touch it and get all wrapped up in it." I tried to picture Frannie with a springy bob like mine, or worse, a shiny bald head like that Irish singer.

"I don't think I'd do a good job," I said. "Why don't you go across the street?"

“I can’t go in there. I’ve not been back since Janelle fired me. I haven’t trimmed my hair in more than six months.” Frannie has the most peculiar voice. English was her first language. Her mother didn’t push her off on her grandmother until she was four or five, but the old woman spoke a strange mixture of English and Italian in a heavy, lurching accent. Frannie’s voice, maybe to compensate, has always moved across words with a fluidity she could never achieve with her body. It’s musical, really, so different from the steady twang of most of the locals I talk to. “You needn’t take off much. Just neaten up the ends a little.”

I sighed and directed her into my office, told her to get the scissors from my desk. She pulled a drawer all the way out in her haste to find them, hurling an array of ink pens and paper clips across the rug. I took the drawer from her gently. “Frannie,” I said, “just go get me the spray bottle we use to mist the plants. It’s probably under the sink in the bathroom.” I gathered everything up, then spread newspapers over the floor all around my chair.

When she was seated in front of me, I took her braid in my hands. It was heavy and alive beneath my fingers, like the flinching tail of some animal. I unwrapped the rubber band slowly, snapping it around my wrist. When I loosened the plaited hair, it was a curtain hanging down the back of the chair, still warm with sun from her walk down the hill and smelling earthy like mulch. I thought how she was probably one of those girls who only had to wash her hair once a week.

When I pumped the spray bottle, I watched her hair curl up against the mist like worms on a wet sidewalk, as if it knew what was about to happen. The first cut was the most difficult—I stood for a moment with the scissors opened. Her hair was coarse. It felt like the wisps of horse hair my brothers and I used to yank out of the barbed wire fence behind the cemetery. But after I worked the blades through that chunk of hair, it became easier. Her hair collected in six-inch tufts on the newspapers underfoot. I was careful, working my way around the crown of her head, measuring each cut against the previous one, although with wavy hair it doesn’t matter as much.

“Are you ready for the big day?” I asked her.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“You guess so?” I looked down at my watch. “The florist truck will be pulling up to Shenandoah Valley Independent Pentecostal in about 14 hours. You better be ready.”

She smiled up at me. “Were you completely ready?”

I pulled damp sections of hair down around her chin, measuring the sides. “Frannie, at eighteen, I was living in the parsonage with my parents and three brothers. Larry had a motorcycle and I needed to go somewhere.” I sat back on the edge of the desk. “My marriage was a complete disaster,” I said. She looked down, picking at her cuticles. “But I got Charlie out of it. If I’d had a lick of sense I would have known it wouldn’t last.” I started to tell her how I was barely out of high school, but I caught myself. Instead I said, “Wade’s an entirely different caliber of man than Larry will ever be.”

“It’s not Wade,” she said, snapping her eyes back up to mine. “I know he’s the one for me. I’m just a little nervous because I always thought Father Daniel would be the one to do my service when the time came. Everyone’s wonderful at the Pentecostal church, but it’s still strange.” Her eyes started to water a little, and I got worried that I had broken in somewhere I didn’t want any part of. “I’m not sure my grandmother would approve,” she said.

“You can’t worry about that, honey,” I told her. “You’ve already made lots of decisions without your grandmother, maybe some decisions you never would have made if she was still here. She did her best to give you your own sense of what’s what, and you have to just go forward based on what feels right to you now.”

I fluffed up her hair—which now fell right at her shoulders, more curly than before—and helped her out of my desk chair before she could say anything else.

The next afternoon everything went off without a hitch. Wade wanted it to be a simple affair, nobody but he and his bride standing up there this time. Charlie and Nick handed out programs and ushered guests into the church. Of course, my daughter refused to wear a dress. She stood outside the congregation hall, scrawny and serious in velvet pants.

Father Daniel actually came to the service, at least I assume it was him, sitting near the back of the sanctuary in one of those white, cardboard collars. Frannie wore her hair down, which is always nice at a December wedding, and the reception went about as well as a dry celebration in a church basement can go. The couple honeymooned in Williamsburg and made it back in time for Christmas.

Larry came into town for the holidays, as well. He parked his rig on the street outside his mother's house, a peeling two story with dogs who run patches of grass bare circling on their chains in the back. I felt obliged to let Charlie see her dad, so I dropped her off in the afternoon on Christmas Eve. I sat in the office for the full four hours I had agreed to, then drove back and beeped my horn until my daughter came running. As she trotted down the walk clutching what I could only assume to be some new toy, I saw suddenly in everything she did—the way she flipped back her hair, the way she stepped over the leaning picket fence—traces of her father.

“How did it go?” I asked.

“Fine.” She was fiddling with the Extreme Sports Motor-Cross Man that Larry had given her. Basically it was a doll with a helmet and a red jump suit, mounted on a motorized dirt bike. I thought about the Barbies I used to buy Charlie. Immediately abandoned and stacked in an old shoe box, each doll's hair was still smoothly twisted into its original bouffant. “Check out these lights, Ma.” She flipped a switch and the bulb flashed on behind the headlight at the same time a recorded revving rose from the little battery-powered engine.

I told her to put on her night gown when we got home. Then I let her sit up with me and eat icing while I decorated cookies.

Although they never met, it is inevitable that Frannie's story would intertwine somehow with that of Trish, Wade's first wife. I went to high school with Wade, and, although I am a few years younger, it would have been impossible not to know who he was. He was a good boy and a good-looking boy in clean-cut kind of way, a golden boy, really—salutatorian, all-state football player. I scoffed at his kind back then and sought out boys with long hair and ripped jeans. Younger versions of Larry, boys who carved words into their own skin and smoked dope behind the shop building.

Wade went to William and Mary, and that's where he met Trish, a Tri-Delt from Nashville. She had intricately highlighted blond hair. She took Dexatrim pills like vitamins, and they kept her slender and full of energy. She had a way of staring intently at whomever she had chosen to bestow her attentions on that made him feel as if he were her entire world. Wade, who had been a local hero here in Shelby, was ripe to be someone's entire world again.

She was a partier, that much is clear. And I can imagine the details: the sound of shot glasses slamming back to the bar, tiny Mickey Mouse faces dissolving onto their tongues, her hair making a tent around their faces as she leans over him in the back bedroom of a strange apartment.

Their life changed shortly after he brought her back to the valley, though. Wade was making plans to open the insurance agency, and they were living in an apartment on Lee Avenue. He wanted to carve out a little place for the two of them. He thought he could settle Trish into such an existence if they had each other, and for a while it seemed he might be right. They attended a revival at the Pentecostal Church held over at Lake Moomaw. As they ate fried chicken with the other young married couples, sitting on the dock and listening to the crickets start up in the tall grass on the other side of the lake, a kind of peace welled up inside Wade's head, and he wanted to hang onto it, let it slide down his throat like a warm nosebleed. He and Trish took out one of the paddle boats, and when they were floating in the middle of the lake, they stopped paddling and let the strange mumble of believers rocking and whispering in tongues carry across the water from the prayer tent. They decided they were born again. They went to church every Sunday morning and had brunch afterwards at the Valley Vista Grill or Ray's Diner.

I started working for Wade right after they had Nick, and I guess that's when things started to change between them, too. I'm not sure when she first cheated on her husband, but I have a feeling Trish unraveled a little with every encounter. After a while I started to hear about things she did—crazy, unbelievable things—like showing up for her son's entrance review into Genesis Pre-school wearing only a rain coat. I can remember cleaning old files from the cabinets in the sitting area and listening to Wade just across the hall, picking up his phone and dialing the same number again and again.

Wade never would have considered a divorce. No matter how long it continued, he never would have been able to wash his hands of the situation. That's why, if you ask me, it was a kind of blessing that when the new middle school gym teacher lost control of his Bronco and barreled past the guard rail while crossing the mountain into Greene County, Trish was strapped into the passenger seat next to him. Wade mourned her, though, like it was the most natural thing in the world for your wife to die on the way to a rendezvous with another man. He paid for a

lovely funeral and delivered an elegy that made throats swell, even in those who knew firsthand what kind of a woman Trish Rogers had really been.

While Frannie's innocence drew Wade to her, it is important to remember that he was used to a woman who knew exactly how to touch him, a woman who could, with one well-manicured hand, work him into an unbelievable heat beneath an airplane blanket. His first night with Frannie was magical in the true sense of the word. She wore a long white gown with intricate beadwork that glittered in the candle light. He wanted nothing more than to hover all around her in the half dark and know she was his. But as the months passed, and he tried to guide her hands in the intricacies of foreplay, he couldn't hide his bewilderment and—there's really no other word for it—disappointment.

Wade tried to talk to me about it. One morning he came into my office and shut the door. He pulled a doughnut from a paper bag and set it on a cocktail napkin in front of me. Raspberry filling was leaking out the side. "Breakfast," he said, settling into one of my chairs holding an éclair. For a while he sat and stared out the window at the cars trickling down Main Street. At that time of day, housewives heading home from Food Lion would have been reflected back in the shaded windows of the salon. Finally, he spoke.

"You got married pretty young. I'm guessing you weren't terribly," His éclair moved through the air after the right words. "Experienced."

"You could say that." I looked up from my report.

"It probably took you awhile to pick up on certain things, huh? You know, to get in synch."

"What do you mean? Sexually?" I thought about the first few months with Larry, how we barely knew each other. We couldn't make it through a meal without fighting. One morning at a motel diner, I actually picked up a three cheese omelet and threw it across the table. Outside, waiting for Larry to finish his breakfast, I rinsed the grease from my fingers in the patio fountain. Sex was the only part we ever got right. I didn't know shit, but when I was alone with Larry, pieces of me took over. My mouth and hands and hips got away from the rest of me in the dark.

I looked at Wade waiting, so earnest, still clutching his pastry by the window. “Sure,” I said. “It takes some time. You just have to be patient.”

Wade began to learn and record to memory the details he had rushed over as a hurried suitor. Things like his wife’s pistachio allergy, or the way the feet of all her jeans were ragged because she wore them just a few centimeters too long. These eccentricities only made her more fascinating to him. Frannie insisted on continuing her job at Walker Manufacturing Company, despite Wade’s protests that they didn’t need the money and that the commute across icy roads wasn’t a good idea. “You know what,” he confided to me, “I’m glad the girl won’t quit. I love that stalwart attitude.” Sometimes that’s what he called her—the girl.

It must be pointed out that Frannie never grew to love her job. She was summoned to the foreman’s office after lunch. One Monday morning there was a notice paper clipped to her blank time card, and following the directions therein, she made her way to the cluster of offices she had seen the morning of her first interview. When she reached number 42A and knocked tentatively, a small voice called her inside. Behind an enormous desk was the foreman of her line, the man who drove by and observed their work at regular intervals, watching a few moments before marking his clipboard. He looked different inside his office, off his little golf cart. It was like seeing Father Daniel without his robes for the first time.

“Francesca,” he said. “Am I saying your name right, dear?” Then when she nodded, “Come inside, please. Have a seat.” He motioned to the two chairs against the wall, and Frannie seated herself on the edge of one of them. She watched as the man moved aside looping reams of computer print-outs. He folded his hands in front of him and smiled at her. “Do you have any idea why I’ve asked you to come see me?”

“No, sir.”

“Well, each line has a quota—a certain number of parts that must be pushed through each shift, as well as a certain percentage of that number that must pass inspection.” He looked at her kindly as he explained this. “I’m afraid our line has not been regularly reaching its quota since you joined the team.”

“It’s just taken me awhile to get the swing of it all,” she said.

“I understand, Francesca, I surely do,” he bobbed his head. “But I also know that sometimes we just get trapped in the

wrong job. Me, I'm a statistician, a scientist, if you will. This is not where I dreamed I'd be, but I'm making the best of it. Do you like your job here, Francesca?" He didn't wait for an answer. "If you don't that's fine, even understandable, but I need you to work faster for me and more conscientiously." He looked across the sprawling surface of his desk top, right into her watering eyes. "I need to see more turn-out. Can I count on you?"

"Of course." She said this as if she were accepting a grave mission.

The only problem was, Frannie couldn't work any faster. I believe this, because I had tried to put her to work doing something as simple as hole-punching in the office. She tried to hurry herself. She imagined music in head, and pretended she had to keep time in some intricate, smoldering metal dance. Bend. Place. Press. Bend. Place. Press. But the faster she went the sloppier her work became. She melded pipes into the doughnuts in crazy angles and had no choice but to toss them into the scrap metal bin, the one that doesn't even go to the inspection center.

One morning a few weeks after her summons, when her scrap bin was filling much too quickly, she realized the pieces she had just placed were misaligned and made a frantic grab for them after she'd already pressed her palms to the buttons. The steel jaws of the machine caught her left hand, and she felt a strange pressure as she watched them tighten, hearing the mechanical groan as the machine crunched against her outstretched fingers. She waited for the pain, like when she tripped and caught a slice of broken pop bottle in her knee in the vacant lot behind her grandmother's house. In the milliseconds before the machine released her hand, she imagined herself passed out on the cement floor, and wondered if they would know to call Wade at his office. Then, suddenly, she was free, and her hand was whole. She stepped back and turned it over in front of her face, wiggling her fingers. Then she walked away from the line, leaving the gaping cluster of men staring, some of them calling out to her, "Hey, where are you going? Are you okay?"

Driving home for the first time in the afternoon, she cracked her windows and breathed in the spring smell of wet asphalt and damp pasture. She kept stretching her fingers out then gripping them around the steering wheel. She had heard of amputees who wake from surgery and think they can move their toes, only to

discover their leg has been removed below the knee. Only the sight of her long fingers and chewed nails reassured her that she still had a left hand.

She made one stop before reaching the office, at St. Isadore's. She knew Father Daniel would be out making his visits on a Friday afternoon, so she went up the stairs to the alcove above the catechumen classrooms. She had not been to mass since weeks before her wedding, and as she knelt at the altar below the tabernacle she could feel the wafers and wine, the resurrected body and blood, radiating out from the locked plywood cabinet. Her own blood was racing in her ears so that she could not find the words for the prayers, the ones she had known forever. Inside her brain one word kept playing over and over and it was a kind of prayer. Miracle.

By the time she let herself into the office, she had begun to doubt her own experience, and she was talking around the accident in veiled circles. I was able to piece the story together, though. "There's probably some kind of safety release built into the machine," I told her. "I haven't heard of any accidents over there in years."

We agreed it might be best not to tell Wade, who believes God witnesses directly through the souls of those who are born again and is wary of any other kind of miracle.

I noticed a change in Frannie immediately. The next morning she dropped her husband off at the office and helped him carry in the components of our new computer system. It made me sick watching that girl, who had somehow broken one of our keyboards and the coffee maker in an attempt at basic data entry, lug boxes of expensive office equipment down the sidewalk. Then, when the computer rep came down from Garrison, she actually helped him set everything up. I could hear them over in Wade's office as we both worked in mine. "Just plug that in over there," the guy said. "Perfect. Now thread that up to me."

"What's going on?" I said. Wade looked up at me, confused. "With Frannie." I nodded my head toward the door.

"Oh, can you tell something's different?" He looked up at me with a ridiculous grin. "She quit her job yesterday. I think she's going to be a lot happier," he said. "And all of a sudden things are better."

"Things?" I didn't know what the hell he was talking about.

"Yeah, things, you know, at home. It's like all of a sudden when she touches me, whoo! Maybe all these months she's just

been stressed out from working in that factory, or maybe we just needed some more time.”

After that it was their yard over on Spotswood Avenue. She dug flower beds all around the place. She took the car down to the boat landing and waded out into Dry River, the cold water riffing around her legs. She scanned the riverbed for rocks, and when she found one that she thought might work, she picked it up and turned it over in her hands, running her fingers all along its surface. She filled the trunk and drove back up Main Street, with the back end of the car only a foot off the road. She stacked the stones into retaining walls to hold in place all that dirt she’d turned up. She felt her way along the rocks she’d already placed until she found the right spot for the next one. They were held together tighter than if she’d secured them with mortar.

She started doing all sorts of crafts, the things ladies around here call handiwork. She embroidered butterflies on pillows and cross-stitched a sampler for Wade to hang in the office. She knit me a turtleneck tank for my birthday in April. She made a wreath for her grandmother’s grave and took it down to the cemetery on Mother’s Day. She tried to talk me into taking a folk art seminar with her at the Community College—basket weaving techniques of the Blue Ridge Mountain people.

And all the while things kept getting better and better between she and Wade until he finally couldn’t take it anymore. He started to doubt her.

“I’m telling you,” he said to me as I stood at the Xerox machine, copying the previous week’s accident report forms, “it’s too much.” He was hovering over my shoulder, obsessing over Frannie’s latest accomplishment in the sack. Something he called the swirl.

“No, Wade,” I said, “You’re too much. You married a woman practically half your age, and now you’re insecure.”

“Listen, it’s like she knows something new every night. Where’s she getting all this stuff, and why didn’t she ever do any of it before?”

I considered describing for him the way they look to me—walking home from the office holding hands, their shadows stretching forward together on the sidewalk. Perhaps I should have told him how, by the end of their first date, he knew Frannie better than I ever knew Larry.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’m your assistant, not your marriage counselor.”

“I won’t go through what I did with Trish all over again,” he said. “That’s too much to ask of any man.”

Charlie started getting off the bus with Nick toward the end of the school year. Since Frannie was free, she offered to keep an eye on her until I finished up at the office. They were trying out for majors that year, Nick for short stop and Charlie, who is left-handed like her father, for pitcher. They tossed the ball back and forth for hours while Frannie yanked dandelions out of her vinca beds or soaked thin strips of oak in a basin of warm water to loosen them up for her baskets. She spray-painted a strike zone target on the side of the woodpile. My daughter was the only girl left in the league. Over the years the others had all switched to softball. She fired away until Frannie thought her arm would fall off.

“You’re hitting that target every time,” she said when she brought out Popsicles.

“It doesn’t matter because I can’t throw hard enough,” Charlie said. The previous spring Wade and I had taken the kids to King’s Dominion, and Charlie insisted on going into the booth that clocks how fast you can throw a baseball. She got three throws, and they all looked perfect to me. Even Wade said she had great form, but none of them clocked higher than 60 miles per hour.

“How hard do you have to throw?” Frannie looked at Nick, who shrugged his shoulders and sucked on his popsicle. He wasn’t sure how to treat his new stepmother, and that’s understandable since she was only eight years his senior.

“Our coach says in the seventies at least,” Charlie said, “or else you have to be able to throw junk.”

“What’s junk?” Frannie unwrapped her own Popsicle.

Nick sighed, feigning exasperation. “Screwgies, knuckle balls, sliders.”

“If I could get a knuckle ball, he’d let me pitch,” said Charlie. “You don’t have to throw those fast at all. You just push it off your finger tips like that.” She flicked her hand out in front of her like she was finishing up a magic spell. “So it won’t spin. Then the wind makes it do all kinds of stuff.”

“They go all squirrely,” said Nick.

Frannie lay her Popsicle down on the plastic wrapper and picked one of the balls up off the lawn. “So it’s something like this?” She didn’t bother pulling the ball in to her chin or drawing up her leg, she just hurled it toward the target, and the kids, even

Nick, watched in awe as the ball pushed straight off her fingers, dipping crazily just before hitting base of the woodpile.

“No one could’ve hit that,” Charlie said, “It dropped right off the table. Can you show me how to do it?”

As the summer wore on, Wade started to lose control. If Frannie were a few minutes late with lunch, he was sure she had met someone on the sly that morning. He would accuse her of all sorts of indiscretions right in front of me, right in front of customers a few times. She left the office in tears, and eventually she stopped bringing over our meals. The little league coach heard about Frannie’s pitching, and asked her if she wanted to volunteer to work with the kids on Wednesday evenings. Wade was positive she had something going on with the coach.

Things finally came to a head in August, and Frannie, tired of defending herself, decided to leave, at least for a while. She moved back into the little house by the vacant lot, almost a year exactly after her grandmother’s death. She’s a different person now, Frannie is. I don’t know that I’ve ever seen someone come into their own like that, all in the course of a year.

Throughout the winter I had Wade over to eat dinner once or twice a week, just to keep him from getting too down, but mostly all he did was ask me if I’d talked to Frannie. It amazes me what I once would have done for him. I’ve stopped by to see her a few times, too. She says she’s not ready to file for divorce, but she won’t move back in until Wade agrees to see a counselor. We don’t talk about her accident, or whatever it was that happened to her on the line at the muffler factory. We sit on the steps and stretch our legs out because the cement holds onto the sun, even after the lights go on in the shop windows downtown and the breeze picks up off the river. We sit there in the dark like high school girls

She’s been working for an orchard outside of town. All their autumn help disappears after the fruit harvest. In the past few weeks they’ve begun pruning trees, and she thinks it’s wonderful the way the light shines through the branches when they’re done. She tries to tell me what it feels like to run your fingers along the last season’s growth, finding the right place to cut so that the leaves keep reaching up.

Kanatihal Hill
still

i have to be funny otherwise
otherwise
imma put motherfucking rocks
in my motherfucking pockets
and
take a walk underwater
and roll with the lochness

no one will know
if i was a myth or
really existed
and no one will know
if i really lived life
or was just an exhibit

Bryn Homuth

Mouths to Feed

Hong Kong

I.

A fisherman casts
out into the bay, the lure
bobbing in the chop
next to wave-tossed ferries,
his empty stringer coiled
beneath a teetering stool.

II.

Skimming a sickly film
from the pond,
she walks the sluggish walk
of one half-submerged,
her waders mossed
with more algae and scum
than the net she dips beneath the surface.

III.

Brushes and paint
arranged like silverware
at a place setting,
blank easel his empty plate,
the sketch artist readies his palette,
waiting to paint his meal on the canvas.

IV.

She throws her weight
behind a steel cart
heaped with garbage, her back bowed
like a stem of water chestnut.
The light reflected by her vest
illuminates wrappers, napkins, and bottles
still strewn across the road.

V.

Crouched at the base of a pillar,
masons mix patchwork cement in pails,
flatten with rusted makeshift towels
as if ironing shirts,
new creases appearing as others are pressed.

Hope Johnson
Whistle 1931

She teetered off,
arms ribbon-wrapped

around a torn leather bag,
skinny bow legs stumbling

from high step to wooden
platform, a few pennies

bouncing in her left pocket
for tar-gangly cousin,

waiting by the sidewalk
to raise a child, not hers.

I passed that same empty
chalkboard boxcar yesterday,

Colored written in powdery
letters across its forehead,

only undiscovered rail artifact
left in Kentucky,

squares etched out, where
windows should have been,

but never were, faded remnants
of cousin Ruby, taped

inside its metal walls, a shorter
brassy woman by her side,

mauve rings hugging
their fourth fingers. They slept

in the same bed,
and granny never told.

Ruby

Our ancestors buy our souls... become our protectors
Bube Tribal Belief, Bioko Island

She begged in stanzas
for a girl-child with a red face,

who'd make nectar
out of her old humming bird body

her voice, a blade of grass once,
yearning to become a whistle, blown

between sea horse lips; who'd collect
feathers in her notebook

grow into bojula—woman who stole
her own thoughts and flew, a pencil

balanced behind her right ear.
She stood in front of Elah-lo

threw herself on her oiled belly, opened
her cupped hands, and there I stood;

girl-child, ruby
with wings.

Kily Keeling

Dorothy Parker gets an I-Phone

Glued to little boxes
They hit click, delete and send
Finding no harm in what they dismiss, miss or end
Thumbing at the boxes morning, noon, and night
What we considered a privilege
They consider a human right
Their wicked little rectangles causing the decline of the English
language
“Writing” is what happens on Twitter, Facebook, and via text
message
They use no quill, no nib, and no ink
They even have automatic messages they can send
Because they are too busy to f*cking think...
Now, please if you would, dear sir,
Pass me another god d*mn drink.

Debbie McCulliss

She Writes Regularly

Breaking ground
she unearths hard
dirt, what is hidden
in the scattered unnamed
broken seeds.

Beyond the fragile
surface roots
she writes what's grown deep,
yielded to the elements,
frosted over.

Budding shoots
rise out of the earth

in settled air.
She weeds

softened earth,
writes bold highlights

in fertile ground
ready
to stem out.

Benjamin Myers

The Angels of Juarez

THE ANGELS OF JUAREZ
are standing on folding
chairs, their feet slippery with sweat
and silver metallic paint.

Behind them a cinder
block wall self-eviscerates
into red, yellow, and green graffiti.

A dry wind chicken-picks goose down
from their wire-framed wings

and tugs at the cardboard
signs that say
ASSASIN REPENT!
and
CORRUPT POLICE LOOK FOR GOD.

They are messengers. They are
witnesses. They are evangelical
kids from a little church

on a dirt road. I have never been to Juarez.
What I know about violence is

from the school parking lot,
the time Jeremy Kane
ripped a guy's ball sack with the tip
of his cowboy boot,

or the time another friend
cut the earlobe from some punk
outside the all-ages club, the way
the blood fell
in sheets like a woman's
hair.

I've been told that
what my uncle remembered
of Korea
was how the wounded
sat bolt upright
just before
dying.

Another friend says violence
is part of rural life, every girl
and boy knows the flat expression
of a belt.

I want to meet it next time like those angels:
shimmering and completely silent
above the faded flicker of police tape,
wings shading the barefoot orphans ducking in
and out of the scene
of the crime.

R.C. Neighbors

Castles

She builds her castle in the sand, with as much on her arms
and hair and tongue as on the bastion.
Plump digits work at the crooked structure—
a clump here, a mound there—
carving out, with shovel and rake, her wide-eyed dreams.

But I dread the day the curtain is stormed,
either by ant or tide,
leaving in their wake the stings of the living
or the stench of the dead.
And when the keep has crumbled, she will realize what I already
know—

we were never at the beach,
but in a plastic turtle,
 on the five-square patio
we call our “yard.”

A Respite

Black Birds
perch on wire—
a layover on
cross-country flight—

hundreds of them,
or more even.
Species unknown,
they look only black

against the sunset
and freshly hayed field.
They stretch from pole
to pole, sag the line,

if only a little.
They cover crossbar,
boxes, knobs.
They crowd together,

wing to black wing,
no space between them,
out of kinship, affection,
or simple need.

When they flutter into the air,
they surge together,
all in unison
like a swarm, a school,

a single, living thing.
Like an eleventh plague,
a cresting ocean wave
that shrinks toward the horizon.

Shawnte Orion:

Mission Control

Elliptical orbits
ultimately return
comets of bad decisions.

Making my world wobble
between the gravitational
pull of arguments and obligations.

Reminding me that even
experienced astronauts
rely on gyroscopes

to avoid disorientation
while navigating space shuttles
through our weightless galaxy.

Upon reentry, backpack jettisoned
my daughter cartwheels across the room.
Stabilizing the entire house

in a moment of inertia. Her
angular momentum keeping
me absolutely still.

Carl Palmer

Blind Trust

“Is anything coming?” not even slowing down for the stop sign at the intersection of our old gravel road and the highway.

“Nothing on my side,” I say. Knowing he hadn't looked before asking confirms a ten year old son's allegiance with his dad.

Dad would have never done this with Mom riding shotgun even if she were to ever ride in his truck, which I don't think she ever did.

I bet he never got her to light his cigarettes either or sip foam off the beer cans I opened from his six pack under my side of the seat.

My best secret was that Friday night hot dog at the varsity football game. *“No need to tell Mom. We'll just make tomorrow a no meat Saturday.”*

Stephen Powers

Losing the Girl I Took to Dollywood Isn't Hard to Master

So why did I go to the wedding
under the Burke Brise Soleil last Saturday?
Because forgetting is like the clouds
moving toward the horizon. Once one
is gone, another comes after
in a different shape.
Which brings me back

to Dollywood. Right there,
around the corner
from the Southern Gospel
Museum and Hall of Fame, inhale
as long and hard as you can.
The last time I brought her here
some smoke from one of her American
Spirits wrapped around the leaves
in a haze and stuck around for my coming again.
Draw it down so it enters your lungs once more.
It tastes as unsettling as the realization
that the last time I'd seen the bride
was two years ago when she left
my flat in Riverwest early in the morning.
Which brings me back

to Dollywood. I return
because I have stared at an empty wallet
when I needed a bottle of Evan Williams
and a pack of Camels, and because I have
woken up in the night with my hand
on the pillow next to me, dream-tricked
into thinking it was her back.
Which brings me back

to Dollywood, because these days I drive
through the part of town wiped out
by a tornado—trees snapped in half,
gas station twisted and uprooted,
church roof peeled down to the timber
trusses—without noticing anything
out of the ordinary. And because
lately only a tequila-logged fire ant
struggling on the rim of my cactus-stem
margarita glass has given my lip a sting.

Nicolas Poynter

Houston Looming

The girl with the metallic-blue hair wrote it with a blood-red marker, and all in caps. Mr. Santiago was affected by words a great deal, how one single word could describe something very complicated, very elusive, how they could form sentences that echoed for a long time. He sometimes spent large portions of his class considering words, which was confusing to his students because he taught physics and not english. The girl with the metallic blue hair had written it on the board to her friend, the girl with the metallic pink hair, who would be in the class the next period. *Have fun learning magic*, she had told her. And then she had turned to Mister Santiago and politely demanded he not erase it until pink-haired girl read it. Spellbound, he nodded in agreement. Then . . . *Magic*, he repeated, mouthing the word reverently. *Magic*. He would not erase it for a week. Mister Santiago, for the rest of his life, would tell people, when asked, that he taught magic, not physics.

Nicky's mother was rushed, late for work, and the frantic nature of her goodbye did little to make him feel better, instead pushed him deeper into his sense that things were quickly falling apart around him, her adoration of him being the most vital of these things. After she had gone, he remained where she had left him, frozen on the tarmac of the bus station like a nervous animal, and watched her disappear towards the flat-prairie horizon, the sun's glare glinting off of different pieces of the car long after Nicky could no longer make out its shape.

"Hot already," he heard from behind him. "This summer is the worst I can remember," someone else, a man that sounded really, really old, added. "That sun has no mercy." Nicky did not turn to look at them, remained like a statue, and the buses, the passengers and the rest of the universe rotated around him as if he were its fulcrum. Every year, sometimes twice in one year, Nicky was sent to see his father. As he was poor, this was accomplished by bus.

The boy climbed onto his bus in the same manner that he did most things—apprehensively, always looking like he wanted to be somewhere else, anywhere else. The other passengers stared

at him as if hypnotized and unable to look away, as if there had been a car accident on him, him an oddity even by bus standards, his mannerisms awkward, his proportions all wrong, and his face, the parts visible underneath so much straight, falling hair, was flaming red with pimples. And then there was the mystery of his race. Mexican? Asian? People always tended to look too long and it made him sick that they did. *Stop looking at me!* He wanted to scream, but didn't. Instead, he quickly threw himself into the first seat he found, the one across from the driver, using it the way a soldier would use a fox hole, and then the boy's entire body clenched into a fist when he looked up to see a gigantic, circular mirror, and his reflection, staring back at him. His face snapped towards the right as if he had been struck from the left. Inconspicuously as he could, he raised himself off the seat an inch or so and scooted away from the aisle, to the window seat, his shoulder pushing hard against the bus frame, to where the mirror could not find him anymore. He rested his cheek there, tight against the window, and exhaled deeply, his breath fogging the area for a moment. The sun was still just a few fingers above the horizon and it was looking right at him.

Nicky heard the subtle laughter behind him. *I have dog hearing I think. I hear everything. Maybe because I am so quiet, I can hear everything.* He instinctively knew it was for him. It was a soundtrack that followed him wherever he went, announcing his presence. It was okay. It had worn a dead spot on him and he did not feel it anymore. The only time it bothered him was when he was with his mother and she looked as if she were ready to cry.

It seemed to take forever for them to start moving but when they did, after the bus had stopped making a dizzying array of left turns and began accelerating straight and towards highway speed, Nicky felt better that the sun wound up on the other side of the bus. The sun, to Nicky, was almost as bad as school, him preferring darkness, and longing for the cold of winter which allowed him to wear scarfs and wool hats and big coats with high collars. The days were short in winter too, the sun weak and often shrouded behind clouds and fog and other gray things. Not like summer. Better than summer. *The colder the better. The darker the better.*

They were just about half way when it became obvious to Nicky that the sun was switching sides, that it had been maneuvering all afternoon, and, to his dismay, was then dropping

low again until it was bearing down on him again with all its force. It began molesting him even worse than before while he watched mile after mile of burnt landscape, squinting through his unprotected, possibly-Asian or possibly-Mexican eyes, his body as still as a corpse, his mind spinning like a top, always running back and forth through things that had happened or were about to happen, searching for something good, crumbs. Sometimes there were crumbs. The thin window glass became hot like a stove, but Nicky did not move, his cheek absorbing the heat without complaint. It was as if he were really not even there at all.

He had been told that he would repeat the sixth grade the night before boarding the bus in Oklahoma City. "It is a maturity thing son," his mother had explained and she had seemed ready to cry again. "You were right on the border age-wise and everybody just feels it is better for you to stay back. Junior high is gonna be very different and you need another year to prepare." Nicky had an inkling of what that meant—nobody in his class really liked him, not even the teachers, and they wanted him to try again with a whole new group of kids, an idea he had thought up on his own long before. The age excuse was just that. He was already one of the oldest in his class. He knew that.

Nicky's mother had gently grabbed his chin, "Look at me, Chico. Please look at me when when I speak to you. You should always look at people." He had not understood the urgency in her voice or what he had done wrong.

The word *autistic* kept being whispered in the shadows that surrounded him and this seemed to make his mother sad, while the others, teachers, acted as if the word was very good. It was not long before he realized the word was his word, that *he* was autistic. Nicky was, at first anyway, very curious about the word, but then decided he didn't care. *They are not going to tell me anyway.* He had many hours to think about what another year in the sixth grade would mean to him. Nearing the end of his trip, He decided that he did not care about that either.

Nicky knew they were close when the scattering of big trucks transformed, all at once, into thick, weird traffic, surrounding them on all sides, the width of the freeway growing quickly to accommodate them. Farm houses and truck stops changed into fast-food restaurants and crowded gas stations and liquor stores. The bus' straight-line path transitioned into a series of snake-like maneuvers, like the plane had done, the one time Nicky had flown, just before it landed. Nicky watched the

horizon, waiting for the moment when the tiny buildings would appear, jumping from behind the giant trees that lined both sides of the highway. *There they are. I see them.* He preferred to see Houston as small and insignificant, far in the distance, and not towering above him. It gave his mind a brief respite before the music in his head quickened and amplified—ten minutes, twenty at the most.

When the bus separated itself from the freeway, careening at first to the right and then quickly to the left at the exit marked *Downtown Houston*, Nicky had to brace himself to avoid toppling into the aisle. The bus whirled along the sharp-banking ramp like a ball being spun on the end of a string. It felt like a roller coaster ride to Nicky and he was grateful when the bus finally stopped, pulling up to a red light with its brakes screeching, pneumatics belching, noisily entering the city as if it had been dropped from the sky. *That was autistic*, Nicky thought to himself.

Buildings are monsters here. The sun glimmered off sterile, glass facades, bouncing from one structure to another, back and forth, until the sky was filled with blinding light. Shabbily dressed men stood on corners and regarded the bus, including Nicky, with hateful, angry faces. They looked like they were melting, slowly dying in the heat. Currents of hot air rose from the asphalt of the road surface and the concrete of the sidewalk, skewing everything slightly out-of-focus and giving the pedestrians an unreal quality, as if they were behind a thin, transparent curtain. It all seemed very hell-like to the boy and he finally withdrew from the window, sinking deep into his seat, one half of his face seared red like a steak. He would soon be at the mercy of his father.

Inside the barn-like station, Nicky sat by himself in the last of dozens of rows of seats, his pack held close to his chest, as he had been instructed, and waited for his father. The sneaky sun was sliding around the building, slowly leveling its gun at Nicky through a bank of large glass doors. Nicky remained motionless, helpless as the light bled towards him on the polished surface of the floor. He watched it approach. Then, without warning, it jumped at him and cast itself harshly all over his face, screaming, *look at this ugly kid! Look at him!* Nicky squirmed, but, it was no use. He became another casualty of summer, like the grass and the trees and the creeks. The Houston sun engulfed him completely. It left him burning and humiliated on the hard

wooden bench, an over-exposed photograph stewing in developer. It flailed at him without remorse, beating down on him, until sweat beaded on his nose and tears welled in his eyes. *Twelve more days after today.*

His father finally arrived just before dusk, his hair combed back and his manner oddly narcissistic for his circumstances, always seeming to be acting in some pretend movie that nobody else cared about. His expression dropped at seeing his son, as if he too were looking at the aftermath of a wreck that had happened. He walked to Nicky, decelerating as he approached, his progress becoming so slow that Nicky fantasized he would eventually start going backwards and exit in the direction that he had arrived. "Good Lord," he muttered to himself when he was close enough that his son could hear, his face plastered with disappointment. Nicky felt it like a sucker punch to the stomach. He looked at his shoes. *Twelve more days after today.*

As always, the talking was hard. They, the boy and his father, merged into the traffic above downtown inside a mint-green Plymouth Fury, a car that Nicky thought looked exactly like an army tank, and then moved eastward into traffic that buzzed like bees, towards the rows of burning stacks, the poor areas where his dad always lived. The traffic was disappearing as fast as the light and the father had more and more room to maneuver. He sped like a crazy man, changing freeways again and again, which meant five-story over passes and steep curves. Nicky clutched his pack tighter, trying to avoid looking outside the car. When he did, it seemed as if they were in flight, level with the tops of the tallest buildings, and fear paralyzed him, him being very afraid of both heights and motion. Nicky jerked his focus back towards the dashboard so spasmodically that his father noticed it. He shook his head at him. "Geez," he whispered to himself, his arm dangling out the window with a cigarette, watching his boy from the corner of his eye. "How did you come from me?"

"Maybe we will go to Galveston tomorrow, huh?" He asked his son this as if he preferred to change the horribly awkward mood inside the car.

The boy did not perk up at this, as had always been the routine. He had been teased and fooled with promises of beach trips before. And his dad had never taken him. If he were to get swindled, Nicky would not be surprised by it. He shrugged and his dad immediately looked as if someone had spit in his face.

“Well then to hell with it. We won’t go!”

We were not going to go anyway.

The Plymouth climbed onto the suspension bridge that reached over the shipping traffic, the one that Nicky had been eyeing suspiciously since it had first appeared in the distance. It was so steep that he was trying to understand how a car could climb it without tipping over backwards. As they started their ascent, his back pushing harder and harder into the car seat, Nicky became terrified to the point that he forgot to breathe for a little bit. The sun had been hiding behind the downtown skyline, waiting. It saw the chance and jumped out, ambushing Nicky, splashing itself off of steel and concrete and back at his face, forcing the boy to squint and cover his eyes with his hands. *Again!* it screamed. *Look at this kid! This kid is so ugly!* The startling combination of sensations and circumstances made Nicky feel as though he were shooting helplessly into a wicked oblivion. He closed his eyes tightly and waited to see if he would touch down on the other side.

Nicky’s father did not work. He received a disability check instead and stayed at rat-hole motels, the ones that gave monthly rates. Even at his young age, Nicky was wise that it made a big difference what day of the month he was sent to his father. Whenever he learned of an impending trip, he immediately ran to the official calendar in his school notebook and studied the logistics. He was not thrilled to be arriving on the twelfth for two weeks. He would certainly have to steel himself towards the end; his father was always broke at the end of the month.

Nicky never spoke of the trips with his mother, an odd thing she often remarked to her friends. She would never know that he took them the same way he would take a punch in the arm or an injection—gritting his teeth. He would never disclose that his days with his father mostly consisted of watching movies in smelly chairs while flying cockroaches ricocheted off orange-brown curtains. The only evidence he ever gave that the trips even existed, and were not imaginary, was to blatantly stare down cheap motels as his mother passed them on the road. “What is with the stink-eye mister?” she would question him. “Rat-holes,” he would answer, but so softly that she could not hear.

Nicky was nudged awake by his father who seemed to be in a suspiciously pleasant mood.

“Want to play a game?”

The boy's eyes widened as if he were being electrocuted. "What kind of game?"

"A kind of card game. And I tell you what. If you win this game, we will go to Galveston *all* next week."

"How do I win?"

The father held up a trio of cards with golden fast-food logos flashing off the edges and fanned them out with that grin that he sometimes had. He plopped them down on the boy's bed as he spoke, "these are winning tickets . . . Free cheeseburger, . . . Free soda, . . . Free fries. They give these out and we scratch them off and win these prizes." He paused for effect, "We get free food."

The alarm bell rang in the boy's head—his dad was out of money sooner than expected. Nicky's posture went limp as he recalled past episodes of hunger and long stretches of boredom, imprisoned in a smelly rat hole, unable to pay for movies or meals or anything really. Then his father's face immediately went wild with emotion, as if it were his cue, like they were actors in a play and had rehearsed this part many times. He stood abruptly and kicked at the side of the chair and Nicky's ears pricked up as a dog's might. He cursed the boy's mother under his breath and stomped around slapping empty beer cans, which then went hurtling through the room as if they were flying cockroaches.

Nicky looked at his feet dangling off the side of the bed. His long socks had become bunched up at his ankles during the night, half on and half off his feet. His breathing quickened and became more shallow. His entire body seemed to contract on itself as he shrunk into a ball. His hands froze into claws and he rhythmically worked the index fingers and thumb together in pincer movements, tapping quickly. He did the same thing with his toes inside his socks, making the socks slide further off his feet. His father stared at his behavior until Nicky realized he was watching him and stopped, placing his hands neatly at his sides.

"Just get in the damn car."

The father said he had already mapped out every one of the fast food restaurants in Greater Houston. "The only rule is we gotta wait an hour before we can get another card, so, . . ." he wiggled his head like a clown at Nicky in the passenger's seat. "I have constructed an hour-long loop. We just run the circle all day long and hit the same place every hour, on the hour."

"How are we gonna buy all that food?"

“Buy?” The father held up a card again, staring at the back as he sped along the surface street fronting the hotel. He read it as a professor might, “No pur—chase nec-es-sar-y . . . We ain’t *buying* anything, son.”

The first place, called hamburger joints by his father, came quickly, just down the street from the motel and across from the freeway on-ramp. The father idled the car at the curb and sent Nicky inside as if they were robbing it and he was the get-away driver. It was between breakfast and lunch, so the restaurant was near empty, only a handful of old people. Nicky was relieved there were not lines formed, but then froze in his tracks at the sight of a young girl behind the counter with dark brown bangs flopping over her eyes. She seemed like a quiet girl, he could tell, maybe like him, and she was pretty, even though she had a face like his. He approached her. “Can I have a game card please?” He asked, his voice sounded odd to him, talking to her but not looking at her.

“What do you want to eat, sweetie?”

The effect of the girl calling him *sweetie* almost knocked Nicky down. He shook his head very slowly from side to side.

“You don’t want anything to eat?”

“No please . . . Just the card please.” His voice sounded even more bizarre than it had the first time and he knew it. It made him nervous that he could not talk like other people, the reason he did not like talking.

The girl seemed confused, as if she had not been in the situation before. She looked around for help, but nobody was paying attention to them. Her frown drove a stake into Nicky’s heart. The boy had a quick vision of returning to the car without a card, or worse, watching his father yell at a pretty girl. He felt as if he were only moments away from a catastrophe or being exposed as a cheater and he repeated himself in a mild panic, “Can I have a game card please?”

Now the girl looked closer at Nicky, his nervousness, and then towards the car just outside the fishbowl glass. The girl could see the outline of a man smoking a cigarette, carelessly relaxed deep into his seat while the boy did the dirty work. Her mouth and eyes tightened. She very deliberately took a giant stack of cards from beneath the counter, looked both ways and then carefully slid them across to Nicky, his eyes growing wide. “You take care of yourself little brother. Don’t take anybody’s crap.”

Nicky reached for the prize, but the girl would not quite let them go. Nicky met her gaze and instinctively knew what she needed. "I will," he told her. "I will take care of myself."

"And what else?"

Nicky's eyes went up into his head as he remembered. "I won't take crap?"

"Good." And her long, thin fingers delicately uncovered the cards, brushing against Nicky's hands ever so slightly when they did, sending goose bumps along his arms and legs. "Here you go."

Nicky thought about science in between stops and how the earth must spin slower in the summertime, the reason why the miserable days lasted longer and longer. He stuck his hand out of the Plymouth and used it to block out the sun completely. The pair rocked a bit inside the car as it accelerated around a loop and Nicky had to struggle to keep his hand there. He smiled just a little bit at his accomplishment, antagonizing his nemesis. *Take that.*

Nicky was working hard, approaching counter after counter with his straight, greasy hair and the haggard expression of a refugee. He became a machine, his sweat forming small puddles whenever he stopped moving. But he hardly ever stopped moving. He scurried between the air conditioners of car, hamburger joint and rat-hole, spiteful towards the sun. It was not his friend. Nicky began to enjoy his momentum. He knew he was doing good, better than any other kid could do. He could endure suffering better than all of them. They would be complaining and whining while he would be working away in silence. He could stay quiet the longest, stay still the longest, work harder and longer than any boy he had ever met. *Take that.*

He and his father left a blizzard of losing tickets in their wake, but soon had enough winners to feed themselves for the remainder of the month. It had only taken five days. They gorged themselves on a cheeseburger victory meal, sitting in the Plymouth as it fronted a park, keeping the motor running to stay cool. The father alternated between complaining about the heat and mocking the joggers along the trail, flicking his cigarettes towards a steel trash barrel. Nicky kept his eye on the sun, monitoring its movements, prepared to jump into the back seat if necessary. He glared at it as he would a bully.

Nicky thought it was strange that his father seemed to like him all of a sudden. They shared the last of the french fries

sitting much closer together than usual, even though the front seat of the Plymouth had enough room for two fathers and two sons. Nicky wanted to measure it to see if it was bigger than the motel room. Nicky knew he had worked hard and he suspected that his father liked that he had worked so hard, that maybe he was even proud of him. They drove back in high spirits and Nicky even smiled when his father sang along to the radio, which must have encouraged him because he kept doing it the whole way and even smiled himself. But, as soon as they got back, the dad fell on the bed with a grunt, the furniture rattling from the impact all around them, oblivious that his son remained standing, tense, just his side of the closed door.

“Did I win?” He asked the back of his father’s frayed underwear. The father did not move. His voice was muffled from beneath a pillow. “We both won. Now we can eat.”

“What about Galveston? You said if I won, you would take me to Galveston.”

“We will see. Not tomorrow though. Tomorrow we rest . . . Turn on the TV.”

“I worked hard. I won. You said you would take me to Galveston . . . You said . . .”

The father jumped and turned like a wild animal. The expression on his face pushed Nicky back as deep as he could go into the door. “You sit down and shut up! This life is about surviving. Not fancy beach picnics . . . We don’t have any money! We got no money to even go to a movie. We sure as *hell* are not driving to Galveston! Sit down and shut up or go back to your mother . . . his room is it for you boy. Take a good look around. We got no money. This is it! Don’t like it? Go cry to your mother, . . . if you can find her.”

But Nicky did not cry, a fact that surprised them both. Nicky did not even flinch. Then something inside him broke loose, and it made a grotesque, mechanical noise when it did. The father must have heard it. He stared at his son, puzzled, as if waiting for his body to explode. When Nicky did not explode, he tried to stare down the boy, but Nicky refused to turn away, his eyes piercing out from the shadows at him. He threw his hands at the boy as if to say, *you are not worth the trouble*, retraced his steps to the bed and started a cigarette. Pungent smoke quickly filled the room. He did not look at the boy, but must have felt his eyes on him as he rested his elbows on his thighs, rubbing at his whiskers with his other hand. The father seemed uncomfortable.

Something had changed and it had changed just like that. When he was finished with his cigarette, he crushed out the butt, flipped over and went to sleep, immediately snoring as loud as the diesel trucks outside.

Nicky remained still, at least as far as his body was concerned. His thoughts trembled like the ground before an advancing army. His mind went some place far from the rat-hole motel. It drew a line there in the ground. *Nothing is right here. Nothing.* Other kids did not have these problems. Other kids did not spend hour upon hour rotting in motel-rooms, in buses and cars and flea markets. Other kids were cute and adorable. Other boys were chased by girls. He was repulsive to girls, regarded with laughter and dirty looks. *Gross*, he heard echoing from behind him whenever he left a room. It was not fair. He would not move until somebody explained to him what the heck was wrong with him and how he could fix it.

The hours slipped away, so many that he lost track of them. He breathed slower and slower, once for every three of his father's, so slow that it was as if he were not breathing at all. The boy did not become hungry or sleepy, standing exactly where his father had left him. He could have easily let go completely, stayed frozen permanently. In fact, Nicky assumed that this was his destiny now. He thought he understood suicide and it sounded so good that he felt silly for not thinking of it before.

It was at this moment, when the boy was holding his breath in a feeble attempt to end his own life, that the sun rose like an angry snake and exploded onto the curtains behind Nicky, radiating energy into his back. The room glowed a sudden revolutionary orange. The sun sent light invading through every crack and crevice, searching throughout the room until they exposed the stack of winning tickets. They had been casually left on the night stand, between a crowded ash tray and a flat, half-drunk can of beer—a treasure trove of lunches, . . . *another way out.* Nicky did not hesitate. He pounced on them, and then grabbed his pack too and then, in a whirl of intense light flashing, opened and closed the door, slamming it behind him so hard that flocks of birds scattered into the morning air.

He walked quickly across six lanes of traffic, not waiting for the light. His heart began to beat out of his chest, as if it alone were pushing him forward, his legs racing to keep up. He breathed in the morning air savagely, trying to purge the stink of the rat hole out of his lungs. *I was almost dead*, he thought. On

the other side of the avenue, he jumped and turned, popping as a guard at a palace might, pulling the straps of his pack tight onto his shoulders, preparing himself for the journey. He was not going home.

The same shiny girl was working the counter. He boldly placed three cards in front of her—free cheeseburger, free sixteen ounce drink, free small french fry. “To go please,” he quickly added as the well-experienced customer that he had become. They both grinned. The other customers seemed to notice Nicky as he stood waiting for his food, but not in the way he had become accustomed to people noticing him, the morning sun framing him in a golden outline, him watching the girl and them exchanging smiles when their eyes met, as if they were friends. *I will take care of myself.*

It was hot early, but Nicky did not feel it. A blue baseball cap pulled low on his forehead, he walked right into the teeth of the sun. It was a new day. He knew that much. Nicky felt as if the sun was protecting him. He thought that the sun had seen him suffer, seen the injustice that had been done to him, and then had changed sides and come to his rescue like calvary, and that it was even more powerful than he could possibly imagine.

Nicky stayed off of the interstate, in case the Plymouth was searching for him, but kept it close, mirroring it, crossing underneath it when needed, back-and-forth. It would be his compass when the sun rotated above him and fled west. *I know what the sun does.* He cleared the line of motels and diners quickly and then walked through the bad areas, what they called the slums. His feet pounded the invisible line that separated the white ghetto from the black ghetto. He looked at the people as he passed through, noisily slurping on the remnants of a fountain drink, incredulous looks flashing back at him from shadowy porches, but Nicky knew that they would not dare to approach him and challenge his protector, the sun.

Nicky passed through many construction sites too and the men almost always stopped working to look at him. One time there had even been a woman. They would take off their hard hats with one hand and wipe the sweat off of their foreheads with the other, all the time watching him, sometimes making goofy faces at each other or smiling wide before returning to their work. Some even shouted encouragement to him as he marched forward at an even pace, like a marine. The world had turned upside down.

Once out of the city, the highway tapered again, all the way down to four lanes, and dropped back to earth. There were no more side roads for Nicky to snake along. He would have to walk the freeway shoulder. The sun was still with him, peering over him from behind, casting his image far in front of him. But as it grew longer, it also grew fainter and Nicky knew his new friend was going to leave him very soon. He saw a decent spot and slid off the road into a drainage trench. Choosing a strategic position, he pushed his back into thick swaths of high, crunchy grass. He could hear the cars behind him, but he was certain he was hidden from their view. The distinctive thunder of the traffic, booming and then quickly trailing off in the distance, was immediately and surprisingly soothing—bullets echoing in the twilight.

He calculated he had walked thirty miles. Every exposed piece of Nicky had been burned. He had sweated salt residue in broad sheets on his jeans and shirt and his lips were so parched that no amount of soda seemed to be able to bring them back to normal. He carefully removed two hamburgers from his pack and began unwrapping them. The muscles in his legs felt strange. He rubbed at them, sighing with pain, stale french fries spilling out of his mouth. But within the horrible ache was his badge, his victory. He did not know exactly what to call it as he nursed himself in the tall weeds, but, whatever it was, it was better. *Yes . . . Yes.*

His ears separated the traffic behind him from a pulsing, low beat in front of him. It was radiating from a building with a giant lip print on its side, men streaming back-and-forth, alone or in pairs, men like his father, he suspected. *Are all men like my father?* Their was no moon and as soon as the sun vanished completely, the sky became pitch black. The flashing blues and greens from the sign became dominant in the night, reflecting off of the boy's face. *Sweethearts*, Nicky read aloud and then passed out from exhaustion.

He awoke long before dawn. His first instinct was to wait for light, but he could not stand it. He stuffed the last of his food into his mouth, jumped to his feet and then, just as quickly, he fell back to the ground. His legs had set up like concrete while he had slept. *Sabotage!* Nicky labored back to his feet, out of the ravine and struggled onto the empty freeway.

He stood in the middle of nothingness, his breathing quick. There was no sound and no light—the vacuum of space. Nicky

was close enough now that fog had developed during the night, making the world even more unreal. He smelled the salt in the air and thought he knew what that meant. *I'm close*. The fear now, the only fear, was not being able to continue forwards, going backwards. He pulled the straps tight on his pack and began walking, limping a little at first, without any shadow to keep him company.

When traffic did arrive, it was very scarce, a lucky thing for Nicky. In the darkness, he was in great danger on the side of the freeway. he hugged the edge as close as he could, but whenever his road jumped over another road, he had to walk across a short bridge and was forced to scoot to his left. He could feel passing cars on his hip and their pull on his body as they whizzed past. It would be easier to stop and wait for daylight, but his feet kept moving. He was afraid to stop and kept thinking he would see it, the ocean, at any moment.

He walked for several hours and then, the sky still dark, he found himself at the geographical edge of Texas and he dropped to his knees in despair. Galveston was an island. In front of Nicky was a sky-high bridge, shooting up and down like the arc of a rocket. It had no walkway. In the blackness it stood as intimidating as death itself—cold, purplish metal and stark crimson lamps casting foreboding shadows. The boy's entire body trembled. He began to smell the smoky, putrid air inside the rat-hole again. He heard a truck approaching behind him and fought the instinct to ease his body to the left as the roar shot passed him at high speed, the driver blaring his horn, his body rocking back and forth from the turbulence.

The lights of Galveston shimmered and pulsed at him like a mirage in the desert. It was right there. It was close. But it was impossible. He was sure he would drown if he tried to swim that distance. Over the bridge was completely out of the question, his mind and body filled with terror at the mere thought of it. And then Nicky remembered the mess that he had tried to untwist while in the doorway of the rat-hole. Yesterday had been the best day of his life, but his predicament had not changed, not really. He had traveled forty miles, but the journey was all for nothing if he could not cross that bridge. His entire future was thirty minutes in front of him. If he retreated now, he would lose it all. He would return to be the disgusting, sad boy that flunked sixth grade, crawl back into his pit. He could not allow that to happen. Nicky made his first ever grown-up decision to either cross the

bridge or to die on the bridge. The winds howled louder, the way they do when a hurricane is coming. He stood up and shed layer upon layer of fear, as if coming in from a winter storm. There was nothing to be scared of anymore.

Nicky stepped out into the middle of the right lane and began hiking up the bridge. The angle was so steep that he could not see anything except bridge, more bridge and black sky. For all he knew, the road ended at the top and he would fall off into the sea from an incredible height. Approaching traffic had to aggressively swerve and they let loose their horns on him, rolled down their windows and screamed at him. He did not hear them. His feet kept moving. *keep your feet moving* he reminded himself. *Keep your feet moving.* If he stopped, he knew for certain he would die there. *Keep your feet moving.*

The bridge seemed to get steeper. Nicky felt as though he could reach out and touch the concrete in front of him as he climbed higher and higher, scaling more than walking. The bridge swayed horribly with the gusting winds, as if it were about to collapse. The cars crossed the seams in the road and the noise of it thundered into his ears. *Keep your feet moving!* He dropped to a knee several times and each time was slower to recover. He was certain he was not going to make it.

Practically crawling, Nicky arrived at the top of the bridge, hundreds of feet above the water, just as the sun broke above the horizon for him. The two of them, Nicky and the sun, stood face to face and regarded each other the way soldiers do after a victory. Galveston was now at his feet. He could even see past Galveston, to the gulf, an endless pool brilliantly reflecting the reds and yellows of the sun. It seemed as if he could see forever. He was horrified and proud, at the top of the world with his only friend. He stood as tall as he could and spread his arms as if preparing to fly off the bridge, utterly fearless. He turned and he could see Houston, once again small in the distance. He raised his arms again to taunt it. *Hah!* A line of cars went by meekly, without a peep. Nicky turned back to Galveston, dug out his ball cap and pulled it low on his head again. He clenched his hands into fists and then he walked down into Galveston to find a hamburger joint.

Mr. Santiago would not visit Houston again for twenty years, not until his father's death, not until a girl with metallic-blue hair

wrote his life story on a dry-erase board using four words. He took a cab from the airport straight to Galveston, following his old trail, and then sat on the sea wall for an entire afternoon, completely still, completely quiet, as was his nature. He watched the waves wash back and forth, applauding how the light danced off of them. The sea had always been a dream to him. He sat with his face reaching towards the sun, just as he had done when he was twelve, and ate his hamburgers.

Charles Rafferty

Dance Class

His daughter is doing pliés to a slow brook of piano music behind the studio door. It is Saturday morning, and he is hungover, just like the other parents waiting in baseball caps and sweats.

Although the studio has a window, no one can see into it. There is a larger window that faces the parking lot, where the risen sun is blazing, turning the studio window into a mural of shifting cars. The lot and the window are milling with arrivals.

The woman in the corner pretending to read the paper looks like she may have been crying before she got here. A man on the opposite bench has a gut so big his t-shirt barely covers it, and he's scratching at a stained spot above his left knee. The rest of the parents stare into their phones.

Together, they feel the floor move as each child runs and leaps and lands in the wash of tinkling piano notes. In the mural, a woman rolls down her window and blows out a giant puff of smoke, as if the interior of the car were on fire. Her cigarette is amplified by the frozen breath of January.

During this quiet, headachy time, he likes to go over the past week's failures, the future week's triumphs. What else should he be thinking about? Don't mountain climbers pause to collect their wits on the last ledge before the summit? Don't we all have a box where the bills can gather before we try to pay them?

Behind the studio door, the daughters of his town are learning to be graceful, practicing the moves they will eventually string together for a two-minute recital in June. He believes his daughter is looking for him looking at her. He can feel it. So for her sake, he smiles into the mural of parking cars at the point where a man is taking his daughter's hand and running for the door.

Sue Reeves

the home place

tidy white house planted in a square mile of dry kansas dirt,
the home place, center of all that matters.
laughter drifts upward through shake shingles,
lifting prayers for soaking rain into the night sky
that reminds me of grandma's speckled mixing bowl overhead.
grand-dad's restless wheat fields whisper, uneasy in the wind,
always the wind.

hangman on the chalkboard in grandma's kitchen,
grand-dad's truck bouncing down the dirt road.
red ryder days and comic book nights,
fresh garden peas and purple-red mulberries,
summer nights spent on the sun porch floor, lulled by the wind,
always the wind.

abandoned but for critters rustling in the walls,
party line—two shorts and a long—now silent.
faded names scrawled on the old chalkboard,
remnants of one last pilgrimage to the home place,
legacy of memories never diminished or displaced
by creaking gray clapboards and loose shakes, driven by the
wind,
always the wind.

Jordan Sanderson

Formula #4

Ask for a room that hasn't been cleaned.
Clean it yourself. Plan to stay
for a while. Make sure no reality
stars have slept there. This is unacceptable.
Steal blue jay eggs and incubate them.
Keep them near your bed. Also, near
a mirror. Look in the nightstand.
There should be a phone book
and a Bible. Pick the birds' first
names from the phone book, middle
from the Bible. You should not give
them your last name. You might
need it for something. Remind yourself
often of the year and the president.
People like you to know these things.
When the birds hatch, learn from them
how to be fed, how to mate, how to recognize
your place. Swallow the smallest of them.
In your throat, it will make a nest
of its own feathers and feed on the caterpillars
in your voice. It will teach you to screech.

Formula #16

The house is empty, except for you,
and the crumbs on the floor
are so old the ants don't even bother.
In the cabinet above the stove,
you'll find the shriveled heart
of a parakeet under a green wing.
The man who used to live here
would leave a burner or two on low,
hoping the warmth would graft
the wing to the heart and a new bird
would be born from the old. He read
in an encyclopedia that *hearing other
parakeets encourages a pair to breed*,
so he recorded parakeets in a pet store
and played them day and night. Like you,
he believed that the part contained the whole.
Inside the heart, you'll find a cage,
and in the cage, two or three eggs.

Formula #46

The blue jays say you're one thing,
but they're birdbrains. On paper,
your name looks good. You will
always be a child in your birthplace.
Your bad taste in lovers got a star
named after you. A white dwarf
at that. Used to, you became the you
in power ballads. Portraits are useless:
you would never tilt your head like that.
The wind says your strings are broken.
Lightning says you're a poor conductor,
always in shock. The microscope calls
you a breeding ground. The two-faced
window calls you an outsider. Symptom,
says your disease. Costume, says a nude.
You might try echolocation. It works
for dolphins, but the last time you tried
to swim with them, they didn't seem to
notice you'd fallen so far behind.

Evelyn Somers

Appointment

It had been very late summer, Dorcas told Charlie—September: after the fracas died down about the flying saucers that had been photographed flying over the capitol. Charlie didn't remember much about their life near Quantico, or about D.C.

It was the morning of the Saturday Dorcas died that she was talking about that September day, on their way to her appointment. Nineteen fifty-two, and Charlie was nine and a half years old. At first he hadn't been listening because he was worried about getting in trouble. They were not supposed to be going anywhere in the car by themselves. Dorcas was only seventeen; she was not allowed to drive unless their mother or Cecily was in the car with her. Or his father, when he came back from Korea. Mary had enlisted, too. She was a Marine now; she'd left in August for Parris Island.

And aside from worrying about punishment, Charlie wasn't listening because he was also extremely interested in watching Dorcas drive. Cecily drove like a bat out of hell. She was reckless; she drove with one thumb to show off. His parents drove unremarkably—his mother seemed to enjoy it and drift away at times, but not carelessly; his father treated it like another duty and discipline and would not talk when he was at the wheel, though he'd hum tunelessly the big-band songs he'd grown up with. Mary drove skittishly, at the edge of the road, chronically in danger of sliding off onto the shoulder because she was afraid of hitting oncoming cars, saying, "Watch it, Sister," under her breath if another driver was getting too close. When Mary was driving, Charlie sat on the driver's side in the back so he wouldn't see how the tires were hugging the extreme lip of the blacktop. He hoped she was learning to drive better in training.

Dorcas was not nervous like Mary. She was governed by an abiding tranquility that seemed deepest and most complete when she was figuring out what to do about something that had gone wrong. When Charlie was much older, he would realize that in a seventeen-year-old, these had been the signs of an optimistic intelligence and capability that the world had missed.

It was before Christmas, and the skies were overcast, but it wasn't going to snow. It was chilly, however, and the car heater

didn't work well, so he put on his cap. Then he had to listen carefully because it muffled Dorcas's voice. His new plaid wool coat rustled against the seat back each time he turned toward her, and it increased his anxiousness. In the windows of some of the houses they passed, they glimpsed Christmas trees. Mostly the lights were not on—it was daytime. There were wreaths on the doors, and more traffic than usual because people, women especially, were out getting their shopping done. That's where their mother was—Christmas shopping for the day. Dorcas hadn't wanted to go, and their mother had been so preoccupied making lists that she didn't ask why; she said Dorcas could keep an eye on Charlie and when they came back, if she wasn't too tired, they'd make fudge, his dad's favorite. The mention of his father wasn't what made Charlie cry then. It was something else—a fear, suddenly, of his mother going. He didn't want her to go. It had never upset him in the past, and he loved Dorcas and was hoping they'd play Chinese checkers when their mother was gone—but in the past year, everyone had left home: Cecily to live on her own, his dad for Korea again, Mary for training. It was too much, too fast. And also, he was afraid something was going to happen.

Their mother had noticed him then. She'd gone over to Charlie and put her hand on of his head. "You miss your dad," she said. "Shall we visit the Barries tonight?"

He sucked the sobs back in and said yes, he wanted to. Then she'd asked him and Dorcas to bow their heads, and she'd said a prayer, as they did at least once a day, for the safety of his father and the other men in Korea. And, as an afterthought, for Mary.

He thought they were going to her friend's house at first—Rhonda. But Dorcas had said she had an appointment. What kind of appointment? They weren't going to DC. She was driving southwest, toward the bay; toward Quantico or Woodbridge. Her voice had a false note that upset him. Dorcas didn't sneak out of the house like Mary and Cecily used to. Charlie wanted to think that whatever errand they were on had to do with a Christmas present or a surprise visit. But the more distance they put between them and their house, the more he suspected it didn't.

She was telling him about her trip to Washington, in September. "That's where I met the baby's father," she said—and he began to pay complete attention. Dorcas was the youngest, besides him, and the sister he was sure he loved more than anyone else. She was thin. Cecily and Mary were pretty, but

heavier. “Dorcas” meant gazelle, and she’d told Charlie that the name was her guarantee of never being fat: there were no fat gazelles. Cecily’s name meant “blind,” and it fit her—she charged around like a blind person, thoughtless, tactless. “Mary” meant “bitter,” and she was petty and closed like her name, holding a grudge because she was the least good-looking—though still pretty—and her breasts wouldn’t grow. Charlie’s name meant “free man.” He couldn’t imagine himself as a man. He’d probably be big, too. “Free man” suggested someone being released from a shackle or a prison. But when Charlie tried to imagine how the name might one day fit him, he saw a cartoon-like version of his father, inflated, floating at the end of a kite-string. He saw the string being cut.

Dorcas was talking about a baby she was going to have. At first he thought it must be someone else’s baby, but it was hers. Charlie tried to absorb this fact that he knew but didn’t understand: a teenage girl could have a baby without being married. He almost asked Dorcas, but he was fairly sure she had mentioned the baby without meaning to. He wasn’t supposed to know. If he asked her, she’d realize she’d unintentionally spilled her secret.

She was caught up in what the family called “one of her Dorcas-sagas.” They were seamless narratives that were very hard to reroute once she got started.

Charlie tugged his cap off because the car had warmed some and because he wanted to hear better. Dorcas told him how it had happened:

The temperature had been noticeably cooler that week, and the air had the sudden dryness of autumn. The sky that day had been so brilliantly azure and the clouds in it so full and white that it looked like a painting. Charlie was struck by her saying “Like a painting.”

She had gone to the capital with Cecily, who wanted to shop for summer shoes and dresses on sale. Cecily would shop, and Dorcas was going to meet her friend Rhonda and Rhonda’s mother, Mrs. Barrie, the wife of General Barrie. Charlie wasn’t sure why she hadn’t just ridden with the Barries. The Barries were close friends of Colonel and Mrs. Sitter.

The Sitter girls had gotten there early—Cecily was driving, and she had a lead foot. The Barries and Dorcas were going to have lunch at a restaurant that had renowned Denver sandwiches and then take a tour of the White House. But after they’d waited

a few minutes, Cecily got impatient. They were less than twenty minutes early now, and since the Barries were punctual to a fault and would be there precisely on time, she decided she would go ahead and leave Dorcas—what could happen in fifteen minutes?—and get to her shopping before all the good bargains were gone.

Dorcas was wearing a purple floral-print dress, her favorite. Charlie knew which dress, when she said it. He liked the dress, which had been a hand-me-down from Rhonda, who was taller and more buxom than his sister. Dorcas looked mature when she wore it.

She'd stood in the recessed doorway of a building that had a pawn shop on the street level and advertised a dance studio upstairs—Palm's Ballroom Dancing—and said "Pardon me" to the people—men, the majority of them—going into or out of the pawn shop, and watched the rest of the world going by. Up the street a few doors was the restaurant. She looked for Mrs. Barrie and Rhonda to appear there, but they wouldn't be there until exactly noon. It was not quite noon now, and people on their lunch breaks were thronging in; it was popular.

On the opposite side of the street, a half block down, a Mennonite choir was singing hymns, and a few of the people who passed her were heading to the corner to cross—a small knot of listeners was standing there watching—not many people. A lot of the pedestrians ducked or turned their heads and went on by, annoyed or embarrassed. It took Dorcas a minute to get it. The Mennonites did not believe in war and had started the PAX. The singing was a response to the war, if not strictly a protest. The women were young, but their starched white head coverings made them look older, nunlike, in their full, flowered dresses, so modest compared to Dorcas's that she was afraid if they noticed her they would disapprove. The men wore dark pants and white shirts. They were coming to the end of "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." They rested their voices for a moment or two, but their rest was an awesome stillness, like listening to a snowflake. Then they began again, singing "Be Thou My Vision." The women's voices soared high above the men's.

Thou my best thought, by day or by night, Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light. Charlie could hear it as Dorcas was describing the choir. Sometimes he tuned out her Dorcas sagas, but this one seemed too important for him not to listen. He put his hat on again and pulled down the flaps to cover his ears

because his ears and cheeks were cold but then yanked it off immediately because it was harder to hear her. When would she get to the baby?

From her vantage point she'd been able to see two wide intersections. The Mennonites were on the corner to her right. Across the other intersection, to her left—she thought it was east—and quite a distance from her, was a tall building that looked like a bank. And standing outside the entrance was a man whose age she couldn't discern. He was much too far away for her to be able to tell what he looked like and what he was gazing at. But she knew by his erect posture, his legs slightly apart, his arms folded behind his back, his alert demeanor, that he was a military man. Then she thought, maybe he was a security guard for the bank. But then she knew he wasn't. He was military. She was sure.

As she watched, he crossed the street, coming in her direction, though he was on the opposite side. He strolled past and on up to the end of the block—not hurriedly—and stood at the back of the group that had gathered to hear the Mennonites. He wasn't listening to them, she thought; he was scanning the small crowd. Then, unexpectedly, he was looking at Dorcas.

She turned away, so he wouldn't think she wanted to be bothered. It was noon now, and she walked up the street to the restaurant.

The Barries weren't there.

She waited a few minutes and then decided to go inside to see if they had arrived while she was watching the military man. The tables were crowded. So was the counter, and waitresses were rushing around taking orders and bringing hamburgers and fried-chicken platters and slices of pie and drinks on trays. The walls were lined with coat hooks, and because there were so many people there and it was a windy day, there were jackets hung all the way around the dining area.

She scanned the tables and saw no one she knew. She wasn't worried, just surprised. She had never known any member of the Barrie family to be late.

“Are you looking for someone?”

It was a blond young man with acne, in an apron, apparently dragged out from the kitchen with a stack of menus to play host.

“My friends were supposed to meet me here,” she said. I don't see them.

“It wasn’t a Mrs. . . . Barrie. And her daughter. Was it them?” the man asked her. His attention was going in all directions, and very little of it was on her.

Dorcas was startled. Yes, she said, it was them. That was when she learned that the Barries’ Plymouth had refused to start that morning. They were still in Manassas. Mrs. Barrie had called and left a message that Dorcas should go ahead and go shopping with her sister. They’d expected that Cecily would deliver Dorcas to the restaurant and wait with her—and that the girls would have the presence of mind to ask the staff when the Barries didn’t show up. But Cecily had left her alone, and there was no way now for Dorcas to contact her. They had planned that she would ride back with the Barries. She felt a ping of alarm, but she wasn’t the kind of person who panicked easily. She had the confidence of her intelligence, and she expected things to work out. There were telephones, and there were buses and taxis. She had money in her purse for an emergency, and it was not like she was very far from home; it was only thirty-some miles.

“Is your sister with you?” The aproned man looked mildly concerned, but he was also very busy, and the duty of greeting customers was plainly foreign to him. He belonged somewhere else—busing tables, possibly. It was easy enough for Dorcas to say her sister had stepped outside and would be back in a minute and the man in the apron not to think any further of it. The food smelled good, though, and she was hungry. She asked for two menus, to keep up her deception, and she was in luck. There was one table for two, and he seated her and then disappeared.

The menu had a line drawing of the Capitol on the front. For a dollar-twenty-five she could get a plate lunch—she wasn’t sure what that included. It was fifty-five cents for a Denver or a toasted cheese sandwich, and she could get a side of coleslaw or even shrimp cocktail, and a cold drink and still have plenty. They had Italian spaghetti and Southern fried chicken, but that cost more. Dorcas read over the menu and looked up, comparing the prices with what was being whisked by on the trays, and then down again, pretending more assurance than she felt because there was the other menu at the place across from her, and she was supposed to be waiting for someone. The man in the apron was gone, and it didn’t look like he was coming back—though even if he had, she could do whatever she wanted, couldn’t she? He could not stop her from eating lunch just because her sister

had not returned. Dorcas had never eaten in a restaurant alone; neither had she seen a woman eating alone in a restaurant even once. She wanted the fried chicken and an ice cream sundae for dessert, but she couldn't spend that much. She didn't know how she was getting home or how much it might cost. In the city, everything was more expensive.

"Are you waiting for someone?"

It was the man from outside the bank. He had one hand on the chair opposite her. He might pull it away from the table and sit in just a moment. Up close, Dorcas saw that he was about thirty. His voice was friendly, confident. It was even kind. She was absolutely sure he was military, though he was dressed like the men in the Mennonite choir. On him, the shirt and tie looked elegant, flattering, though. The tie had a daring pattern, and she recognized that his clothes were expensive, that he knew he looked good in them. The kind voice, though: it sounded real. His posture was the straight, shoulders-back posture that marked most of the men she knew from church, her father's Marine friends.

"I'm waiting for my sister," Dorcas lied. She tripped, saying it. She wasn't a natural liar, and where it had been easy to lie to the busboy or whatever he was with the menus, this man looked savvy and discerning—and he wasn't busy with anything at all.

"Well, she's taking her time," the man said. "I saw you waiting outside the pawn shop; you've been waiting for some time." His hair was very short, a basic brown, with one patch of white at his left temple. There must be a birthmark there. His eyes were pretty girl-eyes, hazel. The flecks of gold in them were irregular. To a lover, they would be fascinating. Heavy brows arched over them—too heavy—but the rest of his appearance was very handsome. Cecily would be falling all over herself to impress a guy like this. Mary would be sulking because she'd know she had little chance. Dorcas looked up at the man—he was taller, standing here, than he'd looked in front of the sky-piercing bank—and felt relieved and at ease. She was a girl. A teenager. A man like this would have a wife. Perhaps he had a child. He wore no ring, but not every married man did. General Barrie did not. The Barries joked about it—he'd worn one in the beginning, but General Barrie, who was not a small man, liked to eat. He particularly liked Virginia ham, and one Easter after the ham dinner his hand began to swell so much from the salty meat that he took the ring off before it got to the point where he

couldn't remove it. And afterward, his hands stayed a ring-size larger, and he couldn't wear it, though he kept it in his dresser drawer—Rhonda had showed her.

So this man might well be married with a child. Anyway, he was old enough to understand fatherhood—to be aware of the needs of children. She was sure he was safe to talk to. He wouldn't hurt her.

When he asked, "Can I join you?" she didn't hesitate. There was no one else coming, and his height, the familiar military air and kind manner made her comfortable enough.

"Please do," she said, and he sat and scooted in his chair. He smiled at her, and it made her feel light, content.

He asked what her name was.

"Dorcas," she said.

"Well, that's different," he said. "And very lovely. I'm John, by the way."

He picked up the other menu, the one at his place, and scanned it. "Are you hungry?" he said, "because I'm starving. Why don't I buy you lunch?"

"You don't have to do that. I have enough money."

"A young lady in a purple dress should always let a male acquaintance pay when he offers," said John.

"You're not my acquaintance."

"But I'm becoming one, am I not? And if I buy your lunch, by the time it gets here we will be acquainted, and you could keep that money for a new pair of shoes, or some hair bands."

"That would be my sister," said Dorcas. "I don't care about shoes."

"What do you care about, then, Dorcas?"

"Education," she said. "I'm going to be a teacher." She spoke with a mild sense of irritation that he didn't seem to understand: she wasn't just a shallow girl.

"That's a nice ambition," said John, half-listening, glancing at a waitress who was hurrying by, trying to catch her attention. "What grade do you want to teach?"

"I'm going to be a college professor."

John raised his eyebrows. "Ohhhh," he said. "That's ambitious. So you're smart."

"Smart enough. I'd like to teach history, or philosophy."

"And are those subjects girls teach?"

"Have you heard of Mary Wollstonecraft? Simone de Beauvoir? Simone Weil?"

“I didn’t go to college. I served in the war, and now I work for the government.”

“There *are* women philosophers and professors,” said Dorcas. “Some. And the culture is changing—and it will keep changing. Women are equally as smart as men, and they’re not going to stay home and dust the furniture too much longer. Already a lot more women are working.”

“We’re seeing that trend decline, since the war is over. I’ve read that it’s actually harmful to women’s minds *and* bodies to be in the labor force.”

“There’s another war.”

“Not like the big one,” said John. “I could tell you . . .” he began. But the waitress was there now, her pad and pencil ready.

“Can I recommend the Denver sandwich?” said John.

“I’d like the Italian spaghetti. And a glass of tea,” said Dorcas.

“Independent, huh?” said John.

He ordered and handed the menus to the waitress, and soon the meals came, and they talked. In John’s conversation, he didn’t mention a wife, and he behaved as Dorcas imagined a single man would. His talk returned frequently to his “work for the government,” but when she asked what he did, he was evasive.

Dorcas ate everything the waitress brought, down to the last crust of garlic bread. When a piece of ground beef from the sauce dropped from her fork, John reached across and removed it from where it had landed, on the soft upper part of her right breast. He put it to his lips and surprised her by eating it. “Delicious,” he said, smiling at her in a way that suddenly made her warm and uneasy. He took his napkin and reached over again to wipe the bit of remaining sauce from her skin. No one at the neighboring tables noticed; probably they thought John was her date. Dorcas realized at almost that same moment that he’d never asked her age and might think she was older.

John dropped the napkin and ran his finger over the spot where the sauce had been. His long arms reached across the small table easily, but even if it didn’t strain and tire him to reach, it must look inappropriate to the other diners, Dorcas thought. Why didn’t someone come over and say something? She wished for the man with the apron and the acne to come back.

“I think I got it all,” said John. “Your skin is very smooth. Very pale.”

“My sister will be waiting for me,” said Dorcas.

“I thought she was supposed to meet you here. If you even have a sister. Do you? Or did you make her up to keep me away from you?”

“Her name is Cecily, and she’s waiting for me.”

“Where?”

“At another restaurant. I mistook this for the place we were supposed to eat. I should have told you; I’m sorry, but I didn’t know it until we were already served, and I didn’t want to be rude.”

“Why are you afraid of me?” asked John. His eyes were fixed on hers. There was an expression in them she didn’t understand.

“I’m not generally afraid,” said Dorcas.

“Suspicious, then,” he countered.

“You’ve been very nice to buy my lunch,” she said.

“And now we’re acquainted; you’re welcome for the lunch. I’m afraid you have the wrong impression of me. I think you’re a sweet, intelligent young lady, and it’s been a pleasure eating with you and learning a little about your future ambitions.”

His tone was friendly and straightforward. Dorcas felt relieved. She’d been getting nervous about nothing. She wasn’t used to being touched by people she hardly knew. And no adult man had ever commented on the smoothness of her skin. But John was back to the way he’d been at first, and she must have been misreading . . . misunderstanding what he wanted.

“Come with me,” John urged her. “I’ll help you find your sister.”

Charlie had been listening, fascinated. It was all the food, in that restaurant. She talked about it in a way that made it almost real. What kinds of pie did they have? he wanted to ask. But Dorcas would have been annoyed because that wasn’t what her saga was about. He had once eaten a piece of hamburger that fell on the ground and been disciplined for it. He understood why John would have eaten the hamburger that fell on her skin.

He was thinking so hard about the food, trying to imagine what a Denver sandwich was and what kinds of pie the restaurant had, that he barely heard what she said next: “But we couldn’t find Cecily. And John said I shouldn’t spend my money on a cab or a bus ticket and upset Mom; he’d bring me home,

and she'd never know. He said it was a favor to a new acquaintance, and I wouldn't owe him anything. But later he said he wouldn't mind if I gave him a kiss. And I did kiss him, and he was very good at convincing me that he wouldn't want anything else, but he wanted something else, Charlie. You know?"

It was about the baby. Now he forgot the restaurant.

"And my common sense and body disagreed about it, but my body won, and I gave him that other thing too."

Chris Souza

A Kind of Lesson

Imagine the child from Colophon
before she was prideful Arachne, weaving

her hair in the dark, each length brought
to a little fan, a mock sheaf of wheat;

and her farther, poorer for love,
reaching out in his sleep for a dead wife

whose absence is a kind of lesson
as the girl reshapes her grief, plans another

tapestry, another story of love rescue,
resurrection, how she'd weight a thousand

strands that she could finger mercy through.
Imagine each tapis unanswered as the weights

grew smaller and more certain in her hands,
a kind of dexterity shuttling towards heaven.

Jay Udall

Fledgling

Stranded, flown too soon
from branches above
where parents scream out
in helpless safety
as I approach,
a small black bird quivers
in a green expanse.
Looking up, it seems
still stunned by its fall
into this new view,
this towering thing
stopping, looking down.

I'm a boy, watching
a friend, his father dead,
turn a lighter and a can of
hairspray into a blowtorch
to blaze a city of ants.

I'm thirteen, too much alone
with too many deaths,
a savage voice rising
in my throat as I chase
a dog, throwing rocks
to fill it with fear,
to stop my own fear
from feeding on me.
I'm a pair of pants,
a shirt, shoes, nothing
under looming blue.

*

Once, stopped on the way
to see my dying mother,
I watched five kittens
play in a dry wash
of red rock, red sand,
scrub willows, mean heat,
their mother gone for food
or gone for good,
and thought of my child
not yet three months old
sleeping with her mother
back in the cooled dark
of a motel room,
how much she needed
us just to survive,
while some of those strays,
even on their own,
would likely scavenge by.

*

Oppenheimer watching
the first flash and bloom
of a thousand suns,
vision of godly force
in human hands made real,
the invisible heart
of matter split to
melt cities, foreign flesh:
“Now I am become Death,
the Destroyer of worlds.”

*

Night comes, bodies curl
to one another,
cities cling to Earth’s curves,
careless mother who breathes us,
leaves us to our own.

O blessed rage for
power—on every side
pure space keeps opening.
The world is flying.

Showing Forth

In a field left for less than worthless
below the highway's headlong tide,
from barren ground more rock and sand than soil,
from thirst inside of thirst, they rise
in green: smallest fingers, claws, spiders spreading.

*

Thread-veins curl off the hard nub and spine
of a maple seed's single wing,
bending back like stroked hair,
supple yellow-green membrane thinning
to transparency, turning the faintest
tinged-with-blood red, stuck in between
the tread of a truck's motionless tire—
falling, flying.

*

After heavy summer rains they appear
by the path, chest high, a great crowd, crimson
shot through stalks and branches—bodies stripped
of skin, fat, tendon, bone—arterial
beasts born of seed and dust, spirits
of matter, inside out.

Reading Blind

The history of my gathering blindness begins
as I close the back cover of some children's novel
and wake, alone, my family far in sleep,
deep night pressing against the windows, claiming all
but the circle of light around my lamp and bed.
Then I'm poring through Schopenhauer,
Leviticus, Dickinson—ghosted thoughts,
hours, ages pouring through me, my body going
stiff and numb as some abstraction or the chair
in which it sits, eyes tracking the lines
as if one of these times I might see through
the words, the shapes of letters, through ink
and pulp, inside the echoing orbits
of charged particles, into the womb
of speech—to be spoken—flesh
become word, breath, first and final silence.
Years slip, I slip into bed beside my sleeping wife,
a hive of ideas swarming behind my burning lids
until daybreak, gray light too bright,
our daughter gnawing the spines of her first books.
My father looks at us with raw wounds
in his sockets from his merciless hunger
for illumination, a shimmering half
remembered, half unseen, the light of one eye
giving way to shadow shapes, our forms
trading names on his lips as he goes, letting go
of syllables, saying less than he sees, seeing
less than he knows, slipping through these lines
to vanish. An orange and white traffic barrel
becomes a man in a striped shirt. A woman appears
to tenderly embrace a trash can. My eyes
close and some partial face gazes out
through sleep's shredding walls, reading me,
as fish that look like fingers read without eyes
lightless lakes somewhere below Kentucky,
as I read the dark, feeling my way.

Jane Woodman

Max and Marion are usually in bed by now

but tonight they are not
because their four-year-old
finished her peas and is
allowed up for the National
Geographic special on loons.

The appeal is lost on Marion,
lost on Max, but there
they are, all eyes watching
birds on a screen do almost
nothing but coo, which soon
enough invites four eyes to close
and Max to wish forever
could come close to this night.

Kirby Wright

At Fat Albert's, Sellwood

Happy birthday, Dadio. I'm playing counter boy in memory of you at this greasy spoon. I squeak on my vinyl stool and toy with a paper napkin. I try folding it into an angel. You'd tell me to act my age. My counter mates? A model-thin blonde in a Reed College sweatshirt and a bald man thumbing *The Oregonian*. The stink of fried eggs makes me nauseous. The waitress slides over a menu—she's doubling as the cook. I contemplate specials as steam fogs my cup.

Moments of indecision always summon you. "Learn to be decisive," you barked. I was your thorn, a chronic pain infected by the disgust of never making you proud. "Worthless," you mumbled one New Year's Eve. I learned defeat in our closed-door sessions, when screams and *I'm-sorry-Daddy's* joined the beat of the belt. I touched my wall and felt sorrow moving in waves through the redwood.

I vow to quit remembering. Memories send me beyond blue, into the indigo sky before twilight. Dadio, you carried hate into the hospital bed, where I spoon-fed you vanilla pudding and rubbed your feet under the sheets. Cold feet, I thought, icy heart. A nurse checked your pulse. "No more flowers," you scolded when my Christmas anthuriums arrived. I swore you'd never die but, if you did, I'd lug you like an overstuffed suitcase into the future.

A coffee refill comes—steam rises like a ghost. The blonde leaves and I crumple the angel napkin. The bald man retreats to the restroom. I feel as if I'm not human at all but a cold-blooded creature propped on a stool. The truth? Dadio, I've been shaped by you, folded by a lifetime of disappointment into a wrinkled toad.

Author Bios

Jeffrey Alfier has work forthcoming in *Poetry Ireland Review*, *South Carolina Review*, and *Tulane Review*. His first full-length book of poems, *The Wolf Yearling*, is forthcoming from Pecan Grove Press.

Rebecca Aronson's first book *Creature, Creature* won the Main-Traveled Press poetry book contest and was published in 2007. Her poems have appeared in *Tin House*, *the Georgia Review*, *Cream City Review*, *Mas Tequila Review*, *Quarterly West*, and others. She lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where she teaches writing and enjoys the mountains.

Molly Bonovsky Anderson is from central Minnesota. She studied Philosophy, Art History, and English at Northern Michigan University. Her work has appeared in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Passages North*, *Penduline Press*, *Big Fiction*, *Wilde Magazine*, *Breakwater Review*, and other print and online journals. She lives near Lake Superior in Marquette, Michigan, where she co-edits *Pithead Chapel* magazine.

Caleb Beissert is a poet, translator, musician, and freelance writer from Washington, D.C., now living in Asheville, North Carolina. His work has appeared in *International Poetry Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Flycatcher*, and *Beatitude: Golden Anniversary, 1959-2009*. Beissert's first book, a selection of English-language adaptations of the poetry of Pablo Neruda and Federico García Lorca, *Beautiful: Translations from the Spanish*, was published by New Native Press in 2013. Beissert earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English, Professional Writing, and Cultural Studies from Western Carolina University in May of 2009.

George Bishop is the author of five chapbooks. His full length collection, *Expecting Delays*, was published by FutureCycle Press in January 2013. Recent work appears in *New Plains Review*, *Naugatuck River Review*, and *Sakura Review*. Forthcoming work will be featured in *Cold Mountain Review*. Bishop attended Rutgers University and now lives and writes in Saint Cloud, Florida.

GF Boyer's poems have been published in many journals, including *The Southern Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *Poetry Northwest*. She's won a few awards for her writing, including an Academy of American Poets' Young Poets Prize and the Theodore Roethke Prize given by Poetry Northwest. She has an MFA from the University of Washington and currently teaches creative writing at Dickinson College.

Kevin Brown is a Professor at Lee University. He has one book of poetry, *Exit Lines* (Plain View Press, 2009) and two chapbooks: *Abecedarium* (Finishing Line Press, 2011) and *Holy Days: Poems* (winner of Split Oak Press Chapbook Contest, 2012). He also has a memoir, *Another Way: Finding Faith, Then Finding It Again* (Wipf and Stock, 2012), and a book of scholarship, *They Love to Tell the Stories: Five Contemporary Novelists Take on the Gospels* (Kennesaw State University Press, 2012). He received his MFA from Murray State University.

Michael Campagnoli has worked as a waiter, fisherman, journalist, painter, and short-order cook. He can be seen most mornings running somewhere along the coast of Maine with his mongrel dog, Yogi, and Anthony, his equally mongrel sixteen year-old son.

Shuly X. Cawood is a writer/editor in Tennessee. Her creative work has appeared in publications such as *Community Journal* (of Yellow Springs, Ohio), *Pegasus Review*, *Moving Out*, and *The Independent Weekly* (now IndyWeek).

Leah Chaffins has previously published short stories and news articles published in *The Cameron Goldmine* and the *Cameron Collegian*. Ms. Chaffins has worked as an editor for both the *Goldmine* and for *CyberSoliel Fine Arts Journal*. Chaffins writes mostly short horror stories, and memoir. She is nearing completion of her first novel, and the completion of two short story compilations, *Gravel Goats*, which is memoirs, and *Chasing Eidolas*, short horror stories. Chaffins is an English Instructor for Cameron University and a student in The Red Earth MFA program at Oklahoma City University.

Tobi Cogswell is a three-time Pushcart nominee and a Best of the Net nominee. Credits include or are forthcoming in various

journals in the US, UK, Sweden and Australia. In 2012 she was short-listed for the Fermoy International Poetry Festival. Her fifth and latest chapbook is *Lit Up*, (Kindred Spirit Press). She is the co-editor of *San Pedro River Review* (www.sprreview.com).

Julie Dill is a Red Earth MFA student at Oklahoma City University. She has written for *MetroFamily Magazine*, *Texas Child Quarterly*, and *The Oklahoman*. She is currently working on her first young adult novel.

Kelly Dumar is a playwright, fiction writer and workshop facilitator from the Boston area. Her most recent publications include short stories in *Open Road Review* and *Literary Mama*, as well as poems in *Lingerpost*, *Emerge*, and *Blast Furnace*, and short plays by *Art Age* and *Foxing Quarterly*. Kelly's plays are produced around the US and Canada and published by dramatic publishers. She will be presenting a workshop for youth poets at the Mass. Poetry Festival in May 2013 and she blogs about writing at www.kellydumar.com.

Todd Fuller's poetry and essays have appeared in a number of journals and anthologies, including the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, *American Literary Review*, *Apalachee Review*, *Barnwood Magazine*, *Cimarron Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *Encyclopedia of Native Americans and Sports*, *The Great Plains: A Cross-Disciplinary Reader*, *Hawai'i Review*, *New York Quarterly*, *Poet Lore*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Quarterly West*, *South Dakota Review*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Third Coast*, *Weber Studies*, *Wicazo Sa Review*, and *William and Mary Review*. His first book, *60 Feet, Six Inches and Other Distances from Home: the (Baseball) Life of Mose YellowHorse* (Holy Cow! Press), was published in 2002. Fuller currently serve as an Associate Director for Research Development at the University of Oklahoma and as an adjunct lecturer in the Native American Studies Program; before taking this post, he served as president of Pawnee Nation College, which he co-founded in 2004.

Julie Hensley grew up on a sheep farm in the Shenandoah Valley, but now she makes her home in Kentucky with her husband (the writer R. Dean Johnson) and their two children. She is a core faculty member of the Bluegrass Writers Studio, the brief-residency MFA program at Eastern Kentucky University.

Her poems and stories have been published in dozens of journals and have received multiple Pushcart nominations. Her most recent work has appears in *Saranac Review*, *The Pinch*, *Blackbird*, *Louisville Review*, and *Ruminate*. A chapbook of her poems, *The Language of Horses*, is available from Finishing Line Press.

Kanatihal Hill's poetry has been previously published in *Yukhika-latuhse* and she also placed 2nd in the 2003 NAJA poetry slam. A member of Oneida Nation of Wisconsin, she and her husband, Tehassi, have eight children and 7 grandchildren. Kanatihal is a student in The Red Earth MFA Creative Writing Program at Oklahoma City University.

Bryn Homuth is originally from Fargo, North Dakota. His poems have appeared in *Catfish Creek*, *The Meadow*, and *Mosaic*. He currently lives in Manhattan, KS where he studies creative writing in Kansas State University's graduate English program and serves as poetry editor for the online literary journal *Touchstone*.

Hope D. Johnson is a native of Lexington, KY. She received her Bachelor's degree from the University of Kentucky and is pursuing her MFA in Creative Writing at Lesley University. Among many, Hope has been published in *Pluck! Journal of Affrilachian Arts and Culture*, *Pine Mountain*, *Sand & Gravel Journal*, and *Kweli Journal*.

Kily Keeling is a Master Teacher in rural Oklahoma secondary schools where she teaches grammar, composition, literature, and math to middle school students. She writes poetry, fiction, and flash fiction. She is currently finishing a young adult novel and her M.F.A. in The Red Earth MFA Program at Oklahoma City University.

Debbie McCulliss is a masters-prepared registered nurse, wellness educator, writer, certified applied poetry facilitator and journal-writing instructor. On faculty at the Therapeutic Writing Institute in Denver, Colorado, USA, she teaches "Body Stories," "Body Poems," and "Writing from the Body." She is currently a student in The Red Earth MFA program and in the Johns Hopkins Advanced Science Medical Writing program. A listing

of publications and literary contributions can be found on her website <http://www.dmcculliss.com>.

Benjamin Myers is a winner of the Oklahoma Book Award for Poetry and the author of two books: *Lapse Americana* (NYQ Books 2013) and *Elegy for Trains* (Village Books Press 2010). His poems may be read in many fine journals, including *Poetry Northwest*, *32 Poems*, *The New York Quarterly*, *Nimrod*, and *Devil's Lake*. He is Crouch-Mathis Associate Professor of English at Oklahoma Baptist University.

R.C. Neighbors is a sixth-generation Oklahoman of English, Scottish, and Cherokee ancestry. He has studied writing at the University of Arkansas and Hollins University, and he is currently a Ph.D. candidate at Texas A&M University studying creative writing and Literature of the Native South. His work has been published or is forthcoming in *The Barely South Review*, *Parody*, *Gold Dust*, and elsewhere.

Shawnte Orion's poetry has been published in *New York Quarterly*, *Crab Creek Review*, *MiPOesias*, *Juked*, *Georgetown Review* and other journals. He is often invited as a featured reader at bookstores, bars, universities, laundromats, museums, and hair salons. <http://batteredhive.blogspot.com>

Carl "Papa" Palmer, twice nominated for the Micro Award in flash fiction and thrice for the Pushcart Prize in poetry, grew up on Old Mill Road in Ridgeway, VA. Carl now lives the good life in University Place, WA. MOTTO: Long Weekends Forever

Stephen Roger Powers moonlighted as a stand-up comedian in clubs and casinos around the Midwest while working on his PhD in creative writing at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee. His work has appeared in *Shenandoah*, *Natural Bridge*, *Main Street Rag*, and *Comstock Review*. *The Follower's Tale*, his first book of poems, was published by Salmon Poetry in 2009, and his second Salmon collection is due out in 2014. He now teaches at Gordon State College in Georgia, and spends his free time at Dollywood.

Nicolas Poynter dropped out of high school before finishing the tenth grade and then spent twenty years not writing. Today, he is a student in The Red Earth MFA program at Oklahoma City

University. His work has recently appeared in *North American Review*, *Citron Review* and *Siren*.

Charles Rafferty has received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. His tenth collection of poetry, *The Unleashable Dog*, is forthcoming from Steel Toe Books. A collection of short stories, *Saturday Night at Magellan's*, is forthcoming from Fomite Press. Currently, he directs the MFA program at Albertus Magnus College.

Sue Reeves is a public relations specialist and disability advocate at Utah State University. In addition to writing poetry, she makes photographs and mixed media art journals, which help make sense of *The Way Things Are*. Her poems have also appeared in *The Barefoot Review*.

Jordan Sanderson's poems have recently appeared in *Phantom Limb*, *burntdistrict*, *The Fiddleback*, *Hyphenate Magazine*, *Spectrum*, and other journals, and his reviews can be found in *Heavy Feather Review*. Jordan earned a PhD from the Center for Writers at the University of Southern Mississippi. He currently lives in Escatawpa, Mississippi and teaches English at Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College.

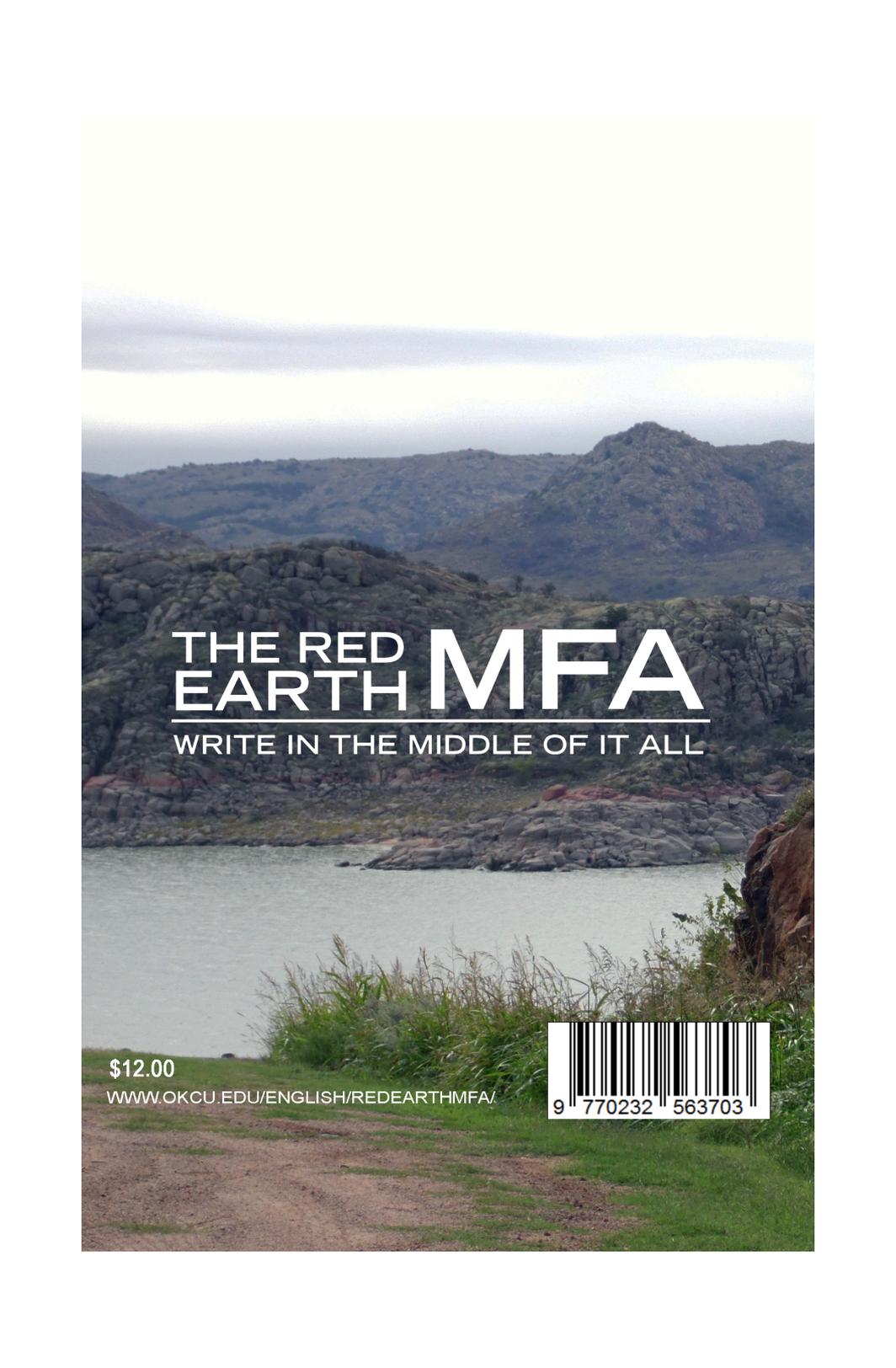
Evelyn Somers is associate editor of the *Missouri Review*. Her fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Crazyhorse*, *Georgia Review*, *Pank*, *South Dakota Review*, *Shenandoah* and the *Florida Review*, among others. Books she has edited have won the John Simmons award, the Drue Heinz and the Peter Taylor prize for the novel and have been published by both university and small presses and larger, commercial presses. She is at work on her second novel; *Appointment* is an adapted excerpt from that book.

Chris Souza lives in Massachusetts. Her poetry has appeared in journals such as *Gulf Coast*, *American Literary Review*, *West Branch*, *New York Quarterly*, and *New Delta Review*. Work has also been featured on "Verse Daily" and is forthcoming in *Lake Effect*, *Cape Rock Review*, *Cumberland River Review*, and *Bellingham Review*.

Jay Udall's poems have recently appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *North American Review*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Spillway*, and *Bayou*. His latest volume, *The Welcome Table* (University of New Mexico Press), won the New Mexico Book Award. He teaches at Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, Louisiana, where he also serves as chief editor of the online journal *Gris-Gris*.

Jane Woodman writes, runs, and teaches high school in the San Francisco Bay Area. She attended Duke University for her undergraduate studies and is currently finishing her MFA in Creative Writing in The Red Earth MFA Program at Oklahoma City University. Ever the optimist, Jane maintains hope that last year's introduction of Poet Stamps bodes well for the state of both poetry and the postal service.

Kirby Wright was a Visiting Fellow at the 2009 International Writers Conference in Hong Kong, where he represented the Pacific Rim region of Hawaii. He was also a Visiting Writer at the 2010 Martha's Vineyard Residency in Edgartown, Mass., and the 2011 Artist in Residence at Milkwood International, Czech Republic. He is the author of the companion novels *PUNAHOU BLUES* and *MOLOKA'I NUI AHINA*, both set in the islands.



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