CutBank
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Kyle Ellingson

Todd in the Garden

Todd slumps in his pew, snuffling the many mucuses of his sorrow. He’s never sat in a pew before. Today he sought a church, any church, on the business of poaching the composition of a eulogy. Any eulogy. He has some eulogizing to do.

But this church—maybe it’s the wrong church. No corpse is on show. The closest thing to an urn is a vase of paper flowers (frayed). And the mic’d up, kimono’d dude pacing around the pulpit (pastor or shaman) is sermonizing not about the rising and setting of a human life (etc.) but about the admirable tenacity of a shoelace knot. Gosh, think everyone: the tenacity of that knot, he says (vigorous). It holds the whole shoe shut. This isn’t even the knot of the laces on the shoes he’s wearing—which are, Todd double-checks, slip-on wingtips—but of another (loungier) pair of shoes, presumably closeted (at present) in this dude’s home.

All his youth Todd has misunderstood: not all church services are funerals.

• • •

After the pastor’s parting blessing, congregants filed into the church cafeteria to enjoy the nonsacramental crunch of some cookies.
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After the pastor’s parting blessing, congregants filed into the church cafeteria to enjoy the nonsacramental crunch of some cookies.
Any (pregnant loner) looked on from her (loner) table as Todd bowed, shied, and let the whole congregation file ahead of him in the cookie line.

“Who are you, dude?” Anya waddled over to ask.

Todd (giant stranger) shied, bowing, and opened his hand for her to take his spot at the end of the line.

• • •

“Eat it, own it,” Anya instructed, holding a snickerdoodle up (high) to the beard of Todd.

Like a child receiving a thermometer, Todd shut his eyes and opened his mouth (aaaaabbbllll)—a cavern parting his beard.

“Good, good,” Anya said, “mum-mum-yum. That’s your cookie—eat your cookie, dude.”

• • •

Any and Todd strolled together in the garden of the church. The sun, above. The congregation of nodding hasta.

“Stroll with,” Anya specified, “not linger petlike behind. I want you up here, aligned with me.”

Todd blushed, feeling invited.

• • •

Todd had to halt the strolling, had to—was tearful and couldn’t see, couldn’t direct his steps over the cobblestones, could for a minute only stand swallowing and re-swallowing a spill of sad hisses.

“I’m not a member of your church,” he said to Anya. He expected all futures of pleasant strolling with Anya to now . . . eclipse. He’d been on the outside of enough groups to know how this worked.

“But that’s good!” said Anya. “Preferred! Did you not see me in there? I was alone.”

• • •

Anya asked Todd to please identify the rigid box flopping between her and him in the cargo pocket of his khakis.

“Oh,” Todd said, “it’s somebody’s ashes.”

“Interesting answer, dude!” Anya said.

• • •

Seated on a garden bench, drooping her pregnancy forward (between knees), Anya pinky-traced eyes and a mouth into the ashes of the open mahogany box (rubber-lined, hermetic):

:(

She showed the face to Todd, who sat thumbing his thumbs in fret about the ashes tipping, spilling, or rising away on a gust of wind.

“That’s my friend Phet,” Todd said.
Todd had to halt the strolling, *had to*—was tearful and couldn’t see, couldn’t direct his steps over the cobblestones, could for a minute only stand swallowing and re-swallowing a spill of sad hisses.

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“That’s my friend Phet,” Todd said.
“Phet’s frowning because he died,” Anya riffed on the details of her ashen doodle. “Is that accurate of Phet and his feelings about his death? To be frowning?”

Todd shrugged like he didn’t know. “Whatever you think. It’s your art.”

Anya said, “But I can’t just assume.”

Todd stood chin-level with the high picket fence of the garden, reporting to Anya about life beyond it. He tries to keep his language compelling.

“There’s an upper-middle-class dog lying cheek-down in the middle of a neighborhood street. Further off, a Honda’s brake lights, um, erupt. The trunk pops open, clickered from inside, and a woman runs from the driver’s door and a woman runs from the passenger door. Now the women are, like, putting the dog to bed in the trunk.”

“Ug. What else is on?” Anya asked (yawn), fists quivering in time with her full-body, butt-clenching wake-up stretch.

Todd begged Anya’s pardon, sheepishly dropped to his knees, and poked around the soily webs of hasta root, dislodging nightcrawlers and detaining the drowsiest three or four in his second cargo pocket.

“So besides fishing off public docks, what else you got going on today?” Anya asked.

Todd eyed the morning sun like it was a one-word memo. He tiredly recited that he’d really love to learn to write and read before another day snuck past him.

He had, you know, some eulogizing to do.

“Oh gah,” Anya said, rolling her eyes in relief, “so you are a dude with important goals.”

Anya piloted Todd’s big hand in the style of handlebars—her right hand gripping his pinky, left his thumb—and laid it onto a shifting bulge in a low quadrant of her belly.

“That’s my unborn child’s head,” she said. “It likes to use the curve of my colon as a pillow.

“Well not it,” she added, seeing Todd’s ill mope of surprise.

Todd stood teetering as he hyperventilated. He stuttered in lulls and spitty plosives—over his chin (beard) lay an ornately beaded net of slobber:

“And if I can’t write I can’t write a eulogy and if I can’t read I can’t read what I write and if I can’t write or read I’ll just have to memorize and
“Phet’s frowning because he died,” Anya riffed on the details of her ashen doodle. "Is that accurate of Phet and his feelings about his death? To be frowning?"

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then I’ll forget and won’t say what I mean about Phet who was my only friend and dude who thought I could be smart if I wanted to—"

“You need to breathe into a paper bag!” Anya said in fright before scaling her mouth to Tod’s and using her cheeks as inflatable chambers of deoxygenation.

• • •

“You DO SMELL,” Anya said, sniffing Tod’s beard.

She’d made out with Tod for as long as she calculated was proper and interesting at the present time. She’d left things at a kind of cliffhanger.

“Kind of,” she said, “like an empty jar of unsalted dry roast peanuts.”

Todd explained that all seven adults of his immediate family lived together in a one-bathroom apartment with a disreputable water heater above a taproom both soaked in and inducing sweat, where morning through midnight he wiped tables and politely bounced inebriates. “I try to stay clean between showers but it’s like the world wants me not to.”

“Well put,” Anya said, patting his knee.

• • •

“LICK THIS PEBBLE,” Anya instructed, and Tod did so without complaint or facial expression.

“Do situps until I say stop,” Anya said, and Tod, without grunts or facial expressions, began to.

“Stop! Stop! You’re weird—this is wrong.” Anya said, tugging embarrassed at his sweater for him to stand.

• • •

From OUT OF a corner of fenceline, the one highest and dampest with unpruned hasta, Anya and Tod emerged, hunkered and blinking into daylight like awoken nocturnal primates. Anya retied the drawstring of her maternity capris.

“So if I wanted your help raising my kid, you’d do it like point blank wouldn’t you,” Anya said.

Todd shied his face aside, to blush in private. His tongue did its tic of wiggling a cracked upper canine, and his throat lost hold of a hehehehe in delighted staccato.

• • •

Anya sat on Tod’s knee (girth, arm-of-sofa-like) watching a bee impregnate a nearby hasta, the lolling of whose leaves and stalks recalled, to her, ditziness.

“Oh jeeze,” she said, “I can’t watch that shit.”

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Anya held up the backs of her hands, for herself to view.

“...I don’t wear rings anymore,” she said. “I used to wear tons—like five or six different ones per finger, two or three on thumbs. I always told people the rings were and adult thing, like a fashion decision; but really it was a child thing, like make-believe; I sort of semiconsciously understood that the rings gave me superpowers. It was the kind of thing where on the surface you’re fully prepared to admit it’s not possible, but deep down you’re like *Fuck that, shit’s mysterious, shit’s possible*. I would fondle these rings, even toe rings, super obsessively, contemplating their powers. I had a little wooden ring that made weeds thrive in manicured lawns. Another made people feel self-hate for quoting movies too much. A lot of ’em had to do with my step-mom: one gave her yeast infections, one deepened her facial creases, one made her remember to sip her coffee only after it was cold. Then I had a big fake-opal ring on my middle right finger that was supposed to mandate sperm to keep out of my eggs. Then the month my period stopped I bought a ring that was supposed to attribute no-period to anemia or some other relatively-benign condition. Then after four months of, like, climactic delusion I walked out of my first ultrasound and dropped 76 rings, one by one, *clunk, clunk, clunky, clunk*, into the trashcan of the ladies’ room. Out in the lobby was my step-mom, happening that day to look young and yeast-free and be sipping steaming coffee. And in my head I broke the lobby silence with a scream that nosedove into a really tense choking reaction, the kind that convinces people you’ve stopped breathing. And in my head I fell to all fours and shredded up the carpet like a feral cat who wants *out*—out of all confining human spaces. But in real life I looked all mature and was like *Yo, back off, step-mom, I’m gonna be a real mom, which is cooler than what you are.*”

...“How did Phet die?” Anya asked in the blue cool shade of a spooky-big haste, leaves like ironing boards gone limp.

“And how did Phet die?” she asked a moment later, in the sunlight that whitewashed the cobblestone footpath.

“*Irg!*” she said in the hot moist shade of the fenceline, where Todd had evasively lowered his face in the overdrama of an unneeccesary worm hunt, “how how how how how did Phet die!”

Yet again Todd scuttled heavily away—back now to the (blinding) sunny end of the garden.

...“Let’s sit again,” Anya said. “I’m into seats.”

“Oop, no go,” Todd said. Occupying the only garden bench was a sparrow, dozing in fondness of the sun.

“Whatevs dude,” Anya said. She pattered to the bench in her sandals, flapping hands. But suddenly Todd had tangled her up from behind in a painless full-nelson. It was his soft (considerate) dexterity that distinguished him as a bouncer.
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“I do this for a living,” he said. “Sparrow was there first.”
“I know,” she said.

Todd and Anya shook hands with entrepreneurial firmness. Anya used two hands to encompass Todd’s one.
“I hereby swear to teach you literacy so that you can properly eulogize your friend and encourager whose death you won’t describe to me,” Anya said. “And you?”
“I swear to, um, surprise your step-mom with vague, um, guarantees of—”
“Of barbarity—”
“—guarantees of barbarity if she gets too, uh—”
“If she in any way belittles or infantilizes me—”
“—in any way belittles or infantilizes you when you have your baby and are a mom.”
“Close enough,” said Anya, giving his hand one last promisorial squeeze.

“Hey,” Todd said. “Hey.”
“What?” Anya said.
“Well you, we—we’re just, kind of quiet.”
“Yeah I can’t decide what happened.”

Todd almost cleared a leg over the fence, but Anya had hooked several fingers through his belt loops and was playing pregnant anchor to his escape.
“Silence isn’t bad,” Anya said. “Certainly not something to ruin.”
His jailbreak had brought an end to their silence—pleased, he dismounted the fence.

“Hey,” Todd said. “Hey.”
“What?” Anya said.
“Well you, we—we’re just, kind of quiet.”
“Yeah I can’t decide what happened.”

Todd circled Anya, hoping to glimpse her face as she turned and turned away.
“Where do you live?” Todd said.
“I do this for a living,” he said. “Sparrow was there first.”
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... ... ...

“How long’s it been since we met?” Todd said, gauging the solar angles in the garden.
“Don’t eyeball the sun,” Anya said. “That’s how eye-patched pirates melted their retinas.”

Anya checked the clock on her phone, pulled from a roomy capri pocket. “Our moment of first sight was 11 minutes, 37 seconds ago as of... now. When I meet someone, I always remember to start a stopwatch.”

... ... ...

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“Where do you live?” Todd said.
“Boring. Too particular, cramping, identifying. Tedium, colorless.”

“You phone number?”

“Numbers? Way worse.”

“Name?”

Anya, spinning, began (demonstrative) to snore.

“Can I tell you mine?” said Todd.

“If you want to make me vanish under the weight of my boredom—sure.”

“It’s just that if I tell you where I live and my name and everything about me, it sucks the difficulty out of everything,” Anya said. “Locating each other gets easier, and easier gestures mean less. I demand epic struggle. Epic coincidence or bust. It’s romantic.”

• • •

Anya dropped a thick brass toe ring into Todd’s palm.

“A superpower ring,” she said. “I know I said I threw them all out and stopped believing in them but that was, like, just part of the story. I think the ring might work quicker than me teaching you to read and write. I mean that could take a long time—like several months. And what if it’s a while til we find each other again? I mean, I will wander the streets as much as I can in search of you—but there’s no guarantee.”

“Mkay,” said Todd (monkish). “But what if I just come by this church next Sunday?”

• • •

“No. That would be lame. Too easy, dude.”

“Oh yeah.”

“But for now just wear the ring and it’ll, like, grant you the power of poignant eulogy.”

Anya issued a solemn swoop of her forefinger, wandlike, to bewitch the ring.

“Here,” Todd said, “you take this.” He plucked a napping nightcrawler from his cargo. “Use it to, you know, scare your step-mom. Until it out works for me to.”

“Good deal,” said Anya.

• • •

Todd, at one end of the garden, stomped a loose cobblestone back into its socket in the dirt. It was a tenet for Todd, to leave a place cleaner than he’d found it.

Anya sat at the other end, pinching crunchable brown leaves from the sprouts of a newborn hasta.

“Before you,” she said to Todd, “it was a habit of mine to leave a place dirtier than I found it, as punishment for people not making me feel happier.”

• • •

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“Mkay,” said Todd (monkish). “But what if I just come by this church next Sunday?”

“No. That would be lame. Too easy, dude.”

“Oh yeah.”

“But for now just wear the ring and it’ll, like, grant you the power of poignant eulogy.”

Anya issued a solemn swoop of her forefinger, wandlike, to bewitch the ring.

“Here,” Todd said, “you take this.” He plucked a napping nightcrawler from his cargo. “Use it to, you know, scare your step-mom. Until it out works for me to.”

“Good deal,” said Anya.

Todd, at one end of the garden, stomped a loose cobblestone back into its socket in the dirt. It was a tenet for Todd, to leave a place cleaner than he’d found it.

Anya sat at the other end, pinching crunchable brown leaves from the sprouts of a newborn hasta.

“Before you,” she said to Todd, “it was a habit of mine to leave a place dirtier than I found it, as punishment for people not making me feel happier.”

Anya, clapping her hands clean, raining upon the newborn hasta
confetti of its own dead leaves, said to Todd, “Gotta go, dude, seeya.”

Her father and step-mom were pressing regions of their formalwear against the interiors of a sunlit church window, knocking on the glass as if to be shown through.

“Seeya,” Todd said, hiding under the lolling mass of the garden’s largest hasta—the church’s monument (placarded) to what, for plant life, is possible.

The ring Anya gave him only fit the very tip of his pinky. It gleamed there, a crown. He tapped the ring on the lid of Phet’s ash box—which made the pinky look like a little king, banging his head.

At birth you can
I think the kindest bee;
Making yellow milk from
A wombat flee; I got a starved

Being. The curved part pretended
It was happy and full of milk,
That it was glad and fell about.
The warm part stank of eyes,

What a beginner I got. Stood all
Around the whatuary, we crossed it
Off lists, I think people knew
Things but did not yet know how to

Trap them things.

Now I have become so drunk I am a father
Cut away his blue sword
Cut away its cold perpetual rays

Because I have become the feeling
That I am a father underneath my cape
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Rae Winkelstein

A FORM OF BIRTHING
And underneath my sword
I feel I am another father
Old and peeled and planted
With long, involuntary teeth.

Removed from all light, yet
He will live, while frogs might live questionably,
Vomiting, drawn to a place frogs’ longing

Repeats in the waves: Earth has
No answer, so they feed it
They give their honey out

SIBLING

I had long hair, squat tail, and fins.
I spent warm summers by the beach up in Maine, I picked
Plump drupelings and I split their skins, funny how
You think you are a crow

Then are shown your original body
Then your head’s pleated scheme
Then all your bestial loss.

I am the receder of ponds, I stand still at the main front
A darker mesh misleafing in the reeds: silica shreds
Are you ready, bristled Oh all with purpose
From the neck down: Equisetum are you merely willing…

And the pool grows shallow in the spring as a yellow bowel
& as light wandered the double eye-did
Septate too, in all the living strings, grew then into a strange delay:

Weren’t they bright
All knocking at the wrong time?
And underneath my sword

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MEASURING

Well we don't know what it sounds like.
(Sounds like measuring.)

Well we can't echolocate it.
(It measured us.)

Its soft thinker
(Same-sympathy foe)

Adorns us like a hook
(Put light on us.)

Fibrils frill its soft brain
(It shears them off.)

They fly sheer
As silk on a deer.

(I druther go aloft
Wedged in a hawk.)

Fertile for the last Fall
And fallen things the world uncovered in us

Phenols, concentrates, the wilds
Marked at the hinge with a strange

Bridal will, the bridle will touch off the jaw

& the velvet meat go to quivers.

Don't know if
It'll hurt us or (it will.)
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Don’t know if
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Juliana Gray

The Wedding March

“I can’t wake up your father.”

Sue, the woman who had been my stepmother for less than a day, half-called, half-whispered to me down the hallway. I was rolling luggage out of my room, slipping away early from the hotel where the wedding party and most of the guests from last night’s ceremony were staying. The sooner I could escape this morning, the sooner I’d arrive at the summer writing camp where I would teach eager high school students, visit friends, and drink lime rickeys on a shady Southern porch.

But there was Sue, dressed in an ivory satin nightgown she’d doubtless bought for her honeymoon, rushing from door to door, tapping too softly to rouse the sleepers on the other side. She saw me coming and turned, twisting her heavily ringed hands. “I can’t wake up your father.”

My father and Sue had been seeing each other off and on for about six years, after meeting through Match.com. Dad was dating a lot in those days, enjoying the single life after he and my mother finally divorced. Each time my sister and I visited him, we had to be introduced to a new girlfriend, indistinguishable from the others, middle-aged divorcees who laughed like roosters and wore too much makeup. Dad lived in a small town in Georgia, and the dating pool was shallow. He wanted someone to drink with and take to restaurants; then he could come home to his bachelor pad and watch Quentin Tarantino movies on his colossal flat screen. Let him have his fun, I thought. I met few of his girlfriends twice.

Except Sue. A widow, she had seen her first husband drop dead in front of her as they were gardening. Perhaps it was a stroke, or a heart attack; Sue never knew for sure. Despite her sunny blond hair and wry humor, the sadness of this loss hung over her. As we chatted, cooking dinners in Dad’s kitchen, I’d occasionally notice her turning her mouth as if biting off a comment to a listener who wasn’t there, or peering like an oracle into her wine glass. “She never got over him,” Dad said. I think it endeared her to him; he knew this was a woman who loved deeply. Unlike the girlfriends who continually touched his arm with their French-tipped hands and brayed desperately at his every joke, Sue gave him a hard time, teased him about playing the same CD all night or drinking so much that he forgot to put the steaks on the grill. He’d laugh and give her a kiss as I looked down and scrubbed a pot.

People often claim a kind of premonition at turning points in their lives. “As soon as I heard X, I knew,” they begin. People say this, and it’s a
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People often claim a kind of premonition at turning points in their
lives. “As soon as I heard X, I knew,” they begin. People say this, and it’s a
cliché, but that doesn’t make it untrue.

The hotel suite was dark. Like a Greek hero entering the underworld, I could already feel the old life, the sunlit world, falling behind. I was Eurydice in reverse, desperate to look back, change time, get in the car and drive far, far away from this room and the unmoving shape in the bed.

Too late. He lay heavily, an unnatural slump in his chest, a dusky blue tinge in his face. His cheeks seemed puffed out. A sheet covered his lower body; afterwards, when I could not stop replaying the moment, I guessed that Sue must’ve thrown the sheet over him, covering the nakedness of his wedding night, before seeking help. I touched his shoulder.

Knowing there was no need for an ambulance, I ran for an ambulance. Instead of using my cell or the room’s phone a few inches away on the nightstand, I ran to the hotel front desk. Families eating breakfast in the lobby, in line to make fresh waffles, watched me sprint past. I am a runner; Dad and I used to do 5Ks together. I ran, but not as fast as I could have. Too late, too late for all that.

I got married at 25, divorced at 31. At the time of my wedding, my parents had been married almost thirty years, but whatever bond once held them had long since corroded. They worked together on the wedding plans and gamely posed for pictures, but at home, my younger sister reported, they rarely spoke to each other without some cut or harshness, usually from Dad. Two years later, when they finally split, I learned that Dad had been having an affair. Maybe he was already seeing this woman as he toasted me and my new husband, grinning and wearing the cap he’d ordered online. “Father of the Bride” read the swirly script surrounded by dollar signs.

The ambulance idled in the parking lot; there was no rush. I gave the EMT his full name, date of birth, address. My voice was steady, for now. In my pocket I could feel the reassuring weight of a corkscrew. While the still-groggy wedding guests watched the EMTs load his body onto a gurney, I’d spotted it on a bedside table and, without thinking, palmed it. It was a pretty thing, inlaid with wood. Mahogany, maybe, or maple. A souvenir. “He just got married last night,” I said.

“For real?” the EMT asked, then shook his head, permitted to say no more.

“Roll Tide!” I’d say when Dad picked up the phone. “Oh, Roll Tide!” he’d reply. I liked to call during halftimes of Alabama games, when
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I knew he’d be home and, if the Tide was ahead, lightly buzzed and in a good mood. By that time I was divorced and living in Alabama, as did my mother, while Dad lived a hundred miles farther away in central Georgia. I knew he had been cruel to her, treating her with cold contempt for many years, deliberately driving her away; yet I’d always been my father’s daughter. I visited on long weekends, and we’d watch bad action movies, eat fatty foods, drink wine, listen to Dylan. While I washed dishes, he’d sit on the patio, making phone calls to girlfriends. He’d quit smoking years before, but had secretly started up again, and we both pretended that I didn’t see the glowing cherries or the butts in the clay chiminea. Sometimes girlfriends invited themselves over, and though he flirted and returned their little sweet nothings, he seemed more at ease when they left. If the girlfriend was Sue, she might spend the night, but then she went home again. Dad and I were alike, I thought; we both enjoyed our solitude too much to sacrifice it again.

• • •

How does a man simply stop breathing? How does the body, that fine machine, fail to perform its most basic function? Pendulums swing; weathervanes point out the wind; yet the lungs and heart stop doing the only things they have ever done. How does the sleeping man just keep sleeping?

Sue wanted an autopsy; she never knew how her first husband had died, and couldn’t stand not knowing about her second. My sister and I numbly agreed. Within two days, the results came back: sleep apnea, with clear toxicology. What were we supposed to do with this? Dad had snored like a freight train, but sleep apnea? Hours after the ER doctor told us he was dead on arrival, my sister and I had torn through his medicine cabinets, looking for prescriptions that would reveal some diagnosis—heart failure, cancer—that he’d concealed from us. We’d found antidepressants, eyedrops, Viagra.

Sue was wrecked. Whatever the autopsy results, she would’ve been wrecked. “Early in the morning, he gave a funny kind of snore,” she sobbed. “What if I’d woken him up? What if I’d kicked him, pushed him out of bed to wake him up?”

I had other suspicions: about the medical examiners, about rush jobs in the deep South, about lies that might be told to comfort a widow. I was a true-crime show junkie, and knew that toxicology reports took weeks, not two lazy summer days. Internet searches backed me up, and also told me sleep apnea was most common in men (check) who were older (check), overweight, and smoked (check check). Though sufferers might complain of sleeping poorly, they were usually unaware that their breathing stopped completely several times during the night. The condition is exacerbated by muscle relaxants and alcohol abuse.

Oh, the wedding night. How many glasses of wine had he downed? How many champagne toasts had he drunk? And then the late-night scotch and cigars by the pool. And then, Sue confessed, he’d asked
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her for a Xanax when they went to bed. He usually took one to help him sleep— he always had such trouble sleeping. We assured Sue that it wasn’t her fault. Still, either the toxicology report was wrong, or the ME had told a well-intentioned lie. I managed not to pronounce this, but I nursed it, ground my teeth on it throughout the funeral and the days that followed. If he hadn’t had so much to drink, hadn’t taken that pill, he might have woken up.

On the worst days, I harbored another belief. If he hadn’t gotten married, he would have lived. Marriage killed my father.

I had been married for only two years when my parents divorced, and I studied their negotiations and careful steps through the process. My marriage had a lot of problems, common ones—poor communication, bad sex, depression, infidelity— for which my ex and I both bore the blame. But one of the fundamental problems, I came to realize, was that I hated being married. I was just bad at it. I disliked sharing a space that he would inevitably disarrange, leaving a slippery pile of mail on the floor beside the coffee table, or failing to run water over dirty dishes in the sink, where melted cheese cemented between the tines of his forks. I hated adapting my schedule to his, making compromises, listening, sympathizing, giving in. There’s a Seinfeld episode in which George, frustrated at his fiancée’s requests for greater intimacy, complains, “Why can’t there be some things just for me? Is that so selfish?” “Actually,” Jerry replies, “that’s the definition of selfish.” My husband once quoted those lines to me, and I didn’t disagree. I was selfish, and miserable. After we divorced and I moved into a clean, bare apartment of my own, I missed a great many things about my husband, but my overwhelming emotion was relief.

What wonderful, horrible luck to have so many pictures. Here’s the whole family, Dad’s and Sue’s, arrayed before some shrubbery. Here’s the bride in her champagne-colored cocktail dress. Here’s my sister in black and white, me in purple, both of us as tall as Dad in our heels, standing on either side of him. He’s in a black suit with a pale yellow tie. His face, always ruddy, looks flushed. I’m trying hard not to blink, but I almost always blink. Here’s the couple before the ceremony; the white rose had fallen out of his boutonniere, leaving him with only a sprig of baby’s breath pinned to his lapel. I’d run back to his hotel room to look for the rose, but couldn’t find it. He didn’t care.

Here’s the champagne toast. Here’s a kiss. Here he is with the best man, walking to the ceremony, impatient. The camera clicks on their backs as they walk away.
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In the days that followed our father’s death, my sister and I lived in his house, cleaning out his refrigerator, closets, liquor cabinet. A spiral notebook beside his computer held addresses and passwords, most of them outdated. Underneath the notebook, in a crisp manila folder, was a printout of Sue’s Match.com profile. Her smile in the small photo was shy, but hopeful. The date printed at the bottom of the page was 2004. He’d saved it, then recently dug it out again. Perhaps he was planning some romantic gesture, having it framed and presenting it as a gift. Perhaps he would simply have shown it to her, told her that he loved her, had always loved her.

At the ceremony, held on the patio of an upscale restaurant in Macon, I volunteered to run the music. This meant standing discreetly around the corner, behind the audience, close to where the wedding party would emerge to walk down the makeshift aisle; I could be helpful without joining either group. Dad had carefully selected the particular recording of the wedding march, some Vivaldi, the recessional by Mendelssohn.

But when I hit play, the wrong song came belting out of the CD. Flustered, I stabbed at the buttons while the audience chuckled. What the hell? Why were the songs out of order? Had his iTunes been set to shuffle when I burned the CD? I flushed and swore. Dad and Sue peeped around the corner, giggling and making faces of mock consternation, until I finally found Wagner.

To soaring violin chords, they walked down the aisle, holding hands and smiling. No one would give them away; they gave themselves to each other. I queued up Vivaldi at the proper moment after the prayer, but midway through the song Dad gestured at me, cutting his fingers across his throat. The song was too long; he couldn’t wait. When the minister began the vows—“Do you take this woman?”—Dad interjected with a booming “I do,” and everyone laughed as the minister said that was fine, but there was more. Both of them were smiling and laughing, squeezing each other’s hands.

Standing in the rear, holding my head high and my shoulders back, as Dad had instructed me when I was a little girl, I felt a smile on my own lips. It was early evening, hot; we were shaded, but the sun flared red off the Georgia dirt in the nearby lot. Soon we’d be inside, drinking wine in the private dining room, and Dad’s reception playlist would sing to us from the speakers. He was proud of that playlist, had been working on it for months—Sinatra, Billie Holiday, Tony Bennett, Emmylou Harris, Elvis, Bobby Darin—no Dylan, at the bride’s request, but a little Stones, a little Jerry Lee Lewis, just to keep it fun.

The minister told another joke—really, he could tone it down—and they kissed. I joined the audience for a few handclaps and hit the button for Mendelssohn, which lilted correctly over the applause. They walked past me, grinning like kids. I can’t remember now whether Dad looked at me, or whether his eyes were fixed on his wife. He’d had his
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Standing in the rear, holding my head high and my shoulders back, as Dad had instructed me when I was a little girl, I felt a smile on my own lips. It was early evening, hot; we were shaded, but the sun flared red off the Georgia dirt in the nearby lot. Soon we’d be inside, drinking wine in the private dining room, and Dad’s reception playlist would sing to us from the speakers. He was proud of that playlist, had been working on it for months—Sinatra, Billie Holiday, Tony Bennett, Emmylou Harris, Elvis, Bobby Darin—no Dylan, at the bride’s request, but a little Stones, a little Jerry Lee Lewis, just to keep it fun.

The minister told another joke—really, he could tone it down—and they kissed. I joined the audience for a few handclaps and hit the button for Mendelssohn, which lilted correctly over the applause. They walked past me, grinning like kids. I can’t remember now whether Dad looked at me, or whether his eyes were fixed on his wife. He’d had his
teeth whitened; they gleamed like polished marble. The old man was so clearly, so palpably happy. He wouldn’t remember my mistake with the CD, only that I’d been helpful and supportive on his wedding day. I’d pack up the CD player and stash it in Dad’s car after the music finished. I wanted a glass of wine. I stood up straight and smiled. Yes, I agreed with some passing well-wisher, it was a lovely ceremony, a beautiful evening after all.

Dust Bowl Wedlock

Roxanne Banks Malia

A wake in wave of tall grass ebb as gently as newsprint coiled around last year’s harvest. Mud and horsehair shredded foundation falls like cloth and dawns the barn abandoned. Or a marriage split by blistered dusk, chalked dew and Do yourself a favor. Warped sashes splintered the view of a quiet paper grass sea.
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Riverbanks and Honeysuckle

- Winner: Big Sky, Small Prose Flash Contest -

The story goes like this:

I went into the Potomac, slipped, cut my arm on some rocks.

The truth is something like this:

I went to the Potomac’s bank. I cut my arm at home.

The gauze I wrapped around myself was ostentatious, its white a bright contrast against my skin, but less worrisome than the wounds themselves. No one outright called me a liar; the river’s current can grab, pull hard and fast like a frightened mother. The parks around the Potomac have bright welcome pamphlets with the bolded, large text, “DO NOT SWIM,” and similar signs are posted on the banks ideal for river access. Regardless, a handful of drownings are scattered in the regional news each year—usually they are accidental.

The Potomac serves as a boundary. Its curves separate states, denoting territory and belonging on either side. In places, it is beautiful. On the banks marking Washington D.C. from Virginia, wild honeysuckle grows in abundance. Though the foliage overwhelms the pale yellow and cream blossoms, the perfume hangs in the summer air, heady, thickening as the days build to unsatisfying thunderstorms. The smell creeps through closed windows, sticks in the nose, the lungs.

As a child, I learned to eat honeysuckle sugar. It is a tedious process and the sort of lesson I want my mother to have taught me, one that requires demonstration and touch. Despite the meager payoff, a few drops of nectar, these are small, bright memories. When I look through my past for a consistent pleasure, I find those empty, discarded blossoms scattered through my childhood summers.

I would like to have eaten honeysuckle on the banks of the Potomac. If I fold the right memories over one another, I can imagine I once did:

Two children walk down a steep hill, vines and thin branches pulling their ankles, then settle at the graffitied base of a bridge over the river. There are no warning signs here. Their parents do not know where they are. The boy clammers over the rocks, stumbling, long hair obscuring his vision, worn soles getting no traction; the girl reaches into the foliage and painstakingly pulls ends off flowers with ragged fingernails. At home, they look for rest. The long-haired boy puts a needle in his arm. The girl drags something sharp across hers.
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The exact translation of the Potomac’s name is uncertain and its spelling is a bastardized version of a former Algonquin name. This is fitting for a river that cuts through the capital of a nation whose story reads, like mine, as one of overcoming and omission. My mother says I was born less than three miles from the Potomac, and I would like to hold the river and its uncertain etymology responsible for my brain’s inclination to blur and rearrange memories to suit current circumstances. There are gaps, too, muddy months of years that have been filled in by others. Their stories vary in accuracy, but I listen because they are preferable to a void. A man who once had long hair says I slapped his mouth. My mother says that, as an infant, I never cried.

I cannot find the bridge by the riverbank. I want to know if honeysuckle grows nearby, if the graffiti can give insight into what happened afterward, at home. It is impossible to pick a point and walk the Potomac’s curves until a bridge resonates with memory, and there is no one to ask for directions. The boy with long hair has vanished into the desert, away from the waters of our childhood. There were others at the riverbank that day, but they slipped into deep creases when I folded my memories and have not emerged.

Driving along the river in late May, my mother points out a spot where, she says, a man and his son drowned while fishing. She has never learned to swim. I tell her I can smell the honeysuckle even with the windows rolled up. She pauses, says she can, too.
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Daddy drives a muscle car and has no hair but what’s long on the bottom. He always looks at me sideways like a drummer. I can tell he is checking to see if I have boobs yet when I’m getting Bobby into the back seat. Then he’s gunning it down the street. Mama sliding away, back on the porch.

Mama doesn’t even try to warn me anymore about what to watch out for. It’s like everything started happening in fast blocks of time, and she got caught somewhere in the spaces that only almost seem to hold them together. Like how she makes salad and then forgets that we are about to eat it.

We get to Six Flags and Daddy asks if Mama gave me any money. I hand it over. Who wants all the stuff just made to tell everybody else you had a great time? Bobby is all face, ready for sick drops through space and dripping ice cream.

So we head in, riding to the park entry on a long electric cart that holds about thirty people. At the ticket window Daddy tries to say I am half my age, and when it doesn’t work he gets a mean look I know he’ll hold onto all day.

It seems to me that people forget they even have a body as soon as they go through the gates. I watch crowds of people waiting for rides until I start to wonder how I’m going to stand it for another minute. And I realize then that people who promise endless wonders want something else and probably hate just about everybody.

Daddy’s apartment is in another state but it’s cheaper than a motel. It has two rooms—a bedroom, and a room that is the living room, dining room, kitchen, and a little patch of carpet by the door where you can stand to take it all in. Daddy looks at us, points at the TV and the refrigerator, and then he points up at some advice he’s going to give.

“Don’t cook bacon on naked day,” he says. And he’s off to his bedroom, shutting the door.

Back home, the rumble of Daddy’s car fading, Bobby heads straight for his room and I go stand with Mama. She’s raising and lowering a tea bag in a cup, and I see that she has been doing it for so long that most of the dark leaves have come out and are swirling around in cold water. We look
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out the kitchen window at the back yard. I don’t know how a clothesline can look like it has never had clothes on it, but ours does.

Soon we hear a noise coming from behind Bobby’s closed door. It’s a popping sound. He’s in his closet again with his b-b gun, shooting into a cardboard box.

The crazy lady with the Doberman’s back, over by the front gate asking her same question: “Your dog have balls? Hey, does that dog have balls?” Her dog has balls, and he’s mean and couldn’t care less about what she says. Yesterday I saw him running all around the parking lot with his leash on before chasing a jogger. She’s there calling out and he doesn’t respond to nothing. I hoped he’d get hit by a car or run off into the mountain, but then again it’s not the dog’s fault he’s such an asshole.

“None of these dogs in here have balls,” I shout back.

“What!” she says.

I walk closer to the gate. “No balls. Only your dog has balls. That sign you’re standing by, it says, ‘No balls.’”

“Read it. Dogs need to be spayed or neutered. That means no balls for that guy there.”

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“Read it. Dogs need to be spayed or neutered. That means no balls for that guy there.”

She lifts the latch and comes in anyway. “It doesn’t say that.” Her dog wastes no time, runs away from her with his leash on and zeros in on something called a Whoodle. The pretty boy owner told me it was a cross between a Poodle and something else, some small breed that starts with a W. You’ve got a Shepsky, he told me. German Shepherd and Husky mix,
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right? And I said he's just a mutt, no fancy hybrid, just a mutt from the shelter.

I don't worry about my dog in here because he can take care of himself. And he listens. I hike off leash in the mountain, and when he runs off, I give him time, then call him back, and Bam! he's there, right by me on the trail again.

But this Doberman and his dangling balls zeroed in on that boy's Whoodle, and the Whoodle's a hyper thing, thinks the Dobie wants to play. It sticks its ass in the air and lowers its head all playful, its tail wagging like crazy, but the Dobie's tail isn't wagging, and its chest puffs out and it bumps the Whoodle's side, and just like that the Dobie spins the Whoodle to mount it, but the Whoodle flips on its back in submission, so instead of doggie style the Dobie is all up on this dog in the missionary position, and the Whoodle's owner is screaming like crazy from twenty feet away, yelling for the dog to stop humping him, that he's a boy anyway, and to please get your dog off, Ma'am!

The crazy lady's oblivious, filling her water bottle at the drinking fountain, and Whoodle boy won't dare get closer, so I go over there and yank the Dobie off the pup, and he bites my arm hard, and I'm about to punch it in the head when my mutt's right there biting its neck. Then when my arm's out, he wrestles the Dobie down and clamps down on his balls, dragging the poor bastard by his coin purse, deflating any envy.
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whose only protector
is its destroyer. In the dark,

there’s nothing to see,
but you look out the window

and tell me you see birds,
hear a song that goes like

The child always round me, asking *mama*,
yelling *mama*, meaning look at me *mama*.

I’m the raw materials, what’s dug out of mines
then refined with heat, time, and water,

forged with each strike, for a strike is always
repeated. Meaning, ascending with power
and health, with glad notes of daybreak I hear:
nothing. But you are warm and breathing like

a bellows. Some mornings you are angry, but
most you’re song in mug with cream. I think,

I did not know you before disease. Would
I have known you otherwise? Our chorus is easily

hummed, now that such strange notes survive.
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Kristol let the word spellbinding float with her, from the opalescent bathwater to the opened window, to the mirror that reflected the sky. Translucent powder in a jar, cotton balls tumbling, her blush from the heated water or anticipation. There was not so much to get ready for before, and now there was: $x + 1$ could disturb a universe. Crystal bottle of perfume, a champagne glass, a palette of nude eyeshadows, each one increasing in paleness, to enhance eyes that needed no brush of sparkle across the lid. The soul station broadcast from a far-away city, a far-off time, when hair was roller-set and eyeshadows in the color of the rainbow. Music was the only way to time travel, but tonight she would be nowhere else but the date on the calendar, marked neither by an X (like a prison sentence) nor a circle (like an company conference) but a heart (like a teenager’s notebook). She left the bathroom in a shimmer of steam and a scent of Daisy Dream, a watermark of footprints that seemed more fairy than human. Spellbinding.

Frankie knelt towards a soundless distance. Some ripped out sod, the tread of boots, raked free of shells. A day moon, pale against blue, reminded him of daylight fading; its target shape, the futility of trying to hit a bullsye. His ears were protected from cacophony, his eyes from glare, so that all he had to achieve was distance $\div$ time $=$ velocity. His rifle was designed at a supersonic range, so around a thousand ft per second per bullet. He admired the mind of the physicist who realized shock waves would slow a bullet down. At what price accuracy? More of a chance to live? He was delving into statistics again, damn his own shockwaved brain. His rifle rattled in his hand, but in fairness, it was his mind that was reverberating, headphones and sunglasses be damned.

Kristin dolled her up with a curling iron, a light hand with the Final Net. She pierced opals in her ears, stones that each burned with their own small fire. The soul music followed her into her room, candle flame smoke whispering up the walls, a bed draped with lace. A smaller mirror here, but larger windows, a glass for the fields and the twilight. If she had time she would think about space, but she did not, she had only time to think about her T-shirt and jeans, her hair and her face, her sandals and opals. But between the twirl of a comb and the unscrew of a gloss, she ran through their future conversations, like superflash fictions. “Where do you want to go?” he would ask, and her reply, “Anywhere.” It was not trite because it was happening to her. Her fiction could be moss and fresh leaves, but her romance would be overbred hothouse roses.

Frankie picked his rifle up. He had started to see shadows crossing the open field, as if people were strolling, oblivious to the hailstorm of fire around them. He was not only hitting other targets, but to avoid these specters, he was aiming away from his own. These are blocks of wood. They are not human. But it may have been waving branches, passing clouds, that tricked his flawed eyesight away from his post. At
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what did he shoot? He was in some kind of silent movie, the grays of the scenery and the muteness of the surroundings. A fellow trainee seemed to roll his eyes at his inaccuracies, but his shells were flying to the ground uninterrupted, and he would not interrupt his own pointblank practice to assist the chaos of his colleague. Indeed, Frankie had studied chaos theory, and the patterns of his shots had begun to randomize. They'd have to close the range, or at least tell everyone to duck. Was not shooting against the pattern of the universe anyway? Did it not go against its theory of natural order? His arm began to shake, but whether it was his exhaustion or his fear, he could not tell. He set the rifle down and winced from it as if it were a living thing.

Kristin kicked gravel from the drive, with the sole of a sandal. The clouds had descended, beading the parked car, the lawn, her face, with dew. Everything shone gray. She waited for Frankie's car to crest the hill; her house was at its apex, a winding wooden fence led to the side garden, the arbor twined with antique vines, the skyblue clematis that wove its way toward the clutches of blue grapes. She would meet Frankie at the driver's side door. But first, some flowers for her hair. She spiked their stems into the braids at her crown, while her mother's radio murmured open-air opera from her kitchen. The soundwaves tricked the fog, arias airy in her ear, and arpeggios sent sailing over the hills.

Frankie stashed his rifle in the backseat, long before the others left. He'd trudged to the parking lot, his eye on the path as if the gravel reflected his defeat. His colleagues were far too engrossed in firing to notice that he was gone, only that their targets were not being shot at from rows over. Their shots were swift and accurate; they had not only clearly mastered velocity, but triumphed over chaos theory, no matter how fast their rifles shot. They would crow over Styrofoam coffee cups tomorrow, but Frankie would ignore them. He would not admit he was too scared to shoot well. Would it not be more dangerous to shoot inaccurately? He ordered himself to stand down. He ordered himself to stand down. We're not taking any questions now.

Frankie drove with the parking lights on, windshield wipers intermittent, defroster on, seat forward. The radio broadcast a baseball game with that AM echo. Was this because it was an electrical image of sound? He imagined the peaceful heartbeat of soundwaves and just let the balls and strikes wipe away. The rifle lay spent and silent and unloaded. He preferred the steering wheel.

Kristin caught the parking lights peering around the curve of hill. The gray had been darkening, the blues of the flowers had deepened too. She waved, like she was her own electrical signal.

Frankie pulled over, braked, let himself out, locked the rifle in. He was still jammed with images of electrical signals, so must lower his voice. He would broadcast nothing except to her.

“You’re shaking.” Displacing fog as she took his hand.

“I’m tired.” The rifle sneered from the back seat. He turned his back to the car.

“What are you hiding?” She leaned over his shoulder, the window
what did he shoot? He was in some kind of silent movie, the grays of the scenery and the muteness of the surroundings. A fellow trainee seemed to roll his eyes at his inaccuracies, but his shells were flying to the ground uninterrupted, and he would not interrupt his own pointblank practice to assist the chaos of his colleague. Indeed, Frankie had studied chaos theory, and the patterns of his shots had begun to randomize. They’d have to close the range, or at least tell everyone to duck. Was not shooting against the pattern of the universe anyway? Did it not go against its theory of natural order? His arm began to shake, but whether it was his exhaustion or his fear, he could not tell. He set the rifle down and winced from it as if it were a living thing.

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Frankie drove with the parking lights on, windshield wipers intermittent, defroster on, seat forward. The radio broadcast a baseball game with that AM echo. Was this because it was an electrical image of sound? He imagined the peaceful heartbeat of soundwaves and just let the balls and strikes wipe away. The rifle lay spent and silent and unloaded. He preferred the steering wheel.

Kristin caught the parking lights peering around the curve of hill. The gray had been darkening, the blues of the flowers had deepened too. She waved, like she was her own electrical signal.

Frankie pulled over, braked, let himself out, locked the rifle in. He was still jammed with images of electrical signals, so must lower his voice. He would broadcast nothing except to her.

“You’re shaking.” Displacing fog as she took his hand.

“I’m tired.” The rifle sneered from the back seat. He turned his back to the car.

“What are you hiding?” She leaned over his shoulder, the window
tinted by menace.

“Just a gun.”

“Target practice.”

“I can’t call it practice.”


“I can’t hit for nothing.”

“Why do you need to?”

“Part of the job.”

“Maybe you can use other weapons.”

“Like a Taser?”

She half-smiled. “No, like reason.”

“You can’t stop a guy on PCP even with a gun.”

“How many guys are on PCP nowadays?”

“It’s about defense.”

“Maybe your offense is better.”

“I’ll need to drop out of the Academy.”

“Over a gun?” She wiped the window down, trying to see it amidst the cans of Coke and coffee cups. “Oh, that kind of gun.”

“Do you see?”

He pushed up his sleeve, bruised all the way up his arm. “Pretty.”

“Each shot is a bruise.”

“Pretty much.” He rolled back his sleeve; these bruises were no badges. “The cop shows, they don’t show what it’s like.”

“Did the targets morph into people?”

“Yes.”

“You stopped to think before you fired.”

“That’s bad.”

“That’s some part of your brain that takes over.”

“The wrong part of my brain.”

“That’s debatable.”

“Debate it?”

“No. You’re wrong. It’s the right part of your brain.”

“Why won’t it protect me?”

“Because you’re not thinking of yourself.”

“That goes against nature.”

She could’ve lain him down on the lawn. She held out her hand.

“What do you want?”

“Your keys.”

He stared up at her house, the wraparound porch, the lights on in the kitchen, the clouds at the second floor. “Do you want me to stay?”

She took his keys from his palm, and led him up the hill. The summer grass was long enough to brush their ankles, and they dipped in and out of each other’s vision as the fog breathed them along their way.
“Yes.”
“You stopped to think before you fired.”
“That’s bad.”
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I guess you could say my father was a magician. He could make things disappear. Heartache, tears, a quarter behind the ear. A bottle of bourbon. Paychecks. He’d figured out how to make his heart stop once, but couldn’t make it start again. His death was not an illusion. I didn’t know how to feel about it at the time because I hadn’t seen my father in over a decade. “It’s true,” my mother said. “Housekeeping found him in a room at the Barton’s 93. Of course he’d be at Barton’s,” my mother said. “Where else would he go?”

When people die, you learn things you never knew before. For example, when my father died, I discovered he’d been living in his truck—a camper shell for a roof. He’d fashioned a bed from a pile of old clothes. No one told me this. I saw it for myself.

When my father wasn’t at the casino, he was hustling. Selling found items to strangers out of the back of his truck in parking lots. He’d collect crystals found in creeks, fashion necklaces of hemp and leather, work the bins of Goodwill discards for treasure. When an item wouldn’t sell, it’d collect dust in the shed. Once, when I was little, he gave me a plush toy hamster that was missing an eye. My father blamed cheap manufacturing, grumbling with a cigarette hanging from his mouth. They just don’t make things the way they used to. What made my father successful in selling junk was the story. It was also how he sold himself to my mother. He told her stories of the desert, of the haunted pasts of men on the range. He enchanted her.


The funeral home transported my father’s body to Twin Falls, Idaho, the closest point of civilization north of the Nevada border. My mother moved to Boise from Twin after my father left, she couldn’t handle the small-town stares, the feeling of failure that lingers over the place. I still know people there, kids I went to school with, and not much has changed. Twin has an Applebees now.

Though my father’s body was waiting for me in Twin, the rest of his things—his truck, his clothes, an outstanding motel bill—were waiting to be settled in Jackpot. The motel asked my mother, who in turn asked me, to take care of “it” meaning the shit my father left behind. He’d made camp in that place, stranded himself there.

I’d been to Jackpot before. On the map, Jackpot is a pin-prick right on the line that separates Idaho and Nevada. You might scratch at the paper and mistake it for a crumb. My father took me there as a child to swim in the pool at Cactus Pete’s while he spent his afternoons in the betting lounge or at the blackjack tables. He was never much for the machines, but sometimes he’d let me pull a handle on the penny slots while we waited in line for the buffet. He told me the key to getting the
Heroes and Villains

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for is the booze. If you play it right, you can come out on top.” And some
afternoons, after spending all day on the casino floor, we’d check into the
Horseshu and sleep off the buzz. If his luck had run out, we’d sleep in the
truck, the arid heat bearing down on us through the windows. He knew
a lot of the dealers, knew their stories, and he’d tell them as he drifted
off to sleep. Bedtime stories. All the dealers wore nametags saying where
they were from, which made me sad and wonder what shit they had to
go through to wind up here. Frank from D.C., Ines from Bosnia, what
brought them to Jackpot no one but my father seemed to care. To my
father, these people were heroes and villains. Peter from Russia was a spy,
but he’d defected and was laying low in Jackpot to avoid assassination. His
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seemed to me as good a place as any to hide. Maybe the stories were true,
but maybe what brought those people to Jackpot was the same thing that
brought my father there, isolation and drink and the hardness of a past
you can’t ever escape.

On one of our trips to Jackpot, my father scored one of the
nicer rooms since it was comped by the casino. He ordered steaks and
we ate them in bed with our fingers. He rubbed the A1 off his lips with
the back of his hand, tasting the remnants on the tips of his fingers with
loud smacks. We sat cross-legged on the covers, wore napkins for bibs,
and stayed up late watching Leno. My father laughed at jokes I didn’t yet
understand.

After the steaks and Leno, I went to sleep, and my father went
down to the casino. This was our little routine, sleep and gambling and
cable television, things we indulged in in excess, in Jackpot, but nowhere
else. I woke up to my father dumping a bucket of nickels on the covers.

“Look, Nikki. I hit the jackpot in Jackpot,” he said. I remember
him scooping the nickels up with his cupped hands and letting them slip
between his fingers like a shining waterfall. The sound of change clinking
and plunking on the mattress.

“How much is it?” I asked.

“How much is it?” I asked.

“Enough, my love.”

In the dull lamplight of the room we swam our hands through
the pile on the bed, feeling the cold against our skin, feeling like it was
some kind of miracle. Like Jesus turning water into wine. I jumped on
the bed and watched the winnings bounce and take flight, some landing
on the floor, some sticking between my toes. We scooped them into
the bellies of our shirts, like Scrooge McDuck, and carried the weight
around the room. The next morning my father bought me a silver ring
with turquoise dolphins from the gift shop and I wore it all the time
even though it turned my skin green. I wore it until it didn’t fit, and after
that I put it in my jewelry box with the WWJD ring that my fifth grade
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On one of our trips to Jackpot, my father scored one of the nicer rooms since it was comped by the casino. He ordered steaks and we ate them in bed with our fingers. He rubbed the A1 off his lips with the back of his hand, tasting the remnants on the tips of his fingers with loud smacks. We sat cross-legged on the covers, wore napkins for bibs, and stayed up late watching Leno. My father laughed at jokes I didn’t yet understand.

After the steaks and Leno, I went to sleep, and my father went down to the casino. This was our little routine, sleep and gambling and cable television, things we indulged in in excess, in Jackpot, but nowhere else. I woke up to my father dumping a bucket of nickels on the covers.

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vanity. I’m sure she knew I took them, but never said anything. It wasn’t long after that trip, when I was twelve years old, that my father crept out of the house in the middle of the night and left us for good.

I don’t know what my father told my mother about our trips to Jackpot. Whatever it was, it must have been convincing because she never seemed to complain. I’ve asked her, and she hedged. Eluding complicity by not admitting to anything. I imagine our brief absences were, in a way, a relief. A chance for her to breathe, or to be with someone else. Or to be someone else. I used to blame her for him leaving—as children often do when adults do things they can’t understand—but I’ve come to realize that there’s always more than one version of a story.

• • •

Two days after I got the news of my father’s death, I took the Party Bus and made it to Jackpot in the late afternoon. There is excitement on the coach to the casinos. People aren’t yet broke and hungover. Most passengers are elderly. Too old to drive, too cheap to fly to more glamorous places to waste their money—Reno, Vegas. The reservation casinos in the Panhandle are an even more treacherous drive, roads that wind and sometimes snow. Jackpot was built for convenience.

When I arrived it was too early to get started on the slots, too cold to swim. There isn’t much to Jackpot. A couple casinos, a couple hotels, a gas station and a trailer park where most of the employees live.

The rest is desert. I checked into the hotel, feeling as if at any moment, my father might emerge from one of the rooms and call off the trick. The flashing lights and ringing bells of the casino radiated in the hotel lobby, drawing you in with the promise of the win. A glowing, plastic Dolly Parton with a cinched-in waist and breasts that were somehow larger than the real-deal sat atop a row of slots a few feet from the check-in desk. Elderly men and women with oxygen tanks and fanny-packs meandered around the casino floor or warmed up slots for the later crowd.

The woman at the counter handed me the keys to my room and a flyer highlighting the various amusements of the weekend. An oldies cover band, a comedian. Lessons at the craps tables and a poker tournament at ten. I took my bag up to my room, opened the blackout curtains. The room was nice, better than the cheap rooms my father would get us at the Barton’s. They’d remodeled the tower at Cactus Pete’s, updated the rooms with contemporary furnishings that were sharp and said to patrons You will win. Even if you didn’t, the crisp linens and flatscreen televisions were a salve to your empty wallet. This must have felt like luxury to my father, it did to me. The room smelled like vinyl and new carpets, not the mixture of bleach and tobacco from my childhood. Both versions unpleasant in their own way.

Around the hotel was a walking path that skittered between the pool, the hotel, around the parking lots and down by the golf course. The golf course had turned the color of manila folders or tooth scum. It sunk in spots. Water collected in tepid puddles. I walked around the
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She wore her floral robe that had gone thin and transparent with age. I remember being able to see the outline of her body. That night we stayed with my mom’s sister in Buhl, and I had pancakes with chocolate chips for the first time.

My mother didn’t go looking for my father. She wouldn’t have had to look that far.

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On the Fourth of July after my father left, my mother took me to Shoshone Falls where the water roared and you could see the ramp in the distance where Evel Knievel attempted to jump the Snake River Canyon. It was fenced off at the time, but my mother remembered when he came to town when she was nine years old. She remembered the crowds gathered to watch, and Evel Knievel’s white jumpsuit, blue stars dashed across his chest. But most of all, she remembered how his chute released too early, and how some were disappointed he didn’t make it, while others were disappointed he didn’t die.

At the edge of the canyon, we watched as others hiked farther down the trail to get a better look. I watched the glint of rainbows form in the basin of the falls, the water storming over grey rhyolite. Everything else seemed monochrome.

“You grandad had a lot of money riding on that stunt,” she said.

“How come they don’t tear down the ramp?” I asked.

places I’d never explored as a child. Around the dormant plants, the rusty playground by the trailer park. It was hard to imagine Jackpot as a town where people could actually live. The place always felt temporary. As if when my father and I weren’t there, it didn’t exist at all.

I wondered if that’s how my father felt when he finally left us for good. If once he drove away in the night, my mother and I stopped existing. For my mother he only existed in the junk he left behind that she had to clean up—spare car parts piled up, a dune buggy with springs poking through the seats. Books that he could barely understand, but was determined to finish anyway. When he first left, I’d convinced myself that he would come back, and that when he did, things would be better. There was no blowout between him and my mother, rather a silent, festering bitterness. I imagined he had other families, and that he’d fulfilled his duty with ours, and it was time to move on to the next. Another little girl that needed love too. I didn’t tell my mother my theories. My father’s absence left us both mute for some time after. I’m sure she had her theories too.

The day he left was remarkably ordinary. My mother had gone grocery shopping. Our fridge was full. My father had been to the Flying J to sell a roto-tiller he’d gotten off an older woman who was downsizing to move to a retirement home. He left that night. The next morning, waking up to him gone felt like a slap in the face. Abrupt. Without reason. No note. We knew he was gone when the coffee wasn’t made and his side of the closet was empty. My mother smoked cigarettes all morning, tipping her ash into the sink, spewing air between her lips like a broken whistle.
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“Your grandad had a lot of money riding on that stunt,” she said.

“How come they don’t tear down the ramp?” I asked.
“Why bother,” she said. “A lot of work for nothing.” She leaned against the railing that lined the trail, looked out over the edge.

“Has anyone tried it since?”

“Probably not. Lot of people were upset about what happened. Don’t think anyone wants to dredge up that mess.”

We watched as two men scaled the Perrine Bridge. I’d never seen anyone jump before. People on the trail pointed and some waved. One man jumped, and I held my breath thinking he was going to die, that he would hit the water and never come up again. His arms spread wide while we watched him freefall until he pulled the cord and his chute bloomed above him. We watched him drift down like the cottony white seed of a dandelion.

Years later I learned that after the failed stunt in the Snake River Canyon, Evel Knieval lost notoriety. He fell out of love with his fans. He attempted a jump over a tank of sharks and crashed into a cameraman. After so many failed stunts and broken bones, he retired. He beat his wife and kids, did drugs, went to jail. He converted, got baptized on TV and then later that year he died. But nobody ever talks about that. Nobody ever talks about the attempts made to make things right, only the attempts that failed.

After the falls, my mother took me to see the fireworks show at the park in town. The loud boom of explosions rattled my chest. The fireworks in the sky, the hot white and burning orange, blanketed my mother with a sort of happiness. When I closed my eyes I could still see the lights, the fountain of sparks burned black. We ate shaved ice and she showed me a trick my father had taught her. She massaged the edges of the empty styrofoam cup, working it like putty. I watched her pinch and push until eventually she had worked the cup inside out. She was still wearing her wedding ring then.

“This always makes me think of your dad,” she said, holding the inside-out cup. Smoke from the fireworks settled into whiffs of clouds, leaving everything smelling like rotten eggs and spent matches. Two boys ran up with crackling sparklers, pretending they were swords. My mother handed one of them the cup, and the little boy threw it away.

... After I had settled into my hotel room, I walked across the highway that cuts through Jackpot to the Barton’s 93. My father’s things were tucked away in motel storage behind the front desk along with spare clubs and a rack of cleaning supplies. A box of lost and found items, visors and single mittens and a bikini top. His bag rested on the floor, and the desk attendant brought it out onto a table for me in the employee breakroom.

“Should all be there,” the desk attendant said. He was birdlike, with thin arms and waxy, pale hands. His polo shirt was too big which made him look like a child playing dress up.

“Sure, okay,” I said.

“Doesn’t seem like much, does it,” he said. His voice was high-
“Why bother,” she said. “A lot of work for nothing.” She leaned against the railing that lined the trail, looked out over the edge.

“Has anyone tried it since?”

“Probably not. Lot of people were upset about what happened. Don’t think anyone wants to dredge up that mess.”

We watched as two men scaled the Perrine Bridge. I’d never seen anyone jump before. People on the trail pointed and some waved. One man jumped, and I held my breath thinking he was going to die, that he would hit the water and never come up again. His arms spread wide while we watched him freefall until he pulled the cord and his chute bloomed above him. We watched him drift down like the cottony white seed of a dandelion.

Years later I learned that after the failed stunt in the Snake River Canyon, Evel Knieval lost notoriety. He fell out of love with his fans. He attempted a jump over a tank of sharks and crashed into a cameraman. After so many failed stunts and broken bones, he retired. He beat his wife and kids, did drugs, went to jail. He converted, got baptized on TV and then later that year he died. But nobody ever talks about that. Nobody ever talks about the attempts made to make things right, only the attempts that failed.

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pitched and it cracked. He peered into the bag. “I’ll give you a minute.”

The desk attendant shut the door while I emptied out my father’s bag. Pulled each item out, one at a time, taking an inventory. My father’s wallet, a soft supple leather, worn for years in a back pocket, the outlines of credit cards embossed on the side. Deep brown and curved. Placed on the table, it made the sound of a cat’s paw on tile. I could picture him leaning in his chair to retrieve it, the familiar posture of men going to pay the check. The bowie knife sounded like knuckles knocking, a brief rap of the handle on wood. His clothes made almost no sound at all.

I imagined the life that had happened with these belongings. How many times those shirts had been rolled at the sleeves, washed in laundromats or motel bathrooms and hung to dry. The number of packs of cigarettes tucked into the breast pocket over the years, and how many smoked or given away to strangers. Bills nestled in the fold of the wallet, how many had been spent, or lost. I opened the wallet, picked through its meager contents. No cash. An Ameristar loyalty card and a condom that had expired two years before. Tucked into one of the side pockets was a picture of my mother. Faded and worn on the edges, creased and straightened out. She was wearing a party hat and tight high-waisted jeans. Her arms crossed over her bare breasts, leaning suggestively toward the camera. The date on the back was from before I was born, with a note in my mother’s handwriting, *Happy Birthday, Cowboy*. A series of Xs and Os and her name written in flowery script.

I collected his things, put them all carefully back into the bag.

The desk attendant handed me the keys to my father’s truck, which still had the rabbit’s foot keychain. I remembered rubbing the fur obsessively as a kid, how the little foot still had its nails attached that clicked when I fidgeted with them.

“*The truck’s parked behind the building. Seems to be leaking a little fluid,*” he said.

“I’m not taking it too far.”

In the parking lot, crows worked away at a fast-food bag. My father’s red Dodge was parked in the corner, the same red truck he’d always had. I was surprised he hadn’t sold it.

I lifted the back hatch of the camper shell and saw the nest my father’d made. An old sleeping bag tangled up among clothes. A box of rocks in a corner. His own miniature hoard. It smelled stale, so I cracked the side windows and left the hatch open. I checked the oil, like he’d taught me, cleaned the dipstick with an old sock from the pile. It was and wasn’t difficult to believe my father had lived like this. He had refused to succumb to the kinds of things my other friends’ fathers did. Refused to have a regular job, refused to cut his hair. Refused to settle down. He’d described it once as an itch in his toes he couldn’t scratch. My mother called him selfish. He was like the stray cat we had, too feral to bring inside. A little brown farm cat with a clipped ear and a crooked tail that would come around for food and leave dead snakes and little birds at the door. Sometimes he’d be sweet and let you pet him, other times he’d bolt and disappear into the weeds.
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With some coaxing, the truck rumbled to a start. I drove it over to Cactus Pete’s so I wouldn’t have reason to go to Barton’s ever again.

As a kid, I’d come up with present-father-scenarios. In moments when I missed him most, I put him there. Dragged him from wherever he was and made him be with me. I came up with elaborate present-father-scenarios where I’d imagine my father in the bleachers at my volleyball game, trying to pawn estate sale rings to the moms in the stands or at night sitting on the edge of my bed telling me how he’d met Evel Knievel at the grocery store buying rhubarb for pie. “Can you believe it?” I imagined him saying. “The guy who jumped fourteen Greyhound buses makes pies.”

He always looked the same.

At the bar in the casino, I developed a present-father-scenario for old times. Brought my father back from the dead. He was wearing the flannel shirt my mother got him one year for Christmas. I asked him why he left, and he told me a story about when he was a young boy, a story I’d heard before as a child.

He’d been walking a creek, he couldn’t remember where exactly he was, only that he’d been there before. That day, though, he followed the creek farther than he’d ever gone. The trees were thick, only letting light in on the water. When he started getting tired, he noticed a clearing close by.

In the clearing was a shack. No one was around and he got the feeling that maybe he shouldn’t go there. He wanted to turn back, but something was drawing him to the shack, like someone had put a magnet in his belly that dragged him closer and closer to the clearing.

Inside the shack, plants hung in bundles from the ceiling and tin cans were stacked against a wall. He remembered wood burning in a pot-belly stove. It was dim inside, and musty, as if when he went through the door he’d gone underground. Behind him he heard a noise, a crack or a snap—he didn’t know the right word for it—and when he turned around there was a man standing in the doorway, gun slung in the crook of his elbow. The man told my father he could have whatever he wanted, but that it was all poison. At that moment, my father became very thirsty, more thirsty than he’d ever felt in his life.

I ordered another beer for my father at the bar. He took a long swig.

My father said that this was the day he met the devil. He said at some point in your life, you will meet him face-to-face. You can never be ready for it. Once you meet the devil, he said, he never quite leaves you.

He drank the man’s water from an old soup can because he was so thirsty. He’d never been so thirsty, he said. He said the water made him forget what happened next, he only remembered running back through the woods, branches scratching his face, his arms. He remembered his mother being angry about a tear in his pants, and how when she asked where he was, he couldn’t tell her.
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I walked down the highway to the trailer park to clear my head and to get away from the chaos in the casino. It was that in-between time of twilight, when the sky can’t decide whether it wants to be purple or blue or orange, so it’s all of them. In the trailer park, I heard children laughing and yelling. The sounds of children made me curious, like when you smell familiar laundry soap on a stranger’s clothes. Like something to be investigated. I walked down the gravel road that splits the rows of double-wides, littered with tricycles and t-ball stands and jumpropes and hula hoops. There were about seven or eight kids, circled in the middle of the road. A young girl looked up from the huddle, split off from the group and came toward me. She wore shorts and had dirt-stained knees, dirt in the creases around her mouth like she’d been wandering the desert for days. Without speaking, she grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the group.

The only time I’d ever seen children in Jackpot before was at the casino pool or the buffets or in the hotel hallways. Children of guests. As a kid, I would try and make friends with other kids at the pool, offer up a game of Marco Polo or chicken, but I was mostly ignored and avoided.

A boy and another girl were battling it out with rock-paper-scissors.

“We’re playing Cops and Robbers,” the little girl said, still holding my hand. “You can be a robber.”

“How do you play?” I asked. The girl cocked her head, as if I’d asked her a question in another language.

“It’s easy, you just run away from the cops.” She shrugged her shoulders, rubbed her nose with the back of her hand.

“Are you a robber?” I asked. She nodded her head. I was instructed to hide, while the two cops counted to one-hundred. I hid behind a car. From my hiding place I could hear whispers and flip-flops clapping on bare feet. Another kid shouted you better run. My heart raced. I knew it was just a game, but in that moment, it didn’t feel like one. The little robber grabbed my hand and tugged me into a trailer. “Isn’t this against the rules,” I asked.

“You just can’t leave the neighborhood,” she said. In the trailer, an old man slept in a recliner in front of a television. Wheel of Fortune was on and the rest of the trailer was dark. She peeked out the window through some curtains, and I froze. We ran back out of the trailer, the door slamming behind us, and crouched behind another car. Someone yelled Gotcha, and another kid whined in disappointment. It felt like we’d been hiding for hours when the little robber turned to me, grabbed my arm and said, “Gotcha.” She smiled and laughed, and I realized I’d been conned. The ultimate betrayal. It became clear to me what it must have felt like when an undercover cop finally broke his cover, and the jig was up.

“That’s cheating,” I said. “You can’t be a robber one minute, and a cop the next. You can’t just do that.” After saying that, I immediately felt silly.
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“No way,” she said, arms folded across her chest. “You don’t even know the rules.”

One of the other captured robbers, a little boy, said he didn’t want to play anymore, that the game was stupid. And just like that, the game was over just as quickly as it’d started. In the distance, I could see the red glowing letters against the tall black silhouette of Cactus Pete’s.

When my mother called to tell me my father was dead, she asked me if I’d ever wondered about what it would be like if he’d stayed. She said in that moment, she was glad he hadn’t because it made the pain of him being gone for good easier. I told her I had imagined what it would be like. In my imagining my father would have gotten a job at the cheese factory. He’d come home late at night, hang his white coveralls in the closet by the front door. Some nights he would plunk down on the couch and my mother would pick bits of dried whey out of his hair. He’d be sober, but could never quit Jackpot. Old habits die hard, I’d imagine him saying as he’d load up his truck for a weekend away. But I wouldn’t join him.

And his death would be the worst thing that ever happened to me. The worst thing that happened to any of us.

On the other end of the phone, I heard a crack in my mother’s voice as she said she should stop wondering about the what-ifs and might-have-beens. I didn’t tell her how I’d spent years living off what could have been.

One night when my father and I were in Jackpot, he stayed out all night and didn’t call, didn’t tell me when he was going to be back.

I didn’t sleep that night. I tried watching TV, tried reading Gideon’s Bible. For a while I watched out the window. I’d considered going into the casino, but I didn’t know which one he’d be in or how to find him once I got there. I must have been eight or nine years old at the time. I took an inventory of survival items in the room, things that would sustain me if my father didn’t come back. It didn’t occur to me to call my mother or to tell the front desk or to call the police. Instead, I thought that a girl could survive off Biscoff wafers, water from the sink, and when I ran out of complimentary snacks I thought newspapers wouldn’t be so bad to eat. After hours of waiting and watching out the window, I saw my father in the parking lot below. He’d never stayed out this late before, he’d always come back before the sun came up. But the sun had been up for a while when he finally made it back to our room.

When I heard him put his key in the lock, I ran to the bed and buried myself in the sheets, pretended I’d been asleep all along. I tried to slow my breath, slow my heart because I didn’t want him to see me afraid. When he came in, he went straight to the bathroom and turned on the
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shower. I listened to the water run, listened to my father shout and sob and punch the wall. Then after a while I heard the quick squeal of the faucet knob turning and the water shutting off. My father got into bed and continued to cry so quiet I thought he was laughing to himself. I didn’t move, didn’t say anything. But it was getting close to check-out time and I was worried they’d charge my father more money, worried they’d send someone after us.

This was the only time I conjured a present-father-scenario when my father was actually there. I imagined my father packing his things, tidying up the bed. He smelled like complimentary motel soaps, not stale cigarettes and sour beer. In my scenario, he would make a pillow pile on the mattress and then scoop me up in his arms and toss me on the bed. I imagined us eating breakfast in the motel restaurant and dipping the corners of my toast in egg yolks.

But none of that happened. We checked out and didn’t have to pay extra. While my father slept off his losses I packed his things and loaded them into the truck. On the way back to Twin we got a flat tire. And we didn’t go back to Jackpot for a while.

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My mother once showed me an old newspaper interview with Evel Knievel. He talked about destiny, and balance. About how if he would’ve made the stunt, people would think it was too easy, if he’d died, they’d have said that was the daredevil’s grand finale. But he didn’t do either, and he didn’t have anything to say about it, other than he lived. In the black and white picture in the paper, Evel Knieval wasn’t smiling. His mouth was open as if he was trying to say something.
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I Got a Line on You

Not one of the inhabitants of the town heard the train the girl named Hope touched in the night. They had grown used to the fury of its passage, had long since ceased to shift in sleep as it rattled window glass and, even at four in the morning, when only tumbleweed and tarantula risked the crossings, warned them with its whistle to stay clear. During the day the trains passed frequently, some of them double-stacked with shipping containers, their wild urban graffiti vibrant and somewhat shocking against the tawny hue of desert. The train Hope touched, if viewed from above, was longer than the town itself.

Hope had been drinking at Trudy’s with a group of kids who worked the summer resorts—dude ranches and health spas—in the mountains northwest of town. They had been dancing to the golden oldies of a local outfit that called themselves Captain Hook and his Left Hand Band. They’d stayed on the dance floor until Captain Hook (Kyle Klunich, branch manager by day at Far West Pipefitters) closed out their set with a ragged if energetic version of Spirit’s “I Got A Line On You.” Trudy flicked the lights as soon as the applause died down and the crowd spilled into the parking lot, but Hope strolled over to a picnic bench beside the
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Diagram with a Line from Deleuze & Guattari

the man is learning  & here the river  the liquor store  next door  is first of all  of the space between  the ocean  is really car touching  in its sleep  & the floor  this murmuring  small & shivering  drawing down the asphalt  & another  here his voice  among so many  the abandoned lot  a measure  at night he hears  ocean  & the earth rolling over  through the window  in his walls  his ear’s bones  he knows are open  & then another

Diagram with a Line from Deleuze & Guattari

the man is learning  & here the river  the liquor store  next door  is first of all  of the space between  the ocean  is really car touching  in its sleep  & the floor  this murmuring  small & shivering  drawing down the asphalt  & another  here his voice  among so many  the abandoned lot  a measure  at night he hears  ocean  & the earth rolling over  through the window  in his walls  his ear’s bones  he knows are open  & then another
train track and sat. A boy, a coworker named Luke, followed her over. He was curly-haired and rough-skinned, in love with Hope in a moony way that made her pity him and love him back, but not in the way he wanted. Far down the valley came the bleat of train. I am going to touch that train, said Hope. Me too, then, said Luke. The train entered town from the east. As the engine drew alongside the bench, Hope got up and walked toward it. Luke did not think she would keep walking. Later he would claim he called out to her just before—not with a finger but with her entire hand, palm flattened as if to protect rather than to risk—Hope touched the train.

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When the train—indifferent to the touch of anyone, even comely Hope—spun her toward and then away from its tracks, into the bed of recently laid gravel, Hope became a schoolgirl walking through an airport during the holiday crush, hugging a pillow to her chest. This is the way she used to imagine herself in an airport before, once in her sophomore year in college, she flew to New York to visit a boy. On that first flight and every other one, the plane had smelled of its bathrooms and everyone who spoke over the intercom had done so with the same intonation, right down to the slight lilt in the penultimate word of every sentence. Flying, which should have been so wondrous—lifted above the earth and settled in some force that swept you in only minutes from the still-frozen prairieland of Minnesota to the early spring of Central Park—was so disappointing it was almost funny. Maybe this is what Hope was thinking as she was once again lifted above the earth. And maybe when she landed, it was not gravel she felt, but a fed-by-snowmelt lake across which she swam naked with a boy so skittish in his disrobing and so awkward in his breaststroke that he would be, forever in her mind, chaste. Though she slept with him. He was her first. He loved her in the sloppy unrestrained way that Luke did, and like Luke, she could not love him back, but for a different reason: because she was just a teenager. Imagining Hope swimming in a fluid crawl across the frigid lake, pursued by the gangly ungraceful boy who loved her, don’t you remember how things were back then? Don’t you remember how we did things just to get them out of the way? Don’t you remember how it did not even bother us for more than a few weeks when we left each other behind like outgrown band posters still hanging on the walls of the bedrooms we had inhabited since birth?
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Nicole Roche

An Interview with Gregory Pardlo

Gregory Pardlo’s collection *Digest* (Four Way Books) won the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. *Digest* was also shortlisted for the 2015 NAACP Image Award and was a finalist for the Hurston-Wright Legacy Award. His other honors include fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York Foundation for the Arts; his first collection *Totem* was selected by Brenda Hillman for the APR/Honickman Prize in 2007. He is also the author of *Air Traffic,* a memoir in essays forthcoming from Knopf. *CutBank*’s online managing editor, Nicole Roche, sat down with him for this generous interview at the Montana Book Festival, September 23, 2016.

NR: I have to ask you about the Pulitzer. In a New York Times article from last April, you were saying after the announcement, you felt like you were following around another guy everyone was congratulating. I’m wondering if a year and a half later, if it’s finally sunk in that you are that guy.

GP: Yes, it has sunk in. I mean, it’s been a learning curve. I think I’ve always had a problem with accepting praise and congratulations, so that’s just a character flaw that I’ve always had. But I’ve also had to learn—I’ve had to learn how to give interviews. It’s something that I never thought about doing, or thought would be a part of my job, as a poet. The whole learning curve has just been rethinking how I can be effective in the world in the way that I want to off the page as much as on the page. I guess in that process I’ve integrated the formerly alienated self.

NR: Ira Glass talks about this gap that exists between a beginning writer’s intentions and what actually makes it onto the page. I’m wondering if there was a moment, a period in your writing, when you sort of said, “Hey, you know, I am starting to close that gap?”

GP: No. I think I might be a little different, at least process-wise. I don’t start a poem knowing where it’s going to go. I pretty much have no clue what I’m getting myself into, so I don’t have any expectations on the back end. So whatever happens, and I think this is true about my work in general, it’s process-oriented. What I think is most demonstrated on the page is my thought process. My thinking through formal restraints, or thinking through the historical and social intersections. I just keep shoveling information into the poem and see what comes up, see what I can make of it. So the result is I don’t feel like it hasn’t met my expectations.

Now, of course, it never meets my expectations. Not to say I’m happy with the work. I don’t jump up from the desk patting myself on the back every time I finish a poem. But I can sort of keep pushing to do something beyond what I may have thought was in the poem.
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NR: *It's been fascinating to watch your trajectory. Your collection *Digest* is so different from *Totem*. It's clear you're thinking about form in a different way. You're exploring a different territory.*

GP: *Totem* is really about my own early childhood experiences. It’s a very personal, very specific world. *Digest* is much more about the world. And I think it’s reflected in the different forms that I use in the poems. That’s why I think it’s more process-oriented. I’m not writing it down as an essay to then turn into a poem. It’s more like shoveling information into the poem and seeing—Oh, this fits. Oh, this is too much. You know? It’s a lot of taking from the poem and adding to the poem. And I think that’s why it’s more process-oriented. It’s more about reflection and rethinking than it is about projecting something out there.
NR: I have to admit I was a little intimidated to interview a writer whose (Pulitzer-Prize winning) book includes the following quotation: “Hegel says, ‘before setting out for a quotation, first dig two graves.’” But I wanted to ask you how you composed the poems that begin with the epigraphs from the various philosophers, “The Conatus Improvisations” and “The Clinamen Improvisations.” How did those pieces come to be?

GP: Similar to what I’ve been explaining, I created a set of restraints and I shoveled in content and challenged myself to see what I could do. First, I got to tell you, the joke in that poem is, Hegel didn’t say that. Confucius said that. So the poem is about misquoting. It was a happy accident that the two graves were also the quotation marks. You set out to quote, you dig two graves… These are all bad jokes, is what I’m telling you. It’s funny—people do read them as conveying this intellectual heft and this training, and no, they’re just really corny jokes.

Here are the parameters for these bad jokes. In my reading for my PhD, and first of all, in reading student work, I’d lose patience with what I call the gargoyle epigraph. Not just students do this. Lots of poets do this. They put an epigraph over the poem that has absolutely nothing to do with the poem, but it’s by Wallace Stevens or Emily Dickinson. The idea is to give the thing this endorsement from beyond.

In my reading I would find these passages that would make really obnoxious epigraphs. So I started collecting them. But then I didn’t have poems to put them on. So now I’m writing poems in response to these epigraphs. The project was to misread them, to have fun with them, to play with them, and not attempt to meet the epigraphs on their own terms. The running theme of the book is to take these things and to digest them and make them my own. Clinamen and Conatus were terms that seemed completely baggy and abstract. Every time I looked for a definition, I would find some other interpretation of these works. So they became interesting organizing principles for the poems.

So the gargoyle epigraph—that explains the Cervantes quote in “The Clinamen Improvisations” that precedes the list of authors and promises “a surprising look of authority.” About this idea of authority—I started thinking about a Bertrand Russell quote in which he states that philosophy, like science, “appeals to human reason rather than authority.” He calls philosophy “a No Man’s Land” between science and theology. Do you agree with this conception? Do you see any of these ideas playing out in your work?

I disagree that philosophy does not appeal to authority, or is not subject to the influence of authority. I think there are very authoritative ways of thinking that routinize the philosophical enterprise, which is another part of the project, the formal project, in the book. I’m not interested so much in answering unanswerable question as I am in finding the unanswerable questions and using them as a form in which I can be lyrically playful. There’s a quote that I’m trying to remember about the relationship between poetry and philosophy that would make me sound really smart.
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I guess I don’t characterize it as a no man’s land because I think metaphysical poetry has always occupied that space between philosophy and spiritualism, let’s say, between the pretense toward science and fact and submission to blind faith—between those two is the content, the territory of the poet.

NR: Digest says so much about history, about the burdens of history or the burdens of legacy, including legacies that are played out in increasingly sanitized or domestic ways, like the boys shooting off fireworks—“the household paraphernalia of war”—in “Problemata.” Do you think history leaves a tangible imprint on a place, on people, on the here and now?

GP: Yes. So, it’s kind of reactionary against the notion of realism in literature. We celebrate Hemingway, for example, for this stripped-down style. And the way I had been sold that style is that it gets to the bare “real,” to things as they are, and I distrusted that without knowing why. Part of what I’m interested in in terms of time in this book is that—first of all, I think realism is as much of an affected style as any other form of literature, and it is not getting any closer to the stripped-down real, and why should the stripped-down real itself be something we should want to pursue? So then, step two, I started thinking, why should we want the stripped-down real? Well, we want the stripped-down real because we are so desperately anxious and haunted by the history in our landscapes and in our environments. You can’t look at the American prairie without evoking the ghosts or the crimes from which we all benefit. Faulkner’s “history is in us”—whatever the quote is. You can’t look at a Southern plantation and render that scene with realism, because it’s unreal to do so. It is a contrivance to do so. For example, when I walk across campus at Colombia, I don’t look at the campus without thinking about all of my heroes that have gone to school there, all of the history. The reason I’m there is because of its romance. The reason I’m in New York is because of the romance that I have with New York. I want the history, as sordid and as beautiful as it is. It’s a part of human perception, first of all, that we only perceive place through the associations of time. If it’s a new place, we’re bringing our own projections to this new place. So A, I don’t think its humanly possible not to associate history with a place. And B, I think it’s unethical to ignore the fact that history and place are intertwined.

NR: What are our responsibilities to that history?

GP: I don’t think of it as a responsibility. I’m hearing responsibility as obligation to history. I don’t think we have an obligation to history. But I do think it is a distortion—it’s the motive that I have a beef with. So, if I want to render place minus history, I have to ask myself why I want to do that. And if the reason I want to do that is because the history that is entwined in a place makes me uncomfortable, then that’s a dishonorable motive in my worldview. I guess I want to leave the door open for projects that want to reimagine the history that’s present. So I don’t think there is a
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rigid record of what has happened in a place, I don't think there's a single record of place, but some of those records indict us. And some of the ways we think about place indict us. If I have a guilty motive, that's a problem. If I have an aesthetic motive… I’m uncomfortable with that, because it seems dodgy. But I think that gets to the basis of what I mean by ethical. Who am I protecting? Am I protecting my ego, or am I genuinely trying to create something?

NR: “Problemata” invites us to “Consider the dear evangelists who canvas our homes / Saturday mornings.” You go on to quote Spinoza for your reasoning behind this: “The good / which a man desires for himself and loves, he will love / more constantly if he sees that others love it also; / he will therefore endeavor that others should love it also.” Reading that and thinking about other themes running through Digest, I started thinking about the roles of historians, or philosophers, or evangelists. I wondered if these weren’t also somehow the roles of a writer. Are writers not at once historians, philosophers, and evangelists?

GP: Absolutely. So I’m trying to be sneaky with all of these. In just about every poem there are ulterior motives. If not one, there are several. Here I am arguing against the kind of rigidity, the kind of—not xenophobia, xenophobia’s too strong a word—resistance to strangers, the fear—I guess it is xenophobia. The reasons that cause us to shut the doors on each other in regular daily interactions. If we can imagine a world in which the Jehovah’s Witness that comes knocking on the door Saturday morning is tolerated, that we’re not responding to that person with annoyance, if not disgust, then I think there are all kinds of other forms of tolerance, or ways that we can be tolerant to one another. So that poem started with the Abraham and Isaac story. I was thinking about Abraham and Isaac, and then I started reading Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling in which Kierkegaard is thinking about Abraham and Isaac, and thinking that we’re all just trying to figure out our various relationships. And one of the central relationships is domesticity, the central construction of domesticity. So I was thinking about the stranger that comes to your door. What is the least welcome person? At least for me. And it was a challenge for me to imagine, to make my mind imagine, if not welcoming them in, then certainly not vilifying them. So that was the kind of project I wanted to pursue.

NR: I’m assuming there are limits to that tolerance.

GP: It’s a question. In the philosophical vein, I’m not looking for the answer there. So the Gouverneur Morris poem before that—who has the power to draw the line of what constitutes the domestic and ensure domestic tranquility? Do you mean in my house? No, you mean under your jurisdiction. How far beyond family and physical home is the circumference of domesticity? What do we include in that circle? That’s the question that I’m asking.
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NR: So is that concern directly related to your choice to write about things like going to the supermarket with your daughter?

GP: Yes, and the boys with their precariously domesticated manhoods.

NR: The line “You often size up the random demographic holiday / traffic makes hoping to see yourself inside a picture bigger / than the neighborhood you know” also seems to speak to that idea of the domestic and how it ripples out from there.

GP: Yes. That’s not a part of that series, but it’s absolutely a part of that thinking. And even the tattoo poem. What is the role of patriarchy in defining the boundaries of domesticity? Do we have dominion over our children, and obviously, women’s bodies?

NR: A few University of Montana students who had workshop with you this week told me that you sort of instinctively knew what each of them needed, what was blocking their vision or their ability to realize their vision in a piece. I asked them, “So he’s some sort of poem doctor, huh?” And one them said to me, “No, more like a poet doctor.” Do you think all writers, or many writers, have this internal obstacle or hangup that prevents them from making their best work or their true work?

GP: Yes. We have denial for a very good reason. We go into denial to protect our psyches so that we can move through our day with some degree of sanity. But as artists, our job is to circumvent those mechanisms of denial, the walls that we build. It’s important to know where the most delicate material is, what we’re most protecting. So one metaphor I have for this I call “the nuclear core,” the power source. It’s also the place of most resistance. In confronting that place of most resistance, there is the most potential for the release of energy. In teaching over the years, I’ve gotten frustrated with the approach of “Well, if you move this line here, or maybe you should try a different word, or this image isn’t quite working.” I’d rather ask the question, “Is this the poem you want to write?” I think if we find the poem that you want to write, or at least the question that you want to ask, then all these other problems will begin to fall into place. So I don’t instinctively know anything. I look at what they put on the page. It’s all on the page. If I had a nickel for every time a student said, “How did you know about my sick grandmother?” I’m like, it’s right here! You wrote it! I’m not reading your mind. It’s in the poem. What’s fascinating is that we’re the last person, the author, the poet, is often the last person to see it. We hand it to other people—but the problem is, most people are too polite to say what they see in the poem. I respect my students enough. You know, we’re here, we’ve expended an awful lot of energy and resources and time to come here, and I’m not going to bullshit you. I’m going to tell you what I see in the poem. If the poem adds up to some deep, dark secret that you never want to tell anyone, well, I’m going to tell you that you’re hinting at some deep, dark secret that you never want to tell anyone. And
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GP: Yes. We have denial for a very good reason. We go into denial to protect our psyches so that we can move through our day with some degree of sanity. But as artists, our job is to circumvent those mechanisms of denial, the walls that we build. It’s important to know where the most delicate material is, what we’re most protecting. So one metaphor I have for this I call “the nuclear core,” the power source. It’s also the place of most resistance. In confronting that place of most resistance, there is the most potential for the release of energy. In teaching over the years, I’ve gotten frustrated with the approach of “Well, if you move this line here, or maybe you should try a different word, or this image isn’t quite working.” I’d rather ask the question, “Is this the poem you want to write?” I think if we find the poem that you want to write, or at least the question that you want to ask, then all these other problems will begin to fall into place. So I don’t instinctively know anything. I look at what they put on the page. It’s all on the page. If I had a nickel for every time a student said, “How did you know about my sick grandmother?” I’m like, it’s right here! You wrote it! I’m not reading your mind. It’s in the poem. What’s fascinating is that we’re the last person, the author, the poet, is often the last person to see it. We hand it to other people—but the problem is, most people are too polite to say what they see in the poem. I respect my students enough. You know, we’re here, we’ve expended an awful lot of energy and resources and time to come here, and I’m not going to bullshit you. I’m going to tell you what I see in the poem. If the poem adds up to some deep, dark secret that you never want to tell anyone, well, I’m going to tell you that you’re hinting at some deep, dark secret that you never want to tell anyone. And
A, you can either get over it and put it in the poem and write about it. Or B, write about something different. But you don’t get to say, “Reader, take my word for it, there’s something really powerful and important but I’m not going to tell you what it is.”

**NR:** In that NY Times article about winning the Pulitzer, there’s this grinning picture of you and you sound so incredulous. And now, hearing your thoughts about it—well, you’re such a personable guy. But I think a lot of people would say, “That guy’s made it. He’s totally made it.” Do you feel any pressure now to live up that expectation? Do you fear it has any effect on your work?

**GP:** To be honest, yes. Of course it influences my work, and it influences how I conceptualize the reader. My reader is much farther abroad now. My reader could be anywhere in the world now, as opposed to a reader within proximity. Changing that relationship fundamentally changes my approach to the poem. That said, I am nonetheless self-doubting and insecure, and a perfectionist. So none of that stuff goes away. Nothing has been lifted from my shoulders. I still agonize. I’m still an anxious wreck when I sit down to write.

**NR:** As someone who has “made it,” throw a bone to us MFA students and other beginning writers. What advice can you offer up?

**GP:** Find your superpower. What do you do that no one else can do? What can you put on the page that no one else can put on the page? I think so often in MFA programs, the culture is a competition to write the Richard Hugo poem or to write the Sharon Olds poem. We want to prove our cred by doing what someone else has done before. Some people will say you need to find your voice—I think that’s kind of trite, overworn, and not helpful. But there is something to say for a healthy self-awareness. We’re flawed, we’re beautifully flawed, damaged, and all-powerful beings. And the more of that we can accept in its uniqueness, then the more we can allow to be on the page.
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Alison Ruth’s short stories have been nominated three times for the Pushcart Prize. She is the author of two novels, Pushcart-Prize nominated Near-Mint Cinderella (Aqueous Books, 2014) and Starlight Black and the Misfortune Society (Prizm Books, 2015).

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