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CutBank 89

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CutBank 89



CUT BANK

89

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THE THINGS WE DO FOR FAMILY

I FINALLY MET the girl I want to make a part of my family. After five years of working in bars, of half-heard conversations and half-seen faces, Kelly made me want to turn on the lights and turn off the music. After the parade of one night stands I refer to colloquially as “my twenties,” simply holding her hand felt like putting on clothes after using fabric softener for the first time (something, incidentally, that I’ve finally started doing since dating her).

But as much as I want to take the next step, for Kelly to meet my family, it’s not as simple as just dropping by my parents’ house for Sunday dinner. My mother died when I was very young, and my father and I were never close. I have no siblings, no aunts; all I have is Gammy.

I’ve told Kelly half of the truth about Gammy. I’ve told her that I have to take care of Gammy because of her illnesses (true), but not the nature of the symptoms or the root of their cause. I’ve told her that we can’t go back to my apartment because it will upset Gammy (very true), but not that when Gammy is upset she can become dangerous and violent. I’ve told her that Gammy will not care that Kelly isn’t Jewish (probably true), but not that Gammy *will* care that Kelly is new and unfamiliar to her. Most importantly, I have told her that Gammy is my family, my blood (true and true), but I have not told her that Gammy is not human. Gammy is actually a member of an extinct species of cat-sized lizard from which human beings

in general (and I specifically) are directly descended. It is either because of this, or just because she is old and curmudgeonly, that Gammy has so much trouble adjusting to new things.

• • •

SO, HOW IS it that I'm taking care of a relative who is also an extinct lizard?

About six months ago, some asshole walked into the bar where I work and began talking about time travel. He said he was from the future, and that no one in the future used fossil fuels or drank PBR, so we were idiots for doing both. He talked about some movies that hadn't been made yet but we still "had to see," and he told us that you can't fully appreciate *Pulp Fiction* until you seen all four vignettes simultaneously by using something called beta wave technology. He hit on one of the female regulars by telling her that she had a really "classic" look, then he downed a shot of what he called "*Vintage Jack*," paid his bill, and left the bar. That's when I noticed that he had left his bag.

This happens all the time. Some patron will get shitfaced and leave something. We put it behind the bar, and usually they come the next morning to get it.

Also, I look through their stuff.

I realize it is not the most ethical thing in the world, but someone needs to look through the bag to make sure there isn't a bomb or a human head inside. Anyway, I'm really into music, and sort of a curious person in general, so it's hard for me not to look in their iPod or laptop and scope out

the bands they listen to. I've been doing this for a couple of years now, and have scrutinized the files of six laptops, eleven iPods, five smart phones...

And now I've done it to one time machine.

It was shockingly easy to use, though I suppose technology only gets more user-friendly with each iteration. It took me a little bit of time to get used to the telekinetic link up—which felt like imagining you are still playing Tetris after a long day playing Tetris—but after that it was pretty self-explanatory. It had a ton of apps too. There was a simple historical app that took you to canonical events (World Wars and such), but there were some weird ones too. One app took you to witness famous hookups throughout history (like JFK and Marilyn Monroe, or like Jesus's parents and stuff), which I wasn't really into.

But there was one app that caught my eye. It was labeled GENEALOGY, and the icon was a family tree. If you clicked on it, it brought up a list of your relatives going back hundreds of years and gave you the option to go visit them. Scrolling down took you as far back as you wanted to go, but I was new to the interface and held down the button for way too long. Next thing I knew, I had travelled 500 million years into the past, and I was looking at my great-great(to the whateverth)-grand lizard.

I'd always wanted a lizard, and the guy who used to have my apartment had left a pretty large terrarium and a few heat lamps behind. (Admittedly, he had used them, unsuccessfully, to grow weed, not extinct lizards, but it still felt like kismet.) But there was more to it. I'd never been close to my family, but here was this lizard who, albeit at some remove,

begat me. Here was this creature from whom all that I am and could ever hope to be had begun. I couldn't leave it there in that swamp, perhaps to be eaten up by a younger and more violent lizard. It was my chance to finally worry about something more than myself, to take care of a family member in a way that my father (with his new bleached step-family) never did. So, I grabbed it up. The genealogy app assured me that it had already had all its lizard babies, so I wouldn't be affecting the timeline. It sort of makes sense. I guess no one person or thing is ever as important to the flow of time as they think they are.

As much as I wanted to keep playing with the time machine, I went straight back to my present so I could get the lizard situated. Also, even though I had a time machine, I still couldn't shake the feeling that I was late for something. I needed to get the guy's time machine back into his bag before he came and picked it up.

I named the lizard "Gammy" because she sort of has my great-grandmother's eyes, or, at least, what I imagine her eyes looked like when she got off the boat from the Ukraine: yellow and jaundiced.

• • •

KELLY HAS BEEN pushing to meet Gammy. With each new suggestion for how to make this happen ("What if the three of us went for a walk?" "What if we went out to dinner?") I have had to come up with a new half-truth to delay it ("Gammy doesn't really *walk* the way you and I do." "Gammy is on a very particular diet." Et cetera).

You might wonder why I didn't just tell Kelly that Gammy was my pet lizard. Women like pets, and they like men who are responsible and sensitive enough to take care of them. But Gammy is not a cuddly or fluffy pet, nor does her appearance (or that of the apartment that she has overtaken) suggest she is in the hands of a responsible caretaker. Here are the principle concerns that I have about exposing Kelly to Gammy:

(1) Gammy has wreaked havoc on my already unimpressive apartment. On our first day together, whatever hopes I had that she would live happily in the terrarium were dashed as she proved able to dislodge the screen lid and push the tank onto its side. The entire process was so traumatic for the two of us that I decided to give up on it. Besides the physical trauma—she wriggled and scratched throughout the entire procedure, and though I was wearing yellow rubber dish-washing gloves I'd taken from the bar's kitchen, she still managed to tear at my vintage shirt and break my skin—there was the sadness of looking into her yellow eyes as I finally secured her in the tank, wedging the lid and sides with some milk crates full of records. I knew I couldn't let her live like that. I moved my futon into the living room and, following the spirit that led me to want to care for her in the first place, gave her the (one) bedroom. Suffice it to say, my feng shui is way fucking off, and I am not fit to receive guests at the moment.

(2) Gammy is *not* cute. She is roughly the size of a cat, and she has hardened skin that looks like it is caked in mud or shit. (Much of the time, she *is* caked in shit, as she has the odd penchant for rubbing herself in her

own feces before I have opportunity to change the newspapers in her room or go through the mutually traumatic ordeal of getting her into the bathtub to sanitize her as rigorously as my frustration with her resistance and the outmatched cleaning products of the twenty-first century will allow).

(3) Gammy always looks as if she is dying, except for the times when she looks as if she is dead. Her eyes are further on the sides of her head than seems possible, always giving me the feeling that she has either broken her face since the last time I looked at her or she is simply succumbing to gravity one body part at a time. Her movements are slow, and her stomach never quite makes it up off the carpet. She vacillates between committed lethargy—only waking up to eat the crickets that I buy from Petco in weird yogurt tins, and to disseminate their digested remains across the carpet—and active destruction of whatever scraps of my security deposit are still recoverable. Much of the time she lies in a lumpy ball in the warmest corner of the room, and when I open the door to check on her or to feed her, she seems to be nothing more than a brown lump on the floor. I don't know how to read a lizard's pulse, to say nothing about the pulse of an extinct species of cold-blooded animal whose survival instincts may have required lowering their heart rate to a pace that even moderately lizard-savvy people (a bar I fail spectacularly to hurdle) might not detect.

(4) Gammy *smells* like she is dying. And this goes beyond the normal smells of animals that are not completely in balance with their domestic environs (the ammonia of piss, the rank, overtoasted nuttiness of sundried feces, and the outmatched artificial floral scents meant to

mask them). When I brought Gammy home, I thought that getting a pet wouldn't affect the smell of my apartment, primarily because it already was pretty gross. Piles of dirty clothes, crusty dishes, un-dumped ashtrays: these were the mountain ranges of my bachelor homestead. I knew that taking care of Gammy was going to force me to clean up a little more, and I thought that could only be a good thing. Even if thirty was the new twenty, it seemed like twenty should be less of a shit hole. But, as much as I wanted to be a little more grown up, nothing prepares for you walking down the air freshener aisle of the drug store while trying to figure out whether peach or mango would go slightly better with the scent of vomited cricket, as if you are a sommelier in hell.

(5) Gammy probably *is* dying. I've done a little research, and it seems as if the oxygen levels in twenty-first century Earth are not quite the same as they were 300 million years ago. Nor are the crickets I feed her fully meeting her needs (no matter how much their packaging looks to have come straight from the Whole Foods nutrition section). Each day, she seems to have a little more difficulty breathing and her eyes seem to be giving up on life a little more. She takes less time deciding exactly where to pee (her primary form of expression and recreation), and I even get the sense she has less energy to commit to wallowing in her own shit, as it is becoming easier and easier to clean her. Taking her to the vet seems out of the question (how could I explain what she is and where I got her? What if they took her? What if she had to live out her dying days among strangers and not her family?), so all I can do is make her comfortable and try not to

admit how much easier my life will be when she's dead.

And as much as I like to think that Gammy would like Kelly, and that Kelly would make Gammy as happy as she makes me, I am worried. I am worried that Gammy will attack her, that Gammy is bitter enough to use her last gasp of stored energy to leap up and mar Kelly's gorgeous, freckled face. I am worried that there will be a gap between them that I cannot bridge. I am worried I will have to choose between them. And more than the choice (I would choose Kelly for *anything* right now. Door number Kelly! Kelly for president!), I am worried about looking Gammy in the eye as I turn my back on her.

• • •

LAST NIGHT, LYING in her bed, Kelly and I talked about our families. The top of her dresser is decorated with a collection of seashells—the only surface of her room not covered in books—and I asked her about them.

She told me stories about spending summers with her grandmother at the seaside, and how she still has the collection of shells they found together. Her grandmother told her that, whenever she was alone, she could put her ear to the shell, hear her family whistling and whispering to her, and know they were thinking of her. She pointed to the two biggest shells, which bookended the collection, and said that they were standing watch over the others.

I was silent. Just before I noticed the seashells, I had been thinking

about how perfectly my arm fit under her neck as we spooned. Whether this was some genetic lottery we had hit, or if it was a learned practice we had developed together, it was real evidence of our connection. But then, in came this story about her family, whose connection to her was irrefutable - unseverable! As long as she had a fucking seashell she would have her family on speed dial. Our relationship might be fleeting, but her love of family was as eternal as the oceans (which, even in the event of the apocalypse, are only going to get bigger). She turned over to face me, forcing me to pull my arm out from underneath her, and asked me about my family.

“Do you have a favorite memory?” she asked in a late night whisper, though there was no one we might disturb.

I do not have many happy memories of family. Of my mother, I only remember a song about mashed bananas she would sing while feeding them to me. My father, I remember far too well. So, instead of a memory, I told her a story.

I told her about my great-grandmother who had come from Ukraine to America as a young woman. But, she was worried that there would be no chickens in the New World, so she tried to smuggle her jar of schmaltz (fat) onto the boat. The customs agents in New York refused her, and the schmaltz jar was thrown into the river.

“That’s a beautiful story,” she told me. Then she riffed for a few minutes about its metaphorical importance, how the fat signified memory. While she talked about the semiotics of schmaltz, I looked over at her shell collection. Part of me wanted to ask her if I could have one, so we would

always be connected. I could put it to my ear, and even if the sound of her family was garbled, it would still be more coherent than the sounds my family makes when it tromps around the bedroom. But I didn't ask. Not because I thought it was too personal a request, but because I was worried she would pick out the smallest shell to give to me.

• • •

TODAY, GAMMY AND I had a bad fight. I had decided that I was ready for her and Kelly to meet. Obviously, I couldn't tell her that the lizard was the "Gammy" I had told her about, but it still seemed important for the two most important women in my life to meet. I would tell Kelly that this was my pet lizard, and that the "Gammy" I take care of was at the hospital for a few days for routine tests or something. If the meeting went alright, then the human Gammy would move to a nursing home, or maybe die. I hadn't thought it out that far. And yes, it would be starting our relationship out on a lie, but if it was the only one I told her, it would be ok.

The meeting was to take place in a controlled way. I would put Gammy back in the terrarium (even if only while Kelly was over) and do whatever it took (buy cleaning products from whatever infomercial) to make the apartment seem habitable for humans.

I opened the door to Gammy's room, armed, as always, with a can of Lysol and heightened reflexes (as much as I thought of Gammy as family, it is impossible to be in the presence of something so prehistoric and not give any thought to instinct). The room is ten feet by twelve, shaped with

whatever drywall cookie cutter is passed from slumlord to slumlord across the country. I had furnished it with a combination of assorted pet toys (ranging from a dog's squeaky toy to a hamster wheel, anything that was on clearance) and whatever dead tree branches I could find in the park. They lay in the front corner, while the rest of the room was covered in soiled, free community newspapers whose circulation statistics had gone through the roof since Gammy had come to stay with me. I had hoped (naively) that separating the room into TOY and BATHROOM sections might lead Gammy to better spatially compartmentalize her endeavors. Gammy (or a coil of scale and limbs) was in her usual ball in the far left corner.

"Hi, Gammy," I said, not expecting a response. Gammy does not often respond to stimuli, and when she does it is in swift, slashing motions. Normally, I lay out the crickets on the rock she likes, and then refill her water bowl (which usually ends up being turned upside down), but this time I decided to try something different. I put the cricket in my hand, placed in front of her mouth (or where I assumed her mouth was, difficult as it is to tell when she is in mound position).

Her eyes moved slowly over to my hand, and she sat up, looking almost like a real, non-dying lizard for a moment, before flicking her tongue out of her clenched mouth and swallowing the cricket. What a moment we'd just shared! It was so domestic and touching that I felt as if, perhaps, we were really starting to trust each other. I pulled the terrarium out the closet (it was the only item in there since all of my clothes had been relocated to the living room) and put it on the floor underneath the window. I'll admit

that it isn't huge, but it isn't tiny. It's about the length and width of a desk, and came up to my knee. A lizard who barely moves could be happy in there. "Come on, Gammy," I said, in the sweetest voice that I could make. "Gammy, let's get you home."

I reached to pick her up. Usually, in her ball form, I slip my hands underneath as much of her as I can, hoping that I'm holding on to the right parts of her to maintain my grip all the way to the bathtub. But in that moment, as she sat there looking like a lizard, I bent down, put my arms underneath her, and cradled her.

Immediately I heard the trickle of urine and felt my sleeve dampen. But I didn't let this discourage me. The terrarium was already lined with newspaper and takeout menus, and the rest of the crickets were inside it, displayed appetizingly on her rock. The few toys that she seemed to occasionally use were there for her entertainment. She would be happy in this home, and we would finally be able to strike a balance. I lowered her into the tank, prepared for more urine (despite the questions it raised about how she could drink so little and piss so much) or worse. I wasn't prepared for the sound.

In the six months that I'd had Gammy, she'd made plenty of noise, but all of it had been indirect. The sound of torn carpet. The sound of scaled leather scattering shredded newspaper. I'd always assumed that lizards didn't really talk (I mean, Old McDonald did not have a lizard with a "lizard noise here" and a "lizard noise there"), or that perhaps they were on some wavelength that humans can't pick up. But, as I tried (so patiently, I had

been so fucking patient with this lizard) to lower her into this home that I had built for her, she made a noise of such unmistakable inhumanity that I was startled to the point of dropping her. It was sound with a high and a low register—the shriek of a bird combined with the guttural bellow of a cow—that seemed at war with itself, as if she was channeling the sounds of birth and death simultaneously, conveying how little there was to her but the base and purposeless instinct to simply continue to exist. I had dropped her into the terrarium, and she was banging against its walls, screaming and shrieking this terrible noise. And that’s when I lost it.

“Jesus Christ, will you calm down for one fucking minute?” I screamed at her, adding my rage to hers. “Is it so terrible to be trapped in that little house? I’ve been living on my couch for six months because of you, and you can’t relax and just be okay in your custom, furnished habitat for even five seconds?” And looking at it—this bizarre leather balloon of gas and fury—struggling against its captivity, I realized how trapped I had become. Imprisoned in my living room. Unable to bring my girlfriend—my future, my *real* family—to my home because I needed to take care of a fucking lizard! Even if we were related (whatever that meant), we had nothing in common, and I owed it nothing. I couldn’t give it away (too many questions) but, right then, I knew I couldn’t keep it. I flung open the window and lifted Gammy onto the windowsill. “You want to be free? You want to stretch out? Fucking go for it!” I yelled.

I waited for a moment in terror and excitement for her to plop down (I lived on the first floor, the three foot drop down to the street

wouldn't bother her), but, of course, she refused. Instead, she stretched herself out on the sill, mocking my open window as she went to sleep in the sun.

• • •

THE NIGHT WHEN I first took Gammy home, after setting Gammy up in my bedroom and before returning the time machine to the bar, I went on another trip with the genealogy app. I was more familiar with the interface and could scroll through my family tree without skipping millions of years at a time. So, I thought I would spend a little time with my mother.

The device set me down out of sight. I was obscured by a tree, but could see her sitting at a table with a much younger version of my father. She was exactly as I remembered from photographs, but he looked so oddly young that I had trouble placing him at first. He was smiling and far too relaxed to be the man I was related to. And she, she was a stranger. I looked at her, tried to stare hard enough to see beyond her face and body to the thing I was supposed to feel connected to, but I couldn't. There was no banana song, and I had no other context in which to love her.

Unsettled, confused, I left. I went back to look at my grandparents, but found that they too were too young (younger than I was) for me to make sense of how I came from them. I went further back, but soon everyone was speaking in Jewish or whatever, and everyone was wearing such cartoonish clothing (nothing like the "vintage" clothes that dominate the hipster scene) that it barely felt like I was looking at people any more, to say nothing of *my*

people. I kept scrolling, and kept scrolling, and again I skipped millions of years, until I was looking at my great-to-the-nth grand-monkey.

He looked pretty stoned. He was sitting in a tree, not even gathering berries or anything, just letting this other monkey chick (who the genealogy app was telling me was *not* my grandmother monkey) eat bugs off him. Then, he saw me and jumped down from the tree and pounded his chest. I guess he was worried that I was going to try to challenge him for the lady monkey, or for his tree or whatever, which I obviously wasn't (though it was sort of nice to be acknowledged). I backed away a couple of feet (making sure not to step on any key evolutionary butterflies), making it clear that I was submitting to him. He chilled out a little bit, but he was still giving me the death glare. I don't know what I expected. I mean, I didn't really think that he would see me and know that he was contributing to the development of life in a profound and beautiful way, and that even though his life was unimaginably gross and exhausting, that his descendants (however abstractly connected) millions of years later would be magnificent, almost godlike manifestations of the possibilities inherent in existence. I really didn't. But I did hope that we would have some kind of connection.

• • •

It IS THE day after opening the window. After giving it some thought, I have decided to release Gammy back into the wild. Admittedly, it is not her wild, but it is closer than what I've provided in my apartment. I doubt she will have a terrible effect on the food chain (there are only so many bugs she can

kill before finally succumbing to one of her countless illnesses), and there are no dude-extinct-lizards with which she could mate (gross), so it's not as if I'm introducing an entire invasive species. Perhaps I am betraying my family but, to be honest, my family has betrayed me plenty, and it is time to build a new family. Kelly for family. Kelly for home.

I wonder if the pet store cashier knows what's up when I buy an animal transport case and not my usual supply of crickets. The case is large enough to fit Gammy, even after I line it with fleece blankets to muffle whatever sounds she might make during the effort.

I decide it would be best to let her go in the state park. It is summer, there will be plenty of insects for her to eat, plenty of dry rocks to lie on. I am doing as right by her as anyone in the same situation could.

I borrow a friend's car and drive out there. She seems to be asleep in the transport case, or perhaps just resigned to what is happening, because she doesn't make a sound the whole drive. I walk a half-mile down the trail and feel lucky not to have encountered anyone (though I have a bullshit story about wanting to take my cat for some country air in case I am interrogated). I find a patch of dry grass on the edge of the woods, lay down the case, and open up the gate. Gammy waddles out in that way she does, seeming with every step to only push herself forward by dumb luck. Her eyes seem wider than usual, as they were when I first saw her in the swamp 500 million years ago, and I feel vindicated in my decision to release her here. It seems as if she will make her way into the woods, into her new (old?) life before anyone sees her. She does not look up at me as she walks away.

But then, I see a small group of people coming down the trail. And, you've got to be shitting me, it is Kelly and what must be her parents (same red hair, everyone wearing glasses, either they are family or they had all been cast to play one in a commercial). I knew that she saw them at least once a week (she'd told me the night she told me about the shells), and I knew that they are all into nature (she was the one who explained to me that Girl Scouts did more than just sell cookies), but this is a disaster. I can explain being out here by myself (maybe I have decided to start jogging?) but how to explain the pet carrying case and the cat-sized dinosaur at my feet. But, clearly, Kelly had seen me before I'd seen her, and even more ominously, she's seen Gammy, because I hear her scream and call out to me in warning, "The lizard! Watch out!"

It would be so easy to scream along with her. To pretend that I have never seen this creature before, to run toward Kelly and even act as if I am protecting her from it somehow. But I don't. Because as much as I can see Gammy through Kelly's eyes—blood and skin and bone and instinct, just as I had seen her the day I opened the window—in this moment, I see Kelly through Gammy's eyes too. I see a screaming, charging body (carbon copy of the other red haired bodies behind her) who, as much as I feel connected to it, is every bit as separate and foreign to me as the sad-eyed lizard who does not want to move. I reach down and scoop up Gammy, petting the top of her head.

I walk over to Kelly and her parents, and say, "Kelly. This is my Gammy that I've been telling you about."

JOHN KOETHE

ENGLISH 206

Why would anyone even want to do it anymore?
Fifty-two years ago I didn't know what it was,
And yet I knew I wanted to do it too, like the idea of a mind
The self aspires to, the self a mind endeavors to become.

I still don't and still do. Yeats and Frost, Pound and Eliot,
Stevens, Moore, seen as from a peak in Darien in a college course
With a syllabus, lectures twice a week, a final exam---
It might not sound transformative, but in an incidental way

What I am now, what I'll die as, and how I'll linger on
For the small while that constitutes an afterlife
Was there from the first day: the urgency, the anxiety,
The sense of something insisting to be said

Again, before the mystery and necessity drifted away.
It looks different now. What's become of poetry
Are different kinds of poets, i.e., different kinds of people
Having nothing much in common but the name.

I miss the echo chamber, where you studied to become
Something unforeseen, recognizable in retrospect.
I miss the mystery, the feeling of history gradually unfolding
And the way it made no sense at all until it did.

In the afternoon of the author everything is there to see.
No one told me when I was starting out "that day so long ago"
That things become more and more familiar, then suddenly you're old,
With nothing to do and nothing stretching out before you

To infinity, reducing whatever you did or had to say
To a footnote, skipped over in the changing afternoon light,
That finally becomes, at best, part of the narrative
In a MoMA of the mind. But I'm glad I did it anyway.

MATTHEW GALLANT

BUCYRUS

bju: 'sairəs

IN THE CENTER of Bucyrus, Ohio, there is a town square and two patches of grass roughly one hundred feet across that flank Sandusky Avenue. The Pelican Coffee House is to the south and the newest branch of Farmer Citizen's Bank to the north. The courthouse sits on the east block—in various states of repair—and two bars are to the west. This is the heart of the city, my hometown, the place where the native Wyandot, before the Europeans arrived, gathered to make maple syrup.

Bucyrus was named, so the legend goes, by combining the words *beautiful* and the name of the ancient Persian leader Cyrus the Great. It's a city both hated and loved by its residents. It's a Midwestern city with typical Midwestern drug problems, crisis of identity, and longing for its past. Through the middle of the 20th century the city was a productive, Midwestern hub. It was a symbol of progress. Where it once was a place of burgeoning industry, Bucyrus has since fallen on hard times. Much of the production from the previous century has slowed or halted. It recently ranked third in heroin overdoses in the state of Ohio.

Near the town square is a large mural, spanning the entire side of the Pelican Coffee House, that shows what the city looked like in its heyday during the Industrial Revolution. In the background you can see Thomas Edison, Harvey Firestone, and Henry Ford, who once stayed at the local

hotel for President Harding's funeral. Both Al Capone and Thomas Edison stayed when they passed through as well—fittingly, Capone stayed in a room below ground and Edison above. The hotel is now closed and most of what is left of the building sits unused. The mural images cling to greatness; the painting represents a time in the city's past when it was looking forward rather than backward, when it was filled with hope instead of resentment. The mural also portrays a vital artery of the Lincoln Highway that still runs through the center of town, but construction of a bypass that loops around the city rendered it useless.

That mural is made to give the effect of looking into the city's past, when there were just as many horse-drawn vehicles as there were horse-powered. The artwork is so realistic that it was nicknamed the "bird killer mural," due to the fact that birds fly into it and often die. With this mural the town square operates as a place stuck between present and past, a place that can't stop lingering, sitting in perpetual nostalgia.

The mural is one attempt at progress. It's an attempt to alter a vessel by filling it with something new, trying to rebuild a community once again. It's an attempt to look forward, to expect progress, not failure, even if the paint is meant to last just 100 years.

Bucyrus is the place that raised me. I was born in Bucyrus, metaphorically and physically. For 22 years, it was my home. It is where I went to school, where I went to church, where my family and many old friends still live. At 15, I had my first drink in the vacant half of the Ramseys' duplex at the end of Wiley Street. At 13, I smoked my first joint

by the Taco Bell dumpster. When I was 8, my family planted two maples in the side yard of my mother's house on Poplar Street. I went to school in the Norton Elementary building, named for Samuel Norton, the founder of the town. As a child, I sat on Sandusky Street curb and watched the Bratwurst Festival parade with my grandparents from their spot in the grass. They got the same spot every year by going the day before and laying out their lawn chairs on the ground.

Most of those things are gone now. The Ramseys' house was raided, the Taco Bell torn down and rebuilt with updates closer to the street, the bank seized my mother's house, and the new owners—in an over the top metaphor—tore the two Maples from the ground. Norton Elementary was razed and is now an empty lot.

Now that I have left, I see the city as an outsider would. I can get under its skin, as it was able to get under mine. I am able to explore it from somewhere other than the surface, able to see its inability to function as either town or city, to see how the place changes people, and how they change the place.

Bucyrus struggles with its identity, stuck between its “city” moniker and “town” feel, attempting to maintain its pride—the self-proclaimed “Bratwurst capital of America,” even though that title is claimed by other places in the country as well.

It's a place that the senescent and (relatively) wealthy residents both respect and revile. One minute they condemn the numerous bars that pepper the city, and the next they relish the fact that Capone frequented

the underground speakeasies during prohibition. In fact, there is still a web of secret tunnels under the streets that gangsters used then, but most have been blocked off or demolished. I've wanted to explore those underground caverns and look through the relics since I was a child. Years ago, when the city built an addition to the outdated courthouse, I walked by the chain-link fence surrounding the construction and looked down to catch a glimpse of one of the passageways, my first real sight of the things I had heard so much about. I knew a family that had a pool table they pulled from the basement of The Crazy Fox and put in their attic. I used to shoot pool on it, with all its unnecessary adornment, and pretend that Capone had done the same. I still like to think he did. The construction was destroying the past. I wanted the tunnels preserved, but the city was growing beyond its past.

The Chamber of Commerce will put on a play for interested parties, one of the members even plays Capone himself. The basement where these scenes take place is also the basement of The Crazy Fox, one of the most notoriously sleazy bars in the city, with a sign hanging outside the door that reads, "Bikes. Chicks. Rods." The fact that actors are glorifying these scenes of debauchery while scenes of modern debauchery often occur in the room above them is most likely not discussed.

Like most insulated cities, gossip is rampant in Bucyrus. Every so often I will hear of an old friend that has overdosed or went to prison. "It's that town," I used to say. I'd condemn the place itself, as if it were the catalyst for that person's actions, because place molds us into who we are. Place shapes the people, who in turn shape the place, in a cycle that never

ends. Hopefully that shaping is for the positive, but that's not always the case. Those who live in Bucyrus talk of "downward spirals" and "quicksand." It's viewed as a social quagmire, in which every year you allow yourself to stay is another year you sink deeper. Every year it becomes harder to leave. The place works on you. This is partially it, but now I have to also think it is the people too, but where does that line end, the one between population and place?

I sometimes think about Mindy, a close friend who lived in Bucyrus, straight-A student, good at everything she tried, sports, friendships, subjects, whatever. But she started drinking a lot, disappearing, not talking to her friends, started stealing from people close to her. The, shortly after her twenty-first birthday, her mother found her body lying on the kitchen floor, blue and cold from an overdose. I think of how often this sort of thing happens. I think of Johnny, who went to war twice, came back, fueled himself into a drunken depression and ultimately shot himself in his apartment across from the VFW. I think of my high school teachers who all the students loved, but who was also a drunk, who got too close to a girl student after she graduated, who got pushed out of his job because of public opinion, who shot himself in his apartment behind city hall. I think of Justin, who some friends woke up one morning to find dead on their couch after a coke binge, leaving behind two young kids and a wife. I think of my life too. I think of where I would be had I not moved away, or where those people who sink deeper would be had something been different, had they had the ability or even the desire to leave.

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WHEN I TALK about Bucyrus I have trouble not referring to the city as a town. These are two different things entirely, the “town” and the “city.” It is the residents themselves that make up the town. The town is the lifeblood of the city. The city is where the people live; the town is who those people *are*. The town is the being itself. The city is just a name, given so because it has (barely) enough people to qualify semantically (10,500 or so, but that number has been on the decline). Even the vernacular associated with the Midwestern city can’t escape this confusion. That is why we call it the town square or the hometown, regardless of size. In all relevant aspects, Bucyrus is a town because “town” denotes some form of the familiar, of knowing one’s neighbors, where “city” does not.

As of this writing, an online search for the word “church” gets 32 results, the city’s website lists 40, and the historical center lists 56, all in a six-mile radius. A running joke when I was growing up was the Bucyrus had two things: bars and churches. People used to call it “Bar-Cyrus.” And that’s where people grow up in Bucyrus, some of us in bars, some in churches.

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UNTIL I WAS about fifteen I attended one of those churches in Bucyrus, a loosely Pentecostal-based one. Services took place inside of what looked to be an old office building, with hand-painted wooden letters nailed to the front awning: *The Bucyrus Christian Center*. In many ways the place

was a microcosm of Bucyrus itself. Rumors abounded, everyone knew one another, the good and the bad, and, like the city, many of the congregation had roots in the South—left over from that great Scotch-Irish migration—or German ancestry. Even my own mother's family came from Appalachia, and before that, Scotland and Ireland.

Every Sunday morning and evening and every Wednesday evening I sat in one of the five rows of pews and listened to the sermon. Before the service, the preacher, Ted, and his wife, Vicky, sang while the assistant ministers and members of the congregation played the drums and guitars. And, like clockwork, my uncle George, a registered minister himself, would build up too, a cartoon character with steam shooting from his ears. Around the same time every service, George could no longer hold in his joy, and he would start running laps around the pews. Hands in the air, crying, screaming, "Bless you, Jesus."

Afterward, during the sermon, Ted, overweight and covered in sweat, would get so worked up that his face turned a deep red, and veins bulged from his forehead. He screamed his words in parody-like tones of the southern minister, the ends of sentences punctuated with a grunt.

Connie, a wiry, middle-aged mother of too-many-to-count, would talk in tongues, like a blend of Yiddish and Zulu. They called this "being taken over by the Holy Ghost," a moment of the body being possessed. It's explained in passive voice, maybe because the taken-over is a vessel, moved from the grammatical subject to the object. The Holy Ghost took over, and their (George's and Connie's) cups ranneth over.

There were many times when I was a child at the end of service that I went to the front when Ted asked if anyone needed prayer. Every time, Ted gave it his all, as if he was healing the blind. He laid his palm, slippery with anointing oil and sweat, on my forehead and prayed with just as much fury as he had for Ryan, the paraplegic toddler in the front row. But I did it for the attention, not because of the need. He pushed back on my head and said, “Bless this child,” and spoke in tongues when it was time. Afterwards I went and kneeled at the tiny alter in front of the stage and pretended to pray, not really sure what to say.

I was the vessel. God, the substance, the filler. I, the filled.

On Sunday mornings as a teenager, after I graduated from the kids’ Sunday School classes, I listened to the youth-minister discuss the dangers of drugs and speak of hellfire and damnation. It was meant to scare us into a life of servitude, and for many it worked. For the rest, it instilled a deep sense of unrest with the practices of the church. If the vessel is willing, though, it will easily fill. The passive versus the active. Our vices, our faith, our fear all the filler.

How easy it is to stay put, to continue with the things you know, to believe that which is comfortable, to not question. How hard it is to leave a place—the people, the memories—behind.

And maybe we stay because we find a home, no matter how much it alters. Bucyrus has been a largely Republican city with a nearly all-white (somewhere around 98%), manufacturing-based community. But those things have changed. See: General Electric (downsized), Bucyrus Precision

Tech (downsized), Baja Boats (relocated), Checkmate Boats (relocated), Swan Rubber (closed) Bucyrus Blades (downsized), Timken Bearings (downsized).

The older residents will remember that it used to be respectable to work at these plants. Not only was one of these factory jobs good, it was *desirable*. You could start a family, settle down, buy a house, and live out the rest of your days with a career and a mortgage in a peaceful, little town.

A divide exists now. Those with money hang on to what little wealth they have, the families whose names are still on the sides of buildings. The families who point out that the decline of the city started when minority families began moving in, even though the decline started long before. However, there is little evidence of this success left, as times get tougher and tougher.

Then there are the others, like my family. The Gallants have a reputation for being typical, redneck stereotypes. Government assisted, addicts, multiple marriages, in and out of prison, and so on, at least that's the outside view. In reality, much of this is true. My cousins have almost too many arrests to count, but these generalities miss the intimate details of the individual, choosing instead to see them as one cohesive body.

This is a divide between the poor and the poorer. These types of people, the well off and the less-well-off, exist in different places in the same town, but they avoid each other as much as possible, look at each other with contempt.

So, I ask myself, where do I come from? Is it the place or the

people? Would my family, had they grown up somewhere else, have done the things they've done, be the people they are? Would they still be my family as I know them now?

These things are a microcosm of the town.

The churches, the bars, the factories.

The vessel, once filled, alters.

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TALK TO THOSE who have left, and they will tell you that there is this pull that Bucyrus has on people, asking them back. And even though I don't believe much in the cosmic, there are those moments of doubt that make me believe. There are moments like when you say you don't believe in luck and then hesitate a half-beat before picking up a penny with its head to the ground, or you say you don't believe in ghosts, and yet you go up the basement stairs a few steps faster when the lights are off. There are moments when I want to go back, however brief, and get myself a mortgage and a career, taking up the factory life like so many before me. But I know those ideas are romantic ones of a place that no longer exists.

The town is the filler and the people the vessel.

I am old enough now to know that Ace Hardware used to be The Pharm and before that it was More-for-Less, and Neff's even before that. I'm old enough to remember where many demolished buildings used to be. I understand now why my grandmother called the convenience store by her house Lawson's instead of Dairy Mart, just as I find myself calling it Dairy

Mart instead of its new name.

When I was growing up, the city seemed different. It seemed more positive. Perhaps this is a product of age, or naivety, but now the youth have graduated from booze and pot to heroin. The place is riddled with the drug. And yet again there are small factions, religious groups and concerned citizens who are trying fight back, to win what looks like an unwinnable battle to change a place by force. Of course, I ask myself how much of this battle is just the city and how much should be attributed to something bigger, to something countrywide? How many places are there just like Bucyrus? Then the country the vessel, the city the substance.

Something unsurprising: Bucyrus is deeply rooted in the tradition of high school sports, especially football. But the team—still under the politically incorrect name, the “Bucyrus Redmen,” or the confusing “Lady Redmen”—rarely performs well, worse than 400th in the state. They have a rivalry with Wynford, the “farm school,” 1.5 miles down the road. Due to lack of funding, these schools will eventually merge into one, and yet residents are still weary of voting to pass school levies. Here are two different entities becoming one, two substances forced to fill the same vessel.

It seems too easy to say that the town manipulated me. It seems too easy to say that by moving away I was able to escape that manipulation, and yet here I am.

Why do we leave a place? How much of it sticks with us? How much of that town is coded in me? I think all of it, the good and the bad. I am a part of it and it a part of me.

Can I really blame the people who stay? Don't they see something in it? Don't we all have our vices, those things that we keep in our lives even though they are bad for us? Maybe that's it: Bucyrus is just another vice that shaped me. It is the habit I should kick but don't really want to. What is it doing for me? What am I doing for it? Neither of us benefits from one another and yet I continue to go back. I continue to explore.

During Christmas a few years back, I was in Bucyrus visiting family. My girlfriend and I were at my mother's new place that she was renting when she told me that my biological father lives somewhere in the county. I had always known he lived close, but this was the first time I heard her say it out loud. This is normally a topic we do not discuss. I know he has other children, but to think of them as real shook me.

Then, a few months later, I was back in town, inside the Shell station on Sandusky, when I saw someone out of the corner of my eye that I thought I recognized. When I got closer, I realized he looked more than a little like me. It was a coincidence, most likely, but in that one moment between awe and reason, I allowed myself to believe that I was staring at my half-brother, a son from the father I never met.

This is where Bucyrus exists, somewhere between reason and doubt. Somewhere on the peripherals of that city is another family I do not know. And every so often, things like this will boil to the surface of my everyday life. I leave the place but I cannot stop exploring. I can't stop wandering the speakeasies under the city. I look at the place from under the shiny surface, at the brick behind the murals. I let it get under my skin. I become the vessel.

ABI POLLOKOFF

FROM GRANITE ILLUSION, SO THE CONJOINED WORLD FOLLOWS

cento

The rims of wounds have wounds as well:

Inside the name, the trick
is to see things as they are: slick bark.
Tin can purged of all its minerals. A meadow of some suffering.
Some silk grief ago, before the cut
of cinnamon or the linnet-colored
thinking which I try to seal off with a sentence, I invoke
her gathering figs.

In the thieving, working back and forth, a breach
augments the meadow with its redness, incessant scour of light.
It is the gluttony of gravity, dazed
by its own mute replication of wire and shadow and sound, obliterating
most of what's imagined growing there.

The slim road dissolves. If we each dig
back to our own tectonic shelf, entering dark vowels, hollow—
symbol and source are what I mean:
figs ripen from the inside out,
ocular weather is every kind, all times, all kinds of strange beasts.

To attend decay as it sets in:
a sky wrestling its dark
the mud out there hurrying to be ordinary
after all night breathing ash.

J. MATTHEW GOTTWIG

TETHER

- Winner: Montana Prize in Fiction -

WHEN THE RATTLESNAKE bites Jack, his mother prays, *Please Lord Jesus, draw the venom from my boy; bring the color of life back into his skin; keep him breathing, Lord Jesus, keep my boy alive!*

But she doesn't cry.

No, that woman is strong as stone, but her boyfriend cries. Yes, William cries the whole sixty miles to the clinic, because he loves that boy more than he loves himself, and he cries because Katie's prayers make him think of that rattler's schc-schc-schc-schc. "We've got to be strong for him, Katie," William says, but when the doctors and nurses cover that boy (so still and ocean blue), they weep quietly for the mom who can't let go. William places a hand on his girlfriend's shoulder and whispers, "Jack loved you, Katie," which is all he can think to say.

But Katie is having none of this and pulls those linens back!

This she prays as her boy's spirit rises from his body, *No, Lord Jesus, I will not relent, Lord, because you are all powerful*, and *this* she prays as that boy's spirit ascends into the rafters, *You can do anything Lord Jesus, I know you can. I believe it in my heart of hearts*, and Katie's prayers are powerful prayers that call like eagles cry. Even as her Lord sings to Jack, prepares a place, a golden throne just Jack's size, her prayers keep that boy tethered to the earth.

But there Jack is, reaching for the sky.

Katie feels him leaving her, feels it deep inside, and hasn't ever felt this kind of sorrow before, not when her sister died, not when she quit her husband, not ever, and it is an awesome sorrow, the kind filled with glory, the kind that rises up and overcomes and gives her just the lines she needs to pray. *Death means nothing to me, Lord Jesus, because you are, stronger, Lord Jesus, I know you are*, she prays, and when Lucifer has his little look, she prays, *I bind these evil spirits of death, Lord Jesus, bind them in the pit of hell, because they have no place here among the innocent*, and when the sky opens so wide even she can hear the heavenly host, she prays, *I reject your judgement, Lord Jesus, reject it, because it is unjust to bury one so young*, and when that tether is about to snap, she wails, *You will bring my baby back!*

And Jack comes tumbling down!

That boy opens his eyes, and the doctors and nurses and even the janitor can't believe what they're seeing but know they need to finish what Katie started. The nurse with the plucked eyebrows whispers, "If you wouldn't mind escorting your wife to the waiting room..." and never misses a day of church after that.

"These people need to do their work," William tells Katie, but she won't go, not after everything, not until her boy looks at her and nods, and when she coos and strokes his little cheek, he does that very thing. Katie stands and takes William's hand but keeps whispering to herself, *Thank you, Holy Christ; thank you for bringing my boy back to me. Thank you for trusting me with this blessed gift*, and she and William step out to the waiting room

and pretend to watch the news.

Jack is a quieter boy after that, and almost everyone asks him, “Are you feeling alright? Are you, Jack?” but Jack just stares into the sky. Even when he smiles, the joy never touches his eyes.

“We feel humbled and just so blessed,” Katie says in his stead, and she talks about praying her thanks every night but doesn’t say more than that. The truth is she’s ashamed, so ashamed, because William still won’t pray with her after such a blessed miracle, ashamed they still aren’t married after all this time.

But William wants to marry her. Yes, he truly does. That man loves everything about Katie, even the mean scar she took from Jack’s daddy, who was not a good man. “But you’re not a Christian,” she says whenever he asks, but in his mind, they are married, and he is Jack’s daddy no matter the loins that begat him. “Still don’t see why that should matter,” William says, but it does. To her it matters more than anything. She prays about this, prays about all sorts of things throughout the day, and wants him as Jack’s daddy, wants to feel a mother’s joy when she sees him put his big, black cowboy hat on sideways and smile his silly smile at her boy, but all Katie feels is guilt. She knows things can’t keep going as they are, not after Jack’s salvation, not after this gift from God.

“Thinking we should bring Jack back to the doctor,” William tells Katie some weeks into summer, but Katie shakes her head and says, “No, Bill, no. He’s fine, Bill,” and doesn’t believe in second guessing the will of God. She knows her boy has changed, can see it in his far-off eyes, can

feel it in her soul. William nods but doesn't agree and can't stop worrying about Jack, but it's Katie who needs some comfort that night. They grapple beneath the sheets, and Katie pulls him close, pulls him deep inside but cries without tears as his weight settles over hers, cries even as her whole body shakes and rolls, cries, because she knows she needs to quit this man she loves so dearly. When William leaves that special place between her legs, she feels alone, and she is alone, because right away, William starts dreaming that dream he always dreams, the dream he can never shake.

He and Jack are out fishing up near his family's cabin, and he's just caught a rainbow trout, a beautiful rainbow trout, and the trees and the creek are singing with springtime breeze, and, *Hey Jack! Get over here and take a look at this beauty*, but the boy doesn't show, and, *Goddamn it, he was right here!* and William gets worried.

He lets the fish go and goes out hunting for Jack and finds him not far away, but, *Oh lord*, he hears that rattlesnake's schc-schc-schc and fear takes hold of his heart.

William freezes.

He freezes, because snakes have always been his devil, and when that rattler snaps out and takes a hold of Jack's shoulder and begins twisting and snapping like a whip, William doesn't know what to do but knows he's got to do something. He grabs that snake hard, and his skin crawls from head to toe, but he hacks at it with his useless old buck knife, and, *Goddamn it!* Those fangs are caught in the boy's shirt and won't let go!

Things usually end right there, but on this night, the sky opens to

glory and song, and William stands stunned, because there Jack is all awash in holy light, smiling like he used to smile. When that boy takes to the sky, William clings to the snake like a tether and shouts, *What the hell you doing? Get down here, boy!* He holds on for dear life, holds on as his feet drag long tracks in the grass and feels like he's been holding on for all of eternity when up from the dirt, from deep in the earth, quakes Katie's prayers, that, *Oh Lord Jesus, give him life; keep him alive, Lord Father God*, which grows and grows until the sky turns dark, and Jack falls hard upon the ground. William takes the boy into his arms and holds him tight, tries to comfort him, but the truth is he's the one who's afraid.

And then their eyes meet. That boy nods one of those nods that contains a thousand words, and William says, "I get it," because he feels forgiveness in that nod.

Jack disappears.

William wakes and feels a little better about things but can hear Jack's still, small voice in the next room over. He goes to check on the boy and finds him sitting up in bed, staring up into the sky, breathing deep.

"Bad dream?" William asks, and Jack nods. "Yeah, I get them too," William says and sits in bed with the boy. They both go quiet and listen to the crickets through the open window. Then William asks, "You forgive me? About what happened, Jack?"

The boy nods again, and a great weight falls off William's shoulders.

Time stands still.

Days come and go and summer cooks the land to a crisp. William

wakes almost every night to the sound of Jack waking from a dream, that gasp and cry for help, and on those nights, he goes to comfort the boy. “Just a dream. It’s just a dream,” he says, patting Jack’s back, and Jack wraps his little arms around William’s gut. Just like that, they rest and wait for dawn.

On the day of the Pastor’s visit, it’s Katie who answers the door. Bill and her boy remain huddled in bed, and Katie is grateful for this, because she needs guidance and doesn’t want her boyfriend hearing what she has to say.

“It was a miracle, Pastor, a miracle,” she says as they sit at Katie’s little round table and sip coffee. The Pastor says, “Indeed it was,” because he believes it was. They’ve had this conversation before, but things have changed for the Pastor, who dreamed about the boy and has come to believe some dreams have meaning. “If you’d been there, you’d know. Jack was dead, Pastor. They’d covered him and everything,” Katie says, and the Pastor takes her hand and prays a silent prayer, because he knows what’s coming next. “And here we are, still living in sin after all that,” Katie says. “Because you love the men in your life,” the Pastor says, and then, “Maybe you should just go ahead and marry him,” but Katie scowls. She says, “He’s not a Christian. We both know that,” and the Pastor does know but this isn’t the rub for him that it is for Katie. “Not everything in our lives can be perfect, Katie,” the Pastor says, and then, “He’d make a good father,” which Katie believes and admits to some wisdom in the thought. But then she reminds herself to be suspicious of Methodists like the Pastor, who sometimes lack convictions and a belief in the supernatural. She imagines Lucifer needling

him, cackling, and watering down his every thought, but he's all she has in this town since her old pastor died. "Think about the boy, that's all I'm saying," says the Pastor, and Katie can't help feeling angry, because her boy is all she's thinking about. "A boy needs a Godly father," she says, and the Pastor knows when he's been out-holied but doesn't want her sending him away, not yet.

The truth is, he wants to catch a glimpse of Jack before he goes.

"Well, I'll pray you find wisdom," he says, knowing she has no interest in following his, and Katie smiles and reminds herself she needs to trust God, but His are hard truths. "Jack still in bed?" the Pastor asks and Katie nods once but turns away, looks through the kitchen window beyond her acres and all the way to the mountains, which seem purple as night by the rising sun. "Well, I'll just say my hellos and be gone," the Pastor decides, and Katie whispers, "Suit yourself," and the Pastor leaves her alone at the table. He taps the boy's door, and his hands shake just a little, but when nobody offers a reply, he peers inside and finds Katie's men asleep. Jack is just as he remembers from his dream, his impossible dream from a few nights back. He can't think of much else these days.

The Pastor knows death can change a person and believes the boy has changed in some fundamental way, something miraculous and beyond anyone's understanding, and he has more than his own experience to go on. Others around town have asked about Jack, made known they too have had some run-in with the boy, something they can't explain, and as the Pastor looks at Jack (so still and morning bright), he prays he isn't putting too

much hope in a dream and a boy.

“Could be nothing,” he whispers but believes it’s something.

He’s heard from Ms. Hitchens, long time Kindergarten teacher and the town’s only yoga coach, who said, “Sure hope you’re praying for that boy, Pastor. I just can’t stop thinking about him. I’m telling you, I can’t,” and mentioned something about some strange dream but kept the details to herself. In that dream, an old dream almost forgotten, she danced like a fool, danced in the very same classroom Jack sat last year, danced in nothing but her skivvies for the high school principal, who would become her one and only. Years later, that man’s heart would break from too much beer and bacon, and she would vow to act healthier and exercise every day, but this dream takes place long before that. When Ms. Hitchens saw Jack sitting in that chair (just Jack’s size), she all but tripped over her own feet, because he wasn’t supposed to be in class right then, but her man called to her, said, *Mmmhmmm. Oh you are a sight. Mmmhmmm*, and she forgot about Jack and got back to dancing, the boy nothing but a lash in her eye.

Ms. Hitchens wanted to savor this moment, her man, but when the sky opened to bright lights and song, the principal started ascending into the sky, and Ms. Hitchens went to chase him down. Pants undone, junk jingling, that man kicked and flailed the whole way, screaming, *What the hell is going on here?* and reached for Ms. Hitchen’s hand, who herself was jumping for him, struggling on too tall stilettos, saying, *Get down from there!* like he was one of her kindergarteners. She climbed onto one of the little tables and reached as high as she could, but then he cried, *I’ll miss you*

Dotie, and disappeared. Ms. Hitchens remembered then he'd been gone for a long time. She dropped to her knees and was suddenly old and skinny like the teacher Jack had always known. *I miss him, Jack*, she said, and longed to see her man again. She looked at the boy, saw him smiling in that holy light, and realized she'd been given a gift: a memory that had all but slipped away.

The Pastor has heard from Tom Starkly, owner of both bars in their little town, who mentioned after church one day, "You know who's wrong in the head? That boy. Maybe you should look in on him and make sure things are right," and mentioned something about some strange dream but kept the details to himself. In that dream, kept breathless by crisp air, he hunkered down behind a fallen log and waited, because he'd seen plenty of muley signs and knew there was a herd grazing nearby. When it came out, that beautiful, trophy buck, he took aim but couldn't shoot, couldn't, because he couldn't imagine ever seeing such a sight again, those ashen trees caked with snow against a high, white sky, and that buck lording over everything. He held his grandpa's 30-06 and could almost hear the old man whispering into his ear, saying like he used to say, *Go ahead, Tommy. It's ok*, and Tommy pulled the trigger. *Pop*, and that buck fell into the snow.

The whole forest took flight.

In this dream, Tom always finds that buck still breathing and can't help tearing up while he leans over to cut its throat, tearing up as his grandpa tells him it's up to him to do what needs to be done, tearing up as blood pools into the snow.

Tom knows this dream, dreams it often, but that night he spotted

Jack sitting on that log like a smudge through a broken scope. He never has much reason to ponder the boy except when Bill comes by for a drink and goes on and on about what happened, washing memories away until Tom cuts him off or Katie stops by (Jack in tow) to give them both a piece of her mind. But on that night, the sky opened up and out poured a whole mess of glory and song, and Tom lost his water into his sheets, but he didn't wake. No, he got control of himself and decided the boy was to blame for all this racket, but before he could get angry, that muley buck climbed to its feet and cantered into the heavenly light. Tom took aim but knew the buck was headed for paradise, headed for his grandpa, who would have another chance to take it down. Tom lowered his gun, looked at the boy, who, eyes closed, still smiling, seemed to be listening to the song. And then he was gone.

The Pastor has heard from others too, all who talk about dreaming some dream, but he doesn't ask the details, doesn't need to know, because his own dream sticks with him like honey.

But after all dreams, Jack wakes feeling lost and afraid, because loss won't stop calling his name. He cries his little cry until William comes and sits with him. "Just a dream. It's just a dream," William always says, and Jack hugs the man and listens to the breeze and crickets through the ghostly drapes.

But then one dream has Jack screaming and gasping for breath, and when William rushes into his bedroom, the boy holds him tight and won't let go, because he dreamed a man shot, an orange-headed man with

thick glasses, an AR-15 with bump stock and high school yearbook in his back seat.

“What is it, Jack?” William wants to know, and this time even Katie wakes and goes to see what’s wrong, but all the boy does is shake. Katie joins them in the little bed and holds her men tight, holds on to keep from falling to the floor, and when she meets the Sheriff walking along the street the next morning, Jack starts screaming. Everybody out and about turns to look at the boy, and they marvel even as their hearts feel for Jack and wish him peace.

Katie does her best to haul Jack away, does her best to comfort him, to pray Lucifer away, but the boy is so dang heavy these days made worse by his flailing limbs. She feels weak and barely able to cope with everything going on and worries demons are tormenting Jack, worries all this is beyond her power, but she prays, *Protect my boy, Lord Jesus*. Protect him, and prays without ceasing like thread off a never-ending spool.

The Sheriff feels anxious when he checks in on the family later that morning, *just making sure everything is ok*, he plans to say. He looks good, smells good too, and even combed his mustache for the visit, because he has an unspoken fondness for William, who opens the door. “How’s everything, Bill?” the Sheriff asks and can’t help the tremor in his breath, can’t help the sweat on his hand when they shake, can’t help squeezing a little harder when he feels William’s bones and scaly skin. “Fine, fine. Boy’s just a little shaken, that’s all,” William says, and the Sheriff replies, “Good, good, well I’m just...well...,” and forgets everything he means to say. “Maybe you’d

like to come inside?” William asks, because he hears the air-conditioner click and knows they’re wasting precious air. The Sheriff feels foolish and wants to get going but lets William shepherd him into the living room, where Jack sits with his mother, head buried in her neck.

When the Sheriff sees the Pastor sitting in William’s chair, he says, “Guess I’m intruding,” but Katie shakes her head and says, “Thinking Jack had a bad dream,” and the Sheriff understands. He had a bad dream too, a dream about the only man he’s ever killed, the man who haunts his dreams. Yes, he saw that gun and yearbook in the back seat, and, *Get out of the car. Come on, now*, and the man obeyed almost in tears, almost unable to breathe. That man came toward him, unarmed but wrong in the head, and the Sheriff pulled the trigger, pulled it without the man having done a thing.

But deep down, he believed he would, believed, because he’d seen a vision of dead and dying children all across the school grounds.

Jack saw the man die, saw him fall. The sky never opened to glory and song, but the earth quaked and cracked to wailing and devastation, and Jack stared down into the pit, stared as that red-headed man with freckles like stars tumbled into torment. Then, Jack turned and ran. He ran, because he felt a different kind of loss.

Jack looks at the Sheriff, “You killed that man,” he whispers, and the Sheriff might have been able to let this go if the boy hadn’t added, “The man with the fire in his hair,” and the Sheriff loses his breath. “I did. As a young officer, I did. I’m sorry. Every day, I am,” but for the first time he

doesn't know if he should be sorry. Yes, the man had a gun, and yes, the Sheriff believed he aimed to use it, but until the ground opened up and that man descended into the pit of hell, the Sheriff always wondered if he'd done wrong.

The Pastor, the Sheriff, and even William share a look, because this moment means something different to each of them, but Katie has eyes only for Jack. The Pastor sits forward in his chair and asks, "You remember visiting my dreams, Jack?" and Jack nods but doesn't say another word, and now even Katie is listening but doesn't understand, because this sounds like the work of demons.

"What the hell is this horse shit?" William asks, looking at the Pastor and then the Sheriff, who turns red as a dusty moon. William's whole body is on guard, because he remembers his dream and sometimes wonders if Jack was there but is always too afraid to ask.

"Don't you dare talk like that," says Katie, covering Jack's ears, and the Pastor stands and declares for all to hear, "Katie, there is something special about your boy, something beyond all understanding. This, I believe," but William steps between them, stands tall with his big, black cowboy hat making him that much taller. William is the biggest man in that room, one of the biggest men in town, and the biggest atheist in the county. "Boy needs a doctor, not all you praying at him," he says, but this is the last straw for Katie, who wonders what sorts of evil William is letting in with his doubts. She needs him to repent or go away, because she can all but see the demons crowding around her boy and knows he needs protection.

Katie stands and touches William's arm. "Bill," she says, and William turns to her. "No, Katie. Boy needs help. Something none of us can give him," and when Katie says, "He's waiting for you to pray for him," William roars and Katie cowers but finds her strength and stands a little taller. They argue like dry thunder over parched plains, but William can't contain the fire in his heart, can't contain his fears and anger, and he pushes Katie (nothing rough) but catches her before she falls. For Katie, it all comes rushing back, those years with her husband, the man she quit, the man who made her bow like he was a god, bow with bruises, and William becomes that devil right there in front of her. Katie is done cowering from devils. She grabs William's arm, says, "You. You! Get out, you!" and William realizes he's done wrong and must submit. "Katie doll, I'm sorry," he says, but she doesn't hear. "You will not touch me with your ungodly hands, not ever again," she shouts, and William says, "Katie doll, I'm sorry," but Katie believes he aims to deceive her. "You are keeping him from healing, you and your lack of faith. They shall take up serpents, and it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover, but yours are evil hands. You could have kept him from being bit if you believed, but you didn't," and William has nothing he can say about this. "Go," Katie says. "Get out of my house and go."

William looks at Jack, hoping he might intervene, offer some defense, but the boy just stares back. "Come on, Jack!" William shouts and thinks he sees the boy tremble.

"William, let's sit and talk about this," the Pastor says, and the

Sheriff says, “Time to calm down, Katie,” but Katie stands tall and crosses her arms and says, “God’s will be done, and this is God’s will. I have known it for far too long and done nothing.”

The Sheriff turns to William. “Well, this is her property, Bill,” he says, and William goes, slamming the door on the way out. The Sheriff follows close behind. “Need a place to stay?” the Sheriff asks, but William climbs into his truck, turns the key, and sits without a word.

Jack knows the sound of William’s truck, knows how it sounds when it drives away, and whispers, “Bill? Where you going, Bill?” but Katie fears demons are whispering through her boy. She wraps her arms around him and prays, *With the power of Christ, I cast you out, evil spirits*, but the Pastor stops her. “There’s nothing evil about your boy,” he says and decides to tell her about his dream and what it has come to mean.

She was there, his beautiful wife, who died before her time, taken by a disease of the spirit and mind, and he remembers holding her hand and weeping, the hospital curtains like a shell. The Pastor is used to this dream. He knows it well, knows that sorrow will cling deep into morning, but this dream was different, because Jack was there watching, just watching, and when the skies opened up and the glory of the Lord shined down upon the three of them, Jack stood and smiled, and the Pastor’s wife, yes even his wife, started singing the songs of the heavenly host. That woman opened her eyes, and they were lucid eyes, lucid at last, and the Pastor believed she’d repented before she died, repented of all those things she said and did as the disease corrupted her soul.

And that woman took to the sky.

The Pastor wanted to hold on to her hand, hold it like a tether and never let go, but he has prayed for her soul, prayed for it every night, and letting her go was the one thing he knew he must do.

And he did.

That dream felt so real the Pastor believes it was real, and yes, he might be a worldly Methodist, but it seems clear to him that Katie's boy has been touched by God, and Katie shouldn't fear that his are the work of demons.

"Gave me a peace I haven't felt in years," the Pastor says.

Katie looks at Jack and feels something new. It's pride, she feels, and opens to the wisdom in the Pastor's words.

But then she sees the pain in Jack's eyes, that tearful pain, and knows he hasn't cried for a long, long time. And Katie knows why, knows she shouldn't have let things end this way, knows William is less a devil and more a man broke by lack of faith in something greater. She also knows that man is long gone, but her boy is holding on to him, holding on like a tether.

And William is gone. His whole soul feels lost. He drives with fear and fury, first to the Town Pump for more than a couple cases of beer, and then all the way to his cabin in the mountains, the cabin where it all started.

Memories of that rattlesnake don't wait for him to settle in, and he starts drinking and dreaming that old dream and wakes to sweat and turmoil, but no sky opens up in these dreams, not anymore.

In that state of mind, he wanders into the wilderness with nothing

but a pack of jerky and a case of beer to keep him going, wanders for what feels like days, wanders with frequent naps across a land that never sits quite right, wanders and pauses whenever he hears something like a rattle but only ever finds bugs. And God only knows how much time has passed when he wakes with that last beer can in his hand, nothing but a gulp at the bottom, and no idea how far he's gone or where he's ended up. It's a bright morning, with sunlight shining through the trees, shining just for him, it seems, and William covers his eyes. He hears it then, that rattlesnake's schc-schc-schc somewhere close, and his skin crawls from head to toe. He finds it soon enough, trying to sun itself on a hunk of granite, while a bobcat slinks nearby. "Git!" William shouts and throws his empty beer can at the cat, who crouches and then jumps away, leaving William alone with this bringer of death and dreams.

William feels his fear, feels it deep inside, and hasn't ever felt this kind of fear before, but Katie's words keep tormenting him, and he knows he needs proof he can be stronger than flesh, needs to know he would never hurt Katie again, never hurt anyone. *Think I'm afraid of you, you sonofabitch?* he prays, and the snake gets back to rattling. William moves toward the serpent, moves through dense grass and fallen cones, and moves beneath pine trees and through shadows into light, and there, feet away, waits that snake, unblinking, tempting him to come closer. *Get me. Do it, you sonofabitch,* he prays and extends his hand. *Grab on, make me feel it,* and when that snake's tail rises higher and William thinks about Katie, thinks about holding her tight at night, he prays a different prayer, prays,

You shall not hurt me, but keeps his hand outstretched, sees those eyes contemplating, that mouth opening, those fangs like daggers aching for his skin and imagines Jack seeing the same sight and feeling the same fright and wanting more than anything to be somewhere else. Katie was wrong, he realizes, because he did protect the boy. Maybe he could have done better, but he protected him, and here William is out in the middle of nowhere with nobody to protect him, but maybe God will.

And that snake moves fast.

And William wishes he were somewhere else.

And lo and behold, the boot cometh hard upon that snake's neck, and William can't help but believe he has seen the Boot of God.

"What the hell you doing out here, Bill? Trying to get yourself killed, is what!" and William drops his arm, lets his whole body drop, and for a second feels angry before realizing his prayer has been answered. "It didn't hurt me," he says, "Oh Lord, it didn't hurt me," and gunfire pierces his ears and rolls through the canyon below.

William hears nothing more but sees the headless snake, looks up to see the Sheriff, whose mustached mouth is moving, but William has only a ringing in his ears.

In the Sheriff's truck hours later, William asks, "How long I been gone?" and the whole world sounds underwater. "Couple days," says the Sheriff, but to William, it feels more like a month. He accepts some mystery in his salvation, in the Sheriff showing at that precise moment. *The Lord protected me*, he thinks to say but can't, not yet, and he hopes this will be

enough for Katie, hopes she'll meet him part way and carry him home.

"Take me to them," William says at last, and the Sheriff looks at him but says nothing, not at first, not until he coughs some grief away. "Sunday, so they'll be at church," he says, and William sits up, lifts his chin, and says, "Then take me there," but hasn't been in years. The Sheriff nods but drives on without another word. "What me to come in too?" he asks after they arrive, and William gives him a look and asks, "What for?" but the Sheriff can't think of anything to say. William takes the man's hand. "Appreciate what you did, coming out for me like that," he says and squeezes tight in that way the Sheriff likes, but then the Sheriff lets him go.

And William walks toward that little Methodist church with the tall, white steeple against the wide open sky, and all is quiet but the Pastor's voice echoing through the parking lot, echoing without resolve and then with resolve as William steps inside and finds Jack upon that stage, Jack, surrounded by Elders praying for the boy who touches dreams, and the Pastor, praying loudest of all, *And we thank you Lord for the unknown and making some things known in times of hardship*, and William moves down the isle. The Pastor's words call to him, yes, but he sees the fear on Jack's face, feels something fundamentally wrong with bowing before a boy but chooses to accept there are some things he does not understand. *Your peace passeth beyond all understanding, Lord, and we thank you for bringing us a conduit of peace, Lord*, prays the Pastor, and the church is bursting at the seams, because Word about Jack has traveled, and William sees locals and wanderers, the nurse with plucked eyebrows, Ms. Hitchens, all William's

drinking buddies, who wouldn't be caught dead in church. So many folks have a story to tell about Jack, and those who don't wish they did, wish he would bring a little of that glory and song, but William passes them all without a thought, down the isle, catching the Pastor's eye along the way and toward Jack, who watches him, breathing deep, because he has come to fear dreams.

William finds Katie in the front, sits next to her, takes her hand, and her skin crawls from head to toe, but she doesn't let go, not yet, not until Jack sees William sitting there and runs to him, clings to him, but the prayers don't stop.

Folks gather around that little family and pray, not loud prayers but whispers, and then the Pastor leaves his pulpit and joins them, placing a hand on William's head and another hand on Jack's, and everyone seems to be reaching out and touching that little family, fingers rolling, trembling, sliding, holding on tight, and whispering, whispering, like schc-schc-schc-schc-schc.

FREESIA MCKEE

WHAT ISN'T DEAD

- Winner: Patricia Goedicke Prize in Poetry -

I don't remember the favor,
if she was carrying my bag or helping
me put on my coat or pointing out
a tall step, my ex-
girlfriend, the gentleman,
the one who told me at the final
break that she wished we had
never met

at the gay bar, in what felt like the loneliest
place, with the same broken friends every week, under
the glow of the sober dyke DJ who said someday
she'd be famous, carrying out the same night
over and over for the same broken friends
who said someday they'd go back
to school, someday they'd get married to a really fine girl,
introducing the bar to their third fiancée, the same bottle
thrown over the back fence from the strip club's
parking lot, broken, wished we had never gone on

to meet over beers the two curious women
who decided we were not
interesting enough for their company, not
exotic enough, not queer
enough, we were young and old and already shacked

up, stable jobs and bored out of my mind, my ex-
girlfriend who wished we'd never
gone up north to spend time on the 4th
with her family in their flag shirts, the neighbor
on the lawn singing *God Bless*
America into a karaoke microphone
like a cantor. No, I don't remember the favor, before
my very own *Stone Butch Blues*,
her sister screaming in the living
room over a mysterious rivalry, I don't remember,
with all we had been through as I ran away
from my life by staying in place on that night near

the end, of what gentlemanly act she had partaken,
I really don't remember, on the dark
Seattle street, the reptilian glow
of the food store behind us, what tender favor
she towered over to help me with
when the anonymous figure yelled
across the street, cheering her on,
low and emphatic, the inadequate statement, "*chivalry is not dead!*"

TAMMY DELATORRE

I AM COMING FOR YOU

- Winner: Montana Prize in Nonfiction -

I AM COMING for you. My mother might have said those words the night she went after him—the bearded man, the one she took to her room all those nights. He would come over after I'd gone to bed. She carried me from her room—the only place I could fall asleep—to the room across the hall. In the sticky Hawaiian heat, I'd wake to their loud moans and groans in the middle of the night and sit straight up in bed. At six years old, the only thing I knew of sex was a glimpse I got on TV: two bodies moving under a white sheet.

The room I was in was not my room. My room was my mother's room. I was afraid of the dark, afraid of being alone, but I also knew I could not go in there with them doing what they were doing. Still, I got out of bed and sat with my back against her bedroom door and fell fast asleep.

I am coming for you. I repeat these words like a mantra, like a prayer, like a blessing. *I am coming for you.* What I am actually doing is driving in the early morning in Los Angeles to the gym. There is little traffic. I am going fast, wanting to be reckless, wanting to wrap my car around some pole rather than to think the thoughts I'm thinking. *I am coming for you.* It crosses my mind that revenge is not a reason to write,

and yet it is the reason I am writing today.

That morning in Hawai'i, when I am six years old, the door I fell asleep against is pulled away from me. I look up, smiling, expecting it will be my mother, but it is the bearded man.

"Listen, you little brat, your mother doesn't need you hanging around." He digs his fingers into the soft, pulpy part of my arm, digs until his fingers hit bone, until I wince with pain, until he's dragged me across the hall to the room that is not mine and throws me against the bed. He pauses for the briefest moment, considering if there's more to be done to me. "Stay there," he says and shuts the door.

I do not come out until I know he is gone, his deep voice absent from down the hall. In the living room, I find my mother lounging on the couch, body relaxed and loose, eyes dreaming, smile crooked, like she's about to lie. "He makes me happy," she says. "Do you like him?"

I shrug, wanting to show her the red welts he's dug into my arm.

"Oh, don't you want Mama to be happy?"

I do, but why does it take him? Why not just me?

After my sister was taken away by Child Protective Services, after my father left, I slept with my mother in her bed, skin to skin. Her sweat. My sweat. I long to know her in this way again, a time when a barrier to her body did not exist. Her hard muscles against my soft belly, her pelvis against my thigh, her clavicle, a resting place for my arm. Mine. All of it. That was my happiness, but I nod anyway for hers.

• • •

I AM COMING for you. I did not see it happen. I did not see him hurt her, and yet she was hurt. I found her unconscious on the living room floor. A red eye swollen shut. A bloodied lip. This was what I knew of love. This was what I learned from her. *I am coming for you, motherfucker.* Because that's exactly what he was. He fucked my mother all those nights, then gave her a black eye. He took everything from her, and he took her from me.

Weeks after I found her unconscious, her bruised eye had begun to heal. I sat in her lap. My fingers drawn to touch the puffy flesh above her cheekbone. She swatted my hand away. "Don't," she said. "It still hurts."

The plum purple had faded, as if it melting into her. I looked at the rest of her body, her breasts, belly and hips. Where had it gone? Deeper. I pressed my hands onto her chest plate and saw another bruise burning a midnight blue through her skin.

"I want one," I said, as if it were a bright-colored tattoo from a Cracker Jack box.

"You shouldn't want to hurt."

But I wanted to be just like her.

• • •

I AM COMING for you. It must have taken a lot for my mother to plan a murder. First, the psychology of it, wanting to slit someone's throat or shoot him or beat him to death, and second, the physicality of it, knowing whether her body was strong enough to take his body and do harm to it.

In my adult life, I've mustered low-grade resentment toward a boss who made me work over the weekend. I've flared with temporary rage at someone who cut me off in traffic. But when I recall the bearded man, the meter moves up the scale, incited by a man who knew how to hurt, years of experience honed behind his methods. He didn't stop and consider; he didn't plot and scheme. It came natural, fingers that grab and dig, fists that hold, then hit.

When the bearded man closed me into the room that was not mine, I might have thought, *I hate you.* I might have thought, *I wish you would die.* A little girl clenching her fists. *Die!* I might have thought that. But imagine my mother. She made a list of things to do. It began with a gun. I was there when she went to ask her uncle for it, said she'd feel safer with it now that my father was gone. And the words did not come to me then, though I wanted to say them: "Please don't give it to her." She checked the first item off her list. The next: leave my daughter in the middle of the night. And the next: recruit two strong, able-bodied men to help me do what I cannot do alone.

• • •

I AM TRAVELING to the gym on Wilshire Boulevard to know my mother's

body. Her strong arms, her svelte figure, her muscular back. *My mother's body like a map in my mind.* I still reach for her in the middle of the night. Just a cold sheet. I strive for a body like hers but fail. There are times when I'm on the treadmill, when I'm running full out, like I'm running for my life, like I'm running to get back to her, even though that's impossible.

It was cold the morning my mother left me. That's why our windows were rolled up when we pulled into the small parking lot of the Presbyterian Church on Ali'i Drive. I could foresee the long, dim room where we kids jammed our jackets into cubbies, crayon-colored on desks and took naps curled in sleeping bags. I didn't want to go in there that morning because I knew my mother had a gun.

She leaned over to kiss my cheek. Her black hair smelled of gardenia and honeysuckle. She was so beautiful with high cheekbones and almond-shaped eyes. I wanted to perch on the steering wheel and lean into her breasts.

"Come on, sweetie. Mama's going to be late for work."

She was always referring to herself in the third person, as if she wasn't her own self, wasn't an "I" making decisions, just someone she knew, taking actions beyond her control.

She waited for me to open the door and get out of the car, to join the throng of children on the playground, so messy and playful and light. They ran and sweat and laughed.

I sat in the passenger seat; hot tears rolled down my cheeks. "Please. Can't I come with you just for today?" Of course, it wasn't just to-

day. It had been many days, a long train of days helping her clean rooms. So many days, I knew her routine by heart: the bathroom, the bed, the trash, then vacuum. Other maids might have done it differently, but if my mother knew anything it was how to clean up other people's messes.

"No, you can't come with me every day. You're going to get me in trouble."

"But I can hide. And I promise to be the best helper."

Usually, she relented after a few pleas. She liked the company and she liked the help, so I worried she had other plans, plans with the gun.

She got out and came around the car to my side. I turned and quickly pushed down the lock. She knocked on the window once with her knuckle. "Open. You have to go to school."

I anticipated her next move and shuffled quickly over the middle console where the hand brake was pulled up and pushed the driver's lock down as well. I climbed back into my seat and faced forward until I heard her say, "All right, you can come. But just this once. I mean it."

• • •

AT THE GYM, I do resistance training first. My muscles work mostly against the weight of memory. I do successive reps until the point of fatigue, until the point of failure. Tiny fibers in my sinew fire and burn until they twitch and shake. On the other side of this effort is me trying to become my mother's body. *My mother's body like a map in my mind.*

I do plyometrics next with explosive jumps, use the elastic properties of my muscles to propel myself through air. I try to land soft and with good form to protect my knees. Old injuries, they still haunt me. I need to be strong like my mother. You never know when you're going to need it.

Because, of course, a man like the bearded man would end up in my bed. He had the same fingers. He put them in me, among other things. When I first met him, he said, "I want to wreck you." I cuddled against his hot skin, thinking, how sweet, that he thinks he could, how sexy that he wanted to try. That story ended badly, as we both knew it would. He wrecked me. And I let him.

In one form or another, every man in my life has been a version of the bearded man. They hurt me because they could, because they knew how. They didn't hit me, like my father or the bearded man hit my mother, but they still hurt me. Like that boyfriend who broke my bedframe, too many nights going hard against me. When he got up for a drink of water, I slid the mattress off the box spring, and the box spring off the frame, and found the butterfly bolt had snapped in two. Like a vertebra, broken, the whole thing caved in.

• • •

AT THE ISLANDER Inn, I helped my mother push the maid service cart down the balcony passage between rooms. The walkway overlooked the gardens and an asphalt road. I pulled the towels while she started to clean the tub. I pulled the sheets and linen from the bed while she brought a

new set in from her cart. She always tried to make the bed in less than five minutes. When I helped, she made the time easily, according to the clock on the nightstand.

At lunch, she let me eat her baloney sandwich. When her boss came by, I hid in the closet. When he came by again, I hid in her cart. He came by a lot.

In one of the rooms, I found an unopened bottle of Wheat Nuts. Mama usually threw out any food, but that day she made an exception.

Those nuts were crisp and salty. I remembered them tasting like the goodness of working with my mother, where work was solid and reliable in its routine, and the gun didn't exist. We finished two floors of rooms. We made everything clean again.

• • •

"READ ME A story, Mama."

"You're already falling asleep."

"But my arms..." They ached from the long day of cleaning. They felt hollow, like they were being erased.

Her fingers gently kneaded my shoulders.

"Aren't you coming to bed?"

"Not yet, baby. Not yet."

She left a little sweetness then; her lips pressed against my crown.



I WOKE WITH a start and reached over to her side of the bed, but it was empty. I ran across the hall to check the room where I kept a large cardboard box I used as a playhouse. I heard crying. I neared the cutout door. Maybe Mama was inside. All I could see was my Raggedy Ann on the floor, one of her legs folded severely under her body. I inched closer and reached to straighten the limb, thinking the crying might stop, but it didn't. I touched my own face; it was wet with tears.

I ran down the hall and checked the rest of the house. My mother was gone.

I waited for her at the kitchen table. I fell asleep on the couch. I got ready for school in the morning. But no one came for me. Not the next day or the next. Not for seven days by my count, and I learned how to count early. My father denied it, said he came the night she called, but who's to say she called the night she left.

Seven days I used a dining room chair to stand on tippy toes to reach the white ceramic bowls she kept in the cupboard. Seven days of Lucky Charms and Fruit Loops. Baloney sandwiches, too. It was on the first night that I counted the thin slabs of pink meat and slices of bread to figure out how long they would last. Seven days I looked at the list of names and numbers tacked next to our phone on the wall. I couldn't reach the phone or the list, but I could use the chair if I needed to. Seven days, five of which I got ready for school in case she came home. Of

course, she'd already begun to leave me. This time, I knew it was for good.

• • •

CONSIDER THE BEDROOM. How many I've been in, through my twenties and thirties, rooms that were not mine. A man I met at a coffee shop. I ended up in his room. This is the part of the story where I take off my clothes. I thought I needed to, to get back to her. *My mother's body like a map in my mind.* I still reach for her. Just a cold sheet.

This is the part where I let the straps of my camisole fall from my shoulders, my breasts bare and heavy. Although this man has a beard, the rest of his body is smooth. This is the part where the top button of my jeans is undone so other parts, soft and puffy, come out. He glares at my belly button, how dark and recessive, how it beckons his tongue. My nipples grow plump; he rolls one between his thumb and index finger, then pinches. This is the part where my jeans are on the floor, and I wonder how to go on trying to be my mother's body. His tongue darts between my legs, between the folds of flesh, in and out.

This body, left by my mother, has not always felt like my own, not something to be taken care of, not something to hold as precious. This is why I hurt it, not on purpose, not at first. He turned me over, entered me from behind. He thrust and pushed my face down into the white sheet of his bed. He ground hard into the curve of my ass; the crook of his arm bent up around my neck, putting me in a choke hold. He might have snapped me in two. Imagine my body found the next morning, bro-

ken and left.

I don't know when it started. That's a lie. I know the exact moment: she snuck out in the middle of the night and left me, hollowed out, just a shell I let men crawl into.

At the gym, today, like so many days, I cannot see my face in the mirror on the wall. I see only pieces of my body: stiff hips, tight neck, bouncing shoulders. I like the momentum of my parts, moving beyond memory. Fragments somehow made whole. *My mother's body like a map in my mind.* Moving over this terrain holds me. I am becoming my mother and not my mother, and stronger through the process.

Consider the many nights without sleep. Even now, I don't sleep well, not since I was a little girl. I refuse to suffer a state of unrest in bed, so I walk the short hall back and forth in darkness, hoping to find tired, that sense of heaviness that makes me fall back through time, to get back to her. And when tired still does not come although the morning light has come, I pull out my laptop and work on this essay and think of all the things that I'll have to leave out.

I won't want to say how a man from Pomona took me to see *Jesus Christ Superstar* because I love that rock opera, how we arrived early so we walked the grounds surrounding the theater, how he pulled me behind some bushes and propped my body against a large green unit. I imagine that metal box had something to do with electricity. Against its dangerous hum, I let him push into me.

I won't tell the part either, where this whole story is about ne-

glect, about leaving my body to the point I no longer exist.

I dated the man from Pomona for nine months. He accused me of sleeping with random men behind his back, accused me of sleeping with his best friend, accused me of giving head to a man at a nightclub when I went to the bathroom, accused me of being a slut. I wouldn't do that kind of thing to him, yet I had done that kind of thing before him: gone home with random men, one I met at a Coffee Bean, another from a noodle house, one from Borders Books. *My mother's body, a map in my mind.* It hurt so much to acknowledge the truth of it. I had been that girl. Wouldn't I always be that girl? His accusations rang in my ears. It became necessary to bring the pain I felt to the surface, to take a phone receiver or the heel of my shoe or even my own fists to my thighs, pain erupting in pleasure, the bruises, a beautiful sign, my body was healing.

• • •

I LEAVE THE gym, and a dull ache flares in my shoulder. Some pain you carry for years; this one crinkles my brow, dries my throat, makes me want to weep. On the way home, I stop at an ATM to get cash. I push my card into the slot and remember how my mother relied on the wrinkled dollar bills left by tourists on hotel nightstands.

Today, there's money enough. I have a solid job and a loving boyfriend, but the thought creeps into my mind: wreck it. Tear it down. I go into a nearby Starbucks and order a hot chocolate. The barista hands me my cup, "I put a little extra in it." He does a whirling-whip-cream ges-

ture with his fingers and wears a naughty grin. He's handsome enough. We could be at his place in fifteen minutes. We could do it against the door of the bathroom; old habits are hard to break.

• • •

AFTER MY MOTHER left me, no one would tell me what had happened. My father's girlfriend got closest, saying things she shouldn't to a six-year-old, "You should have seen what that guy did to her: busted her up real good." And another time, "After your father did what he did, she wasn't going to take that shit from another man."

As I grew up, no one would tell it to me straight. I asked my father once. He said, "You think too much about the past."

Finally, at thirty-nine, I hired a private investigator who obtained the police reports for me. My mother got two men to help her kidnap the bearded man at gun point, to bring him back to my childhood house and beat him within an inch of his life. One account said she shot at him seven times but didn't hit her mark. Another said they broke into his apartment, bound his hands behind his back and put him in a car. Another said she held a knife to his throat and threatened to slit it. She hit him in the face with the gun. She hit him in the face with her fists.

I imagine she might have said, "See! How do you like it?"

She came for you, motherfucker.

It's easy to judge my mother. I've heard others do it, say things like, *she lost it. A screw came loose. She was a hot mess. She was a night-*

mare on wheels.

Violence is never justified. Yet sometimes I think my mother was justified.

• • •

THIS STORY ENDS in a dream. My mother and I are in a department store. We have picked out clothes and gone into separate dressing rooms. Between the slats of my door, I see her admiring herself in a three-paneled mirror, wearing the same tight violet dress I have slipped on. Her waist is slender, her back and arms muscular and tight. The store clerks gather with praise.

In the dream, I feel small, like a child again. My body, blockish and chunky. Her body, the map. I follow its tortuous route.

“Do you have something on? Let me see,” she calls.

I am coming. It’s easy to forget why I created the map in the first place. I push through the door, urgent to say, *Read me a bedtime story, Mama, one with a different end.* But when I emerge, I am alone. I stand before the mirrors, where she once stood, now a grown woman in a different dress, this one a shade of autumn red. It shows off my legs. Revenge is not a reason to write, but it wasn’t revenge I was after, just a desire to find a new map. A map is but a mirror. In the reflection, I appreciate my shapely legs and sturdy core, a shell refilled now with my own beating heart and a rib cage to protect it.

DANIELLE SHUSTER

BITTER CANDYTUFT

Iberis amara

The desert lets out a briney sigh
as if it remembers
the ocean. Sometimes

I see you in the candytuft—
four-petaled,
white as hospital sheets.

A compulsion towards trauma
leads me to hem & re-hem
the Camel-Wide-texture

of your laugh, to settle
on a tuberose
for your lapel, to hold our absence

in my belly when I am restless.
Recollections handled
until they're threadbare reveal far too little

& too much. Loneliness is submissive,
but thistled. I wake in the night,
the never-coming-back of you
clustering in my throat.

AMYE DAY ONG

PAINTING PARK LAKE

It is only by selection, by elimination, and by emphasis that we get at the
real meaning of things.

-Georgia O'Keeffe¹

COLOR APPARENT

UP CLOSE THE lake's water is green—a hollow green full of emptiness. Gulp it down and still there's that tickle in your throat, the need for more. When green, the lake can only offer promises unfulfilled. Flickers of fish tails. A dimple where the snapping turtle was. The taste of moss thick and wet on the tongue though not a clump is in sight.

In a wide steel bucket the lake's water disappears completely. The only indication of its existence: a surface film that refracts a shot of light

¹ Though most well-known for burning desert landscapes and the unflinching nature with which her flower petals unfurled, O'Keeffe was also a great painter of lakes. From 1918 to 1934, Lake George was the setting and subject that spurred her brush. To O'Keeffe the lake and its surrounding mountains were shape shifters, manifesting on her canvases as a crash of kaleidoscopic color or a woman's lips pursed under starry skies or a black feather fluttering on its side. The lake never remained just one thing.

Her Lake George, the largest lake in the Adirondacks, is situated more than 1,100 miles as the crow flies from my Park Lake, a thimble-sized, man-made watering hole in the Appalachian foothills of Kentucky. For all their differences—scale, origin—I am here to tell you they are the same. For my lake lacks not one color or shape. And it will not be made to stay still.

here and there. Perhaps the water vanishes into gray because it instinctively wants to be carried away. It yearns to have a pail dipped into it, to slosh itself side to side as it's carted up a hill, back to a cabin buried in the woods.

On a sunny, cloudless day the water mimics blue. It's a beauty overwhelming and impossible to tolerate—a mirror held up to the heavens that blinds. How to behold such majesty? Trap it in a picture. Twice remove it from the source.

In the black of night, the lake assumes powers of absorption. The line between water and air evaporates before the eye, becoming perceptible by touch alone. Terrestrials learn of their limits too late, after the water, animated in its inkiness, has already surrounded them. The lake can make anything its own.

Below a moon the water becomes as solid and white as an egg. So easy to grasp and roll around in your hand. A weighty ovoid holding all the elemental matter of the universe. In the morning you crack it, fry it for breakfast.

FAUNA

INSIDE THE LAKE live swimming contact lenses—freshwater jellyfish as big as quarters. An “X” marks the spot over their translucent hearts. They map the lake, hovering where the water is cold and deep. When disturbed, their gelatinous bodies contract, descend, dissolving back into the empty green.

Skinny-nosed snappers poke out their nostrils, poised for move-

ment. The tiniest current of a canoe paddle or crunch of gravel from a nearby road causes them to dive deep down into a safe murkiness where they cannot breathe. On sunny, quiet days, they climb onto collapsed tree trunks. After jockeying for the best sunbathing spot they close their eyes and bask in the heat, relishing its penetration from rugged shell to squidgy core.

The smell of smooshed white bread, the lingering wriggle of a worm that's been pinched apart by hand, these dangling treats bring out the bluegills. In the water, the bread dissolves like an old tab of Alka-Seltzer, hurried along by pecking nibbles from the school. The worm is meaty and requires mastication. It is this thoughtful chewing that ultimately results in the bluegill being shot into the air like a daredevil from a cannon. Sequined scales glitter in the sun from all the asphyxiated twitching. What really bothers the bluegill—more than the lightheaded disorientation that's beginning to take over—is the dawning realization that the bit of worm sitting just inside its lips will never reach the stomach.

The catfish will not be hurried along. More bovine than feline, they are interested in grazing. Twilight days and pitch-black nights are spent in a slow, mindless digestion of any edible passing in front of their whiskers. Catfish hover over carcasses felt but unseen. Taste is heightened. Like any good insomniac, they know that food is better eaten in the dark.

Minnows, not minnow. Plural, not singular. Multitudinous even in small groups, they differ from a flock of birds. Absent is the elegant dip-swoop down, the synchronized loop-the-loop to the sky. They are not on

a journey to but a collective dart away from. Their bodies constantly spell out a sign that reads: “Danger.” The escape route circuitous, the exit never found.

MOVE

FROM BENEATH YOUR aluminum rowboat the water knocks, asking to be let in. It has a sixth sense for empty vessels. It dreams of seeping into, submerging them, claiming each and every one. The wind has encouraged these fantasies, enabled the water to rise up again and again. Rap, rap, rap underneath your feet. Such behavior cannot be tolerated. Slap its surface with your wooden oar. Enough!

The sun is gone and in its place a heavy cloud begins to prick the lake. Perforations run in every direction across the water’s surface as the nimbus pours itself in. The lake has no choice but to endure the swell. How painful to watch this addition to the self—a forced feeding of the elemental kind. Fish dive for cover. No smooshed breadcrumb or wriggling morsel can entice them now. Below surface, they watch the upper layer of water turn gray. Not the clear, happy gray of a galvanized pail, but that of smoke blossoming thick from a fire unseen.

The water has other fantasies besides pulling empty vessels into a deep, wet slumber. It also dreams itself an ocean peaked with waves, lassoing tides to the moon. The wind intuits this as well—it is a friend both incorrigible and kind. On occasion, it gifts the lake a blustery day, pushes it forward like a child on a swing so that it may crest up and see a few inches

higher, gain for a split second a new vantage on its very own body.

When the water goes quiet, the surrounding mountains sense their moment and dive in. Without a splash, they displace the skittish minnows, the treasure-marked jellyfish, the gullible bluegills. Thousands of deciduous trees are the lake's lone residents now. Inverted, the mountains experience themselves as the earth in miniature—look up or down and it is only the heavens that surround. The crystalline water lets itself be the mirror in which the mountains see delusions of grandeur. The lake understands this need: the desire to believe that you are the whole and not just a part.

RELATIVE DENSITY

OBJECTS OF FLOATATION:

life jacket

life belt

life preserver

inner tube

paddleboat

Ivory soap

Clorox bottle

Styrofoam

body fat

full lungs

head laid back

eyes looking up

OBJECTS OF SUBMERSION:

wedding ring
rubber boots
fishing pole
open beer
leaking boat
winter coat
heavy pockets
gathered stones
leaden legs
fingers splayed
silent lungs
mouth agape

REM

OF THE TWO recurring dreams I have, one involves me swimming. I swim over the roofs of subdivisions, gliding so close that I can almost touch the nailed-down shingles, coarse and speckled black. To the eye it is air that surrounds me, but when I reach my cupped hand forward and pull, I feel the unmistakable viscosity of water. The giveaway: how it alternates between supple and stern based on the precise angle of my wrist. I stroke on and inhale deeply, savoring the rush of oxygen through arteries. I am a gill-less fish-child of the suburban sky. Water provides the means of flight and

breath. In slumber, the lake has found a way to inhabit the atmosphere of my hometown neighborhood to the north, to possess the paved streets and their right angles, the clipped yards of carefully cultivated green. The lake has demonstrated the far reaches of its dominion. How deeply they stretch into the cul-de-sacs of my mind.

TOUCH

I ONCE HAD a daydream that came true. I dreamt that I could trick a boy named Clay into holding my hand by suggesting we swim down to the bottom of the lake together. I'm scared, I imagined saying, I've never touched the lake at its deepest part. We would be hovering already over that exact spot, water skimming the tops of our shoulders. My hand would gently rise to the surface, palm up. He would see it there, waiting. He would reach out slowly, giving us both precious seconds to learn the sensation of water sliding through fingers, the ecstatic relief when the slide stopped because our crevasses had found each other, hands interlocked. And then, on the count of three, we would fill our lungs tight with air and propel ourselves down, pushing the water overhead again and again with our free hands until it was just the two of us alone at the bottom. There would be a kiss. I wasn't sure exactly how, but it seemed only logical in that growing darkness. We would kiss each other and let go of any remaining oxygen, bubbles retracing our paths to the surface.

In real life, when our feet sunk into the clammy lakebed, toes

immediately subsumed into a sticky mess of mountain silt and decaying carcasses, I instinctively pulled down on his hand so that he sank deeper into darkness and I was propelled back up to the top. He reemerged seconds after me, gasping.

SLICE

TRUE OR FALSE

1. The lake is actually a cake.

True. The lake is baked batter. Its sweetness comes entirely from white granulated sugar. There is no Splenda, nothing to impersonate the zing of sucrose. There is no brown sugar, no tree sap molasses to make it chewy-sticky-soft. It is a yellow cake. Yellow from the eggs cracked and whisked inside. The flour is whole nothing. It is a heavy white powder of milled goodness that will stop your heart.

2. The cake has seven layers.

False. It has four. The top layer has been whipped warm and light. Sponge cake spreads all the way across the lake but only goes five inches deep. You have to splay like a starfish if you don't want to dip down farther to the next layer, which is made with cold butter. Your arms tingle at first to touch it. But then, you come to room temperature—lake temperature—and can finally taste the pleasure pockets of air created from the creaming of butter and sugar. Below the golden second layer is the dense pound cake.

You catch its crumbs only after diving in from a good height, arcing down through it momentarily before you buoy back to the surface. The butter in this layer isn't the delicate tingling kind. Rather, it coats the roof of your mouth, the full length of your tongue, and lingers heavy there, slowing your impulse to return for more. The very bottom layer of the cake is almost never eaten, as something has gone awry. It has turned bitter. From too much baking powder? Rancid flour? The swap of butter for a green olive oil? No one knows for sure. What you taste immediately, though, if you get a bite, is that this bottom layer is not for savoring. It is merely the foundation for lighter, sweeter things—a sobering point of comparison that makes you quicker to recognize true delight when it is sitting squarely on your tongue.

3. The most delicious layer is the top.

Trick question. The most delicious part is not a layer at all. It's the filling in between: thin raspberry jam paste that's been slathered with a long, flat spatula. It is the threshold, the thing that tells you the layers are there. Its scant presence is what makes it so desired. That and the fact that it buries little seeds in the crevasses between your gums and teeth: your physical proof that the cake is indeed an earth-baked confection—one you've had the distinct pleasure of tasting.

GOSSIP

PRIVATE CONVERSATIONS ARE conveyed across the water. Unlike the wind or the ocean, the lake has no voice of its own and so it absconds with the sounds of others. Whispers intended for a single ear skip like stones—grey oblong wonders bounding across a taut surface—until they are lodged in the reeds or flung ashore. Unbeknownst to the speakers, passersby eagerly collect these morsels, tucking them into jacket pockets and ferrying them far from the lake of their birth—to town where they will be traded for other nuggets of hearsay between church pews, across the drug counter, or through the windows of idling cars that have slowed to exchange their hi-do's beneath the glow of a green stoplight.

AKIN

CHOOSE THE PAIR of words or phrases that most closely resembles the relationship between the original pair.

YOU : LAKE ::

- a) Baby : Womb
- b) Bare Feet : Grassy Field
- c) Fish : Lure
- d) Tree : Lightning
- e) Neck : Moose

NEAR MISSES

After a bad date
I slip into the pet store
for the air conditioning.

When I knock over an empty fishbowl
the dogs all turn to look,
tongues lolling, owners tugging.

A clerk points to the fat black goldfish
with billowy cheeks—*they're on sale.*
That one's name is Winston Churchill.

Winston sidles up to the glass and looks at me.
He puffs and his round mouth blows bubbles
like pipe smoke. *I'll take him*, I say.

Then Winston and I are hitchhiking off-highway
near the Cracker Barrel where the cowhands
eat steak, sober.

A man named Hank gives us a ride.
I squeeze next to his toothless father
on the seat. The father places a hand

on my bare thigh. He starts talking
about the Pacific Theatre and I can't
gather the courage to shake off his hand,

so I let it rest there while he recalls
manning the 50 Cal after everyone else
was dead. *Almost lost my leg*, he says,

lifting his jeans to the knee. A round red scar
on his shin is a cluster of bark, the skin raised
and dented. He pats my thigh. *What about you,*

little one? Any scars to show an old man?

A little leak springs in Winston's bag
and I cover it with my thumb. *Cut it, Dad,*

Hank sighs, and pulls up to my building.
Be safe out there. He reaches past his father
to pull the door shut behind me.

I give Winston a tour of my small apartment
and plop him in a vase. *Welcome home.*
He has a small white line along his belly

probably from that knife flashed by a hungry man.
I look at the jagged cut along my forearm
from fighting with the other fish.

Winston mouths at the food I sprinkle
and I watch him
until dark.

FORTUNATO SALAZAR

THE ICE

I MET A CITIZEN on the ice, older guy, had quit his job, now living out of a teardrop trailer with his spouse, who identified as a Boilermaker. We talked ferments across a picnic table while the spouse bundled the pug into a parka: a brutal sea breeze carried her words off into oblivion. Mauve was the color of the parka. You will settle down here and endure a decade on the ice, were her words. You will bounce around from low end to dead end to odds and ends. Odds and ends, you'll discover, are the meat and potatoes of commerce on the ice, such as it is. Oh, commerce, she sighed.

•

ABNEGATION FIGURED INTO the commerce. The couple with the pug after selling their bungalow and investing in the teardrop put the rest of their savings into abnegating. The banner at the entrance to the marketplace flashed a trademarked jingle about abnegating, minus the melody. The neon was loud. Nonetheless the pug snoozed in its mauve cocoon. I commented on abnegation in regard to ferments. I noticed a definite austerity trend. I commented into my cupped hands. What? said the older guy. Into my cupped hands I shouted an observation about a starvation diet. What? said the older guy again, startling Herschel awake. Herschel opened his mouth and nothing came out.

•

SOME OTHER OLD guy had a picnic table to himself; he was hogging a coveted picnic table. Feeling that I'd been monopolizing the Boilermaker, I went over and began a shouting chat with the ancient mariner. See that blade hanging over your head? he shouted. Blade? I shouted. He shouted back a gruesome moralistic anecdote from his childhood. You were only supposed to pull, never to push, was the premise. Pushing imperiled the sibling. It felt like he'd never left the ice just so he could recount his mischief on his home turf. Make a home for himself at the head of the table, milk the anecdote for all it was worth, lie in wait.

•

THE BLADE BELONGED to him, and then again it didn't. If ever a blade could be said to have an owner...and the picnic table, and the cone of space, and the drink coasters from an interior lair. I watched him go off inside to this lair and I thought of riding the elevator up to the ice and how you normally walked out the front doors but if you were a mischievous child determined not to outlive your parents you punched buttons at random until the rear doors opened onto an alcove where obsolete implements existed in a state of suspended abnegation. He brought out into the crowded patio a stack of coasters, all alike: the ice had shifted as it did from time to time. As he knelt, I thought of the lackeys with their antique elevator keys who checked in from time to time on the implements.

•

AFTER SOME ADDING and taking away and folding and folding again, the wayward picnic table promised to behave, at least until the next upheaval,

and the couple joined us there in a tight huddle, the blade which had been made safe hanging over the four of us. The teardrop in its travels had collected stories about all kinds of commerce-related curiosities like the serrated blade; this was their burden now, the couple's, they'd been everywhere beyond the ice and its economy based on the exchange of knickknacks; for every knickknack on the ice they had their own anecdote from beyond the ice about the knickknack in some non-abnegated version. Some variant which in idyllic childhood with a sibling at the other end had been pushed, hard. Not mischief but one ladder truck after another, unfestooned. Not mischief leading to innocently milking an anecdote. More like tick tick BOOM! Off the ice, the sonic component of an explosion wouldn't instantly be carried away into the whitecaps by the nonstop so-called sea breeze. The snow globe which on the ice hung from a peg as a knickknack essentially served the function of hawking other knickknacks. It had a double off the ice. Both versions looked real, with safety pins and fuses. The version on the peg hanging from its safety pin ring; beneath it, the regulars, in their folksy Yankee windbreakers, quipping about pulling duty as a dud.

•

SURELY YOU WOULDN'T consider a ferment like this to be a knickknack? I shouted at the Boilermaker.

You will take a test, she shouted back. You'll be led down an alley to a storage shed, an ordinary outbuilding by the looks of it, weathered, in need of repair. Someone will have mentioned trial by fire. Someone else will have mentioned ulceration, eschar, irreparable damage to growth plates.

I don't expect to grow much more, anyway, I shouted.

Hanging above the padlocked door will be a widowmaker, she shouted.

A what? I shouted back.

...a vault, a one-room testing headquarters, padlocked, devoid of creature comforts, she continued while I shifted my position on the picnic bench as if I were a stainless steel directional chimney cap. She went on. No furniture except for stainless steel restaurant shelving. A chilly vault sheltered from the elements where you could hold out for a few hours at most. Someone will have mentioned sink or swim. Someone else will have mentioned terminal burrowing, paradoxical undressing, blood blisters.

Now the fun begins, she continued. You find yourself alone among a massive flight of ferments. Someone will have mentioned alphabetizing. Hopefully you were paying attention at the time because you won't last long beginning from a standing start.

A standing start? I shouted.

Because you're on the clock, shouted the Boilermaker.

She went on about how if I hoped to beat the clock, I would need to push myself, hard.

I thought again of the elevator up to the ice and the pranks that involved pushing, the button-pushing pranks as well as the teamwork pranks when the elevator stopped along the way and an overly enthusiastic passenger already in love with abnegation was taught a harmless lesson as the

doors with their cheerful hospitality propaganda slid into their recesses and an unlit void appeared which was merely a staging area not yet bustling with activity but immediately made the overcrowded elevator seem a cozy haven in comparison.

Eschar? I shouted. The Boilermaker shook her head.

Widowmaker? I shouted. The Boilermaker pointed at the sky with a pink mitten. I followed the mitten to the trinket referenced by the elder who knew where the fermenters hoarded their coasters.

•

THE SHED! While the Boilermaker had been filling me in, an alley passed itself off as a nursery sparsely decorated with human statuary. Unremarked, the storage shed traversed the alley on bright orange skids fitted to it by the Boilermaker's husband, a team leader before he quit his job. He pulled the shed. The shed arrived.

I brought the test to you, shouted the Boilermaker's husband, throwing his weight into a last adjustment so that the padlock clanked near enough that I could hear it.

I felt eager, prepared to alphabetize. Not so fast, shouted a voice that came from a place of remembering wariness about elevators, the FILO commerce principle as it applies to elevators.

The Boilermaker's husband climbed onto the picnic table with a glass in one hand and began a toast. I caught a few words that were the names of ferments not found on the ice. I envisioned entering the shed

and encountering exotic ferments from the Dakotas or Montana. Ringers thrown into the mix, to identify candidates who hadn't done their homework. Kids like me who impulsively stabbed the Up button.

I thought I heard the word "lackey" and I pictured a server at the bottom of the food chain tasked with ransacking the unheated attic for a bolt cutter that could still open its mouth like a fish and the server conveying the bolt cutter out into the elements where it was wanted by the patron wielding a goblet as he ennobled the youngster with the foreign accent.

Hey Mr. Teardrop! shouted the homegrown coaster engineer and, quicker than he looked, shot out his arms and gripped the Boilermaker's husband by the ankles.

The Boilermaker's husband reached up toward the trinket, set the palms of his overmitts gently against its downward-facing teeth; gave it a tentative shove as if in his travels he'd met with many such rustic emblems of commerce and taken their measure. He was heavysset and the veteran of countless sedentary miles and he'd been sending the server back for goblet after goblet. The force of the sea breeze flexed the polished steel of the trinket as, gripping with his overmitts, the husband swayed. Many of his anecdotes from beyond the ice described his joining in some quaint regional bacchanal. Hung over, atherosclerotic, plugging a battery charger back into the electrical panel serviced by Safari Condo in Quebec. Quebec was very far away now, farther even more by inches as the ice again shifted.

Not winning any prizes, but without incident, the Boilermaker's husband managed to lift the trinket off its hooks and lower it to the picnic

table where it lay aglitter in the bankable sunshine.

•

I'M NOT GETTING any younger! I shouted as the others in our party of four admired the formerly aloft blade and its two batons, one at each end. The Boilermaker and her husband resembled missionaries brought back to the moment when, in their travels, they'd first encountered, in a campground deep in the woods, the fabled river snake blogged about by fellow missionaries. Snake or eel, the lore varied, but in every account the witnesses emphasized how the table or pedestal was too small for the full length of the captured specimen: and so it had been in the campground deep in the woods.

The couple's sudden abnegation of life in the fast lane for work as missionaries stunned everyone.

Maybe beyond the ice there was a version of the knickknack that would hop off the table all by itself and make quick work of the padlock. I looked at the padlock and then at the mischief-maker who grew up on the ice. Whom the ice had formed, for better or worse, into a local rooted to his past. At some level he was still the child who was supposed to push not pull; near to his heart was the temptation to imperil and the strength to resist temptation. Meanwhile I'd been through all kinds of peril in my journey to the ice. We were sibling mischief-makers, the difference being that long ago an opportunity had passed him by. I was the one who would pass through the door.

Nuh-uh, he shouted at me. Antifreeze. It wrecked my wrists. And

he launched into an anecdote about snow globe quality control, living week to week, OSHA.

The Boilermaker's husband looked at me from under droopy eyelids, done in by his ascent and safe return.

The wind dropped off momentarily. In the Boilermaker's lap, the pug, startled, coughed out a hoarse bark. That roused the Boilermaker from her stupor. I followed her lead as she took hold of one of the batons, and together we hoisted the misery whip into position at the entrance to the shed.

•

DID THE LULL last?

It did not.

In proximity to the glittering serrations, did the padlock flinch? The padlock which only an hour earlier in the alley which had been its only home had been rioting while shackled, bellowing in its riot voice which went unheard the only word it knew, *clink clink clink clink clink*?

It did not.

Can the padlock's not flinching be attributed to neglect in the upkeep of the trinket's teeth?

It can not.

Does a ferment exist whose name in terms of alphabetization is a near neighbor of the word "padlock" and whose origins are in the traditional cuisine of the ice?

It does not.

The brachycelaph in the mallow anorak, did it return to snoozing once it noticed the knickknack poised to signal the beginning of the test?

It did not.

The toddler with chin hair, had he ever envisioned inside the elevator that he would be almost lifted off his feet by a sea breeze while gripping a baton which would transfer his power to a length of flexing stainless steel at the other end of which a Boilermaker happy not to be cooped up in a teardrop set herself with her boots far apart in a biomechanically efficient stance and prepared to throw her weight into a vigorous first push?

He had not.

Did the padlock cease its inaudible noisy quaking when the Boilermaker adjusted the vector of the push so that the serrations no longer playacted at threatening the shackle?

It did not.

In the alley, had the trinket when it loomed over the door conversed at length with the padlock about the ferments inside the shed and the illusory simplicity of alphabetizing in a niche commercial environment of unstandardized menu items many of whose names even in a single language varied between alternate versions as far apart or farther in their initial bigrams as the words “knickknack” and “padlock?”

It had not.

The word that the Boilermaker shouted into the sea breeze from her end of the flexing steel, was it “kerf?”

It was not.

The Boilermaker's spouse and former team leader who'd become a competent teardrop engineer and had jawboned about teardrop eccentricities over campfires in the company of the few and far between fellow teardrop wanderers, is it possible that he would choose the wrong tool for the job?

Not remotely possible.

In terms of partnership and keeping the serrations engaged and mutual decision making and working together in a cycle in one continuous motion rather than two distinct movements, all specifically in a context of dual-operator knickknacks, did the elevator survivor know what he was doing?

He did not.

Had he ever had his hands on a baton that would gain him entrance to a shed?

He had not.

Was he getting ahead of himself and worrying that once inside the shed he would tear through the flight of ferments with unprecedented speed or would be so depleted by the time he got inside the shed that he would alphabetize in a depleted haze and, either way, when he completed the test and knocked on the door from the inside to be let out, the administrators of the test, assuming he was still at it, would have retreated indoors to shed their overmitts and warm their hands over ferments complemented by the distinct taste imparted by the acidic byproduct of non-spore-forming microorganisms to the toasted leavened quartered slices upon which the

ferments sat?

He was not.

As the baton on his side of the padlock moved in his direction due to the force exerted by the Boilermaker on her baton on her side of the padlock, was he tempted to remove his overmitts so as to gain a better intuitive sense of the magnitude of the force exerted by the Boilermaker and respond appropriately either with pressure of equal magnitude or to add or subtract magnitude so as to correct for tentativeness or overenthusiasm on the part of the Boilermaker?

He was not.

Had he converted his height to feet and inches and taken the two numbers, feet and inches, as the tens and ones digits respectively of the recommended distance, in inches, from the ball of his front foot to the midline of his rear foot?

He had not.

Was he in danger of hesitating before he made his first contribution to the ideal cycle of continuous collaborative motion because he couldn't feel his feet and had become distracted by pondering the angle at which his knee closer to the test was supposed to be bent and the relationship between that angle and the angle of his knee farther from the test and how the name for the unit of measurement for those angles as well as the angle at which he was supposed to be exerting force upward against the trinket was identical to the name for the unit of measurement that applies in quantifying the magnitude of thermodynamic energy transferred in the

continuous cycles of states in an idealized device called a Carnot engine as well as the magnitude of heat energy in the measurement system modeled after the Carnot engine which if it were an actual and not an idealized engine could be said accurately to be transferring energy from reservoir 1 to reservoir 2 in a magnitude insufficient at the moment to sustain sensation in his pedal extremities?

He was not.

Was the test rigged?

Not that test.

TAISIA KITAIKAIA

MY EVIL TWIN

I feel nostalgic for my evil twin. He used
To lurk around my yard like a goblin,
Sticking his head into bags of leaves.
We worked for the government together,
That's how we met. Weird we didn't
Meet earlier, but the twin was like that.
He had a name like "Laredo" or "Marshall"
Or "Le Faz," I could never keep track.
He'd show up to Christmas and spit
In the pudding. He loved to blowdry
His tender bits at the dinner table.
(What was he doing to keep them so
Moist, breeding caterpillars?) I stopped
Inviting him, of course, but he followed
Me around like a moon-faced armadillo
Through heaps of light. Heaps! He liked
To carry marshmallows in his handbag
Like a typical child. He was in love
With me, that was the worst thing about it.
His love and my repulsion made a sewer
In which dolphins swam, growing grimmer
Daily until they stopped smiling altogether.
Plus, I was tired of the grind. Working
In an office, stapling memos to my back
Like an ancient Egyptian. Merciless,
Merciless! That's the world and its lashes,
Said the twin, and he got that much right.
But the twin only made things worse.

His pots and pans always gleaming
With clean urine, his toadstools ever ready
With unkind wisecracks. My twin, he
Disastered all over the place, tricking
Pretty baristas into going a-blimping
With him, and then lo-and-behold,
There he'd be, jumping blimp, leaving
The barista to fend for herself in the clouds.
I grew tireder and tireder, it was time
To do something. With great resignation,
I wrapped my twin up with twine and
Gifted him to a large, wealthy family
Who mistook him for a clever goose,
The kind that can nanny your children.
Fair enough. I wept then, not for him
But for the aimless struggle of my life,
The never-good-nor-badness of it,
Like a thick smear of paint over lips
Trying to eat a grape. Like lying in a
Ghost's belly and all the alarm clocks
Are going off, but the ghost doesn't
Give a damn. It's a miracle anyone
Has ever looked at you or drawn your
Profile on a napkin. I'm going to order
An entire cherry pie, and when the waitress
Kicks me out at half-past midnight,
I'll leak what remains of my spirit
Into this glass of milk like a criminal
Powder, a poison that makes the waitress
Glow radioactive when she steals a sip,
And when we meet on the other side,
Maybe the twin can solve my murder.

MICHAEL BYERS

GOOD DOG

NO, HIS WIFE Deborah hadn't wanted a dog from the beginning, but then there was this let's call it opportunity, Irina had to change apartments and therefore Max came available, a shaggy friendly old retriever, no threat to anyone, though yes in the first week he did eat the back of the green velvet sofa, heirloom from *Stan's* aunt, *his* loss, Stan pointed out, and yes there was the issue of *not having asked* before he furnished the guest bedroom with a big crate, but they were both more or less retired and the children grown and gone and Stan, at least, found solace in Max, a perfectly joyous beast, purely expressive of his canine rectitude, that in the elevator Max would sit upright maintaining the lifelong apartment dweller's open-faced neutrality, ready to engage if required but otherwise holding his opinions to himself. He fetched tennis balls as though they were partridges, and he committed his business to only the most convenient patches of scruffy dirt, looking not at Stan but up at the trees and the changing weather, a naturalist at heart. Eventually Deborah came around and took turns walking him and a shift in household relations followed shortly, a softening between husband and wife when neither, maybe, had noticed things had hardened. In the way of such things this softening seemed to extend to all the corners of Stan's life, his daughters especially noticed the change over the phone and at Thanksgiving when they all agreed to gather

at home for the first time in ages he felt he was not only tolerating his sometimes gratingly ambitious children and wondering what they valued in life besides money and prestige, but in fact presiding over a family of golden-hearted nobility, in reality he supposed not far from the truth as their daughters were both internists and their son a playwright of all things who had floated with little visible effort into the front rank. And Max was at the heart of this renewal, his silky head on Stan's lap, not begging for turkey but recognizing that Stan might enjoy providing Max a reward for his constitutional excellence. Deborah did not discourage them, rather enjoyed these developments, it seemed, so when she returned one day after New Year's with the terrible news that Max had bolted from the leash and disappeared into the neighborhood they were both equally crushed. Flyers and advertisements proved fruitless and they had never thought to chip him, and after a few weeks Stan resigned himself to the cruel truth, that all the new joy in his life had disappeared, and that now he had to make his way alone with Deborah, which was only the truth as he understood it, for in fact unknown to him Deborah had arranged to have Max shipped off upstate to a goat farm where Max would be happy, for she did love him but fucking Stan, fucking Stan who could not be bothered for decades to consider the punitive realities of her own existence, all the secretaries and secret purchases for women hovering on the perimeter of their circle, she knew all about it, all of it, and at last she had managed to exact a tiny measure of revenge, and how she looked forward to the coming summer when she would drive with Stan as though accidentally to the farm upstate

and say, as the sweet-hearted dog came gamboling across the fields toward them, overjoyed at their reunion, Oh! Stan! Doesn't that just look like Max! But exactly! And masterful, heedless, fucking Stan would have no idea what was happening, no idea at all! And what a lovely change that would be! And what an altogether new kind of married fun!

SAM OLSON

CANNONBALL



Photo by Will Adams

1

CROWDING AROUND THE propane heater in the mess hall
eating stew, someone steals my gloves. No, they just disappear.

A voice in the crowd asks where our ancestors call from.

“Minot, North Dakota,” I say, even though my family stayed

just one generation before continuing west.

• • •

ALL NIGHT HE feeds the wood stove. In his wheelchair in the corner of the wall-tent,
an army blanket across his lap, he waits for rounds to reduce to coals.

It took us all day to split that cottonwood.
He lets us lay our sleeping bags here as trade.

• • •

WIND SHAKES THE walls of the tent. He's fallen asleep, but another man
crouches in longjohns, loading wood.

I watch the stove's open mouth glow across the ceiling,
smelling cottonwood catching. The ceiling canvas rolls,

nautilus in deep, deep water.

• • •

IN THE DREAM, the red outline of a man stomps at my feet, pistols held high.
Only shadows surround us. "You're sleeping on my bed!" he yells.

"No, I'm only scratching this Earth," I say, finding he placed
a coho salmon in my hands.

WOMEN START WHISPERING about the airplanes
that circle the camp day and night.

An elder has a heart-attack and is driven to Bismarck. Someone says
the doctors find traces of pesticides in her bloodstream.

• • •

AFTER SUNDOWN, WALKING by the row of portapotties behind the mess hall,
a woman throws a water bottle at me.

“Fucking white woman,” she says, striding past, spitting
in the frozen straw. I look my palms over and turn to ask why

she saw me as a woman. She’s nowhere to be seen.

• • •

Besides the drone of the surveillance plane, it’s spotlights
on low hills, fencing the camp in white light.

You can see their towers miles down the highway.
They remind me of nightmares I had as a child.

• • •

I SEE WILL on a hilltop with his camera. The crowd, mobilizing, singing, Militia
mounting against the barbed-wire.

After sunset the temperature drops below fifteen. I split cottonwood until protectors
begin shuttling back the wounded. They ride down the flag-road in the beds

of pickups, blasted by fire-hoses, their jeans freezing to their skin.

• • •

IN ONE DREAM, my brother and I stand together in the bathroom
of our childhood basement. The floor is checkered black and white.

My brother points to the shower curtain. A yellow mayfly clings to the vinyl.
It leaps to my fingertip, then speaks: "Learn the deer tracks.

Learn the pesticides."

3

DOCTORS ORDER COATS for the hypothermic. To avoid the medics' pickups,
I run weaving through flagpoles to the supply tents.

A young woman is tearing through boxes of clothes,
seeking anything non-cotton. She doesn't say a word as

she piles coats and blankets into my open arms.

• • •

THE KITCHEN SENDS vats of today's dinner to keep protectors fed.

Eating leftover soup by the campfire, a man catches me with his eye.

"I'm going back up," he says, standing. He hands me his cup and walks towards the white glow above the hill.

• • •

TOO MANY VOLUNTEERS crowd around the healing tents waiting for orders. Everyone makes way when a pickup returns.

A teenager steps off the bed and wanders into the open frame of an unclothed teepee. Medics catch him and lift his shirt.

Around his left kidney, a constellation of welts from rubber bullets.

• • •

At midnight, none of my friends have returned. I go to the wall tent to wait.

When I part the canvas doors, I see the man in the wheelchair

isn't there. Only a pile of sleeping bags, a bucket of cottonwood scraps
in the corner. My hands shaking inside the stove, I build a small house

out of kindling and light it from the center.

• • •

DAN STOOPS INSIDE the tent. Standing by the radiant heat
of the stove, he complains of nausea, struggling to remove his frozen coat.

An hour later, Isabel, Amelia, and Agate return in iced-over jeans
and coats. They were holding tarps over the protectors' fires, defending them

from water cannons, protectors from rubber bullets. We barely speak,
circled around the stove. In my journal, I write,

Who's here to stop the police? It could happen anywhere.

• • •

WITH EVERYONE ASLEEP, I leave to gather more firewood. Crossing
for the splitting pile, I see Will approaching, his camera

still hanging from his neck. When he holds me, I smell mace
on his collar, in his hair. He presses his palms together before

parting the doors of the tent.

IN MISSOULA, I suspect tiny cameras have been drilled
into the plaster walls of my apartment.

I cover the pinpricks with photographs and postcards
and wait.

• • •

I DREAM I'M lying on the frozen clay of the flag-road.
A thousand flags knock together in the wind, but I can't hear them.

Grey wolves lope between the flagpoles, their formation never tightening.
I realize they've circled there forever.

The wolves don't scare me, but I wake in sheets cold with my own piss.

• • •

AT NIGHTTIME IT'S below freezing, but I somehow stay warm lying under the cottonwoods
by Rattlesnake Creek. Beads of ice form and reform on the tips of branches.

Heading to my apartment at dawn, I see a man circling
behind the canary grass by the hair salon.

I say, "How are you?"

"Drunk," he says, walking down the sidewalk towards the railyard.

I'm not drunk, but to his back, I still say "Me too."

• • •

I WAKE AS the coal-trains ease into Missoula. Their brakes
string and bow off the walls of Hellgate Canyon, their dissonant notes

hovering below and above one
another.



Photo by Will Adams

FIVE DAYS.

• • •

NEW SNOW FALLS across the floodplain, wall-tents, and campfires.

At the entrance gate, a woman swings a coffee tin. Smoke rises

from the tin. When I lower the window, the smell of burning sage rolls through.

“Welcome home,” she says.

• • •

CANNONBALL: THE NAME Lewis and Clark gave this river for the shoreline
boluses of sand and calcite they saw only as shot for cannons.

• • •

WHEN WE LEAVE Oceti Sakowin Camp, Will pinches his last tobacco into cigarettes
and passes them around the car.

Isabel and I don’t smoke, but keep taking the skinny cigarettes
across North Dakota, setting them aside.

Now whenever I smell a roll-your-own, I see fields outside Mandan,
rusted over like the roof of a fallen shed.

• • •

I DREAM THE woman laughs when I lie, telling her I'm writing poetry in Salish.

"For you," she says, "learning Salish is consumptive, but deep down
it destroys the colonizer while feeding it on top."

• • •

It's night when we pass Billings. In the parking lot beneath the oil refinery, in the still pools
of melted ice, everything is mirrored. There are two silos, two labyrinths of pipes,

two steam towers. One cloud rises over the refinery. I see its twin cloud
cross the standing water and disappear into the shore.



Photo by Will Adams

JOANNA ELEFThERIOU

AFTER THE WAR

LOOK AT THE guns. Look at the horses, rising. The wife in her wife-beater. The musket. Look at the men. This is our history.

In the year of our lord 2019, a massacre.

We had been trembling for months. The men who rode us had been trembling for months. In the barns, buckets rattled against walls. They rode us at night instead of the day. I thought it was their trembling, I thought it affected their clocks, that the clocks rattled against the walls, and the minute hands bumped into the hour hands because they were rattling because of the humans who for months had been trembling.

We watched as the men and the women pulled stones from the earth and piled them around their houses, walls around walls. They pushed us to run faster and their children to pull triggers.

They trusted no one but their guns. History has not recorded the name that started the war.

Women fuel war, it's well known. Cleopatra, Helen and her thousand ships, Deborah, Queen Anne, and Margaret, several Margarets. So one or two women were faulted for the war of 2019 which wiped out all women and men but there is no real record. No one knows how the bodies began to be blown up. No one knows when the dying began.

Will of God or will of man, the debate rages. Half-heartedly we

pay tribute to the humans, who ended in the war of 2019.

I started trembling myself, along with the men and the women who rode me, when I was a foal. It was 2017 and the world didn't feel right. The older ones told me I was just growing up, that adolescence feels weird whether you're a human or a horse, but I knew it wasn't me, that it was the world. Not going well. The older horses scolded me, said stop seeing monsters where there's only darkness, tame, tame darkness, and while I feigned sleep they whispered *we have seen this before*. They whispered *the men with the skin that burns, they are burning, there is something in them, not their skin, that is burning*.

No one rides us now. We eat what we want. We gallop the plains, as it were, and when we die, it's a claw tearing into us or a tooth. The days of death by metal expelled from a gun, they have ended, they are stories now, which the horses born after the last war only half believe. They think we made up the humans and their guns to frighten foals into mutual respect, into love for other horses, into civility, into those emotions that we, at our peril, keep trying to scare into the young.

At times, I miss the feeling of a rump on my back, and I miss feeling ferocious and strong with that human on my back, so easily broken, trembling, determined not to die.

I gallop the plains, and ask why.

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

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