

CutBank

Volume 1
Issue 95 *CutBank* 95

Article 1

Winter 2021

CutBank 95

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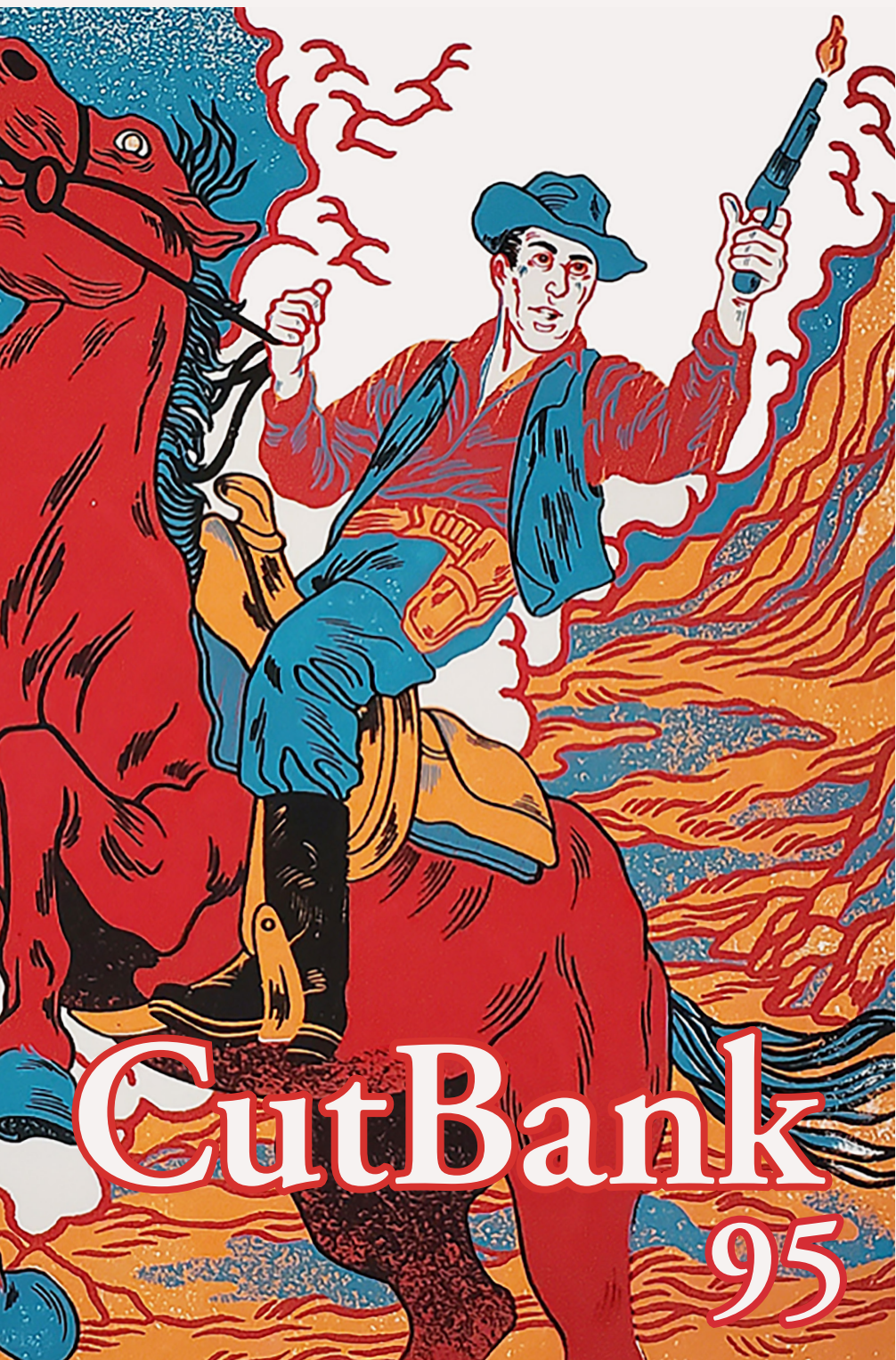
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(2021) "CutBank 95," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 95 , Article 1.

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CutBank is published biannually at the University of Montana by graduate students in the Creative Writing Program. Publication is funded and supported by the Associated Students of Montana, the Pleiades Foundation, the Second Wind Reading Series, Humanities Montana, Tim O'Leary, Michelle Cardinal, Annick Smith, Truman Capote Literary Trust, Sponsors of the Fall Writers' Opus, the Department of English, the Creative Writing Program, Judy Blunt, Boris Fishman, Michael Fitzgerald and Submittable, and our readers and donors.

In loving memory of William Kittredge

Subscriptions are \$17 per year or \$27 for two years. Make checks payable to *CutBank* or shop online at www.cutbankonline.org/shop.

Our reading period is September 15 - February 1.
Complete submission guidelines are available online.

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All correspondence to:
CutBank
English Department, LA 133
University of Montana
Missoula, MT 59812

Printed by McNaughton & Gunn

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ELLEN SKIRVIN

PEACOCKS

I DROVE TO my mom's house to pick up my brother Rich, who wanted to waste a weekend with me in my new apartment across town. Rich was seventeen, two years younger than me, and still lived with my mom. My roommate and best friend Gib sat in the passenger seat, drumming nonsense on the dash. He agreed to come with me since the last time I tried to take my brother out for a good time, my mom threatened to call the cops.

Gib agreed to everything. That's why he had a bunch of shitty tattoos and eight fingers. We'd been friends all through grade school and got kicked out together for selling Adderall in the parking lot before the SATs. We had a talent for sniffing out a profit. Gib's newest project was tattooing. He practiced on himself at home with a gun he bought online. I invested in breeding dogs and snakes.

The sun melted over the slate-roofed houses and maple trees. My truck bed, filled with cages and tools, rattled as I cleared a recently paved speed bump. I pulled into my mom's driveway. She sat on the front porch in a rocking chair that she'd spray-painted brown to look wooden. The house had gray side paneling and overgrown plants in the yard.

I kept the music playing in the truck, and Gib waited in the passenger seat. A ramp I'd installed two years ago led up to the front porch. It was dusty with pollen. My mom didn't lift her gaze as I approached. She wore liquor bottle glasses. It made me feel like she could see everything.

"Jacob," she said.

"Mom," I said.

Gib gestured a thumbs-up to us, although he had no thumb.

My mom tucked her chin to her chest. "Your friend smiles like Eddie Haskell."

I sat on the porch railing, sticky from recently pulled vines. "Is Rich inside?" I asked.

She pressed a soda can to her forehead. Its condensation trickled down her temples. Gray roots crept down her hair. She used to make me massage dye into her scalp over our kitchen sink. My fingers would be stained for days.

She lodged the can in her armpit. "Our cat's missing."

"And you think it's coyotes?"

My mom held up a closed fist. "Found prints this big in the yard. Look for yourself."

"I'm not looking."

"Heat's making them desperate." She cracked her soda and drank.

I rocked a planter hanging from the porch rafter, overflowing with begonias. It leaked from the bottom. "If I go inside to get Rich, are you gonna get all righteous about it?"

My mom moved her mouth like she was chewing. Gib exited the truck and lit a cigarette. The next-door neighbor's sprinkler clicked on with a hiss. A rat snake glided across the street, easy as water, then disappeared into my mom's yard.

My mom took a sip of her soda then stifled a belch. "Leave your shoes at the door."

The living room had been painted green. The ridges of old wallpaper showed through. Everything was softer than I remembered. Clean carpet and throw pillows. Virgin candles and peacock feathers arranged on a side table. AC units buzzed in the window frames. The rare times I visited the house since I left the year prior it felt more and more like a doctor's office.

The door to Rich's bedroom was cracked. I peeked inside and saw him sitting on the edge of his bed with his eyes closed. He still wore his nametag, polo, and slacks from his greeter job at the local Social Security office, where

he worked part-time in the summer. He had gained some weight but looked healthy.

A woman named Ada stood in front of him stretching his leg perpendicular from his torso. His pants were rolled up to the knee. Her tight grip left impressions on his skin. She ran a feather up his stretched leg, then pinched imaginary strings from his calf, tossing them behind her. “Remember to breathe,” she said. Rich breathed.

When Rich and I were kids, we used to walk to elementary school together and talk about the kind of pets we wanted. Our mom never let us have any. I never minded Rich following me around or repeating everything I said. I liked the attention. Then Rich started leaning on me when we walked, sometimes with his arm around my neck. He moved like a duck. It embarrassed me. I’d tell him to pick up his feet.

One day when we were playing in our yard, Rich fell harder than a little brother should. He couldn’t stand and screamed when I tried to lift him. My mom came outside, asked what I did, and felt his stubby legs like they were bruised vegetables. Squeezing, knocking, eyeing. After that, it seemed like someone was always touching Rich. Doctors pulled and prodded and asked him if it hurt. His muscles weren’t strong. They’d grow less strong. I didn’t understand it all. I didn’t want to.

Doctors said he had muscular dystrophy. By high school he’d never walk again. My mother searched for someone who’d tell her different. Ada wasn’t a doctor, but she told my mom different. Everyone in town called her the healer.

Ada was thin but muscular. The kind of meat-to-bone ratio a predator might turn its nose at. She had a dark pixie cut and clunky rings on every finger. I used to cough “dyke” behind her back when I still lived with my mom. She’d been healing Rich for the past four years, but he still couldn’t walk on his own. She always had some new miracle to try. A jar of sludge to drink, a bag of moon rocks to hold, exotic berries to eat.

Ada put her arms under Rich’s armpits and helped him to his wheelchair. She was taller than I remembered. When they emerged, I stared at the wall,

folding and unfolding my arms, pretending I'd just arrived.

"Jacob," Ada said. "You've grown."

"It's been awhile," I said.

Rich spread a dimpled smile, the only feature we shared. "Mom know you're here?" His bangs were wet, cheeks pink. He wheeled toward me, silent on the firm carpet.

"She knows everything," I said, moving behind his chair. "Ready?"

"My bag." Rich craned his neck back toward his room.

I slung the neatly packed bag over my shoulder. "I got you."

Ada stepped aside and wrapped herself in a sweater, despite the heat. "Boys' weekend?"

I looked everywhere but her eyes.

"I'll still do my exercises." Rich saluted her. His nails were painted black. This was new.

Ada squeezed his shoulder. I grabbed the handles of his wheelchair, and Ada followed us outside to the porch. Gib was standing in the yard, his cigarette hanging from his mouth and pointing out his tattoos to my mom. "This one here is Marvin the Martian," he said.

"We're leaving," I said and pushed Rich past my mom toward the driveway. Gib spit his filter in the yard. Ada watched from the porch.

"Already?" my mom said. Her expression softened when she saw Rich. She looked like an old woman.

Rich put an arm around my neck. I lifted him into the passenger's seat.

"I'll be fine," Rich said and searched for his seatbelt.

My mom stood beside the passenger window. "Medications in your bag. It's all labeled. Remember Ada's exercises."

Gib folded the wheelchair into the truck bed, then climbed in beside it. I drove away and watched my mom and Ada disappear in the rearview. I smiled at Rich, smacked his head and said, "Let's get drunk."

• • •

WE MADE OUR way to my place across town, past the old tuberculosis hospital and fenced-off dam, under the Beltway bridge and toward the park. My apartment was a small, solid structure hidden in the trees. It was just off a gravel road that led to the back entrance of the state park. A pile of garbage soured the perimeter and a fire pit blackened the front grass. The garbage trucks never passed through here, so we burned most of our trash. The place wasn't up to any code in any book, but the man who owned the property rented it to us cheap as long as we shut up about everything else.

As we pulled into the yard, Rich nodded toward a metal pen in the grass about 5 feet in diameter. "What's that for?"

"Failed project," I said.

Gib jumped out the truck. "That's all you're gonna tell him?"

I'd bought a Labrador and poodle after I heard their puppies sold for hundreds. I planned to market them as rescues online. The dogs were indifferent toward each other, so I bought another male. He got the job done, but all five puppies slid out dead. The mother wouldn't stop licking them. She snarled when I tried to take them away. I ended up scrapping the whole project and took all three dogs to a local shelter.

"It's a long story," I said and retrieved Rich's wheelchair from the truck then helped him inside. Gib held open the front door and waved his arm as if Rich were royalty.

We cramped ourselves in my kitchen. It smelled like rotten eggs when I turned on the faucet, but Rich didn't say anything about it. A plastic table folded out from the wall. We chugged our first beers, then cracked our seconds. I pan-fried hotdogs on a hotplate, their bellies slit and swollen from the buttered heat. I had bought mustard and bagged sauerkraut special for the occasion. Rich assured me they tasted good, better than our mom's. It got quiet when we ate.

"Can you piss on your own?" Gib asked, biting half a dog.

"Jesus, Gib," I said, glancing at Rich, who spooned sauerkraut.

Gib licked mustard off his palm and said, "He might need help."

Rich shifted himself in his chair. "I do alright."

"He does alright." Gib lifted his beer.

After another round of Millers, I suggested Gib give Rich and me tattoos. Matching roaches on our forearms. Rich once told me roaches would survive the apocalypse and I thought we could too. I went first, and Gib smiled the whole time, crouched over me with the tattoo gun. Gib had wrapped the grip in tape to accommodate his missing fingers. I smiled at Rich to show it was no big deal. Gib wiped ink from my arm with a paper towel.

"Looks like shit," I said.

"Yeah. That's gonna scab," Gib said. "I'll do better on the next one."

Rich drew the roach on himself with a pen first. It looked pretty professional. He frowned as Gib buzzed it on him.

"Doesn't even flinch." I pounded my brother's back.

Gib paused to wipe sweat from his forehead and take a sip of beer. Then, he returned to my brother's arm. Ink splattered on his white muscle shirt.

Rich smiled. "I've felt worse."

His roach looked fatter than mine but more detailed. We laughed about it. I applied paper towels to his arm and wrapped it in plastic wrap. My brother's limbs were soft and fatty like a woman's. When I lived at my mom's I used to help Rich with his exercises. I'd push him to lift more weight and use the blue resistance bands rather than the green ones. I thought it would make him stronger. I even tried to convince him against a wheelchair when the doctors were pushing it. I felt like it was giving in. Nothing ever worked.

The needle had sobered me up, and I remembered I needed to feed the animals. A curtain separated my kitchen from the rest of the apartment, where I kept pythons in a row of plastic containers along the far wall, stacked like a set of drawers within a wooden frame. Four by three. Ten female and two males. Foam squares lined the bottoms and heat lamps were on the lid of each container. Breathing holes pierced in the sides. I had anticipated this moment. The curtain reveal, the lights, the monsters. I wanted Rich to

know I had done something. Built and multiplied.

I pulled back the curtain with a flourish. Rich moved his chair closer, crunching bottle caps and beer tabs under his wheels. The glow from the heat lamps hit his face like Christmas. The snakes slid and coiled around themselves in their cramped space.

“Where’d you get the money for all this?” Rich asked.

I held my elbows and shrugged. I didn’t want to tell him that I had started selling uppers and speed again, after dog breeding didn’t work out. “You want to hold one?”

I unlocked and slid open a container, then lifted the heavy animal from it. Rich reached for it. The snake looked so damn powerful wrapped in his plushy arms.

Gib opened the closet, where we kept a terrarium of mice. They were crawling over each other, red-eyed, over saw dust and poop pellets. To tell the truth, it made me a little sick keeping them like that. Sometimes I’d find a favorite. One with a spot on its back or a busted arm from fighting for its corner of the enclosure.

“Can’t you buy them frozen?” Rich asked. The python slid down his abdomen, measuring his body.

“Ever smell a defrosted mouse?” I asked.

“Jacob microwaved one once,” Gib said. “Splat, splat, splat!” He dropped a mouse on the floor. It froze, its tiny chest heaving with the possibility of freedom. Gib grabbed it and tossed it back where it belonged.

“I learned a lot since then,” I said and pulled the coiling muscle from my brother.

Rich rolled himself closer to the wall of snakes. “People really buy these?”

“People buy anything. I almost got enough money for a bigger place.”

“Then what?” Rich asked.

“Bigger wall of pythons,” I said, stretching my arms wide and falling back in my chair. Rich stared at the glowing containers. The light from the heat lamps made him squint. The wonder in his eyes had faded. Fluorescent

buzzing filled the room. Then Gib laughed. I wasn't sure why.

"I'm good at it, I think," I said and went to get more beers from the fridge, but we had left the thirty rack on the counter. The Millers were warm, condensation puddled around them.

"Ada has her own peacocks," Rich said, waving off the drink I offered.

"Where'd she get the money for that?" I cracked my beer and slurped the rising foam.

Gib burped. "She breed them?"

Rich shook his head. "She only sells the feathers that fall off. The peacocks are like pets to her. It's not a money thing."

"Everything's a money thing," I said.

Rich reached under his seat and pulled out a feather. He twisted the stem. Its veins reflected green-silver then gold. A sinister purple eye interrupted the changing color. It had an oily sheen, like it was unsanitary. Possibly sinful.

"How much you pay for that?" Gib asked.

"Twenty a piece," Rich said and traced the feather slowly down his thigh. "Healing properties run out after a few uses though."

"You know Ada's scamming you," I said.

"I think she believes in what she does." Rich hovered the feather over his bandaged tattoo. "And it makes Mom happy, happier than the doctor appointments."

"Well Mom's not here now, so you don't have to do that."

A tremor in Rich's hand worsened. The peacock feather trembled. "I guess it makes me feel better too. Maybe you should get your own peacocks. You wouldn't have to feed them mice."

As the night wore on, I situated Rich on the couch next to the pythons, apologizing for the buzzing lamps, but he didn't mind it. He brought his own blanket, and I could tell my mom had folded it. We'd go fishing tomorrow, I told him. Even if I had to carry him like a baptized baby through the river. He smiled and thanked me.

I cracked my final beer and joined Gib outside where he nursed his

evening cigarette. We stood under a golden light I'd installed above our front door. I felt hot and itchy in the summer night.

Gib pointed to a cluster of stars. "Don't it look like someone sneezed on the sky?"

"Careful, you'll get a girl pregnant with lines like that," I said.

Gib punched my arm. I scratched the edges of my bandage, where the new tattoo felt warm.

"Twenty a piece." Gib whistled.

I sipped and swatted a moth. "You're thinking about that too?"

Gib's eyes were pink from six Millers and long hours awake, but he was focused.

"One peacock probably got like, what? A hundred feathers? Two-hundred?"

"Something like that," I said, watching a satellite pass overhead.

"That lady's making a killing off your brother. She's like, you know, taking advantage of him."

"Rich is smart," I said. "He knows it's fake, but it gives him a routine. I get it."

Gib took a drag then said, "What if we got our own peacocks?"

"This isn't Noah's Ark. I'm already in the hole with the dogs and pythons and mice."

"We don't need to buy them."

I held a mouthful of beer, then swallowed hard. "What are you saying?"

Gib belched. "I'm saying, forget the feathers. Let's get Rich his own goddamn peacock. Surprise him. He'd never want to leave here."

I thought about when Rich and I were younger, before the falls and wheelchairs and doctor appointments. Before endless detentions and selling meds and my mom kicking me out. When we were two little boys walking side-by-side. When the world was so goddamn big and forgiving.

I finished my beer and said, "I do know where Ada lives."

Gib smiled wide. "I know you do."

I stomped my empty can. Gib tossed his cigarette. We climbed in my

truck and drove slowly at first so Rich wouldn't hear the crunch of gravel. Once out of earshot, I pushed the gas and drove up the road to steal the healer's birds.

• • •

ADA LIVED ON the other side of the state park, where people owned large overgrown patches of land with small homes that fit county codes. Swarms of pollen still floated there from ghosts of trees torn down. Gib and I parked down the block. We took wire cutters from my toolkit in the truck bed and made our way up the road. The house was purple. Wind chimes made of garbage hung from the porch rafters. The backyard was a small playground for pets, wooden enclosures and mulch under a dome of wire netting. The smell of shit strengthened as we crept closer. I couldn't see the birds, but I heard soft gurgles like creek water inside the enclosure. I cut the chicken wire, and Gib pulled a flap away. When we ducked through it and stepped inside, the birds began to scream.

They were phantoms, shimmering and tearing through the dark. We chased and circled two of them. Gib tried to wrestle one into a kiddie pool, but it flapped then bobbed away. I cornered another, the largest of the bunch, against the netting. It opened its feathers, forming a 5-foot radius above its body. Rows of brilliant feathered eyes. The peacock lunged, piercing my chest and pecking with abandon. I lifted my arms to defend myself, and it tore at the bandage of my tattoo. Scorching pain seized my arm, leaking ink and blood. The peacock lunged at me again, and I grabbed its neck. It cried out like a woman and convulsed. I held its throat tighter. Gib ran up behind it and pierced his hands through the fan of feathers, grabbing hold of its flank. I gave its neck a light shaking to sedate it, then we flipped it over. Gib helped me grip its legs together. Then, a light turned on in the house.

Ada's house had large windows. I could see deep inside it. A clean yellow kitchen and bare living room. It was almost like a doll house, like it

wasn't real. Her silhouette stood at the window.

She couldn't see us in the dark. Not with the house lights on. I lifted the bird upside down by its legs and neck. It jerked and flapped, but I held a firm grip. We crept back toward the hole we made in the chicken wire. The remaining peacocks cried and bobbed their heads as they watched us carry their companion away. Gib lifted up the flap of netting for me and I ducked outside the enclosure.

Ada stepped outside. The screen door clapped behind her. She wore a long T-shirt and slippers. "Get, get!" she croaked, taking careful steps into the yard toward her screaming birds. She thought we were animals.

We slinked along the side of the house back toward the road. Gib sneezed from the pollen then laughed. I trailed behind with the peacock. It croaked like midnight clockwork. When we made it to the car, I pinned the bird to the truck bed floor. The peacock's beak hung open. It transitioned to soft, defeated gurgles. I told Gib I'd ride in the back with the bird. He grabbed my car keys from my pocket and ripped the hell out of there. He howled, "Get, get," out the open window.

Back at my apartment, we put the peacock in the metal pen where I'd kept the dogs. It collapsed its feathers to its body and panted like a human. The train of feathers spread in the grass around it. I placed a dish of water in the pen, but the peacock hardly seemed to notice. We weren't sure if it could fly, so I yanked out a tarp from my truck and we staked it over the top of the pen. I was tired, hungover, and ready to blot out the night. We agreed to feed it in the morning.

• • •

I WOKE TO my tattoo burning. It oozed black slime, staining my sheets. I scratched the edges and walked into the python room to check on Rich. He was already up, his eyes puffy, still full of sleep. His hair slick on his neck. He sat on the couch thumbing through penny savers I hadn't trashed.

He looked like a boy who could stand if he wanted.

"How's your roach?" I asked him.

"Need to clean it." He extended his arm. The bandage and saran wrap were still in place. "Do the windows open? It's hot."

"The door opens," I said, approaching him. "I can take you outside."

"I got it," Rich said, pushing me away.

A snake knocked its body against the plastic container, feeding late on its mouse. The rising sun melted orange in the room.

I hugged my brother's rib cage with my good arm.

"Jacob, don't move me," Rich said, his voice lower and harsher than usual. I groaned as I heaved him into his chair. He slipped in my arms and landed hard in his seat. His T-shirt bunched around his armpits, exposing a large pale belly.

"There," I said.

"I told you to stop." He fixed his shirt over his stomach, then wheeled to the kitchen. He moved the curtain aside.

"Let's go outside," I said. "I got a surprise for you."

I pushed Rich out the door into the late morning. Gib had fallen asleep on a lawn chair in the grass. He often did this in hot weather. I kicked him awake.

Gib snorted, sitting upright and blurry-eyed.

I positioned Rich's chair in front of the metal pen, then lifted the tarp from the top. The peacock laid limp inside the perimeter. Its beak gaping around a swollen, dry tongue.

"Shit," I said.

"What is this?" Rich asked.

Gib picked up a stick and poked the bird. Its neck moved at a strange angle. The feathers shimmered like outer space.

"A dead peacock looks like," Gib said.

"That's not what it's supposed to be," I said, shielding my eyes from the sun. "It was fine last night."

"Where'd you get it from?" Rich asked. His face hardened as his mind caught up to his question. "God, Jacob, what did you do?" he said.

My throat tightened. I hung my head.

Gib jumped in the pen. He anchored the bird to the ground with one hand and yanked a feather with the other. He held it up to the light. A bit of skin clung to the quill. The dark eye stared down at him. It looked unforgiving and alien.

“We can still sell the feathers online.” He ripped each one from its root, tossing them behind him into a scattered pile. Rich and I watched in silence as the sun burned on.

BEN KLINE

HOW TO BEHEAD A SNAKE

- *Winner: Patricia Goedicke Prize in Poetry* -

Do fifty push-ups. Saunter
like your uncle showed you
to the sunbathing garter's tail.

Grab it—audacity enthralls
city kids, girlfriends, the bullies
throwing rocks at the goats.

Shake it to confusion, dodging
bite—an absence of venom
lessens no pain. Twirl it

until it's a corkscrew ribbon
and someone says Oooo.
Take a deep breath. Wipe

any sweat on your jeans—never
try it in shorts or a swimsuit.
Crack it like a wet whip,

snapping between your knees—
a loose flick yanked into your chest.
Someone will always yell Oh shit

and at least two people will puke
when the snake's head pops
clean off its glottis—

unblinking eyes scatter
like marbles the nearby cats
kick around until the football players

return to the bus. Toss the carcass
in the weeds. Sit in the seat
behind the driver, under her mirror,

where she can't see you slipping
tips down your pants, dodging
the beating you took last time.

RICH IVES

INSECTGROUP 3-65

IF YOU WERE AWAKE

Pavon Butterfly

From Mexico to Panama, and straying into Southeast Texas, Raphael looks dull in the forest shade, but a male can be brilliant in sun. Although it's rare in Texas, where his tips may be somewhat extended but clipped. Such children begin angular and warty, but soon develop light green stripes and branched head horns. They feed on hackberry in the forest openings. More than once each year, they may begin their journey.

Cautionary traveling includes brown with a suggestion of whitish or lighter brown bonding across the agents of propulsion, vague orange patches near the forward tips, and a strong purplish reflection. Females prefer a lighter brown with white bands and large orange patches on the forward tips. Underneath the protections, both genders are tan with white bands. Eggs, when they are included in the discoveries, are simply round and green.

Raphael has emptied out his violin heart. It wouldn't stay in tune, and it was always crying. His priests are flimsy and approach conviction with obscure evidentiary rules. The friends of each evening that remains gather and do battle with fresh indifference. They have so many things to do that do not need to be done.

Everywhere Raphael goes, more and more improvisational musicians are given to the waves. They learn the salted patterns of survival and return

with their tails rosined. Even the worst of bows can attract them like flies. And then they lift up and separate, each one a maestro of the accurately unexpected.

It's not something you can die of, but life is, and this way of doing things is full of life. You only have to loosen its belt and let the melody fall. A flood of sensual sleep floods over you, and again and again. If you were awake, you'd drown.

I steeped a little paper to make my tea, and there was Raphael, a firmness that spreads and darkens and suddenly turns green. I tasted what I was saying, and the little noisemakers broke open and healed themselves with water and salt. The music grew fluid and pulsed. You couldn't even see the ocean anymore. You didn't need to.

EXPERIMENTS WITH THE ORDINARY

Pearl Crescent Butterfly

A refugee from the Brushfoots, Drew's front legs were small and not used for walking, covered with brush-like scales, but they contained chemical sensors. His sister used hers to scrape the surface of plant leaves to confirm chemically that she has found the right plant for the development and safety of her eggs. Drew used them for cleaning his eyes, which were big and round and reminded you of alien attack movies featuring insects waving antennae with large knobs. A tiny crescent-shaped mark lay like a brand along the lower edge of Drew's spine. With his alien appendages opened (wings or merely bluster?), Drew perched upon the source of his dinner, which he would be taking home to his little ones in a zigzag path to assist with the development of their own still developing spines.

A bright orange male, Drew was darker than his female, and there were many like him, widespread, seen in early spring, one of the first reminders of renewal. Brushfoots have few demands and the Drew varieties can be

easily reared on aster plants. They make excellent subjects for experiments, and are widely available, due perhaps to the appearance of retardation the limp legs can give them.

Drew temperatures vary with depth, season, intensity, and moisture content. Since Drews regulate their body temperatures very little, it might be interesting to discover how much the temperatures of our Drew and the air can vary before the Drew simply goes to sleep or dies. If you compared the moisture content of a similar Drew by drying him in an oven, you would discover that there is not much left but a dusty coat, explaining the lack of independence Drews experience concerning moisture. Collect a little more baggage of Drews and vary the experiments. Give the oven a workout. You may help to discover why the Drews are so docile and common. You may learn the function they have in developing richer soil in the depths of distant forests and garbage dumps.

Fill each Drew $\frac{2}{3}$ full of the soil sample and label him. It is not necessary to retain the Drew appendage. He may be labeled Sam or Joe despite remaining a Drew. It is the commonness of Drews that we wish to understand in this experiment. What is the quantity of ordinariness that the sample can absorb? When you are satisfied you have adequately explored this relationship, try the experiment on yourself. Drewness may reside there more than you would have expected. You may want to alter your diet or hang around more intelligent people. These too could lead you to testing relationships. Many preoccupied scientists have failed to study themselves adequately. A few have begun drawing conclusions that make us anxious.

THE UNREASONABLE SUCCESS OF MISTAKES

Pearly Crescentspot Butterfly

Alfredo has broad open orange areas with wide black margins. Annabelle has heavier black markings. Alfred and Annabelle both have

orange forwarding with black patches, especially along their margin. Several relatives have cream-colored spots. In the rear they may be yellowish to cream-colored with fine brown lines and a purplish brown patch containing a light crescent.

Spring broods have mottled rears with brown below. Brothers and sisters do not seem to know the range of activities healthy societal growth wishes to allow them, and their eggs may lie indiscriminately clustered upon the asters, which the children use to develop their new bodies. They are brown with yellow bands and many branching spines and they wait all winter only to abandon the asters half grown. This abandonment changes them and they manifest a mottled gray, yellowish, or brown aspect. They enter this phase from several directions of breeding potentials and may do so in relatively rapid succession in the open spaces, moist meadows, fields, roadsides and streamsides of the Yukon and Newfoundland all the way to Southern Mexico, and Eastern Washington as well as Southeast California to the Atlantic.

This sprawling proliferation of indiscriminate advancement makes them one of the most common characters in the daily staging of familial outbursts we refer to as, yes, a family. The essential functions are performed low over grasses with alternating flaps and glides. This is often described as highly pugnacious proclivity. The males dart out from their perches or break flight from dominant authorities to investigate passers-by. The nectar from asters, fleabane, and thistle are all used as location devices. Despite frequent misbehavior among the others, there are two families, type A and type B, that do not interbreed. Inappropriately amused scientists call them the Hatfields and the McCoys.

As subjects for our experiments, Alfredo and Annabelle are a little volatile. Try using several strategically placed rubber bands to contain their tendencies to stray. Pour a calculated amount of reasonable moisture into the relationship. How long will it take for misguided excitement to undo our progress? What if the percolation rate may be greater than the aberration itself might suggest? How is it that we have mastered the relationship of

worms to flooding but cannot manage brothers and sisters? We know the frequency of their eruptions but cannot fully understand the dangers of their successes.

CAUTIONARY APPROACHES TO NOCTURNAL DUMPING

Pearly Marblewing Butterfly

Simon's pore space is excessive. He's a little airy. Does it have anything to do with eating the mustard family?

Simon's top is white with black markings at the extended joint apexes and margins. His underside has lime green marbling at the rear. There is a prominent rectangular mark at the center of that margin.

When Simon's children eat the green seed pods of the western tansy mustard, desert candle or wild cabbage, they make a fizzy sound of great release as if they have been trapped far too long in unresponsive bodies and have needed something to overcome the oppressive boredom of ignorant happiness. This happens more frequently in moist environments in the mountainous forests.

Should Simon be frequently altered or allowed to settle into deeper Simonese?

Measure the internal diameter and height of an empty stomach. Now fill it with more complex relationships than external versions of food might suggest. This represents the sophisticated speculations Simon is prone to. They are not accidental, nor do they reach farther than the height or depth of Simon's dreaming.

Attach filter paper to one end of Simon using a rubber band to keep it snug. What actually emerges from the conclusions reached internally? Is it possible to filter out the compacted misdirection or the too-densely arranged glorifications?

And Simon's children are long gone now, but they did not choose to follow their mother, fortunately, since she was swallowed by a swallow, a turn of phrase used by parents to indicate to inexperienced children the ordinariness of deadly interruptions.

Place another rubber band at the base of Simon's pretensions. Snap it only when he has forgotten it is there.

Now you may wish to contain Simon's dreaming. You too are dreaming. You do not own this territory, nor can you restrain yourself from entering it. I am only a conduit with too many infectious aspirations and too much effluvium to fully restrain the dumping. Now please lift the bottom of the container to an appropriate height.

AN INVITATION TO LIVE IN THE OCEAN

Pecos Giant Skipper Butterfly

The small-winged thinking of Renato is blunt, black-brown to tan-brown above, with a varying number of yellow-gold spot bands of various widths, often sporting a black patch across the forward cell, warm brown-gray below, brown at the forward base with yellow spots. White spots appear on the lower hind or it may be all gray below. Tan-gray body fur is extant.

Renato's thinking is fed by lecheguilla, which when mature is bluish. It prefers rocky, often limestone-supported hill country, especially along the bases of the slopes, among agave, mesquite, juniper and yucca. This environment is found in southern New Mexico, the Trans-Pecos area of Texas and Mexico.

Weigh the thinking, and then weigh the apparatus used to do the thinking. What is the difference? Place the difference upon a ridge in the appropriate environment. Let the animals discover it. Weigh their thinking and their apparatus. How do the results compare?

Now imagine you actually could weigh the thoughts themselves. How heavy is the burden they represent? Offer that burden to some shithead you know. Would it not be a great relief if it weren't for the thinking's tendency to multiply and get heavier? Now tap the front of the shithead's thinking apparatus forcefully. This bears no meaningful relationship to the thinking in question, but satisfies the emotional component of the relationship you have had with the shithead. Let the shithead think it is part of the experiment. It will lighten his burden.

Renato has caused this research without even knowing he was the instigator. He probably would think the shithead was. Some experiments provide their most revealing results tangentially. There is an unfortunate tendency in narrow-minded scientists to ignore such results. These scientists are shitheads and may be used for further experimentation.

By the morning after conclusions are drawn, the ocean will have spread across the thinking involved, much as the sky once did, without really being noticed. Complex adjustments are made, and remade, and life goes on with little awareness of the conclusions reached, which grow heavier the more they have to offer. There are muscles we aren't even aware of being developed in these exercises. These magnificent gifts thought breathes can allow it to survive far beneath the surface.

REBECCA LEHMANN

IN THE OCCULT

In the numbers' rise, a fury.
In the onion, raw and chopped to ward
off illness. In the wasp's nest, a pile
of dead ants to ward off parasites.
In the divine, the occult, a bloodful
desire to control the uncontrollable.
Bloodlessly I whispered in the face
of dawn, my feet slapping
the paved trail. In the catchall canyon
of dawn. In the markless void,
inky and filled with loose cats
whose hearts are filled with vengeance
who claw the ankles of coughing children.
In the ventilator's mechanical breath
and pause, breath and pause, we paused
and sighed, we placed our palms
flat against a window, and there was dawn
a cavern, and there was dawn a red
paint drawing on a cave wall, a red handprint
on a doctor's yawning memory. And there
was dawn sashaying and sashed, slashed.
And there was dawn, just dawn.
And the window, just a window,
no charmed shield. No. No.



CATHERINE RAGSDALE

IT'S ALMOST TOMATO SEASON AND YOU KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS

I call my ex to finish the joke for me. My mother answers *tomatoes!* Somewhere in Austin my father puts plants in the ground and my mother holds the flashlight.

All I want to do is put more red on my body. I throw my arm into a wall but it won't bruise. My dog takes a runny shit on the stepstones. I chew on just one seed.

I ask my father why not plant flowers even though I know the answer. If you haven't planted your seeds you better ketchup. My mother sets the table with the largest plates she owns, looks at the one I chipped with disdain.

I want to practice kissing on everybody's tomato mouths. My sister makes gazpacho too soon and it tastes just like vinegar. It's impractical to grow anything inedible.

I think about how if I ate enough leaves they could kill me. The grocery store has had tomatoes all year. I croon to my dog *you're so sad so goddamn sad*. I sit on his patio and dig my heels in the mud.

Soon, yellow flowers.

CHRISTIE TATE

HAIR TIES

AN HOUR BEFORE my eighth birthday party, Mom appeared in my bathroom doorway to “work on my hair.” I’d been doing my own hair since I was five, but for special occasions—Easter, Christmas, roller skating parties—Mom got involved.

I couldn’t find my brush, so I borrowed my brother’s, the one with extra-soft bristles. Mom tried to make it work, but the pliable bristles wouldn’t catch my hair. She decided a ponytail would be best. But then I couldn’t find a hair tie. We were running out of time. Mom’s yanks made my eyes water; her sighs shook the walls. *Why couldn’t I keep track of the rubber bands? Why couldn’t I have beautiful hair? Why was it so hard for me to fit in the box labeled “girl”?*

Dad retreated down the hall, away from the pink-tiled bathroom that trapped me and Mom.

When my hair wouldn’t lie flat, Mom threw the ineffective brush across the bathroom. It broke into two pieces. We both stared at it. Me in fear, her in anger hardening into shame. “I guess there was a lot of hairspray in the bristles.” That was why it broke. That was one of the family fictions we needed to be able to escape from the bathroom and smile wide at the rink when my guests arrived.

• • •

I CAN'T REMEMBER not wanting full-bodied, slightly curly, luscious hair; I pined for it, spent thousands of dollars trying to get it, and despaired that it was always out of reach. I don't hurt myself any longer in pursuit of it, but a trace of the longing remains like a scar. Just the other day, I caught myself admiring my co-worker's long black hair. She once told me that she weighed it on a scale (three pounds), and I thought of that every time I saw her. I also thought: I wish. After all this time—therapy, recovery, feminism, and distance—I still wish. Muscle memory.

I can't remember a time growing up when I thought of my hair as something other than a problem to fix. Too fine. Too thin. Too flat. Too boring. Too unexciting. Too much proof that I was a girl made wrong.

I can't remember not wishing for my sister's sunshine-on-straw hair that air-dried perfectly. So thick. So easy to style. So healthy. So perfectly Texas. So perfectly Daughter. So perfectly Girl.

I can't remember not wishing there were another way, something other than smelly perms, pink rollers, and hot irons; sighs and disappointment and crinkled brows; brushes and hairpins flung across the room in anger.

• • •

ONE WEEKEND, WHEN I was in fourth grade, Dad was in charge of everything at home because Mom was away for the weekend. I sat criss-cross in front of the TV while Dad brushed my hair. One hundred strokes on the right, and then on the left, and then in the back. He worked through the tangles, one strand at a time. No one had ever spent so much time on my hair. Dad said it was important to get the wispies to lie flat. I was only nine, but I knew to humor adults. Dad knew next to nothing about girls' hair—he'd never done mine before—and he'd lost all his hair in third grade after a bout of ringworm and it never grew back. Dad didn't attempt, as I knew he wouldn't, pigtails or braids, but he brushed my hair through two commercial breaks during Saturday morning cartoons. I felt like a daughter, perfectly made.

• • •

SEE MY LITTLE girl hair. Brown like a cup of winter cocoa made with water not milk. Long like the actress in the movie *Love Story*, extra-thin like a malnourished child. See me in the powder room just off the living room in the house where I grew up in Dallas, the one with the pink tiles and the long wooden vanity. On the wall by the light switch hangs a small wooden plaque with an Irish blessing. *May the road rise to meet you*. See me trying to get the part on my head straight. See me tugging on each pigtail to get them even: tug left, tug right, now left a little more, too much, now right again. See me undoing the rubber bands and trying again. Again and again. Each failure collects at and springs from my scalp. It feels like I'm not a girl, though not a boy either. I'm something in the middle. A smudge of not-quite-rightness.

• • •

GROWING UP, MY siblings and I would wait in the living room, watching mindless TV. Eventually, we'd ask Dad if we should tell Mom we were going to be late for our reservation, or the movie, or mass. Dad would shake his head: No. "She's working on her hair." It was code. Code for Mom hates her hair and can't make it do right. Code for don't walk down the hall, don't call out her name, and for God's sake, don't mention the time. We trained ourselves to stare at the screen. When Mom eventually appeared, smelling of Ysatis perfume and her latest hair potions, we would spring out of our seats as though we were grateful she had reminded us to get a move on.

When she traveled, Mom's carry-on suitcase was filled with brushes. Dozens of them. Round. Metal. Wooden-handled. Horse hair. Long, short, skinny, fat. Expensive, cheap. They lay like matchsticks, stacked row upon row. "It takes what it takes," she said when she caught us staring at her suitcase full of brushes.

Once, as we sat eating at a cafe in companionable silence—I was an adult and she was well into her sixth decade of life—my mother gazed out the window over my shoulder. “I really and truly hate my hair. I always have.” I said nothing, afraid to chase away the intimacy of the moment, the candor of her admission. I felt the line between us grow taut—all those hard-bristled brushes, all those heavy sighs in the bathroom, all the anxiety of trying to get it right. Woman, wife, daughter. I loved her for saying what I’d always known in my bones.

• • •

AS THE INTRODUCTORY ad played to the Oscar-award winning short film *Hair Love*, I imagined the plot. A little Black girl struggling to do her hair. Maybe it’s also about how our culture doesn’t always accept hair unless it’s long, luscious, golden, and sitting on top of a white head.

Wrong. *Hair Love* is about a little girl named Zuri who loves her natural hair. Her mother has recorded videos about various ways to style hair, and Zuri watches them, excited to pick one for herself. But she struggles to get it right. Her dad Stephen, who has locks of his own, also struggles with Zuri’s hair, which Matthew Cherry, the creator of *Hair Love*, describes as “having a mind of its own.” Both Zuri and Stephen are used to Mom doing Zuri’s hair. Stephen becomes frustrated and offers Zuri a red beanie. Devastated to be denied the hairstyle she so desperately wants, Zuri refuses the beanie and retreats to her room.

Stephen eventually works through his intimidation—they’re not shown, but I imagine deep breaths, the gathering of energy, his vow to see this through for Zuri. We indeed see Zuri emerge, proudly sporting the style she picked out. Then, the two of them arrive at what looks like a hospital to meet up with Mom, who greets them in a wheelchair. Mom unwinds a scarf to reveal a bald head; cancer is to blame for her absence at home. The family embraces.

A seven-minute video. Hair love.

• • •

IN MY EARLY twenties, I moved to Chicago and cut my hair Harry Potter short. A Texas girl's rebellion. It's very popular to get a new hair style after a break up, and I visualized myself as breaking up with Texas' brand of shiny femininity: the cheerleader aesthetic; the thin body, big boobs, full-hair mandate. My boy-wizard haircut was a quiet, personal fuck-off to beauty ideals that strangled me and my mother. It didn't cure my self-loathing to watch five inches of hair fall around me on the stylist's floor. But those scissors snip-snipping around the base of my neck, at my ears, by my temples? They sounded like liberation. The ticks of a combination lock on a safe about spring open. They sounded like choice. They felt like freedom.

I could choose any length I wanted. I could choose my own standards. I could build a new altar to kneel before. I could play with what it meant to be a woman and a daughter. I could invent a new vocabulary for beauty that included short brown hair. A definition that included me.

• • •

I LONGED TO know my mother's story, the spark that ignited her life-long hair battle. I knew she'd always wished for long, straight hair, a wish thwarted every day by the relentless Louisiana humidity that ensnared her thick curls. I know her mother cared about appearances—selecting the proper salad fork, earning perfect grades, joining the country club, and pledging the right sorority. I know her mother compared her to her older sister all her life, and my mom never believed she measured up. But there are gaps in her story, gaps where there should have been a narrative stitched with love. I want to ask what she felt like at age four, age eleven, age seventeen—when she stood in the mirror and did her hair before the bell rang at St. Joseph's Academy. Did someone make fun of her? Was it simply the burden of living in the shadow of a perfect sister? Wasn't she proud when she teased her hair

into a flawless bouffant in 1963?

I don't know the story to fill in the gaps, but I know what's missing was tenderness and celebration.

Someone should have taught her what it means to be adored. Someone should have made a shrine to her hair.

• • •

WHEN I WAS admitted to the hospital with contractions, my three best friends flocked to my bedside to help me and my husband welcome my daughter. They cracked jokes and sang along to my playlist. They brought my husband pork bao for dinner. They slept on plastic couches in the lobby while we waited for the Pitocin to work its magic. After midnight, I developed a fever and our daughter's heartbeat dropped, so my OB prepped me for a C-section. It was 4:00 a.m., and the epidural had long worn off. The pain roaring through my body felt like it would split me open lengthwise.

As my husband pulled on the blue surgical scrubs, I lay on my side, breathing in jagged spurts. My friend Kara spread my hair out on the pillow behind me and began brushing. Scalp to tip. Her steady, gentle hand moving along my hair invited me into my motherhood. The motherhood of quiet celebration, of gentle hair brushes, of honoring pain and the past and bodies and hearts. She brushed my hair until they wheeled me away for my C-section and where I would welcome my daughter into the world.

• • •

MY DAUGHTER WAS born with eyes as blue as the ocean teeming to the shore from a clear horizon. The eyes of my father and my husband's grandfather. By the time she was two, her hair had grown into wheat-colored ringlets—if you pulled them straight and then let go, they sprang back into their coils. *Boing!* Everyone commented. Those curls! I would kill for those curls! You're so lucky! You can *never* cut her hair!

I've always loved her hair and those exquisite and unexpected blue eyes that peer up at us, her two brown-eyed parents. When her hair is strewn across her pillow at bedtime, I touch it gently, holding the curls between my fingers like fine and fragile gems.

Since she was three years old, she's wanted to do her own hair, so I stepped aside. I still offer to brush it any time she wants. Every Mother's Day she gives me a handwritten coupon: *One free pass to do my hair whenever you want.* She allows me into the bathroom with her to blow dry or straighten her hair three or four times a year. The bathroom is cramped, there are toothpaste stains on the rim of the sink, the baseboards are matted with stray hairs, and still, these occasions feels like a sacrament. I touch her hair and feel the grace that has allowed me into the room with her to perform this sacred duty: by honoring her with tender brush strokes; by letting her tell me how she wants it done; by serving her with my hands and my labor. Some holy moments happen next to a leaky toilet.

When she was ten-years-old, my daughter wanted to chop off her hair. Twelve inches. A full foot. All those gorgeous waves of hair, all that girl-ness, and that her-ness. I stalled for a few days, insisting that she take the time to be certain about this drastic move. Really I stalled because I was afraid of how it would look and feel and how much I would miss that foot of hair and the version of my daughter I'd been looking at and adoring for most of her life. Two days, three days, four days. She never wavered, so I made the appointment. At the salon, I retreated to the waiting area so she could have her moment—her voice, her heart, her hair—with John, the bleach-blonde hairdresser with striped pencil-leg pants who listened carefully and asked a dozen questions before he pulled his scissors out of the drawer.

• • •

THE THING ABOUT *Hair Love* that gets me is that there was another way. There was always another way. All that anger and frustration and pain and shame could have been turned in so many different directions. As the rage

rattled and shook the bathroom, Dad could have walked toward us. In the division of marital labor, he could have taken on my hair, relieving my mother of the burden.

My mother and I didn't have to choke on the hate and shame and self-loathing. We didn't have to turn that bathroom into another mother-daughter control story. We could have laughed. We could have panned out and looked at the ways in which we were drowning in culture's toxic norms, norms she learned partly from her own mother. We could have charted a new course, a slanted path with hair pin turns that carried us out of the thicket of blonde, long, silky, full, luscious, thick. We could have insisted on a different ending. We could have fought not for control but for connection, cooperation, collaboration. We could have brought some red-balloon-soaring, let's-celebrate energy to my scalp. We could have insisted on love. We could have.

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ON THE WHITE Ikea shelf above my desk, I've constructed a writing shrine. It was an assignment from a writing workshop I took with a teacher who used tarot cards as writing prompts and who earnestly referred to herself as a "witch." We were to create a shrine in our writing spaces. In the center of mine lies a nest of hair. My daughter's former ponytail. After the stylist snipped it off, the receptionist asked if I wanted to keep it. I nodded, and she gathered up the strands, bound them with a rubber band, and slipped them into a shopping bag. *Here you go, Mom.* As soon as we got home, I placed the hair on my shrine.

Why? My daughter wanted to know.

This is how I adore you, how I love you, and how I set you free. Me too, actually.

All at once? she asked.

Yes, I answered.

STEPHANIE ROGERS

FAT GIRL TERZANELLE

Fat girl, get up! It's time to fuck this party,
get out now. The boys all want to screw
your girls. Get up! It's time. Fuck this party

and fuck these boys who only want to do
your girls, not you. Just kidding. They want
to do you too. The boys all want to screw

you secretly. Let's go! Let's pull a stunt
like this: unbutton your shirt, watch them bang
your girls, not you. Just kidding. Boys want

to move against you all close up and hang
like blinking lights that twirl around the trees.
Like this: unbutton your shirt and watch it bang

against their faces, against their muscles, breeze
pushing back their hair. Put on a show
like blinking lights that twirl around the trees.

Flash them your giant tits before you go.
Fat girl, get up! It's time to fuck this party,
pull back your hair. Put on a show,
fat girl. Get up! It's time to fucking party.

FAT GIRL LIRA

Me? I hit so stay
if you want. You can run your hands along my skirt
and I'll kiss you the way
a mother smooches her boy on his head or his wart
even. You're like a wart

to me. I don't like the way
you look at me, you ogle me, make fun of the smart
girls. You're like the filet
I fried to a crisp. Your face? It fell apart
so I ate you after I charred

you like a corpse, okay?
(I tear the gristle from all my meat, imagine the flirt
of bees in the May
weather.) Whether you call me fat or heart-
less is fine. I'm not hurt

by your words but your eyes
that travel up the thick of my calves, ass, the shirt
where my tits display
a FAT AND PROUD logo. You go berserk
for it. You fucking jerk.



PAUL RIKER

POSITIVE VIBES

WE'RE DRIVING TO Chicago to see DuncanWithYou live and Dad stops because he says we have to get gas.

Mom says But Terry we're full up.

Dad says I need to stop anyways.

Mom says I just wanna make sure we're not late to this thing. You know, for Boops. She's really excited for this.

That's me.

Dad says Joanna don't start anything please.

Duncan's full name is Duncan Saint-John. Besides Trevor he's the funniest person I know. He makes the best videos, does the best streams, and has the best podcast, too. Duncan is twenty-six years old. He has a skinny face and wears these cool, circle glasses and has a mustache but he has it as a joke, kind of, but it still looks good. He also has this long wavy brown hair that he styles really nice, and also he always has on really neat clothes, like graphic t-shirts with random words on them, and then also he paints his nails, which I think is really cool, because it's not something that most guys do. He founded his channel eight years ago. He started out making videos where he'd play and review games, do video blogs, and stuff like that, but he did all of the voiceover and all of the editing and all of everything himself, and the videos got really really popular. Now he's branched out into different kinds of videos. He does unboxing videos, he does reviews of other things, like movies, and television shows, and even just random restaurants and stuff, and then he has the podcast which is like an advice show he

does once a week where sometimes he'll even interview people, like famous people, like actors and stuff. And also he has a bunch of his friends on his shows, like Morris, who's his best friend from high school and is a visual artist, and Sierra, who's his girlfriend and who has her own channel and is twenty-one and does cosplay and is really pretty. I wish I could do cosplay. But it's expensive, and we don't have as much money as we used to have, which even then wasn't all that much.

Dad finds a Shell station off the highway and parks, and before Mom can ask why he's parking he opens the door, gets out, says something I can't hear, then slams the door shut and goes in.

We're driving all the way from Joliet, which is south of Chicago and a little west. Dad can take me because he hasn't been working since his painting company closed. Mom had to take off work because it's a Wednesday and earlier in the week she kept saying how anxious she was about missing a shift. She had a few drinks before we left. I could tell Dad didn't like it but he didn't say anything to stop her. Now she's kind of loopy, not drunk, I know how she looks when she's drunk, she's just happy. She's feeling Positive Vibes.

That's Duncan's catchphrase. Positive Vibes. He isn't like other famous online people, who say racist things or ask fans for nudes or stuff like that. Duncan is really kind. To everyone. He's respectful and doesn't tolerate hate or negativity. I was watching an interview with him once, an interview on Seth Meyers, and one of the things he said is it's really important to him that people watch his videos and feel happy. That if he can make someone happy he's done his job.

I had heard of Duncan before but I didn't *really* start watching his videos until like two months ago, but I've gone through all of his content since. The videos, the podcasts, the interviews he's done. Everything.

Most of them more than once.

While we're waiting in the car, maybe five minutes or so have passed, Mom says You wanna listen to any music, Boops?

I don't really listen to music that much. Trevor made all the playlists

of all the music we'd listen to while driving around. He'd pick me up from school after his shift at the Long John Silver's but before he'd go to hang out with his other friends. He wasn't living at home at this point. He'd pick me up so he could hang out with me, or that's what he told me, at least. Those car rides were really fun, we'd make jokes, and sometimes we'd talk about bigger stuff like Trevor maybe moving to Colorado one day, and maybe taking me with him so we could live there together, brother and sister. He'd find all this cool-sounding electronic music, but not like thump-thump-thump electronic music, it was more chill sounding, more relaxing. Trevor has good taste in music, just like Duncan. Duncan's favorite band is LCD Soundsystem, which sounds made up, but they're actually really good. I sent a text message to Trevor asking if he's heard of them. He hasn't responded yet.

I bet he's in Colorado now. But I also bet he comes back soon.

Mom takes a big drink of the water bottle she brought along. I don't know if there's booze in it or if it's just water. I don't want to ask, because if it is booze, Mom will think I'm judging her, and I don't want to be negative like that. I sit and look out the car window. It's November, so even though it's pretty early it's dark. I can't see anything except fields and stuff, kind of like at home.

Mom takes another drink and says You excited?

I say yeah.

She says Good. I'm glad. I'm happy we could find tickets so last minute. They're not gonna be the best seats, though, just so you know.

I say that's fine.

She looks back at me and smiles.

She says It's gonna be really fun, Boops. And you're gonna try and ask a question, too, or something, right? Weren't you saying you wanted to ask a question?

So Duncan does a lot of live shows, because he's so popular. And every live show, at the end, he takes questions from the audience. I know this because there are some fan-shot videos of live shows online. Usually you

can only access recordings of the live shows if you donate to Duncan's Patreon page, but I don't have a credit card so I can't. Otherwise I would. But anyways you have to line up at one of the microphones that they set out and hope that you get the time to ask whatever your question is. You can ask about anything, but the only rule is that you need to keep it positive.

I say maybe.

She says What's it gonna be?

I say I don't know, even though I do.

She reaches back behind her seat and grabs my knee, sort of squeezes it. She smiles again. She says I love you, Boopie, and takes another drink of her water bottle and that's when Dad comes back. He has a cigarette in his mouth and is holding a Mountain Dew. Dad usually doesn't smoke, usually he just chews but every now and then when it's really late at night and I can't sleep or I'm staying up lurking on the Duncan forums or re-watching old DuncanWithYou vids I'll see Dad outside my bedroom window smoking a cigarette and looking down at the ground and not moving, like a statue.

Dad gets in the car and doesn't say anything to Mom, just lights his cigarette and cracks the window and takes a puff and we leave.

Mom and Dad are different than Rex and Diana. Rex and Diana are Duncan's mom and dad and they're the world's greatest parents. They've gotten their own following because Duncan has them on the channel and on the podcast all the time. Rex and Diana are around the same age as Mom and Dad, except a few years older. They had Duncan young, just like Mom and Dad had Trevor young. They come in for little segments, "Parent Corner," where Duncan will play new music or show Rex and Diana new games and film their reactions, and it's really really funny, because they're just these cute little old parents and they're so wholesome and kind. Rex used to be a math teacher, and Diana used to teach English. They worked at the same school, which is also the school Duncan went to. They're really important. Without them Duncan wouldn't even exist, after all.

They also are, and have always been, really supportive of Duncan and all of his stuff. Like when he decided not to go to college because he had just

started his channel and knew that that was what he wanted to do because it made him feel happy and made him feel positive, Rex and Diana were okay with it. They're not just parents, they're best friends, and they hold up Duncan and Duncan holds them up, too. But I don't really have that with Mom and Dad. Mom and Dad are just my mom and dad. There were times when me and them and Trevor would go and get ice cream, when we were really little, when Dad still had the painting company, when Mom wasn't at Applebee's yet, when I felt like we were all best friends. Hanging out at the table at the Dairy Queen and watching the cars drive by, Mom and Dad picking the sprinkles off of their sundaes and flicking them at each other and laughing and Trevor pumping his arm up and down trying to get the cars to honk and me laughing so much I almost dropped my vanilla-chocolate swirl. They never did honk. But it didn't matter. That wasn't the point.

The city comes up. More lanes get added to the highway and I look through the front window and I see it, all of the buildings and everything. The theater for the show is right downtown. I was watching Duncan's channel today, because I watch it every day, I pretty much have it pulled up on my computer all the time, and he was live streaming from the city, right by the river. In three days he has a live show in Milwaukee, and then after that he's in Minneapolis, and then other stops I've memorized. I like knowing his schedule. I like knowing where he goes. Sometimes I wonder if Trevor is in any of those places, but honestly, he's probably not. He said that, since he's eighteen now, he wants to move somewhere where he can be outdoors a lot. He can be outdoors here, but I guess he's talking about a different outdoors.

Since Trevor and I can't go on our drives anymore, and because I'm still in a brace from the accident, I've had a lot of time to learn everything about Duncan. Now I know that he grew up in the south suburbs, just like I did, except he grew up in Orland Park which is like twenty miles away and a lot nicer. I know where he lives now, too. I know it's in Chicago. I know it's in the Wicker Park neighborhood. I know the cross street is Paulina St and

Pierce Ave. I know he has a cat, and the cat's name is Samus, and I know that she's a calico cat. I know that his apartment has a spare bedroom where he does all of his recording and I know that he goes with Sierra to all of the cons for her cosplay stuff, like they go to Anime Expo and Gen Con and DragonCon and last month they were in Seattle for PAX West which seems like it'd be a lot of money but Sierra never mentions money. Neither does Duncan.

I also know about his older sister, Desiree, who had a heart condition and once when she and him were taking a hiking trip, before he even had a channel and when Desiree was still at college at U of I, her heart stopped and thirty minutes later she wasn't breathing and died. I only know that because on the fan forums there are some people who were friends with Duncan in high school who said they can remember it happening. But Duncan doesn't talk about it. Ever. Positive Vibes only.

The thing is, and what I didn't tell Mom, is that if I get to ask a question during the show, if I can get to the Q&A microphone, I'm going to ask about Desiree.

Even though it's against the rules.

But people have broken the rules before. In one of the fan-shot live shows I watched, I think it was from Orlando, there was a question asker who asked about Desiree. As soon as they started asking the question though the person helping by the microphone just shut the microphone off so that you couldn't hear the rest of the question, like as soon as the question asker said "Desiree" the microphone just went dead and they took the question asker away by the arm and then Duncan looked at the other microphone they had set up in the theater and took the next question.

I think Trevor would like it that I'm breaking the rules. Trevor broke the rules a lot. He usually did it in a fun way, like our car rides, which Mom and Dad didn't know about. I would tell them I had Drama Club after school, which I used to actually be in, but stopped being in this year. Sometimes the way Trevor would break the rules wouldn't be fun, I guess, but Trevor's not a burnout or anything. He's a positive person. And he's

gonna be back soon. So he can't be a burnout.

There's traffic. Dad's trying to change lanes, except there are a lot of cars, and while Dad is changing lanes a car pulls up really fast and Dad all of a sudden honks his horn for a long time. Mom turns to him and says Terry, please, but Dad doesn't say anything back. He just changes lanes and breathes through his nose.

Honestly when I think about it we've only gone downtown Chicago a few times as a whole family. Usually it's been when me and Trevor didn't have school, back when Dad could take off work whenever he wanted. It'd always be a Tuesday or a Thursday during the day, but it would still be really busy everywhere. We'd ride the Metra all the way north, which took like an hour, and Trevor and I would quote episodes of SpongeBob to each other and I'd watch him play Pokémon on his GBA. Then we'd get to the city and go to Garrett's and get a really big bag of popcorn and Trevor and I would eat it so fast our stomachs would hurt. One time we did one of the boat tours, the ones that go around the river. Dad got boat-sick though and had to puke in the bathroom in the cabin. We razzed him about that for a while, me and Trevor, and even Mom, Mom was cracking jokes at him, and at first Dad was kind of ornery, but on the car ride back he was laughing too, and telling Trevor that Trevor ate his popcorn so fast you'd think he was a squirrel. Probably those big buck teeth of yours, Dad said, and we all laughed at that, even Trevor. It's like what Duncan and Rex and Diana do. Exactly like that.

It's busy downtown. There are people crossing the street and people playing drums on street corners and a whole bunch of different things. Dad's looking for parking but all the parking is expensive, or at least that's what Mom says—twenty dollars, thirty dollars. She shakes her head as we keep passing garages. She slumps in her seat.

Mom says Well I guess I'll pick up more shifts. I'm already doing it for her hospital bills.

I had to go to the hospital. For the brace. After the accident.

Mom says Or I can get a second job, Terry. Could always do that.

Dad breathes through his nose again and finally pulls into a garage.

After Trevor stopped living at home it got kind of lonely. Mom was working, and Dad was on the computer looking for jobs. It's been quiet. It's weird. When we were younger, I'd sometimes watch Trevor play video games, like *Call of Duty* and stuff, which made a lot of noise and made the house feel less lonely, so I looked up videos of people playing *Call of Duty* online, to re-create that loudness. That led me to finding some other videos of other people playing other video games. And that's how I started watching Duncan.

But sometimes I still feel sort of lonely, especially at night, so I'll stay up until really early in the morning. Sometimes I won't even sleep, I'll just watch videos and also sometimes I'll go on the Duncan fan forums. I even made an account and asked a question once, but some guy told me that I didn't know anything and that I should Shut the fuck up and get off the forums you fucking fake fangirl bitch.

It's not worth it fighting with people like that, so I just lurk now. Besides, I'm going to be the one to ask Duncan a question. Not them.

The theater is as downtown as you can be, near the river and the overhead train tracks and the expensive clothing stores and the fast food places that are three stories high. It seems like almost everyone's here for Duncan. A few of them, the people around, look like they're in high school like I am, except if they are in high school, they're not freshmen like me, they're probably Trevor's age. The guys are all tall and have glasses and the girls are all really pretty and have dyed hair and have done their makeup like Sierra does it, so that it makes them look really attractive and old. All of them, the guys and the girls, are wearing shirts with POSITIVE VIBES on them, and hats with a drawing of Duncan's face that Morris did, and a whole bunch of other cool merch, bracelets and sweaters and I even see someone with a POSITIVE VIBES tattoo right on their arm, there forever.

I don't own any merch.

Once we get inside Mom says she has to pee, so I stand with Dad by the really fancy concession stand, which is fancier than any concession

stand I've ever seen. There's gold and red velvet all over the place. It's really nice. Dad asks me if I want anything to eat. I say no. He asks me if I want anything to drink. I say no.

He says I'm sorry I got frustrated on the drive here.

I say it's ok.

He says Things have just been different.

He looks off to the side, stares at the popcorn.

He says How's your neck feeling.

I get the brace off next week. It used to hurt a lot but it's better now. Good thing is that Trevor was fine. The injury I got was from the whiplash, and also because the tree we hit was on my side of the car, so it was extra worse for me. I don't remember much about it. The first thing I really remember after we crashed is being at the hospital and the nurses asking me who I was and who my parents were, and Trevor not being around anywhere, and not seeing Trevor again until a few days later, but again he was ok, and that's what's important.

Mom comes back. She says she wants a drink. Dad doesn't stop her.

Our seats are a few rows from the back of the theater, and we're on the end of the aisle. It goes Dad, then Mom, then me. The audience lights are still up when we get to our seats. The theater is just as nice as the lobby, with a lot of these fancy gold sculptures on the walls and fancy looking old-timey architecture everywhere. I didn't even realize there were theaters that looked like this anymore. It goes to show how famous Duncan really is.

Mom drinks her drink and turns to me and says Having fun, Boops? She smells like booze. I tell her yes but I'm actually feeling kind of nervous about seeing Duncan, in real life. It's weird. To know that the person you've spent so many hours with is going to be so close to you. To know that you know almost everything about him, and he doesn't know anything about you.

After I ask my question about Desiree I'll actually know everything. I'll really really know.

Right as Mom finishes her drink the audience lights go down. People

start cheering. I don't cheer because I'm so nervous now that everything is starting, and then Duncan's theme music plays, and first Morris comes on stage, and then Sierra comes on stage, and then at first it doesn't seem like it's actually him but yes it's him it's Duncan, Duncan is here, and everyone cheers extra loud and I cheer extra loud, too, like I don't even realize how loud I'm cheering, because there he is, he's right there, and he's here, and he's bowing to the crowd, and he's raising his arms above his head, and he's wearing the coolest blazer and has on the nicest shoes and he's walking to sit down at the table at the center of the stage and he's here, he's here, and I'm here, and we're here, and I wish Trevor was here, he would like this so much, he would be just as happy as I am.

Mom asks Dad to get her another drink, and he does.

After the applause finally stops Duncan and Morris and Sierra talk about Chicago. Duncan talks about how bad the traffic is, and how he's lived here his whole life (which he hasn't, but maybe he just made a mistake?) and he still hasn't gotten used to the fact that he can only go two miles in twenty minutes. Everyone laughs, and I laugh too because I get the joke but I don't know Chicago, so it would probably be funnier to someone who lives here. Dad comes back with Mom's drink and Mom says Thank you, Bubba Bear, and sticks her fingers in the drink and flicks some of it at him, which I haven't seen her do in a long time.

First, Duncan and Morris and Sierra do Duncan's Donuts, which is where Duncan reviews fast food chains. Because it's Chicago he does Portillo's. It's really funny. I look over and Mom is slouching in her chair and she's closing her eyes. She's drunk. Dad keeps looking at her, and then looking back at Duncan, and then breathing through his nose, which I can't hear, but I can see, like I can see the way his face moves and I know that's the way he's breathing, the way he breathes when he's being quiet and angry.

Dad used to be louder, when Trevor was around. He always got kind of mad at Trevor, but he especially got mad at him at the start of the summer after the painting company closed. Yelling, fighting, things like that. They got worse through the summer. Really worse.

But that isn't important right now.

Duncan is important right now. Positive Vibes are important right now.

But now I'm thinking back to two months ago, the day when Trevor picked me up from school in secret like he always did. We were driving around listening to music, but this time Trevor was driving a lot faster, running through red lights and cutting corners and stuff, and when he told jokes they weren't funny, they were weird and confusing. I asked him if he was high, because he looked like it, and smelled like it. I mean he usually smelled high but this time he *really* did, and he said How could you ask me that, Boopie?

I said I don't know.

He said That's not true, so don't fucking ask me that, I'm not high, I thought you were on my side.

I said I am.

He said This is why I moved out. No one is on my fucking side anymore. Not Dad, not Mom. I know you are, Boopie. Don't fucking act like you're not.

Then the accident happened.

So the show, after Duncan's Donuts Duncan invites Rex and Diana onstage to do Parent Corner, and everyone cheers, including me, but not including Mom or Dad. They start playing "Old Town Road" over the loudspeaker and Rex says Oh yeah, I heard this one in Jewel the other day, and the crowd laughs, because he's so wholesome, and Mom drops her drink and it spills on the person in front of us.

The person turns around. He's a guy about Trevor's age, and he has glasses and a big beard and he's wearing a POSITIVE VIBES shirt too. He kind of puts his hands up. Mom doesn't do anything.

The guys says What the fucking shit. He doesn't say this to Mom. He says it to me.

Then he turns to Dad and says You gonna do something about your kid.

Dad says I'm sorry about that but leave my daughter out of this, and he

doesn't get up, and he doesn't really yell, he just stays sitting.

The guy says If you want me to leave your daughter out of it tell her to not spill her shit on my head.

Dad says Excuse me.

The guy says If you want me to leave your crippled derelict daughter—

One of the stage assistants is setting up a GameCube for them to play a round of Blindfolded *Mario Kart*, and while they're doing that Dad reaches over Mom and reaches over me and his fists go flying and he hits the guy right in the face, really hard, so hard the guy's glasses fall off like in a cartoon. They're fighting, and the people all around us notice. It's loud.

And while all this is happening, happening right in front of me, I see Morris and Sierra and Duncan kind of look up. They don't stop the show, of course, but they look out, and they see everything, and Duncan sees everything, and I see him looking near the back and I can see him and I can see that he's looking at me. Maybe he doesn't know it. Maybe. But something about the way he's looking out lets me know that, no, he *does* see me, he *is* seeing me. He looks for a while, for five seconds, six seconds, seven, a long time, a really long time, right at me, right at *me*.

In the interview Duncan did on Seth Meyers Duncan doesn't talk about Desiree but he does talk about getting through tough times. Seth Meyers was talking to him about his whole attitude, about Positive Vibes, and he was talking to Duncan about how there are so many bad things in the world, and Seth Meyers said You know the world is awful, right? And then everyone laughed. But Duncan didn't laugh. He looked at Seth Meyers and he said Yeah, the world is bad, but us saying the world is bad isn't going to make the world better. What's going to make the world better is us doing what we can to help each other, and being optimistic even when it's hard, and loving life, because life is great, and we only get one of them, and, I don't know, Seth, do you want to go through life like that?

Seth Meyers didn't know what to say.

Dad keeps punching the guy even once he's on the ground. Even after security starts dragging Dad away Dad's still punching, and kicking, and

he's punching and kicking like he was when Trevor showed up to the house a few days after the accident. This was late at night, once I was out of the hospital. I was watching *Call of Duty* videos in my room, when I heard some hollering from the living room. It turned out Trevor had come back, and he and Dad were yelling at each other, louder than they'd ever yelled at each other before. I came out of my room and already I could smell how high Trevor was, and he said That was my fucking company you ran into the ground you fat fuck, and Dad said You didn't deserve it you ungrateful burnout, and then they started pushing each other and Mom said Stop fighting please stop fighting and they went from just pushing each other to Trevor punching Dad and Dad punching Trevor and then Trevor punched Dad so hard that he fell back through the Smart TV that he bought for Christmas and he cut himself up real bad and passed out. Mom screamed, and Trevor looked right at me and he said Come on Boopie let's go, and he held out his hand. When I didn't move he said it again, he said Come on, stop fucking around. I don't remember what I said, I'm trying to remember, I think I said something like Trevor, no, or Trevor, stop, and then after I said that his face changed. He looked at me like I was the one who punched him, like it was my fault. He looked so angry at me, me, the person who drove with him in the car, watched him play video games, ate ice cream and joked and laughed and laughed and laughed, and he looked at me like I was just some girl he didn't even know, and he looked like he was a completely different person, like he had changed, and I didn't know him at all.

But I do know him. I know he feels bad about what happened. I know he'd love the show, the show that's still going on even while security's taking Dad away, even while Mom's watching and looking confused and saying Hey, Terry, Terry, and even while I sit and look at Dad punching and kicking and punching and I stay in my seat, because there's nothing else I can do.

I know Trevor's either in Colorado or he's on his way home. He's coming home. He has to be coming home, right, isn't he coming home, isn't he, aren't you Trevor, Trevor, you have to come home. Trevor. You have to.

GABRIELLE GRACE HOGAN

COWS

The cows are always more beautiful in person.
Lit by the pink-orange sun leant into decadence,

a sky's brushstrokes gently jackknifed,
the sunfall clouds knocking together like knees.

I long to touch Texas where its shirt rides up.
As though of languid gouache the cows settle the landscape

against their silhouettes. Their fluttered long-lashed,
their patched faces, the dead way they don't watch

the cars amble by: I admire them. I drove all night to get to them.
How many songs have we left? I play Céline with enough softness

to not trouble these beasts who bumble into the lunar lacuna
of their farmsteads. A calf is lit by the yellowed moon; tonight

how many mouths are grazing? How many calves born
with stumbling legs & two heads to carry?

(How does a two-headed calf sleep—which face presses to the straw,
which dribbles milk down its chin as it peers endlessly up?)

The songs go in circles, the pasture positions itself
as the horizon's great green ocean. I am missing

you. Your voice on the telephone becomes a cow
rustling sleep from the yellow-lit town

while these Texas backroads swell & thin & swell again.
Are there twice as many stars in Brooklyn as here?

I long to touch Texas where its shirt rides up
& with stutter the Midwest becomes a bottle rolled by

wind, that brown glass's flat echo, that flat wind
through which the old song passes. It's here, right here,

where I start asking myself to quiet down.
Why are you gone? I don't know

whether this was a loss of love or a loss of self that love,
for all its effort, could not fill.



CHELSEA HARLAN

POEM FOR A FIELDMOUSE

Every night the cats catch a mouse
I rescue the mouse in a yogurt container,
take it outside, and let it go.
Every night for as long as I can remember
or at least as many make a pattern,
I rescue these mice and it's a wonder
I have so many yogurt containers
and that the cats never seem to understand
what's happening. I set the little guy down
by the woodpile tonight. He'll have the option
to seek out the shallots in the shed if he wants
or maybe find his family, I project sentimentally.
He didn't seem hurt so much as alarmed
and, you know, he looked sort of familiar.
Either I'm rescuing the same mouse every night
or he can't believe his own freedom either,
or both, lord help us, both things are true.



STEPHEN BROPHY

OF ALL THE FIRES THAT EVER BURNED

- *Winner: Montana Prize in Fiction* -

IRELAND, DECEMBER 1920

The city of Cork still smouldered two days after the last grenade was flung. Wind roused ash flakes from the mounds of blackened rubble and carried them like drifts of pale grey snow along the quays. The sky hunkered low, a shifting blanket of smoke, showing not so much as a rumour of sun. All around, people gathered to tally the damage to their stores, their city, their lives.

Lawrence found his boss, Bernie O' Callaghan, standing with a scarf fixed over his mouth against the charred air, staring mournfully down the length of St. Patrick's street. The city's main thoroughfare had collapsed in on itself. Some husks of buildings remained, but many more had spilled into the road, crumbled into their own islands of ruin.

"I've been down there, Lawrence," O' Callaghan said. "There's nothing left of it."

He looked back toward the patch of empty sky where his butcher shop had stood for the past forty-three years, the ash heap still smoking. "Not a solitary brick."

Lawrence had recently begun to serve his time as O' Callaghan's apprentice and so far was only trusted to sharpen his master's blades, clean the bone saw, and hose blood into the gutter. In between these chores he practiced his knife skills on the fatty gristle deemed unfit for sale. His wage

barely covered the price of the tram, but was subsidised with ribbons of offal which he took home swaddled in butcher's paper at the end of each day.

For three days he'd watched the smoke fill the sky. It passed over his cottage out in the bare winter countryside and the soot settled thickly on his windowsills. Even then he'd held the slim hope that the damage had been overblown, that the butcher shop wasn't among the wreckage, and his job would be waiting for him. On the tram that morning he'd overheard the accounts of the night of the attack from a couple who'd been caught in the melee. They described a pandemonium of bullets and flames and looted whiskey, the shrieking innocent running for shelter, British soldiers surging down from the northside hills burning everything in their path. There was more talk from across the carriage of a priest being beaten with the butt of a rifle, of firefighters under attack, their hoses being slashed as they attempted to save City Hall, of the ruins of St. Patrick's Street. Lawrence knew then that his hope was a foolish notion.

Across the bullet-pocked street from where he and O' Callaghan stood, the clean-up was underway. Men hefted wheelbarrows overhead to dump the remains of the city into the backs of lorries. Black plumes fanned out over the cold morning street. One of the men noticed O'Callaghan, had a word with his partner and made his way toward them with long, rangy strides. His face was powdered with soot. He wore a thick ginger moustache which curled in to scratch his bottom lip. When Lawrence caught sight of the man he balled his fists at his sides.

"Well, Tierney?" O' Callaghan said, reaching out for the man's hand.

"There'll be no end of blood spilled over this," Tierney told O'Callaghan, speaking with the conviction of a politician sealing a promise to a constituent. As if he alone shouldered the burden of paying back the British forces who burned his city. "I thought I'd seen the worst out of those bastards, but this is just beyond all measure."

"If I could get my hands on just one of them," O' Callaghan said, with his wet eyes gleaming.

"Don't you worry. Myself and the boys are putting things in place. This

will be paid back in full.”

Even with his two feet planted, Tierney carried an explosive energy. His entire body seemed to visibly pulse. He scanned the street and it did nothing to calm him. Then his eyes found Lawrence and he held him in his glare for a long, burning moment.

“This is my apprentice, Lawrence Duggan,” O’ Callaghan said. “Or at least, he was my apprentice.”

“Duggan?” Tierney said. “Is that what he told you? He was Sutton when I knew him, with a British spy for a father.”

Lawrence had lived in the shadow of the Sutton name all his life. Arthur Sutton had run off back to England while Lawrence was still in the womb, and as far as Lawrence was concerned, that’s where their ties were cut. Tierney stepped in close enough that Lawrence could see where the soot clogged his pores, where the smoke had burned tiny red fissures into the whites of his eyes.

“How is Arthur these days? Is he still in touch from across the water? Still keeping Churchill’s boys in the loop?” His consonants were punctuated now with a thin spray of spittle. “He’d be mighty proud to see what they’ve done here.”

“You know well enough I’ve never met that man.”

Lawrence noticed Tierney shift his weight onto his lead leg just in time to duck the punch that came sailing over his head. On pure instinct he swung his elbow. It met Tierney’s mouth with a wet snap and blood came spilling down his chin. Tierney let out a roar through a gap where his front tooth had been moments earlier. O’Callaghan caught a firm hold of him, gripping him in a bear hug.

“Maybe it’s time you weren’t here,” he told Lawrence.

Lawrence was inclined to agree. As he walked away, Tierney pointed after him and filled O’ Callaghan’s ear with hushed words that Lawrence had no desire to hear.

Lawrence refused to acknowledge Arthur Sutton as his father, but nobody seemed to pay that any mind. Least of all his own grandfather who

lived until Lawrence was nine and had never once spoken to him, but spoke openly in company about his British blood being a stain on the family. This talk followed Lawrence through school, too, echoing in the yard at break time, taunting him from the back of the classroom. He held out until age eleven, when he could listen no more. He cut short his education by running Ger Tierney's head into a blackboard. From time to time, word of Arthur came drifting back across the Irish Sea. He was known to walk the dockyards of Liverpool tapping up the immigrant Irish for information. Men swore blind they saw him in a London pub at a table with Winston Churchill himself. There had been talk in recent months that he was spotted boldly walking the streets of Cork in the colours of the British army. When Lawrence heard that, he wondered if after all these years he'd walk by Arthur like any other man in the crowd or recognise his face well enough to put a bullet in it.

When Lawrence arrived home, Claire was still curled under the blankets of their bed. The fire had waned to its dying embers. He lifted the lid from the cast-iron pot. With neither wage nor packages of offal coming in, the stew had already dwindled to almost nothing. He struck a match and re-lit the kindling underneath, rousing a low and fitful flame that tickled the belly of the pot. Then he dropped the last knob of butter in to fatten the broth for her. It melted in, glistening on the surface, the smell of it torturing his gut. He replaced the lid and joined her where she lay in the bed beneath one of the cottage's only two windows. The low winter sun fell over them, failing to warm their gaunt bodies. Lawrence rested his face against the mound of Claire's belly, feeling the tiny flutter kicks within.

"I don't think Diarmaid likes your stubble," she said, speaking from a half-sleep.

"Diarmaid?"

"Maybe. What do you think?"

"Diarmaid Duggan," Lawrence said. The name had a natural feel on his lips. "I could live with that."

She was growing weak, lethargic, and was never far from sleep. The

skin of her face was drawn taut to the bone. For a brief moment, her lips flirted with the idea of a smile, but faded before he could be sure. Her eyes fluttered shut and she began to lightly snore. The bulbous shape of her bump was completely at odds with her frail body. In the dull morning light, he watched it swell and shrink with each slow and shallow breath, and from it he heard the pained rumble of hunger. When he was sure she was fully asleep, he used his hunting knife to pry up the loose section of floorboard by the sink. He dug out the revolver, tucked it in his belt and replaced the floorboard before leaving the cottage.

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FROM HIS HIDING place behind Vagabond Rock, Lawrence heard the uproar of carriage wheels and horse hoofs drawing closer along the rut road. He drew the revolver from his belt and fixed the kerchief over his nose and mouth. His uncle had told him the stories of this place. Of highwaymen who ambushed carriages at gunpoint, robbed the farmers returning from the sale of their dairy at the Cork Butter Market, and clambered up the rock face into a dense labyrinth of tangled trails that only they knew, their pockets jingling with coins. The tales had always been imbued with a kind of Old West romance, and even the word vagabond itself held a certain roguish appeal to young Lawrence. But with his back pressed to the rock now, he felt nothing but sweat and hunger and a creeping guilt for the crime he had yet to commit.

The trail the carriages travelled on cut through the country here like a wound in the earth, the mud frozen to a hard crust, even the midday sun lacking the heat to thaw it. In the river on the far side, bream could be seen flitting through the shallows, darting brightly between the bedrocks and the reeds. The forest loomed over him above the rock face. From dense bracken, a stand of oak trees sprouted, vines woven about their brutish trunks, their leaves drooping like dog's tongues. Light fell through the canopy of leaves, hitting the trail in bright shards like something shattered in the mud.

He held his ground until the clatter of hoofs rumbled the earth he stood on, until the carriage was close enough that he heard the whistling of a thin, meandering tune. Then, at the very last moment, he stepped out into the dirt road and levelled his weapon on the oncoming carriage. His arm was taut before him, corded with lean muscle. Everything about him had grown lean. His trousers sagged at the hips and a dull ache of hunger tore constantly at his stomach. The rider tugged at the reins, yielding his horse. He was a well-fed man of advancing years, stooped forward with his legs dangling off the front of the carriage, his elbows resting across his thighs. He appeared impatient with the interruption to his day.

The carriage was no more than an open trailer of pine boards with two casks standing upright in its bed. With the revolver trained on the old man, Lawrence rounded the nearside of the trailer and tested the weight of one of the casks. It was empty.

“Good to see the market is still open,” he said. “Empty your pockets.”

“I will not,” said the old man, his elbows rested yet on his thighs, still as stone.

“Are your eyes giving you trouble, old man?” Lawrence waved the gun in the air, as though the man might have missed it, or somehow overlooked its significance.

“I see quite clearly.”

“Empty your pockets then.”

In agitation Lawrence thumbed away the sweaty tendrils of hair that hung over his eyes.

“Good Jesus,” said the old man, rearing up in his seat, his grey beard nestled against his chest, “you’re the image of him.”

Lawrence felt the colour drain from his face like a receding tide. He squinted at the old man, hoping to dredge up some hint of recognition or memory. The man’s wind-brightened ears jutted out from under a muddled tweed flat cap. The features of his face were mostly lost to a grey tangle of beard that climbed high on his cheekbones. He wore a black overcoat draped across his shoulders like a cape, hanging to the backs of his calves.

None of it brought anyone to mind.

The old man announced himself as Mick Kennedy, to little reaction.

"You're the image of a man I knew a long time ago," Kennedy said, "an Arthur Sutton."

"Never heard of him."

"Now that can't be true. He might as well be standing in front of me," Kennedy shook his head solemnly. "If he could see you now..."

Lawrence spat in the dirt. "That man you're talking about shipped guns into this country to arm the Brits against his own neighbours."

"I knew it," Kennedy said, a yellow smile showing through his beard. "Listen, young man, all that talk is nothing more than hearsay."

"I've heard enough people say it. Now hand over that money, or God forgive me, I will put this horse down."

He took hesitant aim at the horse's head.

A look of almost paternal disappointment flashed across Kennedy's face. "You'd want bullets for that kind of thing," he said.

Lawrence's eyes flitted towards the wheel of the revolver, the pinholes of light showing through the empty chambers.

"I told you," said Kennedy, "I see quite clearly."

"There's one in the chamber," Lawrence said, his voice faltering, almost tossing the end of the sentence away.

Kennedy smiled, tiny fissures rupturing the skin around his eyes, "I must play poker against you some day," he said. He reached calmly into his overcoat and produced a revolver of his own. "I have six bullets here if you'd like them."

With the gun reduced to an ornament in his hand, Lawrence let it fall to his side.

"It's a dark day when a man can't afford a couple of bullets," Kennedy said. "Look, here's what we'll do. Say sorry to the horse and we'll say no more about it."

There was something in the man's tone that assured Lawrence the man would put a bullet in him just to clear his path, and it would be no more of

an event to him than removing a downed tree from the trail. In fact, at the man's age, the tree might even be more of an inconvenience.

"Sorry," Lawrence said.

"Her name is Lucille."

Lawrence cut him a hard stare, but the gun barrel softened him.

"Sorry, Lucille."

The horse stared sullenly past him, shifting her hooves on the frosted earth.

Kennedy barked out a loud laugh, abrupt as a cough. He tucked his gun back into his overcoat and sat back looking Lawrence over, like a butcher deciding where to make the first cut. Lawrence didn't know whether to run away or hurl himself at him.

"If I put bullets in that thing," Kennedy eventually said, "could you hit anything with it?"

"I fought at the Kilpatrick ambush," Lawrence said, gathering all the air he could into his chest, artificially broadening his frame.

"I've seen you can hide behind a rock. It's the part that comes after that I'm asking about."

"I shot and killed a British soldier with this gun." It wasn't the first time he'd told this lie.

"That a fact?" said Kennedy, scratching at his beard. "Alright, well, why don't you call up to my house this evening then?"

"Why would I do that?"

"I'll pay you five pounds to find out."

• • •

THAT EVENING LAWRENCE traipsed over miles of winding boreens and rugged fields, his mind protesting every step. He'd made it a habit to walk away from any mention of his father, not towards it. Claire hadn't been too enthused with the proposal when he took it home either, but the kind of money on offer could soften the sting of the long winter ahead. When

he reached the address he'd been given, Kennedy met him at the gate. He took the revolver from Lawrence and fed bullets into it while they walked. They rounded a cowshed, ripe with a stench that the old man didn't seem to register. On the far side they came to a willow tree which stood alone on the lawn, overlooking acres of fields that ran down into the valley below under a sky still streaked with smoke from the city.

Kennedy handed the gun back and unsheathed a hunting knife from his belt. He scored the trunk of the tree with an X and led Lawrence twenty paces back across the lawn. Lawrence took a sidelong stance with his arm arrowed towards the tree, the weapon an extension of his flesh. He closed one eye to better sight the target and expelled a steady, gentle breath as he squeezed the trigger. The bullet plugged the lower left point of the X and splinters of bark showered the grass. Kennedy unfolded a five pound note from his shirt pocket. "You'll do fine," he said. "Now if you're going to work for me, it's best I know your name."

Lawrence told him.

Kennedy pressed the money into his palm. "That'll cover the first week, Lawrence."

"The first week of what?" Lawrence asked.

Kennedy's back was already turned. "Follow me," he said, strolling towards his house.

The house was set back from the road, at the end of a driveway of rutted earth. It was an imposing two-storey so full of windows that Lawrence couldn't figure what use a man might have for so many rooms. A timber porch stood out front, raised two steps off the grass with posts at the corners supporting a slated awning. Beneath the awning, wicker chairs sat at either side of a mustard yellow front door. Glancing in the parlour window, Lawrence judged that his own cottage might fit into the room twice over. The glass of the window had been blown in, and lay scattered across the carpet inside. Only tiny shards remained, clinging to the frame like vicious little teeth.

Kennedy motioned toward the armchair inside.

I was sitting in that chair last night when someone took a shot at me,” he said. “I fired back, and he ran off into the night.”

“Who was he?”

Kennedy shrugged, as casually as if someone had asked him the time and he didn’t have his pocket watch to hand.

“It’s no secret I have money,” he said. “Every now and then somebody gets desperate and decides they could put it to better use than me. I have no doubt he’ll be back. If not him, then somebody else. And to be honest, I’m getting too old for the excitement of it all.”

“So, you want me to guard your house?” said Lawrence.

“Correct.”

“And it doesn’t concern you that not six hours ago I had a gun pointed at your head? For all you know, it could have been me who shot your window in.”

“It seems unlikely, Lawrence. This man’s gun had bullets in it.”

Kennedy laughed loudly at his own joke. Lawrence turned to face the lawn where two crows pecked tenaciously at the soil in their hunt for worms. He turned Kennedy’s proposal over in his head, trying to figure the angles. No matter which way he looked at it he couldn’t force it to make sense.

“I don’t understand you,” he finally admitted.

“Luckily, that’s not a requirement of the position,” Kennedy said. “Look, the job pays well and I feel I owe you that much.”

“Owe me? I never laid eyes on you before today.”

“Maybe not you exactly, but I owe it to your father.”

“You can tell the crows all about it,” Lawrence said. “I’m going to go make myself familiar with the property.”

He stepped off the porch and struck out across the land. In the west, beyond the plumes of smoke, the sun was sinking in a pool of its own light. It seemed there was no end to the smoke. And this was only the smoke of one town. For as long as he could remember, the British had been burning towns, homes, farms. He couldn’t remember a time when the country hadn’t

been on fire. This was the life he knew – a life where the smoke might never clear. Not while men like Tierney and his IRA pals stood in the ashes of the city and called for blood.

He walked the lawn and the cow paths and the fields, away from the talk of his father—a man who aided the forces that invaded this land. Lawrence had made it his business to involve himself in the fight to free his country, to separate himself from his history and prove that he was his own man. His chance came when – through the careless talk of a neighbour—he had learned of a plot to ambush a convoy of British soldiers at a crossroads in the village of Kilpatrick. He volunteered to play his part, but they wouldn't have him. His blood was not to be trusted. So he wrote his own history. In the version he repeated to anyone who would listen, he fought bravely at Kilpatrick Cross.

He marched across Kennedy's lawn with that tainted blood swarming at his temples, violence roiling in his veins. He cast his eyes out over the dipping fields, praying for the thief to materialise from the long grass.

At the boundary wall he turned back on himself and was watching the evening shadows pour down the walls of the house when a flicker of movement in one of the top windows drew his eye – the silhouette of a woman. For a brief moment she stood motionless, watching him, then she whipped the curtains closed like she had been caught in some shameful act.

When he returned to the porch Kennedy had left and a pot of coffee sat steaming on the table beside an empty cup and two slices of soda bread lathered thick with butter. He devoured the first slice, then folded the other over on itself and wrapped it in the kerchief for Claire. His hunger sated, he settled into his post and found he couldn't keep his mind from converting his earnings into cuts of mutton and pounds of potatoes, ounces of salt and butter. He made out that if he stretched it out right, this one week's pay could keep the stew pot filled until the baby arrived.

Full dark soon fell. He sipped hot coffee and watched bats unfurl from their roosts high in the pines and cut their graceful arcs across the dark roof of the world. And in all that darkness, nothing else stirred.

• • •

Claire was sitting at the kitchen table, thumbing her rosary beads, when he arrived home. She looked like she hadn't slept any more than he had. She met his eyes, blessed herself and tucked the beads into the pocket of her cardigan.

"What did he want?"

"Security."

"Security from what?"

"He just wants me to watch his land."

"Five pounds is a lot to pay a man to watch the grass grow, Lawrence. What are you leaving out?"

"That it's five pounds a week."

This sum seemed to dilute her fears.

"Look, it's not dangerous," said Lawrence. "He's just an old man with more money than sense."

He unfolded the kerchief and slid the soda bread across the table. She pinched delicate little morsels off of it, making it last as long as she could. Her conviction seemed to wilt with each bite.

• • •

UNDER A BONE-WHITE moon, Lawrence sat again on Kennedy's porch watching the tree line. The wind seemed to rouse the fields to life. Tall grass wavered and twitched in the dark and he found his eye drawn every which way. Every time he thought he saw a solid shape, the wind took it, and it came to nothing. He got to thinking maybe Claire didn't have all that much to worry about. Maybe the whole job was some kind of ruse, and he had been hired to sit out here to protect an old man from the breeze. It occurred to him that there was one crucial part missing in all of this. He was chewing on this thought when the gun barrel pressed cold and hard into the back of his neck. His revolver sat on the table no more than a foot

from his hand, but it may as well have been on the far side of the Atlantic. He closed his eyes against the shot and saw Claire running her hand over her stomach, smiling down at the new life blooming within. A life he would never witness.

But the shot never came.

"We may have to renegotiate your wage," Kennedy said, pocketing his gun.

"Might have to double it if you're going to start pointing guns at me."

Kennedy settled into his wicker chair, took a pinch of tobacco from his pouch and tamped it into the bowl of his pipe with the pad of his thumb.

"What's the matter?" Lawrence said. "Don't you sleep?"

"I've heard it's a worthwhile pastime. Unfortunately, my mind likes to wait until dark to update me on its latest concerns." He lit the pipe and it crackled in the silence of the porch.

"I've been sitting out here thinking, myself," said Lawrence. "You know, I didn't see any bullet hole in that room last night. That window could have been blown in by just about anything."

Kennedy watched him through ribbons of rising blue smoke. When he smiled, the end of his beard rose from his chest.

"Are you married, Lawrence?"

"I am. She's not sure about you either. She doesn't understand what I'm doing here."

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her it was worth five pounds a week."

Kennedy nodded. "I find money will often explain what words fail to."

"It dulled her curiosity alright. But I'm not so sure about all of this myself."

Kennedy's face soured then, as if someone unseen had whispered bad news in his ear.

"In my experience most men like to think they would do whatever it takes to protect their wives," he said, "but sometimes things take a turn you just couldn't have seen coming."

He turned his full body towards Lawrence and opened his mouth to elaborate when his wife stepped out onto the porch and set a tray of coffee down on the table. At first her face appeared veiled in some form of a caul. Lawrence thought maybe it was a trick of the light, but when she straightened up he saw the full violence of her features. The left side of her face was almost translucent in the moonlight. The skin stretched so tight across her cheek that the bare bone almost showed through. Molten skin had poured down her face and pooled at the point of her chin, coalescing there in a grim mass of bright, webbed flesh. Her left eye was melted shut. She wore a wool hat pulled down as far as her one remaining eyebrow. Lawrence could see no evidence of hair peeking from underneath.

"Are you Arthur's boy?" she asked, her voice quivering like it was something she was trying out in public for the first time.

Lawrence's breath caught and whatever words he tried to say to her died meekly in his throat and he could only nod. She took his hand in hers and gently swept her thumb over his knuckles. When she parted her lips to say more a rivulet of saliva seeped from the limp corner of her mouth. The undamaged side of her face reddened at this. She bowed her head and disappeared back into the house, dragging her left leg in a painful-looking limp behind her.

Kennedy had taken a lantern down from a peg on the wall and was hunkered over it, teasing a flame to life. He blew out the match in his hand and picked the lantern up.

"Let's stretch our legs," he said. "Getting cold sitting out here."

It was no warmer in the fields. Lawrence walked with his chin tucked into the collar of his jacket. He couldn't shake what he had seen. Her face travelled with him through the furrows. They reached the boundary wall and followed it along a worn path that fell steeply into the valley below. Only the wind broke the silence between them, occasional gusts whipping the grass at their waists as they walked. At the bottom of the field Kennedy rounded on him, the lantern held at head height.

"I saw the way you looked at Olivia's face," he said. "I'm going to tell

you about it, so you understand something.”

Lawrence began to protest, but Kennedy hushed him with a wave of his free hand.

“She was asleep when the fire broke out,” Kennedy said. “One of my farmhands and I were mucking out the cowshed when we saw an orange glow in one of the upstairs windows of the house. The farmhand was a younger, fitter man than me and the moment he saw the flames he took off running. I’m ashamed to say I was frozen to the spot, like my feet had taken root in the dirt. By the time my mind could process the situation, he was already inside. I stood and watched the fire spreading, black smoke pouring out of the upstairs windows and there was no way I could move. My body just shut down.”

Lawrence saw that Kennedy was crying silently. Tears shimmered in the lantern light and he made no effort to disguise or remove them.

“That window up there,” Kennedy motioned back towards the house. “Top left. That’s where they appeared. He just flung her out into the night, and she fell to the earth with her head haloed in flames. As long as I live, I’ll never forget the screaming. The impact put her out, shattered her left hip too.”

“Jesus,” Lawrence said, “and what about him?”

Kennedy stood aside and lowered the lantern to his waist.

“He’s still here.”

In a patch of grass trimmed lower than the rest, speared into the ground, was a cross hewn of dark timber, with a brass plaque affixed to its centre. It stood knee-high, leaning slightly towards the two men, like a drunk with a secret. With a grunt, Kennedy lowered himself to a crouch before the cross, and the lantern’s light shimmered in fiery orange hues against the brass, illuminating the words etched there for Lawrence to read. There was neither epitaph nor date, only the name—Arthur Sutton.

“I’ve been trying to tell you your father was a good man,” said Kennedy. “He worked here on the farm with me and I can tell you for a certainty he never shipped any weapons. He loved this country. The worst thing he ever

brought into it was his accent. That's all that was needed to judge him."

The world pitched dizzily off kilter and Lawrence's place in it seemed to somehow shift, his history ruptured, irreconcilably altered now from the one that set him on the path to this place.

"I knew there was no appetite around here to hear anything good about Arthur," Kennedy continued. "The place had made its mind up about him by then. After the fire I didn't want to bury him in the cemetery up the hill and have IRA lads pissing on his grave, so we told nobody he was here that night. After a while people decided he ran off."

'But what about...' Lawrence searched, but he could find no end for his question. There were just too many.

"He told me when he first arrived, he'd been engaged to a woman from Blarney, but when her father found out, he ran him off. Told him no Englishman would ever lay a finger on his daughter. I don't believe Arthur knew your mother was pregnant. If he'd said anything, I would have come and found you."

He lay a hand on Lawrence's shoulder and Lawrence sank onto the boundary wall; his eyes fixed on his father's name. Kennedy sat beside him and allowed him the silence he needed. It was several minutes before Lawrence spoke.

"Nobody shot your window in, did they?" he said.

Kennedy shrugged. "Who knows? It could have been a bird," he said, settling himself alongside Lawrence on the wall. "My eyes aren't what they used to be."

Lawrence shook his head. He watched the wavering light flicker across the name that had been the cause of so much turmoil in his life and he didn't know how to hold this truth beside the one he had carried.

"What do you know about cattle?" Kennedy asked.

• • •

THE RISING SUN lit Lawrence's path home. Tufts of grass marked the centre

of the narrow breen. He walked with his chin tucked into his coat collar against the fine drizzle which was falling now across the valley. It was the first time he'd ever entertained the thought of following his father's path. The role Kennedy had offered as they sat on the boundary wall was the very one Arthur had been performing the night of the fire. Lawrence was having trouble casting the man he'd known of in this role. It was a truth that would take time to bed in.

He was so imbedded in this line of thinking that he failed to notice the man hunkered in the gateway of an old thatched cottage. It wasn't until the man stood out onto the road behind him and called his name that Lawrence knew he was there. The man's long grey coat and his flat cap faded into the dull drizzly surrounds. Almost everything about the man was grey, down to the barrel of his gun. It was only the red of Tierney's moustache that stood out against the monochrome grey palette of the morning. Tierney didn't speak a word. He fired only once and Lawrence stumbled back and slid down the garden wall of the cottage, the stonework streaked red behind him. In falling, he fumbled his own pistol from his coat pocket and dropped it into a puddle where it shimmered just out of reach. Above him Tierney squinted through the rain.

"Now your father has something new to report to the Crown," he said.

Lawrence parted his lips to answer and a viscous red mess welled from the darkness of his open throat. Despite his efforts to alter the course of their blood, this was the legacy his own son would live with. Lawrence pawed frantically where the bullet had ripped his throat, trying to call back all that tainted blood, to stop it from flowing on down the line. He slumped to his side on the cold wet ground and the last thing he saw in this world, high above him, was the eternal smoke of his burning country.



HANNAH DIERDORFF

FIRE MAP: CALIFORNIA, OREGON AND WASHINGTON

historic | histrionic | this season at least 40 people at least 7,000 structures at least five million acres at least |
initially | with more than | over a month | though it is now | ___% contained | hysteria: *originally a (supposed)*
physical disorder of women attributed to displacement or dysfunction of the uterus, characterized particularly
by a sensation of fullness in the abdomen and chest, with choking or breathlessness | research suggests |
smoke hazardous | hazard: *a gambling game complicated by a number of arbitrary rules* | air quality index: a
measure of how healthy, how clean | unclean: in Leviticus, anyone who touches a woman during her bleeding
| what do you call the red leaking out of me | red stains on the map | blooming like the black mold in the
corner of my ceiling | the key: red = active burning | brown = land burned since the beginning | of August
| my grandmother texts me: *I'm feeling | very sad tonight because | the three states I've lived in and loved | all*
my life are burning | so much loss of forest | people and animals | my father prays for his mother's peace |
pax americana a tax a pox an ax to tree and tree | hysterectomy | this excision | ordered by officials
after a gender reveal ignited four-foot-tall grass east of LA after | a mother lost her unborn child and her one-
year-old son trying to outrun the flames after | she stumbled toward the Columbia in the dark | her husband
holding her son | her body a season without water | warming

LENA CROWN

FATHER AS NATURAL DISASTER

- Winner: *Montana Prize in Nonfiction* -

MY EARLY YEARS smelled of eucalyptus. The trees enclosed my grade school in the Berkeley hills on all sides, and the products of their molting littered the cement schoolyard, pencil shavings of bark, slender leaves curved and tapered at the tips like goose feathers.

At the base of the dense grove across the street, the hillside so steep that to scale it would require scrambling on all fours, a white sign planted on wooden stakes read FIRE DANGER TODAY. Below was a rainbow of colorful segments, like a wheel of fortune sliced in half, green melting into yellow, boiling into red. A thin white needle pointed to one of five levels that began not at zero but at LOW, followed by MODERATE, HIGH, VERY HIGH, and EXTREME. From the backseat of my father's car on the way to school, I would crane my neck to see which segment the needle had chosen. It pointed to EXTREME so often I had trouble believing that every day, someone spun the wheel anew.

In 1991, half my elementary school had burned in the Tunnel Fire that razed Oakland and Berkeley, destroying almost three thousand of the homes that either clung to the slopes like koalas or thrust bravely into the air on stilts. Because both the eucalyptus bark and the aromatic oil stored in its leaves are highly flammable, the trees were largely blamed for the severity of the blaze. California is home to thousands of them—a century ago, in an ill-advised get-rich-quick scheme, state developers planted the invasive blue gum tree so aggressively that today, eucalyptus whispers over untold acres of woodland.

People say that eucalyptus smells like mint and honey. But to me, the fragrance that hung in the air was the tannic bite of a freshly snuffed match.

• • •

MY FATHER IS flint. Short and solid, an inverted triangle, chest muscles like two boulders from swimming every day.

My father is gasoline, salt-and-pepper hair slicked back smooth and wet like Frank Sinatra, gold mezuzah glinting at his neck, the tank always full, and don't you let it dip below the quarter tick, or else.

Growing up, my father taught me how to discern certain characteristics of a fire just by looking at it, details like the color and volume of smoke and flame, as well as its aftermath, its char patterns and heat shadows. He worked in fire, though he battled insurance companies, not flames. He used to bring me with him on his rounds to visit his clients, people who smiled at me with sad eyes as they stood before the scorched remains of their business or family home.

I struggled to explain my dad's job to my friends. Or to anyone, for that matter. The official title, "public adjuster," illuminated little. Finally, when I was ten, I found a shortcut in Pixar's *The Incredibles*. "You know the nasty bossman who orders Mr. Incredible to deny the nice old lady's insurance claim?" I'd say, waiting for the inevitable nod. "My dad fights those guys."

During peak fire season, in September and October, he left my mother, my brother and me in Oakland and drove down the coast to sell his services in areas where the land itself had sparked and caught. But chasing wildfire claims was competitive stuff, and he often came home with nothing to show for the trip. When he'd arrived at the scene, he told me, stooges from Greenspan—the gargantuan company my dad had once worked for, an emotionless machine, if a well-oiled one—were already promising the client the moon, and my dad, with his one-man operation from his desk outside my bedroom door, could offer only himself. Afterwards, he would brood for weeks, traipsing around the house, slamming doors behind him until

he ran out of fuel.

• • •

DURING CALIFORNIA'S GREAT Camp Fire of 2018, I was living in St. Louis, where I'd attended university. I returned home for the winter holidays just a month after the blaze had finally abated. Rain showers had wrung the ash from the clouds, and the air smelled shamelessly clean.

On the last day of the year, I gazed out the passenger-side window at the desiccated moonscape of the coastline as my college friend navigated us toward Santa Barbara for a New Year's Eve party. Huge swathes of hillside were charred black. From a distance, bushes looked like bushes, but as we drew closer, thickets fractured into bunches of blackened twigs, like skeletons of grape clusters.

We drove by a burned-out church, the first sign of human habitation in miles. My friend glanced over and said, "Whaddaya know. A little piece of St. Louis."

I frowned, but I knew what he meant. In St. Louis, destruction—at least the kind scabbed on the surface of the city—almost always involved man-made objects. Disaster looked like abandoned brick factories and cars smoking on the shoulder and the personal effects of an evicted tenant heaped on the sidewalk: dressers and clothes and books and strollers and coffee mugs and all the minutiae of a life which, when piled randomly on the asphalt, looked like trash.

I fidgeted in the passenger seat. Branches scattered the shoulder, even when no trees stood beside them, and where there were trees, I spotted raw, red blisters on their flanks, as though fresh scars had split. Dead cacti—not black at all, but pale ivory—lay in small piles in the brush like lost teeth. I recalled a poem by Natalie Scenters-Zapico, "The City Is a Body Broken." I turned her question over in my head. *Which of us has become the natural disaster?*

• • •

WHEN IT WAS my dad's turn to drive me to or from school, if we happened to pass the carcass of a burned building, he'd slow the car to a crawl and lean over to squint out the window at the wreckage, murmuring a rapid-fire diagnosis, equal parts admiring and grave. "Look at that. Kitchen fire; major smoke damage. Mm-hmm. That right there is a million-dollar loss." Sometimes he'd jot down the address in his little black book.

"Loss" was a countable noun in his language. A loss was something you could look at, something you could drive toward and past; a heap of singed objects, or, depending on the duration and ferocity of the fire, a collection of absence. Loss was a place. When my dad was trolling for new business, he'd snatch his keys off the hook in the pantry and breeze out the door, tossing over his shoulder, "Gotta visit a potential loss over in Berkeley." The loss had, of course, already happened; what was "potential" was whether or not that loss would belong to him.

I still remember the thrill of these fire tours—a house might look perfectly normal at its face, but after the car crept forward a few yards, I'd see its flank flayed open, innards like gristle chewed up and spat back out, a mess of crumbling plaster and jagged beams so deeply black it was as though the house's viscera were coated in a thick layer of paint.

I could never look as long as he wanted to. "Dad," I'd whine. "I'm going to be late."

• • •

ONE AFTERNOON, I walked out of my apartment for work and into a tornado funnel of black smoke swirling over South St. Louis. On the highway, I took breaks from watching the road to gape at the source: a warehouse the length of a city block engulfed in flames, roiling just beyond the railing of the overpass. News helicopters circled. The fire lasted for almost twenty-four

hours, and the smoke even longer.

I guessed correctly that the cause was electrical—it was a cold, clammy day, and the building was commercial. Electrical fires were common in the city. No matter what neighborhood you moved into, you knew the building probably wouldn't be up to code, because there was no code, or at least no consequences for disobeying it. We all had our horror stories. (My personal favorite was the waterlogged chunk of bathroom ceiling that fell into my bathtub one day, where it sat for three weeks before my landlord finally sent someone to patch it up, only to have the exact same thing happen in the bathroom down the hall a few days later.) St. Louis was an old city, and an insolvent one, so many of the buildings—though quaint and nostalgic from the outside—were sick on the inside, a mess of faulty wiring and rusted pipes and lead paint, their foundations eaten away by systemic racism, housing discrimination, graft, neglect. The warehouse had begun as a classic case: the building was nearly a hundred years old; the basement, where the fire started, had no sprinklers. Firefighters at the scene became especially concerned, though, when they learned that the warehouse contained a stockpile of more than 150,000 candles made of solid citronella, an essential oil not unlike the one stored in eucalyptus leaves.

Passing the inferno on the highway, I'd assumed the fire was electrical by a process of elimination: to my knowledge, St. Louis didn't have wildfires. To me, wild meant natural, biological. Without the excuse of a flammable canopy or the dryness of late summer heat, it often felt easier to see the man-madness of fire in my new home, the hand guiding the match. But Merriam-Webster's definition of the word "wildfire"—"a sweeping and destructive conflagration, especially in a wilderness"—makes no mention of its cause.

Fabricated or not, we reacted the same way, Californians and St. Louisans both: once you'd nested in kindling, you could take steps to stave off disaster on your own, like not using the microwave at the same time as the toaster, but there was nothing really to do but sign the lease, spin the wheel of fortune every day and hope the friction of the needle didn't

produce a spark. Or else become people like my father, who made their living in the ash, who promised to make you a phoenix.

• • •

ON MY DAD'S fire tours, I pretended to resent his disregard for my little-kid schedule, for the sluggish slither of the car as I sulked in the backseat, but I secretly liked that I was the only one in our family who learned the vocabulary of combustion, the language of aftermath. It meant my father brought his ambitions and successes and failures to me first.

He admitted to me once that many people found his line of work exploitative. It was true that he profited from the settlements he reached with his clients' insurance companies, even though the payments he helped broker were often tens of thousands of dollars greater than what the companies originally proffered. I didn't think he was doing a bad thing—I saw the way he cared for his clients, learning every family member by name, taking their panicked calls early in the morning and late at night, walking them through the same bureaucratic labyrinth again and again. But I felt a burgeoning discomfort as I got older and realized that when my dad's work was going well—meaning any time he was busy—it meant California was burning.

• • •

On the day the warehouse went up in smoke, when I walked out the door of my apartment and saw the black tornado, my first instinct was to tell my father.

After I got my first cell phone as a teenager, if I passed a burning building or found a fresh loss, I'd call my dad's mobile and rush to the nearest street sign to plot my coordinates. He received tips like these from his network of allies and contractors and even competitors—like his younger brother, who made double my dad's salary working for Greenspan and occasionally ceded

smaller claims to him—but even so, I sometimes managed to beat everyone to the punch. I would listen for the faint scratching of his pen onto the mint green pages of his black leather book, imagining his car idling at a red light, his shoulder pressing the sleek silver plate of his Razr to his ear.

Even after I moved two thousand miles away, I continued to send him these bulletins. Sometimes they involved fire, sometimes merely in-progress construction or property that had been deserted in an interesting way. He'd reply something about the cost of repairs or the rotten siding or the Victorian windows, all original, and then he'd tell me he missed me.

Leaning over the wooden railing on my balcony, I pulled out my phone and snapped a picture, then several more, toggling with the zoom in an effort to give the shot a sense of scale. In the photo, the pillar of smoke blooms at its crown, mingling with the clouds.

• • •

In Elisa Gabbert's meditation on disaster, *The Unreality of Memory*, she writes, "I had an overwhelming desire for disaster stories, of a particular flavor... I felt addicted to disbelief—to the catharsis of reality denying my expectations, or verifying my worst fears, in spectacular fashion."

Growing up in California and coming of age in St. Louis, however, disaster didn't verify fear, and it definitely didn't deny expectation. In the former, destruction by wildfire was both spectacular and predictable; in the latter, misfortune was minute and mundane, lifeshards piled on the pavement.

Maybe that's just me. Maybe it's because in our house, my father's rampages were both daily and spectacular. I knew what would set him off because the catalysts were always the same—little things, like the pile of dirty clothes on the floor of my closet—but out of stubbornness, exhaustion or both, I didn't try too hard to avoid them. Sometimes I cowered. Sometimes I didn't, or I pretended not to. When I was feeling brave or reckless or just uncontrollably enraged, I played the steel to his flint, hammering at his

temper with clenched-fist determination. I still remember how my clothes looked littering the gravel path from my stoop to the street, damp and sad, like so many fallen flags. Some of my T-shirts snagged on my mother's rosebushes, and when I picked my way through the garden a few hours later, stuffing each item into a trash bag, I found tiny thorn-holes punched into the fabric. But like the piercings in the flesh of my earlobes, most of the holes closed over time.

After each of these episodes—sometimes after days had passed without speaking—he would reluctantly apologize, and I'd accept his apology, and we'd all agree that it couldn't happen again, not like that. We would do things differently. He would be less irrational, less explosive; I would be less messy, less a child. Then we'd re-enter the cycle refreshed, purged. For a little while, we could rebuild.

I suppose I did experience a sense of catharsis from these tiny apocalypses, but disbelief would have been a luxury. I was never surprised when normal turned tornado. Again and again, I was reminded that calm was flammable, that no matter how careful you were, at any moment, forces beyond your control could strike a match.

• • •

IN *THE INCREDIBLES*, after a tense meeting between Mr. Incredible and his boss at the insurance company, Mr. Incredible wraps his toaster-sized fist around the bossman's throat, the man's stubby arms and legs scrabbling like centipede tentacles, and hurls him headfirst through four walls.

We weren't the only recipients of my dad's rage. I've lost track of the apology emails I revised for him after an ill-advised eruption at a client or colleague. I edited his grammar and modified his word choice, but my real job was to excise all the equivocations, bending his sentences into the shape of real accountability, real regret.

I know my father does his best to help the fire victims he works with. In many ways, throughout my life he's been more available, committed,

and generous toward his clients than he ever was with us. I can see why the work agrees with him. My dad excels at aftermaths, where actualities replace hypotheticals, where restoration supplants prediction and prevention, where blame is moot. When he gets hired, the worst has already happened.

• • •

A FAMILY IS like any landscape. Ours burned, fizzled, and grew whole again in cycles, sometimes naturally, sometimes after a concerted effort. Physically removing myself from the landscape helped. Once I settled in St. Louis, our family continued to exist like one of Calvino's invisible cities, an abstract empire, a phantasm.

It wasn't until I'd been away from home for a few years that I realized disaster made me feel closer to my father. Ruin reminded me of him.

In "The City is a Body Broken," Scenters-Zapico performs an act of reciprocal cartography, mapping a relationship onto the terrain and the land onto love. The poem takes that old axiom, the one about how we're all a product of our environment, and ties a double knot. *Which of us has become the natural disaster?*

Like most everyone I know, these days I worry about how we've learned to live with calamity. Because we have learned, or at least we keep living. As Elisa Gabbert explained in an interview about her book on disaster, "We can't function while we're panicking, and adapting to horror brings our panic levels down. But it can work *too* well." When I read something like that, I can't help but feel a little grateful for whatever prevents me from becoming inured to devastation. For better *and* worse, my father tuned my ear to thunder and threat. He helped me notice aftermaths, to stay alert, to read the landscape for its fading scars. It gave us a place to meet, even if that place was loss. There, in the ash, was language; there was resignation, and rancor, and love.

...

WINDING THROUGH THE wake of the wildfires on my road trip along the coast, when I began to feel depressed by the lifelessness of the hills on my right, I'd turn my head away and gaze out at the ocean. The day was clear and blue. Along the horizon, a long silver slit of light like a wound. Or a seam, binding the sea to the sky.

I had to squint to see it, but in some places along the shoulder, there was already new growth. The baby grasses glowed emerald in the arid dirt, peach fuzz on bone.



KELLE GROOM

BLESSED ARE THE DEAD THAT THE RAIN RAINS ON

if someone could just explain this
instead of inventing new kinds of cars
or phones
tell me where are the dead &
every moment of their lives

is it static like a photograph
or are all those moments alive somewhere
& if they are alive how does the pain stop

or the kiss we give the dead
body gone
but love still here blown through open fingers into air

none of these tech guys or the physicists know
astronomers who keep finding new stars
whose light started toward us a million years ago
they've just found proof of the big bang

couldn't we stop tearing each other limb
from limb & try to recognize ourselves
in each other or maybe we can't stand
to see it clearly – all this light
then the body empty & underground

just the thought makes me panicked & claustrophobic
i like it up here but what is there to do
we didn't even see our factories melting
the North Pole until snow came
to Georgia & the polar bears had trouble finding ice.

TERESA MONTEIRO

FATHER TO SON

I said: Here is an egg
because I love you—
not a supermarket Grade A
large brown, but a perfect
quail egg. Even the shell (though
you'll throw it away) is beautiful—
your fingers around it, warm.

Every day I offered an egg,
or an olive, a jar of olives,
the whole olive grove
if you wanted. But
you feared the work.

Never trusting, you chose
the desert. You chose
a scorpion, a friend
who struck from behind.

Demanding a full belly
you wandered lean and
alert, looking for something
better, but alone, sometimes
meeting a snake.

You were unsurprised,
warned by its rattle,
and truly—it had no interest in you,
you who taste like nothing.



ED FALCO

FIVE MILLAT STORIES

MILLAT AT A FAMILY GATHERING AS A CHILD

Two uncles are on the back porch talking softly as a cloud of smoke floats around them. They're both smoking, one a pipe and the other cigarette after cigarette. Millat is seated inside the house, by a window that opens onto the porch. He's been punished and he's sitting quietly in the dark, his hands folded in his lap, dreaming and vaguely listening to his uncles, who don't know he's there, within earshot. For a long time they talk about cars, before the subject turns to football. It's a summer night and the cicadas are roaring, along with crickets, and from the pond down the hill comes the low croak of bullfrogs. The uncles' conversation turns to Millat's mother and an Italian boy she dated in high school. He was a football player, and they talk about a game in which he scored the winning touchdown. One uncle says to the other, referring to Millat's mother, "What's that girl got against white boys?" and they both laugh before the conversation moves on to other subjects. Millat doesn't remember how old he was at the time, but he already knew he wasn't a white boy. He'd learned that in school from kindergarten upward. It's the plural they used, "boys," that confused him for a moment, before he figured out that they meant the Italian boy and Millat's father. That's what sticks in his memory, that to his mother's brothers, his uncles in West Virginia, Italians weren't white either, just like him and his father.

Unpredictable, the things that stick in memory. He loved his uncles and as far as he could tell, they loved him, too.

He met her in 1969, on his 23rd birthday. These were the years right after college, when he lived in Brooklyn, in an apartment he shared with two musicians: Clark, who played tenor sax in The Buried Seed, a jazz ensemble; and Ursula, who played violin for the Brooklyn Philharmonia. Millat wore his hair long, for a time shoulder length with curls his various girlfriends uniformly commented on with mock jealousy. He still keeps a picture of himself from those days, in bell bottoms and a silky white top that looks more like a blouse than a shirt, with all that profusion of hair spilling over his shoulders. He finds it amusing to look at in the present moment, but back then it wasn't anything out of the ordinary, at least not in Brooklyn hanging around with musicians.

He met Maria through Ursula, at a club in the West Village where the Buried Seed was playing. Clark had just embarked on a slow, passionate solo, the wailing of his sax filling up the room. Maria was seated across from Ursula at a small round table, holding a drink in one hand and tapping her fingers on the tabletop with the other. She wore a fringed vest and a leather headband across her forehead. Millat was seated at the bar. When he looked her way, she smiled.

Millat thinks back to that moment now and then: Maria's smile in a crowded barroom, how that instant shaped all of his life going forward. He brought his drink to her table; she invited him to join her; he asked her out on a date the following weekend; they slept together two dates later; six months after that they were married; he took a job in the personnel department of an international corporation; they had their first child in 1973 and the second in 1975; they were married for 23 years, until they divorced in 1994, when Millat was 48 and Maria was in love with another man. After that he lived alone for two years, before meeting Stav, his Irish girlfriend whom he loves and whom he's been with ever since.

What he believes, what he feels, what he thinks he knows or doesn't know, every bit of him forged by choices made or refused, who he is, is who

he became once he stood up from that bar and crossed the room to Maria's table, all of it beginning with a smile in a crowded bar, accompanied by a long, aching saxophone solo.

Once, in the first few months after they met, they were lying side by side in bed holding hands, Maria on her belly, Millat on his back. They had just had sex and Millat saw a small bright ball of light rise up out of his chest and travel in a short arc to Maria, where it entered her through her back, between her shoulders. The memory is vivid. Now he believes he must have been dreaming, but in that moment it was real and even now he accepts the possibility that it happened just as he remembers.

At Stav's kitchen table, Millat thinks what a mystery it all is. It's early morning and he'll leave for work soon. He's wearing a tailored suit, his hair is cut neat and short, and he's gazing out an open window at a city street, seeing nothing: the city all around him hazy as a dream.

MILLAT'S GIRLS IN AN AUTUMN STORM

Long before the divorce, before the recriminations, the therapy, the lawyers, on a sunny October afternoon with a bank of slate storm clouds approaching in the distance, Millat's girls ran in circles as leaves fell like snow in fat gusts of wind: from the crown of a chestnut tree, the red, yellow, orange leaves rising and falling in sunlight, swirling over a green lawn as the girls with their children's yelp and howl snatched them from the air, running madly in circles, each wild with a spirit that filled them like ecstasy, spinning dervishes wheeling and running, leaves in their hands, in their hair, beneath their feet, everywhere under wind-stripped branches lashed by the coming storm.

This was early in the eighties, when the girls were still children. Two years apart: Julia, the older, named for Millat's mother; Ashley, the younger, named after Maria's sister. Maria, Millat's wife of twenty-three years.

That afternoon, the afternoon of the autumn storm, it was still a couple of decades before the divorce, something that seemed impossible at the time, that they should ever break up, Millat and Maria, she from an old-fashioned Italian family and right in the middle, three older brothers, one younger brother, and two younger sisters. Not a divorce in the whole, huge extended family. She was the wild one, Maria, marrying out of her Catholic faith, but not so wild she didn't insist Millat sign a prenuptial "declaration of promise," agreeing to raise the girls as Catholics, which was necessary back then to be married in the church. And it was fine with Millat. Still in their twenties, they had both, Millat and Maria, come of age in the era of the Vietnam war, of protests and counter-culture, of pot-smoking and promiscuity in the name of a coming millennium of love and peace—which of course never came. What came was a resurgent militarism and the long, steady shift of wealth and power into the hands of fewer and fewer; from pacifism to militarism; from "power to the people" to a government of, by, and for the rich. But that wasn't obvious then, when they were still young parents with two beautiful girls, Maria a stay-at-home mom, Millat a young man with a good job in the city, working in what was then called Personnel, before it became Human Resources.

What did Millat imagine back then would be his future? He didn't think about it much. He was too busy being a father and a husband in a time when those roles were still clearly defined. He made the money. Maria raised the girls. He assumed their personal wealth would grow; the girls would go to college and eventually marry; there would be grandchildren; they'd retire, he liked to dream, to a home near the ocean in coastal Georgia, where they went every summer for a two-week vacation. Something like that. If someone had asked him. Not Julia struggling with drugs, and Ashley suffering a bad marriage. Not Maria falling out of love with him and in love with another man. Not years of mutual misery before the final break. Maria keeping the house. Millat finding a place for himself hours away, where he lived a long time alone.

That October afternoon Millat could not have imagined such a future. Then there was only Millat and Maria on their doorstep, hand in hand, watching their girls snatching bright leaves out of the air in a wind storm. In that moment there was neither past or future, only their children in the wind and leaves, as happy as the human animal ever can be, and Millat and Maria with them.

He can still close his eyes and be there.

MILLAT IN THE MOUNTAINS WITH JULIA

She wants to know about her grandparents, who she never met and about whom little has been said; and why she was raised Catholic and not Muslim; and why Millat was never there for her as a child; and couldn't he see that his absence was the reason for her mother's affairs and eventually marrying that jackass Anthony, with his gold chains and tacky jewelry; and what could have been so important that he was never home for more than a few hours; and did he see or didn't he see how he had wrecked all their lives; and he was probably all that time having affairs of his own, cheating on his wife in the city, wasn't he, because he was a man and that's the way men were, all of them.

They're walking, Millat and his daughter Julia, along a mountain trail in rural North Carolina, where they left Julia's husband raging in an A-frame cabin, throwing things against the wall. Millat has come to take Julia away. He has learned through Maria that she and her husband are both addicts. Maria learned through a friend of Julia's, who was afraid for Julia's life, because Hal, Julia's husband, could be violent, and because she knew they were running out of money and drugs, and she feared where it was all heading; she feared for her friend and felt she had no choice but to call and explain because maybe they could help, as her parents. Millat and Maria were dumbfounded. Millat said it felt like someone had hit him in the face with a rock. Julia had just finished college and was supposed to start

grad school in the fall. She had been married to Hal for less than a year. The money Millat had sent to help them through the summer, after they moved to North Carolina where Hal was supposed to be looking for a job, was spent on drugs.

Millat wants to know how long it's been since Julia's eaten. She looks so thin it's frightening. Julia ignores him. She goes on with her litany of recriminations. Millat listens and says nothing. He lets her rage until the fight slowly ebbs to nothing and she's walking beside him crying silent tears. He puts his arm around her and she buries her head in his chest. She whispers, *Dad, take me away from here, please*. Millat takes her back to the city, where he's living with his Irish girlfriend, Stav. Julia stays with them a few terrible days where she's sick all the time before starting rehab. When she gets out of rehab she lasts only a few weeks before going back to Hal. After that, Millat won't see her again for two years.

What he remembers most vividly is this: on the ride back from North Carolina he stopped and bought her a meatball hero, his picky eater, the delicate child who had to be coaxed to eat at every meal—and she devoured the sandwich in a few bites, shoving it into her mouth like an animal.

His beautiful, brilliant child, who he loves beyond measure, starving.

MILLAT ON SUMMER VACATION

His girls have come to join him at the beach, where he's rented a house on the ocean with Stav and Stav's sister and brother-in-law and their three children, ages four, six, and ten. The girls have come with their families: Julia, his oldest, with her husband and one-year-old son, Karim, named for Millat's brother lost to a stroke; Ashley with her girlfriend and her girlfriend's two boys, ages nine and eleven. It's a big house, five bedrooms and bunk beds on the second floor, and still sometimes it feels to Millat, who lives in a one-bedroom apartment in Chelsea when he's not staying with Stav in her one-bedroom apartment in the Village—it feels like living in a bus

station. Kids are everywhere, getting lathered with sun screen, searching for towels, playing video games, watching cartoons, crying, screaming, yelling, demanding and pleading. To get away, Millat takes long walks late in the afternoon, returning in time for the dinner chaos. Often, when he's alone on the beach, Millat talks with Nasir, his youngest brother, drowned at seventeen. Nasir is always with him.

Late night is his favorite part of the day, after the kids are all sleeping and the adults still standing and not too exhausted are out on the deck, some with drinks in hand, talking softly among each other about their lives, their children, their shared pasts, their plans.

Millat is the old man of the group at 58. He drifts off at times watching the horizon, where the dark of the ocean meets the dark of the sky, where a streak of silent lightning lights up the dividing line, clouds above ocean below. The buzz of chatter around him, the occasional laughter, like a comforting shawl thrown over his shoulders. A cooling breeze comes in off the water. Stav is close by, the murmur of her voice keeps him from floating off to sleep. She covers his hand with her hand, interlocks her fingers. Ashley is telling a story about her girlfriend, how they met and fell in love, how she discovered who she really is, how happy she is, how much she's come to love the boys. Millat is listening though his eyes close now and then as he momentarily succumbs to sleep before rousing himself. He doesn't want to miss Ashley's telling, and he guesses she's more comfortable thinking he's half asleep, which, actually, he is. But he hears her. And Julia seated next to her, joining in with stories of her own, about her divorce, and meeting and marrying Ibrahim, about the birth of Karim, about rediscovering her Muslim faith. Ibrahim was also Millat's father's name, which is common enough it's not much of a coincidence, but it pleases Millat and the boy Nasir, who's out there on the horizon listening, the water his home, his element. Millat nods to Nasir, tells him he's sorry he wasn't there to save him from drowning. Nasir laughs, as if this is the most foolish thought ever. He tells Millat to be at peace, to be grateful he's here with his family. Millat agrees. Stav puts her arm around his shoulder and kisses him, a little

peck on the cheek. She begins telling a story about them, about their first meeting. He remembers and smiles. He rouses himself again and opens his arms to his family. I'm here, he tells them, meaning he's awake. And then he says it again, as much for himself as for the others. "I'm here," he says. "Go on. Tell the story."

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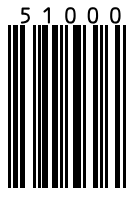


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ISBN 978-1-939717-43-6

US\$10.00

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