

red rock review

Spring 2021 • Issue Forty-Six



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Print copies of *Red Rock Review* may be ordered at \$13.00 per copy. Please visit our website at www.csn.edu/redrockreview for purchasing options.

Indexed by the AMERICAN HUMANITIES INDEX (Albany, NY: Whitston Publishing Company).

Distributed by the College of Southern Nevada, English Department, 6375 W Charleston Blvd, Las Vegas, Nevada 89146.

Cover art by Aaron Lelito
Cover design by Megan Padilla

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Printed in Canada

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Spring 2021 • Issue Forty-Six

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acknowledgments

The publication of *Red Rock Review* is made possible by the financial support given by our sponsoring school, the College of Southern Nevada. In particular, we thank Vartouhi Asherian, Interim Dean of the School of Arts and Letters, Patricia Charlton, Campus Provost / CSN Vice President Henderson Campus, and Mary Kaye Bailey, Vice President of Finance and Administration, for their efforts on our behalf.

The publication of *Red Rock Review* is also possible because of the generosity of the community members of Las Vegas and the arts organizations of Nevada. In accordance with the policies of the College of Southern Nevada, any content published by *Red Rock Review*, on its website and/or in publications online or in hard copy, are the views of the contributing authors and are not endorsed by the Board of Regents, the System or a university, state college, or community college within the System.

Finally, our deepest appreciation to CSN President Dr. Federico Zaragoza for his support of *Red Rock Review*.

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NATHAN BUCKINGHAM

Polyphemus and the Minotaur

MY MOM LEFT ME at the gas station when I was twelve—a peel of tires, a roar, and the tail end of the white Mustang shot away down the final stretch of dusty highway. Keith stood beside the U-Haul, scratching his fuzzy goatee as he watched the car brake lights dim.

I sat on the gas station curb. The raw waft of gasoline, usually sharp and pleasant, the trash crinkling across the oil-stained concrete, the ding-dong of the gas station door, releasing hairy-armed men in trucker hats, tired families toting snacks, a woman with curled blonde hair and blood-red lipstick, doppelganger of my mother, out beside me—all faded. Became ghosts, spectres. It was as if my mom, when she'd left, had ripped away the world's substance.

Keith's eyes met mine. He gestured with a thumb toward the U-Haul's cabin. I stood. My torn blue sneakers seemed too bright against the oily asphalt. Every step felt as if my foot might plunge through the ground, slip me down to Wonderland. Keith looped around the U-Haul's front and climbed up into the driver's seat. Once I reached the U-Haul, I took the passenger.

The engine rumbled, and we set off after her.

"Why did she leave?" I asked, buckling my seatbelt.

Keith glanced at me. "Adult stuff." My stepfather's hands, clenched around the wheel, were white.

Adult stuff. I flipped open the book I'd brought with me for the drive. It was the newest entry in my favorite fantasy series. Before the gas station, I'd been engrossed in British orphans, buttoned-up and solemn, fairies laughing at the edge of a pool, intriguing hints at darker things lurking just beyond garden bushes and low stone walls—but now, the words streamed past me, uncatchable as water.

“Don’t worry,” Keith said. “We’ll catch her.”

I hadn’t considered not catching her. Every detail—lurch, bump, kick in the road, the U-Haul’s throbbing engine, the mountains scraggled like a child’s drawing to the north-east, the steady stream of Keith’s body odor and cedarwood cologne, mixed with old leather and an onion tang from the open bag of Funyuns stuffed in the center console between us—became vivid, oversaturated.

I closed the book. “What kind of adult stuff?”

Keith scratched his goatee. “How do I put this? Sometimes, when you’ve been with someone for a long time, you get bored. It’s like reading a book over and over—you want to read something new, you know?”

I’d read the previous book in the series five times while waiting for the book on my lap to be released, but I nodded vigorously. I wanted him to understand I knew more about life than knights and dragons, that I could relate to adult stuff, too. Perhaps if I did, he wouldn’t disappear like my father had, or the other men that my mother cycled through our lives like so many dusty red rocks piled up alongside the Arizona highway.

“So I tried something new,” Keith said. The sun had tilted sideways until it rested against the horizon, a red font squiggled against the mountain tops like the heading to a final chapter. The light slanted across the bottom half of Keith’s face, shadowing his eyes. “When your mom found out, she didn’t like that.”

Outside, desert dirt and brush, devoid of cactus, wrinkled out to the mountains. A divergent reality uncoiled in my head: Mustang passenger seat, lazily combing through my book’s words, distant sound of Mom singing along to Green Day, hot air billowing in the open windows, tinged by nutty coconut from the air freshener she let me pick out at the car wash the day before, an ignorance of earthquakes.

A yearning erupted in me, so hot and powerful I nearly checked my forehead for a fever, and yet, when I glanced in the side mirror, searching for the gas station, to clutch at a remnant of reality, I saw night was slowly swallowing the highway behind us. We were racing the sunset, and we were losing.

ON OLIVER’S SEVENTH BIRTHDAY, I take him to the library. He trails me up the stone steps, through the whirring automatic doors that caress my neck with lukewarm air conditioning. Just the tip of his pale forehead and a sideways wave of blonde hair are visible above the book jammed against

his face, so close his glasses must nearly be squishing the letters. I'm not sure how he's even able to follow me.

"Oliver, try to keep up, buddy," I say.

"I'm keeping up just fine, Dad."

Inside, I toss my empty coffee cup in the trash can beside the doors. The library is nearly empty on a Wednesday morning—the far away shutter of a rolling cart on one of the upper floors is the only sound in the silence hanging like a held breath over the rows of books. A solitary librarian sits behind the long counter, her eyes roaming through *The Jungle* behind her silver-rimmed glasses. She sees us and smiles. I nod.

We cross the lobby, our shoes slapping out a loud echo on the polished tile, its surface shimmering so brightly I can see Oliver and I's reflections in it as we walk. When we reach the stairs—an l-shaped ripple of steps that extend four floors up—I say, "After we find the next book in your series, I figure we could get lunch at that noodle place? The one with the crab rangoons you like. Then maybe we could head to the store and you can pick out a new video game. Make the most of your birthday."

Oliver finally glances up from his book. His face splits in a wide grin, revealing the one black gap tucked like a gaping door in his mouth's corner from last week's soccer meet, the one that took his tooth. I am reminded of his dentist appointment on Monday, and anxiety lurches in me at my bank account balance. "That sounds great, Dad!"

Oliver's excitement cuts it away. Thoughts of cracking rangoons, dipping them in sweet-and-sour sauce, and sharing a fizzy soda with him all stir together in the pit of my stomach, become a warm soup that lends an amber tinge to the rest of the steps, numbs the burning in my calves. Then the coffee presses against my bladder, and the feeling recedes.

We reach the third floor. A bathroom sign glows bright red through a book to our right. I lead Oliver to it. "Do you need to go to the bathroom, buddy?"

Oliver flips a page. "No."

"Dad does. Wait here until I get back, okay?"

A two second pause.

"Oliver, I'm talking to you. Don't go anywhere."

He glances up, a frown on his face. "I heard you, Dad."

I head in, side-step around a wet floor sign standing like a yellow sentinel in the doorway. Claim a urinal. Unzip. While peeing, I stare at the book poster plastered on the white-washed wall in front of me. It's some

new young adult fantasy. Outside a maze, what must be the main character—a young boy—stands, bow in hand, at the tail-end of a line of other armored youths, all of them clutching their weapons with white-knuckled fingers, some cherub-cheeked and tiny, others with faces trimmed and hardened by puberty, but still not adults. The maze gates loom before them, giant-tall and grey, and beyond are ivy-drenched stone walls, dark and foreboding. The kids all look too eager to charge in, as if tackling the maze, being cut and wrapped in its vines, the dangers within its depths, will be something positive. As if they won't wish they hadn't entered, like everyone does eventually.

I zip up, pivot, and step forward. My foot slips on wet floor. Out and up. My vision tilts and my glasses jump away from my face. I whip backward. Hover, weightless, suspended, for an eternity, before the tile catches my back in a sharp embrace.

KEITH SAID NOTHING ELSE. In silence, we devoured miles. Road paint melted beneath our tires. When we billowed by the tiny green 'Welcome to Lake Havasu' sign and still hadn't seen the Mustang, Keith slapped the steering wheel. "Dammit, Brooke!"

I jumped. My heart thumped inside me, tight as a fist. The world shifted, slightly askew, and everything took on a sharper edge—the mountains loomed, eager to gnaw on a ring; *cheveyo* and *chupacabra* crouched along the highway, waiting for us to break down.

The U-Haul crested a hill, and orange lights pockmarked the landscape—ramble-shack houses tucked against brushy dunes, sloping trailers with metal sheet roofs peeking like tentative faces in cracked doors, the occasional dim neon curl of grocery store letters on concrete and brick.

And there, a hundred feet ahead, squatting on the right-hand side of Lake Havasu's first city intersection—devoid of cars, the single red light like the smoldering, distrustful eye of the cyclops from the *Odyssey*—was a gas station, two letters in their blue-stripe logo winked out and dark, caution-tape strung around one gas pump, dirty white light slivering through windows plastered in advertisements for adult beverages as foreign to me as the spicy, sing-song language of the *carnicera* workers Mom bought warm tortillas from for my breakfast burritos—one hand lifting coffee to her mouth in the morning, the other holding the burrito out, napkin-wrapped, steam wisping up the scent of eggs and sausage, the hint of a smile just visible behind her mug, but more apparent in her eyes.

Parked in front of the gas station was her Mustang. It squatted in the dirt like the bone-white carcass of a horse, an albino spectre that sometimes appeared flickering through the distant trees of a nightmare.

Keith veered into the spot beside her, threw the shift to park, and climbed out. I watched him walk to the gas station entrance, considered following him, but something about the store, its glass windows smudged with fingerprints, distorting the view, grey and silent, void parking lot, us the only customers, Mom creeping around inside, made me feel the same way I did after a horror movie—making my way through the house, turning lights on as I went, eyes alert for any flicker of motion, until I made it to my room, locked the door, and powered on my video game system, eager to plug myself into bandits, car races, and first person shooters so the fear could shrink small enough for me to sleep.

AFTER THE FIRST SHARP STAB, the pain recedes to a fuzzy tingling, then becomes a throbbing that slinks in slowly until it coils in my lower back. I sit up, run a hand across my head, searching for a cut, a lump, and feel nothing. I am fine, and yet, without my glasses, the world remains blurry—that vague lump with the globes must be the sink; those grey boulders to my right the stalls.

My hand skims cold tile, still slick and cool with the linger of soap and lemon from mopping, until they touch the metal frames. I stand and slip them on: my world is blurry and spiderwebbed with cracks. The lenses are broken.

I tuck them in my shirt pocket, stumble to the sink, wash my hands. Slowly, careful not to slip again, I make my way through the bathroom—the dim lighting reduces the walkway to a dusk-darkened alley. Outside, the world is a bookshelf when seen through teary eyes.

“Oliver?” I ask.

There’s no response.

BEFORE KEITH MADE IT TO THE GAS STATION DOOR, it burst open. Mom halted mid-step, half in, half out of the gas station. The light spilling out around her serrated her outline, darkened her features, rendering her and the cardboard box tucked under her arm, six glass bottles jutting out, into some kind of half-formed figure, a blonde-curl marionette, make-up like paint hastily smeared on its sanded face moments before show time.

The shouting started. Words snaked to me, burst against the U-Haul

windows, deadening the volume, and yet, the emotion attached to them still barreled in, full-force, lead weights knocking against me. I opened my book.

“Why would you leave him like—”

Maze. A mess of ivy. A boy holding a bow.

“Don’t tell me how to raise my son.”

Maze. The ivy shearing the boy’s arm.

“You call this raising? He’s sitting in the truck scared half to death, not knowing where you went the whole time, and then we find you buying beer—wait, you’ve already been drinking, haven’t you?”

“Stop talking.” Retreating steps, off-kilter. “Stop fucking talking. I’m done talking to you.” Cardboard carton thunked on top of the Mustang, jingle of keys. “My twelve-year old son is more man than you.”

Maze. The boy’s bow ripped from his hands.

“More man, huh?” Smugly: “Well, *she* was more woman than you.”

Engine roaring to life. Screaming. Voices climbing over each other like zombies scrambling for a fear-hunched form sitting atop a hill, one leg broken, waiting for the drag of dead fingers across the skin.

Keith ripped the U-Haul door open and climbed in. For a moment, his snarling face and messy facial hair edged him with fur, a wolf in flannel. He fumbled the keys into the ignition. “She’s been drinking. We’ll need to follow her.”

I said nothing, merely watched the sun wink out at the horizon.

He turned on the headlights, and we tore out of the parking lot, kept our eyes on the Mustang as it gunned down a road dotted with parked cars, swayed across lane lines, nearly clipped a stop sign, but veered at the last moment. We followed her like we had a chain clipped to her bumper, like we had no choice. She turned off the main road, down an empty, pitch-black side street. In the dark, giant metal behemoths lay along the side, twisted faces aimed at the sky, aluminum limbs splayed and broken, like fallen gods. When Keith flicked on the high beams, they became trailers.

The Mustang slowed to a crawl, headlights ballooning against a brick wall slashed in graffiti, red pentagrams—a fire circle in the woods, black forms dancing among the trees, a blade raised over bare skin.

Dead end. Steam wiped up from her engine, ours. When she pushed open the Mustang door, the tiny overhead light winked on, washed her and a bottle-strewn dashboard in orange, creviced with shadow, like a Jack-o’-Lantern glaring from the porch of a shuttered house.

Keith kicked open his door, then it was shut, and he was creeping toward her, arms thrust out, fingers wagging. Mom leaned in, back hunched and broken-looking, pointed a hooked finger. Their words were low babbling chants, too quiet to make out over the heater's incessant scream.

The maze. I closed my book and climbed out into the night. Shivered as if cold when their chanting swelled. Crossed around the hood, blocking the light from a high beam, sending my silhouette flickering across the Mustang, a roaming shadow eclipsing their twisting forms.

"You guys can stop now." Every bug splattered against the windshield, I realized, was a different story, all ending the same way. "Please." I raised my voice until it cracked. "Please!"

Their heads jerked my way.

"Hayden." The wolf waved a furry finger over my shoulder. "Get back in the cab."

The mannequin ducked into the car, popped out with a tiny white stick. Lighter sparked to life, flame swaying side-to-side as she tried to light it. "No, he can stay. I want him to hear how much of a piece of shit you are."

Her words washed over the wolf's back. He said, "Get back in the truck. Read your book."

The book was paper. Paper and glue, twined, banded, printed in a factory, unboxed and stocked on a bookstore shelf. I thought of taking the lighter, holding it under my book, watching the fire take hold at the glossy corner, beneath the author's name, letters and ink gnawing to harsh black smoke, wafting into my face until my throat dried and my nose felt stabbed by the hairy bees that sometimes ambled onto our apartment patio while I was reading, alighted on my fingers, feelers jerking, probing for a sip of my soda, and yet, never stung me.

Time must have skipped because the mannequin's face was an inch from mine, her eyes glossy and far-away, breath like stale bread, cigarette dangling from chapped lips, its giant red cherry glowing like a blood-moon on the night of the festival.

"Fucking monsters," she said, hesitated for a moment, as if to say something else, something hopefully like "sorry," but then she exploded away, shoved past the wolf, lurched around the Mustang, and threw herself through the scraggly bushes beside the brick wall—her spaghetti-strap shirt snagged on a branch, leaving behind a tiny red scrap of fabric—and disappeared into the darkness.

*

“OLIVER?” MY VOICE CRACKS. I try to force the smudges around me into sharp lines. I wander a catacomb of them, each the same: blurry rectangles that must be books tombed along tall grey shelves, whiteness barricading the ends, no Oliver—or anyone—in sight. The place feels drenched in quiet, the padding of my shoes on carpet the only beat in a silent song of steel shelves, stifled air. “Where are you?”

“Oliver?” I walk faster. Where would he have gone? Everything is grey—not even an exit sign’s splash of red breaks up the monotony. I see no dollop of blonde hair in the distance, no swirl of green shirt. Hear no crinkle of his turning pages. How far could he have gone?

Or was he taken.

Sweat bursts on my forehead. The world contracts until it is tight as my chest. If I lean in close enough to a shelf, plaques coalesce into tiny gold squares. They bookend each aisle, stamped with three-digit numbers, tiny black letters, telling nothing; they are obscure, cryptic maps directing me in circles.

I need to find someone. Anyone. A librarian wheeling a rolling cart. The front desk receptionist. But there is no one. I seem the last human adrift in a carcass of impenetrable, useless knowledge. My heart thumps, a roar in my ears. I don’t care anymore: I open my mouth to scream.

Motion from an aisle. A blur. Hands slap my side. “Gotcha!” Oliver yells, his shrill voice tinged by delight.

I wrap myself around him until he is engulfed, until my heart slows to something somewhat normal.

“You’re crushing my glasses.” His words whisper up, muffled from how his face is squished against my chest. I pull away.

His raised eyebrow is just clear enough to see. “Where are your glasses? And wow, you look scared.” His teeth flash. “I got you good, didn’t I!”

The words are wooden chunks in my mouth. “Yes, you did. And my glasses are broken. I slipped in the bathroom.”

“Oh.” He holds his tiny hand out to me. “Don’t worry, Dad, I’ll lead you out of here.”

I clasp it. He pulls me along, through the library, down the stairs, and out into the bright sunlight, a golden bath that, when it touches me, melts some cold, coiled thing that was buried down deep inside.

I MUST HAVE DRIFTED TO THE BOTTOM of some deep black pool because all I felt and saw were glimpses—a clawed grip on my shoulder, steering

me, heat, lurching motion, streetlights melting by, globes reduced to blurs, and tiny reflective road signs blooming into view before they, too, were gone—all of it subdued and faint and fabled.

“Maze,” I whispered to myself. Giggled.

Everything crystallized again when I stood before the faded blue door of a familiar house, one I hadn’t seen in a year or more, door swinging open, living room TV highlighting Maliya, the wolf’s daughter, her hair chopped short and piercing poked in the corner of her mouth, concern in her eyes, at the same time as the wolf’s rough breath blew against my ear. “I’m going out to find her. Get some sleep.”

Maliya brought me inside, planted me on the couch. “You want some hot cocoa?” She drifted to the kitchen, and, without waiting for an answer, came back and pressed a warm cup into my hands. She sank into the couch beside me, bare bicep, flesh and heat, digging into mine. “I was just about to watch this new horror movie.” Her hand drifted out, thumb on play button, pushed it, and the screen went, for a moment, black, before images blazed across.

I remember reaching out and touching her hand, surprised to feel skin.

Later, when the movie had ended, only Maliya’s snores disturbed the silence, and all that remained of my cocoa were cold dregs swirled in the bottom of the mug, I stood and made my way through the dark kitchen, the maze of black hallways, searching for a vaguely-remembered bedroom. I turned on no lights as I went.

GABE DURHAM

Dress-up

Board game night is for scheming and backstabbing, a relief from all this exhausting virtue. A little spontaneity obscures malicious intent, the way advertisers encourage podcasters to just have fun with it. We mistake our granddads' PTSD for an exemplar of serious adulthood to which we always fall short. The Mafia dressed nice but did bad stuff and our dumb baby brains love that. Once in a dream a deer charged me. While defending myself I kicked my partner in the actual leg. This is how fear reproduces. The inadvertent becomes the violent until the deer in the dream is me.

JESSICA KIM

Disappearing Act

In the morning we're found standing on the patio
by the seaside, summertime up to our waistlines.

This is where we begin, submerged in the first aphorism
of Hippocrates; yes my father is a physician

and no I do not harbor such ambitions. Greetings
morph themselves into sermons

and we are transported back to Sunday
afternoons. Picture me as a child, demented

chronographs jutting out of the asymmetric pockets
of my duffle coat. Time warps a curious presence.

We're learning how to vanish from this frame
of reference. There is a lineage

we have yet to uncover, some astrological coincidence
you cannot map out of the sky. The stars

blink in ciphers, we answer with morse-code
signals, mistaking planes for planets.

You bring out a telescope from the basement
and orient your eye towards something larger.

We learn to hide among the apparitions that hover
in the moonlight in this ghost town. Here,

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everyone aspires to be invisible without
knowing what they're hiding from.

Is this how you want to end up? You tell me not
to look for answers. You meant to say no.

It all ends with an anachronous projectile
gone awry. I am your next target.

SARAH CROWLEY CHESTNUT

Hawks and Pockets

For Lily at age 2

Your collection grows beside the dish
that holds keys and the chapstick I slip
into my pocket each morning: rocks,
plucked up by small fingers, scratched
free from dirt and grit, lifted in ecstatic fists.
Each stone dropped in your pocket—
quartz, granite, slate. Sandstone slippage,
time-shards and weight.

And because “r” is the hardest sound
to make, the rocks you take are sharp-eyed
birds with chiseled talons: “*Hawks!*”
you sing, and rise on thunderous wings,
powerful in your choosing, like that fearsome,
red-tailed being.

JOLENE NOLTE

Opa at Home

In memory of my paternal grandfather

One last time he inhaled, air rasping through his crowded corridors to his failing lungs, his head and renegade strand of hair jerked in the effort. Then—silence, stillness, head bowed like a child's, asleep at last in the car seat. Four years' battle ended there in the thick-knit fabric of his favorite chair, there with three generations to feel one last time the thickness, the weight of his sun-speckled hands.

CARY MANDEL

The Subjunctive Me

“No man should travel until he has learned the language of the country he visits, otherwise he voluntarily makes himself a great baby—so helpless and ridiculous.”

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

AT THIRTY-SEVEN YEARS OLD, I quit my job at the Brooklyn School of Languages and moved to Italy for a girl I barely knew. In Milan, I quickly learned that Italians don't introduce their significant others to the family unless it's serious. I assumed moving halfway across the world qualified. But six months later, Laura still hadn't told her parents about me.

There's an Italian saying, “*Moglie e buoi dei paesi tuoi*. Wives and cows from your own country.” Meaning, in matters of love and work, stick with your own kind. I never met Laura's ex, Fabrizio, but pictured him as a shirtless hunk on the cover of a romance novel. Anytime his name came up, Laura had to wrestle back tears. He was like a part of her family, and word on the street was that Laura's mom, Ornella, was trying to get them back together. Meanwhile, I wasn't invited to Christmas lunch. Instead, I stayed home, studied past participles, and cooked *latkes*.

Laura eventually told her mom about us, but thought it best to keep Franco, her father, in the dark. Ornella agreed, but within a week she had spilled the *fagiolis*. I was soon invited to their home for dinner. It would be a big family affair: Laura's uncle, aunt, cousin, her cousin's husband, and their three kids. Laura was the only one who spoke English. The week leading up to the big night I crammed Italian vocab from my Mead notebook, which also functioned as a shield to thwart conversation and conceal my desperate insecurity.

Laura and I made the thirty-minute drive to the suburb of Pozzuolo Martesana. As soon as I walked through the door, Laura's uncle, Beppe, embraced me. He was a handsome white-haired man whose smile radiated kindness. His wife, Nerina, was a well-pickled smoker who sounded like

Selma from the Italian version of *The Simpsons*. Their daughter, Marta, had deep-set hazel eyes and a Roman nose. Marta's husband, Alessandro, a bearded and rugged type, told me with pride how much he enjoyed riding his 'Arli Daveedsun.'

Ornella looked nothing like Laura. She resembled a roadrunner—a beautiful roadrunner, mind you—with thin lips, a long beak, and small, unblinking eyes. Franco, Laura's dad, had the same button nose and proud high cheekbones as my girlfriend, but was a full head shorter. His thick, stubby fingers grasped mine tightly as he looked coolly into my eyes. No smile. He gave off a Mussolini vibe.

"You are from America," Franco said in Italian. The room fell silent.

Unsure if it was a statement or a question, I broke into a feverish sweat—my body's way of informing my brain that I should be cautious. Like when old people with joint pain know in advance that a storm is coming. Speaking in sentences more Spanish than Italian, I said, "Yes. Well, I *have* born in Canada, but I *grow* in America."

"The wonderful US of A," said Franco. "We created the Colosseum, and your people...McDonalds."

"Dad!" scolded Laura.

Franco continued to interrogate, "You teach English?"

"Yes," I said.

"At a school?" he asked.

"No." I responded with one-word answers, recalling my mother's instructions at U.S. Customs when I was a kid and we were still undocumented immigrants.

Laura chimed in, "Dad, I already told you—"

"Let him speak for himself," her dad insisted.

"It's okay, babe," I reassured her. It was not okay.

"I teach *the* private lessons," I said, digging a lint-tunnel in my pocket.

"Why private?" Franco's questions were like short jabs to the dome.

Pop!

"No taxis," I said. Someone at the table chuckled at my mispronunciation of 'taxes.'

"Do you like teaching?" he asked. *Pop!*

"Yes. More *and* less," I answered.

"Why?" *Pop!*

"Enough, Franco," said Ornella. "Leave him alone."

"What? I can't ask the guy living in my daughter's house when he'll get

a real job?" *Pop! Pop! Pop!*

During the aperitif everyone sang Happy Birthday to a cute one-year-old named Giulia. Franco went into a butchered English rendition. I think for my sake.

"*Mantieni il tuo lavoro. Durante il giorno,*" I said, trying to lighten the mood. "Keep your job. During the day."

Crickets.

Was it because 'day job' didn't translate, or because I'd used the informal 'you?' Franco stared at me like I offered to piss in his soup. Virginia Woolf said humor is the first of the gifts to perish in a foreign tongue; mine certainly felt swollen in my mouth. I regretted not being smarter, more capable, and eloquent.

"Babe, are you alright?" Laura asked. "Your face is really red."

I smiled and blinked sweat droplets from my eyelashes into my *brodo*. The family didn't seem to notice. They were debating the comedic genius of a 1970s film character named Fantozzi—a dollar store Leslie Nielsen, from what I gathered. I stuffed wet sheets of prosciutto in my mouth so I wouldn't be asked to use it for speaking. I wished there were a kids' table.

Lapo—the eldest—was a lanky, timid child. His little brother, Nico, was all boy and the kind of handsome you know will lead to trouble. Giulia—the baby—was the only person at the table whose Italian was worse than mine. Barely. The two of us spent much of the evening babbling nonsense to each other.

Dinner was what you'd expect of a big Italian family meal—abundant food and wine, wild gesticulation, and everyone talking at once. What I didn't realize is that these dinners last longer than most government mandated quarantines. There's the *antipasto* (appetizer), the *primo* (pasta dish), the *secondo* (main course), the *dolce* (dessert), the *caffè* (espresso), and the *amazzacaffè* (alcoholic digestif; literally, 'coffee killer').

Franco shoved an overflowing shot of *grappa* into my hand. The syrupy liquid went down like kerosene. I tried not to make a face as I imagined how seamlessly Fabrizio once fit in. The evening finally came to an end at midnight, though their goodbyes lasted another twenty minutes. Ornella walked us to the door and went in for the standard double kiss—first the left cheek, *then* the right. I went the wrong way, kissing Laura's mother flush on the lips. She insisted we come back for dinner the following weekend. That's when it hit me. I'd have to do this again.

*

“WHY DO YOU ALWAYS LEAVE ME HANGING?” I asked Laura back in the car.

“You did great,” she said. “My family loves you. Especially my uncle.”

“He talked to me for two hours about some problem he has with his tooth or his face. I didn’t understand a fucking word. And you weren’t any help.”

“He has trigeminal neuralgia. Anyway, I’m telling you, it went great.”

“What about your dad?”

“My dad has a funny way of showing affection, but he means well. He said he’ll come by in a couple of days to fix our sink.”

“Great,” I said, mentally planning my absence. “Anyway, don’t you think a six-hour meal is a bit much?”

“That’s the Italian way,” she said. “It’s not like in America. Family is important to us.” As a Jew, I wanted to tell her that family was important to us too. We might not be able to stand each other, but we’re all about family. That didn’t mean I wanted to spend time with hers.

“Didn’t you pick up on my signals?” I asked.

She gave two rapid tongue clicks, Italian phonetics for, “Nope.”

“Really? I did like this like ten times.” I opened my eyes wide and smiled awkwardly.

“I thought you were just having fun,” she said.

“A blast. I lost like seven pounds of water weight.”

In my nervousness, I never considered how relieved Laura must have felt to finally reveal her dirty little secret. I was happy to ease her burden, but did I really want to endure more of those dinners, just to please her?

“In the future,” I said, “if one of us wants to get out of a situation, we’ll signal by squeezing the other’s index finger under the table. Let’s say, three times, like this,” I modeled: pulse, pulse, pulse. “That means abort. Immediately. Okay?”

LAURA SPENT A LOT OF TIME on the phone with her family. I managed to ignore the conversations, but the word *pisello* kept jumping out like the ping of an incoming text. *Pisello* means pea, as in the green vegetable, but colloquially, it means pee-pee, willy, or wiener. Whether I was studying my Italian conjugates or lesson planning for my dwindling number of ESL students, I constantly heard that word, *pisello*.

Cock-talk lingered throughout our apartment for weeks. It all centered around Lapo—Laura’s six-year-old cousin—and his oddly crooked penis. A urologist had discovered a cyst on the head of his member, ostensibly

causing the errant curvature. The cyst needed to be removed and as a precautionary measure, Lapo had to be circumcised. To my horror, Laura informed the entire family that her Jewish-American boyfriend was also part of that club.

“MOM, I DON’T KNOW,” Laura said. “It’s just a thing the Jews do.” She turned to me, “*Amore*, my mom wants to talk to you.” I shook my head vigorously. Laura shoved the phone into my hand and strode off to the kitchen.

“*Ciao, Ornella. Come stai?*” I said, Googling the word *bris* as sweat sprang from my armpits and crept down my sides. I tried my best to translate: “It is tradition. Ceremony on day eight of life of boy. Name is announced.” I tripped up on some words and decided to freestyle. “I don’t know much. There are blessings and food. We eat salmon with soft cheese on Jew donuts.”

“That’s very strange,” said Ornella. “You know we don’t do that here in Italy. The mutilation or the mixing of fish with cheese.”

I wanted to explain that food mixing was frowned upon in my tradition too. But I lacked the vocabulary. When Laura returned to the living room, I pleaded with facial acrobatics for her rescue. She ignored me and went about cleaning the apartment.

“Can you tell me more about the experience?” Ornella asked.

“No, I’m sorry. *No* remember event. I *am* only one week old.”

“Your Italian has gotten a lot worse,” she said. “Don’t you practice with Laura?”

“Your daughter only *speaking* with *my* in English.”

“That’s not true,” Laura yelled from the kitchen. “I speak to you in Italian all the time.” She marched into the living room, snatched the phone from my clammy hand and yelled at her mom for five minutes without taking a breath. Then she said “*Ciao*,” which means ‘Hello’ but also ‘Goodbye,’ nineteen times—I counted.

I WAS STUDYING VOCAB IN THE BEDROOM when Laura called to me, “*Amore?*” I kept flipping through my Mead notebook. It was filled with obscure Italian phrases—idioms, proverbs, and slang—that I rarely attempted aloud. Laura called me again, “*Amoooree?*” I held my breath. She walked into the room with the wireless extended. “It’s my aunt Nerina. She has a quick question.”

I made an aggressive X with my forearms.

“Babe...,” she said.

With the angriest face I could muster, I mouthed, *No, No, NO (!)*

“Babe.” Laura tossed me the phone and disappeared into the bathroom.

“*Ciao, Nerina,*” I said in my cheeriest tone. “*Come stai?*” Nerina dove right in. I wasn’t totally sure, but I believe she asked about my penile sensation.

“*Correntemente?*” I asked, which I thought meant ‘Currently,’ but have since learned is a false friend that actually means ‘Dexterously.’

“*Bravo,*” she said, which means ‘Good’ or ‘Good job,’ but is also a way of encouraging someone to continue.

“*Um, tutto bene.* All good,” I said.

She rambled on but I lost the thread. I was thinking about how much shit I was going to give Laura for leaving me to flounder, once again. My only saving grace was noting the inflection at the end of Nerina’s sentences. Those had to be questions. I’d then respond, “*Sì, sì, sì,*” regardless of content.

I heard a flush. Laura slid the bathroom door open and I thrust the phone at her. She *kibitzed* with Nerina as I waited on the couch, bouncing my knee like a chihuahua with ADHD. Anytime I heard a giggle, I assumed I was being ridiculed.

“What?” Laura said after hanging up.

“Why do you keep doing that? So you can all chuckle at how bad my Italian is?”

“We weren’t laughing at you. And stop being modest, your Italian is great.”

“It’s sweet of you to lie, but I’m a teacher, remember?”

I MANAGED TO EVADE most of Laura’s family get-togethers. Her mom invited me regularly, but I often had an excuse. Early in the relationship, I felt slighted that Laura hadn’t told her family about me, but now that we’d met, they wanted to see me all the time. And all I wanted was to go back to being invisible.

That’s when Laura decided to host a family dinner at our place. I begrudgingly agreed under one condition: no talk of circumcision. Lapo had been nipped a month earlier, and the surgery—from what I overheard during the family’s marathon phone conversations—went off without a snag. Laura assured me that I was in the clear.

When the family arrived, I hid out in the kitchen, obsessively stirring the *Spaghetti alle Vongole* that didn’t need any more stirring. Laura, who

was doing actual food prep, kicked me out to entertain the guests. I once believed learning foreign languages was my passion in life. But after Laura's mom reminded me for the twelfth time in as many months how bad my Italian was, I realized my true passion wasn't foreign languages, but foreign women.

To bolster my depleted confidence, I tried talking with my old pal Giulia, now two-years-old. In one brief year her verbal skills had radically surpassed mine. She soon got bored and stumbled away drooling, leaving me crouching alone on the cold white tiles, thinking, *Fuck you then, Giulia.*

When we sat down to eat, Laura's cousin, Marta, asked how I liked Liguria, and again, the room fell silent.

"Oh. It's beautiful," I said referring to a weekend trip to the coast that Laura and I had taken for a focaccia festival.

Then Laura blew up my spot. "Except he hated the focaccia."

"I didn't *hate* it," I said. I just didn't love the focaccia—it *was* kind of sour. But I couldn't get my words out over everyone's consternation.

"Poor guy doesn't know what good bread is!" said Alessandro.

"He only eats hamburger and hotdog buns," said Franco.

"It's not his fault," Nerina added, "he's used to all that *Americanata.*"

Americanata is a derogatory term for American grandiosity and poor taste: Hummers; rom-coms and action movies; open-carry gun laws; Papa John's stuffed crust pizza and the Triple Baconator from Wendy's.

"To Cary's credit," Laura said, "he stopped ordering cappuccinos after dinner."

"*Non si fa. Punto.* It's simply not done. Period," said Franco. His daughter had already explained that ordering one after 11 a.m. was an offense to God.

"After dinner it's *espresso* or *macchiato*, my dear boy," said Beppe.

"And if you order a *latte*, you'll get a cold glass of milk," said Marta.

"Like all Americans he drowns food in sauces," Laura added. "They actually have something called Creamy Chicken Fettucine Alfredo."

"What in God's name is that?" chortled Nerina.

"You don't even want to know. And if you order *pepperoni* pizza in America, guess what comes on it?" Laura challenged.

"Peppers, what else," said Ornella.

"Nope. Salami!" Laura said. "They also use ham and pineapple as a topping."

"*Che schifo!*" said Franco. "How disgusting!"

Everyone stared at me as if I represented all that was evil and classless in America. Marta asked if there was anything I *did* like in Liguria. The family waited in silence for me to make another *figura di merda*, ass of myself (literally, 'a figure of shit').

"Yes, of course." I said. "Beautiful. Much sun. So beautiful."

"Thanks for the detailed description, Umberto Eco," said Franco. "It's beautiful, we get it. But what did you do?"

"Um, we walked in village," I stammered. "Beautiful. We watched ocean."

"Sea," Laura corrected.

"Yes, the sea," I mumbled. "*She* is beautiful."

"*He* is beautiful," Laura corrected. I could never get my gender articles straight.

"We know the sea is beautiful," said Franco. "But what did you do in Liguria, other than insult the people and their focaccia?"

I searched for Laura's finger under the table and squeezed three times as planned, but Laura never acknowledged our couples' code. The family's anticipatory silence was deafening. I wiped my brow, took a deep breath, and in my most confident Italian said, "*Siamo seduti in un sasso e guardato i gabinetti cercano pesche.*"

Everyone at the table roared. Even Uncle Beppe, who was usually protective of me, covered his mouth with his napkin. I had been trying to say, "We sat on a boulder and watched seagulls hunt for fish," but what had come out was, "We sat *in a stone* and watched *toilets* look for *peaches*."

I tried to explain that in English we don't have double consonants with accented vowels. This made them laugh harder. I stripped down to my undershirt, opened the balcony door, and stepped outside. I could hear Laura inside sharing more embarrassing tales of her obtuse, circumcised boyfriend. I thought back to earlier in the day. *Had I done something unspeakable to deserve this?* But there was no malice in her tone. Laura, like her father, was simply a monster.

Maybe that's a bit harsh. This was probably her way of toughening me up. If it weren't for her occasionally tossing me directly under the proverbial bus, I would've spent all my days holed up in the bedroom, conjugating verbs.

When I returned to the table, Laura was recounting details of our trip to Sicily. "Cary and I were sitting in front of the Palermo Cathedral—"

"Stunning that cathedral," interrupted Franco. "You don't have churches

like that in America.”

Laura continued, “We were sitting on the stairs of the church eating *arancini*—

“Let me guess,” said Franco. “He doesn’t like *arancini* either?” This man was incapable of seeing a belt without hitting below it.

Actually, Generalissimo Franco, I love deep-fried rice balls, I thought but dared not say.

“So, Cary sees a group of people gathered around a cardboard box in the piazza and goes to look. “*Cannellini!*” he says with a big smile on his face, “*I cannellini ano mangiato la papa!*”

Again, everyone at the table erupted in laughter.

“*Poverino*,” Laura said. “He was trying to say, ‘*Cagnolini! I cagnolini hanno mangiato la pappa*. Puppies! There are puppies and they’re eating food!’”

Instead, what I had said was, “The kidney bean’s anus ate the Pope!”

Like Emerson’s illiterate man-child, I brought shame to myself every time I opened my mouth. So many of my humiliations in Italy were rooted in assumptions. The assumption that I’d pick up the language in no time; that adapting would be easy, and that everyone would accept me instantly. As Emil Cioran said, “Only the village idiot thinks he belongs.” I guess I had a different picture of myself in mind. The subjunctive me. The me that *could have been*—a charming, intelligent, less sweaty guy.

During the *secondo*, Nerina wandered over and, like an Italian Dennis Leary, whispered hoarsely in my ear. “My dear, you know about Lapo’s problem with his ‘*pisellino*,’ yes?” She used the diminutive suffix, *-ino*, which I felt was a bit uncalled for. I also thought this matter had been officially closed. She continued, “Ever since the surgery, Lapo feels insecure because he doesn’t look like his dad or brother anymore. Do me a favor and talk to him so he doesn’t feel like such a freak.”

I wasn’t positive, but I was pretty sure she then asked me to show him mine. I wanted to ask for clarification but was internally second guessing my indirect pronouns. I’m not sure what I was more nervous about: having to use words that had never been scrawled into my Mead notebook, or the fact that Lapo’s grandmother potentially wanted me to take my penis out at the dinner table.

“But not now,” she said, as if reading my mind. “Let’s wait until after dessert.” She gave me a wrinkly smile and pinched my cheek with her tarred yellow pincers. “*Bravo*,” she said.

During dessert Nerina made eye-contact with me from the opposite end of the table. She gave me the nod and pointed towards the bedroom like a SWAT team captain conducting a drug raid. I frantically looked up a few last-minute words on my phone—foreskin, hygienic, *mohel*. Then I jammed an entire slice of tiramisu in my mouth, slurped down half a glass of Nero d'Avola, and wiped the crumbs from my chinos. Nerina gave me the V for Victory sign.

Lapo was sitting at the desk in our bedroom, drawing a picture.

“*Ciao, Lapo. Come stai?*” I asked.

“*Bene*,” he said as he crumpled up the picture and grabbed a clean sheet from the printer.

“I heard you were a bit worried, about, um, your thing. Down here.” I pointed toward my crotch like a street vendor flashing his wares.

“*Si*,” he said, and buried his head further into the page. I could tell he wasn't going to make this easy. I considered asking what he was drawing but forgot the word for ‘draw.’ Cursing my poor memory, I made my way for the door in defeat.

Lapo blurted out, “It looks different now.”

“Yes.” I didn't know what else to say. There was a long pause. “You must not *to* worry.”

“Some of the boys at school make fun of me,” he said.

“Me too. Also. Different. But same. Like you.”

This got his attention, and for the first time he stopped scribbling and turned to face me. “Really?” he said.

“Yes, really.”

Maybe this was all the kiddo needed. Good job, Cary.

“You mean like this?” he said and tugged down his sweatpants.

I inhaled like I was about to hold my breath underwater, hesitated, then slowly looked down. Doing my best pediatrician impression, I nodded twice then hastily directed my gaze back into his eyes.

“*Lapo*,” I said, “*abbiamo i pisellini uguali*. Lapo, we have the exact same little penises.” Like Nerina, I'd used the diminutive and immediately regretted it. “I mean penis. Regular penis. What I'm saying is that we have the exact same, normal penis. Proportional.”

My Italian was as fluent as ever. Lapo stood there holding the waistband around his pale, skinny thighs. I looked back toward the door, face flushed with wine and indignity. It was closed. I didn't remember shutting it. Could it have been Nerina?

He asked, “So yours looks like mine, *Zio*?”

Zio means ‘Uncle.’ It felt weird being addressed with a kinship noun, but not as weird as a seven-year-old-boy thrusting his hips forward, eagerly awaiting the flashing of his second cousin’s boyfriend’s penis. Maybe the boy’s grandma told him I would. Obviously, we could chalk this up to cultural differences, but where I come from it’s frowned upon to expose your dick to a small child, relative or not.

Cary, think this through carefully. There’s a 50% chance you lost Nerina’s instructions in translation, and if Lapo’s dad walks in and sees you with your pants down, he’ll surely beat the *shit out of you*.

Lapo finally pulled his pants up and I was overcome with relief. Nodding violently, I said, “Same thing. Yep. Same. Same.”

Lapo got bored with my impersonation of a Pez dispenser and went back to his sketch. I beelined it for the dining room. Laura looked at me curiously, but, I think, with a hint of pride.

IT WAS 1 A.M. BEFORE THE EVENING ENDED. Nerina gave me the double-cheek kiss and I went right like a pro. “I think Lapo feels much better after your talk,” she said. “Right, Lapo? Lapo! Come here and give your *Zio* his gift.” My most kindred of spirits flailed toward me with drawing in hand.

At first glance, the illustration looked pretty avant-garde. Maybe something from the Picasso School of Cubism, or simply the idle scribbles of kid who can’t draw for shit. I could make out some oblong shapes—a house, a moon, a stick figure.

Coming from the stick figure’s midsection was what looked like an old woman’s arthritic pinkie. The rest of the picture lacked color, but the tip of the crooked ligament was shaded with attention to detail—differing hues of pink and red.

Was it supposed to be him? Me? His Dad? Surely not his dad—the pecker was distinctly mushroomed, a mock rather than a full turtleneck. As I stared dumbfounded, Laura yanked the sheet out of my frozen hands. “What’s tha—” but caught herself midsentence. “Oh . . . *Che bel disegno*,” she cooed. “What a beautiful *drawing*.”

Disegno! I thought, *Of course! I knew I knew that word.*

Franco shook my hand, gave what almost looked like a smile, and actually thanked me for the evening. I’d never heard him thank anyone for anything. The man was gruff, with a definite Napoleon complex, but

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no question he loved his daughter. And in his own way, he'd started to care about me too. Which he expressed by fixing our sink and changing the windshield wipers on our car.

Amidst a myriad of *Ciaos*, Laura finally, unhurriedly, closed the front door behind them. I set Lapo's masterpiece on the bookshelf next to my tattered Mead notebook, reminders of our inadequacies, but neither the worse for wear.

ALICE DUGGAN

How I Tried to Get Ahead of It

Showed up
barefoot and naked
in the ER,

to keep things simple,
more efficient.

Got the virus,
I told the attendant,

who said the tests were given
on Thursdays.

Don't need a test,
I explained.

Out of beds,
said the attendant.

Don't need a bed,
I said. Or a ventilator,
either.

Let's keep things simple.
More efficient.

Take me to where you cremate
the bodies.

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You can't go in there,
said the attendant—not

without a mask.

Loan me a mask? I asked.
They're in short supply,
she said thinly.

Then I sat down
on the dirty tiles
and cried.

JO ANGELA EDWINS

Geophagy

We quote scripture—
“dust to dust”—and we
quote the “they”
in “They say,” as in
“They say you are
what you eat.” So we
swallow the earth’s
whiteboned ash
of itself, the ground breaking
down like a stiff corpse
burned by summers
marching towards eternity
and rising inside us, a bird
of wind and flame and mist,
elemental as we are, winging
towards the heaven that teaches us
to cast off earthly things, and yet
who can cast off what
we fail to take in?
No sin in this, devouring
what the good lord animated
with a wave and a word,
the ribs of Adam built
with the silt of the Tigris.
The clay beneath your feet
is anything but dead. Listen.
It sings to you. Listen.
It whispers, *This, my
body. Take it, and eat.*

SARA BROWN

Outskirts

It is still
as if I've just
asked the space between us to speak.

Pills of rain dive onto the pentagonal wafers of dried sand,
wind ceases grasping at the earth
spindling up tunnels of breath.

The ground is humming off key.

She says she has a temptation for Marlboro Lights
on the outskirts of Amarillo, amidst a hot dog machine
toasting your waist & a tourist brochure stapled with gum.

But I am craving to taste the land of your death,
uncover the skulls of burros & bury them
properly. Cigarettes remind me
of the winter sun & you, unsatisfied & greedy.

I feel that this idea of companionship is tripping across the edges
to only find that it has no urgent place to be.
I don't know what I thought I'd find.
I don't feel you here.

CRYSTAL GALYEAN

The Lake House

“**Y**ou already told me, remember?”

He did not. He could never remember what he had or had not told his wife, and it had become, if he was honest, a source of fear. His hand was trembling, and he played it off by rattling the ice in his tumbler. His wife was looking at him strangely, as were the party guests standing on their lake house porch. He fiddled with his cigar and cleared his throat, trying to fight the urge, like the pull of a puppet string, to say the next thing that he was certain had already, under some other circumstance, been confessed.

The dog choking saved him. Her gagging yelp cut through the party like an engine backfiring, and as he pushed his way to the mutt that looked so much like their first mutt that he had suggested, to his son's chagrin, of naming him Ghost, the crowd made room for him to kneel down by the dog. She looked up at him helplessly, a scratching plea rattling from her throat, and he saw a flash of metal behind her teeth. He dreaded reaching past that pink, lolling tongue, but it was his retirement party and his son was looking at him with something near panic so he closed his eyes and reached in and yanked the thing out with one violent tug. The dog sneezed twice and bounded off.

It was a pocket watch. Old, like one his father might have used. Rusted and ruined now, coated with dog bile. Sometimes these things showed up when they lowered the lake levels.

He put it on top of the grill and wiped his hands with a dish towel and realized that something about the smell of the dog's saliva had reminded him of his father. One of the few things he remembered about his father was that he would rescue his sweaters from the washing machine and hold them under his mother's nose. *Smell it. Does that stink? No, it smells of life.* There were some people born full of love for the world and others for whom the highest moral calling could only be to moderate the contempt

they feel for those around them. Night bugs congregated under his nostrils and he tried not to breathe them in.

“William!” Martha, in a yellow sundress, standing too close to the dock's edge. He hoped that she didn't fall in, for to ask his wife to lend clothes to a woman he had once pawed in the closet of their tennis club was beneath the dignity of their marriage. He joined her and her husband, whose name eluded him now, and, taking a sip from his tumbler, resolved to become interested in what came next. They were looking down at the lake, where yellow algae sullied the dark water.

“It looks just like the Milky Way,” the woman said.

“Toxic algae,” William said. “The whole lake bloomed like that this summer. You can't even go in.”

“What happens if you do?”

“A rash, probably.”

They seemed disappointed, so he went on. “But if you accidentally swallow it, you die a slow, horrible death.”

Their laughter echoed across the lake. He watched them over the rim of his tumbler.

“At first it manifests as an upset stomach,” he said, leaning closer. “Nothing to worry, you think, just have to let it pass. But it stays inside you. It ferrets away in your gut for years and then one day you realize that it has control. It moves your mouth when you speak. It handles the steering wheel when you drive. It makes love to your wife. Without you even knowing it, it has swallowed you whole.”

Their laughter had died down. He finished his drink and turned back to the house, taking a moment to admire its wraparound balcony and white porticos, his wife standing thin and shining in the porch light. It had been her idea to build on his father's old lot. The very first summer the algae had bloomed and ruined a whole season of swimming, and he had yelled at her about plummeting property values. He wondered why he blamed her for so much. Just easier that way, he supposed. The sun was lower now and he was not sure where the afternoon had gone. He swatted at a mosquito and admired the dull amber of his whiskey and reminded himself that later he would be expected to make a toast.

It sometimes seemed to him that he was stuck in some early stage of development, some kind of preformation, while those around him, who with their charity work and community clubs, believed they had closed their fists around the slippery scales of completed selves, figured themselves

well-formed and steady. For him, experiences did not seem to accumulate character but passed through him like sunlight through gauze, and because of this he felt he could more accurately see the cracks in their visages, little prophecies of the moment when their unactualized selves would crumble like rock into dust. He would never apologize for keeping his concerns self-contained.

Across the lawn, fingering the pocket watch he had left on the grill, was a wilting tree of a man, pale, familiar. He wore a tweed coat much too warm for the muggy evening. Something about him seemed malapportioned, askew, prematurely aged. The kind of sad, bleached person who reads the newspaper alone in the library. Who you would turn away from on a sidewalk. His hair hugged his skull like it was wet. The end of his nose looked cold and irritated as if someone had come at him with sandpaper. He put the pocket watch down and wrapped his arms around himself, shivering. William did not trust a person who did not have some color by August. Maybe a townie his wife had taken pity on. He hoped that the man would be gone by the time of his toast. He did not want to feel judged.

Back on the porch, his wife was doing an impression of him. She pumped her arms and puffed her cheeks and made her breath ragged and he knew that it was meant to be him on the treadmill. She waved her hands before her face, stumbling backward, while onlookers chuckled. "They're in my nose!" She cried. "Up my nostrils!"

"The fruit flies," he explained. "They were bad this summer."

"Honey, there were no flies."

The faces in the porch light were waxen, blank. "Really, I can't be the only one who has noticed. They were everywhere. Horrific. The cost of living on the water, I suppose."

He willed the lake to belch up an army of gnats to prove his point, but the water was still. Now the arms were pumping again, and her puffing upset her bangs, and there was more laughter. "Really," William said, shaking his head. "I can't believe no one else has noticed."

He felt, at these things, like the masterpiece people skirt around in a museum, the great sculpture of David that visitors, dutifully paying their respects to the lesser pieces around the periphery of the hall, pretend not to be immediately entranced by. Success put everybody at a remove.

His son was tapping his elbow. Wrapped too tight around his small neck was an old woolen scarf, rat torn and filthy, and atop his tiny head a waterlogged top hat, stolen from another time. He could smell the fish

on them and suppressed a gag. He wanted those things off his boy. He grabbed ahold of the scarf and looked around, inadvertently whipping his son's head this way and that.

"Did that man give you these?" He was surprised at the volume of his tone and he noticed the boy looked frightened, but he could not stop himself. "Where is he? Where is that creep?" He turned to his wife. "Who is that weirdo? I told you I want to know who is at these things. Always someone. Always some odd bird." Now the boy had started to cry. He let go of the scarf and tried to listen to what he was saying between sobs. He crouched down and felt suddenly lightheaded.

"Honey, I'm sorry," he said. "Daddy isn't upset with you. But we talked about not picking up things from the lake."

He took the scarf and hat and the boy ran off to play. He balled them up and threw them in the trash and wiped his hands on his pant legs. His tumbler was empty, but it would be too conspicuous to refill it now, after all that. His neighbor tried to defuse the tension. "Strange things come up when they lower the lake levels."

How true. Every few winters they drained the water to ease the push of ice against the shoreline and the mud belched up peculiar things. Tires, drowned raccoons, beer bottles, faded yacht club rolls. Torn newspapers with photographs of rib thin children and one-armed refugees. Fliers of lost tabbies and appeals for bake sale donations. Coverless books and chewed straws and glass soda bottles of the kind he hadn't seen since he was a child. What he could never understand was how the detritus renewed itself, like some sea creature was skirting beneath the surface, opening up time capsules, force-feeding the town the nightmares of their youth.

One year, his son had found an old pair of shoes leaning against their dock post, as if someone had left them there to dry. It had made him shiver. He had barked at his wife, as if it were her fault that some dead's man footwear had crept up over their property line. As if she knew exactly which objects vomited up by her beloved lake would rattle him to the core. He couldn't even remember what he had told her, so how could he credit her with any such manipulation? It was absurd to act as if she was behind these things.

And even his poor kid was nervous and that was completely his fault. The boy was perceptive, and he could probably tell that his father and the lake were not tailored. That his father looked at the water, sometimes, with suspicion. That when they played together in the yard, he now and then

misinterpreted a soggy leaf as a drowned mouse and jerked his son out of the way so he would not be tainted by such lifelessness. That when the fruit flies were bad, or when he imagined they might become bad, he locked himself in his study and put a towel between the door and the floor. What kid, with a father like that, would not be a little skittish. He should have allowed him the stupid scarf and the stupid hat.

“Are you ready for your toast honey?”

He signaled his empty glass and escaped into the kitchen. His hand shook when he refilled the tumbler and his throat felt thick, like he might be about to cry though that was not likely. Indigestion, perhaps. The last time they lowered the lake levels, he had complained to the city council. It seemed, he had said, excessive. The woman behind the desk filled out the complaint slip with precise penmanship but when she took down his address the nib paused over the paper and he knew then that the township, the old timers, had not gotten over it yet. They thought his house too big. Too gauche. It did not fit in with the little three-season cabins that dotted the lakefront, the modest expansions, the cheerfully faded wood.

The zoning board would have loved a faithful recreation of his father's house, with its humble porch and chipped yellow shutters that looked like cat eyes blinking in the sun. He remembered watching his father wipe down the wood paneling every spring, clearing the year's dust with a tonic that smelled of oranges. But all those uninhabited winters had eaten away at the house like moths, and his wife needed a library and he wanted a den and his father had shuffled and bowed for too many years and he would not. He picked a mango from the fruit bowl and peeled it. Its skin was flawless but inside a bruise was spreading and he threw it into the trash. It was the time of day that he felt most critical of himself.

The strangest thing had happened right before they broke ground. The town minister had come, uninvited, to bless the lot. When he was nine, he had told his parents that he would not be attending church with them anymore. His mother had cried but his father had seemed to take it with some hilarity, this prepubescent burst of existential doubt. He had heard stories from the other boys that the minister, a younger man then, would come into his room, pull up a chair, and place a cold hand on his knee and warn him of the empty, evil lives that await boys who do not attend church with their families. He lay in dread of that visit. But the minister never came, never laid his frayed hat on his mother's coffee table, never exhaled righteousness too close to his face, and in his child's mind he had taken

this as confirmation that a boy like him was not meant to be in a holy place like that. So, every Sunday morning he clung to his sheets until he heard the slow reverse of his father's Chevrolet down the driveway. And then he stared at the ceiling until they returned, invigorated and self-satisfied, and he congratulated himself on not having dirtied their time of communion with the Lord. Thereafter he only saw the minister from a distance. A holy black spot on the town's periphery. And yet, on the day they broke ground, there he was. He told himself the minister probably blessed every new property in town. He told himself to forget it.

The house, though, was beautiful. A two-tiered deck that swept down to the lawn. A little lover's balcony outside the master bedroom. A boat house, fully loaded with a state-of-the-art lift. His wife and son loved their long days on the water, their sun-heated skin sticking to the fiberglass, sleeping through all the safe stories they had heard before. His wife credited his loquaciousness to the drink in his hand, but really it was because out on the lake he panicked. So far from land, his family seemed defenseless, and he could not stop the horror reel in his head. His wife caught in the propeller. His son strangled by the banana tube line. Heat stroke. Drowning. A terrible crash, his fault.

Sometimes, when he looked down into the lake, he thought he saw the muck and seaweed rushing up at him, ready to coat his face like plaster, and he had to look up at the sky in order to breathe. If he happened to touch the water, while pulling in a line or lifting his son by his life vest, it seemed to pool on his skin like oil and, no matter the season, had the tepid temperature of a forgotten glass of milk. His family had long ago accepted that daddy didn't swim, and while they floated, their vulnerable bellies bared toward the sun, he could feel the flies gathering in his ears. He would try to distract himself by playing fetch with the dog, but he could never shake the sensation that, when she climbed back up onto the boat, tennis ball in mouth, her fur dripped death.

Still, the house was worth it. Yes, perhaps a bit too much, but there was nothing dishonest about the way he had made his living, and there was nothing intrinsically upsetting about the house, so why that aging, grey-skinned minister had taken it upon himself to bless the plot of land was beyond him. He tried hard to remember them ever having lowered the lake when he was young, but he could not recall a single time that they had laid bare that horrid chestnut slog.

Someone outside called his name. It was maddening how they expected

him to take them all in at once. He downed his whiskey and went back out. The bugs were bad now, but people would pretend not to notice so he wouldn't be the first to say something. He had started to sweat through his shirt, and he hoped that the night would be more forgiving by the time of his toast. A duck's cry echoed across the lake, and he watched the canoe bob on its line. The voices around him were too numerous, and the whiskey's pressure on his eyelids too heavy now for him to place the voice. It was familiar, and he turned around, waiting for the right face to come into his view but there was no one. He closed his eyes and breathed in the night air. Citronella and hot dog. Spent fireworks and premonitions of hangovers. A woman's failing deodorant.

There, across the lawn. The man in the tweed coat was still pawing that pocket watch, looking at it like one would an old family photo. That was enough. He walked toward him but was stopped halfway across the lawn by a short old man with a familiar face.

"You have done so wonderful for yourself."

He barely recognized him, the lines in his face were so deep, but it came back slowly.

"Mr. Edwards, how kind of you to come."

A long time ago, eons, the old man had worked in his father's store. He had a dim memory of the two of them pretending to play chopsticks on the cash register, Mr. Edwards' weather-worn hands big and brown compared to his small fingers. Behind Mr. Edwards, the man in the tweed coat was twisting the pocket watch chain around his neck. He wanted to ask him why he looked so cold.

"I think of your father often you know."

A kind man, his dad. Soft-spoken. Even as a child William had recognized that other men sometimes mistook this as a sign of weakness. He noticed that the tourists spoke slowly and loudly to him, as if he might be simple, and when the lake water dripped from their bathing suits onto the store floor, they did not acknowledge their mess. He had done so much more with that little store than his father could have dreamed of.

"How many locations now?" Mr. Edwards was saying. "Nine?"

"Seventeen," William said. And now he was here, at the end of things. He tried to remember whether he had kept Mr. Edwards on, but he assumed that his presence here, at this party, was proof of no hard feelings. A fly landed near Mr. Edward's brow, but he appeared not to notice.

"I often remember when we would go fishing. You, me, and him. Those

were beautiful days. I keep them with me.”

Every year, in the brief indecision between winter and spring, his father would close the store for a whole week so he could fish in the shadowy cove where the ice still held. Sometimes, he took William along, waking him gently before the sun. The last time he ever went was the day he turned nine. He remembered how, on the walk across the ice, he had slipped, and, as he was falling time had slowed, allowing him to study the way the hawks circled in the sky and the wind bowed the treetops and the uncomfortable bright shimmer of the frozen lake before he hit the ice and began to bawl. In consolation his father had let him help with the auger, though they both knew he didn't have the strength to cut the ice, and when they realized he had forgotten to stock the cooler with bait, like his father had asked, he did not get mad, but simply set off whistling back to the truck, leaving William sitting on an overturned bucket, squeezing his mittens under his chin and singing softly to himself. That was when he first saw the man on the shore.

“Thank you for coming,” he said to Mr. Edwards. “Thank you very, very much.”

The man in the tweed coat was no longer standing by the grill. Someone adjusted the radio back in time, and out came jangly guitars and voices so silky you could smell the pomade. He knew he was past due to make his remarks, but he did not think he could with that man still lurking somewhere, inexplicably dressed, pawing a pocket watch just pulled from his dog's throat. He had to find him, but the lawn was wet from soggy children and he felt his boat shoes losing their grip and the last thing he needed was to fall with so many eyes on him. He had not had that many. He took a moment to stand in the shade of the maple tree, and with his hand on the cool bark he looked out at the party and realized everyone looked so well-meaning and harmless and he chided himself for being what his father would have called irreparably bent out of shape.

But somehow when he stepped out of the shade, the bad mood coated him again like lake muck and when he staggered across the lawn, his shirt pasted to his back, his mouth tasting of cigar and whiskey, he felt the world conspiring against him. He pretended to fuss with the grill and looked across the water, where he thought he could hear the merrymaking of other backyard barbecues, and he fantasized for a moment about jumping in his powerboat and screaming *sayonara* and driving it so fast that his belly would get that droopy feeling but then he thought that once he got there, it was just his luck that it might turn out to be just the same

sort of party, and that he would feel precisely the same way he felt now. His head pounded and his jaw started to ache, and he hoped he was not coming down with something. He should drink some water.

He crossed the lawn quickly so that no one would talk to him and took the porch stairs in one leap. In the kitchen he was mixing himself a drink and his wife's palm was on his arm and she was saying something, but he was trying to think about what that man had said. About the strange things coming up when they lowered the lake levels. When he walked back out onto the porch, he saw his wife smiling at him and behind her, faceless in the dimming light, were all those who had come for him. To hear him. He cleared his throat. The deck was wet, probably from his son and his friends dripping their towels in their hurry to the video game console. It pooled in an uneven spot in a way that had always bothered him, and he felt it creeping into his boat shoes. Now the soles of his feet were alive and alert while the rest of him felt faded, drowned in the summer mug, blurry like torchlights over the lake. The sun was giving its last final death glare and before him were shadows where faces should be.

He tried to smile. He raised his glass. And there, way in the back, looking out at the lake, not looking at him at all, was the man in the tweed coat. That was when he remembered what had happened the day of his ninth birthday, when his father took him fishing. He tried to focus on the faces before him, deep summer skin, floral dresses, bright polos, tried to admire his wife, the uncertain way she held herself and the unfitting red of her lipstick, but the memory was so vivid he could feel the awkward wool mittens on his small hands, and the way his cap, too large for him, kept falling down over his forehead and obscuring his vision. He also felt the wind, and the silence, and then he found himself squinting from the glare of sun on ice.

The man across the white brightness wore a jacket too light for the weather. He hovered on the shore, walking back and forth on the frost-killed grass, and William saw that he had no rod, no bucket. No gloves, nor hat. He was not dressed for fishing. He did not look like someone who had planned to be standing on the shore of a partially frozen lake in the early hours of this cold, sun-blasted morning. There was something unsettling about the way he moved, not like he was drunk, exactly, but something close. His hair clung to his forehead. He was too far away for William to see his face clearly. He wondered if he should call out. Perhaps the stranger was lost.

But just then the man seemed to come to a decision, and he moved toward the center of the lake in a hunched, angry stride, his chin digging into his chest. He clenched his fists and beat them against his thighs. William remembered wishing his father would return so he would not have to be the one to shout. The man needed to stop. The ice broke up towards the shallow spot in the center of the lake. It was not hidden. Anyone could see it. But the man kept walking and suddenly he pressed his palms against his ears, as if William were in fact shouting after him, though he was fairly certain he was not. The ice was thinning, and the man did not slow, and after he disappeared into the water too many seconds passed. William pressed his mittens to his face and breathed into them to warm the tip of his nose while he watched the ripples fade.

By the time his father returned the water was calm again and William did not say anything. That night he feigned a stomachache so he would not have to eat the fish they had caught that day. Later that spring, they pulled the man from the lake after some children in a canoe snagged their oar on his overcoat. Later in life, he asked himself why he had not said anything to his father. Why he had not screamed.

William raised his glass and felt a bead of cold sweat roll down the back of his thigh. He tried to reconcile the dampness of the evening, the unbearable mugginess of it, with that solid block of ice he still saw behind his guests. He tasted salt on his lips and realized he was crying. His wife made a comment which reached his ears as a pleasant series of faded notes and a chuckle rippled through the faceless crowd. His wife's shoulders bobbed up and down like a buoy in a storm but her eyes were anxious and it was in moments like these that he wanted to grab her and crush her close and apologize for every bad breath he ever took. He could have at least tried to ignore the flies. He could have acted like a less suspicious man.

The man in the tweed coat was crouching now, circling his hand in the water next to his wife's brand-new kayak, swirling the toxic yellow algae until it looked like a Van Gogh sky. The tears were coming harder now. The lake smelled like rot and the gnats were thick and throbbing now and he marveled that his guests did not gag. Why they still stood there, expecting him to say something. Mr. Edwards, old as he was, leaned against a porch pillar and he remembered clearly now, the day he let him go. He wondered how he could have forgotten.

The man on his dock removed his tweed jacket and, folding it carefully, lay it on the wood. He slipped off both shoes and somewhere towards the

front of the house someone was ringing the doorbell again and again. He unbuckled his belt and unbuttoned his shirt and William shouted at him to stop but when he dove in the toxic algae parted like milk and closed back behind him in a perfect symphony. The doorbell was getting louder and his chest hurt and he put his drink down and shoved his way through the crowd to pick up the pocket watch still coated with the dog's bile and hold it against his heart. They ticked unevenly together. He lifted his glass and said *to time* and when he fell, the wet grass soaked his pants through and it seemed that was all they needed.

MICHAEL LAUCLAN

Fulcrum

You have to dislodge a stone,
a brick, or maybe a chunk of concrete
from the throat of a footing

you're digging for a new porch
on an old house. You know

what you need: a stronger back.
Also leverage and purchase.

I'm no help at all,
sitting at a desk, thirty years on.

Though I'd like to claim
some deft insight, how
stepping back can reveal

a solution hidden in plain view,
you know better. Sometimes
we have to hammer at things

until our hands bleed.
Cussing, you widen the hole,

beat on the block with a pinch bar
until it chips, shifts, cracks.

MICHAEL LAUHLAN

When you prize fragments from the void
and straighten in triumph, the sky
has turned a sullen shade.

Night is nosing onto the street
and you have posts to set, and kids
at home to story toward sleep.

LAURINDA LIND

Departures

To be useless around the dying
like I am dogs run down or deer
shivery on road shoulders or
birds still moving but bleeding
usually in the street it's cats like

the one waving its tail with
the rest of it stuck to asphalt
a second crushed one that crept
to the end of the driveway that
time it was a peculiar neighbor

the one who had been in a pepsi
commercial who came over with
a shovel & though he was still scary
he hefted its weight on the blade &
went behind his house to bury it &

another time a car speeding down
the snowstreet clipped a cat kept
going a stranger stopped his car
& we stood outside & when
our eyes met we already knew

what I couldn't do so he lifted it
to its own yard & when he left I
lost what he took with him
this savior I might have been but see
I am never ever going to be.

MAC GAY

Snakebit

It's not the only house in Texas
with a hex on it. Hell, if any house stands
long enough, luck frowns on it too. Because
most people don't move and all people die.
It's a lie to think one place is healthy
and another is not just because
of a blot on its survival record. There's
not a foot of ground that has dirt without
human dust or ashes as part of its soil.
Still, sometimes it seems some places just
gleam with the twinkle of bone and bad luck.
Yet everyone's life is seasoned with several
fucked up dark days. Truth is we all step barefoot
out into the dark. Right here in the hall
they found Auntie after four weeks. Then
the puddle of Auntie was no longer stiff.
And all that in the high heat of summer.
I'm glad my sweet aunt left me the house.
Yet after eight years I confess I still sniff.

JP VALLIÈRES

Brown Eyed Girl

AFTER UNCLE CRAWLED OUT OF HIS GRAVE, all he ever talked about was the Virgin Mary. “Oh, you wouldn’t believe how beautiful she is,” he said. “You should hear her sing,” he said. It was fine being his niece and all—I didn’t really think about him all that much when he was alive. But then, when he came back from the dead, I had no choice. Everyone asked me, “Where’s your uncle?” “Can we say hi to your uncle?” They liked him, mostly because of his bones, which were pretty much all that was left. That and a strand of red nylon hanging off his ribs. He lived down at the old abandoned church, the one with the bell tower. It’s a big dilapidated church. Uncle lived there because he needed a roof over his skull and said it was really the only thing that suited him. His needs were few. He liked to ring the bell every morning and on special occasions, like on Canada Day and Fourth of July and our rabbit’s birthday and the day the librarian died. He painted too, refurbishing the old building. “The place is a bit drafty. I got plans for this old girl,” he said.

On Sunday morning we’d go to his church. We never used to go to church, but my dad said we had to support Uncle. “Who knows how long he’ll be with us this time around,” said Father; “Life is short,” said Mother. I didn’t mind the service in those earlier days of Uncle’s resurrection. Uncle looked down at the Bible but sort of made up his own stories that sounded similar to scripture. There was one about a shepherdess that fell into a well and another about a boy and his talking goat. Afterward, Uncle broke out the guitar and played the only song he knew, *Brown Eyed Girl*. We ended up singing it over and over again. Then we walked out of the sanctuary and some people placed old crummy change in the offering dish. Uncle shook hands with his flock as they walked out and gave me a cold bony hug. It didn’t creep me out like you’d think.

*

ONE NIGHT, UNCLE CAME OVER to sit around the fire in our backyard. Dad had s'mores going and Uncle brought his guitar. He didn't play it this time but instead held it on his lap. The wind blew smoke in his face, smoke and some sparks traveling through his eye holes and in the open space beneath his clavicle, but he didn't seem to mind. We could hear his red nylon strand flapping in the breeze. I asked him, "What's heaven like?" He told me it's full of people who were never really accepted on earth. "Those regulars you've seen at the laundromat. They all got in."

"What do you do in heaven?" I asked.

"Mostly we jump on trampolines and shout 'Hallelujah! Hallelujah!'" he said. "Sometimes," he said, "We go on nature walks. We do everything together. The food is really something. And the Virgin Mary," he said, and paused and tilted his head toward the moon. I wanted to know what he was thinking, but I could tell he was done talking about heaven.

No one knows why Uncle came back to earth. It's confusing, I mean, earth, what does this place have to offer the dead? What does this place have to offer the living? I don't know. I mostly repeated what I heard my parents say. Actually, I didn't have it too bad. We lived in this small town where there was a thin creek that ran behind our house. I was always at the creek. There's just something about the running water that made me feel alive. All my friends ever wanted to do was braid each other's hair, but all I wanted was to sit next to the creek and watch it flow. There were some baby trout that swam through. I got a kick out of them too. What I'm saying is that I didn't do a whole lot but still, this earth, it seemed okay to me. Good enough anyhow, and so I really understood why a guy like Uncle would make a second go of life, even if he's only a skeleton.

UNCLE STARTED GOING ON WALKS with me by the creek. We liked to hold hands and look at the water. Sometimes we talked. He told me about his plans with the church, how he wanted to get some new stained glass windows, ones with Jesus on the cross and the Virgin Mary crying at his bloody feet, but the difference was he wanted all the characters to be in what he called, "The skeletal state." I told him it would be bad for publicity, but he just shrugged and whistled an eerie tune through his long white teeth.

We started taking a canoe with us. It was too big for the creek, but Uncle carried it out to where the creek connected with other streams, where it broadened by the railroad tracks. I wasn't allowed to go there, but

I figured if I was with Uncle, my parents didn't have to know. We set the canoe in the water. He paddled us out beyond our village where the river met the lake, further away from the mountain that loomed over us all. This was when Uncle was happiest. He sang *Brown Eyed Girl*, and once told me about how there are thirteen rooms in heaven.

"Everyone is allowed in twelve of the rooms," he said, "but no one is supposed to open the thirteenth door."

"What are the twelve doors like?" I asked.

"I had all the keys," said Uncle, "but the only one anyone cared about was room thirteen." Turns out Uncle never entered any of the rooms. He said he was too fixated on the Virgin Mary. She would hold him and whisper stories until he fell asleep. "I slept for weeks in her arms."

It's hard to put my finger on exactly what the problem was. All I can say is that Uncle started acting strange in subtle ways. One time he said we'd only go as far as Gull's Island, but in complete silence he took us out beyond a point where no one on land could see us. I got home late that night. My parents were extremely worried. I could see the horror on their aging faces.

"Where the hell were you?" they asked.

I told them I was at a friend's house and we got carried away. I didn't like being forced to lie to my parents. They deserved better, but I felt I had no choice.

When I told Uncle how my parents responded he laughed and shrugged it off. "My big brother always was a party pooper."

The last time I went out on the canoe with Uncle he made me paddle. All the while he practiced his tap dance routine. He had gotten into clicking his bones and making a sort of music with the rhythmic clankings. I didn't mind doing the hard work, but I was never very strong in my arms and couldn't row us far.

Uncle was angry with me. "What's in a child?" he asked as he looked over the water. "Don't they know they're pathetic, too?"

I FOUND MORE AND MORE EXCUSES not to go out with Uncle until he stopped asking me altogether.

After a while I lost touch with him. We still went to church but I didn't pay much attention. When Uncle looked at me as I walked out I made sure to not look back. I didn't want to see him.

In spite of my own diminishing interest, the church grew. People from

all over were marching in to hear his Bible-like stories and to sing *Brown Eyed Girl*. The congregation, as one, rose to their feet as Uncle strummed the chords. When he arrived at the bridge, every member, even me, sang “Do you remember when” and we all did, we remembered whatever it was that came to us, mostly our triumphs. The “sha la la la la” came out like praise, like the brown eyed girl was the Virgin herself.

When the new stained glass windows arrived, I thought they didn’t look as creepy as I’d expected. Many people commented on the artistry of the scenes depicted. I could tell Uncle was proud of himself. Dad and Mom were taking everything in stride but seemed to be concerned with things not meant for young people’s ears. At least that’s how it appeared to me, which was frustrating because I was starting to think of myself as a girl who was truly coming into her own. I didn’t feel so young anymore. I was thirteen.

SOON THE SUMMER ENDED, and I was back at school. I drifted through the hallways, finding myself wondering what Uncle was up to. The church had a new paint job. The bell only rang at nine a.m. sharp, every morning. There was something different about the way it resounded over the village: it lacked that deafening tone, the enthusiasm it had when Uncle first purchased the old church. I became slightly sad at the sound until, like everyone else, I decided to just ignore it altogether. It became that familiar something in the air, like the birds in the trees and the wind.

This was about the same time I noticed the boys looking at me differently like I had something about me that impressed them. At first I didn’t take it very seriously, I thought it was my new haircut, but there was something in the glow of the school hallways, and how the light lowered around me that seemed to signify a new form of classmate.

One boy was especially persistent. His name was Peter. Everyone called him Pete. I liked Pete, though I don’t know exactly what it was about him I liked. Perhaps he seemed to be the right boy to begin talking with. I showed him the creek behind my house and we walked beside it. At first we didn’t say a whole lot. I could think of nothing to converse about and sometimes feared I was a complete bore. But after some time together we were talking and eventually holding hands and nudging each other. He once pretended to throw me into the creek. I loved the idea but fought him off. I would playfully hit him, and he would laugh, and when he grabbed my wrists I kicked him in his shins. He pretended he was seriously injured

while I laughed, making fun of a boy getting beat up by a girl.

Once when we were roughhousing with each other he pushed me too hard and I stepped back awkwardly, my heel landing on a rock. I heard a soft *pop* and then hit the ground. Pete immediately joined me on the grass and took off my shoe. I could tell he was frightened, and as soon as my sock came off, my ankle burned inside the skin, and swelled, right in front of our eyes, to the size of an orange.

"I'll have to carry you," he said, and without discussing the matter I was off in Pete's arms. He was not a strong boy, most of them weren't at this point in our lives, but he was determined to bring me safely to my house. Although I was a small I could tell he was struggling against my weight. He was sweaty, and I could hear his chest pounding with blood.

When we came to my house my parents were on the front porch. Pete handled it well. He told them about the accident, even apologized for his careless behavior. My father was impressed with the young man and proved it by giving him a slap on the shoulder.

"FOR YOU, MY DEAR," MY UNCLE SAID, when he came to visit me in the hospital with a woman who looked younger than my mother, and dressed in a black min-skirt. He handed me a bouquet of flowers. Looking at Pete, he said, "And I hear you are quite the young man. First hurting a little girl and then carrying her to safety. One fine gentleman." The lady with him laughed nervously and tugged at the nylon strand hanging off his ribs, obviously signaling for them to leave. Once again I felt that Uncle was changing and wherever he was headed I did not want to follow.

"Nice to meet you," said Pete, reaching out to shake hands. "I've heard so much about you."

"Nice? What does *nice* have to do with anything? Ha!" said Uncle, and reached out and gave Pete's hand a hard high five. It must have hurt Pete, but he didn't show it.

"I hope you recover soon," said the lady. "Although, we should be going, don't you think dear?"

Uncle stuck his pointer finger through his eye socket and said, "I don't think! I can't even *feel*."

WHEN I STOPPED GOING TO CHURCH, my parents didn't mind all that much. They seemed to enjoy watching me mature and make sensible decisions. So on Sunday mornings I had the house to myself. Pete stopped by

one Sunday morning and sat with me on the back porch. He boiled water and poured each of us a mug of instant coffee. We loaded it with sugar and cream. There was something about the caffeine, the porch, and the two of us alone in my house that made us feel like we were much older. I was still mostly chair-bound from the torn ligaments so Pete would fetch me whatever I asked for. I noticed he kept checking his watch. Maybe he wanted to dash before my parents returned. I don't know what they'd think if they found us on the back porch drinking coffee and holding hands.

Before Pete left he cleaned the mugs and dried them and placed them back in the cabinet. I think it was this detail that made me believe Pete was up to something, something more than just spending time with me. I believe it was around this period in our friendship that he wanted more than anything to kiss me. Of course I thought of kissing him too, but not in the same way Pete was thinking. He seemed controlled by the possibility. How I know this I cannot say, but for certain he wanted it more than I did.

When my parents returned from church Pete was gone. He did not kiss me that day. My parents however looked distressed.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Your uncle," said Dad. "He's worrying me."

"What's the problem now?"

"I don't think he sleeps."

"I didn't know he needed to sleep. Do the dead need sleep?"

Before Uncle died he was a travelling salesman with a small company. He did well for himself, selling mainly to independent businesses. But then he started showing up to service his stores drunk. The customers liked him but things progressed, and the longer he lived the drunker he got. Most of the managers let it go until one day Uncle made a pass at a lady, meaning he slapped her on the behind, which might have been okay, except it happened to be a manager's wife. "It's nothing for a man to get drunk," Uncle used to say, sweeping the long blond locks out of his eyes. "All it takes is a decision. One lousy decision. And then another and another and another. Soon enough you're happy and the woman you always wanted to touch, well, all of a sudden you're touching her. It's so easy to make a decision."

Uncle died drunk. My father said he saw it coming. He felt responsible for his brother's behavior. He felt he could have helped him. Maybe he should have spent more time with Uncle. That's the sort of thinking Father was prone to do after Uncle died. Now that Uncle was back Father thought he had a second chance to be that brother he should have been. But anyone

could see it was wearing him down, probably like it did when Uncle was alive. The dead should probably stay dead. I heard this once, and well, I guess it makes sense.

“IF ONLY I COULD HAVE A SIP OF YOUR MANHATTAN,” said Uncle to my mother. We were sitting in our backyard around a camp fire.

“Why don’t you try,” said mother handing the glass over. “Maybe if your bones absorbed the whiskey you’ll be able to get drunk one more time.”

Uncle snatched the glass, a dull *ching* rang out, bone against glass, and then he looked at the drink real close. When he poured, the liquid spilled down his ribs and dripped off his red nylon strip. He threw the glass into the fire, which startled us all.

“If I had it over again,” said Uncle, “I’d take that old canoe out and never come back to this dump.” He stood and walked away from us, into the shadows of the neighborhood, back to his church.

I got up too, and went into the house. I found myself desperately thirsty and sipped straight from the faucet. I thought about what it’d be like if Pete kissed me. I wanted him to. I was looking forward to it. I looked over and saw my mother’s bottle of whiskey. I opened the cap and sniffed the contents. Without wondering about it any longer I placed it on my lips as if it was Pete’s face and tipped it back. The burn hit the back of my throat. I thought I was choking. I coughed and then heard my parent’s laughter. When I turned around I saw them watching me. They almost looked proud of their daughter.

“First time for everything,” said Dad.

“It’s not so bad, is it?” said Mother.

“Awful,” I said. “How do you drink this stuff?”

“When you get older,” said Mother, “life has a way of gravitating towards the bottle. You don’t believe it’ll ever happen but it does, to nearly everyone. It’s about life.”

“Well,” said Father, “Don’t believe everything your uncle says and not *everyone* needs to drink. It’s just that most find it helpful.”

I slept well that night and dreamed about riding out on the canoe with Uncle. Just me and him. But he was only half alive, one half of his body was skeleton, the other, his normal living-self with that long blonde hair. We sang some songs together as we paddled towards the horizon. Uncle was also drinking and passing me the bottle, every time I went to take a sip the

bottle turned in to a floppy fish. One of those bottom suckers with thick fish lips. I'd throw the fish into the water, disgusted, but still dreadfully thirsty. I know dreams mean nothing and some even say they serve no purpose whatsoever, but I tend to think this was another dream about frustration.

OVER THE NEXT MONTH MY ANKLE HEALED, and one afternoon, after a long school day, I walked down to the creek. I noticed it was unusually low. The smooth white rocks lined the outside of the stream, dry and thirsty. I didn't like seeing the creek in that condition. I preferred it to be a flow of heavy waters moving along. It was happiest that way. When it got low it made me sad, like when you see one of those sick lonely farm animals quarantined, away from the others. I walked the creek alone. If Pete knew I did this he might have been hurt. He always wanted to be with me. I wanted to be with him too, but I also needed to be alone with the creek. This helped me deal with the noise of the school's hallways, classrooms, and the cafeteria. It always seemed someone was doing something loud and then others got loud in return, until everything boxed in those walls was the giant voice shouting the one word it didn't mean.

I found myself walking all the way to the lake. Not that it was that far from my house, but the days were getting shorter, and I needed to be back before dark. Instead of turning around though I had a strange new urge I couldn't shake. I wanted to swim naked. No one was around and the water was free of boats. The houses were mostly behind trees and the ones that weren't were only occupied in the summer months. It wasn't a cold day. Without giving it further thought I shed my clothes until I was standing in my underwear. The air felt so good on my skin I couldn't help but take it further, becoming completely naked. It isn't so difficult after you make the choice. I did this as fast as I could. But not so fast that I didn't have to think about how I was heavier in the places a women is supposed to be heavier. When did this happen, this new body of mine? I didn't remember the exact day. I simply woke up, and there I was. Not fully grown. Not even close. When my mother slipped me new clothes, I figured she was being nice, but at this moment by the lake, I realized she knew. She knew I needed to throw out my old clothes. I remembered looking for my favorite purple shirt that day, and not being able to find it. I pictured her dropping it off at the Goodwill for some other little girl to wear, and then I pictured that little girl, who was so much like me, turning into this newly developed older girl and then handing the shirt off to her little sister. I wondered how many

little girls like me would touch my favorite purple shirt.

The water was cold. I covered myself to my shoulders, the ends of my hair soaked. Right when I was about to take the plunge I felt a presence behind me. I can't say I heard anything but when someone is behind you, even if that someone is silent, you know he is there. I turned slowly and saw Pete staring at me with eyes unlike any I'd ever seen. Wide open and confused. I didn't know what to do, so to fill the space between us I laughed out loud and said, "God! You scared me Pete!"

"I was looking for you after school and uh..." Pete was now looking down at the sand muttering nervously, "and I couldn't find you and I wanted to tell you something."

"Sorry Pete, I wasn't planning on being here, it just happened," I said. I wanted all my garments to supernaturally spring up and attach themselves to me. I looked over to the pile and noticed my black bra sprawled elegantly on the edge of the shore, the water lapping, inching its way closer to it. That's where Pete's eyes were fixed.

Honestly, neither of us knew what to do. For a minute we were silent, I watched the war waging between his mind and body. I knew he wanted nothing more than to see me naked but I could also tell that he was terrified at the thought of joining me in the water.

"Pete, could you do me a favor?"

"Sure, sure, of course."

"Could you turn around while I get dried and dressed?"

"Of course, no problem, I didn't see anything, not really anyway, I was a *ways* away when I noticed you, but really I didn't notice you were like, like you are now." He turned, his arms crossed. I used the bottoms of my jeans as a towel. Of course it wasn't enough so I put my clothes on a mostly wet body.

Pete and I walked back to my house as if nothing extraordinary had happened. We talked about some classmates and how terrible the lunch food was. When we got to my house, my uncle was sitting with my parents at the dining room table. My mother's Manhattan was half full, and they seemed in serious conversation. The atmosphere in the house was heavy as if a grim fog had rolled in. When my father saw us he quickly walked over and pulled out his wallet and told us to get dinner at Gram's Diner, only a walk away. Pete and I couldn't have been more satisfied. Obviously there was something of grown-up proportions happening around that table, but I didn't care what it was all about.

I was the first to reach for Pete's hand as we walked into the diner together, where we ordered a basket of fries and a milkshake to share, sipping from separate straws. When he made a joke I laughed harder than ever.

BEFORE GOING INTO MY HOUSE for the night Pete kissed me under a birch tree. It wasn't a peck either, it was real kissing, like what I always dreamed it would be. I was shocked that Hollywood got something so right. Upon leaving each other for the night we both tried to play it off as if it was nothing, as if we knew all along it would feel that good. But we couldn't disguise our bright smiles. I am certain we were in love.

I entered my house exhilarated, looking for my parents but finding only my mother's Manhattan resting alone and silent on the table. I went to the glass with purpose, picked it up, investigating the amber fluid. The blood in my veins surged with such force (Ecstasy? Ecstatic force?) I launched that drink into my mouth without thinking, thankful for the sweet vermouth covering the heat of the liquor. I chewed the cherry to shreds with the flare and joy of victory that comes with your first kiss.

I called out to my parents but they were elsewhere. I walked to the back window and noticed the fire reaching higher than I'd ever seen it in the pit. I saw my father and my mother halfway in the ground. They had shovels and they were digging. Great loads of dirt were being flung on top of a large mound. Uncle was illuminated by the fire and was dancing around the flames. I opened the window slightly so I could hear their voices—my uncle and my parents singing, *Brown Eyed Girl*. I walked out to see what was up. When Uncle saw me he rushed over and kissed me with his jawbone.

"This is it!" said Uncle, "I'll never cry again."

"What's happening?" I said.

"She wants me back! Mary wants to hold me again. She says she misses me! Can you believe it? Can you believe our Virgin Mary wants to hold me? *Me?*" Uncle didn't have the ability to cry but I knew he was, in that very moment, crying as if he was a little boy once more. We hugged for the last time. His bones felt warmer than ever before.

Uncle's last words to me were, "After they bury me, I'll never die again."

I have to be honest. Right then, as I was walking back into the house—away from Uncle for the last time—I didn't care about him, or about the Virgin Mary, or about my parents losing a brother and friend. Instead of

joining them I went inside to the bottle of VO and poured a small amount into a shot glass. I was feeling so good. From Pete's kiss? The alcohol? Maybe it was something only someone watching me could figure out. Anyway, without giving it another thought, I threw back the shot. Not bad. I was beginning to understand this business of drinks. I felt *mature*. I poured another. I threw it back as if I was proving something to The Virgin Mary.

"Ha, ha!" I laughed and staggered. I was happy, why would anyone ever in the history of the world be sad?

I poured another.

The room began to shift a little, things going slightly off kilter. I leaned against the counter top. I needed to sit down. Maybe another shot? I poured. How easy it is to pour. How easy it is to make a decision. I drank. The drink did not help me, instead it made all things, living and dead, way *way* worse. I tried to think about the kiss but it didn't help. I wasn't feeling like myself. *Where did I go? Where is I? What is I? I? I? I?*

When I stood, the linoleum was spinning, I needed to puke, I wanted to puke, I hate puking but I had to puke. Get the poison out. There was nothing else to think about, there was that kiss but it didn't matter anymore. I stumbled to the toilet and stuck my middle finger to the back of my throat. Diner smidgens came hurling out of me, some spluttering through my nostrils.

When it was over I leaned against the tub, my breath shallow. I vowed to myself to never drink again. Then I heard what sounded like a final sad song. Were those bagpipes? Uncle was going back to heaven or whatever there is in the afterlife. Who has time to understand all that? I was slumped over the edge of the tub, limp and exhausted, my eyes were closed, but the beginning of a smile emerged on the edge of my lips. I felt as though I was barely emerging out of the nightmare. I wasn't there yet, I wasn't quite alive, but I knew I was well on my way.

JOSHUA MCKINNEY

The Word

In my mouth I hold the word
 for the word I want to speak.
But that word, the desired word,
 the shadow word, will break if heard.
So I wait, tonguing the dark word's weight
 in the silence called poetry.

NOTE:

This poem is in the traditional Korean form known as *sjjo*

RODRIGO FIGUEROA

Hermenéuticas

1.

Se abisma hacia la profundidad del flujo,
donde lame su ríspida carne, visto
con envidia por el hambriento cadáver.
En parejas le ignoran, en su purpúreo
andar hacia su espalda, donde encontrarán
en sus fauces un ripio, otro hemistiquio,
quizás una forma más pura de poesía.

2.

La noche se desgrana hacia el día,
sus estrellas se granulan en nubes tormentosas:
heraldos de la batalla que se librará sobre los árboles del Oriente,
al traspasar todas las fronteras
y notar que no eran más que un burdo espejismo.
Sobre el basamento de cartón rompe
el pétreo oleaje resquebrajado.
Rígidas las hojas abanicán un paisaje que aquí no tiene ningún sentido.

3.

Tu dois leur dire
que tu es dans une bibliothèque,
qu'il n'y a rien à interpréter.
Tu es seul et ta solitude
te traîne vers un vide de sens.
Tu veux le remplir de mots,

de métaphores incompréhensibles,
mais ton problème est que tu n'as pas
un sujet sur lequel parler.
Une statue sculptée dans flourine?
C'est nuit!

4.

La habitación poblada de pechos que se hinchen,
de historias que no escribiré nunca
ni poseeré de manera alguna.
Lenguas a las que nunca perteneceré
y a las que nunca podré venir. Aquí también
soy un extraño, como estos animales maclados,
extranjeros, que fluyen a mi lado.

NOTE:

Spanish original published in *Una frontera transparente* [Invisible Border] (Arenas Blancas, 2013).

RODRIGO FIGUEROA

Translated from Spanish by Steve Bellin-Oka

Hermeneutics

1.

Plunged into the current's depth,
it licks its coarse flesh, eyed
with envy by the hungry corpse.
In pairs they ignore him, his amaranthine
backstroke, where they will find
discord in his jaws, a hemistich, another half-line
of perhaps a purer poem.

2.

Night disintegrates into day,
stars granulating inside cumulonimbus clouds—
heralds of the battle to be fought above the Eastern trees,
to transgress every border,
unveil them as nothing but crude mirage.
Like cardboard, at its cracked base
the stony surge breaks.
Rigid leaves fan a landscape that makes no sense here.

3.

You've got to tell them
you're in a library
and there's nothing to interpret.
You're alone and your solitude

drags you into a void of meaning.
You wish you could fill it with words,
with incomprehensible metaphors,
but your problem is you have nothing
left to talk about.
A statue carved from fluorine?
Pointless!

4.

Room full of swollen breasts,
stories I'll never write,
never possess.
Languages I'll never belong to,
into which I can never fully enter. Here too
I am a stranger, like these crystalline animal pairs,
foreigners, flowing by my side.

AMI PATEL

the edge of worship

morrissey insists
some girls are bigger than others
here i am

rum-smothered
and bleary as a cactus
my third bottle this week
and it's only thursday

i am possible only
in a ravine at twilight
i am possible only
in the doorway of desire

and she is narasimha
gnawing my hinges

under the specter of night
i imagine her nipples
glowing purple like the dirt
i ate in india as a child

shehnai and salty foreheads
blurred the dusty street
at my uncle's baraat

i carved my nails
into the dark ground

AMI PATEL

tasted the freedom
of the forbidden
eclipsing my mouth

DIANE THIEL

In the Mirror

I confess that I used invisible ink...that I write in mirror writing
—Anna Akhmatova

Silencing
falls slowly
first signs
barely noticeable
tonight cover of snow
in some cases
until poems become code
secret in writing
invisible ink
holding lines in memory
smuggling poems
truth tucked under
mirrors this too familiar
place in history
here again
now silently
face our records

Silencing
slowly falls
signs first
noticeable barely
snow of cover tonight
cases some in
code become poems until
writing in secret
ink invisible
memory in lines holding
poems smuggling
under tucked truth
familiar too this mirrors
history in place
again here
silently now
records our face

FORREST RAPIER

Transformation, Reversal

Your face grows shaggy, unfamiliar,
and your own crazy dogs eat you alive.

Diana, the dream-naked archer, pulls a buck's
crown of curved bone from your skull.

Insignificant leaves sew a skirt of curses
around your waistline. A vixen births
a litter of kits in her foxhole—new earth.

She vanishes at the snap of a twig.
Invisible voices blaze your blood
buzzed, then boiled—*they hate you.*

Diana's entire nymphaeum sings of world
maps, lost underwater—her crystal
mirror scatters and blurs. Lakes call
your name, barks from the trail.

Nearby, her silver-haired bathers pour slender
streams from curved vases, he steals a look
at her through an arch of boughs, pulled back.

Stupid loons weave threadbare nests
with Diana's meaningless side-eye glances.
Beasts laugh, the whole morass snares
a feast of light in a spiderweb mosaic.

RED ROCK REVIEW

Your foolish eyes pool glazed in milk,
sun-tranced lost trapper searching
for maple trunks and the singing lakes.

You follow the fog-etched, familiar
voices echoing off leaf gloss
like songbirds confusing the airwaves.

At the midday bright-edge of a forest,
the horse you rode in on bucks and spooks.
Go into the woods, see her swimming, and leave.

LIZA SOFIA

Cornfield Constellations

IROLL DOWN MY WINDOW on the carriageway to get a better look at the sky. It's a good thing I'm not driving because I can't keep my eyes from drifting up to those ethereal clouds above us. I point out a pair of dancing squirrels in the sky, with their bushy tails intertwined, and tell you it reminds me of when I used to live in Boston and feed squirrels at the Common in the evenings. And just ahead of us is an antique butter churn that I tell you reminds me of my first-grade field trip to an 18th-century manor. You can't see either. But that's alright. I'm happy to explain each cloud as we drive by. Though, I don't think that the miles and miles of cornfields stretched out ahead of us is enough.

I'm getting scared the road will run out.

I ask you to pull over every time we pass a patch of land with grass cut low enough for us to lay on, but you say we can't because it's private property. There isn't a foot of terrain that isn't private property. There's always some pesky red barn attached to it like a tick you can't shake off. Though, I can't blame them for wanting to own the land and the clouds above it. Everyone likes watching clouds—the same way everyone likes watching sunsets and meteor showers and shooting stars. Because it makes you feel small in the grand scheme of the universe. But not right now. Right now, I'm an ancient Greek god riding through crop fields in a light blue Hyundai Sonata chariot, telling you the myths behind each of my constellations.

It's getting darker now.

You know I've never liked the heat, but for once, I want the sun to stay in the sky just a little longer.

RED ROCK REVIEW

I think about taking your hand off the steering wheel and tracing the outline of the long vined potted plant that almost fell on my head as a toddler, but I doubt you'd see it anyways. Instead, I take your hand and hold it tight in mine and silently vow to tell you these stories tomorrow.

MICHAEL MINASSIAN

Sleepwalking

You never said the words
out loud, not even
when you called me
from re-hab.

But I remember when
you let your guard drop,
cursing your parents
and sleepwalking

through the apartment,
like the time you woke
after stabbing the back
of your own hand.

The emergency room doc
gave me dirty looks
while he stitched you up;
our story about an accident

while washing dishes
seemed thin even to me—
you cried a sink full
on the drive home,

told me not to call
your parents, the father
who gave you the first
taste of a blade,

RED ROCK REVIEW

his only daughter;
and the deepest cut:
your mother washing
her hands, turning her head.

RICK ANTHONY FURTAK

After the Agony in Stony Places

*"I thought I had no hope of ever making it back
to that place I called life."*

– Sally Brampton, *Shoot the Damn Dog*

Your body tries to stop the open wounds
within. You haven't seen yourself in days,
and when you finally stand face to face
you *will* begin renaming things. That bruised,

strange, cooped-up gaze—that infinitely drained
incomprehension gaping back at you—
is yours. This doom-filled room, this cruel fate
(untrue, it *must* be), even these acute

pains in places unaware, unfeeling—
these, too, belong to you. Come back to life
and meet with fistula, dialysate,
transfusion. Get acquainted: learn their names,
their dangers. Let them know your voice, discreetly.
Take solace, in the dark, from blinking lights.

CHRISTINE BOYER

Thunderegg

MARIE GOT THE CALL on a Thursday evening. She had a rough day at work, driving across several counties to check on the test oil wells, bouncing her Honda down cratered dirt roads, past tumbledown barns, into the driveways of rusting trailers and cheap clapboard houses. The yards were all of a kind—sun-faded plastic toys scattered, a shrine to the Virgin Mary festooned with fraying silk flowers.

Marie returned home late, the dull throbbing of a migraine in the back of her head. She shucked her dust-covered clothes into the hamper and showered. She ate a piece of dry toast to settle her stomach and then worked on her collection to settle her mind.

She had a routine. First, she removed all of her specimens from the shelf, lining them carefully on her coffee table. Then she dusted the specimens with a barely-damp cloth: the leaf whorl fossils, the trilobite *Phacops rana*, the geodes and chunks of pyrite and an almandine garnet, deep red-purple as arterial blood. The apothecary jar full of tumbled quartz—unremarkable, but Marie had a compulsion and couldn't stop herself from buying one at every mineral expo she attended, turning the smooth stone over and over in her fingers until she got home and added it to her jar.

The last step was placing the specimens back, one at a time, with a satisfying little *clink* on the glass shelving. It was the most enjoyable step, when Marie exerted her will and placed order on the chaos. Everything in its place.

She had just lined up her coral fossils when her cell phone chirped from the coffee table. She winced when she saw who was. Her mother usually only called on Sunday, after Mass, when she could catch Marie up on the latest church gossip. When she called any other time, it was an emergency. It was almost always the same emergency.

“Hey,” Marie said. Her eyes shifted to her collection, half reassembled,

seeking out the empty spot in her line of geodes as her mother spoke.

Marie didn't even have to take notes. It was the same story every time. Sister, overdose, emergency room. She hung up with a sigh and went to get dressed.

MARIE'S NOSE STUNG from the hospital-reek of urine and industrial grade disinfectants. The receptionist on-duty was a former high school classmate, and Marie ducked her head to hide the dark flush of embarrassment that crept up her neck as she gave her sister's name. She found herself standing at the foot of her sister's bed.

Lizzie was asleep, half curled on her side like a comma. Her mouth hung open, and the corners were crusted with picked-at sores. She was wraith-thin, her shoulder blades poking through the thin material of her t-shirt like scythes. Lizzie was only eleven months younger than Marie—Irish twins, they were called, even though they were Italian and Polish. They had the same chestnut hair, the same brown eyes, the same square hands of their father. But Lizzie looked decades older now.

"Hey," Marie said softly. She reached out, hesitated for a moment, then shook Lizzie's foot.

"Hey yourself," Lizzie grumbled. She rolled onto her back carefully, making sure not to tangle up the IV line.

Marie considered her next words. "Mom is worried sick. How many lives do you have left, Kitty?" She used the childhood nickname, from when Lizzie would crawl around on all fours and pretend to be a stray cat. She used to purr—or do a six-year-old's approximation of a purr—if you stroked her head and said she was a good cat. She had dropped the game as quickly as she had started it, with only the nickname surviving to adulthood.

Lizzie shrugged. "Two lives left. Maybe three." She glanced at Marie for a second, then looked away, staring at a curling poster warning about the dangers of hepatitis. She picked at a scab at the crook of her arm, peeling each edge as delicately as a surgeon, drawing fresh blood that welled up. Marie winced and looked away.

MARIE SPENT HER LUNCH BREAK over the next few days reassembling Lizzie's life, like she always did. Lizzie drifted in and out of their lives, racking up stretches of sobriety, long enough to give them a sort of brittle hope. Then she flamed out spectacularly. Marie knew better than to try an

intervention—the family had one, once, before their father died—but she still helped where she could.

Order over chaos. Marie got Lizzie into an outpatient program that included daily doses of methadone. She got her a part-time job at the church. It paid next to nothing (which was half the point—Lizzie didn't need easy cash) but gave her life structure and some supervision. At least Marie knew where her little sister was for three hours a day. She cleaned Lizzie's apartment, sweeping through with heavy-duty garbage bags and a sharps collection container.

She bought a cheap but sturdy bed frame since Lizzie was sleeping on a bare mattress on the floor. She considered buying a new mattress, but decided on sheets and a coverlet, both in cheerful pink, instead.

MARIE PULLED THE VEAL SHANK out of the oven, ladled some broth over the meat, and then slid it back in for another twenty minutes. It was their mother's birthday, and Marie had spared no expense. She spent the entire weekend cleaning her mother's house, their childhood home, and prepared an elaborate menu. She even lugged her coffee machine over so they could have good coffee instead of their mother's usual freeze-dried monstrosity.

The only wild card was, as always, Lizzie. Her sister had been clean for a month now, holding down the receptionist gig and going to rehab and getting her daily allotment of methadone. Marie was nervous though. She could always seem to sense a coming storm with her sister. She felt it in the back of her skull, like how she always knew a thunderstorm was coming because a migraine formed first.

The knock on the door announced Lizzie before she came in. She had grown up in the house, same as Marie, but ever since she moved out, she knocked. Marie rolled her eyes. Lizzie always had to proclaim how separate she was from the rest of them.

"I'm on time," she said, walking into the living room. She shrugged out of her oversized sweatshirt, then perched herself on the edge of a dining room chair. Marie turned and called up the stairs to their mother that dinner was almost ready.

MARIE THOUGHT SHE HAD UNDER-SEASONED THE MEAT—it was too bland for her liking, but her mother had praised it endlessly. Lizzie only picked at the food.

"No appetite," she said, turning the bloody bits of veal over and over

with the tines of her fork.

“Well, I’m just glad to have both of my girls here with me,” their mother said, patting Marie on the knee clumsily. “It’s the best birthday present I could ask for.”

Their mother had taken to widowhood like most of the women of her church, flourishing with a second life once she was no longer tied down by a husband or children to raise. She belonged to various church committees, and Marie could barely get a call through to her, since their mother kept the line tied up with the gossip she and her friends traded.

Which wasn’t to say that their mother didn’t miss their father. Marie was sure she did. After their mother had cleaned out his closet (and the garage, and the workshop in the basement, and his little hideaway in the den), she had enlarged the portrait from their ten-year anniversary and hung it in the dining room. Lizzie glanced at it from time to time, as she pushed her food around her plate.

Marie started a pot of coffee brewing, the gurgle of the percolation the only sound aside from the ticking of the grandfather clock. She pulled the tiramisu from where it was chilling in the refrigerator and sat it, with a flourish, on the table. She began to cut portions for each of them.

“None for me,” said Lizzie.

“C’mon,” said Marie. “It’s Mom’s birthday cake, Kitty.”

Her sister shook her head. “I’m not hungry.”

“But it’s homemade. I used a coffee liqueur to soak the ladyfingers.”

“I’m still not hungry.” Lizzie was silent for a moment, then added, “Besides, I’m sober. I can’t have alcohol.”

Marie scoffed. “It’s a liqueur, not grain alcohol.”

Lizzie pressed her lips together and narrowed her eyes. She said nothing.

Their mother broke the silence. “How about I unwrap my gifts?” she asked, her voice too chipper. Marie knew that tone—she’d heard it plenty when she was growing up. She called it her mother’s deflecting and redirecting voice. Her *look-over-here* voice.

“Sure,” Marie replied. She retrieved the two gifts and sat them in front of their mother. Lizzie tucked her legs underneath her and gnawed at her thumbnail as their mother tore into the paper like an eager child.

Marie had gotten her three Murano glass birds: a deep red cardinal, a golden canary, and a deep cobalt jay. Their mother sighed over them, snuggled in the fluffy cotton batting.

“They’re lovely,” she said, pulling her eldest daughter in for an awkward hug. “I know exactly where I’ll put them.” She placed the lid on the box, then carefully slid it aside.

Lizzie’s gift was wrapped in newspaper, and inside was a framed picture. The frame was ornate, a glazed china confection of scrollwork and carved flowers carefully painted and gilded. Lizzie had obviously copied the original photo on a copier machine, probably on the sly at her job. It was a photo of Lizzie and their mother, from when Lizzie was young. Marie, with a jolt, recognized the photo: it was from their annual camping trip, the last one they took as a family. Lizzie had cropped out Marie and their father. On the edge of the picture, Marie could just make out their father’s forearm, rosy with muscle underneath the plaid flannel sleeve.

“You cut me and daddy out,” Marie said, incredulous.

Lizzie shrugged.

“Why would you cut us out?”

Lizzie shrugged again.

Marie stared at the sliver of the flannelled arm, and she felt her temper growing, rolling through her body like ball lightning, from deep in her belly through the tightness in her chest. She looked up at the portrait of her parents, looked at her father, his dark hair black like a grackle’s wing, combed and swooped back, his big square hands resting on their mother’s shoulders. Marie shook her head as if to clear it and looked down at Lizzie’s gift again, a thought occurring to her.

“Where did you get the frame?” she asked. She stared at Lizzie, who looked back for a second, then slid her eyes away to stare at the floor. “You steal it?”

“Now,” their mother started. “Now, don’t...”

“Didn’t steal it,” Lizzie mumbled.

“Because you’ve stolen before,” Marie continued, louder.

Lizzie crossed her arms and was silent.

“You drained mom’s checking account, stole her credit cards. You stole a bunch of my specimens. Pawned them, probably. My aquamarine. My opal thunderegg.”

Her voice cracked on the last word. Their father had been a long-haul trucker, going back and forth across the country. He always brought them gifts from his travels—stuffed cats and cat figurines for Lizzie, geological samples for Marie. His best gift had been the thunderegg, a rock the size of a tennis ball that had been split open to reveal a knot of opal inside, like a

geode, but filled with solid pearly white silica instead of hollow. She thought of when he gifted it to her, pulling her onto his lap, his arm tight around her belly as she opened the gift box to reveal the thunderegg, nestled in pale pink tissue paper.

Marie felt her stomach roil. She tasted the oily veal in the back of her throat and grimaced. “Daddy gave me that thunderegg.”

“Girls...” their mother said, her voice too bright and too loud. “Let’s not do this again...”

Lizzie cut her off with a dark look, stood up, and grabbed her sweat-shirt. “I didn’t pawn your stupid *specimens*.” She said the last word with a sneer. “What would I get, like five bucks for some dirty rock?” She strode to the door, turned, and looked back at Marie and her mother, then glanced at the picture of their father with a scowl. “Besides, I can make my own money.”

“Yeah,” Marie said. “By being a whore.”

Their mother gasped. “Marie Grace!” she hissed in a stage whisper.

Lizzie grinned, a horrible rictus of stretched lips and yellow teeth. She slammed the door shut behind her, rattling the china and leaving an echo of memory to reverberate in Marie’s ears.

IT WASN’T EVEN A FULL DAY before their mother called Marie, fretting. Lizzie had skipped out on rehab, and she hadn’t shown at work. Marie got into her car. She started looking for her sister.

THE THING ABOUT BEING AN ELIZABETH was the surfeit of nicknames. You could be Beth or Liz or Lizzie. Betty or Betsy or Libby if you were feeling retro, like a 1950’s housewife. Elsie or Ellie. Elspeth, if you wanted to be unique.

Lizzie’s family called her Lizzie, until they started calling her Kitty, the hated diminutive that sprung from a stupid game she played for all of a week when she was little. Kitty and Kit and Kit-Cat. *Is Kitty-Cat taking a cat nap? Does Kitty need petting?* She was over thirty years old and still couldn’t shake that fucking name.

Heroin was like that too—so many names. Horse, skag, dope. Mud. China white if it was the pure white powder she had once at a party in Reno that made her feel weightless, like her bones were as hollow as a bird’s. Black pearl if it was the sticky tar out of Mexico that gummed up needles if you didn’t cook it right.

When you combined black pearl with Lizzie, you created something entirely different. The mangy, half-feral Kitty was erased. Replaced with something incandescent, that glowed and vibrated on another frequency entirely. When she shot up, when the first hit of heroin rolled through her veins like warm syrup, she always thought of Marie and her collection of rocks. She was fascinated with her sister's obsession for geology, for the beautiful things you could pull from the mud with a little patience and a keen eye.

Lizzie had collected words instead, reading through the thesaurus when she was a kid. She loved the rare words, the nearly-obsolete ones, the peculiar ones that belonged to specialized fields. In the field of geology, there was *adularescence*. It was her favorite word, like a marble in the mouth you could roll around with your tongue. It meant the glow that comes from the inside of a gem.

Lizzie was adularescent. The heroin settled into her blood and set her alight, a bluish glow that shimmered in her, just below the surface.

SOMETIMES SHE WOKE UP in her own apartment. On bad days, she woke in the hospital.

Marie came to the hospital. She always did. Lizzie pretended to be asleep, wondering which tone her sister would take with her. She turned and faced her sister. She picked at her arm, relishing the tiny sting as she pulled a scab off, relishing the flash of revulsion that crossed Marie's placid face.

Marie swept through like a summer storm, practically leaving a faint odor of ozone in her wake. Lizzie's apartment was cleaned, cleansed. The ratty mattress was covered with new sheets and a garish polyester coverlet. *How like her*, Lizzie thought. *Cover the ugly and pretend it's not there.*

THEIR MOTHER'S BIRTHDAY was going to be a tour of Italy, Marie had told her over the phone, even though their mother's only link to Italy was her maiden name and a few swear words in the mother-tongue. Lizzie wanted to go out to eat instead, to the nice Italian restaurant a few towns over, maybe. The thought of being in that house made her itchy deep below the skin, where she couldn't scratch without tearing herself apart. It made her head buzz, like when she lived for a few months beside a power substation that hummed and vibrated.

She found the picture frame in the supply closet of the church rec hall.

When she ran out of things to do, the secretary gave her projects. Water the plants in the vestibule. Check the missals for missing pages. Organize the supply closet.

The frame was in a box of old altar server schedules, shoved in the back of a shelf. Lizzie set it aside, then slipped it under her baggy sweatshirt when she left for the day. The box had been dusty, she reasoned. No one even knew it was there, so no one would miss it.

She went through her scrapbooks, looking at old pictures.

In the last one, the only scrapbook that was half-finished, she found the picture. It was her and her mother and her father and Marie. Arms slung around each other, at the cabin by the lake in upstate New York. Their mother squinted against the sun, and their father was unreadable behind his sunglasses. Marie was sunburned, her cheeks and nose painfully red. Lizzie was twelve, just starting to grow into her gangly limbs and too-wide eyes.

Two weeks at the lake, an eternity for a twelve-year-old. Her mother took the car and drove into town, to get groceries or a cup of coffee at the café. Marie was always away, stomping through the woods until she reached the stony outcroppings where she spent entire days sorting through the slate for fossils.

Which left Lizzie alone with her father.

She pulled the photo out of its anchors in the scrapbook, then took a pair of scissors to it. With steady hands, she excised her father and Marie. The cut was almost perfect—just a sliver of her father's arm remained. Maybe it would be hidden under the picture frame.

Lizzie had been sick to her stomach, afterwards. She would find that, even as an adult, certain things would make her nauseated, forevermore. The smell of cheap beer. The feel of flannel. Any man, whispering to her, murmuring in her ear, calling her Kitty-Cat.

She had told Marie, of course. She had pulled her sister aside, under some sisterly pretense, had gotten her alone down by the dock. Marie's face had turned to stone as Lizzie described, in halting terms with a vocabulary she didn't really have, what had happened.

"Don't ever say that," Marie had hissed at Lizzie, grabbing her upper arm and digging her fingers in deep. "Nothing happened."

"But..."

"Nothing happened." She squeezed Lizzie's arm tighter. In the morning, there would be a constellation of bruises there too.

*

LIZZIE STARTED RUNNING AWAY. First, for a day or two, then for longer stretches. She always came home though. Like a cat, after all.

She liked traveling the interstate, hitching rides with truckers, traveling from the rolling Appalachians through the flat Midwest and to the craggy Rockies. Most of the truckers were nice, most were lonely. They told her about their own kids; they told her about the little league games they missed, the graduations, the birthdays. They asked about her own family and wondered who might be missing her. They bought her greasy meals at truck stops, runny eggs and hash browns and sloppy burgers with the works.

They told her to be careful. One gave her a Swiss Army knife and told her to keep it in her shoe.

Others were more of the taking kind.

Once, she returned home on a Sunday. Early. She crept into the house even though she knew everyone was probably at Mass. The house was cool and silent, save for the ticking of the grandfather clock in the living room.

Only underneath the ticking, another sound. Whimpering. Pleading. Lizzie felt the blood drain from her face, and her stomach twisted painfully. She turned on her heel and left, slamming the door behind her, rattling the china.

She was gone for a full month after that. And when she came home, she always knocked first.

WHEN THEIR FATHER DIED, Lizzie was out west. She didn't hear about his death until Marie had managed to get a message through. Marie had arranged for the plane ticket home to Pennsylvania, and she let Lizzie stay on her fold-out. Lizzie lay there at night, helplessly awake, jittery and aching for some dope, and stared at the rock collection.

She could tell which ones were gifts from her father—Marie had lined them up in the front of the shelf. She wondered about her sister, the flinty look on her face as she had grabbed her arm and insisted that *nothing happened*. She wondered what the inverse of geology was, if there was a word for putting things back into the ground, unlearning them and forgetting them.

They had been close, as children, and so alike. Lizzie had always pictured the two of them as twins more than separate births. She imagined herself as an egg, not like the kind in an anatomy book but like a bird's egg,

with a thick, smooth shell, hard as granite. She imagined her sister in the womb, nearly hatched, and herself, queued up right behind her, ready to begin.

For the first time, as she stared at the geodes and the thundereggs, she realized that they were still alike. They had been made from the same stuff, the same experiences. It was only with the weight of the terrible things that were done to them that they diverged.

Lizzie rose from the lumpy mattress, got dressed, and trod softly over to the shelving unit. She looked at the collection, considering which ones might be worth something. She slid the greenish-blue rock into her bag, then the cut round rock with the pearly interior. She felt a pang of guilt but brushed it away. She needed to get high, and if Marie could bury down her memories, well—so could she.

Of course, the theft was noticed. Not mentioned, of course, not when it happened. No one ever said the words right when something happened. Instead, they let the words calcify, and saved them like ammunition, and fired them when they would do the most harm, the portrait of their father looking down on them.

MARIE FOUND HER IN AN ABANDONED HOUSE near the old brick factory, where the town addicts went to shoot up in peace from police. The downstairs was a wreck of graffiti and holes in the plaster. Marie gingerly worked her way up the stairs, then searched each room. Lizzie was in the one at the end of the hallway.

Someone had dragged an ancient mattress into the room, and Lizzie was sitting cross-legged on it. She had set up her operation on a cinder-block: a candle whose flame juddered and flickered, a grubby spoon, a bottle of water. A twist of black in a baggie, like molasses. Lizzie glanced up at her sister.

“You don’t want to be here for this,” she said.

“I’m your big sister,” Marie replied. “I haven’t...” She hesitated for a moment. “I mean, I should’ve...”

Lizzie cut her off with a shrug of her bony shoulders. “You were a kid too.”

Marie blinked. “But nothing happened to me,” she whispered.

Lizzie stared at her for a moment, then shook her head. She tied off her ankle, poking at the scant flesh until a vein stood out. Marie looked away as she shot up, then turned in time to see her sister’s tense face go slack.

RED ROCK REVIEW

Relaxed, she looked almost like a kid again. Lizzie sighed, then laid back on the mattress. Her arm sagged down onto the floor, and something rolled out of her hand. Marie picked it up. It was the opal thunderegg.

It had an understated beauty, only showing itself if you held it to the light and saw the shimmering fire underneath the surface, the flashes of red and gold. It wasn't like a geode—when cracked open, it revealed its glittering crystals lining the hollowness within. A thunderegg was a solid thing, rarer.

Marie palmed the stone and felt it grow warm in her hand. She wanted to lie down beside her sister and curl herself around Lizzie's frail body like a protective shell. She wanted to howl. She wanted her rage to tear across their town like a storm, downing trees and ripping roofs and making the gutters run and overflow. She wanted to kick the candle over and let it burn the house down around them, burning away all the bad memories until only the best parts of them remained, shining like diamonds.

Instead, she pulled out her phone. She called 9-1-1.

L. R. BERGER

Carlotta at Home

Abiquiu, New Mexico

1.

With only instinct for compass
and wounds demanding
a vast horizon, she sought out
this mesa encircled by mountains
like any woman overtaken
by a call from midlife
to start over. She didn't build
so much as raise this house
up from sand into air,
dowsed ledge for water
and then, defying
whatever odds were left
to defy, planted seven
plum trees for seven friends
death came too early for.

2.

In the desert, light reclaims itself
as noun: a presence
not for serving the illumination
of other things but for being itself,
a sovereign character in the greater story.
The plum tree saplings are young,

still sure light exists only for their ripening.
And who'd argue with the bravado
of spindly branches in the desert
bearing the preposterous
weight of all their plums?

3.

When Carlotta holds out a basket
pretending to wonder
if I'd care to harvest the plums,
we both know the real question:
Can I bear the weight
of such happiness in a chore?
First plum in the basket,
next plucked for my mouth—
tithing warm juice and flesh,
a few dropped for birds.
Quicksilver sky. Hardy pit
at the heart. The fruits
of a woundedness transfigured,
Carlotta humming behind me.

4.

Everything in the desert
testifies to the improbable.
Late afternoon winds fly in
carrying the blackbirds
Carlotta says roost every night
in the crowns of the seven plum trees.
Behind the wind, a dark bank
in the distance is driving
rain across the desert toward us.
The plum leaves quiver
offering up earthly applause.

DANTE DI STEFANO

Dear John Ashbery,

The moon in the mirror is killing me. It's just a sliver over my left shoulder and barely discernible except when I squint. This morning I woke up to the smell of apples and I thought I was a dreamer in a Donald Hall poem, dreaming I was a character in a Robert Frost poem, whose portrait had been done by an anonymous amateur local artist in the style of Norman Rockwell, but then I realized my two-year-old daughter had left a half-eaten MacIntosh by the side of my bed. Her tiny toothmarks looked like crescents reflected on the surface of the Susquehanna River. I think I might be living in the afterlife.

MICHAEL CADNUM

The Woman Who Invented Time

She sets out a bowl of whitebait nightly
for the cat, and kidney for the fox.
She perfects the ladder. She fries

blood pudding. The root cellar—she digs it.
The window—she paints it shut.
The apple orchard by the river—
she rakes the scribbles
into rows.
She stirs her urine into
to the chalk-acre,
planting privet along the ghost road,

inventing the chisel,
the treadwheel, the gusset,
burning the bone.
She invents the slit.
She oils the iron.

She powers longing, wordless
horsepower, and as for that occasional
adventurer with a tale—she lets him talk.
Long weeks filter
down from the north, green headaches stir
the saplings. She tells the archaeologist
where to sink his mattock,

MICHAEL CADNUM

and pours the virgin another.

This is not it, goes her song. But it is.

PAIGE POWELL

Swarm

MARSHALL, SIX-YEARS-OLD, had a plastic dinosaur whose pointy feet he liked to spike across his nose, a dog named Moo, and the super most best alien blaster gun hidden behind the tennis racket in the coat closet. He had a sister named Tara he didn't like very much, who called him a dipshit under her breath at dinner, who was allowed to babysit him when his mom and dad were gone, and who was given to spats of anger, which his parents referred to as "Tara's difficulties" (if they referred to them at all). He had a scar in the shape of a puckered kiss from when Tara threw her jewelry box at his forehead because he was talking too close to her face and his breath smelled like onion rings. He remembered how it sprang open and he heard the little ballerina inside spin, the music tinkling, tinkling like the stuffed elephant his mom used to give him to help him go to sleep, and it was the thought of the soft elephant and his mom and the dull aching in his head and the face of his sister that had him in confused, hot tears.

He was crunching on a piece of toast, kicking at the table legs and thinking about going next door to ask his friend Judah to come and play, when his mom sat down at the table next to him, one hand clasped around a cup of coffee, the other punching his arm gently.

"Hey, baby boy," she said. "What's shakin'?"

"Not a lot," he said, mouth full.

She smiled, and the tiny bit of squirminess in his stomach that always reared its wormy head when one of his parents decided to talk to him one-on-one eased a little. He offered his mom a bite of his toast and she took it, growling and shaking her head like a dog. He laughed.

"So, kiddo, what do you think of hitting up the science museum tomorrow?" His heart leapt. It was summer vacation and he was starved for things to do. Like a pioneer boy, he imagined. He nodded. "Great," she said. "You, me, and Tara, we'll all go tomorrow." The addition of Tara was

less good, but he'd take it.

And then his mother made The Face, the one she made when she and his dad talked to him and sister after they fought, the face she made when his dad moved out, the face she made when his dad moved back in. Dammit, he thought, and then felt bad for thinking dammit. *Are you upset? It's okay if you're sad*, his mom had told him after his dad moved out. *I'm not sad, Mom. I'm ok*. But he'd been crossing his fingers behind his back the whole time.

"Mom and Dad have to go somewhere, okay? So Tara is going to watch you, okay? You can call me if you need me, okay?"

He kept thumping his foot. He knew it was annoying his mom and that she wouldn't say anything because she knew she was making him sad. "Why does Tara have to watch me?"

"Tara is twelve and you're eight." She poked him in his ribs, which used to make him laugh but was now an embarrassing, babyish indulgence. "You can watch each other."

"Can Judah come over?"

"Oh, baby." His mom did a tightrope smile. "You know he can't."

"But why?"

"Because his mom doesn't like Tara."

He already knew this, but it was still unfair; he didn't want his mom to be sad, but he also didn't see why he should be punished. "Look, Judah can come over any time, really, any time, as long as either Mommy or Daddy are home. Alright? Cool beans?" She did two thumbs up. He did two thumbs up back, but in his head he did two thumbs down.

Tara was in the living room watching tv and eating potato chips. "You shouldn't eat those for breakfast," he said. Tara shrugged. Tara ate a lot of food all the time, and at first his mom and dad said something, but now as long as she didn't touch the "good" food, the kind that had to be kept in the refrigerator, they let her do what she wanted. They were too busy being mad at each other, and that was ok, that's just what adults did, even if Marshall and probably Tara didn't like it. She was watching a show that was not his favorite, but she let him sit down on the other end of the couch, so he stayed.

They could follow their parents by their sounds; their dad shuffling around in their parents' dresser for a clean fucking shirt, their mom's *forchrist'ssake* Jeremy as the bedroom door opened, the jangling of the car keys in the entryway. They had been fighting, mostly about money. All

their dinners lately were straight from a can or the freezer. Last week his mom had bought a bowl of oranges for the family to share, and his dad was so furious he didn't even take a bite. *Those cost more than a week's worth of gas, Lydia.* They fought about other things, too. Mostly Tara. But those fights weren't shouting fights. They were sad, quiet fights, with lots of crying. Once he'd heard his dad say, when he thought Marshall was asleep, "I don't know what to do with her anymore. I don't know what's wrong with her." His mother had answered, "There's nothing wrong with her. We just have to love her enough." His father had said, "Can you? Can you do that?"

His dad popped his head into the living room and Marshall knew he'd switched faces in the hallway. "Ta ta, little chicks! Be good! No skirmishes!" And then the sound of the front door closing and locking.

Marshall wondered what was the probability of Tara agreeing to play basketball. Probably zero hundred percent.

"Guess how many planets there are in the universe." Marshall jumped—he couldn't remember the last time his sister had talked to him. He was glad, though, because he remembered from a few weeks ago when his teacher drew all the planets on the board. There were eight, and he said so.

"Moron," Tara said, shaking her head. "There are an endless number of planets in the universe. Infinite. Do you know what infinite means?"

Marshall knew better than to answer; instead, he sunk back defiantly into the couch cushions. He watched tv as his face got hot. He listened to the birds singing in the maple tree outside the window.

"You know they're going to marriage counseling, right? They're probably gonna get a divorce," Tara said.

"I want to go outside," he declared.

It looked like he would be ignored, but suddenly, like the snake he saw strike at a mouse one time, she pressed the remote and the tv turned black. "Alright," she said. "I have something to show you."

He sat up. "Really?"

"Go get some shoes on."

As he was pulling on his new light-up tennis shoes, the puppy, Moo, started sniffing and whining. "Moo, too?" he called out.

"Just us."

And even though it was with his sister, there was a certain relief to being out of the house. She could maybe be good. Once she helped him with his math homework. His mom and dad liked to tell the story of how one time, when he was a toddler and could only say a few words, his sister

asked why he couldn't do anything right, and his parents said, well, he's got a lot to learn, and she rolled her eyes and said, I'll teach him. He liked this story because it seemed like his sister would maybe let him in on her secrets. He knew she had them. He learned through sneaking.

For example: hidden under her bed he found a stack of library books, all about bees. He couldn't read all the titles, but he looked at the pictures, flipping through glossy pages with funny striped bugs. He'd never seen a bee in real life, but he knew his mom and dad tried to help the bees at work. They went to the White House, his mom told him, because the bees were gone and they were trying to bring them back. He didn't know why that was important, and he didn't know that Tara even cared. But he guessed she did, because he then saw, peeking out from the side of her nightstand table, yellow paint. When he shifted the table as best he could with his super strong arms, he saw there were a bunch of bees, all flying together, painted on her wall. He didn't know Tara liked bees or painting. But that was the cool thing about sneaking.

He hoped he would find more cool things on their adventure today. They lived on a cul-de-sac, and there weren't any houses behind theirs; just a big field, filled with wildflowers and sharp grasses that cut at his ankles and plenty of bugs and mice and rabbits. The neighborhood kids had flattened out a path for themselves to traverse from either side.

"Where are we going?" Marshall asked.

Tara looked at him like she was deciding. She shrugged. Marshall noticed she was holding something against her shoulder. "Why do you have a baseball bat? You didn't bring a ball."

"Because that's what we had."

"But why do you *need* it?"

"A cowboy would have a pistol, right? Or a spy would have a secret knife?"

He had to agree, although he still didn't understand. "But those are to use on somebody. What're you gonna use a baseball bat for?"

"To protect you, baby brother," she said. He knew she was doing that thing where she said a nice thing in a nice voice, so she wasn't for real. She either said nice things in a mean voice, or mean things in a nice voice.

They were silent a moment, shoes crunching over dried grass, listening to the coo of a dove somewhere. "Hoo, hoo," Marshall cupped around his mouth and yelled.

"What are you saying to them?"

Marshall smacked a bug off his arm. “Huh?”

“You’re talking to the birds. What are you saying?”

“Hi, I guess.”

Tara laughed and raised the bat high above her head, pretending like she was going to swing it into Marshall’s face. He was a little scared. “The kid knows the language of doves and says nothing. Communication for communication’s sake. You don’t have to announce you’re here. You can just be here.”

He puzzled through this. That’s not why he talked to doves, he thought. He wanted to tell her that, but he got confused and said, “But then they can’t hear me.”

She stopped idly whacking at the surrounding tall grass and looked at him. He realized her eyes were brown. Did he know that before? He had to have known, surely; when he was littler he colored many pictures of his family and knew the colors to fill in their eyes, but he had not seen his sister’s eyes like this before: round like shotgun shells. Dark brown and liquid-y like his mom’s coffee. She was looking him right in the eye and it made him push his toes into the ground until he saw red and blue flashing in his sister’s pupils.

“I gave you that scar on your head.”

Marshall felt cold and sweaty. Like a spelling test. Like a spelling test he forgot. “I know.”

“I felt mad. I threw that box at you and it hit your skin and broke it.”

“It’s okay, Tara, Mom said—”

“I don’t know what Mom said, but I’m telling you it’s not the truth, alright? I was angry and I hurt you on purpose. I hit your forehead but I could have hit your eye. Do you understand? I could have hit your eye and it would have been pus and blood. But instead I hit your head open and I felt nothing.”

Marshall was really going to throw up. He didn’t like this at all, didn’t like that there weren’t any adults, didn’t like that the first time his sister looked at him for real he wanted to run away.

“I’m okay. It’s okay,” he mumbled. He looked down at the ground so he didn’t have to look at her. He played with the loops on his jeans and watched a beetle crawl around his shoe.

“Marshall,” she said. She wanted him to look at her, but he wouldn’t. “It felt pretty good to not feel anything. Do you understand?”

He started rocking, heel toe, heel toe. “Because you’re so angry all the

time.”

“Yeah,” she said. “That’s why Dad hates me.”

“Dad doesn’t hate you.”

“He should.”

He waited until he heard her feet crunching through more grass, and then he followed his sister, even though he could have gone home. “Where are we going?”

She didn’t answer. She was looking for something.

They kept walking until they reached the creek bed and the ground got muddier. “Okay,” Tara mumbled. “There should be a log somewhere down here. I can’t see because of the grass. Keep an eye out.”

Marshall kept an eye out. The grass was so tall, arching golden and bladed up to the sky, that when his sister went ahead of him she was eclipsed from his view. It felt like he was maybe in space.

“Got it!” Her hand appeared out of the grass before the rest of her. “Come on—I’ll have to help you across. It’s dangerous.”

She pulled on his arm until he saw the log she was talking about; thick and rotted in some places, stretching firmly across the creek. He looked at Tara. He was not a brave kid. She knew this.

“We have to go across to get to where we’re going.”

There was a logic in that, even if it seemed to him that where they were going was hardly the point. She lifted herself up onto the log, carefully placing her two feet so that she didn’t fall. She flung out a hand behind her, impatient, and Marshall grabbed it. And so the two crossed the creek.

When he reached the other side, Marshall realized he could no longer see his house if he looked behind him. It was very hot, and his head was sweaty, and he could’ve gone for a snack. At least a drink of water.

They were walking steadily forward until Tara noticed a chain-link fence. “Yep,” she said, nodding. “Right through here.” Marshall noticed there was a gap in the fence, a portion of it hanging askew like a broken toy. They eased their bodies through the hole.

Marshall noticed a building in the distance. It looked like a school, or hospital. There was an American flag blowing overhead. “Whose house is this?”

“The government’s. What we’re looking for is over here.”

She grabbed him by the shoulders. “Close your eyes. Listen. You hear it?”

He squeezed his eyes tight and tried to block out the wind through the

grass and his sister's breath and the faraway sound of an airplane. It was frustrating him that he wasn't getting it, that there was a game Tara was playing and he didn't know the rules, when he made himself be still.

And then he heard it. Or, felt it—the sound was a million tiny vibrations coming from his chest. But then he realized that it wasn't his chest at all, it was a buzzing sound coming from somewhere outside his body. He opened his eyes.

He had seen, but not noticed, the white boxes on sticks dotted throughout the field. He had not known what they were.

"What are those?" He asked.

"Hive boxes," Tara said. "Mom and Dad supervised the construction. I looked it up in the library. Each one of those hives has thousands of bees. And there are *fifty*."

That seemed impossible, Marshall thought. "Thousand" was an impossible word. He had never seen a thousand of anything, probably. Let alone more than *one* thousand.

"The bees are inside? They won't sting us?"

"Not from here they won't." She pushed the thicker end of the bat into the ground, resting her elbow on the handle. "Marshall." He looked at his sister, and now she was the one looking away from him, eyes darting at the horizon, at her twiddling fingers. "I need to ask you a favor. I understand if you can't do it, but I have to ask, okay?"

Tara had never, not once, asked him for anything.

She closed her eyes and breathed. "We have to break them," she said. She asked him to take the baseball bat and swing it, hard, into the boxes, breaking them into splintered sticks and muddied honeycomb. To hurt a million honeybees. She explained to him that the honeybees were dying, that the nation was counting on the colonies thriving. But still she asked him to do it. Marshall, who had yet to use his body for hurt in this life.

"Please," she said. "It needs to be quiet."

The thing is—he did it. He took his boy body and lifted that bat into the air and rained it down on the hive boxes, again and again. Maybe he was like his sister, at least parts of him. Maybe he was angry, too.

At the first whack a swarm of bees buzzed angrily, but he kept going, over, and over, and over, and soon there were wilted bee bodies swimming in the ruined honey, there was honey and chipped pieces of wings and bits of leg coating the baseball bat, yellow and black furry bodies swarming around Marshall's red and crying face.

The bees were swarming so fast and so loudly that his breathing came in hard and fast and he looked for his sister for help, but Tara herself was swarmed with bees, yellow and black and glints of eyes covering her head to toe. He screamed her name, but the buzzing was so loud that he knew she could not hear him, and then he noticed, the bees weren't swarming, they were taking pieces of her skin and flying away with them, she was slowly unfolding, she was melting.

And then a cloud of bees erupted from his sister's body, and there was nothing to do but scream and wish for his mother.

He looked down, and his arm was covered—more fur than skin—and they were taking it away, flying his skin into oblivion, and he—he himself—was diminishing, trying to hold on to boy, but it was easier to fly—

And we flew out of the sack of skin, joining our sisters in the sky to find a different hive, a different home, in a hovering, musical cloud.

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