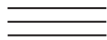




THREE
RIVERS
REVIEW
OF UNDERGRADUATE LITERATURE

VOLUME XVII



UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH HONORS COLLEGE

Three Rivers Review 2012
Volume XVII

Three Rivers Review of Undergraduate Literature is an annual student-run publication of the University of Pittsburgh Honors College. It seeks to enliven, foster and publish the best undergraduate fiction and poetry in the greater Pittsburgh area. It accepts submissions, from September 15 to January 15 of each academic year, from undergraduate students at the University of Pittsburgh, all University of Pittsburgh branch campuses and all institutions of post-secondary, undergraduate education in the Pittsburgh area. Inquiry and submissions can be e-mailed as attachments in Microsoft Word (.doc compatible) files to: ThreeRiversReview@gmail.com. Submission requirements are: a maximum of 15 pages (double-spaced) fiction or 5 poems. All submissions must be accompanied by a cover sheet including name, academic year, academic institution, mailing address, e-mail address, submission titles and a press-ready biographical statement. Submitted work is not guaranteed to be returned. Authors will be contacted as to the status of their work no later than two (2) months following the current volume's submission deadline.

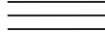
Three Rivers Review wishes to sincerely thank Dean Edward Stricker, Karen Billingsley & the University Honors College, Jeff Oaks, University of Pittsburgh English Department, Jane McCafferty, Sharon McDermott, Dawn Lundy Martin, Chris Chirdon, Nour Abdelghani, Joel W. Coggins, Jeannette Schroeder, Evan Chen, Cheryl Corey at *McNaughton-Gunn*, and all past editors of TRR.

Cover Image by Shelby Pasell.

Copyright © 2012 *Three Rivers Review*/University of Pittsburgh Honors College. All rights revert to author upon publication. Copying done for non-personal or classroom use is forbidden without the expressed consent of *Three Rivers Review*/University Honors College or author. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, in creative works contained in *Three Rivers Review* is entirely coincidental.

THREE RIVERS REVIEW

VOLUME XVII



UNIVERSITY HONORS COLLEGE SUPERVISORS

UHC Dean	Edward Stricker
Assistant to the Dean	Karen Billingsley

UNIVERSITY STAFF ADVISOR

English Department Faculty	Jeff Oaks
----------------------------	-----------

EDITORIAL BOARD

Editors-in-Chief	Matthew Tumas
	Ariel Fisher
Fiction Editor	Emily Maier
Poetry Editor	Kelsey Hughes
Head of Publicity	Sophia Bender
Design Editor	Shelby Pasell

THREE RIVERS REVIEW STAFF

Poetry:

Samuel K. Bolno
Julian Day Cooney
Melissa Disa-Mandoly
Megan E. Vanek
Cameron Vass

Fiction:

Michael Elofer
Samantha Harper
Donna McDermott
Rita Patel
Madalyn Sproull

CONTEST JUDGES

Jane McCafferty & Sharon McDermott

CONTENTS

POETRY

2012 THREE RIVERS REVIEW POETRY PRIZE

WINNER: Hannah Aizenman

Emergency 13

Names for Light 21

RUNNER-UP: Nina Luckshmi Mohan

Growing up Tiger 22

You Feel Me? 23

SOPHIA O'BRIEN

The Future 24

ROBERT KEISER

Delirium Tremens 25

FICTION

2012 THREE RIVERS REVIEW FICTION PRIZE

WINNER: Adam Dow Talk of Foolish People	29
RUNNER-UP: Nick Slapikas May-Bell Burning	39
DILON DIATLO You Are The Ants	51
QUINN KEANEY The Viaduct	59
KELLY KNISLEY The Dimples His Mother Loved	66
NATE KREICHMAN And God, I Know, I'm One	72
LIZ MCLAUGHLIN The Cabin	81
SARAH REAGLE Suspended in their Cocoonery	90
ANNA QUINN Second Degree	99

COMMENTARY

POETRY INTERVIEW: Dawn Lundy Martin	111
CONTRIBUTOR AND JUDGE BIOGRAPHIES	117

EDITORS' NOTES

Well. I can't tell you how happy it makes me to know that you're reading this. But I suppose the impossible has never been one to keep me from trying.

What you hold in your hands is, something I haven't realized until this year, the most beautiful thing...ever. Whether you've already bent it out of shape, dropped it in a puddle, allowed dust to collect on it, vomited all over it, lost crumbs to the abyss between the pages of it, or in any other way disgraced or dismembered this immaculate testament to undergraduate brilliance, the idea and the purpose behind this...this...Three Rivers Review [Of Undergraduate Literature], is, well, just the best thing ever.

Every year, it's the realization of a dream.

I used to just look at Three Rivers Review and kind of take for granted all the work that goes into it. But there are so many things that go into this magazine. If you take a minute to look at it all, and think about it. Look at the copyright page, at every little word. At the staff page, at the table of contents. Even at the page towards the back that says Volume XVII and tells you what font we used and who made them. Look at all of the things you never really bother to look at. Look at the number XVII and realize there were 16 volumes and 29 issues of Three Rivers Review before this, and two volumes of Thirst before that. And each volume built on, and learned from, the ones before it.

And now when I think about this issue, I don't just see the cover, or the stories inside. I don't just see the work I've put into it myself, or the work my friends, the writers, the honors college, or the judges – everyone who's been credited here – have put into it. I see the work that everyone who has ever even slightly been involved with Three Rivers Review has put into it. Even though it's just a little undergraduate literary magazine, that's a lot of work. A lot of work. It's all led up to this issue, the one you hold in your hands.

And I see how everything, everything, everything has led up to now, to this moment.

Matthew Tumas
Editor-in-Chief
Three Rivers Review

The magazine that you have in your hands right now is the product of some hard work by some very dedicated individuals mixed with a love of writing and a desire to share that passion. This year's magazine is full of talent and we're thrilled to have been able to work with fantastic submissions. My years with TRR have been brief, but it's amazing to see what this magazine has become in such a short amount of time. Even more so, getting to work behind the scenes has proven to be illuminating: the sort of work that goes into putting this magazine together boggles my mind and for that, I'm more than proud to be able to share this with you.

I'd be remiss if I didn't thank a bevy of folks for their involvement with this. First and foremost, my co-editor, Matt Tumas. Matt really took charge with this magazine and what you're holding in your hands is the aftermath of his numerous phone calls, emails, inquiries and a whole lot of nagging me. His ideas for the magazine proved to be brilliant and I could not imagine working with a more devoted person. Our editors, Em Maier and Kelsey Hughes, for taking the time to hold meetings and lead discussions about the submissions. Their enthusiasm was never ending and it will really show through in the selections that were made for this magazine. Our lovely staff who showed up for meetings even though they might have been busy, or had to trudge through the indiscriminate Pittsburgh weather to get to them (and also for putting up with my ridiculous emails). Julian Day Cooney for being a sounding board for Matt.

But of course, we couldn't have done this without the help and support of the University. Thanks to the UHC for allowing our magazine to grow and flourish, as well as Dean Edward Stricker. Thanks to our advisor Jeff Oaks for his continued help. Thanks to Karen Billingsley at the UHC for answering every single one of our questions. Special thanks to Sharon McDermott and Jane McCafferty for being our guest judges this year and taking the time to read through all of the submissions we sent them. We'd like to thank Dawn Lundy Martin for lending herself and her time to our interview.

But most importantly, we would like to thank the undergraduate Pittsburgh writing community. There's passion, there's devotion, and there's craft. It's your dedication that contributes and supports the literary community. It was difficult to choose pieces this year (as is every year), but we're confident the ones we have chosen exhibit a broad range of talent and skill. We would like to congratulate those whose work is in this magazine with extra special golf claps going to our contest winners. Please continue your writing

work, as your contributions have proven to be valuable.

Thank you so much for reading Volume XVII of Three Rivers Review. Your support means the world to us.

Read on,

Ariel Fisher

Editor-in-Chief

Three Rivers Review

POETRY

2012 THREE RIVERS REVIEW POETRY PRIZE

JUDGE'S REMARKS

Hannah Aizenman: "Emergency"

"Emergency" is an ambitious, haunting and haunted poem packed with lyrical fragments and a sense of a speaker trying desperately to make a whole of such fragments. The intelligent use of white space creates both a visual and a tonal sense of a speaker moving between two worlds, haunted by an ancestor's ghost. The speaker's search for answers and her deep choice to remain a witness to the past, though at a cost to herself, make this poem both poignant and compelling. This poet successfully married a strong use of diction with a strong use of form. I applaud the tension created with the fragmented sections up against the solid-looking, column like sections of the poem. Finally, I chose this poem for the strength of its lyrical language. "My zayde died/ in the spring, pear blossoms falling/ with the smell of dead fish and/ the softness of snow...;" or "The sound of my voice/ a violin burning, the entire/ orchestra a waning inferno,/ the chorus rising from a /grave dug deep..." The poet created a complex catalogue, elegy and dream, giving flesh to the ghost that haunts the piece. It is a dark, beautiful work.

Nina Luckshmi Mohan

"Growing Up Tiger" transforms what could have remained a straightforward narrative poem into a deeper, sadder, more textured testament that fights against both bigotry in the larger society and self-hatred in the individual's heart. I was drawn in by the poem's movement, the compressed childhood beginning with the speaker in the womb "clearing out/ the space where dahl and shark/ should be..." A compassionate, somewhat angry, and somewhat sad voice leads us through the emotional landmine of being an "outsider" under the "...blackening ray of the American/ sun..." The poet's intelligent choice to juxtapose an American moment (the speaker's mother in the grocery store, who "couldn't believe/ frozen food, missed the goat meat./...was overwhelmed by the bread..") with the moments in Kandy Province (where the boys "...call sowkiyama to my body wrapped in a sari...") helped to make this poem a strong exploration of identity. This poet gave a lot of attention to individual word choice and the element of mystery and surprise in the poem. These smart choices made the poem stand out among the rest.

Sharon Fagan McDermott
Author of *Bitter Acoustic*
Poet

WINNER: HANNAH AIZENMAN

EMERGENCY

i.

Bearing witness:

the memory passed from body to body;

that years later—in the moment of yours beside mine
a spatial-temporal situation a point of origin for the

divergent vectors of our dreams—

mine bone and barbed wire
mine cattle cars and carbon monoxide

a fast-holding and feverish a primitive panic,
an historical pathos unrelenting, obsessive.

Bearing witness:

If I had known you would say later
(and yet you knew dreamt me
faceless, atrophic a pencil sketch of a girl).

The snow came, quiet, as we slept—an incident,
the blizzard, like anything else—

an incident, like your body beside mine.

I woke to a landscape

seamless, erased. *Blindness*,
I thought. *Help*, I thought.

Your eyes stayed shut.

If I had known—

ii.

In bed with you, I was never
in bed with you. The ghost
came nightly, stronger than I,
with her hair so like mine,
her despair so like mine, and
her lips and her hips and
her hands so like mine, and
even I could not tell us apart.

iii.

Did you ever—?

Bearing witness:

my zayde showed me the faded ink in his arm. It read *B-21* When I was young
it read the story of a boy who should not have survived.

Did you ever—?

And when he spoke his accent heavy
the words floated from his mouth
(names of the places where he had half-lived
Pionki Auschwitz Braunschweig Wöbbelin)
like pillars of thick dark smoke.

He said:

*You were always cold
always hungry
always scared.*

The two questions he would not answer:

Did you ever kill anyone?

Did you ever eat human flesh?

iv.

I relinquished my name as
it fell from your mouth: I
took that of my ghost, or
gave her mine. Drunk on
honey and wine and the black
milk of daybreak, I called
myself Shulamith (*Shulamith*,
Shulamith). The ghost carried
me into the night and the fog.

v.

[*Things I gleaned from my zayde's apartment:*

two dictionaries in Russian and Polish
two suitcases a dingy bong
an American atlas a collection of letters
a mirror framed by gilded nymphs.]

vi.

I woke to all white
an army of nurses in starched uniforms
hovering through the
 labored breathing
 hearts half-beating.
I woke to a head full of
 television static;
outside, the snow—
 summer must have come *sometime —*
a world where I might
once have lived—
 but I can only ever remember the cold —
an image—

What is an image?

What is its context?
Can a wound mean more
without a weapon?

*This is a place where
people go to die.*

I woke to
a number
on my wrist

woke calling your name or wanting
to call your name (you in some
remote office, you handling
the paperwork)—

no answer, only the void only
the unseen orchestrations of a thousand

clean hands.

vii.

The sound of my voice
a violin burning, the entire
orchestra a waning inferno,
the chorus rising from a
grave dug deep. Nothing
to say and no language
for it—only the torturous
silence of snow, only a dead
tongue behind my teeth.

viii.

A world where I might once have lived
(*What is an image?*)—

your body beside my body,
the summer that must have come.

Say: strawberries
cheap champagne
enough

Say: cigarettes and
Say: that the body would be

your face pressed to my neck and
no old bones tangled in my curls
that I could point to a thing and call it real.

Before I succumbed to the pull of the memory tide
to the mad lovesongs of all these wordsmith sirens

I would say could say
light at dawn
a winged prayer

a thing alive nestled behind my breast,
some soft animal humming
I am, I am, I am.

And if I had erupted into
a flock of doves instead of so many ashes

it might have been—
I only wanted—

but instead a sinking ship
overboard the lovers the poets everything drowning,
the whole damn thing.

ix.

Shulamith; I would not be
confined—wanted you to
see my bones were but
cold glass flutes, a wet
heavy rose where my
mouth should have been.
I shrouded you in smoke
and dream; you could
not fight—your fingers
blind on lampshade skin.

x.

Another hospital years before
and I sat there, in the chair beside the bed
the helpless witness
to someone else's nightmares.

My zayde asleep

and shouting

HELP

help

help

help

help

and when I woke him

*It's getting away and I have nowhere to go
It's getting away and I have nowhere to go*

he lay pale as a haint
in the bright white light

his eyes like pits,
polluted wells.

What is an image?

Say: an illusion

Say: created and creator

(Did you ever—?)

Say: point to a thing and
call it real.

My zayde died

in the spring, pear blossoms falling
with the smell of dead fish and
the softness of snow

left
left

the pieces of a half-assembled story
so many spaces I might never fill

(it might have been
I only wanted)

Did you ever—?

HELP

xi.

[*Things I might have left behind:*

a list of words for an unwritten sestina
a toothbrush by your bathroom sink
an empty bottle of cheap red wine
bedsheets stained with blood and ink.]

xii.

My body was not my body—
was not flesh and bone and
blood—became, at your
touch, a column of pages
from a book unbound, spine
all unglued (the disassembled
history of more than this
single sick girl). I burst into
flame; fell into ashes; lay, an
elegy, upon your pillow.

xiii.

You found me

If I had known —

and the specifics didn't matter

blood and bathtub
noose and stool
head in oven

it could have been anything

a miscarriage
a car wreck
appendicitis

but the failure of the body
that most fragile machine

a thing I could point to
and say *real*.

A spatial-temporal situation, where I see
everything white that I know is not white

elemental dissolution
the want for air, for water

HELP

where your hands are only your hands
pressed to the cobweb curve of my spine
where my head is flooding, filled with
warped film television static snow.

What is an image?

The documentaries we watched
the dark theater of obsession
I could never look away

the gravity of the grave

the currents of those underworld rivers.

An image:

your palms cold against my back,
the wails of sirens
lights spinning in the night
like some sordid carnival

something in me breaking
the sound of
shattered glass.

Tragedy, trajectory: something
sinister in rising from the ash.

means living to Bearing witness
tell the tale.

Something human I say (*Did you ever—?*)

I cannot give up

my ghost.

NAMES FOR LIGHT

In the beginning (I wrote)
there was a house. I wrote a house
out of smoke, out of feathers and ash—
phoenix house, firebird house.

I wrote myself a lover who could hold
flames in his hands. I wrote my own hands
into orchids, wrote until they disappeared.

Into every corner, cobwebs; hunger
into every shadow—I wrote myself full
of a longing made from marble.

A museum of sleeplessness.
A manual on how to come undone.

I wrote the heart into a nova,
bones into melting glass; with trembling
fingers stitched the cosmos together—
amateur seamstress, untrained surgeon.

A bed (I wrote) of half-forgotten
myths, of incomplete bodies, the spaces

between words, between teeth, between
cells—here, the lover offered his
infernals like small alms, and everything

I touched turned cold and into stone.
The house collapsed, I wrote
and could not raise it up again.
I wrote myself into a place with

no windows: only crumbling
flowers and keys to no doors,
a broken kaleidoscope, so many

grave rubbings, a list of all the words
that I might use to say alone.

RUNNER-UP: NINA LUCKSHMI MOHAN

GROWING UP TIGER

I was born allergic to legumes
in Park Ridge, IL under the fluorescent
sheen of Lutheran General
and I rejected Jaffna prenatally
as I slurped up pastries
from my mother's belly, clearing out
the space where dahl and shark
should be. When my mother fed me
white rice with her hands I could feel
her cold, sticky fingers resting on my lips
saying *pavan, be calm and eat*. On her first
visit to the grocery store she couldn't believe
frozen food, missed the goat's meat.
She was overwhelmed by the bread.
Twelve different kinds of bread. She tells
me that in Jaffna the dogs and cats ate people
food and I'm reminded of my life's greatest
irony, or as the doctors call it: self-hatred
because it's hate to hide myself
from the blackening ray of the American
sun and it's hate to spit out tea
from Kandy province and it's hate
to stomp at the boys who call
sowkiyama to my body wrapped in a sari
so instead I eat my beige food
and I am calm and through mouthfuls
of white rice and salty cheeks
I cry for *amma, amma* so I won't go
to school and I won't lunge
at the girl who says I say my mother's
name backwards and I won't
dig my nails into her hand until she bleeds
my stripes onto my forearm
so no one will ever call me a terrorist again.

YOU FEEL ME?

I plucked my bones from a banana tree twenty years ago. They beat against my liver like the sun on your skin. Squint to see the angle where my mind becomes my ear, I am sharp. My feet curve outwards so that each footfall is a fanfare for my arrival, but you are deaf. I shouldn't have to ask you to touch the spaces behind my knees and awake my lone dimple. You're supposed to draw out the drone in the gap between my lips. To make pillows out of my heels. To catch my knuckles as they burst out of my fingers and skitter across the floor, running wild. You say you'll never see what I see, but I dare you to dip your thumbs into my pupils and pull out my mother's childhood. If you were brave you'd churn these banana bones to your own rhythm and make them shiver. Make them grind up the hairs on my hands until they settled all over my forearms like dirty sand. Walk through my calves and crouch inside my ribcage. Chew on the back of my spine until I am pulpy. Blend me, blur my teeth. No more digging, no more carving. Instead you leave me here, sitting outside myself, while my nerves trill. While my nailbeds buzz. While my bones hum and shrink inside me.

SOPHIA O'BRIEN

THE FUTURE

it was in the back seat of the car, the neighbors told me
it had been rotting there for weeks
we were living in the country then, with our dogs or other animals
everyone was hiding bodies somewhere
we were all at war, we were all war criminals
counting our fence posts and imagining them to be borders
imagining our steps to be miles,
our children: soldiers

when locusts came to colonize the vegetable garden,
my mother stayed inside and drank cold tea
evening came quickly that winter
and fog lay heavy on limbs like snow
I gathered my bicycle spokes to use as weapons
walked to school with pockets full of needles
sometimes I felt them turn inward and prick my own skin
hook their teeth into me and hang off my hands like feathers

planes flew overhead those days
billowing flags tied to their tails
blue, gold, or whatever we belonged to
and I hoped that they meant we would dig up the man
who was living in our basement
I hoped he would speak again soon
I hoped we could let the cows out into the field

ROBERT KEISER
DELIRIUM TREMENS

Tongue writhes.

Escape from the overhanging wall
Rippling
 Faces
 Gasping
 Excitement.

 A faint aura
Like red rock lit by the setting sun
The horizon enveloped me,
Growing from heart and lungs.

Inside deeper emptier than desert air

Like neon of a commercial restaurant,
Throat—guttural—grasping for a glass
 Of something.

Complete loss
 Of control,
In dauntless days.

Like a mescal worm
 Cradled by cold linoleum
Still
 Drowning in the golden liquid
Of the cocoon.

I remember I pulled the cold metal
Door open, sunken eyed, and smiling
When the faint buzz of the aura rose.

 Still swinging, still rising. The empty
 Space remains. Only filled

By flowing demons.

FICTION

2012 THREE RIVERS REVIEW FICTION PRIZE

JUDGE'S REMARKS

Adam Dow: "Talk of Foolish People"

"Talk of Foolish People" portrayed the character of Marvin with real sympathy. He is hapless and a bit lost, kind, decent, and tremendously lonely. I liked the way the narrator hovered affectionately above Marvin, detaching from him in places, commenting on what Marvin could not know about himself. Loneliness propels him forward, and his encounter with Brian is completely strange and might have been life-changing, but Marvin, true to himself, is "not sure if he had just narrowly missed a monumental accident or miracle." While so many of the stories I read were admirable for different reasons, I kept coming back to the scene in this one where Brian's asking Marvin, "Are you like me? Or are you like one of the birds? The story was unusual and very well written.

Nick Slapikas: "May Bell Burning"

The writer of "May Bell Burning" made me care about the boys in the small town of Edmonsville, and plunged me back into childhood where boys like Walter command wary respect with violence. The writer has a great ear, and the dialogue springs to life; I rooted for the characters, and especially for the narrator as he came to understand Walter and Charlie, and his relationship to both. I admired the voice of the narrator, who sometimes surprised me with a direct address: "There's something that you have to know about Charlie and it's important: he's never going to hit that baseball." Another very well written story with great characterization.

Jane McCafferty
Writing Professor, Carnegie Mellon University
Author of *First You Try Everything*

TALK OF FOOLISH PEOPLE

It had been a long morning and afternoon for Marvin, but there was much more to come this day. His hometown looked different, driving back from the cemetery, but this was the usual. He hadn't lived or taught math in Stavenport for some twenty years, but he and his wife Annie made the six-hour trip from New York, less often of late, to see their daughter who now did both of those things. The town was in a perpetual state of comparison for Marvin: old against new, or, what he *remembered* as the old against the decidedly new; Marvin hadn't realized that, like everyone else, his memories were often quite distorted from the real events. It did not help that Marvin's memories were getting old.

One memory brought Marvin to the funeral of Ron Fenice this morning. He was sure his reason for going was sound. Not because Annie was keeping him in New York while his grandchildren were growing up. *They* were staying in New York while *their* grandchildren were growing up: it wasn't any easier on her, Marvin knew. Not that he hadn't noticed Annie was having the time of her life in New York. He had seen her change in ways he could not comprehend a person of his and her age doing. It was not that he felt caged by the city; or that he saw his wife perpetually claiming her freedom each day and envied her. Nor that he hated her for keeping him there. It wasn't that Marvin needed the feeling of normalcy the act of sitting in a church and watching ceremony upon tradition upon ceremony gives one. But, it was, of course, each of these things. Ironically, Marvin was not very good at putting two and two together.

Marvin went, he thought, because he recognized the name Fenice. On Saturday morning, with his grandchild on her lap, Naomi said, "Paper says four funerals are going on tomorrow. Two at the Lutheran, one at the Methodist, and one and the Catholic."

"Anyone we know?" Marvin asked.

Naomi read three names that Marvin was disappointed he didn't know. He didn't seem to know anyone here anymore. Then she said, "Ronald Fenice," and something lit in Marvin, like hearing a sharp noise in the black drifting off to sleep. But he had not figured it out then—not that there was anything to really figure out—then, he only knew he would have to come up with a reason to go to the funeral on Sunday morning, before he and Annie left for New York.

Somewhere between then and Saturday night, before Marvin

went to bed, a dim barroom emerged and disappeared, until the lights and the mirror revealed a solid, large man sitting to his right. Then the man's face was clear—Marvin had not forgotten him, but he hadn't remembered him in a long time. He was a brute, and on the night Marvin so desperately wished to remember clearly, Fenice wanted Marvin to know it.

Fenice was a loud man; Marvin knew that to be true. What he had said to Marvin before slapping his big hand across Marvin's chest with a little laugh, that wasn't so clear. Marvin remembered there being a boy in that barroom—some barroom, probably that one—who discomfited him. More the boy's presence than the boy himself bothered Marvin, because he thought of Naomi as a child and how he never went to bars when she was little, let alone took her to one and made her sit in the corner. Alone. But each of these memories had their separate strands, none of which Marvin was willing to recognize. It could not be young Brian Fenice in that barroom. It could not be that the man joked about hitting the boy. It couldn't even be that Marvin was the coward he made himself out to be, imagining that he only laughed off the remark about abusing the boy.

Marvin had made it all up. At the least, he had interwoven respectively true stories to make something absurdly untrue. If it had been a book—perhaps a movie, for Marvin didn't read much—he would not have believed that the character Himself would ever go to the funeral in search of the abused boy, much less follow him to the burial in the hopes of actually approaching him, all in order to apologize for something that would have to have happened almost forty years ago. What would he even say? *Sorry your dad might have abused you when you were little?* It didn't matter that it wasn't plausible.

Say what you will of it, but Marvin was in a lonely place. Making him even lonelier, he didn't know he was in denial about his loneliness. When he lied and told Annie and Naomi that he was going to the funeral because he knew Ron Fenice from the school years back, he thoroughly enjoyed that they believed he had an old friend from Stavenport. So he went to the funeral. Then he got curious and asked a smiley old woman if Ronald had a son, which he did not, but she pointed out his nephew, Brian. So, looking for the face of the boy in the man, Marvin watched him. Even though it was not there, Marvin was intrigued; he went to the cemetery, as well. He even walked towards Brian right after the closing prayer at the burial, intent on saying he was sorry or hello or something like that.

But Brian's wife spoke as Marvin got close.

"Do you want to try again? Don't answer now, just, would you even consider?" She was looking Brian right in the eye, a little playfully. Even Marvin didn't need help reading that one. Brian had obviously had trouble getting it up, Marvin figured. He guessed he'd be about fifty. Marvin added it to the list of things he knew about him.

Marvin followed him home, not even sure that he would bring up what he thought he knew about Brian. All to have someone to talk to, someone he at least knew a little. Or so he thought. A few hours later, Marvin came back and knocked on Brian's door.

When the door opened, and it was Brian standing there, Marvin said, "Hi. I was at your uncle Ron's funeral this morning." This, he thought, suggested a desire to talk inside, but Brian only looked at him. "Could I—" he said, looking beyond Brian into the house.

"What about the funeral," Brian stated. He didn't look like this was where his attention laid, his eyes moving as if to trace an aura around Marvin's head. As if Marvin were not a person with eyes to meet. It was a countenance Marvin had grown accustomed to.

He hadn't prepared for an interrogation. When he lived in Stavenport, a visitor after a relative's funeral was almost expected. If he had been let inside, he would have had a little time and some space to get to know Brian; he could make up a loose tie like the one he gave Annie and Naomi. But he made something up, figuring Brian would correct him and still let him inside either way.

"I met your father once in a bar. Hank Fenice, right?" He knew it was Hank because the smiley woman told him so. "Worked as a guard in a prison or peniten—penitent—" Marvin snapped his fingers as he looked at the floor and, noticing a large, pink box on the porch with Brian's name on it, said, "What do you call those?" When he looked up, the door was closing on him.

When Marvin's daughter Naomi became a teacher like he had, there were jokes about keeping the tradition alive or inheriting the family business, but even family members didn't say things like, "We could use more teachers from this family." He was a teacher by occupation, not by calling. As a child, he had wanted to be a baseball player like Joltin' Joe. Then he wanted something easy. Textbooks could teach as well as anybody he took for class in high school, so he decided to become a teacher of basic algebra.

Naomi went to college in New York City in 1987. In 1988,

Annie decided they were ready for a bigger town. Marvin had asked if that was such a good idea; he had wondered if he would get a job in a safe school in the city. Annie insisted kids at the school in town didn't like Marvin, which, although it hurt his feelings, he could believe. The truth was that Marvin was just one of those teachers you would say, when he died, taught for a living. He was the teacher you knew you had but maybe forgot in what grade or what exactly the class was called. So you could forget him, but not many really disliked him like Annie said.

After college, Naomi came back home to teach, where she thought she could affect the kids. And she had—Marvin sometimes received letters from the principal and former colleagues who cheered him for implanting the idea of teaching in such a “capable educator.” But never did the letters say, “Just like her father.” Annie had settled right into the city and, even now, was not prepared to come home. So, in their arrangement, it was Mom and Dad who came home to visit the kids on holidays and long weekends. It was Mom who came home, as if from school, and told her daughter what she was learning in New York City: which organic foods she could be buying for the kids, expensive and terribly hard to find items in Stavenport, recyclable diapers of the same impracticality, and which coffee flavors from the chain restaurant in which she worked would “change Naomi’s life.” They had come this weekend because Annie’s schedule had changed and she wouldn’t be going in on Monday. Marvin was, of course, in no hurry to go back.

Marvin was walking off the steps and down the sidewalk that ran directly through the middle of Brian’s yard, discouraged and yet a little relieved by the sudden rejection he felt, when he heard a door shut behind him and footsteps approaching.

He turned and saw that Brian was already next to him. He watched Brian say, “Actuall-y...” and, spinning Marvin around by the shoulders, Brian directed him toward the house. “There is something we could talk about,” Brian said as he walked Marvin back to the porch and up the steps like he were a fugitive in need of stowing.

The door shut. Marvin stood in the doorway for a moment next to the man. He looked around the house, unsure what to make of their shuffling on the way in. It seemed empty except for the two of them and the furniture. “Nice place,” he said to Brian.

“Mmhmm, yes,” Brian said, “well keep your coat on. We won’t be staying long, but take a seat if you’d like.”

“What’s the hurry?” Marvin said, sitting on the deep brown leather couch.

Marvin was leaning his cane on the chair next to him when Brian said, "My wife won't be gone much longer."

Since they came through the door, Brian had gone to the sink, gulped an entire glass of water and, wiping his hands and mouth in one fluid motion with a dishrag, had already made his way back to the couch where he stood over Marvin.

"Doesn't she like visitors?" Marvin asked.

"We had a disagreement earlier," Brian said.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Marvin said, "anything important or just one of those things?" It wasn't his business, and he didn't really want to know; it was just a setup, since disagreements are usually trivial, to be able to comment on the connection between husbands and the way their wives start silly fights.

"Quite important," Brian said, "are you energetic enough to walk?"

Some small defense went off in Marvin. "Walk where?" he asked. He felt he was about to be let in on something.

"Just to the other end of the house," Brian said, pointing down a hallway off the living room.

"Could I just explain myself a little first?"

"Please do," Brian said.

"Well I'm from New York, from here I mean, but I've lived in New York City for some time and my wife's been on my case lately, I'm sorry I don't know where to begin actually."

Brian looked at him and laughed. Marvin didn't recognize that there was empathy, or perhaps camaraderie in it, for it sounded to him like a scoff. Brian looked like he had a purpose, walking around the house as Marvin imagined a president in the White House should. It looked like Brian considered it home, as if he knew it as well as anyone ever would, but something important was keeping him from relaxing in it. Marvin had already forgotten the vague details of his barroom conjuration and only wondered whether he wanted to know what the "something important" was.

"You look nervous," Brian said. "What is your name?"

"Marvin," he said.

"Do you have kids?"

"I have a daughter, Naomi, she teaches in town," Marvin said.

"I don't have kids," Brian said, "but I'll bet she's great."

Marvin used to sometimes get complaints from parents when a child didn't do well in his class, but they'd simply call him

dull or boring. He was really just passive. But he knew Naomi was a good teacher; she was just that kind of person. Marvin wished he could be around her more often.

He thought of the New York City apartment. One could watch the cabinets in which, daily, piles would grow of Annie-sized handfuls, a different color for each flavored-coffee shot from the “flavor station” at Annie’s workplace where she stocked most and withheld some for sampling at home, although Marvin liked his black.

“I *hear* she’s wonderful,” Marvin said. That’s how he meant to say it anyway. He wanted to see what a great teacher she was. It must have come out as, “I hear she’s *wonderful*,” though.

“Is that bad,” Brian asked, a grin beginning to stretch, “that your daughter is a good teacher?” He sat down in a chair across from Marvin and shook a set of keys Marvin hadn’t known were in his hand.

“If I’m holding you up, please don’t let me intrude,” Marvin said, looking to his cane—something he had noticed only recently happened unconsciously when he thought about moving.

“What did you do for a living?” Brian asked.

“I was a teacher, too,” Marvin said.

“Ahh, I see then,” Brian said, “this is my point, then. This is what I tell her and she still... that’s bull stink,” Brian said.

“What?”

Brian leaned forward and smiled. “I’m sorry,” he said, “it’s not funny. It’s just that if you had been here a little earlier you could have been my Exhibit A. You’re jealous right? She’s a better teacher than you?”

“I’m proud of her,” Marvin said, laughing, hoping Brian would laugh, too. “Why would I be jealous of my daughter?”

“I think you should see this now,” Brian said. “It’s about my Uncle Ron.”

Marvin had done a few things he expected to do at Brian’s, but none of it in a manner he would have expected. What he wanted to talk about, he wasn’t sure, exactly. He figured he would talk about Naomi and the grandkids, but he hadn’t anticipated being accused of envying her. He thought Brian might tell him about his uncle Ron, maybe even about himself—but he hadn’t wanted to go to some other room to do so. Brian was running on high while Marvin was only trying to make it outside the same man he came in. This was Stavenport, though. If you couldn’t trust people here, the world must have passed the brink.

"Okay," Marvin said. He grabbed his cane and scooted forward on the couch. Brian grabbed his free arm to help him up. They walked down a hallway, Marvin noticing then the size of the house. He counted four doors on the way, one of which must have been a bathroom, as well as a stairway to the second floor. The thought of how many rooms were up there startled Marvin—all the room any family could want and no children in the few pictures on the walls. It was an L-shaped hallway, and at the end was the only door that directly faced them, each of the others having been on their left or right.

Brian opened the door and said, "This is where my wife would hint that she wanted my Uncle Ron to stay."

"Right," Marvin said. It was a very normal bedroom.

"My Uncle Ron? The dead guy, you knew him?"

"I never met him," Marvin said.

"You know he had M.S.?"

"Yes," Marvin said.

"He died in Rochester. In a care center. He and I never really talked except generally or like business acquaintances, even when I was seventeen and he had to take me in for a year after my dad died."

"That's too bad," Marvin said.

"Well, he once said something to me that I've never forgotten," Brian said, "I don't think he ever intended to take it back and always meant for it to hurt me."

"You had a fight?" Marvin asked.

"I just decided then that I didn't need him. He was only harmful."

"But your wife wanted him to live here with you?"

"I never told her exactly how I felt about him," Brian said. "I mean I never told her what he said. But she knew we weren't close and that I was uncomfortable with the idea of our getting closer. For the last however many years she'd call that place in Rochester around Christmas or his birthday and ask for a picture of him to shove in my face or comment on how bad he was looking."

Marvin felt like a child caught between two parents asking for his sympathies, and yet he knew he'd only hear Brian's version. He noticed that Brian was still shaking his cluster of keys, one of which he guessed was a car key Brian itched to use before his wife came home.

"Is this what you and your wife fought over today?"

"We never fought," Brian said, "she just couldn't let me get a word in." Marvin thought it ironic that Brian would complain so

as he ranted this story. "My wife and I have a strange relationship. My family has one of those histories—she gives me a lot of pity. Until there's someone else to feel sorry for and she makes me feel guilty about that. I stood over my last relative today, and I felt free. The family name had filtered down to me. Do you know what that feels like?"

Marvin knew what that felt like, but something told him it felt entirely differently to him than it did to Brian. It was all uniquely terrifying, and the house was beginning to make him feel uncomfortable. That feeling he had first relished in on the doorstep, of nervousness mixed with a near-assurance that he would leave feeling better than before, was gone. This was a mess. Marvin gripped his cane hard. Why would he go in this man's house?

"Why did you pull me in here the way you did?" Marvin asked.

Brian shut the door to the spare room and held his gaze on Marvin. "Ease up," he said.

Brian led Marvin back to the living room and stood in front of the door. Marvin wondered if it was to block him from leaving.

"Ease up," Brian said, "this could be important for you."

"Why?"

"Are you jealous of your daughter for being a better teacher than you?" Brian asked.

"I'm not," Marvin said.

"Then why the bitterness? Why are you here?"

"Are you going to let me go if I tell you?"

"I'm letting you go regardless, crazy," Brian said, "but why should I? What is there out there for you? You're a washed up father. You've done your job, stud."

"What the hell are you referring to," Marvin thundered.

"Aren't you different than you were before you had a kid?"

"Let me out the door, this is absurd."

"Give me your honest answer," Brian said, holding Marvin by the shoulders, looking right in his eyes, "Are you different?"

"Yes! Christ, yes. That's what happens when you're a father, even you know that now let me out."

"Do you know what my wife says to me after the burial today?" Brian asked. Marvin unknowingly knew exactly what she had said, but he hadn't seen the connection. "She asked me to make a damn baby with her," Brian said, loosening his grip on the shoulders of Marvin's jacket. "After all the trying we had done, off and on, I'm thinking we have this implicit agreement not to risk it with trying."

And she takes whatever freedom I get today and asks me to give it all up, to pretend I'm half my age and gullible, just so I could never sleep or smile again."

Marvin straightened himself out, pulling his jacket taught at the bottom. "You can't be thinking of it like that," he said.

"You can't think of it any other way," Brian said, "Kids are a pain."

"So why'd you pull me in here? That's none of my business."

"Not long before you came here, I was out in the back yard smoking my first cigarette in years," Brian looked proud of this. "These birds that gather in the trees outside our house were flying directionless around and back and forth. Like ponies going for a trot through a pasture, just on a whim. Then they would one by one land on the peak of a house. In all four directions, they were lining up side by side across the lengths of the roofs. I was thinking about my wife and that stupid spare room, and the cheeping kept getting louder. They sing when they land. Have you ever fallen asleep with the TV or music on?" he asked Marvin.

Marvin nodded.

"The sound was getting louder but it turned into a sort of hum. All at once, then, they flew from the houses in one direction, like a wall. Then it was silent, like the moment you wake up because the noise has left, and I was awake to see them dart off in unison in one direction, make a little correction, and fly back."

Marvin didn't know what to do. "That sounds like something," he said.

"It was beautiful," Brian said, "Beautiful because I could see it from a distance. None of them had any idea what they looked like. Off on my own, I see what's beautiful. I'm asking you, though, are you like me? Or are you like one of the birds?"

"What are you proposing?" Marvin asked.

"I'm going to try something tonight I've never done before. But it's what I want to do. Now you can go along with what I want to do, or you can come up with something else. Or you can go with the birds and be told what to do until the end. You can go through the motions, every day, all the time."

"What do you want to do?" Marvin asked.

"It's a yes or a no," Brian said, "do you want to come with me, or have you got a better idea?" He jangled the car keys.

Marvin pretended to think. He was not, of course, about to consider any of it. It was the talk of foolish people to think being selfish produced reward. On the responsible side, there was also the

possibility that this man could do something very, very stupid.

"I think I'd like to just head home," Marvin said.

"I had a feeling," Brian said. He shook Marvin's hand, which Marvin thought peculiar, and opened the door for him. "Good luck in New York City," he said, "And good luck with your wife." Marvin couldn't remember how much he had said about Annie, but Brian seemed to know what bothered him all along. He was not sure, as he stepped onto the porch, if he had just narrowly missed a monumental accident or a miracle. Brian was like a comet, only fascinating because, at this particular moment, it wasn't going to destroy you.

Marvin stepped outside and said goodbye. As he walked off the porch, he nearly tripped on the large box, which he discovered had a picture of a metal detector on the side that wasn't pink. As Marvin got in the car, he wondered what it might be for. He thought that after he talked to Naomi about convincing her mother to let them move back, and if it all worked out, he might like to come back and see if Brian Fenice found what he was looking for.

MAY-BELL BURNING

Today is the first day of summer vacation, and I have a tradition to tend to. First day after school lets out, I head out to Edmon's Creek with my friends Walter Freemont and Charlie Sherwood to set fire to all our school papers from the past year. The rule is that you have to give everything to that fire, because otherwise it's cheating and you're pussy. That's what Walter says, and you don't exactly argue with Walter.

Walter has the proudest middle finger in Edmonsville. I swear, he practices using it every night in front of his mirror, fine-tunes the flick of his wrist, polishes his extension and fluidity of deployment. It's startlingly expressive, snaps to attention with the vigor of a United States Marine. I've seen him use it at least twice a day for every day that I've known him, and I've known him for six years. He's flipped off deer, bad weather, sports teams, teachers, sales clerks, honey bees, best friends, worst enemies and even, on occasion, his mom, Edmonsville's librarian Clara Freemont. He's my best friend.

Walter's sitting on his front porch when I get to his house. He's got a cigarette jammed in the corner of his mouth and he's fiddling with a pack of matches. I start up the front steps and Walt looks up to smile and give me the finger.

"Hey, Walt," I say.

Walter nods and sucks on his cigarette, blows some smoke my way. I cough and he laughs. He takes the cigarette out of his mouth, grinds it out on the floor, flicks it over the railing.

"Hang tight, Willy. Just have to grab my stuff," he says, and he goes inside.

Sometimes I wonder what the hell I'm doing hanging around with Walter all the time. It's probably because it just feels so good to have him on your side. Walter attacks and defends with equal enthusiasm, and he never misses a chance to do either. He'll cuss you out until you're almost ready to cry, but the second somebody else tries to take a lick he'll drop whatever he's doing to come rescue you. When Walter's fighting for you there's nothing quite like it. It's like standing next to some kind of great cursing fire, but you know it's not going to burn you, at least not until it's done burning the other guy. You can feel invincible sometimes.

Just last year, in the eighth grade, this kid Danny Walker (he's a dick) was giving Charlie a hard time in the halls. Tripping

him, knocking his books out of his hands, all of that, until one day Walter goes over to Danny during lunch, calls him a “good-for-nothing lousy piece of shit,” and hits him right in the mouth. He came back over to our table, patted Charlie on the shoulder, and just went on eating his lunch. Walt has his moments.

Walter comes outside and punches me on the shoulder.

“What the hell was that for?”

“For bein’ an asshole, Willy. You oughtta work on that.”

“Piss up a rope.”

“Screw off, shitheap.”

Like poetry.

Edmonsville is small, and I would love to tell you what it’s close to except it’s not really close to anything. Kids in Edmonsville don’t do much except go to school, play the occasional game of baseball, and hang out in the surrounding woods sharing swear words and cigarettes. Last year our school got a trio of basketballs and a hoop for the blacktop and it didn’t get any serious use for a whole year. Walter tried to shoot once (he was trying to impress this girl named Carrie Wilson) and the ball didn’t even reach the backboard.

“Will, shut up and listen, ok? Basketball. Is. The *faggiest* sport. Of *all* time.”

“That’s because you don’t even know how to play, Walt. When I was up in Boston I played a game with my cousins, and it wasn’t all that bad.”

“You can’t even get the thing up to the hoop! Why in Christ is the hoop so high,” Walter said, lifting his hand above his head.

“Because basketball’s a game for tall people, Walt. You have to be tall to be good at it.”

“Tall and faggy. Mostly faggy.”

“Up in Boston—”

“Willy, you know what else I hate, fucking *Boston*. So just stop talking about it.”

Last year over Christmas I went up to Boston with my dad and mom to visit my aunt, uncle and cousins and Walter still hasn’t forgiven me for it. “Christmas was great, except for the part where I sat on my ass alone and my best friend skipped town,” he said. Mostly, he can go eat his own shit, because I had a good time. And it *was* fun playing basketball with my cousins.

Walter and I cross Splendid Avenue at the Flower Shop. Walter stops in the grocery store and comes out with a bag of M&Ms. He finishes the bag in three handfuls and doesn’t offer me any.

"Say Will, how in the hell do you think they make an M&M anyway?"

"I don't know man, I've never thought about it before."

Walter looks at the bag in his hand and shakes his head. "Man, if I had a dime for every time I thought about that, I could buy myself a shitload of M&Ms."

"Maybe you should write them a letter, Walt. Put your mind to rest."

"Hey, Will, blow me ok? I'm not writing anybody a pussy letter. Just a question, yeah?"

"Why do you care how they make them?"

"No reason, other than I really like goddamn M&Ms."

"Well, there's that candy shell thing on the outside, and then the rest is just chocolate, so maybe they just sorta—" I begin.

Walter laughs. "Yeah, ok, fuck it. Anyway, I'm asking Carrie Wilson out for sodas this weekend."

"Oh yeah?" I say.

"Sincerely."

Walter's not going to ask out Carrie Wilson for sodas this weekend, and I know this because he's been planning on doing it for the past six weekends at least but has yet to go through with it. Walter's had something for Carrie Wilson for about forever, but he won't talk to her, at least not like a normal person. I don't understand what his problem is, because Carrie's a nice girl and she'll talk to anybody. But Walter gets especially loud whenever he's around her, and he does this weird thing where he crosses and uncrosses his fingers really fast. He's not himself; she makes him nervous.

Something else about Carrie is that she's smart. She's probably smarter than anyone else at school, especially in math, where I've never seen her come up with a wrong answer. One time though, in grammar and writing, she messed up a sentence diagram on her homework and I told her the right answer before class started. She said thanks and walked away. It felt nice until Walter walked across the room and said "What was all that about?" to which I said "Nothing. She was just saying good morning."

Charlie Sherwood's house is a blasted wooden block of a place on the edge of Edmonsville, and it literally sways when the wind's blowing hard. As the story goes, Charlie's family was one of the first to arrive in Edmonsville, and his great-great grandfather built the house with nothing but a hammer, saw, and shovel. He married, started up a family, and there's been a Sherwood in the house ever since. The unfortunate thing about all of that is that

no other Sherwood has seemed to possess Charlie's great-great grandfather's work ethic, and the house isn't much to be proud of anymore. Charlie's outside in his front yard, tossing a baseball into the air and trying to hit it with a hickory branch. Charlie doesn't own a regular baseball bat like the rest of us because his folks are too poor to buy him one, but he loves that hickory branch and brings it to every neighborhood game; he insists on using it even when one of the guys offers him their bat.

There's something that you have to know about Charlie and it's important: he's never going to hit that baseball. I've watched him try and miss for hours before without so much as a foul tip, and it's the saddest thing in the world because Charlie wants more than anything to be a professional baseball player. Why he chose that as his dream I can't say, because Charlie really is just about the worst baseball player that you'll ever see, but he's been harping about it for years and not even Walter has a small enough heart to tell him to drop it. Charlie's never been to a professional baseball game, just watches whenever he can on his family's almost-busted TV, but he keeps up with the teams as best he can through the newspaper. He's saved every sports section from the town paper since sixth grade, and he keeps them neatly folded in several stacks in his closet. This collection is one of the few things he takes pride in.

"Charlie," Walter yells. "Drop your stick and get your shit, we're going."

Charlie swings, misses, looks over his shoulder and smiles when he sees us. He drops the branch, picks up the bag at his feet, and trots up his driveway, smiling.

"Hey Will. Hey Walter. How's it hanging?"

"Hey Charlie," I say.

Charlie looks from me to Walter, still smiling. "Ask me," he says.

"Ask you *what*?" says Walter.

"You know, ask me how it's hanging."

"Charlie, how many *fucking* times do I have to tell you—"

"How's it hanging, Charlie?" I say.

"Long and low, Will, *long* and *low*," Charlie says, then loses everything, laughing.

Walter and I look at each other, then back at Charlie. Charlie's been asking me and Walter "how's it hanging" every day for the past month, and it hasn't stopped being funny for him yet.

"It's not funny, Charlie. It wasn't even funny the first time," Walter says.

"Oh," Charlie says, catching his breath. "Oh, yeah, yeah it is. Yeah it is." Charlie takes a deep breath and we start walking.

Not more than ten feet down the street, Charlie starts singing the Everly Brothers, which Walter hates. Charlie sings all the time though, and I feel that it's probably just to spite Walter but this makes me mad because it means that Charlie's singing for the wrong reason. You see, whenever Charlie breaks into song in front of Walt his voice goes all tinny and lousy, but he actually has a half decent voice. But see, just there, I sold him short. Charlie has a great voice. One day I went over to visit his place and, just before I opened the door to his room, I heard him in there singing. For a second I just stood there, my hand hanging over the doorknob. It was something else. It was *that* good. Maybe if Charlie could sing like that around Walter I'd get to hear his voice more often. But it'll probably never happen.

"And I---- didn't re-al-ize what a kiss could beee," Charlie sings.

"Aw, Jesus, knock it the fuck off Charlie," Walter moans.

"Mmm, you got a way about ya," Charlie continues. Walter picks up a rock and throws it at him. "All right, Walt, hey, all right! Shit." Charlie stops singing and we keep walking for a while.

I'm thinking about what we're about to do. Throwing out our school papers. Yes, the rule is to burn *everything*, but I'm not so sure I want to do that this time. It's probably nothing, and I'll probably torch every last thing just like years prior, but I don't think I'm going to be so quick about it this time around. Usually, we head to Edmons Creek, find a clearing, build a fire, and dump our stuff out all at once. Walter goes first, then me, then Charlie. We hang out and enjoy a few smokes while the last year burns up. The whole deal is over in about an hour, then we go back and go for a bike ride, or play some baseball or something. We never look at what we're putting into the fire. Maybe this time I'll take a peek. Just to see what I wasted my time on.

I'm also thinking what it would look like if I took Charlie's side for once. Something about me—I don't help Charlie out nearly as much as I could, and it makes me feel like a pussy because Charlie's one of my closest friends. Walter is too, but it's different with him. Walter doesn't need help. He's got his middle finger, he swears really well, he's the kind of guy who'll walk across the lunchroom, call Danny Walker a "good-for-nothing lousy piece of shit" and hit him in the mouth. Guys like that don't need help. But I guess being friends with Walter makes it easy to forget that people sometimes need help *with* guys like that. People who use hickory branches to

play baseball and have beautiful voices that nobody'll ever hear. People like Charlie.

"Me, I think that the White Sox are the best team in the country right now," Charlie says.

"Cool, man," Walter says.

"I really just think that it comes down to Nellie Fox—man, could you guys even imagine getting to see those guys play?"

"Yeah I could probably imagine it," Walter says.

"I know that I just couldn't even get my head around that. Actually being right there with all of them playing? Eating a hot-dog, maybe even catching a ball?"

"Before you piss yourself Charlie, I want you to take a look around. We're in goddamn Edmonsville. Where in the hell are you going to go to watch the White Sox play?"

"Well, I mean, it doesn't really matter I guess. I'd be happy to see them anywhere. Take a drive out to the big city—"

"Your old man can't even drive."

"Well Walt, maybe—maybe I'll drive huh? Borrow somebody's car and drive out of here to watch the White Sox play. And when I get there, I'll give you a phone-call and tell you what a piece of shit you are."

Walter gives Charlie the finger. "Charlie, nobody in your family's ever driven anywhere in their whole goddamn life, what in the hell makes you think you're gonna be the one to do it?"

"Yeah, yeah take it easy, Walt, we both know I'm not gonna do it, Jesus. I was just thinking it would be one cool thing to do. You can't tell me you wouldn't want to watch a game in a real goddamn baseball park."

"And have to sit around a bunch of moony-eyed fucks like you gawking at every last pitch, hit, and catch? Thanks Charlie, I'll pass."

"What about you Will? Watching a game in an honest-to-God baseball park, how 'bout it?"

"I guess that'd be all right. Maybe someday you'll make it to one."

Walter shakes his head. "Bullshit," he says. "Charlie, I was telling Will that I'm asking Carrie Wilson out for sodas this weekend."

"Aw, Walt, that sounds great. You think she'll say yes?" Charlie asks.

"What the fuck do you mean, Charlie? Of course she will, she's been practically begging me to take her out all year."

There's something that I left out about Walter that I probably

shouldn't have. Walter moved to Edmonsville with his mother, father, and Tom, his brother, at the start of our third grade year, but by the time the year was over Walter's dad had left. Took the family car one morning, drove down Splendid Avenue and out of Edmonsville for good. For a while there it was just Walter and his brother living with their mom, but three years after the old man split, Tom did the same thing, except he stole somebody else's car. We were twelve years old, and it's the only time I can ever remember Walter crying. I felt guilty because I didn't have anything to say to him, and I was too embarrassed to put my arm around him or something. I just sat there with him on the front porch while he balled with his face in his hands. I don't know how long he cried, and eventually he got up and went inside. Afterwards I went over to Charlie's and threw him a bunch of baseballs that he failed to hit.

I've never tried talking to Walter about what happened for fear that he might start crying again. I never really knew Walter's dad, and I get the feeling that Walter probably didn't really know him either. Maybe he was one of those dads who came home and sat around the house but who's head and heart were floating somewhere a million miles away. Whatever it was, his leaving didn't seem to cause any big shakes, except that our teacher started calling Walter "Walter Freemont" instead of "Walter Ross." It was a strange sort of thing, because on the day his dad left, Walter told Charlie and me that he was pretty sure that his old man wasn't going to come home. Charlie and I were all positivity, we told him we were sure that his dad would come back, and we asked him why he would think otherwise. Walter looked at us really straight and he just said "He's not coming back." Simple, and stern, and that was the end of the conversation. Afterwards Walter was the same old Walter he'd always been, so there was no reason to talk about it anymore.

Walter's brother is a different story though, and not just because of Walter's crying on the front porch. Walter was close to Tom and for good reason because Tom was pretty great as far as older brothers go. Tom was five years older than Walter, and taught him all of the important things. I remember him teaching us about the middle finger in the summer after fourth grade (Walter took to it more enthusiastically than Charlie and I.) He taught Walter how to reinforce that middle finger with swear words and coarse phrasing, told him about sex before Walter had any real interest in girls, taught him how to throw a fastball before any of the neighborhood kids, making Walter the most valuable pitcher in Edmonsville. But it went beyond the tangible stuff. I expect that Tom talked with Walter about

a whole lot of other things that he never shared with us. Maybe he talked to Walter about their dad, maybe he talked to Walter about being good to your friends, maybe he let Walter cry and put his arm around him and told him not to worry. Maybe he did all of those things right up until he hot-wired Donald Mesher's Ford and left Walter behind. Poof. Just like that.

Edmon's Creek is little more than a lazy trickle because it hasn't rained in a few weeks. None of us are complaining because it'll be a lot easier to start a fire with everything being so dry. Walter walks across the stream to the other bank and throws his satchel onto the ground. He starts clearing away some dead leaves with his foot, giving us some clean earth to use for the fire. Charlie and I throw our bags down and begin gathering rocks from the creek bed. Walter gets to work gathering branches and leaves, throws them into the ring of rocks that Charlie and I have set up.

Walter reaches into his bag and pulls out a few papers which he crumples up and stuffs underneath the firewood. He takes his pack of matches out from his pocket, strikes one, and throws it into the pit. We sit down and watch the flame grow. Walter lights a cigarette on the fire, and offers one to Charlie and me. We light ours and sit there looking across at one another, smoke curling out all over the place.

"This summer me and the folks are heading up to Chesterfield, and my Uncle Rodger is taking us out on his lake, he got a new boat," Charlie says. "You guys wanna come? My dad says it'd be fine. You have to meet my Uncle Rodger, he's great. He was a lieutenant in the war."

"Yeah Charlie, I'll ask my folks," I say.

"How in the hell are you guys getting all the way up to Chesterfield?" Walter asks.

"Uncle Rodger is coming down and picking us up. I'm sure there'll be enough room in the car. Aw, you guys have to come, Uncle Rodger said that we might even be able to do some fishing."

"Count me out, man," Walter says, tossing the butt of his cigarette into the growing fire.

"How come, Walt? It's gonna be great," Charlie says.

"What the hell is so special about a boat anyway, Charlie?"

"I've never been on a boat before, man."

"Yeah, and who gives a shit anyway? I thought we were doing baseball every Saturday this summer. If you go up to Chesterfield, we lose you for a game. You really want Danny Walker and his guys having a man up on us?"

Walter glances my way and I catch a piece of his smile. Charlie's absence from a baseball game has only ever helped us to victory, but Walter knows what to say and I can see Charlie's face all screwed up through the smoke, weighing a weekend on his uncle's boat against a baseball game with the guys.

"Shit, Walt, I wasn't even thinking. Maybe I can ask the folks if I can stay here for the trip. I don't wanna let the team down."

"There we go, bud. Alright, let's get this show on the road," Walter says, pushing himself up onto his feet.

"Charlie—," I start.

"Hey Willy, cut the shit, ok? We gotta get moving here. This place is starting to feel stale."

"Charlie, you ought to go up to your uncle's place, man. We'll be all right for one game."

"No thanks Will, Walter's right. We can't give Danny the edge. I don't want to let you guys down. I'll be there, no worries."

Sometimes you just can't tell someone how you really feel.

I open up my bag and start pulling out my work. I have all of my assignments split up by subject into folders, Walter rides me really hard about it, says it's a really pussy thing to do. I have one for math and science, one for grammar and writing, one for history, and another for Latin. I have all four folders in front of me, thick with worksheets, notes, essays and old tests. A whole bunch of shit, just like last year. Best to just get rid of all of it, really. Every last thing, or else it's cheating and you're pussy.

Walter's down to his last stack. He's peeling it apart one page at a time, dropping each one into the fire, smoking another cigarette. He looks over and sees me looking up at him, winks and gives me the finger.

Maybe Walter's the pussy.

I wrote a story for English this past year about a pioneer girl named May-Bell Adams, who goes out into the forest and kills a grizzly bear with her dad's gun and a hunting knife. It was great because when May-Bell finds the bear in the woods she's too scared to do anything about it and she hides. But the bear eventually finds her and she finally defeats it by shooting it in its eye and cutting its throat all to pieces with her knife. The thing is, I wrote it as if I were May-Bell, like as if I were the one fighting that bear, and I smeared the pages with dirt and fake blood and crinkled the paper all up so it looked like it was written in pioneer times. My dad helped me with the fake blood, and my mom said it was really good, and made me send it to my aunt in Boston, who sent it back to me with ten dollars

and told me she thought it was the best thing she'd ever read. Ms. Thomas gave me an A for it.

If Walter had ever seen it I would have never lived it down. The fact that my mom sent it to my aunt in Boston, the fact that I got an A for it, the fact that it's a made-up story about some made-up girl—I don't know what he would have said, or what he would have done, and it's probably better that way. Never mind that I was even a little bit proud of it, proud enough to put it on the kitchen fridge (but still more than embarrassed enough to take it down whenever Walter came over to hang out.) This morning, before heading over to Walter's, keeping in mind that *everything* has to be burned, I took it off the fridge for the last time, put it in my grammar and writing folder, and put the folder in my bag. Now it's in front of me, all set to be cremated.

"All right, Willy, batter up," Walt says as the fire finishes work on his last assignment.

I stand up and brush myself off, bend down and pick up my math folder and pitch it into the blaze. I pick up Latin and history and do the same thing. I pick up grammar and writing, open up the folder, and pull out the May-Bell story before tossing the rest of it into the fire. I fold my story up and put it in the back pocket of my jeans.

"Hey Will, what the fuck man? What'd you take out?"

"It's nothing, Walt."

"Bullshit, man. C'mon you know what happens here Willy, everything goes. Go ahead, finish her up."

"I'm not throwing this one out."

"This *one* of *what*, shithead? Pitch the damn thing," Walt says, taking a few steps toward me.

"Yeah, Will, man, you know the rules, man," Charlie says, laughing a little, as he dumps his whole bag full of paper onto the fire. He crosses his arms and looks at me, smiling. "Abracadabra!"

"Shut up, Charlie," I say.

"Whoa now, Willy, what the fuck, man. I'll do it for you if it's gonna make you all bitchy and shit."

For some reason, it makes sense to turn on Charlie now. "You're never going to be a baseball player, Charlie," I say. "You don't even have a mother-fucking bat." I don't know why I've even said this to him, and when I look at his face I get this feeling like my stomach is full of rocks or maybe a whole bunch of nails.

"What?" Charlie asks.

"I said you're never gonna be a baseball player," I yell. "I said you don't even have a real mother-fucking bat, ok? You're a

good-for-nothing, you know that?"

Walter's looking from me to Charlie. Charlie's still standing by the fire, still holding his school bag, his eyes serious. It's easy to attack Charlie. That's where he fits into all of this. When I leave Edmonsville, I'm never going to think about Charlie again. He's going to be walking around this place with his hickory branch until the day he dies, and there's nothing I can do about it. I don't help Charlie out nearly as much as I could.

"Will, your pocket?" Walter asks.

"Fuck off, Walter." I say.

Walter's in front of me now, he reaches around me for my back pocket but I swat his hand away. He shoves me, I stumble, he grabs the May-Bell story out of my jeans. Unfolds it, I'm standing there and I don't know what to do. Just sort of paralyzed.

Walter's eyes move over the first page, he flips it, reads the next one. He's smiling. Looks at me, balls up the story, grinds his cigarette out with it, then turns around and throws the butt and the story into the fire. He's laughing.

"What the hell was the piece of shit, Willy? Shit, Jesus. . . Don't worry, man, all taken care of." He looks over at Charlie and gives him a thumbs-up, but Charlie doesn't give him one back.

I'm still standing there looking at Walter and I haven't moved. Still sort of paralyzed, but I can feel all sorts of things snapping in my head and before I know it I'm one, two, three steps closer to Walter and I've just hit him as hard as I can right in the jaw and hear Charlie yell 'holy shit' and 'fuck' and Walter's this drunk-looking ragdoll dropping farther away from me with these crooked steps and then I'm right there next to him and I hit him again, this time in the stomach and each knuckle has its own pulse.

You can hear a whole lot of air race out of Walter's mouth and he's on all fours breathing heavily and there's one half of me that might want to kick him but the other half feels guiltier than I've ever felt before because that's Walter right there and he may deserve to be hit but certainly not by me and certainly not because of some shitty story about May-Bell Adams (who isn't even real) and a stupid fucking grizzly bear.

Walter's up on his feet though, but I wasn't expecting that and now it's him hitting me in the face, in the shoulder, in the stomach, right on my mouth and now I'm doubled up on the ground and using my tongue to see if I still have all my teeth. I have my arms up around my head and I can hear Charlie say 'what the fuck' but it's all wheezy and stretched and it doesn't sound much like Charlie at

all. Maybe Walter will hit me again and wouldn't that be something because one more hit might just do me in. I think about that time when Danny Walker hit me with a fastball but this hurts more than that because Danny only hit me in the leg and Walter got me in the face, twice. Then I hear Walter crying, and he sounds just like he did that day on his front porch after Tom left town.

"You're just supposed to throw it all in, Will, why'd you have to fuck that up?" but his voice is all squeaky and thick with the crying.

"I just wanted my story, Walt. I'm sorry that I hit you," I say, because I'm sorry that I hit him.

"You're just supposed to put it all in the fire and then it's over," he says and I can see his face is all red where I hit him. "You put it in the fire and that's when summer starts and we can all be together."

I'm stunned because if Walt had heard Walt saying that he'd have flipped him off and called him a pussy, and for a moment I almost do the same.

Charlie sits down and looks at the fire.

"I'm not going anywhere, Walt," I say.

Walter takes a deep breath that snags a few times going down his throat and he wipes his eyes hard with the backs of his wrists, runs his forearm under his nose with a sniff.

"Yeah you are."

"No, Walt," I say. "I'm staying put right here."

I know I'm lying.

"You only have to think about leaving," Walter says.

"What are you talking about, Walter? I'm not going anywhere."

But I keep lying anyway.

"You only have to think about leaving," he says. "And then you're already gone."

YOU ARE THE ANTS

For miles and miles you march. In the hot desert heat it seems as if you will march to your death. Your antennae and mandibles have grown dry, yet two by two, all in identical brown uniforms, you and the army of thousands continue on. Finally, the One holds out her hand.

“ATTENTIOOONN!” screams the Line Leader as you and your army brethren come to a halt. You have finally made it. No other colony has ever settled in a place like this, but that will not stop the lot of you. Nothing can stop your colony. You’re G-d’s greatest creation to date. Over thousands of years your kind has grown to have the largest population on the planet, proving survival in some of the worlds oddest places, and this is where you all will start your new lives. The cool mellow breeze, the infinite granules of sand, the beauty of the never-ending blue abyss, and of course, the enormous Blue Mountains filled with abandoned leftovers and trash. This is where generations and generations will thrive. It is the perfect spot and the One knows this because the One is your Queen and the Queen knows all. You are the ants.

Leaning out of her shaded portable throne – carried by her servants – the Queen whispers into the Line Leaders’ ear. He relays her message.

“After generations and generations, we have genetically grown to be the best architects in the world!” the Line Leaders’ voice is deep and it resonates over the welcoming purr of waves against sand. “This is ours.” He indicates to the never-ending stretches of water and sand. “Now, let us build!” And with the tilt of the head, you and the thousands of ants begin to dig into the sandy abyss.

For hours and hours the sun penetrates your tiny glistening exoskeleton as you and the colony dig. The ocean’s waves casually pulsate in and out of shore, growing just close enough to send a friendly mist to cool off you and your fellow ants. Tediously, you all work. After observing multiple ants before you, you too stop to appreciate the mist and wave back as the ocean retreats into its depth. Then, just as the sun starts to take its traditional plunge into the sea, you and the ants place the last granule of sand onto the tippy top of your architecturally perfect anthill.

“Hurrah!” you cheer in unison with the massive crowd and you feel the strength of the colony through the vibration in your chest. “Long live the Queen!”

The Queen leans over and whispers in the Line Leader's ear. "After a hard day of work," the Line Leader bellows while the cheers fade, "the Queen grants you all permission to celebrate!" With word of celebration, the colony begins to tremble as you and the army of thousands cry your approval. Drumbeats and trance-like chants meet your ears as you join a circle of dance. The sun has set. You are the ants.

Moments before the crack of dawn, you and the others awake from your celebratory sleep and are ready to work. You all gather in the colony plaza and a hush falls over the crowd. You look to your fellow ants and feel a rush of pride in the vastness of your colony. The Queen bestows her presence. She whispers into the ear of the Line Leader.

"Good morning! Take a good look around you. We have truly built a home worthy of the heavens! Today we decorate this home. Today we will travel to the Blue Mountains up North, collecting the treasures we find inside!" And with the tilt of the Line Leader's head, you and your colony march towards the Blue Mountains.

Meters of endless sand grows behind you as your destiny and feelings of entitlement to this beach grows inside you. The ocean, accompanied by the wind, calmly paces back and forth. They work hard to spray a cool mist that reaches as far as the Blue Mountains. When you all finally reach the mountains, you search through layers and layers of glorious garbage to find treasures. By the end of the search you and your colony have collected tons of odds and ends including bottle caps, flat copper circles, popsicle sticks, strings, a magazine picture of a human and a sunglass lens. The next few hours you ants carry the immense weight of the treasures back to your beautiful new home. The ocean and wind continue to work hard to cool the colony, but they should. After all, it is your colony that has chosen to bless them with your presence. So you continue on, without a thank you or a hello, dropping behind little specs of trash, which is okay, you are positive they will disappear beneath the layers of sand. And as you do this, the wind and water retreats its efforts unnoticed and irritated.

In the plaza you all gather your new treasures and settle in to your surroundings. Outside the sun dives into the sea and a full moon slowly takes its place. The Queen appears before the crowd and silence, like a disease, infects the colony. She leans over to the Line Leader and whispers into his ear.

"It is no question that we are creatures built from the eye

of G-d. For what other creatures in this world can carry ten times their weight? Here we have gathered treasures fit for a kingdom, but before we enjoy them we first must decorate!" The Line Leader nods his head and in an instant you find yourself decorating the anthill with the rest of the colony.

Together you turn bottle caps into Jacuzzis and the flat copper circle into dance floors. The Popsicle sticks become shelves and the strings are now slides for the children. The picture of a human face has been turned into the colony dinner table and the sunglass lens the colony mirror. Like the multiple ants before you, you too find yourself taking quick glances into the new mirror. If not for everyone taking on the same appearance, your broad round chest and six muscular legs would surely be something to brag about. Built like brown stone sculptures, it is clear that ants are the greatest force on Earth.

The Queen stands before the thousands of you and you all freeze, eyes fixed to your Highness. She is beautiful, with her broken winged cape and antennae crown. She steps up to the small dirt podium ready to speak.

The anthill begins to rumble. Everyone continues to gaze at the Queen, thinking that in all her glory it is surely her causing the hill to shake. Slowly, however, you and the others take notice to the unfamiliar look of trepidation growing across her face. It is not your Queen who shakes the anthill and the fear of this settles in as water rapidly starts leaking from the hole in the center of the ceiling. It is the ocean tide who, boiling in rage from your colony's arrogance, is now trying to destroy your architectural work of art.

Pictures fall from walls and you tumble over your neighbor. The large plaza within the colony fills with screams. You stay silent. You know that you are the greatest force on this Earth and the ocean cannot do this. As you and a few others look to your Queen for guidance, she steps back from the podium and doubt races through your exoskeleton. You hear cries about G-d and his lack of existence, propelling you to question his legitimacy. *Would G-d really do this to his own creation?* The screams are growing louder and they come from every direction. The Queen clacks her jaw and emits a hormone. It is a sweet smell, like honey in a hive. It distracts you from the sudden silence of the screams. They have stopped. You and the colony look to the Queen, high above in all her glory. She turns to the Line Leader who then relays her message.

"Fellow Ants!" The Line Leader cries. "Follow me and please do not panic!" He directs you all through a set of corridors leading

to a back exit. Standing before the lot of you he continues, "This is our home! We are descendants of the G-d. We have as much right as the ocean to live upon the great land. Waves will not change this right. We are architects sent from the heavens. Now let us build!" He indicates to the driftwood a few yards away and, in the thousands, you all scurry off to obtain it.

Together you work to quickly carry back the gigantic wooden planks. The sea violently splashes away at the anthill, swiping its massive claws across the sand. In the darkness you swear you see an ant or two sucked into the dark blue chasm. You can't help but wonder if they're gone for good or if the undertaker ants will try to find and collect their bodies. Your chest feels as if it's tightening and might snap, but you keep your head straight and your mind on protecting the queen. As the Line Leader screams orders, you and your colony frantically scamper around in an effort to construct a water barrier. There is no talking tonight, only listening. Without a second thought, you all work straight through to morning, raising planks and smearing muddy adhesive. Slowly, the moon descends into the deep blue depths. Along with it, it drags the vicious waves of justice. The tightening in your chest loosens and a calm, steady work pace washes over your colony as the finishing touches are put on the flawless barrier. Together you have beaten the ocean. Together you have conquered water. You are the greatest creatures on Earth and together you now return to the plaza.

The Queen whispers into the Line Leader's ear.

"It is our G-d given right to live and thrive here on this beach," announces the Line Leader, "and we have surely proven just that. G-d did not set out to destroy us, but to challenge us so we can prove ourselves to the heavens. Last night, we beat the ocean. And while today we rest, tonight we celebrate. Long live the Queen!"

"Long live the Queen!" you all shout, binding to one another through a verbal thread, as you make your way back to your cubby of a room.

Cozy and safe from the tide in your dirt patch bed, you dream of an Earth in which your colony lives forever, while just outside the wind trembles with rage. Though you may have, it had not forgotten the specs of trash you and your colony left behind on the sand as you hurried to decorate your hill. Over the past day, the wind had blown and been clogged with your colony's litter. Now, as you sleep, it gradually picks up speed. At first it whistles, but then it snarls. Sand flies through the air. It sounds like sugar smacking a table as it crashes against the water barrier. The anthill quivers with

each blow, wakening you in a panic. You stick your head out of your dirt alcove and observe the shaking walls and thousands of nervous ants. They scuttle and dash about, screaming that the end is near and the anthill will collapse and kill you all. *Can it be? Another challenge so soon?* The Queen and Line Leader step up to her podium ready to lead. She whispers into his ear.

"Do not worry fellow ants," he reassures you, "we have overcome water; a little wind is nothing. This is our home. We are the architects of G-d!" The Line Leader roars. "A few meters away lay a patch of leaves and grass. With this we will weave a sail that will direct the wind past our precious colony. Together we will control the wind!" The Line Leader nods his head and the thousands of you march off through the back exit to gather the leaves and grass.

You crawl with your colony through the fierce wind. Many ants you know, and many you don't, fly into the air as if being picked up by an invisible hand and are cast hundreds of yards away. To recover these ants would take weeks and you know it. The survival of your colony counts on the survival of the Queen and keeping her in mind, you trudge on for the good of colony. When you all finally reach the leaves and grass, you hoist them between your mandibles and crawl homeward to protect the anthill. Masterfully, you help to craft the wind barrier. Grass, then leaves, then grass, then leaves, again and again until you all finally achieve a beautifully aerodynamic tightly woven pattern. And when it is all set and done, the wind cannot latch to the barrier, let alone knock it down. Again and again, it batters against the green and brown patterned cylindrical mechanism, each time slipping right past it. The sun is now rising and the warming winds retreat high into the atmosphere. The sand settles back to the ground and everything is calm.

Above, the clouds have been watching. Gray with fury, they accumulate. They are thick and dark. As the wind rises, it whispers to them about your colony-- secrets in the form of whistles and purrs.

Gathered in the plaza, you and your brethren remain silent, holding your breath while listening to the slowing of the winds. As the wind comes to a stop, you breathe again, and un-huddle from the crowd. For now the worst is over and you know it. G-d must exist, for the Queen has survived and so have you. The colony lives on. You straighten out your body and notice the ants surrounding you all do the same. From above it looks like an undulating wave of brown. The movements stop, however, as the

Queen appears before you all, gracefully balancing on her four hind legs. In her front right claw she clutches her ritual staff. She outlines the crowd with the tip of the staff and the silence is deafening as *her Highness* prepares to speak.

The Queen opens her jaw and thunder bellows. Silence. She opens her jaw once more to speak and thunder roars outside of the anthill. *Is she the one who makes the sky shout its monstrous tone?* Her mouth is shut. Thunder snarls once more. The Queen makes her way up the spiral walkway on the inside edges of the colony hill. With the Line Leader close behind her, you and the colony follow her lead. She exits through the hole in the ceiling, standing on the edge as hundreds of you crawl from the hole behind her to see with your own compound eyes.

The sky is a mystical swirl of grays. It growls and everyone but the Queen shudders in fear. She is calm. You look to her and admire her tranquility in such a time of worry. The gray swirls light up with the luminosity of a billion fireflies. In the distance you can make out streaks of light slicing through the air to meet the ground. Then, not too far off a streak of light cracks through the air meeting some dry brush in the distance. An enormous blood red flame combusts and reaches for the thickened clouds. The Queen turns to the Line Leader, who relays her message to you and the rest of the awestruck colony behind them.

"Ants!" he pauses and indicates to the giant flame. "This is fire! A gift from G-d himself. Fire will provide warmth within the colony and light amongst our darkest of journeys. Please, we will collect this fire with sticks, but I warn, do not get too close." With the nod of his head, you and the ants fetch tiny twigs and forward march towards the flame.

Blistering, crooked streaks of light collide with the sand just meters away. And as you march, you have a feeling these streaks are actually meant to hit you and your colony. You wonder if this fire really is a gift from G-d or if those chaotic encounters earlier really were G-d's way of asking the colony to prove itself to the heavens. These questions cluster your mind until you almost wander out from formation with the marching army. To be safe, you decide it's best to just swallow these thoughts and move on.

Approaching the flame, you strengthen the grip of the twig between your right and left mandible. It straightens out, stretching high above your antennae. Your exoskeleton is hot and becomes more and more stifling with each step. Even so, you do as the others do. You dip the tip of your twig into the glowing blur and you flinch as the tip ignites. The army continues to move and so do you. As yellow flashes explode in the sand about you, for a moment you notice the beauty in the dotted line of thousands of ants, crawling with tiny

bulbs of light held high above their heads, contrasting against the tote sand. An immense pride swells inside you and you continue on your way, following the line all the way back to the hill.

You and the colony quickly and carefully crawl back into the hill, gathering at the plaza. Even in the daylight, the plaza is lit like never before. Each individual granule of sand can be seen reflecting in the cast of flames. The Queen steps up to her podium. Thunder booms outside of the hill and the colony hums in fear. The Queen is calm, however, and again emits a hormone with a smooth odor. This calms you and the rest of your colony. She steps up to the podium. Next to her is the Line Leader who holds a fiery twig. The Queen holds up her staff and the hums silence.

Having seen the ants return to their hill, the clouds outside have begun to dissipate. Birds chirp in the distance. A calm wave of water fizzes on the morning sand. "We are the Ants," she begins. "We are G-d's architects. We are descendants from the Heavens." Her pause is swallowed by the silence and you feel a pang of guilt for doubting your colony, your Majesty and G-d. "We control the waters!" A wave crashes against the water barrier, but you do not flinch. "We control the winds!" The wind barrier rattles outside the anthill. "And now my ants, we control the fires!" On these last words the Queen dips the end of her staff into the Line Leaders' flame. The end of her staff bursts into flame and she holds it before her, illuminating your Queen in all her glory.

Your body slightly sways as your eyes follow the red entrancing tip.

"This is our home." She continues, "We found this land. We built on this land. It is our right, our *destiny*, to be on this land." She traces the outline of the crowd with the flame. "We have worked hard since we've arrived, conquering demons larger than life itself. Today G-d has given us a gift; he has rid us of dangers and eased our struggles. He has given us fire. We will rest today, leaving these flaming staffs outside of our sleeping lodges. And it will become tradition to do this, as today," the Queen pauses, "becomes known as our day of rest." You and the immense crowd scream in excitement. "So rest up my colony. Tonight we celebrate and tomorrow, safe from the waters and winds, we will begin our new lives."

In unison, you roar with the rest of the colony. "Hurrah! Hurrah! Long live the Queen!" Tired, but filled with the energy of victory, you and the rest return to your sleeping quarters, fastening each flaming twig into the dirt before your bedroom doors.

Snuggled beneath the warm golden layers of sand and dirt, for now, you sleep sound. You dream vividly about

conquering mountains and ruling lands. “For the Queen,” you mumble, almost indistinguishably, in your sleep. And as the sun sets, night falls upon the colony. In a few hours you all will awaken expecting a great feast. You will expect to relax in Jacuzzis and dance on floors made of copper. You will expect to hear drums, celebratory chants, and to crawl back into your beds, intoxicated with victory, once again falling asleep safe and cozy beneath the layers of barriers and sand. But in a few hours you will not wake up to a celebration. The chants you think you are hearing will actually be the screams and cries of your brethren. The tapping of feet on copper will be your very own running for your life. Over the next hour or so, a twig or two will fall. A flame will catch. A fire will grow and hundreds and hundreds of ants will wake up, trapped in a self-built oven. Your Queen will be burned alive and in the scattered screams you will hear ants blaming G-d. Others will claim he does not exist. In the end, however, you will have to make this decision for yourself as you struggle with the choice of whether or not to abandoned the colony or die as one. And while this is all happening, in the back of your mind you will wonder if, maybe, this is just another one of G-d’s challenges, because after all, you are the ants.

THE VIADUCT

Above.

It's a pity, he thinks, staring up at the bridge. Such an elegant structure will be reduced to just that: a structure. A useless piece of concrete. From here on out its purpose will be stripped away right along with the train tracks that are being torn from its surface. He kind of likes that though, knowing that while budget cuts may take away its original meaning, they also create a new one. Just over a quarter mile long and 65 feet high from the Delaware river's surface, made up of 51,376 cubic feet of concrete and 627 tons of reinforcing steel, the viaduct now stands defiant, refusing to be forgotten almost to the point of arrogance. They can take away why it was built, but they can't take away the fact that it was *built*. Old, but just as strong as the mountains beside it. There is no creaking in the wind, or complaints from erosion. Try as it might, the river can't sweep it away.

It stretches its sturdy arms from one side of the river to the next, connecting Pennsylvania to New Jersey. No one had ever seen anything quite like the Delaware River Viaduct before its erection in 1908 by the Lackawanna Railroad. Many worried that it would ruin the beauty of the land two miles south of the Delaware Water Gap where it was expected to stand, but the bridge blends in as well as a massive construction of unnatural stone in the middle of a natural setting possibly can. A beautifully carved slab of concrete made by man in between two mountains. A gray slice of urbanity clashing magnificently with the green of the trees, the blue of the sky, and the cloudy water that curves and flows around its thick, concrete legs. After enough time had passed, the bridge almost grew into its surroundings. Everyone who had seen the river before it was built had passed away, taking with them memories of a bare valley.

The bridge is flat on top, the former home to railroad tracks, but beneath is a mass of curves. Five large spans make up the underbelly, and each are topped with 10 smaller, arch-like cutouts. They're like children's cubby holes, carved from thick stone to hold up speeding trains instead of backpacks, sack lunches and rain-soaked umbrellas. The biggest ones have enough space for the average man to stand straight up in, while the smallest can house only the wind.

From the rural road under the westernmost arch of the bridge, it's a risky climb to the top up the thickly forested hillside that the bridge is built into. He clings to the broad trunks of Red Maples to steady himself on loose rocks and wet dirt. It rained last night, and his gleaming brown loafers were not meant for this kind of terrain.

If I fall, no one will hear me cry out. It's Sunday. The banks are closed and apparently so is the construction on the train tracks. Unmanned equipment glints in the afternoon light. A path well trodden by construction boots eventually appears in the green, and he follows it to the flat stretch on top of the bridge. He presses himself up against the guard rails at the edge, leaning over, feeling the sun-cooked metal warm his stomach through the thin cotton of his dress shirt. He wants to keep leaning. He imagines diving headfirst into the watery depths below. He imagines disappearing. *Why am I here?* he wonders.

It draws people in, they say. For years the little town next to the Viaduct, Slateford, told stories of the bridge. When it was being built they introduced a new, continuous pouring method. It got the concrete in a whole lot faster, but if a man were to fall in, he would be buried alive. Legend has it that more than one of the black laborers who worked tirelessly to finish the structure took their final breaths along with a fatal gulp of cement. They say that their ghosts still hang around, that if you walk the bridge by yourself, someone will always be walking with you.

A gust of warm air makes his silk tie dance as he stares into the frothing cobalt far below. He wishes it would stop moving for a moment, so he could see his reflection, a temporary tattoo on the water's face. *Why am I here?* He's not working today. He's not sitting at his small desk, in his small cubicle, with an enormous list of complaints from his boss. No numbers to calculate. No numbers to crunch. No numbers at all. No one saying "Bill, can I see you in my office?" No one questioning him about the mortgage, cable bills or an ever-growing pile of debt. "*Bill, did you fix that broken stair?*" "*Bill, did you get the car fixed?*" "*Bill, did you fix the kid's swing set?*" He has so much to fix, so much more than stairs or cars or swings. From that high up it looks like there's nothing in that water. It's clear. It's free.

His wife is probably at home with the kids, changing them from their church clothes so they can run amok in the mud puddles that line their street after a big rain. He told her he was running to the store to get milk. Before he left, she kissed his cheek. Quick, soft, like a habit; like she never thought it would be the last time she ever got to kiss his cheek. *Since when was this all so overwhelming?* He tears his eyes from the water and looks out at the view, which is nice from the top of the bridge. It's a hot morning and all of the colors seem so much brighter somehow. The blue river stretches on and on until its gobbled up by the hungry mouths of lush trees. The sky is robin's egg, no clouds and no sign of rain. It dips down to caress the tops of

the mountains on either side of the river, mighty green camel backs rising up from the depths of the valley.

Suddenly he's hoisting one creased khaki leg over the upper rail, then the other, so that he's standing on the edge, free from safety bars. He thinks about jumping. He wonders if the fall will kill him. He reaches one tentative arm out to touch all that separates him from life and death. It's air. It's gossamer. It's nothing. And then he's back over. He can't remember climbing back to safety, but he's lying in the jagged embrace of the gravel on the bridge while sucking in breaths and laughing harder than he should be. He thinks of his youngest, jumping feet first into the big puddle that forms at the bottom of their driveway, an explosion of water spraying all over her wide, toothy grin. *Why am I here?* he thinks again. *Why am I here?*

Inside.

When the last of Pennsylvania summer's flowers wither and the sun begins to trade duty with gray skies, ice and frost line the skeletal remains of the old train tracks on top of the bridge. When tearing them up in 1989, some pieces of dying metal were forgotten by the crew of the Lackawanna Railroad. Thin beams of steel were left to live out their days staring up at sky, forever hearing the rush of water below. On either end of the bridge are two manholes leading within, old service entrances for maintenance workers to get inside the viaduct. Both are marked by the remains of stone sheds that used to sit above them, but now stand only one-wall tall as a result of weather and time.

"GOING DOWN?" faded graffiti reads on one of the crumbling edifices above an open manhole. Peering into the two-foot by two-foot circle, it's a dark descent. Stretching 30 feet below, fading into the absolute pitch, are the rusted rungs of an ancient ladder that cling to the dirty cement walls with dying metal arms. *Going down to where?* she thinks. Her hands start to shake at the thought of scaling down this sorry excuse for a ladder. Her pulse quickens. Her breath catches in her throat.

"Going down?" he says with a laugh. "Of course we are. I'll go first though, make sure there aren't any monsters lurking down there."

She doesn't argue with him as he lowers one beat-up Nike onto the first rung, then the other, hoping he'll sense the fear in her eyes and see the nervous flush flooding her cheeks. She's never been good with heights. She's never been good with boys, either.

"It's just a bridge, Serena. Relax. Breathe."

And then he's gone. The top of his head, a messy arrangement of straw-colored hair, is sucked into the gaping black artery that leads to the heart of the bridge. The crisp air has gotten colder since they parked the car at the bottom of the steep hill that leads up to the top. It seeps through her dandelion yellow pea coat, the one with big, shiny buttons that make her smile. She blinks against the chill of the wind and stiffly folds her arms against her chest to stay warm. She hops from foot to foot on crunchy gray gravel. Right to left. Left to right.

"Reen? Are you coming?"

What if I fall?

"I promise I'll catch you if you fall!"

His voice is an echo, a weak and tinny parody of itself as it floats the 30 feet to the surface. She's always loved the sound of his voice though, deep and strong. Safe. She likes the way it wraps itself around her ears like a warm blanket. *It's fine*, she thinks. *It's fineit's fineit's fine*. Slowly, ever so slowly, brown boots sink into the hole. Denim-clad legs. A yellow coat. Her hands grip the rungs with a hold that turns her knuckles white, and she tries in vain not to focus on the sweat that's forming on her palms. Hand below hand, foot below foot, she descends. Halfway down she tears her focused gaze from the corroded metal handholds to look up at the ring of bright gray sky that's getting smaller and smaller miles above her. *It looks like an eye*. Inverted, though. It's light where the dark is supposed to be, dark where it should be light.

She touches one sole onto solid ground that faintly glitters with the broken glass of a hundred bottles that suffered fates at the hands of souls who climbed upwards.

"See? I knew you'd survive."

They stand in a large, cavernous room. The sound of steady dripping bounces off the walls and the pounding of the gushing river is magnified. Everything is dark except for the cascading, gray light above and the light coming from a hole just big enough to crawl through on one wall.

"C'mon, this way. You first this time, 'cause you're gonna love it."

He leads her to the glowing entrance and motions for her to go through on her hands and knees. She ducks her head under, fitting her body through the opening, and gasps.

There's color, so much color, in all directions. Spray paint swathes every surface of the rough concrete, and the daylight intensifies each and every swirl. A Technicolor bouquet of stars and planets

hovers overhead and a giant design featuring the word “LOVE” in sea foam green and cotton-candy pink weaves its way around her feet. They’re in one of the cubby holes of the bridge, able to see the north and south ends of the river flowing out on either side of them. There are more “rooms”, each coated with all kinds of beautiful, intricate, and sometimes vulgar murals. A surprisingly detailed image of a crying man is sandwiched between “Girls touching girls!!!!” and “Sex me? 1-800-6969”. There are smaller and smaller openings, very much like mini-doorways, to crawl through to get to them. They have a very Alice in Wonderland feel, being too big to fit through the door.

“So what do you think?” he asks.

She turns to him and smiles.

“Come here, sit next to me.”

They sit on the edge of the cubby hole with their legs dangling over the Delaware. It has started to snow, tiny flakes floating down on the river.

“I feel like we’re in a snow globe,” she says.

He inches a little closer to her, and she takes his hand. The action feels less timid than she expected, maybe more than she intended it to be. *What will he think?* He laces their fingers together, both feeling the joy of fumbling for uncharted limbs, the rush of something new. She leans into his shoulder. He kisses her forehead. She savors every fragile second that builds into the minutes spent inside of the bridge. A moment so delicate, happening within something so strong.

“We can go whenever you want to.”

“I know. Just not yet.”

Below.

The easternmost arch of the bridge hovers over the endless parade of cars and tractor trailers that make their way across Interstate 80. There’s a truck stop with a gas station and a McDonald’s with some cheesy magazine kiosks a half mile or so down the highway, and a toll booth is a mile north to make sure everyone pays if they decide to leave Pennsylvania. He can’t remember the first time he saw the Viaduct. It could have been on a hike with his dad. Maybe as he was climbing Mount Minsi he cast a glance down and saw the heap of stone from far above, but didn’t realize what he was seeing. Maybe his dad pointed it out to him. He could have seen it on the way to his mom’s house in New Jersey. Knowing her, she probably frantically tapped her finger against the closed car window as they

passed under its wide, open hollow. "Chris! Chris look at the bridge! Look at the bridge!" Either way, he was determined to go see for himself.

Everyone talks about Alice in Wonderland. At school, you haven't officially partaken in all the culture that Monroe County has to offer until you've scaled the hillside, walked across the crunchy gravel, slipped inside the manhole, and smoked a bowl while watching the colors splash across the walls inside the bridge. He's smoked a couple times, but always at crowded cabin parties late at night in some empty field. Always with a bunch of people to look cool in front of the guys. The girls. Everyone. He's never done it by himself, inside of a bridge, with nothing to stop him from tumbling off the edge and breaking his neck on the hard surface of the running water underneath.

The other side of the bridge, the western edge, is something different entirely. It doesn't have any of the modern bustle of its counterpart. A rural stretch of road, "Old Road", lies parallel with the rusted mainline of the railroad tracks, complete with patchy gravel and overgrown clumps of ferns. Above is a tunnel of trees tangled with one lonely, swooping telephone wire and pieces of sunlit sky trickling through leaves and branches. Eventually he finds the dusty little road in Slateford that leads to the bridge. Scattered on either side of it are trailer homes and desperate one levels in dire need of repair. He parks his Ford Escape on a worn shoulder at the edge of the forest and sees the path that leads to the top of the Viaduct. On the other side of the road is an unmanageable thicket of bush and tree trunks that separates the crumbling asphalt from the Delaware. *Well, I bet no one's ever gone over there.* He picks up a fallen branch and begins to push and hack at it until he's halfway through the mess of green. Thorns leap out at his exposed calves and burrs cling to his socks. He can feel the sting of the intricate cuts that are slicing up his forearms, the dew from leaves soaking his shirt, and the sweat beading on his forehead. *How much further can it be?*

With one final shove to the bustle of plants in front of him, he breaks free. Before him is the river, rushing with an intensity only mustered after a good rain. There's a sliver of riverbank, only big enough to put one foot on, so he leans down to let the water wipe away the blood and dirt that drip across his arms like a network of outer veins. *What am I even doing right now? Stupid, so stupid.* Maneuvering himself into a barely comfortable position, he's able to sit down, one leg tucked under his body while the other rests on dirt and rocks. Looking up, there's only the bridge. It's huge from this

angle, shooting out of the river like some mammoth horror-movie monster, but without any of the horror. Something about it is just so quiet. He feels still, scared to move for fear he might disrupt the calm that seems to paint everything around him. The sun glows high and hot in the sky, but from his seat the bridge keeps him in cool shade.

The arch nearest to him rises up and curves, and he can see that while it must once have been white or cream stone, it now has streaks of brown grime. He's struck by the thought that maybe no one's ever seen the bridge from here, save for the people who constructed it however many forevers ago, and that comforts him. *So what if I didn't light up and trip out while looking at some spray paint? Who gives a—*

"Yo, Chris! You back there?"

He turns to look through the brush in the direction of the shout, and sees two hands waving above it all. It's Mike, come to make sure that he completed this rite of passage.

"Yeah, hold on!"

"Dude what are you doing? You know you're supposed to go in the bridge right, not under it?"

"I'll be out in a second, relax."

Taking one last glance up at the stone, he bids a brief farewell to the Viaduct. *I'll be back*, he thinks. Everyone comes back.

THE DIMPLES HIS MOTHER LOVED

Victor and the Dean

The Dean sat facing Victor, hands clasped on the desk, lips smiling but unparted. His scalp was dusted with wisps of blonde hair that were matted down with sweat where his glasses pressed behind his ears.

“Dr. Findlestein, I really want to go to college.”

“I understand that Victor, but you failed the aptitude tests I gave you, all of them. Your reading comprehension score was quite literally a zero.” Laughter bubbled up within his throat but fell flat and brittle against closed teeth.

Victor stood and held his hat to his heart. “Dr. Findlestein, with all due respect, I think you got it all wrong. Sure, my score is zero but that means I can only get better. I mean, isn’t that what college is all about? I want to learn, sir. I see guys my age and they got books and papers in one arm and a girl on the other.” He gestured out the window to the grassy campus lawn, lit up with midday sun. “There must be something to this if every guy out there wants to get in.

“Listen, I know on paper I don’t look so good, but I know how to work, Dr. Findlestein. I lived on the street for a while when I was a kid and I worked hard for my money. Now I’m here, and I want to work hard for my smarts. I want to get an education.” Victor bowed his head slightly and shrugged. “I want to make my old man proud. I bet an educated man like yourself knows what that feels like.”

Dr. Findlestein blinked several times and smiled, lips unparted, before swiveling around and opening a drawer in the filing cabinet behind his desk. He shuffled through papers and Victor studied a photo of the Dean and a cat that looked professionally taken.

“You will be on academic probation for the first semester. This means you will be closely monitored by a faculty member, you must score proficiently on all of your final examinations, and you must pass each of your courses.”

The Dean signed the forms and handed them to Victor, damp where his hands had pressed into the paper.

Later that night Victor told his friend Ricky about the appointment. “He was one of those guys who was always smiling for no reason, you know? I kinda wanted to pop him one in the mouth. I think he just let me in so I wouldn’t give him something to not smile about.”

Sitting on the curb outside their favorite diner, Ricky laughed and took a hulking bite of his cheeseburger. "Well, congrats. Me and the guys always knew you were gonna do somethin' big with your life. 'Course if I had those little dimples of yours, I'd probably be able to talk my way into college too!"

Victor threw a french fry at his friend. "Get outta here."

"'Course, sometimes I wonder if you're not just trying to run away from it all." He looked at Victor. "You'll come back, right?"

Coming Home Fanfare

He was eleven. Almost a month of living on the street had changed him- hardened him, but made him softer in some ways too. When the men in suits with their black shoes gleaming like fresh nickels made comments about going to school or the quality of his mother, Victor was hard. It had almost become a routine, part of his act as he kicked stones after the crisply pressed pinstripe suits and spit and suggested that they bend over.

But when he was playing, Victor could be soft. On a good day he and his friends collected more change than could fit in their pockets. He would spend his hard earned pennies on potato chips and afternoon movies with the rest of the boys, but Victor played for the feeling it gave him.

Every day for four weeks he had sat on a bucket or crate, whatever had been thrown out in yesterday's trash, and performed for the passersby. His best friend Ricky had taught him to play the spoons on the night he ran away from home. Eventually, he had picked up the harmonica and drums, and most recently he had started to challenge himself with playing all three at once. Their band was small but they were good. They were very good.

"Ricky, Squibs, look." Victor pointed down the street at a flock of old ladies on their way home from Church. The boys licked their hands before pressing them through their hair. Victor turned to Rickie who pinched his cheeks. They had found that a hint of rosinness accentuated Victor's dimples.

It took only a verse of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" for the gaggle of monochromatic skirt suits to begin tossing pennies into the hat on the sidewalk. Victor paused mid-harmonica solo, clutching his instrument to his chest, and bowed. He thanked them and smiled until they blushed, until his cheeks cramped.

On the drum, Squibs picked up the tempo and the boys moved seamlessly into "When the Saints Go Marching In". It was a transition they had implemented before, and was usually effective

with the type of middle-aged, averagely dressed man who was currently coming towards them on the sidewalk. Victor nodded at Rickie and the boys tossed their instruments into the air in an elaborate exchange. Squibs filled the street with a brief drum solo as Rickie picked up on the harmonica and Victor's hands moved in a blur of silver spoons.

The man stopped in front of them, face clouded in shadow under the brim of a fraying fedora. "Hello Victor."

People in the neighborhood were familiar with the band and Victor was its front man. He smiled at the man, spun, and continued on with the spoons tap-clacking behind his back. Easy and smooth. The man watched but didn't throw any change into the used cigar box lying at their feet; Victor picked up the tempo. He could appreciate a challenge. He shouted over the improvised harmonica solo. "Any requests, sir?"

"Victor, it's time to come home." The man removed his hat and stood with one balled fist on his hip.

The music played on as two spoons fell to the ground, bounced, and lay glistening on the sidewalk.

The Escape

"She's all we have now, boy."

The kitchen smelled like cigar smoke and sauerkraut and Victor wanted to puke.

"Does she make you meals? Does she keep clean socks on your feet? Gertrude came from far away to take care of your ungrateful hide."

Victor kicked a stray truck across the kitchen floor before turning and stomping away, each step slower than the first to show that he wasn't scared.

From inside his room, he could hear his father sigh; a chair leg scraped across the floor. Gertrude said something in German and Victor thought he heard cows, somewhere in the distance, mooring their response.

He went to his bedside table and pulled out a worn picture of his mother. It had been her I.D. badge when she served as a nurse in the war. Though taken in black and white, he could see her green eyes and dark hair, dusted with highlights at the crown of her forehead. Footsteps were falling in the hall. Victor jammed the photo into his pocket and listened. The floorboards squeaked just outside his door. Silence. He knew it had to be Gertrude; his father would have barged right in. Victor pictured her standing on the other side of the door,

hand resting on the handle, trying to piece together some fragmented sentence with the few English words she knew. It would all be for nothing though, when she finally came in and boiled over. Gertrude would turn pink and begin to sweat with Victor's lack of cooperation. The room would get hot and smell meaty and all attempts at English conversation would give way to shouts of German hysteria.

"Nein, *danke*." Victor held his breath, lifted his bedroom window and leapt through, never once looking back.

A Spoonful of Bacon

He was sitting on the stoop overlooking their postage stamp of a back yard. His toes pointed towards each other, engaging in inaudible whispers of dismay, as he held a mug of bacon grease. Several hours of cooling had settled the grease into a semi-gelatinous white substance; the longer Victor waited, the worse it became. His aunt Gertrude had caught him picking again.

"Nein, Victor," she had curdled, "*das ist zum abendessen*".
That is for dinner.

Hand still in the bowl of bacon, he couldn't deny that he had done it. Instead, he replicated a few steps from an old Fred Astaire tap number he had seen on TV. Closing the act, he tossed the bacon in the air and caught it in his mouth. There would be no amusing her. As he stood there displaying the dimples his mother had always loved, Gertrude forced the mug, hot grease dripping over the brim, into his hands and made a gesture of salute.

"Prost."

Meeting Gertrude

He stood rigid like the kitchen chairs and tried to figure out what his aunt was hiding underneath her dress. From the shape of the bulges, he guessed that she was probably storing pork. At least that would explain the smell.

"Hallo Victor. Haben sie schon von Deutschland?"

Her voice was thick and her words rolled out of her mouth and congealed somewhere in the air between them. Victor held his breath and imagined taking the stylus from his Woolly Willy game and moving the dark patch of hair from beneath her nose up between her eyebrows.

After a few moments of silence, his father put a balled fist on his hip. "Well, if you aren't going to say anything boy, then go set the table. Gertrude made spatzel, just like what I used to eat when I was your age."

He was curious about his father's life back in Germany, but the man rarely gave specifics and Victor never asked. Instead, he ate that first meal in silence and tried not to let the wavy noodles on his plate remind him of ribbons weaving through funeral wreaths.

Winter Weather Advisory

Victor would never forget the days when his mother would help him set up roads around the house made from shoelaces and unraveled balls of knitting yarn. She used to laugh by the stove, wooden spoon in hand, as he honked and whistled and pushed his trucks from room to room. At the end of the day she would rub cream on his knees and tell him the weather forecast as he crawled into bed. "There's going to be heavy fog early tomorrow so make sure you leave extra time for your morning commute," she would whisper, her nose pressed to his, "and don't forget to turn off your high beams. Too much light is bad for visibility."

One morning after a particularly dismal forecast, Victor had woken up to a room covered in cotton balls. It only took a moment for him to realize that this time, a blizzard had really come. He rolled quickly out of bed and went to work, beeping and chewing thoughtfully on his tongue, as each shoelace road was carefully plowed.

Through a small space between the door and the frame, Victor's mother stood smiling. He stopped plowing and looked up. "Do you want to drive with me, Mom?"

"I'll go anywhere as long as it's with you." She kneeled down next to him with the skirt of her dress pooled on the floor around her and grabbed a truck.

"Here we go," Victor said, looking over his shoulder. "Just do what I do."

When Victor's father came home from work, he found the dishes unwashed and the vacuum sitting in the middle of the living room floor, cord unraveled and lying next to the outlet in the wall. He heard laughter and the sounds of car engines revving and followed the sound to his son's bedroom. He peered into the room.

Victor's mother was scooting behind him and beeping at him to go faster. She took the truck in her hand and drove it up the bottom of Victor's foot; he laughed and shook his leg at her. A few moments later she did it again. This time, Victor turned around and dropping his truck, jumped into his mother's arms. He sat in her lap with his head rising and falling on her chest as she traced the outline of his cheek and pressed a kiss into his dimples..

“Just me and you, little guy. Always and forever.”

Victor’s father backed slowly away from the door, careful to avoid the squeaky floorboard at the end of the hallway.

NATE KREICHMAN

AND GOD, I KNOW, I'M ONE

It was summertime when I arrived in New Orleans. I spent my first days and nights huddled on park benches and the corner booths of dive bars. Kicking the skag, getting over the sick. When that was all done with I was able to get a job driving a taxi late at night. I was God's lonely man. To my surprise I found the lingering whistles of French horns do not trail you through the streets of New Orleans at night.

To my surprise.

Along my cab route was this insect of a coffee shop open at all hours of the night. I was always picking up sad little women from that shop. One night, maybe my second or third on the job, the man in the radio told me to head over there. This was around two in the morning. I found this sad little blonde girl waiting for me, purse clutched to her chest. She was around my age and wore too much eye shadow. Some guy was harassing her. Walking in circles, cackling, poking her. But she just stood there. I got out of the cab and asked if she was the one who'd called. She nodded and started walking towards me. The guy grabbed her by the arm and spit up some bullshit line like "hey baby stay a while." To my surprise, I cracked him one right in the nose. Then, we got in the cab.

To my surprise.

After she had thanked me too many times I asked where she was going.

"Tom Johnson's," she said, "It's a bar in the French Quarter. Three-oh-nine Decatur Street."

I nodded.

"I'm Shelley," she said, "by the way."

"Austin."

The ride was quiet. The radio was broken. I could hear the boss man inside, but there was no music. Instead, I listened to the wind cut, cut, cut, through my half open window. When we arrived, Shelley asked if I wanted to come in for a drink. My shift wasn't over for six hours, but it looked like a nice place, two stories with a balcony.

So I did.

Strange vibrations in that bar. It was the way people's eyes followed me around the room. It was less the way the Mona Lisa's would and more like a Scooby-Doo villain had poked out a portrait's

eyes to watch me from some secret chamber behind the wall. I got the sense everyone knew everybody else, like I was intruding on some kind of secret society's chapter meeting.

Shelley took my hand and led me to the corner of the bar, towards a solitary black man in a dark purple suit with green trimmings. He was younger than the rest of the crowd, but you got the feeling he was in charge. As soon as he laid eyes on Shelley his face broke into a smile. She gave him a hug and proceeded to talk about how I'd "rescued" her from "some creep down by Teeth's." Frankly, she made me out to be far more heroic than I was.

"What's your name, son?" asked the man in charge. His words were thick with Louisiana drawl.

"Austin."

"Well Austin, thanks for looking after ol' Shelley here," he said. "I'm Benjamin McWilliams Ducreaux, that's *Mack-Williams* and *Doo-Crow*. This here is my place."

He shook my hand and patted the stool to his left. I took it. Shelley sat down on my other side. "Whatchu drinking?" he said.

"Bourbon," I said. When in Rome. Benjamin motioned to the bartender, a half-bald fat man nearing middle age whom I would later learn was Tom Johnson, the bar's namesake.

"You new in town, Austin?" said Benjamin.

"Yes sir, got in a week or so back." I looked down at my wrinkled t-shirt, one of two that I owned. "Do I look it?"

"You smell it," said Shelley. Benjamin gave her a look like she'd interrupted the grown-ups talking. I just smiled. When you're right you're right.

"I'm uh, still looking for more permanent living arrangements," I said. "I don't suppose you're hiring? I've got bartending experience."

"Now Austin, if it wasn't for you helping out Shelley here, I'd say no," he said, stretching his arms out wide. "But we here is one big family, and we's *always* looking for help." He paused and looked me up and down. "From the right sorts of people."

I finished my drink. "And what sort is that?"

His eyes met mine. He was serious. "The sort that protects they own. The sort that will get his hands dirty and keep his mouth shut. You think you can handle that?"

To my surprise, I did.

The bar's patrons started to trickle out. When Shelley left she squeezed my hand and said she'd see me soon, after I'd taken a shower. When the door was locked behind them, Benjamin introduced me to a few of his friends. He referred to each as his "brother in-law."

Among them was Tom Johnson, the fat bartender. Benjamin told Tom that I'd be helping out around the bar and to set me up in a room upstairs. It was bare and wooden but it had a cot and a bathroom down the hall. A bathroom, complete with shower.

"Mr. Ducreaux I—"

"Call me Benny."

"Right, Benny. I really can't thank you enough."

"Austin, Austin, think nothing of it. This is what I *do* for my in-laws."

After being alone for so long, the camaraderie was almost intoxicating.

When I awoke I took my cab back to the depot. I would have to go back for my check. When I returned, Tom showed me around the bar, describing the odd jobs that would be my duties. He also told me to pour drinks if I didn't see him around. He had a habit of disappearing. Big feet but light steps. It was mid-afternoon, I was sweeping up when Benjamin strolled in. After I thanked him again we got into conversation.

I learned that Benjamin McWilliams Ducreaux's great-grandmother Variola had come to New Orleans from Haiti at age seventeen and lived to be one hundred and two. Variola had practiced vodou, but not that bullshit you see in the movies. Her religion had taught her that life is nothing more than perpetual suffering interspersed with fleeting moments of respite. She had passed this knowledge on to Benny at an early age, and although he practiced no religion, it was not a lesson he soon forgot.

"If you don't mind me asking, how'd you come to own a place like this? Being so young and all," I said.

He chuckled. "I happen to be the second-most successful coffin salesman in all of New Orleans."

"And business is good, you know, with the economy and all?"

"Damn economy can go up, down, west, or sideways, people ain't never gonna stop dying."

He also had a brother-in-law in the county coroner's office. Next of kin got a flyer from Ducreaux Coffin, Incorporated the morning after every cold body showed up at their doorstep.

Benny was either a brilliantly cynical businessman or there was something he wasn't telling me. Even then I suspected the latter. As time wore on I learned more and more about the "in-law's" operation. Along with the legitimate earnings the bar and coffin

business brought in, they ran countless rackets on the side. Drug running, prostitution, Benny had a finger in all of it. All the in-laws got a cut of the action, but he always took the biggest.

That was never a problem though, the whole community loved Benny, even outsiders. The bar's success brought local businesses new customers every day. In turn, real estate values went up. Plus, every year his company offered a full scholarship to the local high school's valedictorian. And that was just the "good" stuff. If someone did a local wrong and conventional justice had proved inadequate, everybody knew you went to Benny. He rarely asked for anything in return.

When I walked in on Tom running a high-stakes blackjack game in one of the bar's back rooms, I thought I'd figured out where he was always disappearing to. But I later found the bar had a *further* back room, where Tom sold guns with their serial numbers filed off. There was also Tom's son, who I knew only as "Teeth." Teeth had been a friend of Benny's since grade school. He'd gotten the nickname on account of his day job as an assistant dental hygienist, but that wasn't how he contributed to the in-laws. Teeth broke into that dentist's office late at night and used it as a clinic, performing abortions on sad little girls without health insurance. It had occurred to me that most of the in-laws' schemes profited from death, or at least potential death. I tried my best to be appalled. I really did. But when Benny asked if there was another way I could contribute, I offered to write obituaries for him to send along with his flyers to all those dead bodies' next of kin. We could take a fee from any family that ran it in the paper. He liked that idea, clean money.

Oh, and Tom's deck only had three aces.

Shelley came to the bar every night with a few other girls. I spent my days wrist deep in toilets thick with vomitus, thinking up lists of things I could talk to her about. It was nerve wracking. The lists I mean, not the vomit. I can't tell you how much easier it is to get through a day when you've got heroin waiting for you than conversation with a girl you've just met. With heroin, you already know the result: uncut pleasure regardless of purity. There are no uncertainties. With a girl I have to wonder some if she likes me or if the conversation's going well, but mostly I wonder whether or not she'll touch my wiener. I guess that's the upshot of marriage: it's kind of like heroin. The uncertainties are gone. But then, so is the pleasure.

Shelley, it seemed, occupied a position similar to my own in the in-laws' hierarchy, a sort of pledge in their fraternal order.

Until she was initiated she would have to prove herself the way all young females in-laws did. She was a hooker. We were getting close, so I didn't know how I felt about that. But I knew better than to test Benny's judgment.

One night about a week in, I was attempting to wash the permanent marker cocks off the walls of a particularly foul men's room stall when Tom burst in and tossed me a set of keys. It's strange that women never find themselves compelled to draw vaginas on the walls surrounding *their* facilities. Tom must've worn size fifteens, but I swear I've never heard him take a step.

"Time to drive," he said.

"Where to, Tom?" I replied.

"It's Mr. Johnson."

"Oh, but Benny always says—"

"It's Mr. Johnson."

"Right. Where to, Mr. Johnson?"

"Shelley's got a customer, some rich creep out of town," he said.

"Oh," I said. I would have preferred to continue scrubbing. "Alright."

"It's the grey sedan around back."

I made my way downstairs and tapped Shelley on the shoulder. "Your chauffeur has arrived m'lady," I said, tipping an imaginary cap. She smiled. You've got to make the best of every situation.

Along the way, we did our best to pass the time people watching and joking around. The ride was filled with giggles and light punches on the arm. I knew I'd made a good joke when she would brush her hand on mine or across my shoulder. We both noticed when we passed an old movie theater re-running "Aladdin."

"I used to love that movie when I was a kid," I said.

"Me too," said Shelley. "I can remember my mother taking me to see it."

"Are you and your mother still close?"

"Not exactly," she said with the slightest of grimaces. I knew when to stop digging.

We arrived at the john's house. Tom had not been wrong, he was rich. "So, do I just wait in the car?"

"No, silly, you have to come inside and make sure things go smoothly." I didn't like that. Not one bit.

Shelley marched up the rich man's walkway while I followed close behind. When she rang the doorbell, the man answered almost

instantly.

"Hello there! Come in, come in," he said. Tom had proven himself right once again. This guy was a fucking creep.

"Hey," said Shelley, with what I hoped was only feigned exuberance. "Remember me? I'm Shelley." What did she mean remember her? It just kept getting worse and worse.

"Of course, of course. It's Shelley, you said? And who might this handsome fellow be?"

"Oh, this is my friend Austin. He's my little chauffeur and bodyguard," she said, tossing a wink in my direction.

"Well isn't this a treat?" said the man. "I'll tell you what, Shelley, I'll pay you double and give your friend the usual rate if you can get him to watch us." Mother. Fucking. Creep.

Shelley turned to me and batted her eyelashes. Of course she batted her fucking eyelashes. "What do you say Austin? We could both use the money."

If it had been up to me I would've told him where to stick it, but I couldn't disagree with Shelley, let alone take money out of her pocket. Not to mention that this snake could no doubt spare a couple extra bucks. "I mean, only if it's alright with you," I said.

Shelley nodded in approval. The man grabbed her hand and she grabbed mine in turn, then he led our human train upstairs.

I'd rather not get into the specifics of it all, it was sex, use your imagination. I did my best to avert my eyes, but the creep started to whine and threaten not to pay up every time he caught me looking anywhere but the point of penetration.

Once we were back on the road, Shelley pulled the cash out of her bra, counted it, and handed me a third. I'd never known self-loathing like the kind I felt as I jammed that money into my front pocket. I tried to maintain my composure during the drive, but let's just say it was uncomfortable. Shelley could tell something was up, but she didn't make any mention of it. I swallowed vomit each and every time I fingered the wad of bills in my pocket.

But I couldn't stop myself.

A month or so later, Benny told me the guy who usually ran security for Teeth was incapacitated, so I had to help out. It was to be an initiation of sorts, to become a full-on in-law. He told me all I had to do was walk around, keep watch, and around appointment times, sit by the back entrance and not let *anybody* in unless they knocked a certain way and slid an envelope under the door. Teeth had a schedule to keep: we get in, he does his job, I do mine, and we get out. No sweat, Benny said, but I had to prove my loyalty. Shelley was proud of my new responsibilities. She promised she'd stop by

to check up on me. I knew Benny wouldn't approve of a visit while I was working, but when else would I get another opportunity to be alone with her?

Just as the bar was getting crowded, Teeth and I headed out. When I stood up, Benny pushed a bundle of napkins across the bar. As we piled into his rusty blue El Camino, I unwrapped the package to find a tiny black handgun. No sweat, I recalled.

"You ever feel bad about the work you do? You know, morally?" I asked him.

"What do you mean?" said Teeth.

"Well you're cutting these babies out and—"

"They *ain't* babies."

"Alright well you're cutting them out and, I mean I got no problem with a woman's right to choose and all that crap, just seems being the one to do it would be tough."

"If I didn't, someone else would."

"That's true."

"Look kid, you know what part of the embryo forms first?"

"No, what?"

"The anus."

"The anus?"

"That's right," he said, swinging into a parking lot. "So technically we all start off assholes. What I'm doing, I'm just ridding the world of a couple new assholes."

It was hard to argue that logic.

I sat inside the basement door, It was the only way in or out save the front. Three girls arrived, knocked, and slid their envelopes under the door. I led each one to the operating room. I even tried my best to be comforting. I told them it wouldn't hurt at all, and this would all blow over in time. They were unconvinced. While Teeth carried on his business, I made my paces around the building every half-hour. Each time I was to walk two laps inside and two outside. A chill ran down my spine every time my swinging hands swept across the cold steel on my hip.

Teeth was working on his third customer when I heard the knock and watched an envelope slide to my feet. It was too thin to be cash. I got spooked and groped for my gun. But inside was a note, "It's Shelley, let me in!"

Shelley and I walked around the office flirting and cracking jokes. Nothing any rich city girl ever did made my heart jump the way it did when Shelley laced her fingers around mine. Shelley, the hooker. The hooker who took money from people she'd never met to

have sex with them.

"Does it ever bother you, the things we do for Benny?" I asked.

"How do you mean?"

"It's all this death and loneliness and suffering. We create it, we profit off it."

"My work makes people feel less lonely."

"But how does it make *you* feel?"

I felt her fingers curl away from mine before the sound of equipment crashing rained down from Teeth's operating room. I'd left my post. I was so fucked. We rushed to discover the source of the commotion. A masked figure was strangling Teeth with the long tubing of a saliva ejector. His patient lay still; only her chest inched up and down as the mask on her face filled and emptied her lungs. Filled and emptied. Filled and emptied. I pushed Shelley away from me. "Run," I said. Then, I remembered my gun.

"Let him go," I said, my hand shook with potential.

"If you gon' shoot me boy, shoot me," said an unwavering, oddly familiar voice.

So, to my surprise, I did.

A body fell to the floor. Teeth's. The masked man descended upon me. I squeezed the trigger, again, and again, and again. His hands reached towards me, towards my neck, before pulling me into an awkward embrace.

"You did it garyon, you passed part one." It was Benny. The bullets were blanks. "You proved you'd spill blood to protect your in-laws."

"But, Benny, I, what, Teeth—," I said. The gun dropped from my hands. I felt my chest cave into itself.

"Teeth had to go," Benny explained. "Tom is too important."

I couldn't speak. I didn't understand. Benny dragged me to a seat. "What now?" I asked.

"Do you remember what I told you the night we met, Austin? Hands dirty, mouth shut? Your hands is dirty."

I said nothing.

"We need to go."

He grabbed me by the shoulders and brought me to his car. It was a hearse, the same dark purple as his signature suit. "Relax now Austin, you did it. Just keep your mouth shut and you're one of us. No more scrubbing toilets."

No more toilets. In the future, it seemed, my hands would be clean.

"Do you know why we're called the in-laws, Austin?"

I didn't.

"Because we're a family, but we ain't related by blood."

That much was obvious.

"Sometimes, when one of your in-laws dies, the family gets an inheritance." He flung an envelope onto my lap, Teeth's customer's money. "There's your inheritance. Now just keep your mouth shut and you having Shelley around, I won't even bring it up."

"Please don't hurt her," I said.

"I won't touch her Austin, as long as you explain to her what happened. You need to make sure what she saw tonight is the same thing we did, the 'official' version."

"And if I do that, you won't hurt Shelley?" I said. "No matter what?"

"Austin, you have my word."

All seemed well in the bar's main space. I followed Benny to Tom's further back room, where a number of in-laws surrounded him as he wept. He rose from his seat and put his arms around Benny.

"My boy, Benny! They took my son!" he sobbed before his eyes fixed on me. He thrashed about, trying to get at me, but Benny's hug locked him tight. "You were supposed to watch his back. *You* killed him!"

"Tom, there was three of 'em. They strolled in with a shotgun pressed against a customer's back. Had her do the knock and give him the money and all, no way he could've known, nothing he could've done. Ain't that right Austin?" Benny said. There was a calm about him, this conversation was nothing. Like he was recapping an episode of his favorite sitcom.

"Yes sir," I said. The words fought their way out.

And for the first time in a while, I was not surprised.

Tom slouched over again, inconsolable. "Listen to me," said Benny, but Tom kept right on weeping. Benny lifted him up and slapped him. "Tom, listen to me, we're gonna find the bastards that did this. We're gonna find 'em and we're gonna make 'em sorry they messed with my in-laws. Ok, Tom?"

The sobs receded. The life flowed back into him. "Look me in the eye, Benny. Look me in the eye and tell me we're gonna kill 'em all."

"Tom, you have my word."

LIZ MCLAUGHLIN

THE CABIN

I've been up here a week now, in the mountains, the forest—three whole months since I screwed my head on straight. I've kept busy; gathered wood, made soup. Started a list of things that need done around the cabin. The list is getting long.

The silence is starting to settle into my bones, surrounded by so much earth and wood. I'm enjoying the fire and smoke, the wind and solitude. The sun shining through the branches of the gnarled oak tree out front warms the floorboards, years of wear in need of refinishing. And I wonder if the oak would mourn the floors, plank by plank, chopped; or see them as some kind of legacy, a life after death.

I'm going to stay here awhile. Fix this shack up.

Lately, when I start to get distracted, I hit the deck—crank out sets of push-ups, sit-ups; ten, twenty, thirty pull-ups at a time, my fingernails indenting the soft pine beam of the rafters; anything when the silence gets deafening. The pump in my muscles brings me right back to center; the burn in my lungs, the thud in my chest pulls everything into my core where it's compact. A clever trick I learned back at Mercy House. Rehab does that, teaches you acceptable ways; trades one habit for another. But damn does it work. I do another set if the first doesn't cut it. And after that, if there are still cyclones of thought, need, want, flying through my head, I go for a run. I can outrun most anything.

It's all adjustment. You have to adjust to your surroundings. Adapt. They warn you: Be cautious. Don't try too much at once. Ease back into it. So what do I do? I go from cars honking and people hollering and dogs up all night; the city vibrating, everything fluorescent and buzzing; the constant hum, this machine that just doesn't stop. And I come out here; smothered by mother nature, choking on her flowered scent.

Under my feet, the earth is writhing. There's something heavy about the air out here, trapped in the underbelly of the land. The August rains press everything closer and closer to the dirt; stomp it all into mud. The summer settles itself in, squats on its haunches to sit low and wait. Time is a completely different beast out here.

I finally started to put some real work into the old cabin. It'd been left to go to shit since Pap passed. The rest of the family doesn't want anything to do with it. It's just another piece of property that needs upkeep. After I discharged from Mercy, I stayed with Mom but I knew that couldn't last. I'm far removed from the days I could just lounge around her house, eating and sleeping. I've got to be a man; I've got to fend for myself. Uncle Hank came over yesterday afternoon and we got to talking about this little shack, the work that needs done. I offered to stay longer; need a place to stay anyway, need to do something with my hands. I figured it would be a distraction, something to focus on. Uncle Hank looked at me long and hard, told me the cabin would be mine if I fixed it up. Said there's no use in it going to waste—a perfectly good piece of property. And besides, he said, Pap would've wanted it that way.

Pap would've wanted me to pour myself into the floorboards.

So far I've just tightened her up a bit, got the door swinging smooth, put new screens in the windows, oiled the tools in the shed; I sharpened the axe, split firewood. This cabin might have been neglected, but it's a sturdy little bastard; thick and strong built by hands thick and strong. I can see those hands now, all veins and sinew. He used to tell me I had strength. He knew what I could become. He saw potential when everyone else saw waste. He'd want me to callous up, let this little shack to turn me into a man. When you build something with your hands, seal it with your blood, stain it with your sweat, your soul becomes a part of it.

This little cabin can't shake him; I feel him, I hear him. He's trapped in these wooden beams. Burning in the wood stove. He's rising up out of the ground and reaching through the branches of the old oak tree. A specter.

When I take time to think of it, it feels good to get away from that urban machine. The temptations, the women, the whiskey; their promises to fill you up and free you. And I'd blame the needle too, but the needle doesn't promise anything. It's the plunger. That trigger. The needle's just a hollow hallway.

I thought it'd be easier up here, but so far it's harder. Back in the city I didn't wake up in cold sweats, salty with nightmares. Out here I keep dreaming of deer; tan and white and leaping into the grills of semi-trucks. Tactile fur and gleaming metal polished to a mirror; and then red blooming, crimson splashing. And that's just the start. In these dreams, my past is a tangible thing, full of color. I can taste its bitter tannins, the smoky women linger long after I wake. I can hear its sizzle, its snap. Once again I'm vibrant, alive, a scavenger. Picking apart the pieces left behind, stuffing scraps into my jacket pocket. In these dreams, my past creeps back, her face a dark cloak. I can feel her knocking on the bones in my knees. And all the while she's counting down the minutes on her fingers.

I can see myself growing stronger now. Back at Mercy, when I finally woke from the haze, finally got the nerve to take a look in the mirror, I stripped and just stood there; bones protruding, lean mass gone, long eaten away because I certainly wasn't feeding it; my eyes empty, weak. A beaten animal. I threw myself on the floor, couldn't manage a single push-up, had to get on my knees like a girl. I was furious. I took that hate and turned it into strength—siphoned it, bottled it up. Now my biceps swell with pure liquid rage. My shoulders are thick with fury. My thighs ache with anger. My whole body is this coiled machine, ready, waiting, waiting for that bitch to come back. Tempt me again, take away my minutes, my seconds; replace my time with cotton and sickness, dilute me, snuff me out. I know she's got a plan. She's coming back to finish me; to pull my tendons between her teeth; to suck the jelly from my bones. But I'm ready and I'm waiting.

I was sitting on the porch feeding new cotton wicks into the kerosene lanterns when Uncle Hank stopped by the cabin again. I inspected the lanterns in my hands, rust slowly eating them away. Uncle Hank pulled two brown bags filled with groceries out of the passenger seat of the cab. By the time I had stood up to help, he had already pulled open the screen door, set the groceries on the narrow counter in the kitchen, returned to the porch. He sat on the stoop. The screen door slammed shut behind him with a cringe.

"The rain's been coming almost nightly now," he said without removing the toothpick from his teeth.

"It has."

"You got to get to fixing that roof, or you're going to be dealing with a world of shit."

"It's next on my list, Hank. Believe me. Did you bring those roofing nails and shingles?"

He stood and walked over to his red pickup truck, dropping the tailgate with a clunk. He leaned into the truck bed and dragged two old Wild Irish Rose boxes to the end of the tailgate. "Come and get them."

I shouldered each box and set them by the shed. Uncle Hank slammed the tailgate shut; the crack reverberating off of the trees. I inspected the boxes. The second one had a flap torn off. It held some odds and ends, enough roofing nails to finish the patch job. One of the nail packages had opened and spilled into the box. The loose nails had worked their way to the bottom where there was a one-inch gap. A trail of them wandered from the pickup to the shed.

Fucking Hank.

Just then I heard the pickup's engine turn over and sputter a bit until it was given some gas. By the time I got to my feet, the tail end was ambling down the drive, a glimmer of sun-faded red, two inch deep tire tracks in the soggy dirt leading out of view, mud tracks trailing down the road.

I've been thinking about that shit all goddamn day. The judgment in his eyes, on the lookout for any indication I'm about to commit a major fuck-up. Always hunting for it. There's something else in his eyes too: confidence, inevitability, waiting. Sometimes I wonder why he comes up here at all, probably as some retribution to the family, some way to prove himself, figures he's protecting his sister from having to worry about me.

After Mercy House, rehabilitation, discharge, after I had gone back home, she just wandered the house a shadow, quiet, shades of grey. Never put shoes on, just stalked the halls in her socks, unraveled. But somehow it was as if she had always known I was going to grow up a mess; knew no amount of good parenting could dig out these black roots. She saw them in me long before they began to sprout out of my veins. She saw them back when they were still curly green tendrils working their way into my guts. Maybe she had started to pull apart at the seams back then. I was too strung out to notice her eyes light up, the corners of her mouth turn down; that moment she realized her son was some

junkie manifest destiny.

I haven't been getting the same effect from my efforts. The push-ups, pull-ups, sit-ups, have all become mechanical. I just go through the motions. They don't dampen the blows any longer, barely take the edge off. I need something stronger. I've been sleeping straight through the morning, waking to the sweaty heaviness of the afternoon. The day wasted.

I started to reinforce the rafters where the water has been coming in under the loose shingles. Just replaced those last week. I cut the boards to fit and started hammering them in. I can't let myself grow lazy, soft. If I want to stay straight I've got to persevere. Can't lose the path. Can't get distracted. Got to prove it to them; I can do something right for once. I can keep my shit together. At the very least I can stay sober and strong.

And then I brought the hammer down on my left thumb.

At first nothing. Blankness. A few moments of quiet comfort. And then the pain. It started in the flesh of my swelling thumb and spread through my muscles, nerves, tapped straight into my bones. My whole body throbbing from the inside out, screaming. But I find an odd equilibrium where the physical pain meets my frustration, a settling, an eye in the storm. And only then does the desire to shrug off my skin intensify. I am pure want: I want to unzip this hide and run out of my flesh. I drag my boots underneath me, my feet heavy and hot. I roll and moan onto the bed. I sprawl face down on the sweat-stained bedspread, everything an unsteady rippling mass of injury. I squeeze the water from my eyes and heave my entreaty into the salty cotton.

When I wake the next day, the need to crawl out of my skin awakens right with me. I put on my shoes and I run. I follow a path worn bare by generations of deer's innate yearning to follow, follow, follow. And then I get to thinking about the deer and how the state knows where to put those deer-crossing signs. It doesn't matter to those deer that we blew out the mountain; put two four-lane super-highways going through in either direction, a concrete artery running perpendicular to their main thoroughfare. It doesn't matter to them—they have no choice. They have no other way to go. They've been forging that path for years. The deer before them and the deer before them. Then we come and blast and bulldoze, pave and paint and illuminate. And we're surprised at them crossing where they've always been compelled to cross. That path is theirs, their blood pumps the map. The trail

blazed in their bones, a sinewy memory.

And here I suffer up this winding hill to the top. Trees and forest, never any closer to an end, just a deeper burn in my calves. Liquid singing in my eardrums, the rhythm of twigs snapping underfoot, everything creating this cadence; the thumping heat in my thumb, the same blood hot in my hamstrings. Mind finally unhitched, I finally remember just why it was I came up to this cabin in the first place: to sweat that last stinking drop of it out of my system; to clear the sludgy residue from the bottom of my gut; to twist and wring the poison from my pores; cast out those last shadows; kill that demon lying in wait.

I keep running.

I run until the afternoon becomes the evening.

I run until I finally shake my way back to the cabin, back to my list, back to finishing the things that I've started.

I haven't slept for days; at least it feels like days. It's hard to tell with the incessant rain, the constant grey. The thunder has been knocking the roof since the morning before last, the night before that, I can't remember when it started or how long it's been. But I know all the while the lightening applauds it along; the wind barks up the boards, shaking the sides of the cabin. The storm keeps slamming; it's been coming for weeks now, as many weeks as I can remember. Shucking the shingles, flashing the curtains, burning images through my eyelids, branches of the oak tree etched onto my retina. So I sit and I rock, I creak in the chair in the corner. I am a babbling brook. I can't stop rushing. The water has entered my bloodstream. It has diluted me, washed away my edges. I am a stone, polished smooth in the tumbler. I am the rhythm of my torso, back and forth, back and forth. I am a pendulum. I survive to swing. And tick, tick, tick.

The storm outside, I can hear him getting angry now. Huffing, he picks up his hammer. He positions the three-thousand pound sledge over his head. I taste his rage. I've slipped my feet into his boots. He pauses at that moment, the height of his control; all that weight over his head, hanging. This is real power, the promise of destruction. I've held that much teetering overhead, wooden handle splintering in my hands.

The storm takes a deep breath. He decides the moment is

right.

And he brings his hammer down.

I rush out of the cabin, chair creaking behind me. The oak tree stands split straight down the middle; the heavy half reaches for the ground, an old man lumbering to steady his self. I watch as the tree creaks and yawns with the rising wind.

Something is bubbling up; the roots stir inside of me.

I am suddenly sick.

I heave the contents of my guts into the grass. I imagine stringy black roots pouring out of my mouth, but the dirt is only splashed with pools of yellow bile. My heart races, the pain in my head whistles.

The goddamn tree is split down the middle.

I can't think of what to do. The storm slaps me across the face with cold rain. My thoughts spin. My heart is pounding through my ribs now, threatens to crack my bones. My tongue begins to swell against my teeth. I need to run. I need to bring this shit to center.

I need to run, now.

And so I run.

Away from the cabin, the oak, straight into the thick of the storm. My legs are rubber, my knees bend backwards. My burning eyes are cooled by the buckets of rain falling from above. I find my cadence. The heat of my body meets the cold of the rain. A spray of steam trails behind me. I am a comet, pulsing through the forest. I am a ball of fire. I find my head and I find my center. The wet absorbs all of my sounds. I am silent. On mute, I run in the peaceful quiet chaos of the storm.

The rain falls from its crescendo and becomes nearly silent. I plant both of my feet in the dirt. Everything catches up to my stopped body, slams into my back with ricochet force. I fall onto my knees. My elbows suck into the thick mud of the earth. The rain, a tiny patter now, paws at the back of my neck. My chest inflates with a giant sob when I catch movement out of the corner of my eye.

A doe.

She's lying in the underbrush, waiting out the rain. Knobby knees curled underneath herself, watching me.

I blink.

She blinks.

Doe eyes, thick lashes.

At that moment I understand what to do. Time has stopped in this place. This is the rock I must roll up the hill, again and again. I have become Sisyphus. I will wait at the bottom for it to roll back down. I am here to catch it, to push it back up. This is perseverance, this is strength.

The storm has finally broken. There is actual quiet now. And light. The doe senses the shift and stands. Shakes the wet from her coat. Leaps off.

I pull myself from the mud, and make my way back to the cabin.

When I come upon it, I see the damage done. While I ran and ran through the forest, the oak tree formed a fist and punched through the floorboards. Punched straight into the root cellar. The tree is completely split now, the heavy half reaches into the floorboards like a giant hand. The sun shines hot and fierce into the cabin. I crawl through the hole ripped open by the oak; weave my way up and over the jungle gym of branches. I'm suddenly a kid again. Once inside, I see that a thick branch has crushed the wood stove. Another has smashed the rocking chair to splinters. Everything a busted game of pick-up sticks—shingles and two-by-fours sprawling. I notice a gleam in the root cellar, a glint of sunlight refracted, something wedged under the floorboards.

Like an exploding beam of sunlight burst into a million pieces of color it all comes flooding back to me, wavelength by individual wavelength: the thirst.

Before my brain can even register it, my body responds; see the thirst is faster than the electrical synapses between my neurons. This time I crawl back through the branches, get underneath them to creep into the black earth of the root cellar. In the darkness, in the dirt, my hands grasp a long tall bottle—ominous black label—glass so thick and sturdy. I can feel its contents pulsating; clear and cool and sharp and clean. I'm vibrating. The tiny hairs on my arms stand on end. A thought begins to push its way to the forefront of my consciousness.

Almost immediately this thought is pushed down, down, down. And replaced by fear and joy and blood-pumping, heart-pounding justification. This is it, my temptation, my moment of

reckoning.

This is my talking snake.

The gnarled branches of the oak form a canopy over my body as I sit in the dirt of the root cellar. My fist tightly grips the bottle of whiskey. I loosen the cap and drink down the burning brown liquid. Everything is dead quiet now. Mute. The branches of the oak tree brush against me, leaves cool and wet on my face. Row upon row of dewy brown liquid shimmers, encased in glass. Enough to last me months, years. I have died. This is heaven.

With my free hand I begin to peel back my layers. I unzip my skin and slip free. It's only now that I discover it: I have no backbone, no supporting structure, nothing at my center. I'm pure exoskeletal.

I collapse back onto the moist black dirt below, no longer a man, now an empty suit. The branches shudder. The quaking leaves shake tiny droplets of water straight through me onto the dirt below. I am weightless. I am steam. I press the bottle into my chest and can feel it growing larger with every breath I take, an inflating balloon. I close my eyes and feel myself rising. I float through the branches, through the floorboards, through the rafters. I rise right out of the cabin, pulled by some invisible slipstream into the sky above.

SARAH REAGLE

SUSPENDED IN THEIR COCOONERY

The infestation started slowly. I noticed the moths near the end of summer. I thought — like the stray bee or beetle — they'd come in through the open windows. I kept thinking they'd leave on their own, fly out the way they came. Or follow me out the door once the cold came and the windows closed. But they never left. Instead, they multiplied.

The morning it got cold enough for oatmeal was the morning the moths became unwelcome. There comes a breaking point for all guests, like when a friend crashes on the couch between apartments. The dirty socks left in the living room. The milk left to spoil on the counter. The larvae left in the oatmeal, suspended in their cocoonery. They weren't the remnants of summer; they were the moths that a mother should've told me about before I moved into my own apartment. The ones that come in with the groceries and breed until the feathery sounds of moth wings fill the air before bedtime. They were flour moths, pantry moths, Indian meal moths. And they were everywhere.

That morning, when I saw the tenuous webbing stretched between the oats like a confused cobweb, I dropped the container and screamed. I got out the broom and dustpan and started to clean the mess, blushing as though someone had seen me in my moment of girlish fear. As I tried to angle the broom to get the sticky larvae out from under the cupboard, I heard a knock at the door to my apartment. It was my upstairs neighbor — Celia. She was the only one who could get past the first set of doors to the house.

Celia was the first person I met when I moved in. She was here even before the landlord, who admittedly was an hour late to give me the keys. I was sitting on the front step waiting, contemplating how twenty-two years could fit in one moving truck when I saw Celia coming from down the block. She had black hair cropped close to her head and wore a rust-colored pantsuit with a chicken brooch clipped under the collar.

She introduced herself as Celia Wilcox and responded with a yep-yep-yep-yep when I asked if she lived here. Her clipped words reminded me of a clucking chicken — but perhaps

that was cruel to think. A projection of her strange brooch onto her words. Celia invited me in for tea, telling me that the landlord was never, ever on time. And with nothing to do and nothing to lose, I followed her.

The house looked the way it did on the Internet. Red brick with vines creeping up and over the front windows; bordering unkempt but erring on the side of rustic. Celia opened the first door and went into the small foyer, revealing two more doors. It reminded me of a fun house, the kind where you just have to hope you chose the right door.

"Yours is the one on the left, but you can see that later," Celia said.

"Yeah, I hope so," I said.

"Now, I should warn you that I have a little collection," Celia said, starting to open the door to her apartment. "Some people think it's a little silly."

"I'm sure I've seen worse," I replied, expecting an abundance of dolls or snow globes.

But it was neither. It was chickens. Everywhere. A coop of sorts. Sculptures lined the stairs, growing larger as we got to her living room, where they cluttered the walls and windowsills. The art on the wall and pillows on the couches depicted chickens. In cages, out of cages, laying eggs. No medium or method missing. There was scrap metal, embroidery, batik, cast iron, straw, screen-printing and plastic. The vase on the dining room table was shaped like a chicken and filled with hydrangeas. The figures surrounding me made me feel like I was at a party of guests I'd never met but that would welcome conversation. Like if I started clucking, they'd cluck right back. Maybe that's how Celia picked up her way of speaking. Or maybe the speech came first. It seemed a little too obvious to ask: chicken or the egg?

Walking into her kitchen, the eyes of hundreds of chickens followed me, and hundreds more met me there.

"This is where my collection started. I wanted a country kitchen," she said, pointing to the wall of chicken magnets nestled against her refrigerator. "Let me put on the tea."

"Oh. Well, I guess you got your country kitchen," I said. I couldn't think of anything else. I silently called her the Chicken Lady but resolved to never say it aloud. I liked her. Even as I looked over to see her moving three chicken teapots off the burners

to make way for the kettle, which was surprisingly normal. Just metal. She held the handle with a chicken potholder.

"It got a little out of hand. After a while, I just had a whole country house," she said.

"I know what you mean," I said.

"They mean good luck, you know. Good, good, good, good. That's part of what I liked about them," she said.

Tea became a regular occurrence in our shared house. Her children and grandchildren had all moved away, and I guess I was something of a surrogate. I had to guess because she never talked about them. There was only one picture frame in her apartment - chickens dancing around the edge of a shot at the zoo, frozen smiles on a group of kids and parents with Celia in the center. When I'd asked about it, she'd muttered something about a wedding and Seattle without any clipped words. The next time I was over, the picture was gone.

I'd come close to memorizing every chicken in her apartment by the time she knocked on my door that morning.

"Honey, you in there?" Celia said, muffled by the door.

I knew she was trying to peek in through the peephole. And I knew she knew it didn't work in that direction. I'd told her the first ten times I caught her doing it.

"Coming, coming," I said, jogging down the short hall.

Bits of oat were stuck in my hair and on the bottoms of my bare feet. I opened the door, hoping she wouldn't judge me too harshly for my appearance and wishing I was still in the kitchen. I felt myself spreading the infestation to other parts of the house. I needed a mask like they wear in Japan for the flu. And a shower.

"When do you want to head to the store today?" Celia asked.

I stared at her like she was asking the color of my underwear. I forgot it was a Sunday. I forgot that these mornings were for taking Celia for groceries, afternoons were for tea, and evenings were for working.

I'd offered to take her to the store once when I saw her lugging bags of groceries off the bus, the blue bags bumping against her in an almost obscene way when she took the last big step down to the sidewalk. And then it became every Sunday morning. I take her to buy the tea, and she serves it. And then I trek off to work to take orders and carry plates of food and smile even when I don't want to.

"I can't," I said finally, choking on the words.

There was no time. I imagined the larvae burrowing into my oats, spitting silk and wrapping themselves in blankets of grain. I imagined the rate at which they could multiply in the time I went to the store and back. I imagined myself as I appeared to Celia at that moment, and I couldn't find adequate words. I couldn't tell her that I was living with moths. She'd think I was dirty, incapable of keeping my own apartment free of pests.

And then I thought of them spreading. If they snuck into the sleeves of my jacket or the folds of my scarf and followed me to work, snuggling into the baguettes and waiting to flutter out at the customers when they reach for something to dip in their soup. And I could picture my boss yelling at me already. His chins flapping and flecks of his spit landing on my lip when he found out I was to blame.

I could hear my mother in my head, telling me about how the neighbor's dog had fleas. Or how my aunt had fruit flies in a thick, black band around her kitchen's ceiling. Telling me that only dirty people got pests. That we weren't that type of people. And I'd never seen Celia without a matching pantsuit and colorful brooch. Always impeccable in that old lady sort of way. She wouldn't have this moth problem.

"I'm sorry. I'm busy today. I just can't," I said.

"Is something wrong, dear? You look pale, pale, pale," Celia asked.

I looked up to see her eyeing my oat-dotted hair with downcast eyes. I hoped she thought the oats were some sort of beauty secret. Celia poked her head inside my door, perhaps looking for the mysterious source of oats. I prayed that the moths hadn't followed me. That she wouldn't glimpse a flutter of wings in the glare from the morning sun. The gleam lighting a trail of dust through the living room.

"No, I'm fine. You have to go though. I, uh - " I said.

And then, as if some higher power was returning my frantic calls for help, the phone rang, stopping me from having to think of a lie.

" - have to answer the phone. Sorry."

"Well, okay. I'll still see you later for - " Celia said as I shut the door.

I couldn't have Celia think I was dirty. I didn't want her to know about the moths. And I needed to get rid of them. I could

feel them all over my nerve endings, sending chills up my spine like a whispered breath against my neck. I'd rather have Celia think I was rude than dirty – or “unclean,” as my mother had called me once before making me rub my hands and face with soap until the bubbles burned when they touched my skin.

I answered the phone without looking at who was calling. In retrospect, I'd file that as a mistake.

“Hello?”

“Hi, darling, it's been too long.”

It was my mother. We hadn't spoken for almost a year, since my last birthday. I'd been avoiding her calls and emails since she'd spent an entire dinner detailing the ways I could be a better daughter. If I could dress like a lady, if I could keep a boyfriend for more than a few months, if my nail beds weren't so damn shallow. It wasn't the first time, but I'd wanted it to be the last. I'd moved here not long after, neglecting to tell my mother the new address. But my phone number hadn't changed.

“Are you there? I can hear you breathing,” she said.

I hung up the phone before she could say anything else. Or before she could hear my voice crack when I responded.

When I was twelve, my mother found a mouse in my room. She saw it scurry along the wall, skirting my bookshelf and moving toward my bed. Like so much else – our plumbing leaks, our cat getting lost, Dad leaving – she blamed the mouse on me.

“Do you keep food in here? How did this get here?” she asked.

I didn't keep food in my room. I didn't know how it got there. But she wouldn't or couldn't – didn't, at any rate – accept my innocence. Or my cleanliness. She made me get into the bath as soon as she deemed me guilty. Which was immediately. While I soaked until my fingers grew old and wrinkled before my eyes, she tore the sheets off my bed and threw them out. I thought it a drastic measure even then. But I listened to her, always. She said they were dirty; the mouse had touched them. But the mouse didn't look dirty to me, and I didn't feel dirty. But to my mother, we both were.

Heading back to the kitchen, I tried not to touch anything but the floor. And even that was on tiptoes. Once there, I grappled

in the cupboard to find the book I'd bought about household pests among the cookbooks and loose recipes. The book was a security blanket of sorts when I bought it – I hoped I'd never have to use it. I paged through until I found the page where the moths' tiny brown bodies were blown up to ten times their real size.

The book told me to eliminate, vacuum, bleach, prevent. It became my mantra. I had to pick up where I left off with the oatmeal and find every infected box or bag of food. I knew it was going to be bad. I'd let them go for months, never thinking we were sharing a food supply. I rarely used the food in the pantry. All my meals were made exclusively from the refrigerator or freezer. I'd tried to stave off malnutrition while making my meals as quickly as possible. Vegetables and frozen dinners, lunchmeat sandwiches and quesadillas. All the while, the moths were breeding and boring in the neglected pantry. The phone rang again twice as I stood planning my attack. I didn't move to answer it.

I started on the bottom shelf and worked my way up. They could get into anything cardboard, squeeze their way through anything plastic or shrink wrapped. I mourned the waste of food, thinking dimly of those commercials with those ragged, bloat-bellied children. But it had to be done. Eliminate, vacuum, bleach, prevent. They got into my favorite tea, left unused since I'd been going to Celia's. Moths staggered around the inside of the cardboard box, where the webbing was indistinguishable from the teabags. I thought maybe they were hopped up on the caffeine in the black leaves, rendered incapable of flying out at me. They snuck under the one corner of my box of Nesquik that wasn't fully snapped on; left burrow marks through the chocolate powder, larvae on the rim. I clamped the lid fully on before throwing it away, squishing their fat white bodies beneath the clear yellow plastic. They were in ramen, in pasta, in potato flakes.

I filled two garbage bags with the nibbled and wasted food. All that was left were cans. Just soup, vegetables, fruit. Even those had to be washed in case the tiny eggs stuck beneath the label, between the aluminum ridges. The paper labels would forever be rippled from the experience.

Next came the vacuum. I wielded the hose like a Ghostbuster, sucking the cocoons out of corners like they were demonic spirits. I bleached the shelves, the floor, the counters. Every suspect surface in the kitchen. And it felt like the moths

were suddenly gone, though I hadn't killed any directly. I thought maybe they figured out what was happening and had gone to play hide-and-seek in corners and behind curtains. I wondered if calling out *olly olly oxen free* would bring them out any faster. I couldn't stand the thought of waiting for the moths left in hiding to show themselves so I could squish them into little puffs of dust, like they disappeared in a magic trick. But at least they'd be gone. And soon.

The last thing I could do was to prevent them from coming back to the pantry. Satchels of bay leaves were the most common – and least poisonous – approach. I guess they didn't like the smell. But of course I didn't have any. I wasn't one for spices either. I had only the most basic – salt, pepper, cinnamon. I know we had them at work though. I wouldn't feel too bad snagging a handful. It'd help make up for the pitiful tips from the I'll-just-have-a-water crowd at any rate.

When both the cupboards and my clothes were thoroughly coated with bleach, I threw my clothes in the washing machine on the hottest setting. The cupboards would have to wait a few days before being washed out and restocked with the remaining cans. The only thing left to clean today was me. And since I didn't fit in the washing machine, I got a scalding shower instead. As the water beat down my face like coals popping from a fire, hurting more than I thought it would, I thought about the missed calls on my phone. And what my mother would think if I told her about the moths. Or worse, if I'd told her that I was learning how to fix it in a way that didn't involve burning down the house or throwing out the entire cupboard. In a way that acknowledged that these things happen. To everyone. And how much farther that'd separate us. Not just states now, but something less tangible. Something I'd left behind with my stuffed animals and picture books. That desire to be like her, to throw my clothes away instead of just into the washing machine.

And then I thought of Celia earlier, and I knew I hadn't fully left it behind. I rapidly felt guilt constrict my chest. I recalled Celia's face – even her dark skin growing somehow pale against her rich yellow pantsuit. The way her inquiring neck shook when she bobbed through my door, just wanting to find my problems and fix them. I'd wanted to protect her from myself, from the moths, from how my mother made me think.

But maybe distance wasn't what she needed. I thought

of the chicken picture frame and how she already had so much distance.

When I got out of the shower, I dressed and went to knock on Celia's door.

"Oh, Molly, I didn't expect you. Don't you work?" she said, opening the door.

"In an hour. I could miss a day though," I said. "Do you still need groceries?"

"Not enough for you to miss work," she said, looking at me concerned, the way she did earlier when she poked her head in through my doorway.

I'd imagined her saying yes, getting into my car and telling me the new recipes she was going to try that week - she always had a new soup or cookie to make. I guess there isn't much else to do when it's just me and some chickens for company. But of course she wouldn't do what I expected.

"Who was that calling earlier, anyway?" she asked. "You were so, so distracted."

"Hey, did you ever hear of pantry moths?"

I hoped to catch her off guard the way I had been earlier by the phone.

"What? Sure, honey. Wait, wait, wait," she paused, stopping to laugh in a way that bounced up the stairs and back into her apartment. "The oats in your hair?"

"Yeah. The oats in my hair," I said, trying to force my smile to match hers. It was the smile of the second-place winner at a spelling bee.

"So that's who called earlier? I didn't know moths were that pesky," she said.

I should've known I couldn't divert her that easily. She could never take a hint. Not when I didn't want to talk about a bad date, not when I spilled a tray of water on a customer, not now. I knew better than to keep avoiding the question at least - her inquisitions rivaled the Salem witch trials.

"No. My mom," I said, staring down the chicken on the bottom step.

I'd never talked to Celia about my mom. She didn't talk about her family, so I didn't talk about mine. We talked about recipes, about my spiteful and spit-full boss, but not about moms and kids. Our conversations were comfortable and safe like the

ones you have with a friend you only ever meet for coffee – or I suppose, in this case, tea.

“You know, I think I remember my daughter getting those moths once in college. Took her weeks to get them out for good,” Celia said, patting down my oat-free hair.

I faltered for a moment to find words. We’d moved out of the coffee shop and into the car. Confined, intimate, not always comfortable. My first boyfriend had asked me out and broken up with me in a car. The latter in the middle of a carwash, where all music sounds beautiful. But he didn’t.

“But they left eventually?”

“Of course,” she said. “Just took some time.”

“I guess. I didn’t actually talk to my mom. It was a one-sided sort of thing – her talking, me hanging up,” I said, my stomach bottoming out and rising up again as if driving down a hill too fast.

I didn’t know what Celia would say. But I felt a shift. Like when playing with a marble maze, and you put the little glass ball in the top. And you’re never really sure which path it’s going to take.

ANNA QUINN

SECOND DEGREE

This is before the fire.

Here, there are no sirens, no yellow tape running along the edge of the scorched yard. Instead of hoses swelled with water running across the sidewalk from the hydrant to the fists of the firefighters, there are six-year-olds with chalk in their sweaty hands. It is late summer, its days long and evenings longer, lamplights calling children home to front porches and the arms of mothers. The air is thick with the cries of cicadas. It is this summer that I remember.

Aiden has just turned sixteen. In my mind, he will always be sixteen, and although I have passed that birthday long ago, he will always be my older brother. He lies across the bed, his blinds drawn against the dusk outside. His legs are tucked underneath a quilt splayed with milky stars and moons, stitched by our grandmother as a baby shower gift. I sit at the end of the bed, beside Aiden's feet, a chocolate cake resting on the plate atop my lap as my legs dangle off the edge. Aiden's eyes are closed, and he could be sleeping, were it not for the smile. Aiden's dreams are tortured. He never smiles when he sleeps.

"No frosting," he says, without opening his eyes. His eyelids flutter slightly, as if he's struggling to keep them closed. I look down at the cake and nod.

"It's chocolate," I say, and Aiden smiles further, his lips parting to reveal a glimpse of the top row of his crooked teeth. I move closer. "Happy birthday."

Aiden opens his eyes. Their blue is almost startling against the shock of black hair crowning his head. "Thank you, Mags." He reaches over and wraps his arms around my shoulders, pulling me tight, taking care not to crush the cake. Up close, he smells feverish. The back of his sweater is damp; even as I pull away, it sticks to my palms. Aiden doesn't notice. He wraps the quilt tighter around his waist.

The top layer of the cake is still warm, and tiny drops of condensation ring the edge of the plate, barely visible. I try counting them. Aiden sees me squinting and reaches over to the lamp on his nightstand, tugging the chain, and a faint light fills the room. The plate lies between us. The knife is missing.

I slide off the bed. The wooden floor is slick beneath my feet. "Let me get something to cut it with." I'm not two steps across the room before Aiden's voice catches me.

"Wait, Mags," he says. "I have something here." Aiden is pawing through the orange bottles on his bedside table. One is knocked sideways, and it rattles as it falls to the floor. I kneel to pick it up. ATVIAN, 0.5 MG reads the label. I place it back on the nightstand.

From among the pills, Aiden recovers a plate, a half-eaten piece of lasagna lying in a pool of tomato sauce. He ignores what's left of his lunch and plucks the fork and knife from the plate.

Gripping the knife with his right hand, he makes to slice the cake. "Wait!" I grab his arm. I can feel the ridges of bone underneath my curled fingers. Aiden is stiff; he looks at me, eyes wide. Tiny flecks of color are scattered around his pupils.

I look down at my fingers and immediately let go, taking several steps backward. My hands form fists.

"You forgot your wish," I say, nails biting into my palms. Outside, the hum of an engine coasts down the street, and through the gaps in the blinds, the glare of headlights flashes briefly across the far wall. Six years ago, we would have sung to Aiden, but after "happy birthday" comes candles. There are no candles in our house.

"You're right," Aiden nods. "Come here." I hesitate for a moment before stepping forward. "I need help," he says, and his fingers grasp my wrist, as if to take my pulse. His touch is cold. "Help me."

Aiden uncurls my fingers, then folds them around the handle of the knife. It weighs heavy in my hand. "Ready?" he says, and places his hand atop mine.

"Don't forget your wish."

The knife splits the cake.

It is the evening of September first, a Sunday. My mother is frowning.

In and of itself, this is not unusual. The doctor is upstairs, and every so often, the floorboards creak as he moves across the room, stethoscope in hand. I imagine him listening to Aiden's heartbeat. I imagine it is unsteady.

"Madigan," my mother says. I look down from the ceiling and change from counting lumps in the sheetrock to the

number of wrinkles in my mother's forehead, current tally: seven. The fake crystals in the chandelier dangling above the table cast shadows across the walls. The edges of my mother's silhouette are sharp, unwavering.

"Madigan," she repeats, lifting a forkful of potatoes from her plate, setting it down again. She heaves a sigh. It comes out measured, contained, the sigh of a woman who wakes at five to practice yoga. "It's time you found some friends."

"I have friends," I say. The creases lining her forehead dig deeper, miniature valleys embedded in her face. "There's Mrs. Tennyson next door. The gray cat, too. And I have Aiden." My mother takes off her glasses and folds beside her plate, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Madigan, an eighty-year-old woman is not the sort of person you should be seeing on a regular basis."

"Eighty-one," I say. "It was her birthday last Tuesday. I baked her a cake." Vanilla, with maple icing. Mrs. Tennyson says she is too old for candles.

I stick a forkful of deflated mashed potatoes in my mouth. The texture is lumpy, undercooked.

My mother glances up from between her fingers. Her stare is narrow. I am told I have her eyes. "Neither," she says, "is a cat."

I lift another forkful. "But—"

"Not with your mouth full."

At that moment, the top step groans. My mother pushes her chair out, lays her napkin on the table. Her heels echo against the floor with each long step. The doctor appears in the hallway. He is a burly man, thick around the middle for a doctor, and his chest heaves slightly from the exertion of the stairs.

"Mrs. Fitzpatrick, could you spare a moment?" The buttons of his collar strain to enclose his neck. My mother nods and motions him with a pale arm towards the office before proceeding down the hall. Before he follows, he looks back over his shoulder.

"Madigan," he says. His tone is that of an afterthought. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine." His gaze feels like a microscope. I stare at my plate, the half-eaten mashed potatoes and slice of oozing roast beef. Perhaps it's not me the doctor is staring at, but my dinner. I feel compelled to offer him a bite.

The doctor shifts his weight. "Always good to hear. Take

care of yourself, now.” He turns and makes his way down the hall.

Only once he leaves do I realize that my hands, lying in my lap, are knotted within my napkin.

The second week of September comes, and with it, a knock at the door. I am upstairs in my bedroom when I hear it, a persistent rapping that comes in threes. I fly across the hallway, pausing only briefly to check on Aiden, whose eyes are fluttering in some stage of REM.

Three more knocks.

I sprint to the stairwell. In my haste, I miss the third step from the bottom and, sliding in my socks, come within inches of smashing my face against the portrait on the wall. My mother and father stand behind Aiden and me, my father’s palm lying heavy on my shoulder. Aiden’s left hand is clasped around my right, the edges of my mouth curve up in a smile. My face is unfamiliar.

Whether from the portrait or to the person waiting at the door, I run. Above the fireplace in the living room hangs a mirror, and lying on top of the mantel is a pair of gloves. I grab these and slip my hands into them before unlocking the door.

Standing on the welcome mat is not the doctor, not a deliveryman. It is a boy. He is several inches taller than me, and in his arms is a fishbowl, full to the brim with water. Miniature waves move from one side of the bowl to the other, threatening to crest over the top.

“I lost my fish,” he says.

“Your fish,” I repeat.

He nods. His cheeks burn red.

The bowl is, sure enough, empty. “Sorry,” I say, “but I haven’t seen it.” I grab the door handle and start to push it shut, but before the door meets the frame, it slams against something. There is a shoe in the way—not a sandal, but an actual tennis shoe, faded from white to a dull gray and with a mud-caked sole.

“Mind letting me look inside?”

I crane my neck around the door. The boy’s hair is brown and lopsided, like he’s cut it himself. “I do, actually. Please move.” I lean my shoulder against the door, but it refuses to budge.

“It was your mom,” he says, and for a moment, I stop pushing. “She offered me a twenty if I got you out of the house. See?” I ease the door open wide, and the boy steps to the side,

next to the clay pot filled with black-eyed susans. In the corner of the yard, my mother is trampling around in the garden, ankle deep in chicken droppings. She does not turn around.

I turn back to the fish boy. Balancing the aquarium in his right arm, he sticks out a hand. "Chase Turner, at your service."

I ignore his hand and step onto the porch. "Madigan," I say, my back to him as I twist the key in the lock. He's beaming, clutching the fish bowl as if it's filled with treasure. His smile flickers ever so slightly when I add, "She gave you twenty? I'll take ten."

October, and the children in elementary school are running up and down the street, ghosts and witches and the occasional Superman or two. Chase and I sit on his front steps, the cement cold and damp, and hand out peanut butter cups and Hershey's bars. I count the ringing of the bells at the church down the street: four, five, six, seven. It may be Friday night, but Chase's posture is still perfect. Eight years of Catholic school will do that, he says, wiping a smudge from his khakis.

Spiderman toddles up the front path and asks for a Hershey's. I drop one into his pillowcase, then a second. "Thanks," he says, bursting into a grin somewhat atypical of an arachnid. "Cool fish."

Mer, with her maroon fins fanning out behind her, is swimming inside her bowl beside us. I joke that this is so she doesn't escape. She was never really lost; as Chase explained later, it was more of an orchestrated attempt of hide-and-seek. Meaning: he lied.

Chase's eyes follow Spiderman down the steps. When the boy reaches the next house, Chase turns to me. "Why do you wear those gloves?"

"Because I'm Rogue," I say. This is true: fake spandex stretches across my arms, making me sweat, and the front locks of my hair are dyed white.

Chase crosses his arms. A wrinkle forms in his pressed shirt. "Not just on Halloween. I mean the rest of the year." The light casts deep shadows across his face, his eye sockets hollowed.

I turn to the plastic pumpkin full of candy bars. "My skin is toxic," I say, digging for an Almond Joy. My fingers fumble amongst the chocolate.

What I don't tell Chase is that the shadows tonight are not nearly as frightening as the crisp whites and sharp edges of the surgical ward. I say nothing of that evening years ago when I woke in a bed not my own, my vision blurry and thoughts scattered as I struggled to focus on breathing: in, out; in, out. That night, only after making sure I was alive did I realize I could not move my hands.

An accident, they said. You fell, they said.

Flickers of memory paint my mother and Aiden in lawn chairs on each side of me, my father standing in the middle of the yard, as we gathered around the bonfire. Even in the summer heat, Aiden trembled slightly; yet he was there, and that was enough.

The fire was so hot, they said.

When some part of my brain registered that I was falling—seconds, long seconds, before the rest of my brain could react—I stuck my arms out in front of me, to save my face, no doubt. My palms plunged into the embers.

You're lucky, they said, that you still have your hands.

I don't tell Chase I'm lucky.

"Touch me," I say, "and I'll steal your memories."

Chase's gaze lingers on me before he turns to face the street. "You never told me your house was haunted," he says. "If I'd gone inside, I might never have seen the light of day again."

At this, I look up. "Haunted?"

"There's someone upstairs," he says, pointing at the second window from the right. The windows are black, but even without the lights, I can tell that Chase is pointing to Aiden's room.

"Too many ghost stories?" I fling a packet of M&M's at Chase, but it's my heart, not his, that beats double-time. I imagine Aiden standing next to his bed as he pries the blinds open.

Chase shrugs, but across his mouth is a frown. Snow White prances up the path, her skirt trailing among the leaves, and when she cries "Trick or treat!" Chase replies, "Trick."

January, and the fallen leaves are replaced by snow, tiny crystals that gather along the streets and sparkle before inevitably being pelted with clumps of road salt. They turn to slush, and, occasionally, when the ground temperature dips below thirty-

two degrees, form a thick layer of ice across the roads. These are what they call “dangerous conditions.” I do not argue. Nor does Aiden. Dangerous conditions mean days of me sitting at the foot of his bed, lying on top of the universe as I listen to Aiden narrate the classics lining his oak bookshelf.

Aiden’s voice is steady and confident. It is not the first time he has seen these words, and several run-throughs ago, he mastered their rhythm, their inflection. “Your worst enemy, he reflected, was your nervous system,” he reads. “At any moment, the tension inside you was liable to translate itself into some visible symptom.”

My fingers trace the stitching running between the squares of the quilt. On the other side of the glass, the snow is falling in fat flakes, lining the edges of the windowsill and muting the world around us.

“Do you know what I wished for last summer, Mags?”

After a moment, I realize this is not Winston Smith talking. “To get better,” I say. I remember the smell of cocoa powder, of unbleached flour. This is the wish he repeats every July.

“I wished that next year, we’d celebrate my birthday the same way.”

“You’re not allowed to tell me your wish,” I remind him. This is why he hasn’t recovered, I think, not yet; his confessions cancel out whatever progress his wish might have made, and even as the orange bottles on his nightstand multiply, his mind grows weaker.

“Having fun with that boy across the street?” Aiden’s voice sounds like steel.

“What boy?” I ask.

It is March when I lose my gloves.

Chase has invited me to see the cherry blossoms. He is composing a portfolio full of photography, pages of four by six inch color prints, which he will send off to the admissions board for a private academy in Newport. His assignment is titled *Life Before the Lens*.

The sky is a perfect blue, and, walking underneath the boughs, the white flower petals look like clouds against it. With the weaving of their limbs, the cherry trees stretch across the path, forming a tunnel that spans the length of the block. Chase

is wandering between the trees and the edge of the lake, trying to capture flowers floating on the glass surface.

I crouch down to pluck a blossom from the stone walk. My fingers are thick, clumsy; I don't dare touch a petal for fear of bruising it. With my left hand, I slip the glove from my right and lay it out along the path. My grasp is shaky, but I manage to scoop up a blossom, to cradle it in the center of my palm. Its petals are a fragile, stark white against the red of my hand.

In that moment, my right glove disappears.

I jump to my feet and whip around. Behind me is Chase, my glove dangling from the fingertips of his left hand. In his other is his camera, and in the next instant, I am blinded by the burst of the flash lens.

"Chase." My voice is a warning.

He releases his camera, and it falls back to his chest, attached to a loop of fabric that hangs around his neck. Chase reaches, his hand latching around my wrist. His eyes skirt my palm.

His next breath catches in his throat.

"There was an accident," I say.

I tell him about the masks of the burn unit, of creams, ointments, and salves. I tell him about the smoke of the bonfire and building S'mores. I tell him about waking up without fingerprints.

He listens, his own fingers gripping the edges of his camera, and, when I finish, turns to me with a question—though his words are not measures of heat or pain:

"What about your brother?"

I return his stare.

"Aiden?" I say. "Aiden wasn't there."

The breeze threatens to cast the petal from my hand.

"Do you want to know why winter's my favorite season, Chase?" His face betrays nothing. "Nobody asks me why I'm wearing gloves."

After a moment, he speaks: "Beautiful." I trace his eyesight to the cherry blossom folded between my fingers. I nod.

"Well," Chase shoves his hand into my right glove. "Let's go."

The last day of June, Aiden is not sleeping when I step

into his room, though his eyes lay closed.

"What's happening across the street?" he asks.

I glance out the window. Beyond the wide leaves of the oak tree beside the path, Chase's blinds are shut.

"The Turners are in Newport for the week," I tell him. "Chase got into his photography program. They're attending orientation."

Aiden looks as if he's drifted off.

He is smiling.

I do not remember July.

That is what I tell the firefighters. I was asleep, I say. What's going on? I say. I ask the same things of Aiden, but no words cross his lips.

On the Fourth, I crawl into bed before dusk, making sure to twist my blinds tight. My windows are locked. I consider taking a sleeping pill for good measure. My mind wanders to Aiden's room and back. No, I decide; it is better not to wake him.

One hour later, when my eyes shoot open, my instinct screams *fireworks*. I pry myself from the sheets and step carefully along the hallway, avoiding the boards that creak. "Aiden?" I whisper, once I've reached his doorway. "Aiden?"

I step inside. He must have taken his pills, because he does not speak. His breathing echoes too faint for me to hear.

It is only when I reach his nightstand that I realize the bed is empty.

At the same moment, my ears register something else. It is not the sound of fireworks exploding outside, but the high-pitched shrieking of sirens, alarms still distant, but growing closer. I rush to the window and thrust the blinds aside.

There are flames crawling from the second-story windows of the house across the street, reaching out into the sky.

Chase's house.

Dimly, my brain registers stinging as my feet slap against the floor, but I am too far off to notice. Aiden, I think. Aiden, who does not leave. Aiden.

I burst out the door and make it as far as the mailbox before the first fire truck arrives, lights flashing red and white. The second arrives not long after, screaming as it flies towards number 56. All of Lawrence Street, it seems, has come to watch the world spring alight. I spot Mrs. Tennyson leaning against her

cane. The fire gleams within the lenses of her glasses.

I do not see Aiden.

The gravel of the front walk digs into my heels as I run back to the house. As I wrestle with the screen door, something catches my eye. It is Aiden's face, chalkier than I've ever seen it. He lies collapsed across the wooden porch.

"Aiden!"

I slip my arm around his back, try to support him. Ever so slightly, I feel the rise and fall of his chest through his shirt. His eyes are closed.

A one-syllabled word escapes from his lips, only to be drowned by the siren. I bend closer. Half-delirious from the noise and the lights, my mind is playing tricks on me; Aiden smells only of smoke. "Gloves," he repeats, before dissolving into a fit of coughs. I struggle to hold him straight. Above us, the ambulance lights blaze against the front window.

"I'll get a paramedic, Aiden," I call over the sirens. "Just wait." I unwrap his arm from my shoulder and stand up, but before I step away, he grabs my ankle.

"Gloves," he chokes, unfolding his right first. In his hand lies a black glove. My glove.

I bend down, but instead, lose my balance, and my knees smash against the porch deck. "Aiden, what are you —?"

"Mags," he says, and there are tears leaking from his eyes. "Accident."

And I know.

Propping the screen door open with the pot of black-eyed susans, I ease Aiden inside, his arm draped across my shoulder. Our steps are halting and slow as we cross the hall to our parents' bathroom. Its tiles gleam black and white.

"Shower," I say.

Aiden's head nearly lolls as I guide him to the bath. He grabs me for support — my arm, not my hand.

Later, I tuck Aiden underneath the stars and moons. His breathing is softer than ever; his hair, still dripping wet. I step away from the bed and peer outside. The house has been ruled a total loss by now, but there's still a stream of water running from at least one of the firemen's hoses, splashing into the charred rooms through gaping holes where walls should be. Suddenly, I think of Mer, gasping for air, for water as the glass of her world melts around her.

Beside me, Aiden sputters.

In the months to come, I would receive a postcard in the mail, one decorated with a bleeding stamp and no message. The other side bore a photo of a female hand.

I do not remember a return address.

That day, under the cherry blossoms, I did not lie to Chase. The Aiden he saw was not by my side. It was my brother who tripped me. It was my brother by my side when I awoke. It was my brother whom I chose to protect.

Now, I imagine myself telling a different truth. This is what I see when I lie in bed at night with the blinds closed, the windows locked. I would step off the porch and scream, scream louder than the sirens and the crackling of the flames, scream until the paramedics and the firemen and the police alike found the two young victims of Lawrence Street.

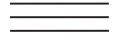
I would kill my brother.

I would save myself.

It does not matter. As of today, the case of the July Fourth fire at 56 Lawrence Street is officially closed.

It has been ruled an accident.

COMMENTARY



INTERVIEW

DAWN LUNDY MARTIN

Dawn Lundy Martin earned a B.A. from the University of Connecticut, an M.A. in creative writing from San Francisco State University, and a Ph.D. in English from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Martin's first full-length collection, *A Gathering of Matter / A Matter of Gathering* (University of Georgia Press, 2007), was selected by Carl Phillips for the 2007 Cave Canem Poetry Prize. Her second collection, *Discipline* (2011) was chosen by Fanny Howe for the 2009 Nightboat Books Poetry Prize and is a finalist for the 2011 Los Angeles Times Book Prize. She is also the author of three chapbooks, *Candy* (Albion Books, 2012) *The Undress* (Belladonna Books, 2006) and *The Morning Hour* (Poetry Society of America, 2003), which was selected by C. D. Wright for the Poetry Society of America's National Chapbook Fellowship. She is the co-founder of the Third Wave Foundation (New York), feminist, activist foundation that works nationally to support young women and transgender youth ages 15 to 30, and she is a founding member of The Black Took Collective, an experimental performance art/poetry group. She is currently an assistant professor in the Writing Program at the University of Pittsburgh.

TRR: How would you describe your writing process? Where do you think your inspiration comes from? Is it an internal or external inspiration?

DLM: Inspiration, I think, is overrated. If I waited for inspiration to write, I'd rarely do it. I believe in ritual (writing every day), working really hard, in chaining yourself to your desk or wherever, shutting up, and writing. I believe in linguistic play. Genius writing might not always come, but there's always written language. There's always language to listen to, to read. That said, I can't deny that love is often a catalyst into creativity in a way that is its own special thing. Must be the endorphins.

TRR: At what point do you consider the work finished?

DLM: Sometimes when I finish a poem, I never come back to it and tinker with it. It just feels cooked. Others are never done. These might be the ones that are more complicated, that can evolve as I grow as a writer, person, thinker. When I read new work in public for example, I often read with a pen in my hand because in that moment of reading out loud in front of an audience, I can experience the work newly and

gain some insight into how it wants to speak.

TRR: What is your relationship to form in poetry? What do you think its place in contemporary work? How do you work with form?

DLM: For me, form is often (but not always) the place where language ends. It is a way of speaking that contributes to the content in the poem, or what wants to be said. My poems either spill out into form, or work, reversely, from a formal interrogation that I stumble upon when playing in the work. When I wrote *Discipline* I was listening to a lot of lectures on UbuWeb. I listen to Derrida's voice, even though I don't understand French. I listened to the cadence of the speech in my headphones for hours while writing. And something about that cadence, I believe, found its way into the poems, which just emerged as prose poems. Then I had to work a bit to shape the material inside them, the syntax, etcetera, so that some tension is produced by the sentences and near sentences in the blocks of text.

I was also interested in writing a long a series of poems that are interconnected but stand alone as well—I think about it now as multiple and weaving narratives. Titles would have enclosed those poems and I didn't want them to be enclosed or encapsulated.

In *Discipline*, there is one poem with a clear title "Coda"—how does this attend to your ideas of form/structure its relationship to content?

"Coda" was in some ways an afterthought instead of a final thought. So it seemed like it might stand outside of those other utterances.

TRR: In a lot of your work in *Discipline* the body plays a key role as well as the poetic "I." What roles do these play in your life? How do you differentiate between yourself and the poetic I?

DLM: I like these questions because it makes me think about dissociation. The speaking "I" in *Discipline* does not have a transparent disposition. There is no looking through the "I" to a specific person, especially this writer. Instead it's a figure standing in for some potential speaker. It's not even a self that it stands in for, really. This might be confusing to anyone who's ever heard me read from the book because I often talk about personal experiences—my

father fading away in a cancer state, or I'll call the book a kind of autobiography. And it's true that what's being said emerges from the thinking through these things, but the moment the language begins to take shape on the page, the I shifts outside of itself, in a way, and toward some kind of shuddering or ghostly effect. These things that want to be said cannot be said from a single stable speaking I. Or, perhaps what I really want to say is, the singular stable speaking I does not exist in Discipline because experience has fractured it.

TRR: What can you tell us of the Black Took Collective? What is it and how did it come to be?

DLM: The Black Took Collective (BTC) was founded about 10 years ago by Ronaldo V. Wilson, Duriel E. Harris and me. We were young poets at the Cave Canem Retreat for African American Poets, which at the time was held in a monastery in Upstate New York. We were slightly rebellious and interested in stances of opposition to representations of blackness in poetry that seemed to authenticate blackness, to nail it down, to claim this racial identity as a closed state of being via a series of familiar tropes. Our stance was a critical stance against this. We wanted to be all races or no race, all sexualities or no sexuality, to create fissures, disruptions in the ways that things are normally known.

BTC has evolved into a three-person poetry performance collaboration. We do staged multimedia temporary installation pieces that investigate identity. For example, our most recent performances, which all have a site-specific element that attends in some way to the place where the work is being performed, projects excerpts from Gertrude Stein's novella *Melanchtha* as a way of calling up the racial imagination that produced that text. We want to bring it into the room as a way of saying, Look at all that breathes up through culture's floor.

TRR: It's obvious from your work that you have a great interest in feminism. What can you tell us about the Third Wave Foundation?

DLM: Feminism to me is very simple. It's a belief that women are just as valuable as men. It's a belief that no matter what your gender identity is you should be treated equally to those whom society seems to value most. Feminism is an effort to change the world to reflect these beliefs. What's complicated is how the belief that women are not as valuable manifests in the world. The other complication is

how to fix this problem. My co-founders and I started the Third Wave Foundation 15 years ago, now, because we were keenly aware that that there was no national organization for young women and men who were interesting in this kind of activist work. Our foundation provides money for local organizations run by young women and trans youth so that they can enact the next phase of the feminist movement.

TRR: Who are your favorite poets and why?

DLM: I want to talk about poets who've influenced my work—Emily Dickinson, Susan Howe, Harryette Mullen, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Myung Mi Kim, Claudia Rankine, but I also want to mention theorists Frantz Fanon, Slavoj Žižek, Susan Sontag and visual and/or performance artists William Pope.L, Kara Walker, Adrian Piper, and playwright Adrienne Kennedy. I chart lineages in the black *avant garde*, women's experimental traditions, and social justice theory. Thus, the work emerges in and against not only poetry and poetics but also other ways of looking at, investigating, and changing the world.

TRR: Who would you liken yourself to? What work do you identify with the most?

There are some obvious echoes of Myung Mi Kim's approach to poetry in my first book (I studied closely with her at San Francisco State University), but since then, my poetics have shifted significantly—they still hang on to some important ways of thinking I learned from Kim, but push further, too, into territories unknown, thus far, even to me.

TRR: If you had to describe your own work in a phrase or sentence, how would you?

I would never attempt to describe my own poetry in a phrase or sentence—maybe a long essay or a book-length volume?

TRR: What do you think is the most important thing to learn/remember as a poet?

DLM: I'm not going to say because it'd be totally cynical.

TRR: What advice would you give to young poets aspiring to publish?

DLM: Do not write toward publishing. At least don't write toward publishing if you see yourself as an artist, and I'm only interested in writing as an art form, which means I'm a total snob when it comes to poetry, but that's another story.

What young poets need to do is immerse themselves in the work of making poetry. Read a lot. Read widely at first across periods, styles, movements, etc., and play around with the strategies you notice in those works in your own work. This means that you'll be trying a lot out/on, but with the goal I believe of noticing and developing your own preoccupations that you can either place within or against certain lineages. Then it becomes important to focus, to read deeply in those lineages.

Also do other poetry things besides writing: subscribe to journals you love, go to poetry readings and talk to people including the readers, send friends, teachers, and idols your work, and write poetry reviews.

Publishing, frankly, is not the hard part.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

HANNAH AIZENMAN hails from Birmingham, Alabama. She will graduate from the University of Pittsburgh in April with degrees in English Writing (Poetry) and History of Art and Architecture. Her work has appeared in Three Rivers Review and is forthcoming in Collision Literary Magazine.

DILLON DIATLO is a senior at the University of Pittsburgh who is currently pursuing a major in English Fiction Writing and a minor in Theatre Arts.

ADAM DOW is a Fiction Writing major (in the University of Pittsburgh) from Potter County, PA. He spends his time playing music in a band with his brother and a friend in Pittsburgh, and missing his dog--Brewster--who is home in Coudersport with June and Ward.

QUINN KEANEY is a Nonfiction Writing and Communications major, who loves photography, running, karaoke, and romantic walks on the beach. Hopefully you'll see her writing for Cosmopolitan one day.

ROBERT KEISER is a 22 year old poet. He studies Latin American studies. He is interested in travel and anything poetic. He has been published in the Avalon Literary Review and on weirdyear.com.

KELLY KNISLEY is a senior at the University of Pittsburgh. She is a double major in fiction writing and psychology. Kelly sings with the University of Pittsburgh Women's Choral Ensemble and is a member of the Golden Key Honour Society and the Mortar Board. "The Dimples his Mother Loved" is Kelly's first published work.

NATE KREICHMAN graduated from Paul D. Schreiber High School in Port Washington, New York in spring 2009. He is now a junior fiction writing major at the University of Pittsburgh and staff writer for The Pitt News. He loves books but he loves TV more, don't tell anyone. He hopes to oneday bring his writing talent to the film and television industry.

LIZ MCLAUGHLIN is a part-time third year fiction major at the University of Pittsburgh. Her passions include (but are not limited to) long narratives, flash fiction, urban cycling, and one rep maxes.

NINA MOHAN a Chicago native, is in her fourth year at Carnegie Mellon University. She is pursuing degrees in Creative Writing and Voice Performance. Her secret life goals are to write a musical based on the songs of Weezer and study ornithology.

SOPHIA O'BRIEN likes to write, and she might spend the rest of her life doing so. She also likes her cat, Leo, and her knitting projects, which usually remain unnamed. Although the prospect of immediately becoming a cat-hoarding spinster is a very attractive one, she is going abroad two days after she graduates in order to discover other potential avenues of attraction.

ANNA QUINN is a senior English writing and Japanese major at the University of Pittsburgh. Her writing spans the gamut from short stories to young adult pieces, with a hint of blogging and essays intermixed. In 2008, her environmental piece on Silent Spring was awarded first prize by the Rachel Carson Institute. Also in 2008, her short story *The Fortune Cookie Teller* placed second in the Carnegie Library's Ralph Munn young adult creative writing competition.

SARAH REAGLE is a senior at the University of Pittsburgh with a double major in English Literature and Art History. She speaks broken Italian and tends to read YA literature in her down time. If Sarah went to a desert island and could choose only one cookbook, it would be *The Breakfast Book* by Marion Cunningham.

NICK SLAPIKAS is a junior at the University of Pittsburgh, majoring in English Writing. After college, he plans on teaching English at the high school level. He enjoys writing, reading, martial arts, Ultimate Frisbee, and looking at himself in the mirror.

JUDGE BIOGRAPHIES

SHARON FAGAN McDERMOTT is a poet and literature teacher at Winchester Thurston School. Prior to this, she was a Visiting Lecturer of creative writing at the University of Pittsburgh for seven years, where she won the Tina and David Bellet Excellence in Teaching award in 2005. She is the author of three chapbooks: *Voluptuous* (Ultima Obscura Press), *Alley Scatting* (Parallel Press, 2005); and most recently *Bitter Acoustic* (Jacar Press, NC) about which poet Betty Adcock stated, “*Bitter Acoustic* is a making so genuine, so original, so true it takes the breath away.”

JANE MCCAFFERTY is author of four books of fiction, most recently the novel *First You Try Everything*. She currently teaches fiction and non-fiction at Carnegie Mellon. She had a very difficult time choosing stories from this good batch and would like to congratulate ALL the writers.

VOLUME XVII

This issue of *Three Rivers Review* is set in 9-12 point Palatino, a typeface designed by Hermann Zapf, initially released in 1948 by the Linotype foundry. *Three Rivers Review's* masthead is set in Copperplate Gothic Light, a typeface designed by Frederic W. Goudy and released by the American Type Founders in 1901. Printed in the United States of America by McNaughton & Gunn, Inc., 960 Woodland Dr., Saline, MI 48176, on 60 lb. Natures Book Smooth Antique Recycled paper, which consists of 30% Post Consumer Waste.

SUBMISSIONS

Three Rivers Review of Undergraduate Literature accepts unpublished work by under-graduates at institutions of post-secondary education in the Greater Pittsburgh area. **We do not accept simultaneous submissions.** All submissions are reviewed in anonymity.

Submissions are opened & reviewed between September 15 and January 15. Responses to submitted work can be expected by March 15, following the reading period.

Submit up to 15 pages fiction (double-spaced) or 5 poems to:

Editor-in-Chief
Three Rivers Review
3500 Cathedral of Learning
Pittsburgh, PA 15260

or through e-mail as a Microsoft Word (.doc) file to:

ThreeRiversReview@gmail.com

Annual Three Rivers Review Poetry & Fiction Prize contest details are made available during the Fall semester.

Thank you.

