

# COBALT



ISSUE 21

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## Issue 21

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Sophie Newman

# Flâneuse

*“And so away he goes, hurrying, searching. But searching for what?”*

Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*

\*

You are a palate. You are a palate upon which city people mix colors, thoughts, first impressions. You take your time with the present, handling it carefully, like lace, and fold it up in a box inside yourself.

There is a man with an ice cream cone, a woman with an overstuffed purse, a hooded teenager who is not quite a person. The bus passengers press against one another on the green line and stare out the window at you, staring at them.

You try to picture yourself as anyone, people bleeding out of you like an overstuffed washing machine, mixing, churning.

Only the influx of everything is too much, so you disappear, but are also ready, waiting. You concede almost everything.

\*

People watch you. Their hungry eyes sear past your clothing and through your skin and through your bones. You are anything they want you to be except yourself. You are an image of someone else, a reflection of past lives, a refraction of some memory they lived, once.

A man with a silver watch and an upturned collar eyes you through tawny sunglasses. He has seen your likes before, defenseless, putting on a defense. I know you, his eyes seem to say, though you try not to look. You are still, frozen under the promise of freedom, the fleeting moment before you become who you are supposed to be.

\*

In an empty apartment, you empty out the contents of your purse on the couch. Trash flees from you, too.

One wallet  
Croissant, half-eaten  
Two chopsticks  
One condom, unopened  
A train ticket  
Three sticks of gum  
A pencil  
Two pennies  
An unsent postcard

\*

It is evening. The city is inside. The city is eating, reading, having sex, drinking water, peeing, retiring.

You are at a Chinese restaurant eating alone. You are drinking, too. Soup. Pear cider. Soup. Another pear cider. Another pear cider.

A couple behind you begins to argue about how much to pay the babysitter. The current political climate. Grocery shopping. Who has to run the dishwasher, what to do about the dog, who is not doing well, even for her age. But what is there to do?

A crowd of young people enters. They slip past you, laughing through tight lips and watery eyes. Their cheeks are rosy, frost-bitten from the boos and the cold. They are intimate, touching each other

even as they take their separate seats at the table. One man wraps his arm around a woman with a thin frame and bulky coat. She looks away from him, and you see her face for a moment in profile, lipstick slightly smeared around the corners of her mouth like residue on glass.

You order another cider.

\*

Night. You are walking and it is peaceful, like snow, but there is none. Car horns wail and vanish. The sound of a film floats out from a balcony window. A song you have heard before, many times, only you couldn't place it. Something French you saw in a movie, once. It reminds you of summer.

The headlights of cars are trained on the road, drivers hidden safely behind tinted glass.

The key in the apartment door sticks. The foyer is dark. Your roommate is home. She has made tea and is going out, she says.

Do you want to come?

You don't, but you say yes. Is there another way to answer? You don't know. You think perhaps you once did, but you have now forgotten. It is easier, better, to say yes.

\*

You begin to make yourselves. Clothes (One outfit is too many. Too many is never enough). Change clothes. Change again. Is this too \_\_\_?

Where are you going? Who will see you? Who will they want to see?

I'm nobody, who are you? I am rather not myself today.

Making a face is easy. Powder. Eyeshadow. Blush (just a little). Eyeliner, to protect and shield. Mascara to fill in the gaps.

Hair (must be long).

Legs (must be lanky).

Breasts (must be pushed, out, up, forward, perky, hastening).

Cute as a kitten. Skinny as a giraffe. Curvy, like Elizabeth Taylor. You aspire to be one of these things, if you can. You strive to be compared to someone else. To be recognized in the grander scheme of beauty. You exist most fully in terms of another.

\*

Out. Outside. It is cold. Fuck is it cold. Cold is an enemy to women like you. Skin must be exposed in perfect ratios at all times. Ski coats are out, so are warm socks. Leather jackets, okay.

Best to drink. Best to drink to ward off the cold.

This bar is dim. Faces glow like ghosts in paintings and you choose to enter their realm, wary of the consequences. This isn't your first time.

This bar is sophisticated. You can tell because everyone wears black. Black is the color of envy, lust, and death. The color Audrey Hepburn wore in Breakfast at Tiffany's.

You order, sit down, scan. But for what? You have a conversation with your roommate without really having it. The room begins to close in around you.

The people in here are jerks, don't you think?

I know, hahahahah.

How is your drink?

How was work today?

How is that boy, what's his name?

Oh, that's done. Yeah.

Meanwhile, your brain is humming, performing its computations. You are at home here. Your mind does it without you, which makes you wonder what you are still doing wearing black, mourning something before it happens, and not out there, watching.

Only, how could you? When there is a woman — especially a woman in black — she cannot simply disappear. She must wait to be found or discovered or helped and even when she wants to be lost, she must be lost to someone. Surrendering is a condition for acceptance and for love (which you must also learn to desire).

\*

The boy in black is laughing at something you said and you didn't mean for it to be funny. It wasn't one of your best jokes. Your heart sinks at the feeling of not being understood, if that is really what you want.

You say something else. Only do you? Was it you that was talking just now? You're not sure. Your mind has gone black. Blank. You weren't paying attention.

Your voice sounds like Audrey Hepburn in your head, only slower and more distant, and suddenly you're scared that you left something in the apartment that you desperately need. Your jacket. Why didn't you bring a jacket? You don't want his jacket (leather, sweaty, sticky), although you suspect he would offer it to you. He looks like a KGB officer. In a hot way, you guess, but he probably works in accounting or something to do with business. Finance. Probably.

You order another drink.

Where is your friend? He asks, timidly. Why, she is gone, gone, you say, somewhat dramatically. You feel ridiculous, but you persist in your ridiculousness. It is a condition, a compulsion. You can't help yourself. If you could, you would be somewhere under the stars. But this is all you can do in the city at night, when the world has gone mad.

Goodbye, Ofelia. Fare thee well.

See you tomorrow.

\*

His apartment is nice, nicer than you expected. You lay your purse down on a chair and admire the view of the city sprinkled with artificial light. Maybe, it is enough to be here just for the view, you think. Maybe, later, you will remember the view and feel fortunate to have been there to see it and not somewhere else, perhaps seeing nothing.

Nice view, you say.

Yes, isn't it? He says.

It is, you reply.

You can't look at him, not yet. You take a moment to revel in the glory, and the consequences of that glory. We both spent a moment in the truth of the situation. Isn't this the scene where you're supposed to be happy?

Then, you turn. You smile, walk. Stop. Smile. Take off your shoes. Take off your tights.

You take a moment to create a narrative in your head, so you feel safe. You think ahead to the end, then past the end into nothingness. You steady yourself on uneven carpet in your bare feet, toenails painted Columbine Blue that reminds you of spring. You hold your breath, count to one million.

\*

You go home in the middle of the night. You don't know why you do it, but it seems pointless to wait in the apartment with the nice view until you don't want to wait anymore. Best to leave with or without your wits.

The night is nighter. The streets no longer offer headlights or any nourishment other than concrete. Sad cloaked figures trump home after hours. They don't look up at your face, now, which is a relief. You are not sure if it is there.

The buildings and the pavement feel misty, like a storybook. You feel like Alice in Wonderland. Only everything is right side up, when it should be upside down.

You revel in the silence. The silence of the city that so often throws at you everything, but now it sleeps.

\*

You get home and open the window, inhale the smoke of the night, which is different now, on the verge of lightness.

Naked, you find your body. Naked against the city night and ripe with power and emptiness. You are no one. You are invisible, finally, not eclipsed by the gaze, the constant eyes...you have made it out, somewhere. On the beach.

You take a shower. You scrub with a ferocity the bumps and bruises on your body that are alien to you. Where did they come from? You examine them for answers. Suddenly, you feel deeply sorry for your imperfections. You apologize to your body, which you realize you have used as a vehicle for your own sadness and confusion. It wasn't your body's fault. You wish to repent. To cleanse yourself of your own neglect.

In the stream of water, you spend a minute thinking of nothing. You feel immense gratitude, almost, fleeting, love...

\*

Your roommate is home. You hear the key, her footsteps on the creaky boards. She opens the bathroom door and slides down the wall to the floor.

She isn't crying, but she isn't doing anything else, either.

You both don't say anything for a while.

Then she asks: can I get in?

And you say, okay.

And so, she performs the same ritual, slowly peeling away the layers of the city. When she enters, you apologize for her body, too. You scrub the bruises with the same energy, the same will to cleanse as you did your own. She succumbs. And then you pray.

You are not sure why it helps, but it helps. You have never been a religious person, even when you were younger and more willing. You pray to each other.

She asks, like caterpillar from the book: who are you?

And you say, I'm still becoming.

She nods.

You touch the bridge of her nose, where water accumulates and drips down, down. You close your eyes for a minute. You love her because to love her, as she is now, is to love yourself, which you need more than any great suffering or revelation in the streets.

The water pools at the bottom of the shower and pours into the drain, traveling somewhere in the city, traveling anywhere else but here.

## Unusual Path to Tenderness

He scared me. My feelings for him scared me. The first night Ed and I sat in front of my fireplace, I opened my heart to this man, something I'd promised myself I would never do again. I felt vulnerable and exposed and began to back away.

"I can't see you this weekend," I said one Friday morning, a few months after that first night. Ed had come to my university office and closed the door behind him.

"Why not?" He stood with his back to the door.

"I'm still sort of seeing someone else, someone who comes up occasionally from Houston," I said.

"So I suppose I'm just supposed to hang around until you decide we can see each other?" Ed's voice held a sharp edge. "I don't think so."

"You can just go hang out with your intuitive friends in Boulder. You'd rather do that than be with me anyway." I spat out the words. Ed made weekly trips for treatment by an energy healer in Boulder, Colorado. It made me uncomfortable in ways I didn't fully understand.

"Suit yourself." He left and slammed my office door behind him.

For three years after that, our fiery roller-coaster relationship continued to drain the energy out of our lives. Our passions flared, but intimacy between us broke down regularly. It seemed as though we were both too frightened to remain engaged and fought with each other as a way to protect ourselves. We knew no emotional middle ground. For every moment of adrenaline-charged rush of love between us, there were days of rage and anger.

We tried meditation. We tried counseling. We tried church. We tried psychics. Nothing seemed to make a difference.

One late afternoon, Ed walked into my office, closed the door, and sat down across from me. His face looked flushed. He held a flyer of some sort in his hand.

"I think we need help. I know we both want ongoing intimacy, but it's not happening. I think we should sign up for this weekend-long tantric seminar in Boulder," he said. He handed me the flyer. Charles and Caroline Muir (now divorced), who had led seminars on Tantra for many years, were running this particular weekend workshop.

All I'd ever heard about Tantra was some widely publicized comment rock-star Sting made about his sex life with his wife. Supposedly, Sting claimed to have had wild tantric sex with orgasms lasting for many hours. The prospect of this sort of workshop made me nervous. Would we all have to get naked with each other, a tangle of bodies in an erotic, orgasmic frenzy, I wondered?

"I can't imagine why paying a lot of money to participate in a sexual orgy for a whole weekend is going to help us," I said.

But I had to admit, I was curious. We signed up.

Although Tantra has long been practiced in many eastern cultures, in the early 1990s it was just beginning to take off in the United States. The word Tantra is a combination of the Sanskrit words *tanoti*, or expansion, and *trayati*, or liberation. Born in India thousands of years ago, Tantra emerged as a rebellion against the belief that one must reject sexuality in order to reach higher levels of consciousness.

The week prior to the workshop, as though on cue, Ed and I had a major relationship breakdown. On the short drive from where we lived in the foothills west of Denver to Boulder, I huddled as far into the passenger side door away from Ed as I could manage. He stared straight ahead, his face like stone.

I would rather have gone to a Tantra seminar with a complete stranger.

We entered the hotel lobby. Through the door, I saw twenty or so people sitting on cushions in a circle. My heart began to pound. What if I have to get all intimate with these people? I thought. Even worse, what if Ed does? But to my surprise, everyone was fully clothed and they all seemed pretty normal.

We joined the circle. My rigid back was turned like a wall toward Ed, who sat all hunched up like he was trying to make himself invisible.

The seminar began with a presentation about the male and female genitalia. "This is the lingam or magic wand of light," Charles said, pointing to the image of an erect penis on the poster board at the front of the room. "I want you all to love the power of the lingam and not be afraid of it." I heard some of the men behind me sniggering and turned my eyes down to my lap. How gross, I thought.

He flipped to the next page. "And yoni is Sanskrit for vagina." A purplish engorged vulva stared back at us. "This is your center for creation, ladies. You must learn to protect the magic of your yoni by only fueling it with energy that loves it as much as you do."

We watched a video of Charles and Caroline, providing explicit lessons about how to touch, kiss and massage each other's sacred spots. The woman's spot is in the area of what some refer to as the G-spot. The man's is near the prostate gland. The theory is that when these sacred areas are massaged

gently and for some time (the Muirs suggested a couple of hours), it evokes sensations and emotions that can stimulate spiritual and sexual awakening. At this moment, just the thought of doing that with Ed was evoking in me sensations of disgust and repulsion.

“Start at the top and explore all 360 degrees,” I barely heard Charles say over the roar of loud resistant voices within me. “Locate her sacred spot, which can be found on the front wall of the yoni, an inch or so in toward the stomach.”

The following day Ed and I got a break from each other’s stony hostility when there was separate instruction for women and men in different rooms. Caroline stood in front of the room. The yoni image was now tacked to the wall behind her. A dozen women sat on cushions at her feet. From where I sat in the very back, I felt the expectant energy in the room. These women seem comfortable with all of this, I thought.

“Without knowing what’s down here,” Caroline began, placing her hand between her legs, “we can’t protect and nourish it.” She pointed to the yoni image on the wall. “We’re going to talk about how to come to multiple sequential orgasms. The more orgasms you have, the greater the energy you will generate to fuel vitality and creativity.”

“When the vulva’s creativity peaks,” Caroline continued, “you will ejaculate.” A few of the women in the front row looked at each other and giggled. “I know that some of you have heard experts say the liquid that comes out of us women when we ejaculate is just pee, but they’re wrong!” Her voice rose. “You need to trust your own generative power.”

I left the room with mixed feelings of optimism and inadequacy. I wanted to experience the kind of multiple orgasms Caroline described. At the same time, I was quite sure they were beyond my capabilities. I learned later that in a separate room, Charles was teaching the men how to elevate their lovers to Goddesses, and how to make love without ejaculating. He argued that the fluid loss saps a man’s vital energy.

We women came back together with the men, practicing breath, eye contact and therapy-like exercises with different people for the next few hours. Each exercise stripped away another layer of emotional protection, leaving me feeling raw and frighteningly exposed by Saturday evening.

For the last exercise that evening, we were asked to rejoin the partner with whom we had come to the class. Charles and Caroline provided us with a list of instructions before sending us home to practice what we had learned. Instructions included gazing into each other’s eyes, sprinkling our lover’s face, neck and shoulders with kisses, whispering words of encouragement, and helping each other feel loved and desired. All this before working on the sacred spots.

Ed and I hadn’t spoken more than a few words in the two days since we arrived at the seminar. As

we walked toward the car, he reached for my hand. I clasped his in mine. We stopped and our eyes locked onto each other. In that moment I knew we were learning about something far more important than sexual intimacy. We were learning about emotional vulnerability.

“You are my Goddess,” he whispered with a new kind of tenderness.

Stephen Finlay

## The Rover

And years on there are still ghosts in the telegraph lines that sizzle into the secret nooks of west-central Illinois at night. The lines aren't there anymore, haven't been since the 50s when the train depot shuttered, but as long as there are still some weathered, leaning poles along the tracks outside of town and a few blue glass insulators cling like desperate fruit to their slat branches then the ghosts of McDonough County are guided home on that landing strip. Sit on the freezing, leaf-strewn hardwood floor of an abandoned farmhouse in rural Illinois and think hard and smoke meaningfully and tell me I'm wrong. There was nothing in a childhood Ouija board experiment either but that didn't keep me from being light as a feather, stiff as a goddamn board. I hear my father wheeze and cough with shattered lungs in the next room. I am home for Thanksgiving and 10 days sober and I know I'll go to The Jenny Wren soon and tie one on with people I haven't seen since high school. Last night, I visited a high school friend and his father showed me a photo he took when he was nine. The photo is of his friend's little brother lying dead in a could-be-sleeping sort way in a baby-sized casket in the front round room of my father's house, before we moved into it, when it was still the Craycraft Funeral Home. I remember the drains in the basement, the embalming table bolted to the floor. He said he went to many funerals in my dad's house before it was my dad's house, when it was still funeral home. He said he learned about death in our living room. I wonder what the ghosts of Bushnell learned from watching me grow up in the living room where everyone they knew got a chance to say their goodbyes. I hope it wasn't anything that wasted their time. Or worse, caused them embarrassment. My ex-wife is the only person I ever had sex with in my dad's house and I'm glad we never had sex in the front round room. A little ghost's parents should be the ones to tell him about such things. He shouldn't have to learn them from the living.

Stephen Finlay

## I-55 by Pontiac, Illinois

This is the Motel Six with  
a framed photo of  
the same Motel Six  
from the air.  
In the background,  
I can see the same gas station  
through the lobby window.  
And the same cornfields  
surrounding. And I wonder  
why they show us  
the roof, the expanse  
of the 36 car parking lot  
the off-ramp in the distance.  
There is a brochure  
for Historic Route 66.  
I'm travelling so I know  
I'll be drinking.  
Check in,  
fidget,  
flip and walk for vodka.  
Bob and Ray on the radio  
as I pull in.  
They always sign off  
with a reminder  
to hang by your thumbs  
and write if you get work

Robin Gow

# Bride of Christ

we all know that people  
with the same could easily  
fall in love with each other.  
Catherines; of siena & alexandria  
wearing white cowls & wedding dresses,  
one rising, one drying the plates  
i'd left over in the sink.  
the purple sponge. siena,  
turning her hands over in the hot  
water till they were red,  
the stigmata coming off like  
ink marker, down the drain,  
all the years of bleeding.  
alexandria kissing them,  
telling her she was  
a good wife

,  
she was  
the best wife

.  
the wedding bands,  
simple gold,  
i ask to hold them.  
in high school when i loved  
a boy & thought i was a girl  
i would sometimes look

at bridal magazines,  
mythologizing a wedding.  
it wasn't that i wanted  
to marry him but that  
i wanted a photograph-able  
future, the shapes of dresses:  
the mermaid, the ball gown--  
pearls & lace  
i do

,

i tell the Catherines  
i do love you  
in a way a God couldn't  
& they start to weep,  
only instead of milk or tears  
purple streaks down their faces  
we laugh & the colors  
change, from purple to blue  
to red, not a blood red  
but a scarlet garnet--  
the kind of blood girls  
without gods get to have,  
divorced women,  
the wedding bands down  
the sink's throat.  
the kitchen floor  
dripping with color  
like oil spill rain  
we finger paint  
their dresses, they kiss  
me, leaving purple  
& gold lip prints  
on my face & my shoulders

i leave them, holding  
each other on the counter  
i do i do i do i do  
i don't wash the  
marks off before bed--  
what a mess what a mess

Alan Semrow

## Scenes from *Unfaithful*

I love the scene in *Unfaithful* when Diane Lane's hair is all wet, and she gets all sexy and shy when Richard Gere pulls the recorder out to make a video.

I love the scene in *Unfaithful* when Diane Lane tells her son to spit his gum out in her hand and then she proceeds to put the gum in her mouth. Weirdly gross, but weirdly cute.

I love the scene in *Unfaithful* when Olivier Martinez runs Diane Lane's hands across the braille and mouths those nonsense words. I love how they hold hands after that.

I love the scene in *Unfaithful* when Diane Lane keeps scrubbing that white and green plate over and over because she can't stop thinking about how badly she wants Olivier Martinez.

My favorite scene in *Unfaithful* is when Diane Lane's on the train all giddy and crying and laughing because she can't stop thinking about the volcanic sex she just had with Olivier Martinez.

I love the scene in *Unfaithful* when Diane Lane and Olivier Martinez are getting all sexy and he tells her to hit him. She does it and then they fall into a fit of rageful, passionate sex.

I love the scene in *Unfaithful* when Diane Lane takes herself to the shaky train bathroom to wash Olivier Martinez's come and scent off.

I love the scene in *Unfaithful* when Diane Lane's sleeping and Olivier Martinez draws the flower next to her vagina.

I love the scene in *Unfaithful* when Diane Lane is in the bathtub and finally notices the flower. I love how she starts rubbing at it, so Richard Gere won't see.

I love the scene in *Unfaithful* when Diane Lane is at the coffee shop with friends and Olivier Martinez shows up and they fuck in the bathroom stall. I love how she says, “We always do it in the best places.”

I love the scene in *Unfaithful* when Diane Lane tells Olivier Martinez that he’s the first thing she thinks about every morning.

I love the scene in *Unfaithful* when Diane Lane fucks up chicken dinner because she can’t stop thinking about Olivier Martinez.

I love the scene in *Unfaithful* when Diane Lane is seated at the kitchen table wearing an over-sized sweater, smoking a cigarette, and crying because she realizes her actions might have some repercussions.

I love the scene in *Unfaithful* when Diane Lane spots Olivier Martinez kissing another girl in the bookstore and starts hitting him over the head and screaming because he was supposed to be only hers. “Who is she?” she asks.

I love the scene in *Unfaithful* when Olivier Martinez fucks Diane Lane from behind in the stairwell after she tells him it’s over.

I have mixed feelings about the scene in *Unfaithful* when Richard Gere kills Olivier Martinez with the snow globe. I thought it was a genius murder device, but it makes me sad that the Diane and Olivier story is pretty much over.

I love the scene in *Unfaithful* when the detectives tell Diane Lane and Richard Gere that Olivier Martinez is dead and then she has to try really hard to not make it visible how destroyed she is.

I like the scene in *Unfaithful* when Diane Lane realizes that the snow globe she gave Olivier Martinez is back on the shelf in the living room—and that her husband definitely killed him.

I love the scene in *Unfaithful* when Richard Gere tells Diane Lane, “I didn’t want to kill him. I wanted to kill you.” I just thought it was a really good line.

I love the scene in *Unfaithful* when Diane Lane burns the pictures Richard Gere’s private detective

took, and then starts crying, remembering the windy day she met Olivier Martinez, picturing what it might have been like had she not gone up to his apartment to bandage her bloodied knees.

Criss Harris

## One Two

What I didn't like about boxing was getting hit. Specifically, I didn't like getting hit in the face. Really, any blow on the head resulted not only in sharp pains, lingering headaches, the occasional migraine, but more seriously, a sinking sensation of doom, an elevator-dropping queasiness about how things were going to be. I couldn't help it—even if I covered well enough to avoid black eyes and re-breaking my poor blood-spouting nose, a tag to the temple left me reeling.

In one of the last matches between Joseph and I, a bout suggested by our mother who was tired of hearing us call each other increasingly foul names, I remember well the first hit I took on the head, right on the cheekbone, and it made me dance with the harried feeling that it was only a matter of time.

The lamps in the picture window flooded the front lawn with light. We circled on the frosty grass, careful of our footing, and I tried to go after him whenever the light was behind me, so that I could come out of darkness like an avenging angel. When we were nine and thirteen, this might have been the advantage I needed, but now, at 16 and 20, we were mostly grown, both of us over six feet, both athletes, and he played college football.

When I waded in for what turned out to be the last time, I came at him hard with three backhand left jabs and a right to the body, and he grunted with it, but didn't back down. A left knocked my guard hand into my own face and then I guess it was a straight right that made the world explode in light, and the feeling that something was broken behind my eyes. I came to with the cold seeping into my back, my brother grinning down out of the dark at me.

What I liked about boxing was hitting, making the tag, driving home. When we started we had only one pair of gloves, so he took right and I took left. We held our ungloved hands behind our backs and worked exclusively from the defensive crouch, bodies turned sideways to each other. In that position, you can hide behind your glove, protecting your head, while you move into position for an uppercut or jab.

You only use a hand high straight when your opponent is already reeling or dazed, when his guard

is down; otherwise, since you have no second hand, you are terribly vulnerable to a series of fast shots. So you work on speed, on patience, on wearing the other guy down, intimidating him. With few full-power shots, no one is bleeding much, and you can while away an hour circling and circling back in the driveway, sweating despite the fall chill.

We had a beat-up old radio with one speaker that we plugged in to the garage outlet. While we wore each other down, we listened to classic rock. If Survivor's, "Eye of the Tiger," from Rocky III came on, we'd go berserk, taking any amount of punishment to get in there and do some damage. We swore at each other mercilessly and I remember laughing a lot, usually right before I got knocked down. Sometimes I'd crack him up with a goofy expression and then windmill past his half-hearted defense and we'd both end up laughing about it.

Once we had two full sets of gloves, my favorite moments were in the clinch, a one-armed hug that puts you inside the opponent's arm while you work the body, just hit and hit and hit and he hits and hits and hits until one of you breaks apart or you both fall down in agony. That felt like love to me.

I didn't like the fear. So many kinds of fear to deal with in the moments when we laced up. It felt a little like getting ready to die to me, and more so as I got bigger and stronger and boxed with others who weren't always kind enough to let me win once in a while. I had the distinct and entirely accurate sense as I sized up an opponent that I was about to cause him bodily harm, bruise him, knock his brain about in his skull, cut him above the eyes, bloody his lip, bloody his nose, cause his eye to swell shut, and pummel his midsection till his organs hurt underneath muscle clenched in soreness. He would hurt for days. Of course, I also had the distinct and entirely accurate sense that his tight-eyed grin was all about the same intentions.

"Gonna fuck you up so bad we'll be scooping you off the pavement with shovels by dark."

"You sure can talk."

"Don't worry, I walk too. These shoes were made for walking."

"That's a fucking Nancy Sinatra song, you feeb. For that, I'm going to have to break your jaw."

Could he actually break my jaw? I gave him my back to hide my worry, looked up at the old gnarled walnut tree that hung over our back yard, dropping black-hulled fruit that stained our clothes in the late fall. My bigger fear was that I would cry, especially if boxing someone other than my brother. It had happened before, after the blow that knocks the breath from you—not the air in your lungs, your actual breath, your capacity to breathe, knocked out, unavailable, and the tears start welling. I wanted to be the fighter, but holding a bandana to my nose—probably broken again—I was just the child, weeping in my blood, thinking of the long ache the day would become.

I was afraid of tripping—I had to box without my glasses and kept my opponent close inside the

fog that blurred everything beyond five feet of distance, but I couldn't watch the pavement, or grass, and sometimes fell. I'd ask for mercy, get back up feeling shameful, feign an injury if I had to, then wallop him while he was distracted.

Tell you the truth, I liked the fear. I ate it up. The fear was what made it real, made the whole exercise of gloves and footwork, the speed of attack and backpedal something that mattered, because if I did it right, gave in to my adrenaline and quickness, my basic gut-level desire to do damage to another human being, I could watch the fear widen in my opponent's eyes. And I could fight it off myself, come through the weight of danger to act, push into the circle of his blows, take several and keep on swinging until the chance for a solid right came through and then, arms burning with fatigue, snap his head back with one sharp contact and he would fall.

There is a species of writing, often used by applicants for schools or jobs, that always ends with what the writer has learned and if I were in that mode, I'd talk here about what boxing taught me—the discipline, the toughness, the knowledge that I could fight on through adversity. It wouldn't be true.

I was never disciplined about anything, never particularly tough. What boxing really taught me was the combination, the one-two, the basic fact that a blow can rock you back on your heels and a second one can take you down. That tough as you are, disciplined as you are, courageous and joyously masochistic, the second one leaves you cold, spinning, worrying about what the world will hit you with next, sick with the pain of it, looking up at the stars or the cloudy sky, waiting for the rest of it to come.

Judith Bowles

# Untitled

Not finding the grave of my parents  
I came down the road of misshapened trees whose  
roots, strangled, shoved up in a mass and a heave.  
Earth there is parched and speaks, with an effort, of days  
filled with birds, of the many shades of memorial green.  
I am getting rid of some clothes that clutter my mind  
with their endless stripes and misshapened sleeves.  
Two bags-full hope that this riddance makes room  
for some grammar to settle, finally, and offer the handhold,  
the intricate balance that aerial footing requires.  
Not finding my untitled poem this morning was like the mass  
and the heave of the earth, parched but still speaking,  
and it told me so.

Ryan Harper

# The Easter Pageant Roman Soldier

It rides on him,  
the toystore breastplate bumpy  
with superhero muscles,  
stretched over a sofa cushion belly,  
strangled at the base  
    like baled hay, with a nylon  
    belt, holding true the duct tape  
    sword, strangled at the middle, dangling  
    dead and without work,  
before a crowd of unarmed  
non-speaking roles, the plastic  
shield dropped almost to leather-latticed  
calves and sandaled feet.  
    The toystore helmet, fuzzy  
    with faux mohawk, strapped tightly  
    across a prickly underjaw, he,  
    strangled at the top,  
bears away the king of kings.

Erin Gunther

## How Our First Date Will Go

I will suggest that we get coffee. If you don't like coffee, I know there's no way it's going to work out anyway. Although after I do, I will know that it's a bad idea because I will be nervous already and caffeine will make my heart pound even more and will make the sensation of bone-less-ness even worse. So to offset this, once I realize my mistake, I will park at the furthest parking garage from the coffee shop to walk off my nerves. I suggested this coffee shop because a former fling from the semester past had offered this same spot. That was the time I proposed we do coffee rather than a "quick one" at his apartment, when I got a hot coffee on a hot day, and when he tried to make out with me on the park bench with no warning.

I will wonder, on my walk, why it is that I am actually nervous. There is nothing from our conversations that has distinguished you in any special way. In fact, this is as blind a date as it possibly can be. I will laugh at myself for agonizing over what I would wear, and the fact that I checked my makeup and my teeth fifty times in my car mirror before I went out into the sunlight where I would be exposed to you. I settled on my plum colored dress because I knew that it complimented my body well, pairing it with some gray leggings and my high boots. This will be covered by my gray Michael Kors coat with the hood anyway, but I will know that I at least look good underneath.

I will wait for you on the bench outside the coffee shop because I am ten minutes early. I wanted to be early so that I could be the one to see you coming, having already gotten comfortable with the surroundings. I take the time to watch the cars roll through the stop sign, to watch the mother pushing the stroller go past, and to scroll through my phone like I'm really looking for something.

You will come around the corner and we will greet each other. It will be awkward because we are assessing each other. I will have a fleeting thought that maybe it would be easier if we were naked like those people on the TV shows because then we could be completely exposed and wouldn't have to try to stare through each other's thick layers so hard. Because it is always physical first, although we will pretend that it's not through our conversations.

You will buy the coffee, but I will get iced coffee, even though it's a cool day in late fall, and you will get a hot coffee. They will be two dollars each and I will think about being a cheap date because

I always have been, but I will still stand there with my purse opened anyways because there will be a part of me that wants to pay for mine.

We will take our coffees and sit on the bench for a while, side by side, trying to keep the conversation from lulling into aimlessness. This is how we keep up our illusion, that we care about what the other is saying, when we both have already made up our minds. We will take a walk and I will joke about being your Ithaca tour guide, but try to dodge the more personal questions, which I have become good at, and I will be grateful that you will like to talk about yourself. I will laugh and make eye contact and respond to show you that I am interested. I will be unsure about why this seems to be going so well and why I feel that I am actually enjoying your company on this short walk.

Then it will come to it: you will offer to drive me back to the parking garage. You will say that you are parked close and it's really no big deal, so I will consent. We will retrace our steps to a side road and you will point to a rusty truck and say, "That's it." I will stare, but not say anything, and then you will break into a laugh that sneaks out of the corner of your mouth, and you'll say, "I'm just kidding!" And I will laugh, but then you will say, "It's the one behind it." And I will see a car, the kind of car that I used to see in the pages of car magazines that my sister used to get because she liked that kind of thing.

My heart will sink and I will know that this has been too good and that this car has damned the entire date. I will know that because you have a sports car, there is no way I will be able to keep up the persona that I am just like every other kid in this college town, that you will find out sooner or later that I am not good enough for you. I will take this as a warning sign that you may have a damaged ego, because don't all men with damaged egos self-medicate with specialty cars if they have the money for this self-evident cure? I will still like you despite these warning signs, but I will vow to be cautious because I will know that this will be a bad idea. You will drop me off at the parking garage and I will say the bottom floor is fine because I really don't want you to see me walk to my '99 Jeep Cherokee just yet. You will tell me to text you and despite all the reasons that have taught me that I shouldn't, I will.

# Simon Perchik

\*

The glare this plate thins out  
eats the way each star  
tells you it's still alone

though rim to rim you bring  
a rain smelling from a narrow road  
holding down the Earth

till everything is dirt and she  
is sitting at a table, asks you  
to hold her hand, childlike, fill it

lets you swallow the afternoon  
even she will remember, your lips  
circling down in flames and hunger.

\*

You don't read how weak it was  
though this windtorn composition book  
steadies its lettering for afternoons

the way beginners wave their arms  
making room for the Honor Roll  
mixed with stone, not yet the pages

–these dead are used to it :words  
put together by a still warm crayon  
and you too no longer move

leave them nothing except an afterall  
in writing and on these sheets  
hillsides to fit inside your name

holding it between your fingers, higher  
and from the struggling dirt, over and over  
making mountains, clocks, emptiness.

\*

You caress this dust as if it's stuck  
drains under ripples and sap though all goodbyes  
keep warm in a dark lake at sunset, reek

from varnish, hunted down by small stones  
by dying wood and from the rot  
and enormous rain paws the scent open

the way she once stood still –the room  
is familiar, shattered by lips, cheeks  
–as for you it's just another door

somehow dry, no longer the one by one  
you leaned against then left behind  
away from everything, both hands at once

and yours is the only loneliness still leaving  
–what you smell is when she first came in  
and stayed without turning her head.

\*

You walk past as if the first death  
was a bird –enormous feathers  
half stone, half outworn, one by one

though they still need more time  
could calm these dead, spread out  
airborne, older than the number 10

than this hillside letting its small footsteps  
fall standing erect, frightened  
–you come here to listen for eggs

for echoes, for brothers, sisters –it's useless  
flying so close, wing tip to wing tip  
till a moon is all that's left

bringing you its black, covers you  
already one hand on your shoulder  
counting your fingers out loud to 0.

John Ballantine

## I Want to Say

I want to say, get real, wake up. The world is not a bed of roses. I want you to look at the pictures and see men like your father with billy clubs hitting you. Yes, you with bright eyes, a student. Men hitting you with billy clubs. Look at their smiles. Not just here, but in NYC, Shanghai, Cairo, Istanbul, and St. Petersburg. There are dead boys and girls and parents in Caracas, Tehran, Hong Kong, and Paris.

I want to tell you that holding hands, singing as you step forward for justice—for the right to be heard. I want to say, do not do this lightly. Some will die, others will disappear, and you will be disappointed as some say it ain't so bad and turn their backs, cross their hearts with bowed heads of surprise. Yes, that is how it is when you step forward and say now is the time.

I want to say I'll join you and march with peace in my heart and a smile that warms us in the dead of winter. But the joy we feel will be tested; I know that taking bread from the rich will not come with alms of thanks. No, fists will rise, lies will multiply, and you will not like the hypocrisy of your elders. Yes, you will see the inside of dark cells that line the walls of those who keep the traffic moving. I want to say that this can be changed.

I want to say that tyranny won't reign—theirs and ours, but the fierce fire of determination in your eyes and their hard chins tell me that the battle has just begun. I want to say that it will be okay, that love, kindness, and your step into anger will break the barricades. But it won't always; the fight will turn to new disguises, more lies, and even taller, unscalable walls.

I want to say that protests are our right, that marches will be safe—maybe for now—and the world will be better. But the tears of loved ones line our streets, and the love that binds our hearts does not heal all wounds.

I want to say that we will win, that the other guy is wrong—crazy even—and the light of day will shine only on our truths. But the glow of democracy is short, “the shark has pretty teeth he,” and some will be shot. Still we must sing through the thunder clouds, walk in torrents of rain. I want to say that this is the way, that I have walked it too. It is hard. The dead will be forgotten, and we continue on trying to remember them.

I will say that this is the way to live, the only way, really. With fists held high, our feet marching

strong, our hearts are calm because it is the only way to stand here right now. We have watched too long, still many do not believe, and I want to say this is our day, but I don't always know.

I want to say I know why the world is this way, but I don't. I keep hoping I'll know why, that I understand, but I keep putting one foot in front of the other, not knowing what is ahead. I want to say thank you for all of this. Life is hard, life is good, and I want to say I love you—every one of you—but that is hard too. I want you to hear me say all of this, and I want you to understand why I don't sometimes.

Andrew Sarewitz

## Miss Marcia

I have a photograph of two women holding hands. Shoulder to shoulder and smiling. It's an interior shot, taken in the living room of a homey condominium in Northern New Jersey. It's not a particularly interesting image; no special emotion captured or some elegant moment in time. But it is of two women I love deeply and it is the only photo I have of them together.

Judy, my mother, is on the right. Having known her well, I confidently say she is 88 or 89 in the picture. Dressed in a violet turtle neck, her silver hair is freshly washed and combed. She's wearing simple sterling earrings and an animated grin, as if reacting to something juvenile but amusing that my older brother Dan may have said. No glasses—for as far back as my memory travels she preferred to take her glasses off when being photographed, unless she was wearing one of her fashionable pair of glamour shades (which by style, could pinpoint the era).

Marcia, Judy's caretaker, is on her right, wearing a short sleeve blue cotton-blend blouse over a long pleated skirt and some half breed of a hat and hairnet covering her hair.

I look at the picture a lot.

The first time I met Marcia, my father was still alive. She had been hired as a care taker to look after him, when Dad became bed-ridden. She replaced a nurse who understandably wanted only to see after my father's medical, comfort and bathing needs, not additional personal care and errands that both my parents expected. I doubt Marcia knew what she was in for when the agency recommended her. Told he had just months to live, Dad did not give way for four and a half years. When he died, Marcia, by now in her late fifties, told Judy she would not abandon her unless she wasn't needed anymore or until Mom passed away. Marcia kept her word.

Old age and loneliness can be malignant companions. They each attached to Judy's heart. Her family and friends provided important gifts of distraction, company and love, but Marcia was her salvation. And mine.

At some point during my routine weekly visits to see Judy, she was no longer able to drive. More accurately, Mom was no longer allowed to get behind the wheel of a car. My brother Dan took the

majority of the heat for that collective decision. And as Mother's memory became challenged and selective, she seemed to only remember that it was Dan who metaphorically took the keys away from her. Her handsome but floundering silver Volvo, having degenerative electrical illnesses culminating in an air conditioning system that only produced heat, we gave to Marcia for her son. This left us with a brown-sugar (Toyota's term) colored Corolla my father had bought off the lot in the late 1990's for \$10,000, primarily as a means of transportation for local errands. It was the most basic model you could buy, obsolete roll-down windows included. I hated the car, which my father thought was hilarious. My New York City snobbery that I tried to keep at bay could not be contained. It was the most ordinary object I could imagine. Yet the car outlived both my parents with the last repair in which I was involved being the replacement of a clamp to reattach the fallen muffler. It cost me ten dollars at the local Sunoco station.

With Judy no longer permitted to drive, Marcia was charged with picking me up at the train station each week. And thus a tradition of twenty minutes (each direction) of conversation began. Mostly about my work or my mother. One thing I greatly appreciate among the memories of my time with Mother toward the end is that almost without exception, at least once during each visit, Judy and I would laugh uncontrollably over something we both found hysterical. Often at the expense of her faltering hearing when we would do the New York Times Crossword Puzzle. I guess I should admit it was the Monday puzzle. And during the week, strange and funny things would often happen with Mother that Miss Marcia would share with me and we'd howl with laughter. Our love for each other grew, with my mother's heart as the binding subject.

On the dark side of this was loneliness. Weekends were particularly depressing for my mother because Marcia didn't stay. Her family and the relationship with her church on Sundays was abided priority. Other sweet and gracious women would take care of Mother, but they were not Marcia. In her choice not to go to assisted living or a retirement home, she was aware that being alone was a trade-off for staying in her own house. For a few years our family discussed her moving. When the discussions became serious, Judy vehemently refused. Early after my father died, when Judy was still running on most cylinders, she and I talked about the ramifications of staying by herself. In the end, we all agreed that in a situation with no perfect solution, what Jude said she wanted was a decision to be respected.

As her friends moved and passed away or just stopped visiting once Mother was no longer her complete self, Marcia became more and more central in the daily happiness of Judy's final days. Mom referred to Marcia as her sister. My mother had two younger siblings who were her best friends so

adding Marcia to that sorority is significant. Yet Marcia never called my mother by her first name. She was, “Mrs. Bressen.” It drove me crazy. Maybe that was my issue alone, but I couldn’t understand it. Generationally, as an employee or from a different culture, whatever the reason, Marcia would never address Mom as anything other than Mrs. Bressen. It was nothing I was able to force. And what did it have to do with me? It was Marcia who wasn’t comfortable calling Judy by her first name. My reaction had less to do with the love between these two and more with my perceptions of privileged white women and their employees of color.

There are relationships that are forged in what I call “The Deserted Island Effect.” Circumstances where people who would not choose to spend a substantial amount of time together are, for lack of a better sentiment, stuck with each other. I guess it’s not really as rare as I make it out to be. I believe that’s often the reality for siblings, co-workers, etc. We learn tolerance, compromise and negotiating. Maybe the reason why Judy and Marcia’s bond seems to fit “The Deserted Island Effect” so perfectly is that I don’t think these two women had much in common save both being children, sisters and mothers.

My mother had physical afflictions that began years earlier and grew to be more debilitating than her memory loss. Traveling became increasingly difficult. For a number of years my parents portrayed the antithesis of the stereotype of East Coast Jewish folks who wintered in Florida. They vacationed in the forests of New England for years. When Dad’s infirmity made it impossible to enjoy the nature and property of their Vermont home, they found joy in the warmth of Tucson, Arizona, where annually they would stay for a few weeks during the coldest North East months at a motel by the foot of the mountains. Discovered by my mother’s youngest sister, this became a precious escape. They had been seasoned travelers during the potent decades in the search of bird sanctuaries, unexplored cultures and beautiful landscape. When they could no longer travel easily, Arizona was a God-send. After my father’s death, Mom continued to visit the desert motel. But inevitably the trip became too difficult, for several reasons including no direct flights. And as Judy’s mind began to fail and her physical condition made it necessary to have a wheel chair on hand, no one wanted to commit to taking her away somewhere warm. Not my siblings, not her sisters, not I. It’s painful to write that without defending. I don’t like painting us as selfish in this vein. I’d like to think we all made up for it in other significant ways.

It was Marcia who offered to take Judy away to some place warm for a week, come winter. This would be her Christmas present to my mother. We were in the car during this conversation. Marcia had picked me up at the train station, but as always, she preferred having me drive. I remember pulling

into my mother's driveway, turning off the engine and looking at Miss Marcia.

"You would do that?" I asked.

"Of course!" she said. "I love Mrs. Bressen."

Without discussing it with my siblings, I said that if she was willing to take Judy somewhere sun-washed and warm, we would not allow her to pay for the trip. Her accompanying Mom and taking care of her would be the gift. We would pay all expenses in addition to her salary, which didn't cover anywhere near the price of twenty-four-hour care.

This was not some vaguely masked opportunity for Marcia to get a paid vacation to the sun. Twenty-four hours a day of Judy would be no picnic. After taking her on holiday, Marcia would bring Mom back to New Jersey and then take her annual winter trip home to the Dominican Republic to visit her family.

So after Christmas, the girls set off on their adventure to Sanibel Island.

As a family effort to find the best location, we found this Florida resort town had a hotel with guest rooms on the ground floor, walking distance to the dining room as well as a large swimming pool all on a gorgeous ocean front location. And it was family oriented with children throughout the property. My mother loved children. She could spend hours watching kids run around and swim and play games. And Marcia could hopefully also have some joy and relaxation in-between airports, cabs, feeding, bathing, dressing and keeping my mother company.

Marcia was a registered nurse in the Dominican Republic. She confessed to me that when she moved to the States her English was not fluent enough to land a job at an American hospital. She found work in hospice at a nursing home as well as private care with the elderly. When she came to us, a man she had looked after for a number of years had passed away. It was a difficult loss for her. Though she never specifically said so, I think she really would have preferred not to get so emotionally entrenched again with a patient, but in order to make a good enough living, she felt she needed to take this additional income, at least until she would receive benefits from the government and nursing home when she turned sixty-five. When we found Marcia—or she found us—a bond formed between my parents and her. In order to do this vocation well, you must have a heart born for this kind of nurturing. It may be something you can discover about yourself, but I don't believe it can be taught.

When Dad passed away, Judy fell into a sadness that had some believing she might die of a broken heart, including Marcia and me. As many who knew them witnessed, my parents had a story-book

marriage lived in real time. But as my mother and I would later discuss, she paid a heavy price as the survivor.

Judy would live nearly eight years beyond my father. When Marcia had promised not to leave, I don't think she had wagered spending almost twice the time she had spent taking care of Dad seeing to my mother. The devotion and mutual affection was gleaming. Even in the way they greeted each other it was evident. The kisses hello, the smiles, hand holding hand, the way Judy looked at Marcia.

For those who have closely watched someone reaching the end of their time, often the roles of parent and child reverse. Separate from cognitive loss, seeing both my mother and father face giving up their independence was very difficult. I think back toward the end of my father's life, when my mother and I would take him out to lunch. The last line to independence for Dad was driving. Losing this freedom was rough. Each week we went to the same one or two restaurants—locations I'd been driving to for years. Dad, with great authority in his voice and pointing like a sergeant talking to his troops, would give me explicit and annoying directions while I was behind the wheel. Needless to say, I eventually got in big trouble when my mother and I were in some animated discussion and I missed his direction for a short cut. Dad seriously admonished me. Mom and I tried hard not to giggle like school girls caught passing notes in class.

I hate endings. Maybe that's why I love epic films and novels spanning a thousand pages. And soap operas. Though the inevitability of my mother's death was expected, I was still her child. Leaving her house on the afternoon she died, knowing I would never see her again, I got into the passenger seat of Judy's car seated across from my brother, and wept until I was empty.

I don't know what made me think that my relationship with Judy might live on through Marcia. She has a life, children, grandchildren, homes in both America and the Dominican Republic. On the day of Mom's memorial, when I stood to speak, I caught Marcia's eye sitting at our family's table, tears overflowing. When I was done speaking I went first to her and drowned myself in the comfort of a mother's arms.

The family gathered a final time as we emptied Judy's home after selling the property. Marcia came with her children to take certain possessions we gifted to her church and family. It was a Wednesday. She looked at me with wide eyed love and said she thought she'd never see me again. Naively, I said, "Why would you think that?"

Miss Marcia has not responded to my recent texts or phone messages. Sentimentally, I want to believe it's too difficult for her to spend time with me. Realistically, the bond she and I shared was my

mother. She loved me, she probably even misses me. But she has moved on to a place that doesn't include me or my family. Her own life.

Suzie Vander Vorste

## An Unresolved Stain

My grandmother Lorraine's house fell apart around her for ten years before anyone noticed. The rooms she raised her family in for forty years rose around her toward the end of her life like the choking bars of a jail cell; every surface buried beneath books and coats and shoes; furniture almost invisible beneath heaps of clothes; coffee mugs and plates stacked like mini Leaning Towers of Pisa on countertops.

I believe that it was, in fact, in the end, her house that killed her.

Her bathroom had so much water damage that the floorboards could no longer bear weight. It was unsafe to walk across the room to the bathtub, so she stopped bathing. Her toes became infected because she couldn't wash her feet, and her slippers hid the infection long enough that by the time one of her children finally saw her barefoot, the only option left was amputation. She lost all the toes on her left foot.

At what point does one become a hoarder? I wonder an hour into a Saturday afternoon Hoarders marathon that I find myself inexplicably drawn to one day during the first year of my graduate program.

As I watch the people on the show claw their way through mountains of garbage, I question how, for each of them, it began. Most of their families seem to be in denial—having turned a blind eye at some point as it all fell apart.

My grandmother's house, likewise, decayed bit by bit, and my family, like the families on the show, failed to notice, the way parents fail to notice changes in a growing child.

In the episodes I watch, a pattern emerges: crushed bodies of cats, ceiling-height stacks of papers, rotting food in non-functional refrigerators, and rampant cockroaches. I wince at the sight of unusable bathrooms, at plastic jugs filled with urine and showers stuffed with refuse.

As a child, my mother taught me that everything in a home has a place: jackets belong in closets; shoes go in a rack beside the entry door; small garbage pails are emptied into larger hidden ones every morning. Dirty dishes go in the oven when company arrives. One's home should be a lemon-

waxed temple, and my mother has always kept hers holy.

Growing up, if I asked why we had to clean so closely, my mother would tell me, “That’s not the point! You need to show that you care for what you have. No one else will care for you!” And so she scrubbed, and Lysoled, and varnished baseboards with Pledge.

My grandmother’s house, however, smelled like damp, moldy clothes. Bread crusts littered the counter-tops. My uncle and cousins lived with her and left football gear in the hallway, pop cans on bookshelves, toys in the dining room. When I went to her place during the week as a child, I sat with my shoes on her couch, dropped my book bag at the door, and never washed a single dish.

During my sophomore year of high school, I remember becoming aware of a ketchup stain scarring the white wall near the kitchen in her house. It silently dared my mother or me to complain. My uncle had whipped a ketchup bottle at Grandma’s head when she walked away from him during a fight.

The unresolved stain tested me: in my mind, the sticky mess would mutate into a duck; a hollowed-out man’s face.

During these visits, my grandmother would sit for hours in a plastic lawn chair and stare into the air. I thought her lazy. At seventy-three, she no longer worked on her farm and hardly left the house because her hips hurt. She seldom spoke and when she did, she’d tell me things like, “I’m tired enough to sit forever,” and “Sleep is my favorite thing. All I have time for is sleep.”

I can see her now in my mind: her head slumping forward in her chair; her knobby knees motionless; the TV crackling in the background. As a high-schooler, I don’t understand why she doesn’t clean up the stain. She’s spent a lifetime wrestling feed-bags and fixing fences.

Her mess must have grated on my mother’s nerves—her cleanliness stems from a deep frustration at growing up in her mother’s house. Because my grandmother went out to work on the farm each day, she relied on my mother to clean house, and Mom has told me that she often felt more a maid than a daughter. When my mother moved out in high school, no one took over her role.

When I stayed with my grandmother as a second-grader for a few months in the wake of my parents’ divorce, my mother couldn’t bear to let me live in filth like she had.

She tried to fix up the house as best she could. She didn’t ask permission; she just did it. “I had to do something,” she tells me. “That place was too much of a pigpen.” She bought gray paint at the hardware store; the cheapest color she could get her hands on. She wallpapered and re-grouted the bathroom; cleared out and painted a room upstairs in case she had to move back in after the divorce. It breaks my heart to think of my mother planning a way to move back into the house she so badly

wanted to escape. She must have been desperate.

That summer my mother would mow the yard. My grandmother, who at that point, almost never left her chair would sit on the stoop and watch. I wonder if it secretly pleased her to have the help, or if she was put off at the way my mother changed things without talking to her.

Deep into the Hoarders marathon, my reactions move from intrigue over a man's Elvis memorabilia addiction to repugnance over a molded melon. During a tour of Elvis Man's house, I ask myself why I'm watching this. His sticky floors and urine-soaked clothes bring to mind a house I long to forget. The remote is right by my hand. I make no move to change anything.

Two female psychiatrists swoop in to aid Elvis Man, who can only enter his apartment by pulling himself through his doorway and scrambling up a heap of his belongings. The doe-eyed, blonde psychiatrist works with a female hoarder whose house is overrun with about eight cats. Cat Lady holds her cigarettes in trembling hands and helps volunteers sort through stacks of rotting clothes. Later, a brunette psychiatrist visits an elderly woman with a kitchen stuffed with wicker baskets. She tells Basket Woman's loved ones: "Your mother suffers from a disorder."

The psychiatrists take everyone through the hoard. Everyone must see the destruction for this to work. Depending on how much the stricken family members' faces start the pale, the blonde psychiatrist will lay a hand on their shoulders to prepare them (and me, too, I think) for what they will see.

"He hasn't had electricity in the kitchen for some time. That's why there are so many wrappers. The refrigerator hasn't worked in months."

"The last time she counted there were eight cats. They've taken over the front rooms of the house."

"Her water has been cut off and that's why she has plastic jugs in the bathroom."

No one ever expects the smell of sewer, but it's almost always there.

At the end, it was a smell that pervaded my grandmother's house, too. Although her home never quite reached the point of near-total collapse, I hear myself in the family members' insistent refrains, "It wasn't that bad the last time I was here."

Because it wasn't that bad. Not until the day my mother took my grandmother to an exam that revealed inoperable, advanced cataracts. It wasn't that bad until it clicked in our minds how long my grandmother had sat blind in her own home.

The psychiatrists broker the give-and-take between hoarders and loved ones, alternately bottling down guilt and stoking anger. They patiently listen past the "I can't believe you could live like this" and "what's wrong with you" jabs, and hunker down when, finally, the hoarders reach the moment of break-through. Here, it's key that the hoarder's eyes water, that they express visible distress, and

it's equally key to point out my grandmother's eyes watered, too, when my mother informed her she needed to move to a care center. It was one of the only times I ever saw her cry.

Cat Lady's house is filled with newspapers and slick with fuzzy green moss. Her cats shit and piss till the countertops are caked; their bodies full of fleas and mange.

Bulky men in coveralls haul out items in garbage bins and crates. They work at a manic pace, particles kicking up in their faces as they toss loads of garbage into trucks.

Cat Lady's trash fills a truck; Elvis Man's trash fills two. Basket Woman departs with more than I can track. Her daughters discover their father's army hat buried under heaps of junk. The show has me primed for the moment, for the episode's catharsis, and I am ready for the trigger. The middle daughter who finds the hat derails her mother's purge to show her two sisters the soggy material, and together they rage.

I rage with them. "Tell her she's acting like a baby!" I shout at the screen.

When they confront her, Basket Woman's jaw squares in a way that is all too familiar to me. I realize in this moment that I only want to scold the woman on the screen because I never had the chance to rebuke my grandmother for who she became at the end of her life. I'm mad at my mother and myself for not seeing the problem till it was too late. I'm mad at my grandmother, even now, for never asking for help.

The summer before I began ninth grade, my mother tried to intervene one last time. We took out only what was no longer used—cracked dishes; limbless Barbie Dolls; dusty video games; linty magazines. We bagged them up and put them in our truck. I washed bedding, fluffed pillows, and swept the thin floors.

When my grandmother came back from the farm, her face flashed red. She stormed past the living room, throwing her jacket.

"Whatdya do? How could you!"

She whipped around the house; her small frame thundering through the kitchen.

"You can't seriously want this junk," my mother argued.

My grandmother clenched her hands and with gritted teeth told us, "Get. Out."

We left in silence.

The ride to the town dump gave me a sour stomach the entire way home.

Only years after her death do we finally understand that my grandmother did not want us to move her things because she was blind. We did not know that in rearranging and emptying the clutter, we were leaving her lost in her own home.

Basket Woman's daughters have more luck.

"It's no longer okay to avoid talking about Dad," they tell their mother, "We all miss him."

"You leave your dad out of it," their mother warns.

Anger burns hot in her eyes until the girls start to cry. At the sight of their hands slapping at tears, she finally relents and admits out loud that she's missed her husband every day since his heart attack.

The end of this episode reveals a delicate entranceway with slick wood floors. Potted plants rest atop refinished stands. A wide hallway leads to the spacious kitchen, a sparkling room Basket Woman greets with a hearty smile that pushes her wrinkles aside.

Though I am pleased about the way her waxed floors glint under camera lights, I know it's not likely to last. But I want to believe. I decide the four women will drink tea together in this kitchen. Her grandchildren will come over on Sunday afternoons and play. At night, she will walk the hallways in her nightgown, running the soles of her bare feet over smooth surfaces. Light will stream in from cleared windows; the scent of lemon oil wafting through the rooms. As the end credits roll, for just a few minutes, I allow myself to pretend.