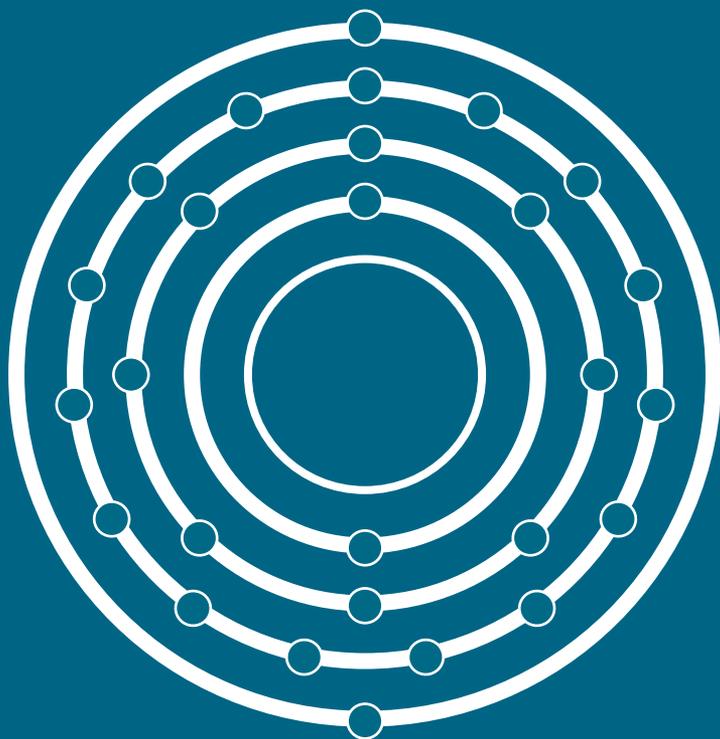


COBALT



VOLUME FOUR

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COBALT

VOLUME FOUR

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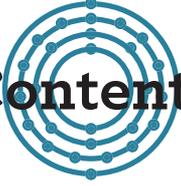
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2015 Prizes

Gabriela Mistral Poetry Prize

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Elisabeth Murawski
2015 Gabriela Mistral Poetry Prize Winner



Housesitting: Garden and Cat

*Lark of my house,
laugh often.
Your laugh is in your eyes
the light of the world.*

—Miguel Hernandez, “Lullaby of the Onion”

A crash puts on hold
all thoughts of Miguel
Hernandez, dead
at thirty-one of TB.
The cat Oiseau,

up to now unafraid,
free to kill
anything small,
streaks into the kitchen,
springs to the counter
and through
the open window

into the garden.
Sunflowers growing there,
petals tight. Onions.
Velvet ants
that can sting
through a gardener’s glove.

COBALT REVIEW

Investigation
of her bathroom lair
discloses
what scared:
the fallen rod
of the shower curtain,
damp towels hurled down
like a bolt from the sky.

Three years Hernandez
suffered Franco's jail cells,
waking up with rats
in his bed,
rat dung in his hair.
For a while
his wife and infant son
lived on onions.

Oiseau, a curve
in the dust,
washes herself. Sun
on the tin roof next door
reflects in.
I turn to it, surprised
by the sweetness
of second-hand light.

I call Oiseau and she comes.

Elisabeth Murawski



Poem for Charlie

Never courted a woman.
Never wore a red
bandanna to a dance.
Never left the farm.

More than a hired man,
less than a son.
Unschoolled. Her kin.
A second cousin,

or somebody's nephew.
Mart and Bruce
took him in. Charlie
helped her run things

when Bruce died:
the blackberries,
the cows. Stood by
her long decline.

No reply to my
condolence note
until his Christmas card,
a creche scene

COBALT REVIEW

much too beautiful,
I thought, for Charlie
to choose. Then shame,
to presume he couldn't.

Beside his name, a line
in wavering script, labored
as his slow
and halting speech:

I miss Martha so much
it's just so hard
to get used to it.
I saw the Bible quote in red

about the star
coming to rest
where the young child was,
and wept for Charlie.

Jacqueline Kirkpatrick

Girls in My Town



Girls in my town get knocked up by the river in the backseats of Camaros and the beds of Nissan pickups. They cling to the salvation promised over the tops of their Buds and Gennys. They don't have to sneak back in at sunrise cause no one's home and no one cares anyway. They open the door that no one bothered to lock and walk down the hallway to the dirty bathroom and wipe the night off their faces.

If the night was good, meaning, if someone told the girls they loved them then they might feel good too. When girls in my town feel good they try to be good. They will get dressed and wake up their siblings that share their beds and help them get ready for school. No one wants to go to school but they have to because it's a guaranteed meal.

From the first of the month until around the ninth there will be no tears, no screaming, and no fighting. In my town, the first of the month means eating at least once a day. From the first of the month until around the ninth, the girls in my town, if the night before was good, might make their siblings some toast before trying to get to the bus on time. Sometimes, the girls in my town have to pray to Jesus that their mothers (and sometimes their fathers) will get home to bring them all in to school because they missed the bus again.

When the mothers (and sometimes their fathers) don't come home in the morning and they miss the bus, the girls in my town do what they have to do. They call up the creepy, older guy that has stalked them since they were about nine years old. Every girl in my town has one creepy, older guy who has made her feel just a little off by lingering hands on her arms, or making compliments about her body.

I know what you're thinking. She thinks it too. It's disgusting. *She gets what she deserves.* But girls in my town take care of their little brothers and sometimes their little sisters too. Only sometimes because when little sis-

ters start to bleed, start to get knocked up by the river, start to come home at sunrise, they become competition. Little sisters are tricky in my town.

The creepy, older guy always answers his phone. He picks up before the second ring. He immediately knows who it is. He addresses the caller by name and sometimes adds a *honey*, a *baby girl*, and says *be right over*.

He gets there in seven minutes. In my town you can get everywhere in seven minutes. He'll wait outside, revving his engine. He wants everyone to know he's picking her up. He's helping out. *What a great guy*.

Girls in my town send their siblings out first. She tells them to be nice to him. He reaches over, opens the passenger door, and shoves the seat forward letting the siblings pile into the back. The siblings talk nonstop. Sometimes the little sisters understand what's going on, if they have just started to bleed, or if they listen real closely to his breath when he makes eye contact with them in the rear view mirror, but girls in my town don't listen real closely. They smile back. Girls in my town always smile back.

Sometimes just as the girls in my town step out of the screen door onto the porch and begin making their way to the creepy, older guy's Camaro, sometimes a Nissan pickup, their mothers (and sometimes their fathers) get dropped off. They will thank the creepy, older guy for helping them out and their mothers will look at their daughters with jealousy and contempt, because daughters are tricky in my town.

The ride to school will take seven minutes and most of the ride will be the chatter of the siblings. They won't see it from the backseat but his right hand, when not shifting his Camaro, sometimes a Nissan pickup, will be on her thigh. She doesn't mind it too much.

He drops them off across the street from the school. She gets out, shoves the seat up and the siblings pile out onto the sidewalk. Her friends are there waiting for her. They can't smoke on school grounds, so they smoke here and wait until the final bell rings. The creepy, older guy smiles at them all and burns out in front of them in his Camaro, sometimes a Nissan pickup, and they all laugh. She tells her siblings to have a good day and they race across Main Street to the school because they want to get to the cafeteria before it closes for breakfast. They like to save the morning apple juice or orange juice in their coat pockets for after school.

They will lie to their friends about what happened at the river. They can't have Amy, or Brandy, or Lindsey, and definitely not Tonya, knowing that Tommy, or Caleb, or Billy, and definitely not Patrick, doesn't give a shit because then they will slip Tommy, or Caleb, or Billy, and definitely Patrick a note before last period and ask them if they want to meet down at the river. Friends are tricky in my town.

At lunch time the girls in my town piss on sticks in the bathroom waiting for the lines to appear. One line means no. Their friends smoke

cigarettes with the window open sitting on the ledge of the sinks waiting for the results. Sometimes they are nervous, but mostly they are jealous. Pregnancy means someone loves you in my town.

When their water breaks they call Tommy, or Caleb, or Billy, or maybe Patrick, but they don't answer. They haven't answered since the two lines appeared in the bathroom at lunch time. Then they have to pray to Jesus that their mothers (and sometimes their fathers) will get home in time to bring them to the hospital. When the mothers (and sometimes their fathers) don't come home in the morning the girls in my town do what they have to do. They call up the creepy, older guy and ask if he'll drive. He gets there in seven minutes. He waits outside, revving his engine. He wants everyone to know he's picking her up. He's helping out. *What a great guy.*

Girls become mothers who don't come home at night in my town. They are in the backseats of Camaros and the beds of Nissan pickups clinging to the salvation promised over the tops of their Buds and Gennys. They don't have to sneak back in at sunrise cause no one's home and no one cares.

They get dropped off by creepy, older guys in their Camaros, sometimes Nissan pickups. If it is the first of the month until around the ninth, and the night was good, meaning, if someone told them they loved them they might smile at their children, say good morning, blow a kiss, and wish everyone a nice day. They will thank the creepy, older guy for helping them out and their daughters will look at them with jealousy, and contempt, because mothers are tricky in my town. They open the door that no one has bothered to lock and walk down the hallway to the dirty bathroom to wipe the night off their faces.

Girls in my town who become mothers will walk back down the hallway to the living room. On a ripped, stained, and spring-less couch they will stay all day drinking their Buds and Gennys yelling drunken obscenities at Channel 13. When the sun sets and their children have left with their friends, or are asleep in their shared beds, the girls in my town who become mothers drink orange juice or apple juice that they find in the pockets of their children, and call Tommy, or Caleb, or Billy, or maybe Patrick to pick them up and go down to the river.

Emily Keirnan

2015 Zora Neale Hurston Fiction Prize Finalist

Joan of Knoxville, 1945



The foreman let the girls out early but kept them on the clock anyhow. It was the first good thing to happen in weeks, Joan said to Helen as they walked together to the bus, twin white purses swinging at their shoulders as sweat pooled through their blouses' seams—skin swimming into summer's wet heat. Helen's hair had gone instantly flat when they walked outside, and her whole face looked dewy. Joan noticed it with a dim amusement—the girl could never keep herself nice. Joan did not think there would be many more favors from the foreman or many more good days. Anyone with eyes in her head could see the war was ending and they'd soon be back to making autos instead of airplanes, with the boys taking their places on the line where the girls had been filling in. The lucky girls had gotten engaged to their soldiers when they first shipped out, and Joan had heard more than enough about that whole business. Dresses to be picked out and receptions planned—it went on and on until Joan could have screamed. The rest of them would be fighting over waitressing jobs, trying not to end up back on the farm.

The work had dried up two weeks ago, but they had been kept busy cleaning the equipment and reorganizing the useless old files in the office. No one had been in those files for years, and Joan had opened one drawer to find a mouse nest made from decade-old sheet-metal orders and the shed gray hairs of a woman who, Joan felt certain, had since grown old and died a natural death. The project had taken up most of a Wednesday and Thursday, at least, and was better than being down on the line with all the noise like it had been a year ago. Now everything was spick and span and in pristine order (except for Helen, of course, who was hopeless. The women in the office wouldn't even let Helen answer the phones when things were slow on the floor because you could just *hear* the mess of her), but now there was really nothing left to occupy them, and the

devil's playground, etc. and so forth. The foreman had overheard a couple of them talking about the soldiers they'd met down from Oak Ridge last Friday night, and he'd turned three distinct shades of pink, and then they'd all been sent home fifteen minutes later.

"Will you see Eddie tonight?" Helen asked as the bus pulled in front of them, billowing heat and dust around their calves.

"I certainly will not," Joan said, smiling at the bus driver as he opened the doors, as if the two of them were in a conspiracy together against Edward Jones of 241 Baxter Avenue. "Last time I went out with him he spent half the night dancing with Claudia Beale. You could call up Henry yourself, you know. He does exist apart from Eddie and me."

"I couldn't," Helen said in her urgent little whisper-voice. She was right of course—she really couldn't. Joan almost laughed just imagining Helen stuttering and shaking over the phone, fingers practically convulsing on the dial. Joan had to put her hand up to her mouth to smother it, right there in the bus aisle.

They pushed their way to a seat in the middle of the bus, past several rows of nearly catatonic old women laden down with shopping bags. The heat had come on suddenly that year—a late spring followed by a quick, consuming summer. Helen was looking increasingly moist, so Joan heaved a sigh and nudged at her with an elbow.

"Look, here's what I'll do. I'll have a little party tonight—just a couple of the girls and whatever men they can scrounge up between them. I will *invite* Eddie, but I won't *talk* to him any more than I have to. I will tell him to *bring* Henry, but I will not be responsible for *entertaining* either of them. I mean it too, Helen, you are going to have to be charming on your own."

"I can talk to them just fine myself."

Helen's voice was shriller when she said this than she had likely hoped it would be.

"Good then. I'm going to have to create a dinner out of practically nothing, and probably help you to get your room decent as I'm sure you've not cleaned it this morning, and all for your personal benefit, so don't be huffy."

Helen probably did say something to that, but Joan did not hear it because the bus had stopped and admitted another man who looked enough like Alex to prevent her doing anything but looking and waiting and trying to match what was in front of her to what little she remembered. She'd asked him for a picture in one of the first letters she sent, a few months after he'd shipped out. He'd taken so long to send it, or to reply at all, and what he'd said in that letter had been so spare and cold that she'd burned letter and picture both in the sink almost as soon as

she'd shaken them from the envelope. The flame had grown so big that it had almost lit the curtains, and the black marks were still there on the sill. She regretted this later, when the other letters came, the strange, long ones that were more like he had been, and made her remember him and also worried her because they weren't love letters, quite, and never seemed like they were quite meant for her, though it was her name that ran all through them. She regretted it even more later, when those letters, too, stopped coming.

He wasn't dead, that much she knew. His people owned the land next to her family place back in Sweetwater, and her mother saw his parents, the Craigs, every week at church, so she would have heard. Joan had gotten up the nerve to ask after him when she was visiting last, in the unwinding hours after Easter dinner when the clearing up was done, and the men had gone out once more to bed down the animals for the night, and she and her mother were alone in the house. She had wanted the question to sound casual and unconcerned, though she knew it would not, and it hadn't, and her mother had looked at her in that squinting, disapproving way that upset Joan only because it was so shockingly ugly, and on the face of one who shared so many of her features. In the dim of the spring evening, her mother's face was like a portent or a premonition.

"I haven't the first clue about Alexander," her mother said, head bobbing as she spoke with a puffed-up disdain that reminded Joan of a chicken chased off a pile of corn. "Mrs. Craig hasn't spoken a single word of him in months. It is almost as if there is something not to be proud of."

"Well," Joan said, "he was an odd boy."

Her mother nodded, but said nothing, and the nodding seemed to drag on and on. They talked of other things, and Joan went back to the city the next day. Now she never spoke of him, and some days didn't think of him at all, except when she saw a man like him on the bus or at the store or walking below her windows in the mornings. The man on the bus went past and sat behind Helen, and it was not Alex, but still Joan kept turning, all through the ride home, just a little turn, to catch the look on his face.

The afternoon was a flurry. Helen worked herself into a state of nervous collapse almost immediately. Before Joan had a chance to do anything towards constructing a dinner beyond staring despairingly into the nearly-empty cabinets, Helen emerged from her room with tears standing in her eyes and freshly washed hair already beginning to collapse in tuffets around her face. It had taken the better part of an hour to get her calmed and presentable. It was all Joan could do to throw together a green salad and get a casserole scavenged from leftovers into the oven. The girls all arrived early, done up and nervous in new or little-used dresses. The war

was ending, something new would soon begin, there were rumors of returns. The men would arrive late, as they always did, as if they'd all been terribly busy and necessary somewhere else and coming at all was an afterthought, an acquiescence. Helen had been getting more and more nervous, jittering about in the kitchen to no obvious ends, so Joan suggested they open a few bottles of beer, just the girls, and that is what they did. They'd gotten a little silly, lounging around in the big armchairs and smoking cigarettes in a slow, languorous way that felt fancy and rich to them, and someone had started singing a ridiculous song in a low, jazzy voice, and for a bit Joan had wished that this was all there would be to the evening, this beginning.

But of course the men did arrive—Eddie and all his university friends in a big, noisy bunch that broke up their happy little huddle. Helen jumped up and started smoothing her dress as if she'd been caught in some mortifying crime, and the other girls were hardly any better, fluttering towards the men and cooing their hellos like now they were really getting down to business. Joan didn't say hello to anyone, but took herself straight to the kitchen and started mixing martinis. She had one herself and lined the others up on the countertop. They sat glimmering, sweating a little, waiting for hands to take them up. Joan sat half-perched on a tall stool, rolling an olive around her tongue—under and over again. She could hear the party growing around her, and knew that soon enough they would press in through the door to where she was waiting, and then she would have to smile and offer her hand to one after another, saying “oh I didn't see you come in,” but for a little while she would hold the line against them. She could hear Helen out there, talking to Henry, retelling some story she'd read in the news in a high, fluttering voice. But really, she did sound charming, and Joan was proud.

The man who came in then did not look like Alex, really, except that she'd been thinking about him, and there was something about this man's hand on the doorframe, the way he seemed to need to stop there and steady before he came in.

“You're all alone in here,” he said, and seemed to mean something more by it, or nothing more and that itself was strange. She nodded.

“I don't believe we've met. Would you like a drink?” She gestured to the glasses, and he took one, moving towards her in an awkward, fumbling way, embarrassed of his own arm as it reached out past her. He took a too-big gulp from the small glass, but didn't flinch with the gin, at least.

“Clarence,” he said, thrusting out a hand, which she took, lightly and briefly, in her own.

“Joan,” she said, though she always wanted to lie in these moments, to make some great joke on the stranger; it was only that she could never re-

member another name, not quickly enough. “Are you a friend of Eddie’s?”

“We met at one of his mother’s charity events a few weeks back. I take it you are...”

“The hostess,” she completed, dropping halfway into a curtsy. “You a soldier?” she said. She had a way of saying this which pleased soldiers. He shook his head.

“I’m working up at the installation in Oak Ridge.”

“I see. What ya’ll making up there anyway?” Another question she’d learned to ask. He smiled, shrugged.

“Wheels for miscarriages,” he said.

There was a little more chatter between them before Joan excused herself, saying she needed to greet someone who had just come in, though really she couldn’t have cared who was at the door. In the living room she’d meant to find Helen and point out to her that there were dishes piling up on the end tables and a mounting paucity of clean glasses, but when Joan spotted her, she was standing by the bay window with the very last of the evening light pooling around her feet, and she and Henry seemed to be getting along famously—her little hand on his arm. Joan turned the other way from the sight of them. The gin in Joan’s martini had worn off entirely and she found herself feeling heavy and dull in the midst of the tipsy crowd. She looked around for anyone she wanted to speak to, but there was no one. She felt as if the sun had slipped into a different angle, and now everyone was cast in a plainer light, revealed to be silly, surfacey creatures, smiling big and laughing at nothing.

And now she was thinking of Alex again, annoyed with herself for the way her mind kept slipping back, more frequently and deeply than it had for months. Utterly lacking in humor as he had been, he had seen in her the seriousness that others seemed unable to detect. He never seemed to want from her that dithering girlish weakness of which the others were so fond. He’d known the ways in which she was stronger. He’d never shot a gun before he was conscripted, so she’d taken him out with the old Winchester that her daddy only used to take potshots at coyotes and lined up a bunch of cans on the fence in the back pasture. She had pushed the flats of her palms against his shoulders to move him into the right position. She had let her arm and her hand cover his where they met the metal curve of the trigger. He had let himself be moulded and maneuvered, had watched with open fear as she squeezed off a few shots for demonstration, two hitting their targets, one falling wide. It was the last time she remembered feeling properly aligned with the world—useful and used.

She turned towards the kitchen, but found Eddie directly in her path, grinning in that confident, senseless way of his. Like a man perpetually cutting into a birthday cake.

“Joanie, where have you been hiding?” he said, wrapping a thick arm around her waist. She tried to pull away but he seemed not even to notice the resistance, so there she hung, pinioned up on tiptoes beside him.

“I wasn’t hiding anywhere,” she said, instilling as much chill into her words as she could, off-balance as she was “I have a responsibility to entertain all of my guests, not just you.”

He barked out a laugh and gave her waist an affectionate little shake before releasing her.

“Well, I promise I won’t take up more than my fair share of your hospitality then. Were you headed for another drink? Why don’t I just tag along, more efficient that way?”

She shrugged, but didn’t try to stop him—what was the point? In the kitchen she set to work with the cocktail shaker, and he leaned himself against the counter behind her, arms folded and face still contorted into that contemptible smile.

“Helen says your sore at me because I danced with Claudia last week.”

Joan stopped shaking the martini for a moment to look back at him, and when she resumed she shook more vigorously, more intently, as if to make up for having allowed herself to be distracted by something so below notice.

“Well, let’s see if I ever tell her anything again, but now that it’s come up, yes. You were awfully rude, I thought. And everyone saw it too. You can’t imagine the pitying looks I got at work the next day.”

“Come off it, Joanie. I was just being friendly to her because no one pays the poor girl any attention. You know how it is between you and me. You can’t go getting jealous over every silly girl I talk to. And don’t you think that thing is mixed enough?” He tried to take the shaker from her hands, but she pulled back, dripping water onto her dress and his shoes.

“How is it between us, then? What is it you think I’m supposed to know?”

“Don’t start that again,” he said, and took the shaker, and this time she let him. He set it on the counter, then used his cold hand to tilt her head back while they kissed. They leaned together for a while after, her head against his chest, the small indent of a button forming on her cheek.

“Come to the house Sunday,” he said, when they had begun to pull away from each other, Joan running a hand through her hair to straighten it where it had become twisted and mussed. “Mother worries when she doesn’t see you, thinks you’re either working too much or found someone you like better.”

“There’s no one I like better than your mother,” Joan said, and Eddie smiled at the joke but just said “You’ll come?” and she nodded that she would.

“Well, you’d best not ignore your other guests,” he said, giving her a light

chuck under the chin, then leaving her there. She heard him rejoin the group outside, heard them shuffle to make room for him.

“Henry, unhand that woman!” he crowed in mock-horror, and everyone laughed.

The apartment had grown warm, and Joan felt stifled by it, the heat of all those bodies, the thick moist of breath on skin. The window to the fire escape was propped open, though the evening outside was still and breezeless and seemed unwilling to mingle with the inside air. Joan crawled out instead. Helen had planted rows of flowers in little pots and lined the landing with them, but they’d been starved of water and left in the sun and turned to sticks of straw that stood straight up from their little parcels of dry earth. They rustled as Joan stepped over them, catching at the hem of her skirt. Below her, on the steps leading down to the next landing, was the embarrassed man she had met earlier—she searched for his name, but had lost it—smoking, and seemingly caught in a moment of indecision over whether to turn and greet her or pretend he had not heard her noise, deep in thought.

“Do you have a light,” she called out to him, purely as an act of mercy. He stood and came to where she was leaning against the window frame, pulling a lighter from his pocket as he did. She took a cigarette from her pack and he lit it. She stood looking out across the city. Somewhere below and to the west a couple was fighting, their voices growing into bird-screches and growls. He was still there beside her, hands in his pockets, looking lost and expectant.

“You remind me of someone,” she said. Though it wasn’t quite true, she wanted to break the silence.

“Who’s that?” he asked. He jerked his head towards her suddenly as she spoke, as if he’d still not noticed her there.

“Just a boy I knew. Someone I grew up with. He’s in the Pacific now, I believe.”

“What was it that reminded you?”

She turned to face him, scrutinising.

“I’m not sure,” she said. “You seem nervous.”

“I’m fine.”

“That was what reminded me. He was a nervous boy. Worse than you. Sometimes you’d try to talk to him and he’d look at you like he’d gotten an electric shock.”

“I hope I’m not so bad as that.”

“No,” she said, stepping forward a few paces and leaning down with her arms on the railing, looking towards the sidewalk below. The arguing couple’s voices had quieted and drifted away. “The way he was, it just

wasn't fair. I keep thinking to myself lately, how strange it is that they took him at all. They shouldn't have let him be a soldier."

"He made a hard sacrifice. It is a noble thing. We've all had to make sacrifices in our own ways."

She nodded, unconvinced. She stayed silent for long enough that when she spoke again it was not quite a reply.

"I wish I could have gone to war," she said. "I think I could have liked it."

From inside the apartment there was more laughter, everything she'd arranged a stunning success.

Alisa Golden



He says
the early morning
is divided into three sections:
[Pre-bird] | [Bird] | [Post-Bird]

According to the bird clock sold in stores,
Wren and Tit-mouse are [Pre-Bird];
Oriole, [Bird];
and Mourning Dove is [Post-Bird].

But our live clock says
[paste Mockingbird here]
for [Pre-Bird]—if s/he is on the block—
If not, we just hear freeway.

We have to get up
[Post-Bird] when
all birds are
done and gone.

But [Bird] [insert crows here]
still gives us time to

[This Space Intentionally Left Blank]

make love.
We don't mind the crows.

Mark Parsons



Between the frontage road and southbound lanes
two grassy banks converge as seam,
each verdant slope a sunny grain opposed.

A guardrail at the top
dark with shadow
juxtaposed against a cloudless azure sky.

Under the canted-open hood
gusting wind carves up steam
emitting as a spout.
Galvanized irrigation pipe
trussed around a central tower
pivots through soybeans over terrestrial heave and surge.

At a rest stop an information board
explained the mechanics supported the farming.
This isn't true. The mechanics came first. The mechanics
settled this region like settling a debt.

Anxious when I shouldn't be,
the absolute certainty of the mechanic's arrival
takes this moment away from me, takes this moment like a picture;
the mechanic will protect me
if there's a need.

See the hunting knife in a sheath worn on his belt,
the handle carved from antler, for a guard
the round and flattened palm.
The weapon, so vivid—
it's like he's here already.

I hear traffic, the whirring hiss
of hardened rubber tread on asphalt road
under the engine thrum.
The traffic must be going north
because I see no southbound cars or trucks,
the direction I'm headed.
From which direction will the mechanic arrive?

Thomas Courtney Click

Deep Blue Salloon



It was a clear day, and a stout breeze pushed the *Ogygia* over teal waters, heading south along the windward shore of Chinchamos island.

“Sure, I feel bad about the old lady,” the Grouper said to Bali and Branch. His curly, blond locks flapped in the wind as he pushed the wheel of the sailboat towards the southeast. “But there ain’t much we can do. Omar’s got Pam in the jail and we can’t do nothin’. I say we point this yacht towards Honduras and never look back.”

“Drop me off first,” Bali said, her blue eyes and black hair lighting up in the afternoon sunshine. Her wetsuit was pulled down around her waist, her golden bikini top in perfect creamy contrast with her dark-coffee skin. “I’m not going anywhere until she’s free.”

“Honduras? Panama would be better,” Branch said. “Get it through the canal and out into the Pacific as soon as possible. Who are you renting it from?”

“Chinchamos Outfitters,” the Grouper said. “It’s also for sale. But that kind of cash? Fuck it. Forty-two damn beautiful feet of waterline. I could live on it. Why not steal it?”

Branch took a sip of rum, closed his eyes and enjoyed the quiet power of the *Ogygia*, easily turning eight knots, he figured, under only the main and jib sheets.

“Because Chinchamos Outfitters is *owned* by Omar,” Branch told him. “He’d have someone chase you down in one of his speedboats and shoot you.” And then Branch got a lousy feeling as he thought about who that someone might be.

Bali and the Grouper only knew him as Branch, divemaster at Caribbean Argonauts Dive Shop. They didn’t know that Branch’s real job on Chinchamos was taking care of dirty little things for Omar. That was something they could never know.

Branch took another drink and looked at the windward shore of the island. He turned around and gazed out at the open water, where the turquoise horizon turned dark blue and then black.

“How much are they asking? For this boat?”

“Half-mil.” The Grouper twisted his beard, then spat lazily into the water. “But I hear they’d take four-fifty. Why you care? Tips improving at the dive shop?”

There was no reply from Branch, and the Grouper rambled on. “Panama, huh? Who is it lives there? Is it Mezzicans?”

“Grouper, you’re a real diplomat,” Bali said. She smiled for the first time in the days since Pam’s arrest, and then Branch admired the musical sound of her laughter.

“I believe the citizens of Panama refer to themselves as Panamanians,” she said. “Quite a diverse culture there. Lots of Asian influences.”

“I just like to get you going,” the Grouper told her. Then he turned away from the wheel and looked directly at Branch. “You serious about buying her?”

“If I could, I’d buy it, and we’d all just go,” Branch answered. “Put a desalination unit and an air compressor on it, and then just go. But I don’t guess it’s time for me to leave Chinchamos. Not just yet.”

His cell phone vibrated on the teak bench. It was Omar again, undoubtedly wanting an answer about the Cuba job. He didn’t know much about it, but it was something long distance, and he detested that kind of work anymore; making a mess of a man without having to ever look him in the eye.

Need to clear my head before I talk to him, Branch thought. Need to get under some water.

“Why do you even carry one of those things?” Bali asked, nodding at the phone. “You’re always so worried about your privacy. You know they’re tracking you. Killing the honey bees, too.”

“Good point,” Branch said, turning the phone off and tossing it aside. “What’s this dive site you’re taking us to?”

Bali smiled again. It was an honest, strong smile, and it scared Branch. It was a smile that had its origins in a good family, and it was a smile that beamed at some happy path ahead. It was a straight path that those beautiful straight teeth smiled at, a path with a happy ending. A smile of faith. And she smiled at all those things Branch had never been able to believe in.

“Some sleeping shark caves a fisherman showed me. Really pristine coral. Five degrees to the southwest, Grouper,” she said, shielding her GPS unit from Branch’s view. “Every place gets ruined. Omar building a cruise ship pier right on top of Paradise Reef. So I’m keeping this place a secret.”

If only she could be in charge of things on Chinchamos, Branch thought. “No problem, Bali,” he said. “You can blindfold me, too.”

The wind from the east carried them along on the mainsheet and the jib, and then they were in a patch of aquamarine sandy shoals, surrounded by deep, blue water.

“This is it, Grouper,” Bali said. She powered down the GPS and zipped up her wetsuit. “Drop anchor in these shallows. We can kick out to the reef from here.

After Branch helped the Grouper bring the sails in, he dropped the anchor onto the soft sandy bottom. All three divers geared up, rolled in, and drifted down onto the warmth of the sunlit sandy bottom, and then Bali led them out of the shoal and into the depths.

A school of parrotfish danced fast and wild to be away from the strange, bubble-blowing humans. They were miles away from Chinchamos Island, and Branch noted the absence of the usual banging and grinding noises from the cruise ships. The absolute silence made the water seem wilder and deeper.

As Bali kicked down, the sunlight sliced through the water behind her and illuminated her agile figure. Branch and the Grouper followed her into the grottoes hidden within the wall of coral.

They glided through an archway encrusted with purple gorgonians, swarming with French Angels and blue chromis. Branch hovered at the edge of the wall, then he went vertical after Bali, kicking down hard – 100, 110, 120, passing her at one-thirty. And he kept going.

The dark silhouettes of Bali and the Grouper were up above him, hanging like piñatas from the ceiling of some aquatic cantina. Branch dropped deeper. He floated onto a coral plateau and looked down with delight at the infinite oblivion that opened below him.

Then a little deeper and the pressure was crushing him, pleasantly, and the air from the tank was thick and sweet in his lungs. And in an instant he no longer felt lousy - about what was waiting for him in Cuba, about what he'd done with his life - and he wasn't afraid of dying. Because with every breath he was closer to that place where he could be alive *and* dead at the same time. He allowed the narcosis to come over him, and then he could almost hear a piano plinking out some sweet turtle-jazz music. His regulator squealed at the depth, but to Branch it was just the singing of some aquatic vocalist on stage in a dark and dingy bar. The bar he knew as the Deep Blue Saloon.

Open mike night, he figured. Maybe one day he'd work up his own act. He drifted along, his worries over the Cuba job going up with his bubbles, and then at three hundred feet below sea level he hallucinated the watery outline of a girl, wearing a blue one-piece woven from the

silkiest Sargasso.

“Hi, Branch,” he could almost hear the girl say to him almost sweetly, and as she leaned forward her cleavage almost bulged out of its watery costume. “Haven’t seen you in a while. Having the usual today?”

His own name sounded strange to him. For a moment he’d forgotten it, was hopeful others had forgotten it, too. He had some important business up above, but the awful urgency was replaced by foggy numbness. “Got to get, to go—”

“To go where, Branch?” he could almost hear the girl ask, and then she was whisking a silver platter in front of him, tempting him with shimmering highballs of amber analgesia. Branch felt himself pouring a glass of the tonic down his throat, and then quickly he was so intoxicated he’d forgotten all about Cuba.

“There’s nothing for you up there, Branch. Stay with me. You’re always rushing off, rushing away, up there,” the girl almost pleaded, nodding upwards.

Branch looked up at the blue glow of the surface, four hundred feet above him. It looked like some intricate, sparkling chandelier. “Pretty lights,” he said to someone, almost, and he struggled to remember what business was waiting. It was like a phone number some sexy girl had given him in a dream. When he woke up from the dream the phone number slowly evaporated, but he wanted to dial it anyway.

He poured down another drink and wondered—which was the dream? Here, with this almost waitress? Or up there? And whatever was waiting for him?

“Got to get going,” he said. “Got an appointment. Up there. Just not sure what it is.”

The girl quieted his excuses with more shots of the almost tonic, and then she told him, “You should stay. Who knows? You might even see a Maltese Bikinifish!”

This was both encouraging and hilarious to Branch. He smiled, and with the smile he found the regulator in his mouth to be a nuisance. Why should he be bothered with such a thing? He wanted to spit it out, and then at last his life would have meaning. He’d spend what was left of it exploring the mating habits of the Maltese Bikinifish. A real job at last. There *had* been that year of teaching in Florida, but in the end that had been just almost, too.

Branch’s dive console beeped and buzzed at him, informing him that both drowning and decompression sickness were imminent. He wanted to look at the console, but the girl held his gaze with her beautiful green eyes and her bright smile.

“Got to find the pay phone,” Branch said, and as he did, he forced him-

self to look at the dive computer. The digits and lights were meaningless. He was too nitrogen stoned to understand them, but he was dazzled by their backlit, fluorescent beauty. He floated off, heard the girl telling him *almost* goodbye, and then Branch was crawling out the back door of the bar and into the alley.

He lingered in the alley, played with the sand there, admired its silty softness. He glanced out into the interminable depths—*looks like they've set up a volleyball court out back!*—and he saw shadows moving on it. A pair of twenty-foot tiger sharks seemed to be playing volleyball with a loggerhead turtle. They were ripping it to pieces, popping its head back and forth over the net with their snouts, eating huge chunks of its body. Branch floated towards the sharks to get in on the game; the sharks, afraid of his ruthless abandon, scurried to get away and disappeared.

Branch watched as the turtle's bloody, decapitated head sank down into the depths, and he remembered Cuba. He felt lousy again as he thought of what some innocent man's head would look like if he did the job waiting for him there.

Then a rumble grabbed him by his ears, and the rumble started to pull him upwards. Back above three hundred the rumble became a roar. At two hundred the roar was a Monday morning alarm clock, screaming at him that he was late for work. At one fifty Branch recognized what the scream really was: the grinding noise from the propellers of a cruise ship, leaving Chinchamos and shredding the quiet of the wild waters as it passed by a mile to the north.

What was the name of that fish? A Maltese Bikinifish? Ain't no such thing. And then he knew no one would have forgotten his name.

After a long deco stop on the way up, Branch joined Bali and the Grouper in the azure shallows. Then the three divers surfaced into the swell left by the passing cruise ship, now a smoking blemish on the horizon. Back on board the *Ogygia*, they hoisted anchor and sailed towards a string of tiny islands bisecting the channel between Chinchamos and the mainland.

They anchored the boat in a small, deep inlet near the largest of the islands then waded ashore with the ice chest. Bali and Branch lay out on the warm sand while the Grouper free dived from the beach, hunting lobster for their supper.

"What did you see down there?" Bali asked. "You were way past the limits."

"See?" Branch asked, grinning. "More of a feeling, but what did I see? Neon lights. A bar. A waitress, a big tray of – I think it was – nitrogen martinis? Couple of rough customers out back. Playing volleyball."

"Getting stoned, as usual. What else did you see?"

“In the Deep Blue Saloon,” Branch told her, “in the back rooms, and in the dingy booths, down around two fifty and beyond, there’s this angel of a waitress down there.”

“A saloon. Perfect. But the angel part is interesting. What does this angel waitress do?”

“What angels are supposed to do. Watch over you. And then forgive you for every bad thing you ever done.”

“What bad things?” she asked, but when Branch said nothing she moved on. “It’s that easy to find forgiveness? I never knew.”

“Oh, yeah. Easy to find. Just one problem. The forgiveness fades away with every foot you rise up.”

“You could serve a purpose here in the real world,” Bali said. “Instead of killing yourself down there. Besides, you might miss out on some good things up here.”

“Maybe so,” he said, challenged, and now tempted by her.

“These bad things you mention,” she said. “Whatever it is you’ve done. There’s bound to be a better way to put it behind you.”

“What could be better?”

“Going that deep? Aren’t you afraid of dying? Sorry, but if you browned out and started to sink, I would *not* be coming after you. Not way down there. Not on plain air.”

“Plain air’s the only way to go. It’s a nitrogen thing, Bali. Nitrogen.”

“It’s a way to go, alright. Out. There wouldn’t be any saving you.”

“Guess not. You afraid of dying?”

“No,” she said. “Not of dying. But wasting my life, yeah. Not reaching my potential. Not having all the great sex I’m supposed to have. That’s why I wouldn’t go past one thirty. Unless I was using tri-mix.”

She reached across the sand and placed her soft, brown fingers on his hand.

Branch said nothing. He fought off the urge, reminded himself that he couldn’t risk blowing his cover. He was so close to having enough; so close to being able to leave the life and make a fresh start.

“But when the moment comes,” Bali continued, stroking his hand, “I do wonder.”

“The moment?” Branch asked. He tried to distract himself, but her hand was soft and smooth and she was talking about death and he found himself riotously ready to take her.

“That moment. Like that cave-in last week. It was right behind me and I just knew that you and Pam and the Grouper were dead. I felt helpless. Couldn’t do anything to help you. Then you rescued the others the way you did, and you don’t even know there was a reason for it all.”

Branch moved his head to get a better view of her firm physique plas-

tered against the sand, trying to weigh the benefits of any involvement with her. Her nipples poked through her golden bikini top, and her navel piercings glistened in the sun, the golden reflections shimmering on her flat, brown belly.

“Oh,” he said. “*That* moment. You don’t need to worry. You’re young and smart. You’ll have a good life. A strong life. It’ll be in a warm bed somewhere a long time from now, and there’ll be someone there to hold your hand. No, it’s a waste of time for you to worry about it. It will do all the work for you. When that moment comes.”

Branch paused, looked out at the Grouper’s bubbles on the water. “You’re not like me, Bali. I been dancing with it too long. Anyway, that’s a long way off for you.”

“You must jack off a lot. You and your imaginary barmaid.”

Branch laughed, admiring how Bali had said it without being mean. “Sometimes it’s for the best.”

“Don’t you want something real? Do you believe in anything real?”

“I believe in the laws of physics,” Branch told her. “And I believe in nitrogen narcosis. I guess that’s it.”

“Narcosis is real,” Bali said. “But what you see down there isn’t. I’m into real stuff. Like love and family. Like protecting the reef and the turtles. And stopping Omar and the pier project. You should find *your* path. A real one.”

“I had a real path. In the Navy. But I washed out. Then I found something I loved doing. Washed out again. And I just kind of fell into the cracks. Don’t know how to get out.”

Bali laughed as she looked out at the ocean. “You’ve got a strength about you. We could use you. But that’s a mighty deep crack you fell into.”

She was interrupted by an enormous splash as the Grouper shot up from his underwater hunting.

“Got a monster,” he shouted, holding up a bulging catch bag. “Couple more down there, under a coral head, pretty deep for just snorkeling, but I’ll get ‘em. Get the fire started.” Then there was another splash and he disappeared.

Bali put her leg over his and then she slid over on top of him. She looked back over her shoulder towards the water and the Grouper’s bubbles. Then she kissed him, and he didn’t resist. Salty, strange and cautious, warm and delicate.

The kiss might have gone on for hours—or perhaps it was only a few seconds—somewhere in between. The Grouper was still down on his free dive, and Branch knew his chubby buddy couldn’t hold his breath that long. But the kiss felt timeless. Then there was another splash as the Grouper surfaced, announcing that supper had arrived.

Branch gathered driftwood from the beach and tried to shake off his stoned confusion, while Bali helped the Grouper prepare the contents of his catch bag. By the time they started the fire the glow from the west was bouncing off the glassy waters, painting the beach and the jungle of the little island with pink and orange strokes.

Bali grilled the lobster and served it with cold potato salad from the ice chest. They finished the meal with some canned peaches and a piece of chocolate cake the Grouper had brought from the boat. It was barely dark, but the stars were already sizzling in the clear sky. The fire was burning low and Branch admired the shadows from the small flames as they strobed Bali's face. The Grouper poured more rum into Branch's glass, then pulled out a bag of mushrooms.

"Gather 'round, kiddies," he said. "The man with the goodies is here."

"What do you have there, Grouper?" Bali asked.

"All cultures have their sacraments," the Grouper said, a large amount of sacrament already stuffed in his bearded cheek. "And these Rangoonese mushrooms are just for us white boys. We don't know what might happen if a real Indian ate this medicine."

"I'm Asian, dumbass," Bali told him. "Why would mushrooms from Rangoon be for white boys and not for me?"

"It's complicated, Bali. Has to do with U.N. regulations, things like that. But, what the hell, have some of these mo-fos anyway. Mixes real well, as it turns out, with rum and nitrogen."

Bali took the bag from Branch, looked carefully at the mushrooms in the firelight. "Disgusting. You eat these?"

The Grouper laughed. "I was just a kid, up in the Pacific Northwest. It wasn't so much the high. It was the ceremony we had, me and my friends. We didn't fit in anywhere. But we found *these*, and we had something sacred. Then we were a tribe, we were a league of warriors, and *these* -," he said, taking the bag away from Bali and opening it for Branch's inspection, "these were our shared experiences."

"You were a league of warriors?" Bali asked. "I thought little boys like you played little league."

The Grouper grunted. "We were shunned from that league. From that tribe, from all tribes. Anyway, I never had no arm for it."

"Right," Bali said, reclining back onto her blanket. "No arm. Don't mind me. You tribal warriors go ahead with your sacrament. And your rum. And your deep dives. With everything that's going on I've got to stay tapped into reality."

Branch felt conflicted. What Bali had said rang true to him, and his attraction to her was undeniable. But he couldn't be taking her side on the pier thing. Omar wouldn't have it. So he grabbed a big pinch of the dried

mushrooms and washed it down with a swig of ice-cold rum.

“That’s right,” the Grouper said, laughing as he watched. “Don’t listen to her. Keep the buzz from the dive going. Don’t ever come up.”

The Grouper got up from the sand and stretched. He waded a few feet out into the water, paused, seemed to scrutinize something on the surface.

“Feelin’ good,” he said. “All the problems of the world, all the damn problems on Chinchamos, they’ll have to do without me tonight. You kids have fun on the beach. I’m headin’ back to the yacht. Hit the hammock, lie about in supreme indolence, enjoy the headphones. Trip out for the rest of the night, what’s left of it.”

“That’s some kind of ceremony you got,” Bali said, watching as the Grouper splashed out into the water. He went under, then a moment later there was another splash as he came up. Then he climbed the ladder and pulled himself onto the teak deck of the *Ogygia*.

Branch reached to cover Bali’s body with the blanket, hoping to avoid any entanglement, but it was pointless. She grabbed him, pulled him on top of her, kissed him without any of the caution she’d shown earlier.

Then she was naked and on top of him, and the shooting stars in the sky looked like sparks flying from her black hair. Distorted electric blues music rang out from the Grouper’s headphones, but to Branch it was the sirens of the deep calling him again. He was back down in the depths, flying past the French Angels and the tiger sharks. And all the while he flew, Bali rode him. She gasped, and then tiny beads of sweat broke from her brown body. She leaned down to kiss him, but suddenly Branch could only see the turtle’s head bouncing between the bloody snouts of those sharks.

Later, she lay contentedly with him, but the remorse had come and he was feeling sorry for that turtle. He was plenty worried about what waited for him in Cuba, but he was more worried about what would happen to Pam if he didn’t go. The mushrooms were coming on him strong now and the stars were pulsating wildly above him.

“There’s another thing planned for day after tomorrow,” she said. “We’re going to march to the jail to protest Pam’s incarceration. And the pier project, too. Something real. If you want to get out of that crack you fell in, come with us. Day after tomorrow.”

Branch knew that protesting would do no good. Only going to Cuba for Omar the day after tomorrow and doing the terrible job would get Pam sprung from jail. That would get him one step closer to his own goal, but it would also lead to more danger, more darkness.

“You’ve got to believe me. I wouldn’t be any help to you.”

“Have some faith. Find where you’re supposed to be with your life.”

“I know where I want to be, Bali. But to get there I’m gonna have to walk

a damn crooked path.”

“Come with us,” she said. “A few people standing up can change the world.”

“Yeah. That looks good on the refrigerator magnet. But whenever I tried it, it only made things worse. From my experience, staying home is almost always safer, and it yields better results. I advise you to just stay home.”

“I won’t live like that. I want to do great things. When people Google me, I want them to see wonderful accomplishments. What do you want them to see - about you?”

Branch took a deep breath, ran his hands over Bali’s smooth shoulders, closed his eyes and explored his way down her back. “When they Google me? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

“What are you running from?”

Branch thought about how easy his enemies’ job would be if they could just type the words *Branch Curry* into Google and find him.

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me,” he said. “You know what the Grouper said about belonging to a tribe? It’s true for most people. They want to look good on Google. They never dare to explore life beyond that. But that’s where I have to live. Outside the tribe.”

“So lonely,” she said. “Billions in the tribe, all of them afraid. All of them except you. What happened to you?”

“It builds up layer by layer. I don’t know. I grew up on my grandpa’s farm. I guess some things happened there that maybe sidetracked me from a normal life.”

“Farm boy. Thought so. What was that like?”

“Learned to hunt. Got good with a rifle when I was just a kid. Mostly it was hot, in the fields. Busted knuckles and bad suntans. Didn’t know how much I didn’t like it until he took me to the stock show up in Ft. Worth.”

“Stock show? That’s what, Wall Street?”

“Pretty close. Giant exhibition halls, full of prized bulls and fat hogs and sheep, things like that, farm girls and blue ribbons. All of it reeked of shit. I snuck out of there when he wasn’t looking. There were roller coasters out on the midway, really scary and rickety ones. I liked those roller coasters. After a few rides they weren’t fast enough or high enough. When we got back to the farm I tried to invent my own roller coasters. Grandpa sent me back to my father in Houston pretty soon after that. I grew up alone.”

Branch rolled onto his back and looked up at the stars, dimming now that the red glow of morning was beginning to swell. A shooting star burned across the sky. Suddenly all the stars seemed to be shooting, and as he looked back at Bali, he felt the beach rocking around him.

“And here I am,” he said, watching a meteorite burn across the sky towards the glow in the east, towards Chinchamos. “Always one more job to do, to keep me busy.”

“You’ve got to know when to quit, Branch. It’s like that last shooting star before dawn. You look for one more. You don’t want to admit that the beautiful night is over. And then it’s getting light and the safety of the darkness is gone. And you’ve stayed out too late.”

It was true; he’d stayed out too late. But he knew he wouldn’t be able to make the protest, wouldn’t be able to walk a new path with Bali, not just yet. He had a job to do in Cuba. A horrible job, to be sure, and he was dreading it, but it was a job. And it wasn’t just for Pam. It was for him. To get him one step closer to where he wanted to be. To hell with everyone else. And if nothing worked out, he’d always have the Deep Blue Saloon.

The rain in Spain, Branch thought, trying to prepare himself for the question he knew was coming. *Suspenders?* No. *Sheep?* Maybe. *Ski goggles?* Come on, man, you can do better. *Barbecue?* Yeah, that’s it, he decided. *Barbecue.*

“What are you thinking about, Branch?” Bali asked.

Branch looked at her and smiled. “Barbecue.”

John Sibley Williams



We're late.

Night has already parceled the wall into disconnected bricks.
Someone's collected the prayers slipped between
and burned them in effigy. In silence the sky responds.
The mothers crumbled to all fours scratching at the wall
have returned home to a different kind of wailing.
The soldiers have already said goodbye to their limbs.
Men with skin darker than the absence around stars
have retired their chessboards and stories and ancestors.

There is nothing left to lose and ask for again.

I've carried a notebook bearing what I cannot release of you
down past the river, through the sands, to this myth.
I am wanting to be rid of your bricks and light: my religion.

But the ears of the wall have closed for the night.
At night the river runs backwards, toward memory and truth.
Tonight I'll sleep like someone who has never known truth
and be the first to relieve this burden of hope
by smashing my head into the wall of the gods
until love has left me so love can return.

Mason Boyles
2015 Zora Neale Hurston Fiction Prize Winner



Proud Mary

I mean, it's Pender County. How much riverfront can you want? All that water, chucking toward the ocean in squiggles and swirls. All those docks. Well I didn't care for them.

What Trudy Gibbons wanted was me, and what I wanted was her Pa's peanut tractor. You ever seen a peanut tractor work? Shucks them right there in the field for you. Puts them straight into tin buckets you hook up to a funnel at the back, all you have to do is pop them off and deliver them wholesale to the diner up the road. Trudy's Pa had made a mansion and a timeshare that way. Sometimes when I came over he showed me the pictures from Bermuda.

"No ticks down there," he'd say, but it looked like there were still plenty of docks and water; I don't see why he'd have chosen a spot like that. Might as well have paid for two weeks a year in his own backyard. But that tractor, all the same.

So here were Trudy and I, holed up for another evening at the diner. Here she was all choked with frills and billows—where had the dress come from, I'd asked her? Belk's, she'd said, but she must have meant the Belk's from when her great grandmother was a young woman. The dress was very dusty. A certain patina swirled out from it when the air conditioning unit kicked up, choking my omelet right out of my mouth.

Trudy wasn't fetching but I wasn't dashing. She liked to talk to me about needlepoint patterns. She would show me the way you had to pinch your fingers just right and be careful to go exactly by the outline. Any deviation or originality would ruin the entire design. Once I'd suggested that maybe she make her own needlepoint patterns.

"Well I don't see the point in that," she'd said. And you know what? She'd *laughed*.

We went to this diner a lot, is what I'm saying. There wasn't much else

out here to do besides covet peanut tractors.

I sat there, Trudy plopped there. Her frills flaked with pancake batter, her fingers scrunching up a tower of napkins that she stuffed into her empty glass of water. I moved the glass—jettisoned it between us—and looked out the window for her Pa's peanut tractor. When the corn was cut low you could see all the way to the Leaving Pender County sign three miles south. It was enough to make you wonder whether if you kept looking you could see all the way back to your wretched baked potato ancestors, those sharecroppers who'd dragged themselves here from Scotland or Ireland or some other peacoat wasteland. Nothing for them in this place but the dirt of the earth and the sweat you dripped into it. Nothing but a hole to get stuck in.

You grew up here never quite finding enough to get out. Not enough education, not enough profits, not enough gas from the single-pump station out by Trudy's Pa's house. Just the fields to scavenge over and the tin foil plant built by the bend in the river.

Tin foil, my God. Six days a week minus Christmas and New Year's I melted and crinkled and rolled the stuff into tight shining sheets. My fingers were all cut up from it. There was so much foil stacked in the warehouse that it scrambled cell reception through the entire county; everyone had to use landlines. We had to live like the Amish, only we weren't the Amish, we were the great grandchildren of marooned bumpkins, the ones stupid enough to hee-haw down from Appalachia with a hope for something better by the coast. You got about four last names around here, one lilting accent and two kinds of noses. What I'm saying is, living in Pender County was prolonged suffocation.

Trudy's damp palm on my fingers. "You're brooding," she said.

"I'm thinking."

"You're thinking downward, that's brooding." She wiggled her fork at me. The rest of her wiggled, too, the momentum moving through her in concentric ripples. "I told you I didn't want anything big for our anniversary."

"Right," I said. By the way: we'd been dating for seven months.

Trudy put down her fork. She got another napkin and crinkled it up in her hand. The pancakes had been sitting out so long that the syrup was hardened, it was like amber encasing the artifacts of her meal in a rigid shell. Whipped cream, butter globules. All of it frozen there like the tar pits.

"I did have some ideas," she said. "About our anniversary? There's that spa over in Duplin. They have mud baths now. You just lie on a table, it's all heated up, and you get very still while they spread it all over you. They even have the cucumbers for your eyes."

“Cucumbers?” I said.

“It’s exfoliating. It draws out the toxins or something. Or maybe it keeps in the toxins, but it neutralizes them. I saw it on Good Morning America; no! Discovery Channel. There was a documentary or something. An infomercial.”

I went ahead and looked back out the window. Pig-bellied clouds drooped down low enough to brush the trees—rain soon. My elbows stuck to the laminate of the table. Trudy’s hand tightening over mine. Her words burrowing into me, planting stakes to hold down my head. Anniversary, spa, Discovery Channel. Proposal, marriage, mortgage. Trudy’s Pa was burly for sixty. He did a hundred pushups and swam in the river every morning. Who knew how long he’d stick around before he kicked that tractor over to me in his will?

“I’ve got a lot to catch up on,” I said. I tried to lean back and stretch but my butt was stuck to the seat, too. It was like Trudy’s syrup had filled the entire diner—even the air clotted to my throat when I tried to sigh.

“It’s only eight,” Trudy said. “Your shift tomorrow starts at six.”

“It looks like rain.”

“Pa can drive us back. I’ll call him.”

Pa, Pa, Pa. I settled into my haunches and stared at Trudy’s mouth. It hardly moved when she talked, just stayed sort of gaping while the words trickled through pre-formed. She told me about needlepoint patterns. She needed me to know that the 18 ct. Aztec Flower had taken her fourteen hours to get right, that she’d started using goldenrod yarn instead of daffodil and had to pull it all out halfway through.

Thing about needlepoint was it all had to be done on stiff openwork canvas. Each move of the thread had to go through a particular spot on the grid, it had to occupy a predetermined space. When you were finished you’d made a new fabric out of the canvas and the yarn. Then what did you do? Well, you looked at it for a while, then you spent all night explaining it to your boyfriend. This woman wanted to eat up the rest of my life like her cold stale pancakes.

“We should really go,” I said. It was eight twenty. The clouds were sagging so low that they might have been falling, crashing into the earth to split open, stagnant and empty, in some cornfield.

Trudy picked up her menu. She made a show of *reading* it, since she was an actual *high school graduate*, except instead of actually reading she was moving her finger while watching me to make sure I was seeing her. “They have new espressos,” she said. “Don’t you want to try them? Shouldn’t we get some energy for the walk back?”

I waved the waitress over and threw some money at her. I ripped my elbows off the tabletop, I grabbed Trudy and forcefully guided her out

of the booth. All of this so I could go home and sit alone in my empty trailer, skimming through my GED prep books and sticking my cut up fingers in lemon juice to keep from falling asleep. To keep from getting still, freezing up. The things that happened when I fell asleep—good God, they put a fear in me.

Trudy stumbled along beside me in her frilly billowy syrupy dress. I got her out the door and the entire outfit sort of collapsed around her. Rain, is what I mean. A whole fat brick of it.

The clouds, the humid sizzle, the instant churning of dirt into mud; it was all biblical. Kind of thing you expected to see in a church illustration or maybe a dream. My God, did it come down. Cats and dogs, as they say. Sharecroppers' sons and peanut farmers' daughters. I mean, the drops actually *hurt* when they hit you.

"Let's go inside," Trudy said.

"We're already wet."

"We can't just stand here."

I shrugged, like: *well yeah we can*. What I said was, "Call your Pa."

We went back inside. The air conditioning stung like the raindrops—it sucked goose bumps out from my arms. There were about ten people lined up for the phone already, which made you wonder who in the county was left for them to call. We wobbled to the back—past Eunice, Edith, Mary, Gertrude, Tom, Fat Tom, Fat Tom Jr., and Al Davidson—and stood there making puddles, making small talk. Trudy was doing most of both.

"I've been having these nightmares," she said.

"Topical," I said. I pinched myself; it was worth a try.

"I go to sleep," Trudy said. "I drift off and then I'm at home in my bed—sleeping, actually, I mean I'm dreaming that I'm sleeping—and it's very dark. It's night, you know. Plus the window is open. Or no, the window opens while I'm in bed and that's the first scary thing. Something comes through, it's like a shadow in one of those Halloween masks, and it picks me up and carries me off to the county line."

"Then what?"

When she shrugged it was more like: *well obviously*.

"I wake up," she said.

"Do you ever see what's past the county line?"

She nodded. Her neck folded into the rest of her and opened back up like a second mouth. Creases all across it. "Looking out at everything—that's the scary part."

What did I think about at six a.m. while the conveyor belt groaned through the foil plant? What did I think about while Trudy groaned through my life with her pancake breath and needlepoint? What did I

think about when I read the introduction to the GED Prep book a hundred times and did jumping jacks to keep from drifting off? What did I really think about when I was thinking about Trudy's Pa's tractor?

I thought of that river. The way it pulsed through the county, one impossible streak of water funneling out to the salty infinite. That ocean was big. I bet a water molecule could do a lot with a peanut tractor and a GED once it got to the ocean. Once it got there, if it got there, as long as it got there—that was the trick. Moving was pretty easy to do when you were water.

So I'd ordered these Zen books. Buddhist stuff, mainly, with instructional DVDs that took you through yoga and meditating. *Be like water*, the expert would say. *Dissolve into the singular and infinite*. I crossed my legs, I hummed on the floor of my trailer, my God did I try to fade into the fabric of everything, to be still so I could move. But I was always tired. I walked around with anchors through the backs of my eyes.

Soon as I settled down for long enough—even with the DVD going—I tumbled into terrible dreams. Night terrors, I mean. This swelling from my ribcage back to my spine that turned into fingers, hands clawing me down so I couldn't move, I couldn't get away, I was breathless and smothered by the weight of the dark. The weight of everything. Pinch to make sure you aren't dreaming; that's what they tell you. Well every day I walked around with bruises from my own fingers.

So Trudy's Pa showed up in his tractor. It tumbled out of the dark like a vision, like two fat headlights on top of sleek green flanks. Going only twenty but boy did it kick up mud. I pushed Trudy outside first. She waddled and I ran and each raindrop just about tackled us, we're talking about something *Levitical* here, not just biblical, like the whole wrath of the cosmos was converging above us.

Trudy's Pa opened the door for me. He was rolling a cigarette, cradling it in his big corded hands to keep the rain away.

Well don't just stand there," he said.

I climbed inside. There was no radio reception—the tin foil plant, you know—but Trudy's Pa always kept a CD in the deck. It was CCR, it was so worn down it skipped over almost every track, and the only one he ever listened to was "Proud Mary."

"Rollin!" John Fogerty wailed. "Rollin! Rollin on the river!" Over and over, just that, with a funky D chord squiggling behind it. Funny thing about Fogerty is he never even lived in Louisiana. The guy was from Berkeley.

"Trudy still inside?" Pa said.

"She's on her way."

He set that cigarette on his thigh and gave me *the* Look. “She’s got an ankle condition. I know you’re no gentleman but you could pretend, at least.”

Shucks, was that rain cold when it smacked into me for the second time. I scooted down the tractor and through the mud and it was too dark to see, too dark and too cluttered from the hell spilling out of the sky, but I waded back across the parking lot until my boot ran into something. It was a solid lump of mud. A quivering lump sprinkled with pancake crumbs. Under the wail of the storm I heard a higher, more histrionic wailing.

“I’m dying!” Trudy screamed.

I bent down and slid my elbows under her armpits.

“God help me!” She twisted around to make sure I was hearing her.

I sat back and tugged. She came up a little but she wasn’t helping me.

“You can do it,” I said.

“I’m in pain!” she said.

“Your Pa is waiting,” I said. “He says there’s a leak in the roof and your needlework is getting damaged.”

She wailed some more and put her palms down in the mud. I got her loose with a little heave-ho, with the squealing suction of something heavy splitting with something gravitational.

“Stand up,” I told her. The rain splattering into me like a paintball gun.

She wrapped her arms around my leg. “You hate me,” she said. “You hate me! You hate me!” She sounded like John Fogerty. “I didn’t want you to see me like this.”

“It’s just mud.”

She was tugging pretty hard on my leg. I had to plant the other one wide to keep from tumbling down with her. Back in the peanut tractor Trudy’s Pa was watching us.

“Please,” she said. “I’m so pitiful. Come down with me, just for a second.”

“We should go.” I tried pulling loose but she had her nails in my shin like an alligator bite.

“I went to high school. I have a diploma. I have *hobbies*, okay? But you still think you’re better than me.”

“Nope.”

“You do. You sit there and never listen to me and then you go home and sit there in your stupid trailer doing nothing. You’re sad, you bastard. I’ll have you know that Fat Tom Jr. sent me flowers last week, and they came with a card where he’d written a poem about my frills.”

She tried sighing and sucked in a mouthful of rain. Back in the tractor Trudy’s Pa was waiting with his hands on his hips, like *come on*.

“A poem,” Trudy said. “About my frills. He rhymed it with drills, he

said he'd trade all of the drills in his workshop for one date with me. And okay, maybe you're thinking Fat Tom Jr. has a medical condition with his colon and is a little bit potato as far as intelligence, but he *sent me a card*, that's the point. He *appreciates* me, and he's never once brought up my Pa's peanut tractor."

Trudy imploring me. Trudy's Pa waiting on me. That beautiful green peanut tractor idling, the \$4,000 shucking silo slung low from its undercarriage like an ornament. The rain eating all of it, pounding everything into the dark wet earth.

Well I crouched down right then and I kissed Ms. Trudy.

You ever get a whiff of old dishwater after letting a pan sit in the sink for a few days? You ever get that whiff, then dunk your face in it? That's what this kiss was like. Trudy's pancake breath corroding my tongue, her syrup lips sliding and slapping all over my mouth. She opened real wide like she wanted to swallow me. It went on and on and I pinched myself hard but I didn't wake up. No dreams here, just secondhand breakfast food. Finally I put my hands on her cheeks and yanked my face back from them.

"My goodness," Trudy said. She was giggling a little. She stood up and bumped her hand against my side like she wanted me to hold it. "My goodness, how romantic."

We waded out of the parking lot and back to the tractor, Trudy blushing and laughing through all of it. The terrible rain, its fat exfoliating sting. The ditches were overflowing. The water lapped across the road, it pooled and swirled and twisted south. All that rain moving to the river. All that river moving to the ocean.

"Well," Trudy's Pa said when we slid into the compartment. "You ready yet, or you need some more panky?"

That dumb white grin of his, Trudy's pink cheeks and plastered smile. What did they think, that I was going to *marry* her? That we'd have *flowers*? And *brunch*? In a marriage ceremony you had to be very still, you had to stand exactly where they'd put you. It wasn't any different than my night terrors.

The tractor groaned back along the flooded asphalt. Wet and dark and wallowing John Fogerty engulfing us.

"Left a good job in the city!

Working for the man every night and day!

And I never lost one minute of sleeping,

Thinking about the way things might have been!"

What did Fogerty want? He wanted to keep riding the riverboat, he needed that wheel to keep turning. The wheel moved the water, the water moved him. I sucked in the raw tobacco smoke. Trudy leaned on my

shoulder and rubbed my thigh. The frills of her dress were swollen with mud, they were puffed up like a lifejacket—something to protect her from all this moving water.

By the way: boy, was that water moving. Sloshing all over the road. Rolling off from the tires in thick little waves. The corn was stalk-deep in it. It must have been up past the shucking silo, too, which was no good for the machinery.

Trudy's Pa rolled another cigarette. He was using his knee to steer, looking down into his lap. Still had that dumb grin, too.

"Trudy's Ma and I had a kiss in the rain," he said. "Oh, we had a bunch of kisses. We rolled all around in the mud and then Trudy was born."

I imagined a wailing miniature Trudy freshly split from the womb. I imagined her waving her structurally unstable ankles in the air and wobbling across floors in a baby bib. Then I thought of a baby with my bald spot and her ankles, my crane nose and her gullet. Me with this kid; Trudy and me with this kid. In a mansion, maybe, but only one room of it. The windows covered over with needlepoint. The tractor rusting outside. I'd be trapped in the house, stranded on the farm, marooned into fatherhood. I was sweating like in one of my night terrors. It was a hundred degrees on my skin and zero degrees in the air. Trudy on one side, her Pa on the other, the compartment and the rain and the black bloated night all around—I pinched and pinched myself.

"What's wrong?" Trudy said.

"He's probably thinking of how to propose," her Pa said. He was still working on that cigarette, one knee wedged into the steering wheel. "I'll tell you how I proposed to Trudy's Ma if you want."

I didn't want. The compartment smelled like mildew and carcinogens. The reek slid up my nose and stung my brain, it put splinters all through my head.

"We did it in a hay loft," Trudy's Pa said. Still steering with his leg. "The proposal, I mean. But we did it in more ways than one, ha ha."

Then the whole front of the tractor plummeted.

We all tumbled into the dashboard—my ribcage, Trudy's bosom, Trudy's Pa's grinning face. *Smack, thunk, ow*. I squinted through the dark and saw a whole bunch of field. Corn, I'm talking about. Mud-heavy water.

"Golly," Trudy's Pa said. His nose was a little crooked and bleeding. "Golly, golly, golly. Everyone okay?"

Trudy peeled her frills off the dashboard. She groaned a little but didn't wail.

"We ran off the road," I said.

"We got stuck in a ditch, is what happened," Trudy's Pa said.

"Right," I said. "We ran off the road into a ditch."

He rubbed his nose a little. His tobacco and paper were all over the floor. Trudy still groaning, my ribs feeling like the business end of an ironing board.

“Well,” he said. “Let’s take a look, I guess.”

We slid out of the compartment and Trudy slid into the empty seat. When we shut the door she groaned louder, but the way the rain had picked up we could hardly hear anything except hydrogen. There was water all the way past the rims of the tractor tires. There was water past our shins, it squelched into our shoes. It rolled by in a hungry current and tried to tug us along with it.

Anyway, the tractor was full-on diagonal with its front in that ditch. The silo was all scraped up where it had caught the lip of it. The rain hit the dirt and made mud. The mud hit us and made angry people.

“HA HO MIN UH,” Trudy’s Pa said.

“What?” I said. The rain was too loud. It came down solid and smothering.

He got right in my ear, cupped his hands around it. “THIS IS TOO MUCH,” he said.

I got back in his ear. “TELL ME ABOUT IT?”

“FIRST YOU,” he said, “SMOOCHING ALL OVER MY DAUGHTER, PRETENDING TO BE A GENTLEMAN, THEN YOU GO AND DISTRACT ME INTO RUINING MY PEANUT TRACTOR.”

“HOLD ON,” I said.

“YOU HOLD ON. YOU GOT TO BE A MAN, SON. WE’RE OUT HERE IN THE RAIN AND I SAW YOU KISS HER, BUT I RECKON YOU’RE ONLY HERE FOR THIS TRACTOR OR SOMETHING. SO I NEED TO KNOW RIGHT NOW IF YOU’RE GOING TO DO RIGHT BY HER.”

He turned his head away to let me talk into his ear. The rain was dragging the blood down from his nose over his lips, off his chin.

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN?” I said. “DO RIGHT?”

“YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN.” He pointed up at Trudy groaning in the driver’s compartment, then he pointed at his ring finger. “TELL ME RIGHT NOW THAT YOU’RE GOING TO MARRY MY DAUGHTER.”

I stepped back; he stepped closer.

“TELL ME THAT YOU’LL GIVE HER CHILDREN?”

I stepped back again but he caught me with those big corded hands. Everything about him was big as the night—dark as it, too—and he gulped me up, crushed me to stillness with his grip. “LISTEN TO HER TALK ABOUT HER NEEDLEWORK. PAMPER HER. GET RID OF YOUR TRAILER AND COME LIVE IN THE HOUSE WITH HER. MAKE HER HAPPY.”

I blinked and I blinked and the biblical rain was full of the fear of God.

It drilled through my scalp, it found a lightning rod right down to my marrow. Trudy's Pa squeezed me real tight and didn't let go. Trudy up there groaning in the tractor, never moving. Trudy's Pa had such big hands. He dug his fingers into my arms and there was every night terror of mine compiling all at once in those palms. Every paring of movement building up. Swirling like water in an eddy, swelling like water behind a dam. He squeezed, squeezed, squeezed. He bruised my arms. He *pinched*.

So I kicked him right where Trudy had come from.

He folded over and I shook away. The water was tugging at me. It pulsed up high and I let it push me along. I got out of the headlights and I was gone, there was no finding me in this aching dark. Trudy groaning and her Pa hollering and the rain eating up all of it, the ground and the corn and the tractor too.

I floated through the night and let that water carry me. It whisked me all the way to the warehouse behind the flooded tin foil plant, a hundred sheets of foil bobbing up by the ceiling. I took one for a raft. I was giddy. I was belting John Fogerty. I climbed, I floated, way out to the river I let that water carry me. The river left the county and I let it carry me. It went out of the rainstorm and I let it carry me. It went out to the churning ocean and I let it carry me. Not once did I fall asleep. Carry and carry me.

Eva Olsgard
2015 Gabriela Mistral Poetry Prize Finalist

All Saints' Day



You wake, startled by the *clack*—
my circular needles pulling yarn round
beginning a new row.
On an iron chair in the hospital,
I perform conjugations from a single thread:
a loose hank wound into a ball,
then knitted, loop by loop, into a hat.

“Mother used to knit with needles like that.”
Your mother, great grandmother Taylor,
blowing smoke as thick as unspun wool,
would knit Scots-style by oil lamp,
while you snuck down S.T. Ranch Road,
sporting your Lindy cap, towards the barn
where you hopped from high rafters
into bags of fresh-sheared Shetland.
You went to school with miners’ children,
their blushes dulled by a thin gray film
or by a thud in the heart echoed
when a strut tumbled and the shaft thundered closed.
Sheepdogs bayed at the dark, but no bear came.
Your parents’ souls stole mysteriously away
like trails off the tips of thin cigarettes.
Death hung about the beams then, swift
as your Chinese cook, slipped his knives
into the sheaths of a long silk scroll,
rolled them carefully, and tied the ribbon tight.

You had never seen beyond the mountains.
Swamp sweat, needle itch, mist rolling off
Great Slave Lake: *Athabasca*.
Raven squawked and squawked;
His throat, like a golden trumpet,
suspended the sun in the night sky.
Mornings, you broke ice to wash your face.
In a house without mirrors, you learned
to search out the three chords
hidden in a single rope of hair,
how to weigh an even braid in your hand.
Dried tobacco leaves from your uncle's farm
strayed into the house where Auntie Maggie
wove grasses by the open window,
singing to the solstice in Cree.

You saw your husband off to the Navy
and went to work,
telegraphing between extended relatives
what the sutures of railroad ties could not mend.

“There is the weft.
And there is the warp.”
You lift your hand from your chest
drawing five fine threads slack to your heart.
Then fall silent again, your head cocked back,
your long braids tangled in your pale arms
like something tossed up by the sea.

When I finish your hat, I feel empty again.
 Our two suitcases sit near the bed;
 I do not know who is departing and who has arrived.
 During my dream, I was three women at once:
 One of them moved like a shark,
 tracking a straight path from one pole to the other;
 One of them unscrewed all the light bulbs
 and pinned her bun with black matchsticks;
 One of them was called to water
 and when asked for her fidelity
 cried: YES! YES! YES!

“The doctors are taking pictures
 of every part of me. They are taking
 blood from every part of me. They
 give me drugs to make the pain stop
 but nothing makes the pain stop
 except when I pray to God. Then,
 I feel calm for a while,” clutching
 your abdomen, your words struggling
 through a kelp field of plastic tubes.
 I do not know your God
 but I know the surgeon’s scalpel
 cannot separate your ovaries
 from the dark cells that now embrace them.
 The hat I have made you will slump
 impotent in the hallway closet
 while you are carried off to the crematorium
 laid out in your long hair like *The Lady of Shalott*.

It was you who first told me of Ancient Greek doctors
searching for a mouse running loose in the body.
I can see you two springs ago,
quadruple bypass stitched up
beneath your security uniform,
returning home from your graveyard shift
at the pace-maker plant with a question poised:
“Who will watch the watchers?”

“Margaret?” you ask the nurse
expecting your daughter has just entered the room.
When I call you after the operation
you ask me if I would like to speak with my mother.
But it is the nurse, confused, submerging you again
in the kelp field of plastic tubes.
“Margaret?” you call to me.

On All Saints’ Day,
I remember your husband
during his final month at the VA:
his skin a deflated parade balloon,
his sea legs crumpled beneath him,
his fingers stretching as though in calculation
of a sum invisible to all but one.

When I take up my needles
and work the soft yarn in a circle,
I know how this art began.
Knitting is a trifle compared
to knots which hold things fast,
just a warm thing to embrace
some object of our love.
The sea spray is always calling,
and even a name cannot call back
a sailor whose anchor is tugged down,
reeling him home.

Fabric grows, stitch by stitch,
cascades from my hands like a thousand arrowheads
compacted by Gravity and Time.

To the memory of Margaret Smith

Leo Ryan

2015 Earl Weaver Baseball Prize Finalist

The Oriole Way



As he reached for the silver storm door that bore the wounds of step ball games from decades ago, Thomas Riley Jr., was greeted by the unmistakable aroma of sweet tomatoes and Old Bay that could mean only one thing.

“Is that you Tommy? Ya want some crab soup?”

“No Ma, we’ll probably get something at the Stadium.”

“It’s just as well.” Kate Riley replied. “I gotta get this soup in the fridge before it thunders.”

“Pop, you ready?” Tommy called.

“I was born ready.” Big Tom replied.

“It should be a good game.” Tommy offered. “Johnson is pitching.”

“I love that kid.” Tom said.

“I know you do Pop.” Tommy replied, knowing full well that Dave Johnson, from just up the road in Overlea, was to his father the major league son he never had.

Tommy walked to the kitchen where his mother sat worrying.

“We’re leaving Ma.” Tommy told her.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to run you over to the Stadium?” she asked.

“No.” Tommy said, “We’ll take the 22, just like the old days.”

The two of them walked into the late May afternoon and made their way up the hill toward Belair Road. They walked past the rowhouses that cascaded down the narrow street from the great cathedral of Belair Road, the Shrine of the Little Flower. In years gone by the houses were filled with families like the McClearys, the Patros, the Mullers, the Wojciechowskis and the Tuminellos, good Catholic families with tiny statues of the Blessed Virgin tucked behind sparkling storm windows and concrete statues of St. Francis and his animals on postage stamp

lawns. When Tommy was a boy he thought the houses so straight and true he imagined they were soldiers standing in defense of Holy Mother Church.

They walked past the old Dorothy School of Dance, where Tommy had spent hours as a boy trying to get a glimpse through the frosted windows of Maria Tuminello practicing tap or ballet in something more form fitting than her Catholic school uniform. Some days a very young Tommy would stay there so long, the setting sun would throw the shadow of the great stone church down Kentucky Avenue shaming him into going home. With each passing year the shadow's effect diminished.

They turned left at the Shrine, and as Big Tom passed the huge stone church he made the Sign of the Cross as was his devotion. They continued to the corner of Lake Avenue and Belair Road where they passed one of Big Tom's former haunts, the Dugout Stag Bar.

"That damned lawyer just about ruined baseball in this town." Big Tom offered as they passed the Dugout.

Tommy smiled. He knew his father would never forgive Edward Bennett Williams for the 1985 edict that stopped fans from bringing their own coolers of beer into the stadium. Big Tom's pre-game warm up had always involved a stop at the Dugout to have a red and white Coleman jug filled with draft beer. And, since the beer would have to be poured from the tap very slowly so as not to create too much foam, well, a man might as well have a cold one or two while he waited.

Banning coolers of beer from Memorial Stadium was a blue collar heresy right up there with taking "Baltimore" off of the Orioles' road jerseys. That it had been done by a lawyer, a lawyer from Washington no less, only made it worse. He might as well have put the Birds in pinstripes.

To Big Tom, baseball was everything. Growing up in rural Harford County just north of Baltimore in the 1940's, his family always one step ahead of an angry landlord, Tom Riley always had baseball. There was an endless supply of older brothers to pitch to him, and at night, if the power was on and the signal was just right, he might persuade his mother to let him listen to a Philadelphia Athletics game on the radio.

For Tom Riley, the boy who would become a steelworker, baseball was order. Three strikes, three outs, four bases, four balls, nine men, nine innings. Everything in baseball made sense and young Tom needed something to make sense. His own father was a mess, drunk more than he was employed. The drinking made the lack of money worse, or was it the lack of money that made the drinking worse? Tom never really knew. The only consistent things in young Tom's life were baseball and violence. Everywhere he turned, someone was getting a hit.

In 1954 Tom Riley's life changed for the better. His beloved Athletics

were sold, but the hole in Tom's heart was filled to overflowing when the St. Louis Browns moved to Baltimore and became the Orioles. That was the same year Tom's father died in the veteran's hospital at Perry Point, his liver finally giving out. Relief.

"Pop, here comes the bus," Tommy said. As the doors opened, the son took the father's elbow to steady him as he walked up the steps, an accommodation the steelworker would have found unimaginable just two months ago.

"Thanks Tommy," the older man said. "This chemo is kicking my ass."

Tommy helped his father into a seat, sat down next to him and closed his eyes. This was the twenty third summer he and his father had been going to Memorial Stadium together. Their first game was in the magical summer of 1966 when an innocent seven year old Tommy almost caused his father to fall out of the upper deck laughing when he asked, "Dad, are Frank and Brooks brothers?"

Tommy tried to concentrate on those happier times. "Pop, do you remember when you coached my first Little League team?"

The older man smiled. "Sure. I remember the Little Flower Cubs. We didn't win a game did we?"

Tommy laughed. "No we didn't"

"You know," Big Tom said, "We could've won every game."

Tommy laughed. "How in the world could that group of misfits have won every game?"

"Look, whaddya think would've happened if every time one of you kids got a hit, you just kept on running?"

"We would've been thrown out."

"Christ Tommy, little kids can barely catch and throw, let alone hit a cutoff man, execute a relay and make a tag. You'd have scored every time."

"Then why didn't you just have us do that?" asked Tommy, even now thinking a win or too might have soothed the unbearable itch from those old wool uniforms.

"Because you had to learn how to play the game the right way. The Oriole Way."

The Oriole Way was baseball distilled. It meant, take care of the little things, and the big things take care of themselves. It had been part of the Oriole organization from early on, the genius of Paul Richards that resulted in near dynastic success from 1966 through 1983. To Big Tom and his blue collar brethren, it meant a little more. The Orioles didn't buy pennants like those pin striped bastards from New York. The Birds did things the right way, the Oriole Way.

At least until that damned lawyer bought the team and started running them into the ground.

The bus pulled up right in front of the stadium. The late spring sun caromed off the stainless steel letters on the façade. TIME WILL NOT DIM THE GLORY OF THEIR DEEDS. When Tommy was little, he thought that phrase referred to the Orioles who shocked the baseball world in 1966 when they whipped the Dodgers in four games to win the World Series. Later he realized it was a dedication to boys who had given the last full measure of their devotion.

“Pop, how about I get us a couple of nice box seats?” Tommy offered as he helped his father down the steps of the bus.

“Christ no!” Tom replied. “I don’t want sit down there with all the doctors and lawyers who are too busy talking about golf to watch the game. Upper deck is just fine.”

Tommy laughed and walked up to the ticket window, knowing that despite all his legal skill, he would never convince his steelworker father to sit in a box seat. He came back with two tickets in the upper deck, third row, behind the plate.

“All right, let’s go Pop,” Tommy said.

Big Tom said, “Let’s take the escalator up.”

Tommy raised his eyebrows. Ever since the escalator accident on Safety Patrol day in 1964, Big Tom had commanded that his kids stay off the damn machines. Things had clearly changed. So up they went, past the long cement columns stained by rivers of rust until they reached Big Tom’s beloved upper deck.

They found their way to their pink wooden seats and when he got his father settled, Tommy asked, “Pop, how about a beer and a hot dog?”

“A beer would be great Tommy,” the older man replied. “But skip the hot dog, I don’t have much of an appetite these days.

Tommy went down the ramp and saw a souvenir stand. He decided to buy his father an Oriole cap. Big Tom’s hair was starting to lose its battle with the chemo drugs and Tommy wanted to do something, anything for his father. He looked all through the stand, but couldn’t find a single cap with the cartoon Oriole, the one that had been on the heads of all the great teams from 1966 on. The only caps they had bore the new “ornithologically correct” bird, a humorless, lifeless solution to a problem that didn’t exist.

Why must things change Tommy wondered, why can’t they just stay the way they were?

Tommy handed his father the cap and the beer. “Thanks.” Big Tom said. “Christ I wish they hadn’t changed the bird.”

Tommy laughed. Finally something they agreed on.

They settled in for the game. Dave Johnson of Overlea on the mound and the Ripkens (who actually WERE brothers) of Aberdeen Maryland

up the middle. It was a Baltimore baseball fan's dream.

The Angels' lead off batter took Johnson's first pitch into right field for a hit.

"There goes the perfect game." Big Tom laughed.

The innings and the beers kept coming. After three of the former and four of the latter, Tommy gave in to the weight of what had to be said.

"I'm sorry Pop," he said.

Big Tom turned toward his son. When Tommy was a boy, his father's ice blue eyes could bore right through him. Now, clouded by the chemo, they could only beg him not to go further.

"I'm sorry for all the trouble we had between us," Tommy said.

"Christ, just forget all that stuff Tommy," the older man said. "Let's just watch the game."

Tommy knew that was the end of the conversation. He wanted to apologize for everything, for driving a foreign car in college, for registering as a Republican for his first election, and perhaps most of all, for rooting for the Yankees for a couple of dark seasons. Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa. But Big Tom invoked the first law of Irish relationships. There is no problem so big it cannot be ignored. Getting Big Tom to talk about what had happened between them would be tougher than explaining the infield fly rule to a girl.

After the sixth inning, Big Tom turned to his son and said, "You know, I wouldn't mind seeing how the other half lives. Wanna sneak down to the box seats?"

Tommy smiled. "Sure Pop."

So down the ramps they went, Tommy holding onto his father in the same way his father had held onto him in 1966. They made it to the lower deck, and before they went to the box seats, Tommy asked his father if he wanted another beer.

"No thanks son. I'm done."

They walked into the light in the lower deck and had their pick of empty seats. The O's had been awful the season before, 54 and 107 awful, and an early season match up against the Angels hadn't exactly packed the place. They found a spot about ten rows back from the home dugout and sat down.

After the first few pitches Big Tom said, "Jesus, these seats are fantastic! Do you sit down here a lot?"

"Every once in a while."

"Must be nice." Big Tom said. "I could never afford these seats."

Tommy bit his tongue. He was pretty sure that the difference between the cost of the upper deck and the box seats was less than the cost of a Coleman jug full of draft beer.

"They are nice." Tommy replied.

After a few seconds of silence, Big Tom turned to his son and said, "You done good."

At the end of the seventh inning, the score was tied. Big Tom put his hand on his son's arm and said. "Would you mind if we got going? I'm pretty whipped."

"Sure Pop." Tommy said. It would be the first time Big Tom had ever left a game before the final pitch was thrown. The thought of it made Tommy wince.

The lawyer helped the steelworker onto 33rd Street where they found a cab. The busses were lined up, but they wouldn't begin leaving until the ninth inning, and Tommy needed to get his father home.

They climbed into the taxi and Tommy gave the cabbie the address. Propped up on the dash there was a transistor radio in a fake leather case held together with rubber bands. "Could you put the game on?" Tommy asked.

"Sure," the driver said. "I was listening to it myself."

As they drove down 33rd Street past Lake Montebello, Tommy saw that his father had fallen asleep. They rode in silence through Clifton Park where Tommy had taken up golf while he was in law school. He remembered how his father had accused him of forgetting where he came from, how he was going to be just another lawyer sitting in the box seats ignoring the game and talking about his handicap.

The cab turned down Kentucky Avenue and eased past Dorothy's. It was outside of Dorothy's that some hoodlehead had snatched Tommy's mother's purse about a week ago. Big Tom had stood by helplessly while the punk took some cash, an old wallet and the last vestiges of his manhood. As they rolled down the hill, Tommy thought the tired rowhouses looked like tombstones in a veterans' cemetery, long straight memorials to a proud past.

They pulled up in front of the house just as Billy Ripken grounded into a double play to end the game. After paying the cabbie, Tommy woke his father and helped him up the steps into the house, and then up the stairs into his bed.

Guy Choate

But I Have an MFA



I can feel a human presence on my right. It's Walter, standing there with a large chef's knife, the blade of which is dripping water.

"Have they showed you how to clean the knives yet?" he asks me.

"I don't think so," I say.

Walter pulls a kitchen towel from his pocket and wipes the blade once, hard. "Just like that," he says with an all-knowing smile. "That's all you have to do."

"Cool," I say.

And then he walks his lanky, 6-foot-2 frame toward the knife magnet.

I wish that was Walter's sense of humor on display, but it's not. Walter likes giving me information. He likes telling me exactly how to do things because, while he's not my boss, he does have seniority on me. I haven't been here long in the red-bricked Hanover Tavern outside of Richmond, Virginia. The older crowd comes here for dinner and a show at the in-house theatre, but in the kitchen, hidden away from everyone, Walter reminds me that I need to wash both sides of the sheet trays because the bottoms get greased up when they stack.

One of the cooks asks Walter if he's found a house yet.

"There's one house in Hanover County that I can afford to buy on a 30-year mortgage with what I make here," he responds. "It's a \$49,000 house."

The statement hits me hard from a couple of angles. The first hit comes as a reminder that I'm only making \$8 an hour. The second hit comes upon the realization that over the previous three years I've accumulated more in student loans than what it would take to buy a small house. And then as my thoughts progress, it hurts to realize it would take me more than 30 years of washing dishes to pay off the debt I accrued in order to get my MFA in Creative Nonfiction Writing.

I try to stay positive by engaging the conversation. “Are you buying a house, Walter?”

“No,” he says, “it’s just for a school project.”

I find comfort in hearing that Walter is taking classes. Somehow him investing in education makes me feel better about my own investment, which has yet to pay any financial dividends.

“Where are you in school?” I ask.

“Hanover,” he says.

I’m new to this area, where my girlfriend Liz grew up, and I don’t know all the colleges yet. Of course, it crushes me when Walter explains to me that Hanover is not a community college at all, but rather a high school.

When I can’t remember where to put the clean bowls, Walter gives me a disappointed look. I don’t know why it matters to me, but I want him to think I’m smart or cool. He doesn’t.

When I started looking for jobs, I focused on full-time editing gigs, but when I didn’t get much response, which is to say I got absolutely no response, I began applying for proposal writing jobs, which were more plentiful. I wrote what I thought were some solid cover letters in response to jobs that required only a bachelor’s degree. Some of those jobs would even let me substitute experience for the education requirements. However, I have both. And a master’s degree to boot, but none of that seemed to matter. I was lucky to even get an email letting me know that the company had gone with another candidate.

For a while I focused on jobs that were committed to hiring veterans—a lot of government jobs will give preferential treatment to those of us with a military background. But apparently not me, despite spending my 21st birthday as a NATO peacekeeper in Bosnia.

A friend put me in communication with one of the founders of a large dot com in Richmond. However, the only opening they had at the time was for a marketing intern position. I emailed back and forth with the founder, felt a connection, and then I swallowed my pride and said I’d like to apply for the internship. I never heard from him again. When I finally convinced myself I had the capacity to be a dogcatcher in a neighboring county, I applied for that. No response. I applied for a part-time job running the Facebook page for a local Girl Scout Troop. The application took a good thirty minutes, but I never heard a thin-minted word from the little brats.

My sister is a corporate recruiter and she tells me my resume looks good and my cover letters are even better. I’m baffled as to why I haven’t heard anything. Every few days I go back and look at the files I’ve sent potential employers. I double-click my resume and a big part of me

hopes that when it pops up, it's not my resume at all, but rather that picture Liz took of me sitting on a toilet someone placed on the curb to be picked up with their garbage. Had I accidentally sent the dozens of potential employers a picture of me pretending to defecate in the street, at least I would understand why I hadn't been granted a job interview. Instead, my resume pops up, and I am left with no explanation.

The guy who cut my hair the other day told me I can't find a job because Obama.

A lot of people tell me I can't get a job because I got a useless degree. A smarter demographic of people tell me I got a teaching degree, but I don't want to teach, and there's a strong possibility I'm just straight bad at it.

I am eager to work. I am 31 years old and I'm lucky enough to have been given a place to stay rent-free until I can get back on my feet. But I am 31 years old and I am barefoot staring at a rocky mountain of debt that I have no choice but to try and climb. I am 31 years old, and for the first time in my life I am questioning whether or not I am a man. Because I am 31 years old and sleeping on a bunk bed at my girlfriend's dad's house with no prospect of supporting myself, much less the children that I'd like to one day have.

I know what you're thinking. You're sitting there, reading this, and you're thinking, all of this works conveniently well in a self-deprecating essay, but this guy's probably got some prospects in real life. And the reason I know you're thinking that is because I've thought it myself. In fact, I've thought of nothing else besides that, for months. I'm 31 years old. I'm healthy. I'm educated. I'm well-traveled and well-read. I have good manners. My military record says I can follow orders without question. My liberal arts education says I can think for myself. I'm self-reflective. If you can get over me talking out of the side of my mouth, it's sometimes possible to find me attractive even. I have dependable transportation. I'll organize the office March Madness pool. I'll chip in \$5 to get Jenny from Accounting, whom I've never even met, a gift for her baby shower. I'm a fun person to have in the office and I'll do whatever it takes to get hired, to get health insurance, to remember what it's like to experience the feeling of self-worth again.

"You should try Capital One," a friend of a friend advises me one night.

No shit, I think to myself.

People who have jobs, who don't turn down dinner invitations because they know they can't pay for dinner...this is how they think. They think, this guy's unemployed and therefore must be an idiot, he obviously hasn't checked with the largest holder of jobs in the area, perhaps he's never heard of the Fortune 500. People with jobs must have this

idea in their heads that I can just show up to the Capital One offices and Alec Baldwin (or whomever it is they have hired as their current spokesperson) will be there hanging out with an army of Vikings, all of whom are eager to give me one of the spare jobs lying around the premises.

Liz, an aspiring counselor, comes home frustrated from work where she uses her degree in psychology to bring people the pasta they ordered. Someone has told her that she should give up waiting tables to be a teacher.

“As if I can just decide to be a teacher one day,” she vents to me. She speaks with sarcasm—”Oh yeah, thanks, hadn’t thought of that. I guess I’ll just start teaching tomorrow!”

People with jobs are oblivious to what it takes to find a career. They all know someone who makes “really good money” and “loves his job” doing something that I’d “be really good at.”

“Why stop at teaching?” Liz asks. “Why don’t they just tell me I should give up waiting tables to be an astronaut? I’m sure they make good money.”

Taking the trash out at my dishwashing job, it’s a long walk from the kitchen, through the gravel parking lot to the dumpster. It feels good to get away from the sweaty sink. The fresh air is cold on my skin and so I put on my sweatshirt that reads across the front, “University of New Orleans,” which is the school where I got my MFA in Creative Nonfiction Writing. A car pulls into the parking lot right about the time a trash bag rips open to spill out a disgusting mixture of food onto the ground. I can make out the bones of a fried buttermilk chicken breast and a soggy dinner roll drenched in what I guess to be she-crab soup. Because I’ve been in this position before, I do what I know I need to do—I drop all the trash bags except the torn one and I desperately try to balance it so no more of its contents falls out before I get to the dumpster.

On my way back to the other bags, I have my recurring daydream. Someone will see my sweatshirt with what looks like a vomited version of the Hanover Tavern’s dinner menu on it, and that person will ask me about my education. I will tell him about my master’s degree, and he will say something clichéd (because he’s a normal person without an MFA)—“What’s a guy like you doing in a place like this?”

But strangers don’t come up to dishwashers in the parking lots of restaurants and offer them jobs at the businesses they own in town. So, I walk back to the kitchen, and I stand over the sink full of mushroom gravy-stained sauce pans and I regret not going to school for something more useful, like nursing or welding or maybe Lamaze.

I guess there are good things about my dishwashing job. I get more than my fair share of free food. Good stuff, too—oysters and pear salads

and steak. While I may be in my stained sweatshirt and camouflaged cut-offs, I'm eating just as well as the patrons walking through the front door in their suits and dresses.

I think about people in the corporate game who complain of their power-hungry and manipulative bosses. I'm thankful to just have Walter. He seems sincere in simply wanting the sheet trays to be grease-free. I can't fault him for that. And he's not even breathing down my neck until late in the afternoon, after he gets out of school.

When I think about it, having a shitty job isn't quite as shitty when you have a liberal arts degree that taught you how to effectively express your feelings about that shitty job. I may not have the financial peace to pay retail for cocktails. I may not have the health insurance that would allow me to see the doctor about the slightly concerning gastroenterological issue I seem to be developing. And I may not be able to afford all the vacations every single one of my Facebook peers are going on all the time even if they have a family of five and who the hell still goes to Disneyworld anyway, you miserable sap.

But, I do have an MFA. So there's that.

William Wenthe



Early October, gardens and pavements
are fluttering, gold-flecked
with the wavering low flight
of the tiny, migrant butterflies
named “Dainty Sulphur.”

Our friends are driving their daughter,
breathing tubes taped
to her tiny nostrils,
to a hospital in Dallas, and doctors
they hope can save her.

And having mentioned both
butterflies and child, I know
decorum demands
I bring the one to bear
on the other.

But fuck decorum.
The Dainty Sulphurs,
fluent in their flight,
say nothing. The child,
too young to speak,

beneath the crusted blood
of nosebleed caused by raw
rush of tanked oxygen,
had smiled, lifted her arm to me,
and waved, Bye Bye.

Shelley Wood

2015 Frank McCourt Creative Nonfiction Prize Winner

The Scrubber of Bodies



George greeted us at the reception desk wearing a flowing, white linen shirt and the poufy, low-crotch pants beloved of earthy people the world over. He was tall with wavy black hair to his shoulders, chiseled cheekbones, teeth sharp and gleaming like glaciers. A Greek beard skirted his jawbone—hours old or many months, you couldn't say. Originally from Athens, George had moved with his wife to the island of Lesbos five years earlier and they'd since had two boys. He coached water polo and ran a cross-fit gym in the nearby town of Mytilini, working at the hammam on weekends. Clearly, in the economic decay that is modern-day Greece, even the direct descendants of Adonis need to pick up extra work when they can get it.

The trip to the Mesagros hammam was my husband's idea—something I would have reminded him about later, had there been any recriminations. We ended up signing on for the complete package: steam, scrub, foam, and massage. This last, we assumed, would be the relaxation component following the more businesslike part of the bath. George gave us towels and a cloth sarong to wear as a wrap in the steam room, then showed us where we could change.

Here, we puzzled over the sarong, a strip of rough cotton not much wider than a tea towel. The hammam was billed as a traditional Turkish bath, which has its roots in Islam; naturally we assumed women would be separated from the men. But we were clearly the only guests and as far as we could tell, there was only one steam room. So how were we supposed to wear our sarongs? With or without our bathing suits? Covering *everything* or just the lower half? Had it just been me and my husband, Tyler, we wouldn't have worried so much about the sarongs, but friends of ours from Canada were holidaying with us in Greece, and we'd all gone to the hammam together. I wasn't sure they needed to see

any more of me than they had already.

A concept originally borrowed from the ancient Roman baths, a hammam is a place to swelter out toxins before progressing to a scrub and massage. There is also the larger, ideological aim of purification, as if dirty thoughts or cloudy convictions can also be scoured away. I had my doubts.

Us four friends, swaddled in a mix of sarong styles and trying to stifle our giggles, pushed open the heavy door to the steam room, the heat hitting us like a paddle. The room was roughly the dimensions of a king-sized bed built entirely of stone and plaster and heated by a wood-burning fireplace outside. One stone bench was pushed against the wall so you could lean back into the warm rock, close your eyes, and pant. The other bench was arranged in the middle of the tiny space, everything within arm's reach of three antique faucets positioned above large earthenware urns.

First we sat in the steam and experimented with pouring water over our heads, daring one another to try hotter and hotter bowls, snickering like teenagers. It's not often you sit around in swatches of wet cotton with your friends focused solely on perspiration.

After fifteen minutes there was a polite knock on the steel door and I poked my head out into the cooler air. "Is it time for one of the guys to go with you for the scrub?" I asked.

Even as I said this I was taking in George, who'd stripped out of his reception attire and was now swathed only in a cotton sarong identical to the one I'd opted to wrap ineffectually over my bikini. He'd folded his in half lengthwise, so that it was little more than a loincloth slung low around his hips. The hair that began at the base of his beard snaked languidly down his neck before sprawling across his broad pectorals then funneling into the sarong. I fixated on his monobrow.

George looked puzzled by my question.

"No, no. I come in there now with you, yes?"

This was unexpected. I'd assumed the scrubbing and "foaming"—whatever that was—would happen in a different location. I'd also presumed that female guests would be bathed in private, by a woman. But no. Now we were five bodies, pores splayed wide open in a sweltering stone room. *Unclean thoughts*, I chided myself, and urged my gaze to dance elsewhere and nowhere, light and careless.

George was busying himself with soapsuds, fabric, tubs, and sponges beside the stone bench, his triceps bulging as he twisted the taps one way, then the other. Satisfied, he turned to us, packed snugly on the seat against the wall, and asked: "Who will go first?"

No one spoke. What would be worse? I reasoned, or that's how I

explained my pluck afterwards. Enduring the 40c damp heat, watching George bathe my friends and husband, or me, getting soaped and scrubbed, under the up-close-and-personal gaze of the others?

“Me,” I said. Then I undid my sarong and flung myself down on the stone slab.

I lay face down on the unforgiving surface seeking in vain for a comfortable position for my creaking kneecaps and chin, willing myself not to think about what this might look like for my friends and husband, let alone George. When, for example, had I last shaved the back of my legs? The thought of a shadowy bikini-line, on display in a steamy closet with a Greek god bathing me, pained me more than the pressure of the hard stone on my hipbones.

George gloved up with a thin loofah shaped like an oven mitt and started in on my right ankle, moving in slow circles up to my buttocks, then down the other leg. He scrubbed my back and my shoulders, he inched down my arms and made his way slowly, slowly between each of my fingers. At one point he carefully lifted my leg up onto what I presume was his lap and gently exfoliated the arch of my foot. What a curious part-time job, I mused. How, for example, does this scrubber of bodies describe his day to the friends he meets after work for a couple of Mythos lagers? Do they chuckle together about the husbands whose knees he grazes with the hem of his tea towel while soaping up their wives? George’s strong hand slid up my hamstring and a sound escaped my lips that was part moan, part mortification. I’ve pushed and prodded my own leg-meat before: I couldn’t bear to think how this might look to George or worse, where the eyes of my sweltering friends and husband might have been resting while George worked his way through my fleshier sections.

At a certain point, George flipped me over. He made his gentle loofah-ed loops up and down my feet, shins, and quads, gave a thorough scrub to my ribs and navel, then moved on to my clavicle and arms. Briefly, but by no means dismissively, he executed some delicate circles in what I’ll call, for decency’s sake, my décolletage. Ever so gently he scrubbed my forehead, cheeks, earlobes, and chin.

I had to keep my eyes pinched closed. If I’d managed a glance at my husband, I would have dissolved again into giggles and something in this extraordinary experience would have been diminished, some sorry, soiled part of me untouched.

When the scrubbing was over, George sluiced me down with bowls of cool water, pausing only—my friends and husband told me later—to sluice himself down as well, standing tall, arching his back, tipping his face to the ceiling and letting the water course over his curly black locks and torso.

I was hoping I was done, that this would be the point that I'd be helped, groggy and sheepish, into the arms of a female attendant outside, in charge of whatever came next in this process. I wasn't. The foaming, it turned out, was also a component of the steam room, part cleanser, part essential oils.

George wrung the suds warm and frothy from a coiled cloth that he held over me while I lay down again on my stomach.

Tyler, no doubt keen to insert himself into the scene, leaned forward through the steam and whispered a description. *You have a foot-high mound of bubbles on your back.*

The foam segment, alas, lacked the hygienic purposefulness of the scrubbing. This was a slow lathering and massaging that lasted anywhere from ten minutes to thirty; I lost count. Here, the excruciating self-consciousness that had gripped me from the outset climbed to new heights. This was, no question, one of the more sensual exchanges I have ever had with a stranger, yet my husband was within nudging distance of my left elbow and two good friends were also close-proximity spectators. Later they tried to reassure me: they'd had their eyes closed or kept them trained on the ceiling, or on George himself. "It was too hazy to see anything," Tyler insisted. I don't believe him.

George's silky hands explored my toes. He cupped the heel of my foot. He inched over my tight Achilles pausing to work on a knot in my soleus that I thought I alone could have pinpointed. At one point he reached with his hands around my stomach, kneading with his fingers, giving my spleen the kind of rubdown it has spent a lifetime yearning for. Then I was rolled over again onto my back, one final time, clean, unclean. I opened my eyes.

Daylight was sifting down through the heat from orbs of glass set into the domed ceiling, the steam rising up towards it as if to shoo it away. I let my lids sink closed again and found it was possible, after all, to set aside the charged carnality, to unplug the electricity, real or imagined, of this small room, under these strong hands. A married man with two young sons, holding down several jobs in the world's oldest democracy, was gently, gently polishing the pale underside of my forearms. When, I wondered, was the last time I'd been washed like this? So painstakingly, in such generous detail? Not by me, that's for sure, always rough and rushing. Not by my husband, who at that very moment was likely hatching plans to rectify this. But the thought that rolled over me with the next sluice from George's bowl was of my mother, who surely was the only one who'd ever held and handled me in this way. And of me, as a baby, being bathed as if I was something infinitely rare and pure and loved. Where, moments earlier, I'd been biting back giggles I was now

abruptly battling tears. How lovely. How tender. How extraordinary.

And then he was done.

I sat up sluggishly. “Go slowly,” George said, putting a hand under my elbow and steering me out the door. He directed me towards a shower then stepped into the stall beside me, ducking his head under a jet of cold water.

“Thank you,” I muttered, unable to pour enough weight in the words, my tongue clumsy in my mouth. George snatched up a battered water bottle, tilted back his perfect chin and glugged for a full thirty seconds before speaking. “You go now for massage with Nicole next door,” he said, his white smile flashing. Then he headed back through the door of the hammam to start scrubbing my friends and husband. Tyler, who went last, had the luxury of being exfoliated, foamed, and rinsed unwittingly.

Later, grilling him about what this was like, to observe me being handled and soaped by another man, Tyler was unperturbed. “Fine,” he said. “It was very hot.”

He was referring here to the temperature.

Later, after we’d gotten this smirking conversation out of the way, I would tell him about my fleeting instant of decontamination. I’d try to describe the moment when the energy in the room had slipped and shifted, and that I’d almost cried. How the light had wrestled with the steam, but had been forced to fall back. But not yet, not while we could still make light of it.

“Not weird?” I asked.

“No,” he shrugged. “Not weird at all.”

“Really?” I pressed him. “And if it had been me, watching you, and the scrubber was a female swimsuit model, wearing only a sarong. What would you be thinking about?”

This gave him pause.

“*Margaret-Thatcher-naked-on-a-cold-day-Margaret-Thatcher-naked-on-a-cold-day*,” he said, grinning.

My point exactly.

Rebecca Orchard



The sunlight had in it the quality of bees. It hummed against Brother Albrecht's closed eyes as he stood at the window enjoying the warmth, which still felt like a newly bestowed gift so close on the heels of winter, the views of the mountains unsmeared by mists. He was fortunate to have a room that overlooked the valley, to be able to see the shadow of the clouds passing over the tapestry knit by the pines. He had not requested this view, but the Father Abbot was wise in what he saw in men: Albrecht treasured this sight as he treasured no earthly possession.

He was both remembering and anticipating time spent with Brother Fabian tending the hives in the meadow behind the Abbey. It was the hour, in the summer, when most of the Abbey rested, and a hush lay over the grounds while Albrecht and Fabian smoked the hives. Over the murmur of the slumbering bees they cut slabs of honeycomb, paper-thin but miraculously strong. Fabian would hold a piece up to the clear, open sky and watch the light glow through the comb.

"The works of God," he would say.

It was hard for men like Brother Fabian to restrict their speech only to the strictly necessary. Some felt that to stifle comments about the glory of God was to do a disservice to God, but the silence had been the easiest part, for Albrecht. When he had lived outside these walls he had been reserved, shy of his voice even when it was most needed, and had welcomed the chance to let his throat rust from disuse. He had asked Father Eustacius some years ago if he might take a vow of silence, reveling in the idea that he may never be required to speak another word.

The Abbot had studied the brother standing before him, quiet. Father Eustacius had grown quite old but was not bitter, in the way that only men who find joy in their occupation are not bitter. This had been a new sight for Albrecht when he had first come to Alpirsbach, every

bone longing for a place to lay his burdens down.

The Abbot said: What comfort we most want we must learn to live without, and what we find most difficult we must conquer.

So Albrecht still spoke, though sparingly and with great care, as if rising each time through layers of earth.

The bells tolled now for Terce, a great bronze wave over the valley, and Albrecht lingered for one more moment in the window before stepping into the cool shadow of his room.

He set down the quill he had been holding, noting the new stain of ink on his finger next to the one, fading, from yesterday. He would pray for forgiveness for his preoccupation and for greater control over his wandering mind, which of late had been difficult to master.

He opened his door to find the great old hound sleeping against it. It looked up at him with rheumy eyes and he leaned down to scratch its back where its hair was thinning, as if years with the monks had given it its own tonsure. The brothers did not keep pets but the animals in the Abbey did not know that, and all had favorites; Brother Fabian was orbited eternally by a ring of multi-hued cats. The dog wheezed onto its cracking joints and walked past Albrecht to lie down in the square of light cast through the window onto the floor.

The toll ceased as Albrecht waited at the top of the stairs for an old monk to descend, painstakingly, before him. That old hunting dog had found its way to this valley scabbed and scarred, and the part of Albrecht that still remembered the midwives of his village wondered if the hound sensed their kinship, knew that Brother Albrecht too had seen what it had seen.

The stairs let out onto the slate flagstones of the cloister and Albrecht joined the line of monks making their way into the sanctuary; he returned Brother Thadeus's greeting with a nod.

They had taken their vows together, although Thadeus was a much younger man. He had been given to the Abbey as a nameless infant, and had been raised by the monks in the shadow of the Schwarzwald.

It was hard for some of the oblates to truly value their life. Those given to the monastery as children were often resentful of their seclusion and their many obligations and their own fear. They had failed to respond truthfully when the Father Abbott asked them on their thirteenth birthday if they wanted to leave, failed to be brave enough to forsake this shadowy peace and enter the world of men, although choosing the life of monkhood took a certain bravery too.

His own time in the novitiate under Brother Martin had been easy to bear, once he learned to silence what he now thought of as his "elsewhere" mind. He had needed to sink beneath the rituals and orders like

a stone in a deep pool.

The brothers had at first been reluctant to admit him due to his advanced age and lack of learning, but saw the love he had for the shape of the words of Scripture and found his reflective nature promising. Father Eustacius had appointed a special teacher for him and he had learned to read and write in German and in Latin. He hoped as he neared old age and his body gradually crabbled itself into uselessness he would be allowed to copy manuscripts like Brother Ulrich, whom Albrecht could watch for hours, each precise scratch of ink bleeding finely into the vellum, joined slowly over time into letters and then into words. Last week as a private meditation Albrecht had practiced his own pathetic copying with Psalm 51: *Cor mundum crea in me, Deus: et spiritum rectum innova in visceribus meis*, watching meaning come from nothingness, his pen a tool of great and mysterious power.

But until the day his joints ground to powder or his talent matched Brother Ulrich's, he would enjoy the tasks assigned to him for the support of the monastery. He was eager—as eager as he allowed himself to be these days—for warmer weather and the chance to work outside. He would, as he had been taught, take the day's Scripture and turn it over in his head as he plowed or sowed or scythed, so first its words and then its meaning and then its implications would work into his coursing muscles. In this way, he thought, he may finally become willing to shed the last shameful vestment of his former life.

He entered the church. He had seen grander facades, with gilt and painted clouds, but this sanctuary he loved for its simple, clean strength, its brightness and the smoothness of its sandy stones, the fact that it both soared and stayed rooted to the earth. This was a place where a man like him could find the peace of God. He closed his eyes and listened to the brothers singing,

Dextera patris, lapis angularis, via salutis, janua caelestis, abluere nostri, maracielas delicate, a breath, Attende Domine... Voices journeying together, a crowd over a hill. Albrecht's lips moved with them, their words his in spirit, but his singing fled from him. Many things had left him at the death of the last member of his young family, so long ago it seemed now like a passage from the book of Daniel, something he had studied at his desk by the window.

To worship the Lord is to be joyful, the Abbot had told him. You must ask Him to lead you out of this valley of sorrow.

In this one thing only, he disobeyed.

For many years Albrecht had lived only to preserve the memory of those he loved. He was their only living vessel; he cared for the health of his body and mind only to lend them the use of it. Unlike his brothers

in the Abbey that had so blessed him, Albrecht had known the terrible unsettled world, the plagues and the scourge of men, the floods and the famine. Here only did peace surround him and here only did it begin to rule him. He had learned to take simple, selfish pleasure in the Psalms and the sound of his brothers singing. In the swing of the thurible and its arc of smoke. In the sun beating warm on the shoulders of his black habit.

His guilt over this quiet life he had banished through many prayers, but the sin of his sorrow remained in his breast, beating alongside his heart, and he fed it as dry wood feeds fire, against the will of God.

Andrew Rahal

The Human Wind Chime



Glass jars and string are laid out
on the elevated bar stage.
Hooks and needles
disappear into his cheeks.
He slowly bends at the waist
with arms stretched out.
His skin stretches from lobes
and flab. He dances barefoot
on a bed of glass. He staples a
shoebox to his forearm. He pulls it
off and passes the box around
to collect gas money. He lights a
cigarette, cracks a beer, begins
to sing a love song, the glass still
swaying about his upper torso.
When the audience is about
to lose it he sings louder. Some
have to stand up, cover their eyes,
laughing like a body in shock.

Andrew Rahal



July, Sunrise

a crow studies
this litter of peaches

ants make artless
and disciplined work

of the clumping
shadowy nectar

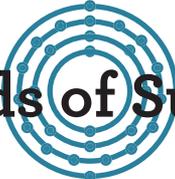
dark cores
with red eye-liner

dash and scatter
before the sunrise

heat has the time
to settle in

Walker Harrison

2015 Earl Weaver Baseball Prize Winner



Legends of Summer

A beaten, withered tennis ball sits half-observed in a patch of grass. In black script the word Wilson is impressed over the ball's faded and fraying neon fuzz, and beneath is a solid 2 that in a previous tennis-ball-life was used to distinguish it from its comrades on the court. The ball is momentarily at peace until a small hand, sporting callused palms and mud-caked finger nails, swoops down and scoops it up, before tossing it into a white plastic bucket.

The hand is mine, and I am nine. I am sprinting around the lumpy outfield of the baseball field that my dad has mowed into our large property on the North Fork of Long Island, collecting rogue tennis balls. My hope is such: if I can gather these redirected balls fast enough and deliver them back to my dad, who stands waiting on the pitching mound, we'll be able to do a little more batting practice before the sun, fast descending, disappears behind the treeline. Batting practice isn't really an accurate term for the routine, though. It's more like home run derby, as instead of honing any sort of precocious skills, I'm trying to launch these tennis balls into the unkempt bramble that waits beyond the outfield, our pretend stadium's version of a fence. My weapon is a 28-inch long silver aluminum bat, and every day I am a baseball superhero on the stage created by my dad.

It is the summer of 2001 and I am honeymooning with baseball, having just completed my first season playing little league. There is something beyond just a typical appreciation for the sport going on in my head, especially given my age. After my games, I go home and type up my teammates' and my stats and write faux-recaps for non-existent newspapers. I follow the real results of professional teams, most closely those of my beloved Yankees, with a passionate focus more often seen in seasoned fans. I toss aside the unwanted sections—National, Metro,

Arts—of the *New York Times* every morning before pinching the Sports section, unreasonably thinner than the others, and flipping through it for box scores. Many nights a week, I lay on the couch and listen to John Sterling and Michael Kay call the games on the radio, imagining the plays in my head. My dad, who didn't allow a functional television under his roof for fear his kids would watch it too much, is often also in the room, looking at papers from work but reserving an ear for the broadcast.

We do not live in Jamesport, Long Island, a community so small that it only officially warrants a title of CDP (census-designated place), but rather we stay there for the majority of the summer months. The house we built there, the land we own beneath it, and the nearby beach form a welcome alternative to our more regular urban existences eighty miles inland in Brooklyn. It is a luxury that I don't really understand at the time, my mind too jammed with anecdotes from baseball cards to realize that most kids don't have baseball diamonds in their backyards and many don't have dads who would upkeep them.

Our days fall into peaceful routines during the summer months. My dad wakes up early to tend to the property, cutting tree branches, moving plants, and watering the grass. My mom goes for runs along the beach, the soft sand a safer surface for her surgically repaired knee, and sits at her desk, working or tending to the newest Harrison, one-year old Julia. My older sister, Sarah, eleven, and I entertain each other and ourselves. The messy living room is a continuously changing footprint of our activities. Single Archie comics lay open, bridge-up, on the floor while dozens more sit stacked in re-commissioned milk crates; the hardened clay pieces and colorful cardboard directions to our homemade board game leak out of the room's wooden cabinet; a striped hoola hoop leans against the wall next to the staircase; but most important is the plastic bucket of tennis balls and the aluminum bat, stored strategically by the door, ready to be rushed out of the house and to the field at any moment.

In the dining room, the sports pages are spread out on the table. On many mornings that summer, under the wet circular stain leftover from my cereal bowl, the paper shows photographs of Barry Bonds, the superstar outfielder for the San Francisco Giants. His back muscles bulge out of his uniform and his shiny, swollen head is squeezed into a hard plastic batting helmet. The items that adorn his body have unintended poetic significance. Dangling from his ear is a gold cross, an indication of his faith to Christianity but an ironic trinket considering his ongoing violation of a sport that many Americans hold as a religion. Strapped to his right arm is a black, bulky brace that protects him from injury via a pitched ball but also gives him an odd, robotic appearance. This half-mechanical exterior stands for the unnatural and unrevealed source of

Bonds' success. He is baseball's Darth Vader, his body gradually being transformed from limited human into powerful instrument, a telling reflection of his soul's journey toward the dark side of professional sports.

Bonds is the protagonist of the drama that has taken the sports world by storm that summer. He is hitting home runs at a record-setting pace, chasing the mark of 70 home runs in a single season. It seems like every night he rockets a baseball into the San Francisco night and rumbles around the bases as thousands cheer on his pursuit. But his success is as befuddling as it is captivating: at age 36, Bonds is too old by conventional wisdom to be showcasing not only his best performance, but perhaps the best the game has ever seen. Is there some sort of magic at play?

Not magic, but chemistry. During that summer, and in years previous and to follow, Bonds bloodstream carries a cocktail of substances designed to make him a better baseball player. The list of things Bonds ingested or injected, with the help of several knowledgeable trainers, is long and seemingly poisonous: testosterone, human growth hormone, insulin, deca-durabolin. The drugs are constructed not only to make his muscles much stronger, but to also help him recover from injury. Their use is illegal without a prescription, and against the rules in Major League Baseball (MLB). Some of them, such as the Clear, a transparent liquid, and the Cream, a topical ointment, have intentionally vague names that mask their abilities. Others have shocking original functions that make a human's use of them almost incomprehensible. Bonds uses Winstrol, often injected into race horses to make them run faster, and Trenbolone, given to beef cattle to enhance their muscle quality. He takes on a beast's strength, and also one's aggression. He is curt and short-tempered with his teammates, his girlfriend, and even the men administering the drugs to him. He angrily continues to blast home runs through the summer heat, entertaining fans across the country who are enjoying his performance too much to care about his surly demeanor.

I am amongst this crowd, unaware that Bonds has taken an unfair shortcut. I am awed by his mighty abilities, but also obsessed with my own—like thousands of other American nine-year-olds, I have dreams of being a pro ballplayer. These youthful desires turn the Jamesport field into a theater, where my father and I quietly pretend that I am competing as if on a MLB team. We both know our true identities, and he probably knows that my future doesn't include professional athletics. But we want to get lost in the summer and our own imagination.

So Bonds and I go head-to-head. I get my batting practice chances under the Jamesport sunlight, requesting several opportunities a day from my dad. Bonds gets his rebuttal on the professional level at night under bright stadium lights. His feats are typed under his box score and

read by the nation. Mine are scribbled on a piece of paper in my room and presented to my dad on occasion. We each go through slumps and outbursts, but always remain within striking distance of each other. The calendar numbers rise and fall, but our totals keep growing, headed maybe for that standard of 70. 37, 38, 39 The figures fly by, as June turns to July. Harrison clobbers a ball to deep center field! Oh my that one almost hit the minivan in the driveway! I track Bonds' progress from the opposite coast. 51, 52, 53 We persist through the August heat. Bonds bombs one to deep right field! It clears the stands and splashes into McCovey Cove!

September arrives and we load up the minivan with clothes, books, unfinished groceries, a dog, two cats, and anything else making the trip back. The doors are locked and the water is turned off. In Brooklyn, I return to school for the fourth grade. On some weekends, my dad and I are able to escape out to Jamesport to play some home run derby and add to my statistics, but the weather cools and arithmetic homework awaits so we call it a season. I tally my home runs: 74. Various other numbers go unrecorded but not unremembered. The number of pitches my dad threw me. The number of afternoons we spent ping-pong tennis balls around the diamond he'd once pushed a sickle bar mower through. The number of times he ended up throwing me an extra bucket just minutes after telling me he had to go back to work. The number of steps I took as I scrambled around the outfield, frantically picking up tennis balls and racing against the setting sun.

Bonds continues his pace into October, and in the last week of the season he clubs home runs number 69, 70, 71, and 72, breaking the all-time single-season record. In his last game, on a cool night in San Francisco, he belts number 73. He has set a new record and sits atop the MLB throne, enjoying the adoration of the baseball world, including a nine-year-old boy from Brooklyn who reads about his exploits under a bowl of Fruit Loops and smiles because Bonds didn't reach 74.

The winter approaches. As I sit in class learning about the Revolutionary War, Bonds' body becomes as bloated and grotesque as his previous year's statistics due to the side effects of all the substances he is taking. His head swells and his hair falls out. His back breaks out in acne and his feet grow several sizes. He is a walking deformity, and casual observation would seem enough to incriminate him as a cheating athlete. But only positive urine tests can get Bonds in trouble, and the MLB does not test for steroids despite explicitly banning them. Thus, Bonds and countless others are able to use performance enhancing drugs (PEDs) with impunity. In a matter of months, mediocre players become good ones, good players become great, and great players, like Bonds, become extraordinary.

One might think that the MLB would impose thorough drug testing to protect the integrity of the game. But the performance enhancing drugs are also profit enhancing drugs. Baseball now has a gladiatorial edge to it: angry behemoths throwing, hitting, and running with power never seen before. Gone are the days when baseball is seen as game of pure skill and finesse, replaced by a more marketable product. Fans pour into stadiums, tune in to televisions, and buy up merchandise. The league rakes in the cash, and so do the players who provide the entertainment value: Bonds signs a \$90 million contract that winter. The more tenured fans suspect a dark explanation and call the league into question. The young ones, like me, float along in grade school naivete, convinced of baseball immortality. The rest are stuck somewhere in between, old enough to recognize the dubious results but unwilling to address them. They cling to the same innocent perception of baseball that defines my wide-eyed fanaticism, aware that an acknowledgement of the impurity of the game spells the death of their boyhood idyll.

Although steroids are often taken to help speed up recovery from injuries, the reality is that they also cause the body to break down. They increase muscle mass but don't offer proportionate growth for joints, tendons, and ligaments, the underlying connections that must support the muscles. A steroid user's body becomes unsustainable: ligaments and tendons, overburdened with unnatural amounts of weight, rip and tear. This consequence is seen all over the MLB, where more and more players must miss weeks and months with injuries related to these performance enhancing drugs.

The MLB as a whole becomes an unfortunate embodiment of this problem. It bulks up on superficial material in the form of entertaining substance-aided performances, but does not boast the system to keep it all together. Complaints begin to rain down upon the Commissioner's office from the likes of drug-free players, tired of being outshined by cheaters, and from baseball purists as well, incensed that the game's legends are being passed in the record books in an unscrupulous manner. Former players, having nothing to lose in their quiet retirement, speak to the rampant drug use in the sport, offering inside information and legitimacy to the hunt for cheaters.

Under pressure from fans and players alike, the MLB is forced to act. In 2003 they implement standard drug testing. Later that year, an IRS investigation of a popular steroid lab on the West coast leads to a federal raid of the establishment, during which files with players' names are seized. Two Sports Illustrated reporters release a book called *Game of Shadows* with specific and confirmed evidence of Bonds' doping. The MLB appoints a former US Senator, George Mitchell, to investigate

steroid use in the sport. He releases a report in 2007 full of testimonies of former trainers and receipts for drugs with ballplayers' signatures on them. In total, 89 players are implicated, including Bonds.

I grow into my teens during these years, and am forced to accept that my favorite sport is tainted. The reputations of the heroes of my childhood, whose names and numbers I used to wear on my back, are marched to execution by the public. Some of the accused claim the reports to be erroneous, the allegations to be malicious. Others admit to their sins as they continue playing, while the older offenders slip into oblivion. At age 42, Bonds plays on, but is considered the lowliest for leading such a ruse summers ago and chasing records not rightfully his. He faces the wrath of a betrayed fan base who boo him viciously wherever he steps on to the playing surface and throw fake syringes at him in the outfield. He retires at the end of the year, holding many statistical records but remembered in the eyes of fans as the villainous face of the dwindling steroid era. He disappears from the scene, a welcome development for many, and gradually his career moves from contemporary conversation to the history books. He is a smudge on the hundred year story of baseball, but one that is finally contained.

Years later I sit at a bar on the Upper West Side. Baseball highlights play on the several TVs mounted around the place. I have seen these replays before, but can't help but rewatch them. My love for the sport has grown more complex since my gradual understanding of its adulteration through PEDs, but it has not diminished. I still scroll through statistics online, strike up conversations with other fans on the subway, and munch hot dogs in the Yankee Stadium bleachers as my favorite team puts cleat to dirt hundreds of feet below.

Across the room is a tall, skinny man with a gray hat pulled down low near his eyes. He too watches the TVs, occasionally sipping at a dark drink. I recognize him as Austin Cole, a former college classmate of mine who was drafted by the Detroit Tigers, a professional baseball team, after he graduated in 2012, and sent to the bottom of the minor leagues to compete his way up the totem pole. At our university, he had been an elite pitcher, winning the conference Pitcher of the Year award and dominating his opponents throughout his four-year career.

I approach him and we shake hands. We were not close friends during our overlapping two years, but a quick chat seems appropriate for his brief return to campus. Besides, our fates are more intertwined than those of ordinary acquaintances. As a professional baseball player, albeit in the minor leagues, he still grasps at the dream I once had as a kid. His extended pursuit of baseball stardom blurs the lines between his

reality and my imagination, his adulthood and my boyhood. To speak with him is to reconnect with a former desire—to watch a fantasy grow tall and strong but also to observe it dictated by real-world constraints that a fourth-grader never could have foreseen. His immense talent and decision to ride it as far as possible equate to neither the reanimation nor the burial of my childhood aspirations; instead he reveals them as warped by time and money and other things that don't grow in the Jamesport grass.

I listen closely as he explains his life as a minor league baseball player. It is not enviable. Between April and September he has only four off days, two of which are spent almost entirely on a bus between small cities where his team draws modest crowds when compared with the tens of thousands that fill major league ballparks. On the road he shares cheap hotel rooms with three teammates. He is paid \$500 every two weeks, and gets nothing during the six-month offseason. He pitches well but falls prey to the politics of the sport: as a 23rd-round draft pick, he is considered a low-priority investment by the organization. He is laid away on the team's Low-A club, the West Michigan Whitecaps, four promotions away from the MLB.

"It's pretty disappointing," he says, and takes another sip of his drink.

"How much PED use is there?" I ask, hoping to take advantage of a rare interaction with someone on the inside. The question is still relevant, even years after the steroid era. Despite having an updated and difficult anti-doping program, the MLB still must struggle to keep up with ever changing pharmaceuticals that are designed to be barely detectable and leave the body quickly. Just months earlier, a dozen high profile players received lengthy suspensions based on failed drug tests and another raid of a drug lab.

He sighs.

"It's definitely still present," he says. "For example, testosterone clears your system in a matter of hours, so unless you get tested right after you use it, you can get away with it."

I nod. This subject clearly troubles him. His goal of reaching the majors is made even more difficult by his competition's use of PEDs.

"For some guys it's all about making it to the bigs and getting that paycheck. That's all they ever say around the clubhouse. That's how they try to motivate us and that's why players juice. For me, I'm still in it for the same reason as always. Ever since I was a boy I wanted to play the game I loved in the major leagues."

I nod in understanding—deep understanding.

He finishes his drink, wishes me luck, and walks out of the bar and into the night.

On the occasional weekend our family still drives out to our Jamesport house. My dad cuts trees. He moves plants. He waters the grass. On one night this past summer, we sit on the front porch looking out toward what used to be our little field, eating corn off the cob and recalling my apocryphal existence as a nine-year-old baseball superstar. My dad let the grass and bushes regrow once I outgrew the field. A dusty homeplate embedded in the dirt is the only proof that a field was once there.

It has been twelve years since I bested Bonds by one home run. The official MLB statkeepers are unaware of my record, but that doesn't matter. Bonds may have accomplished his feat against world-class athletes on fields manicured to perfection and got paid millions of dollars in the process. But hundreds of miles away, a dad and a son were doing it because they loved the game and each other. That is why 74 is more than 73.

There is now a long path through the overgrown grass that crosses our Jamesport property and leads to the main road. Out of boredom and nostalgia, I occasionally walk this path, looking back at our house behind me and around to the acres where I used to roam. More than once I have spotted a small gray sphere peeking out from the grass that borders the path: a forgotten tennis ball in its resting place. I never pick them up.

Phuong Vuong
2015 Gabriela Mistral Poetry Prize Finalist

What My Father Gives Me



do you like salted lemons?
my father asks me delicately
between his fingertips
he brings out and displays
a glass jar with floating yellow globes
and he smiles, saying
normally you can break them apart
but this time i put so much salt
they didn't soften

my father who gives me
salted lemons
makes offerings
when my silence seems
too prickly for much else
my father so good
at surviving,
even his preserved lemons
stay floating in salt water

Emily Kiernan

2015 Frank McCourt Creative Nonfiction Finalist



Domestication

Last week, my horse had to get his teeth done.

This is not unusual. Wild horses graze constantly, and this keeps their teeth worn smooth and flat, but almost nothing is wild these days, so points can develop on horse teeth, hooks and grooves.

I suspected this had occurred when my horse began to refuse the bit. He weighs nine-hundred pounds, so his refusals carry a certain emphasis.

Horses are built primarily for running away, and they sometimes panic under restraint. They may pull back when agitated, rearing and falling. They hurt themselves this way—get hung-up on ties or cut open on corners. They break bones and cut skin. They snort and yell, eyes bulged. The sound of slipping, scabbling hooves on concrete is one of the worst I know—a stomach-sick terror of a noise.

In such moments, a horse's largeness is only amplification of his delicacy—spindly legs and ballerina ankles, a thin swan neck with the vertebrae just visible at the crest. He has a heart the size of a basketball, and sometimes, when he is frightened, I can see it shivering through his skin.

So it's always a balance between gentleness and force, threat and persuasion. There is only so far you can force a subject.

Good horsemanship shares its methods with the governance of totalitarian regimes. You must expect inquiries about your strength, your ability to lead and to punish. There are other parts too—partnership and affection—but sometimes, when faced with another that could crush you, you have to posture up a bit. Bluff and bluster. You have to act tougher than you'd like, sometimes. Tougher than you are.

That's why I spent half an hour last week getting tossed around a wooden pen by a big, frightened animal I'm supposed to take care of. I began to think early on about his teeth—the possibility of hooks and grooves—but by then it was too late. My horse is a smart horse—sometimes I look into

his eyes and see a look of deep consideration, a wheels-turning look. He is capable of revolt if he were to realize certain kinds of resistance are possible. Once he refused the bridle, it became essential that I get it on him. It was an absurd situation, but the situation with a horse is always absurd. It's just love and power and nothing to level them off.

This is how you bridle a horse who does not want the bit: You take the bridle in your right hand and stand under the elegant arch of the neck. Your back to his chest—an intimate pose: he'd hurt you if he came forward, but he's not going to come forward. Your left hand maneuvers over the long bridge of his nose with a gentle pressure that draws his face down, buckling you into the negative space around him. You lift your right hand up behind his ears and slip your left thumb into the very corner of his mouth. If all were going well, you would guide the bit between the teeth, bend the far ear and then the near one as the headstall passed over them.

But all is not going well. The head flies up, and the body goes back—you try to hang on, move with him. If he bumps a shoulder into you, you toss your body back into his. If he breaks free, you chase him, as if the running was your idea all along. The ideal thing is to hold on, not get tossed off to one side or another, but to follow him straight back, to lever his head down, to let him back himself into the wall. If you get him there, you might make him feel trapped enough to give in, to see no other way out but the way you are opening. Or he might run you over—that's why the tyranny, the iron-fist act, so he doesn't think he can just run you over, though he can.

That is how it went for him and me. Finally, he backed into the corner. Finally, he dropped his head low. Nostrils tinged red and flaring. I got the bridle on him and, a moment later, I took it back off.

I called the vet. She came out in a white pick-up and stood stroking his neck. She asked how he did with needles, and I said he did fine. Usually true, but he must have caught wind of something. As the syringe got close, he began to shiver his skin and sidestep, the vein gone invisible in the quick rippling of the flesh. The first Crude Instrument of Control was produced—a device called a twitch. It was a foot-long, wooden club with a loop of chain hanging from the end. My horse's top lip was pulled through the loop, and then the chain was twisted tight. The lip bulged round and smooth, an inflated balloon, a weakening membrane. I watched as my horse grew calm. Supposedly, this does not hurt. Supposedly, it has something to do with endorphins.

The vet got the needle into the vein, and then my horse grew woozy, his big body swaying on too-small feet. He seemed surprised by how many legs he had, unable to manage them all at once. The next Crude Instru-

ment of Control was produced, something like a Hannibal Lecter mask with extra hardware. Long leather straps that fastened at the poll—that ineffable space between spine and skull. Adjustable, pulled tight. Into his mouth were slipped two metal plates which, at the turn of a cheek-side screw, were cranked open to reveal the shocking depths of his mouth. He tried to resist this—a few head shakes, a slight working of the jaws, but he was hamstrung and held by the inaccessible and secret places of his body.

Then the third Crude Instrument of Control was produced, and this is when he really freaked out.

If you have wondered how the actual work of equine dentistry is performed, this is the way: a huge metal rasp connected to a power drill. It looks and sounds like a small jackhammer, and the vet pushed it far back into my horse's forced-wide mouth. For this he woke up. He was too loose on his legs to make much progress backwards or forwards (though he tried—lurching and angry and white-eyed), but his head was free, and with this he made a valiant stand—yanking high out of the machine's reach or shaking mightily against the apparatus that held him.

It took an hour. He fought through four doses of sedative and would have fought through more if the vet hadn't stopped giving them, afraid he would collapse, unconscious, on top of her. By the end she was cursing openly, doing nothing to hide her disgust, her boiling dislike of him.

I think I was supposed to apologize for his behavior, but all I felt was a perverse and glowing pride—for his strength, for the sudden outcropping of wildness in this supposedly tame creature. His utter intractability proved to me its inverse—a capacity for willingness, for trust. Watching my unutterably stoned horse fling a full-grown woman around a box stall for an hour forced a reevaluation of every interaction we'd had—especially the hard ones, the ones where he'd wanted only to run away from whatever I was urging him towards. I realized that I'd never fooled him with my potemkin authority, and I hadn't worn him down: when he had done as I'd asked, it was—always, every time—because he'd chosen to. He was capable of choosing otherwise. I was proud of that and did not understand it.

When it was over, I left him to sober up. I paid the vet and got instructions—he'd gotten a few good zings with the power-rasp, she told me. She prescribed an antibiotic, a pain-killer. She did not think his teeth were the problem, did not think he would take the bit next time it was offered, but I thought she was wrong, that she'd missed the point entirely.

I walked him back to his paddock. He was quiet and stood with me for a long time as I stroked his nose and neck, loosened with my fingers the knots in his mane. Something felt shared between us—a creature love, a languageless understanding that encompassed our autonomy and dif-

ference. The kindly alienation of unlike animals. We did not know each other's limits, but the moisture of his breath condensed on my hands, and it was warm, then cooling.

James Tadd Adcox

excerpt from forthcoming Cobalt Press novel



The “survey of the literature” is fundamentally an act of repetition. How strange, then, that there exists to this point no comprehensive survey of the burgeoning scholarly work on nineteenth century philosopher and psychologist Constantin Constantius, who spent his life struggling with the question of repetition. This year members of the Constantin Constantius Society celebrated their namesake with the Society’s second annual conference. These notes, written in the conference’s immediate aftermath, do not presume to the sort of comprehensiveness the subject deserves; nevertheless, it is hoped that the following document will begin to rectify this omission in the literature to some small degree.

The author of these notes is a founding member of the Society as well as the Society’s former president. He—I—will not hide, when appropriate, his opinions on the actions of the Society, particularly regarding the recent decision by the board on the matter of executive leadership. He—I—understands that true objectivity comes not from hiding one’s own biases or beliefs, especially when dealing with sensitive or controversial subjects, but stating both one’s subject position and the facts as clearly as situation and evidence allow¹. But more on that at the appropriate time.

¹The present author is aware that a summary of the conference proceedings has been or will be offered up by former Society president and current interim acting president Professor Thomas Grinding, almost certainly a timid and lifeless recitation of the panels and presentations, with perhaps some albeit slight engagement with the ideas presented; but as Professor Grinding’s paper will not engage with the actual events of the conference—how could it, except in their shallowest, that is, their objective and outer manifestation?—the present summary is offered, in part, to fill these gaps. If it appears written in haste, this is because the present author recognizes the timeliness of such an engagement, undertaken while the body is still warm, so to speak; and he believes furthermore that there is only one in the position to do so.

There was a sense of hopefulness at the outset of the conference. The Society, as well as many of the non-Society participants, recalled the inaugural conference, under the presidency of Dr. Grinding, as a disaster. Questions were raised in some quarters regarding the desirability of hosting a second conference at all. Other members had argued for ignoring the existence of the first and urged an inaugural “redo”—an idea which certainly had its appeal, given the Society’s philosophical concerns. However, holding in mind Constantius’s dictum that “the interesting can never be repeated,” it was determined, for both historical and scholarly reasons, that the Society must move forward, building off of the previous year’s mistakes—each member, as the vote was cast, thinking to him—or herself, if not in fact muttering aloud: “God save us from such interesting events as those of the previous year!”

The lead-up to the second annual conference, it may be humbly noted, was significantly more successful than the inaugural. Panelists attended from all regions of the United States and a good number from abroad, including Japan, China, Western and particularly Eastern Europe, and one scholar from Australia. A particular draw this year was the venerable F. Barnabus Florantine, a tremendous name in Constantius studies, who had refused, on theoretical grounds, to attend the inaugural conference, but had agreed to give the keynote at the second.

Alexandra Smyth
2015 Gabriela Mistral Poetry Prize Finalist

What Kind of Shine



We let things rot because we
hate, or we are tired, or simply

because we forget. I don't
know which is worse. I'm not

sure that it matters to try to
quantify this passive destruction.

It smells like coffee grounds
and decaying vegetables,

the intimacy of familiar garbage.
I wish I could find a way to go

back. Wouldn't it be better to
start at the black, bittered end

and throttle towards the sparkling
clear of start? I do not long for

new beginnings. It's only this:
I wonder what kind of shine

exists beneath tarnish.

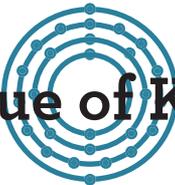
Alexandra Smyth



There is no form of lying that I am unfamiliar with. My favorite, the most subtle: that of omission. I find it is easier to breathe in the locked room of things I cannot tell you. This is more commonly referred to as autoerotic asphyxiation. I am not troubled by emptiness, after all what is a lung but the expansion of air? Sometimes you sigh into the windowsill, a quiet demonstration against my willfulness. What I wouldn't give for a good thrashing, some kind of proof that you still get jealous from time to time. This is but one example of my illness: a pathological need to constantly take up space. I watch you through the liquid in my wine glass and take some small form of satisfaction in my ability to always keep it near full.

Zack Graham

2015 Zora Neale Hurston Fiction Prize Finalist



The Virtue of Kindness

Victoria Steadman has never before been to Quentin Lane Baptist Church. A friend of her mother's recommended it during Victoria's going away party, saying that it was just like Blood of Christ Baptist back in Sauganash, only "a little smaller and plenty richer."

Victoria has no trouble finding Quentin Lane: it's conveniently located right off Route 43, a simple plastic building erected by the same real estate company that built the Presbyterian church down the road and the strip mall a mile past it. She parks away from the other cars in the lot but lets the engine run, ringing her hands and pressing her dress against her legs. She's never been good with strange places, and in her thirty-one year life she's never gone to a church other than Blood of Christ. When she finally turns off the car and gathers her things, she's shaking.

Quentin Lane reminds Victoria of Blood of Christ: little boys in oversized suits chase one another, teenagers exchange flirtatious glances, old women fan themselves with pamphlets. Victoria takes a seat. Moments later an organ sounds, the chattering dies down, the choir shuffles into view, and the congregation stands before bursting out in faithful song.

The song ends on a drawn-out "amen," and the pastor recites Ruth 3:10 three times before sermonizing on the virtue of kindness.

Victoria's mind drifts as the pastor speaks. She takes notice of the men of the congregation, their profiles, the widths of their shoulders, the women by their sides. One sports gold hoop earrings in his ears. Another's dreadlocks fall past the backrest of the pew.

Her gaze lingers on a smaller man. He sits alone. Every so often she watches his balding grey pate bob and sway fervently. Late on in the sermon, as the congregation stands and claps and sings, he turns and catches her staring dead at him. His eyes reel her spirit toward him. When Victoria finally looks away, she's out of breath.



Joe tries to click the button on top of the buzzing BlackBerry, but it slips out of his hands, falling onto the driver's side floor and sliding beneath the peddles. Joe slams on the breaks—the pickup truck behind him skids to a halt inches from his bumper, its driver honking and cursing.

Joe collects the phone and continues down Route 43 for a quarter mile before pulling into his usual spot in the Quentin Lane parking lot.

These people have no decency, he thinks. His clients and fellow attorneys call and email him during the only two hours of the week he ever designates that he's "offline." He reaches into his pocket to remove the device, but stops himself, thinking of what his mother would say if she saw her son checking his work emails when he was supposed to be in church.

Joe rushes into the church, saying passing hellos to those he sees and taking his usual seat on the far left, where few people sit because the floral arrangement blocks the view of the choir. As the congregation stands to sing the opening hymn, Joe gazes around the room at the sea of familiar faces and immediately notices the new woman in the blue dress. She has thin lips and high cheeks, and her long neck quivers beneath the weight of her head.

His chest warms. His fingers tremble. The hairs on his neck stand up.

He comes to his senses and turns away as the congregation sits. He can't look at her again. Not so soon. He tries to focus on the sermon, but he can't take it in. He doesn't remember ever feeling this way, and thinks for a moment he could be having a heart attack or a stroke, one of those life events that are known to strike men of his age, even healthy ones.

The congregation stands to sing once more, and Joe steals glance after glance at the woman until he eventually catches her staring at him. Their eye contact makes Joe's chest white hot. He can't think about anything else as he sits down and thumbs through the good book and feels the BlackBerry vibrating in his pocket. He needs to know her name.

The parking lot releases Victoria from religion. The practitioners ebb toward their vehicles, entangled in scraps of conversation. The sun's so hot Victoria fears patches of sweat might form beneath her armpits and certain areas of her back.

She lifts her arms away from her sides, allowing the wind to run through the space between her body and her dress.

"Excuse me."

She knows it's him before she turns around. His voice has a crisp, educated finish.

When she turns, she tries not to notice his considerable belly and not-quite-grey hair, which place him a year or two over sixty.

“Yes?” she says.

“I don’t mean to be intrusive, but have you attended a Quentin Lane service before?”

“I haven’t, actually...”

“What was your prior affiliation?”

“Blood of Christ Baptist Church in Sauganash, Michigan.” “And what brings you to Buffalo Grove? We’re a long way from Sauganash...” Joe chuckles at his own joke, but stops when Victoria doesn’t.

“I’ve just started teaching at Johnson Elementary.” “Oh is that so? What do you teach?”

“Fifth grade.”

“And how did you hear about us?”

“A family friend from home recommended Quentin Lane. She said Reverend Murphy’s sermons are far better than Reverend Dreyfus’s over at Mars Hill.”

“I used to attend Mars Hill—I can attest to that.”

He chuckles. She chuckles too. Her laughter spills from her nostrils and lips, sliding through her gloved fingers. “And how did you enjoy today’s sermon?”

“I did. I even enjoyed the Reverend’s opening passage.”

“Do you not typically enjoy them?”

“Well I...” Victoria clears her throat. “I often find them to be somewhat at odds with the moral of the sermon. But Reverend Murphy’s was acutely selected.”

“Acutely...” Joe whispers, letting the word melt on his tongue. Joe has never heard a member of the congregation use a word so eloquently, so casually...

“What’s your name?” he asks. “Victoria. And yours?”

“Joseph. Joseph Ray. You can call me Joe. My good friends call me Joe.”

They shake hands.

“Well, Victoria, I don’t ordinarily do this. Well, as in, I’ve never actually done this before. In any case, you seem as though, and I hope I’m not sounding, well, presumptuous, but, in any case, I have a membership to the Art Institute of Chicago, and the new Modern wing is opening this Saturday, and it’s going to have a few interesting exhibitions, and I was wondering if you would be interested in accompanying me?”

Victoria observes the man before her. Visibly trembling, he lifts his gaze from his feet, and something about him makes her smile.

“I’d... I’d like to go,” she says. “You would?”

Victoria can feel a profound goodness in Joe’s heart, a goodness that

warms her inside, something between a thimbleful of whiskey and a cup of soup.

“Yes,” she says.

Joe Ray makes Victoria think of something her mother once said. She and her mother were drinking coffee a week after Victoria received her diploma from Great Lakes Christian College. Her mother smirked in this rare moment of openness: “I married your father because he was strong. I knew he would protect me, and do anything to keep me, and he has. But sometimes I wonder if I would have been happier marrying a man who was good.”

Victoria writes her phone number on a crumpled receipt she finds in her purse. Joe says he will call her on Friday night.

Joe enters his mother’s room in the nursing home. She hears him enter and sits up.

“Joseph! I’ve been waiting for you...could you hand me my glasses? Nurse Amy left them beside the television because she said I needed a nap, but I told her that I was eager to play the bingo at four thirty...these people don’t understand me.”

Joe takes the glasses from beside the television and places them on his mother’s lap. She smiles at her son as he sits in the chair at her bedside.

Joe has never talked to his mother much. She stopped asking questions about his work and his love life a while ago, as she was tired of making Joe feel guilty about his inability to produce grandchildren and had no interest in the minutiae of corporate law.

“Momma, I’ve met someone.”

“Have you now?”

“I have.”

“And when did you meet this lovely lady?”

“Earlier today. She’s a new member of the Quentin Lane congregation. And I’ve asked her on a date.”

“Oh wonderful, Joseph!” Eva sets the Bible down and leans over, wrapping a frail wing around her son. Joe places his palm against her back and squeezes her tight.

When Victoria returns from church, she tries to read one of the novels she found in the “Important 20th/21st Century Literature” section of the local bookstore, but she loses the thread of the narrative every few minutes. After reading the same paragraph three times, she puts the book down and decides to make coffee, hoping a little jolt of caffeine will imbue the novel with the beauty and intrigue she found in it just yesterday. But the coffee scatters her focus so badly she can’t read a single sentence

without her thoughts hopping from one

Joe-related item to another.

At last, she decides to call her mother. "Hello?"

"Hi mom."

"Victoria...how are you?"

"I'm fine, fine mom. How have you—"

"You ain't fine, child. You sound like you just run a marathon. You alright? Did you go to church?"

"Yes..."

"And that church Mrs. Worthington told you 'bout...how'd you find it?"

"I found it quite suitable. I found the Reverend intelligent and captivating. The building itself is stunning. And the congregation is lovingpassionate... devout..."

Everything I could have possibly asked for."

"Well ain't that nice..."

Victoria lets her courage come to a boil.

"There was one member of the congregation I found to be particularly of note."

Yolanda bursts out into laughter that couldn't be more different from her daughter's—a hacking cackle that sounds more like a vulture than a person.

"You my daughter, Vicky, and I love you more than anything.

But you sure do gotta way of using that big brain and them big words to get around sayin' what you got to say."

Yolanda cackles once more. "You met a man."

"Yes."

"Is he rich?"

"Mother, how could you?"

"My momma had an expression whenever we talked about men. She used to say: you gotta paint the picture 'fore you hang it on the wall."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning you gotta know everything about a man 'fore you know whether he good enough for you. And I don't think even a handful of men in this world good enough for you, Victoria."

"That's sweet, mom." "So... what's he like?"

"Well he's... kind. Intelligent. Eloquent. Refined."

"How you know all that already?"

"Well he was extremely polite to me. He was well-spoken, well-dressed. And he asked me if I'd accompany him to the Art Institute of Chicago... he's a member."

"He did what now?" "He asked me if—"

"I heard you child, don't patronize me. My poor Victoria..."

“Mom! What are you saying? How is this a bad thing?”

“Well you only been with Reginald. He was a good boy. I liked him. All the other dates you went on, the men was trash.”

“Firstly, that’s untrue. Secondly, why aren’t you happy for me? Joe is kind. He’s good. Don’t you remember what you said about dad?”

“I know I know... but where he taking you again? An art gallery?”

“A museum. An art museum in downtown Chicago.”

“Downtown Chic...” Yolanda trails off. “Good Lord child, what has gotten into you? Your father and I taught you better than to run off with some high and mighty con man.”

“He’s not a con man. What are you talking about, mom?”

You’ve never even met him.”

“And you met him once. Tell me, Victoria, what kind of a

Christian man, our kind of Christian man, takes a woman to an art museum in downtown Chicago? Huh? I’ll tell you what kind—the kind who think they better than us.”

A protracted silence stretches between mother and daughter. “I’ve got to go.”

“Victoria, honey, wait... I—”

Victoria hangs up the phone, biting her lower lip to hold back tears. The moment passes; she lifts her head and takes a deep breath. She looks forward to Saturday more than anything.

Joe has already decided which exhibits he’s most excited to see at the Art Institute, but there are the matters of where to park, what to wear, and where to dine. Over the course of the week, Joe spends hours he would have spent reviewing contracts and filings thumbing through Zagat guides, magazines and the appropriate section of the Chicago Tribune in search of the perfect restaurant. His friend and fellow attorney Clarence catches him in the act on Tuesday afternoon and confronts him.

“Gotta hot date, Mr. Ray?” Clarence asks, sidling into Joe’s cubicle.

“Well, I... I wouldn’t say it’s a ‘hot’ anything,” Joe stammers. “I’ve met a... friend at church, and she has agreed to visit the Art Institute with me.”

Clarence rubs Joe’s shoulders.

“Joe, you gotta get snazzy with it. Unbutton that top button, buy a good bottle of red wine with dinner, and leave the Bible at home.”

Joe stiffens. Clarence laughs, and launches into a story about when he was a young, ambitious attorney right out of law school. Joe believes he’s heard this story three (potentially four) times since Clarence started at the company, but listens to the story anyway, stomaching his disapproval as Clarence delves into graphic descriptions of the things he did to some waitress-model that spilled a drink on his date (“was a real anger fuck,

you know what that is Joe?”). When Clarence finishes the story and goes back to work, Joe shakes his head, hoping no one spills anything on Victoria at any point on Saturday, and knowing he will never know what an “anger fuck” is.

Every night, Joe prepares dinner for the people living in his house. He adopted his drug-addicted cousin's children when they were little, and now they've grown up. The daughter, Chenise, is twenty-four, a nursing school dropout who lives in the house with a man named D'Wayne, who spent eleven months in prison for assault and claims to be an auto mechanic. Joe's attempts at plucking up the courage to evict D'Wayne always end in prayer, despite D'Wayne's insistence on cooking four eggs and five pieces of bacon for breakfast every morning (none of which he offers to pay for). Chenise's brother is an obese sixteen-year-old named Shawn. Shawn stands five feet tall, give or take an inch, and insists upon wearing white t-shirts so long he frequently trips on them.

Joe cooks meals from his mother's recipe book. He cooks macaroni casserole on Thursday night, which he burns because of an impromptu conference call. Joe instructs Shawn to set the table, which Shawn grunts about because he's in the middle of playing video games. Once everyone sits down, each confronts the tray of burnt casserole with an upturned nose. Joe helps himself, although he's more than generous with the barbecue sauce, while Shawn and Chenise only serve themselves corn.

D'Wayne sits quietly, texting on his cell phone.

“Would you like some casserole, D'Wayne?” Joe asks. “Nah I'm good.”

“Already had some food? Eggs and bacon, perhaps?”

D'Wayne sets his phone down and glares at Joe. Chenise gives D'Wayne a sideways glance. In an effort to appease the tension, Shawn grabs the tray of casserole.

D'Wayne breaks eye contact with Joe and stands up, announcing that he's going to McDonald's to pick up food. He asks if either Chenise or Shawn want anything. Both look desperate, but neither speak. D'Wayne departs.

After the front door slams, Chenise stands up. “Why you always gotta mess wid him?”

“I was asking a question.”

“You a lawya! You got cash! Why you care if D'Wayne get fed off what in the fridge?”

“Because he didn't put it there.”

Like all the other arguments about D'Wayne, Joe and Chenise's argument devolves into a screaming match, at the conclusion of which Chenise slaps Joe on the shoulders and chest until Joe storms away.

Joe locks himself in his bedroom before D'Wayne returns.

When Joe wakes up in the morning, no one has cleaned up. McDonald's wrappers cover the dining room table; a few insects crawl across the uneaten casserole. Joe clears the table and puts the plates in the dishwasher. He then takes the carton of eggs out of the refrigerator and cracks the remaining eight down the drain of the kitchen sink, tossing the carton in the trash before walking out the door.

Victoria's students have taken notice of her lack of attentiveness since Joe asked her out. On Tuesday she excuses herself from the classroom after making two mistakes while dividing two hundred and fifty-two by seven. The students laugh and laugh ("Ms. Steadman, go on 'n' gimme the chalk 'n' you take a seat," says an obnoxious boy). Victoria splashes cold water on her face in the bathroom as she wonders whether or not Joe has diabetes, a question she's been considering since she woke up.

As the week goes by, Victoria considers more and more questions about Joe. Does he have any children? What does he do for a living? How many women from the church has he actually asked out on dates? Does he want to have sex with her? Such concerns make her neck feel hot.

The teachers agree to a Margarita Happy Hour after school lets out on Thursday. Victoria orders a virgin daiquiri, and draws skeptical looks from a few of the teachers in doing so. Victoria has never tried tequila but doubts she would like it. When one of the teachers orders a pitcher of sangria, Victoria timidly asks for a glass, a gesture that puts all of the teachers at ease. Victoria gets involved in a conversation about which parents to avoid during parent-teacher conferences (Ms. Soon's advice: "If they care a lot or they don't care at all, it's best to tread lightly."). As the teachers depart, Victoria wonders if Joe would care a lot. He would, she decides. Or hopes. She can't tell.

Victoria has a mild headache in the morning, but the day is a breeze. She screens two movies for her class, both of which she rather enjoys herself, and shoos them out of the classroom before she realizes she hasn't had a cup of coffee all day. She wants to treat herself to another movie at the theater that evening, but knows she has to wait for Joe's call, so instead she returns to her novel and finally grasps the narrative.

She reads as carefully as she can, forcing herself to ignore the clock. By the time she's removed her makeup, showered and gotten under the covers with Tabitha, it is 10:00 p.m., and Joe has not called.

She goes to bed worried, and wakes up just as concerned. She eats half a grapefruit with a bit of honey and sugar for breakfast, glancing at the phone at least four times over the course of the meal. She decides to take another shower. As she's washing her back, she thinks she hears the

phone ring, and leaps out of the shower without washing the soap off. She opens the bathroom door, feeling soap suds trickle down her back and over her buttocks and down her legs. The phone isn't ringing.

She gets back in the shower and finishes washing herself. She decides to put on makeup and the outfit she picked out for the date, just in case Joe surprises her with flowers and a flurry of apologies. She sits on the couch and continues to read the novel. When she finishes the book, she sets it down and allows herself to check her watch. It reads 4:45 p.m.

Joe's Friday at work consists of emailing desperate men with MBAs trying to get a deal done. Clarence takes him out to a nearby Chinese buffet for lunch, and there counsels him on his approach to Saturday. Clarence fills Joe's ear with all kinds of inappropriate advice, but Joe, to his own surprise, secretly enjoys the support. Joe reads a bit of political journalism around 3:00 p.m., forgoes his afternoon cup of coffee, and decides he will go for a jog when he gets home.

Joe returns home to find his house trashed. Shawn has skipped school and has invited his friends over to the house, which reeks of pot and pizza and cheap beer. One of the windows is partially broken, and the television has a fine crack running down its right side. Joe trembles as he cleans the mess. Shawn is nowhere to be found. The destructive teenagers have come and gone, leaving a moaning Chenise in their wake. Thumping comes from her bedroom, thumping so loud it shakes the entire house.

Her room thumps away as Joe takes out the trash, changes into athletic apparel and jogs around his community for thirty-five minutes.

Joe thinks of many things as he jogs. He thinks of kicking

D'Wayne out of the house for good as soon as he gets back. He thinks of what Victoria would say if she saw the aftermath of a high school drug party in his house. He wonders if she would understand that he was not ready to raise his cousin's children, and that he secretly believes he has failed to do so. He wants her to be insightful enough to unearth these truths and alleviate his fear and his guilt and his sadness.

Joe can hear Chenise screaming as he approaches the house. When he enters, he charges up the stairs to find a naked D'Wayne attempting to break down the bathroom door, yelling through it at Chenise, who refuses to unlock it. Joe retreats downstairs and gets a baseball bat from the garage. By the time he's returned to the second floor, D'Wayne has broken down the bathroom door and cornered Chenise where she sits on the toilet, crying. Joe tightens his grip on the baseball bat and tells D'Wayne to pack his things and leave.

"Or what?" D'Wayne asks.

"Or I'll make you leave," Joe threatens.

Before Joe can swing the bat, D'Wayne lifts Joe into the air and throws him into the bathtub and begins to beat Joe in the face with his left fist then his right fist twice then his left fist, over and over, until shards of Joe's glasses are lodged in his forehead and his cheeks, until Joe cannot see, until both of Joe's cheekbones and his jaw are shattered. D'Wayne carries Joe to the top of the stairs and tosses him, Chenise slapping at D'Wayne's back. Joe topples down the stairs like a duffel bag, coming to rest on the living room floor.

Joe misses three weeks of work to recover from the injuries. Doctors place metal plates in his cheeks and his jaw. It takes three plastic surgeries to put his face back together.

Clarence visits Joe in the hospital more than Chenise and Shawn combined. During one of his visits, Clarence asks how Joe feels.

"Much improved," Joe says, "much improved."

"I'm talking about your emotions, Joe. Do you feel anger? Hatred? Disgust?"

"I only pity that boy," Joe says. "But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also."

Clarence tries to restrain his rage. He puts a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"I have a favor to ask of you," Joe says. "Anything."

"I ask that you go to my church and tell my reverend that I've been in an accident, and that I will return to church in two weeks."

"Consider it done." "Thank you."

"Joe," Clarence takes a deep breath, "I know you don't want to hear this, but you need to get those people out of your house. They are toxic. If for no other reason, do it for the lovely lady you met at church."

At first, Victoria attributes Joe's disappearance to nerves. She imagines him picking up the phone and dialing six digits of her phone number and hanging up before dialing the seventh. She can't find him in church on Sunday, but assumes he will eventually overcome his shyness. After a week passes without word, and she doesn't see him at church the following Sunday, she grows furious. Maybe her mother was right. Maybe Joe is a con man, a philandering sociopath. Maybe his shy manner and kind affect were for show.

Three weeks pass. Victoria grows concerned. She wonders if anyone has seen Joe since the Sunday they met. She assumes he has colleagues, friends—surely they would have reported him missing if he actually were in danger.

That Sunday at church, as the congregation trickles out into the parking lot, Victoria approaches Reverend Murphy.

“Reverend... I wanted to say how much I enjoy your sermons.”

“Why thank you, sister...?”

“Steadman. Victoria Steadman. I’m a new member.” “Indeed. Deacon Thomas tells me that you’ve already donated. Our many thanks for your generosity.”

“I spare whatever I can...” Victoria clears her throat. “I have a question for you, Reverend.”

“Yes?”

“Are you familiar with a member of our congregation named Joseph? Joseph Ray, I believe it is?”

“Of course. Mr. Ray has been absent from the last few services because of an unfortunate accident. He’s been recovering, and will return next week.”

“Oh no! Might I ask what happened? Was it a car accident?”

I’m so glad to hear that he will return so soon...”

Reverend Murphy smiles furtively at Victoria. “I’m sure he will be glad to see you as well, Ms. Steadman. As for the accident, I’m not sure what happened. I suggest you ask the man himself.”

Joe gets to church a half hour early the following Sunday and slouches down in his normal seat, his dark brown jacket and baseball cap an attempt at camouflage. He goes unnoticed as the congregation files in. When Reverend Murphy takes his place in the pulpit, he sees Joe and nods. Joe nods back.

“Joe?”

Joe turns to see Victoria sitting next to him. She tries to keep her composure as she observes his repaired face, his bloated, waxy features, landscapes of sunken skin and jutting bone.

“Hello Victoria. I’m sorry I didn’t call, I’ve... I’ve...”

She reaches out and runs trembling fingers over his forehead and cheeks.

“Are you O.K.?”

He nods, his eyes engulfed in shame. “Fine,” he croaks. “Just fine.”

An organ sounds. The choir shuffles into view. Joe and Victoria stand with the rest of the congregation, and together they sing a melodic affirmation of servitude and faith that rises and falls before ending with an “amen.”

Asha Dore



Jess and I took inventories of our bags and each other's bodies, checking that we'd packed our sleeping bags, extra undies, first aid kits, water pills, and duct tape in case our tennis shoes tore on the road. We slid our knives into their woven sheaths and hooked them backwards on our belt loops, the knives inside our pants, the covered blades beside the skin of our thighs. We checked each other's bodies to make sure the knives weren't visible through the fabric of our jeans, that the hems of our t-shirts covered the little clip that held them in place.

Because freight trains slid through our hometown, slowing down as they passed the anarchist coffee shop down the street from our house, most of the traveling kids we knew used Pensacola as a kind of home base. Most of them carried at least one knife when they traveled, though we'd never heard of anyone actually having to use one. Being choosy about drivers, traveling in groups of two, making sure one person always stayed awake—these were the ways we kept ourselves safe. Still, Jess and I knew how fragile our bodies were and how little our own skin did to protect us. We kept the long knives under our clothes, our secret, safe.

It was the summer I hitchhiked for the first time. My friend and roommate, Jess, had been hitching wherever she needed to travel for a couple of years. Both of us had paying jobs, a rare thing in the community of gutter punks and squatters living in the community beside the train tracks in our Florida hometown. Jess used the money she earned working at a daycare and I used the tips I earned waiting tables at a Japanese restaurant to pay for a two bedroom bungalow that housed as little as three or as many as six people at a time.

We could have driven my car, but hitching was a kind of rite of passage for the younger members of our community, a way to show that we were both committed to and hard enough to live as a part of a community that

thrived together, sharing resources, trading goods, all of us living a membrane away from the material world that Jess and I had grown up within and would later return to.

Jess went with me on my first hitch.

Before the summer started, Jess caught a little cold, nothing serious. A few weeks after the cold ended, a pink rash developed in the palms of her hands, her arms, her shoulders, her chest and belly. The rash spread across her whole body. Small bumps became long red splotches. Eventually, the rash lightened, went pale, died. The top layers of skin, the rash, detached. Jess went to the doctor. *A side effect of mononucleosis*, he told her. *You just have to ride it out.*

The kissing sickness.

In the beginning, she could peel the dead layers off in sheets. Short tubes of skin slid off her fingers. Little flakes fell off her back. Like Elmer's glue when you were a kid. Squeeze it out on the top of your arm, smear it in, let it dry, peel it off.

I was too afraid to hitch alone, so I rode a bus up to Baltimore to visit my boyfriend for a few days before I met up with Jess. We met at my boyfriend's dorm. We sat around his tiny wooden kitchen table, drinking hot tea and talking about the summers we'd spent separately. *All your skin falling off*, my boyfriend said to Jess, *like a snake.*

Gross, Jess said.

My boyfriend sipped his tea, his knuckles dotted, with pink and red and yellow paint. *It's one of those things that you can't ignore.*

One hell of a metaphor, I said, trying to sound like I knew what he was getting at.

It's just my body, Jess said.

One of Jess' friends, another traveling kid, showed up at my boyfriend's apartment with his Mom's car and two paper lunch bags filled with cut vegetables for our trip. The kid drove us twenty miles out of town to a busy truck stop. A few minutes after he dropped us off, the rain started. Cold and grey. Jess and I shivered under our thin hoodies; we knew summer and not much else. Across the parking lot, we saw a truck driver walk to his truck and open the door. He was bald and wore a loose t-shirt and baggy jeans. *If this guy won't pick us up, we'll go inside until the rain stops*, Jess said.

As we walked, our hoodies soaked up the rain. The wet hoods stuck to the skin on the sides of our faces.

We approached the driver, and he immediately agreed to bring us as far as Atlanta. *But I have to make a stop in Massachusetts first*, he said.

Jess and I looked at each other. Neither of us knew much about the

geography of the northeast. Massachusetts couldn't be that far away from Baltimore, and the rain was coming fast.

Sure, we said.

Marvin, the driver said and pointed at his chest.

Jess and I introduced ourselves.

Marvin pulled a lever and pushed the driver's seat forward so Jess and I could climb into the back. Marvin climbed in and closed the curtains that separated the back of his seat from our part of the cab.

Jess and I took turns sleeping while Marvin drove through the night. Five or six hours in, Jess leaned over to wake me up. She pressed a finger over her lips like *shhh* without saying it. She pointed at the crack between the maroon curtains that separated us from Marvin. Through the crack, Marvin's hand pressed buttons on the dash. A hushed voice came through the radio.

You picked up two girls?

Yeah, buddy, Marvin whispered. *And I think they're going to kill me.*

Jess and I rolled our eyes.

Marvin whispered into the radio, his words unintelligible.

Jess shook her head, bunched her hoodie into a pillow, and laid into it. It was my turn to stare through the curtains at the strings of rain blowing sideways across Marvin's windshield while Marvin drove and whispered into the tiny receiver, like a mouse in his hand.

Watching the rain, I thought about all the invisible bits of Marvin spread across his cab. Thirty to forty thousand cells a day, almost nine pounds of skin a year, sloughed off of our bodies into the air around us. All of Marvin's edges, lost in the air of the cab or stuck to the seats, the doors, the curtain between us.

In some hours, Jess and I would crawl out of the cab. The soles of our sneakers would land on the concrete beside some highway. We'd stretch and watch the back of Marvin's truck disappear into the morning heat. Our old edges would stay in the cab with Marvin. Some of his edges would stay with us, too.

In the morning, we arrived in Massachusetts. Marvin closed the curtains tight and told us to stay quiet while pulled into a warehouse, unloaded and reloaded his truck. We sat in the back finishing our bags of chopped cucumbers and baby carrots. Jess peeled off the last bits of dead skin that had flaked around her fingernails and piled the pieces on a flattened paper lunch bag between us.

We chewed and whispered while the cab heated up, telling each other

stories of the last month of summer. I had stayed in Florida, working extra hours to save money for classes at the community college that fall and camping out between beach dunes with my boyfriend for the three weeks he visited. I told Jess about the way my boyfriend laid behind me on the sand, running his finger down the knobs of my crooked spine, telling me my hips were thrilling and strange. How it made me feel like an alien when he said it. My boyfriend, the art school student, had such a different life from mine, flying from Baltimore to Florida and back in the summers, tearing open checks from his parents in the beginning of each month the way I tore open my paychecks. Different lives and different bodies. Somehow, there was still that point of contact. The skin of his finger sliding down the skin of my back, vertebrae to vertebrae. Cell against cell, skin against skin.

During the month I was in Florida with my boyfriend, Jess had been hitching around the Midwest. She told me about the rides she had caught before she met up with me in Baltimore, the way she spread out her hoodie on stranger's car seats to catch any skin that fell off. She told me about the boys she had met on the road, the way they held her body and didn't give a shit about the rash, the way it came apart when they touched her, the chill of the fragile skin underneath. *A body is just a body*, one of them told her.

She told me about a truck driver who picked her up while she was traveling with one of our mutual friends. The driver bought them a couple meals a day and snacks in between. *He looked kinda like Santa*, she said. *The best hitch ever.*

Marvin climbed in, turned the truck around, and started driving south.

By the afternoon, Jess and I had run out of food and things to whisper about. The humidity thickened. We had been sweating for a while, but without any airflow, we were really starting to stink. I leaned up through the curtains. A blast of a/c hit me in the face from Marvin's part of the cab. I held onto the starched edges of the curtains. *Can we open these?*

Marvin's eyes shifted toward me in the rearview. He looked scared, *No. Where are we?*

Almost to Baltimore, again.

I sat back and looked at Jess. The last time we had stopped to pee was at an empty truck repair stop the night before. We'd been holding it for hours. Jess leaned up through the curtains. *We need to piss right now.*

Marvin cleared his throat and nodded. A little while later, he pulled into a truck stop megaplex. Two diners, a hotel, and several dozen pairs of truck headlights blinked through the grey afternoon. My stomach throbbed. Jess and I gathered everything we had brought into Marvin's truck. Marvin didn't look at us while we hopped out. *Thanks*, Jess said.

Yeah. Thanks, I said.

We turned to walk toward the truck stop, but Marvin said, *What the hell?*

We turned back. He wrinkled his nose and handed us a shower card. He said, *Ya'll stink like white people.* Jess held the card with the tips of her fingers and stared at him. She scratched her shoulder. Tiny leaves of skin flaked off where her nails touched. More than I could even see.

Marvin fiddled with something in his back pocket and looked away from us, *Hurry up we've got a long drive.* We jogged toward the truck stop showers. *Do you think that's why he was afraid of us?* Jess asked.

Because we stink?

No. Because we look white.

I looked at the tops of my hands. I wondered if Marvin's truck would be there when we finished our showers. Did it matter that Jess wasn't white, that I was, that Marvin wasn't? Did it matter more that we were women and he was a man? Or that we could've afforded a truck stop shower if we wanted to?

A truck stop. A couple naked, teenaged girls and a tall, quiet man.

Who was the predator and who was the prey? What if nobody fit those roles? What if we all fit both of them? Within whose body did the danger actually reside?

Jess and I entered the truck stop under a sharp blast of a/c, followed signs to the women's showers. There was no soap in the shower, so we filled one of the our empty Ziploc bags with antibacterial hand soap from the bathroom sinks and brought it into the shower stall with a stack of paper towels. Jess and I took turns standing under the lukewarm shower, washing our faces and arms and each other's backs with the hand soap. We tried to dry off with the paper towels, but our bodies were so wet, the paper rolled off into tiny pieces and stuck to our whole skin.

When we left the shower, Marvin was there, leaning against the side of his truck smoking a long cigarette. He motioned for us to hurry up, and we jogged back and crawled into his cab. The next morning, he dropped us off on the side of the highway fifteen miles north of Atlanta. We walked for about an hour before an older guy picked us up in his rusted hatchback and drove us downtown. He dropped us off at a Taco Bell. We went into the bathrooms to run water over our wrists, splash our necks, comb the dead skin out of our hair, rub soap on our armpits.

We ordered four bean burritos and ate them fast. We were a five hour drive from home.

Jess and I waited at Taco Bell until the sides of our soda cups sweated themselves soft. We threw them away and walked between the hot metal

buildings downtown, stopping occasionally to ask people for directions to the bus station. We debated about splurging on tickets, walking for a couple of blocks. At a stop light, Jess waved at a car filled with teenagers. They pointed to the right, told us the bus station was *like six blocks away*.

I thought hitching would be more dangerous, I said.

Everybody thinks that before they do it, Jess said. *Having your own car is like a protection. Like a little moving house.*

I thought about all the road trips I had driven by myself and all the people passing me, all the people I passed. All of us alone in our cars, our cars separated by less than a foot, a dotted line in the middle of the road.

Hard to let go of all that, Jess said.

Jess and I felt like sellouts when we bought the bus tickets. We agreed to not tell anyone in our community that we had gotten home that way.

The bus was empty except for me, Jess, a guy sleeping under his ball cap, a girl listening to her headphones, and a couple curled, sleeping on their sides across two chairs each, their bodies separated by the aisle between the seats, feet pointed at each other. Jess and I sat beside each other out of habit. We stared forward the whole way home. We had already talked about everything in the back of Marvin's cab. We knew each other's summer stories, our histories, our whole lives, but it wasn't so much about the knowing, just the being. We had given each other permission to exist, side by side, all of the truths of our body delivered, accessible. We didn't even need to reach.

On the way home, I watched the heat choked trees pass by our window and thought about my boyfriend's body back in Baltimore. I thought about the house Jess and I rented back in Pensacola, my narrow bedroom, my short black apron crumpled on the floor.

I looked at my arms, tiny flakes of paper towel still clinging to the small hairs. Soon Jess and I would be home, taking turns in our own shower to wash it off, to cover our skin with soap and lotion that smelled like citrus. We'd get dressed and go to our jobs—Jess to teach her daycare class, me to the sushi restaurant. I'd walk in an hour before opening. I'd turn on the coffee pot and fill the tea maker. I'd cut lemons and polish wine glasses and stack bowls. I'd carry trays to customers for five or six hours, trays filled with diet sodas, fried pork, rolled sushi, and sashimi, squares of tuna, salmon, mackerel organized into small roses, pink or white blooms, octopus tentacles curling out on top of a cucumber salad like a kid's drawing of the sun, tentacles that some drunk real estate agent would pick up and hold up in front of his teeth like fangs, all the flesh lifted from one body into the mouth of another and transformed into the energy we need to make meaning of our own lives and the membranes between us, membranes that are always shedding and reforming, even

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when we can't see them.

And the flesh, consumed. A bite pulled into the mouth by a hungry tongue. Is it fish or flower?

The mouth decides.

Neil Serven

2015 Earl Weaver Baseball Prize Finalist



The Old Apple

My slump began when my father started showing up to my games. I knew he was there only because C. J. spotted the Miata in the parking lot. And then I saw him: sunglasses and visor, golf shirt, crown of cigar smoke, in the third-base seats.

He doesn't say hello, is the thing. He buys a small coffee at the Dairy Queen, stays until the sixth inning or so, gets into his car, and leaves.

I am now zero for my last twenty-six and nobody on the team is talking to me, it's like I've caught leprosy. We have a tournament in Kalamazoo in two weeks.

Coach gives his typical useless shit advice whenever we go through slumps. Relax, don't try to think. Keep your back foot planted, hands inside the ball, whip the bat through the zone. Trust your talents.

It's hard to put a good swing on the ball when I sense a hand coming down to yank me away by the collar.

Last I heard about my father he was the manager of concessions at Indianapolis Motor Speedway. He'd promise now and then to take me to a race but it never came together, with school and all. C. J. remembers him. So do Donleavy, Virgil, Lorenzo. I was in fourth grade when he and my mom separated and they wasted a year of everyone's time pretending they wanted things to work out.

I'd write him letters and mail them with a self-addressed stamped envelope, just like when I'd send my baseball cards through the mail to major leaguers to get signed. Sometimes he'd send back cash. Other times he'd send an excuse. He'd be in the middle of moving again, or waiting for a guy to pay him back. Andre Dawson asked for money for the sickle-cell kids. Paul Molitor told me to stay in school.

If Mom knows my father's in town she hasn't said anything about it. I'm

not sure if I'm supposed to be the messenger, it's like I'm nine again and we're eating dinner in different rooms.

One day my father shows up with a lady. She's not young, exactly, but she's not old like he's old.

Not a bad rack, Donleavy says, craning his neck over the roof of the dugout, trying to look casual. She's a clinger.

What do you mean?

I mean she's holding onto your dad's elbow like he's a balloon, gonna take off somewhere.

Donleavy's pop has cycled through a whole roster of women, every crayon in the box, so I guess I shouldn't feel so alone.

She's going to try very hard to get to know you, he says.

When it's my ups the guys all give me backslaps like I'm being trucked off to battle. Look alive, look alive. There's two on and none out and I'm the tying run. I look over my shoulder expecting to be pinch-hit for, but Coach just claps his hands like a puppet.

So I wing it, try to forget everything, and for the first time in forever I get ahead, three and one. Benji on deck after me has been tearing the cover off the ball so I know I ought to see something sweet.

But instead of a fastball I get this rinky-dink pitch that wants to be a slider when it grows up. It doesn't slide, just kind of dips and hangs. I stay with the pitch, try to foul it off, utterly stupid when I have a strike to work with. Halfway into the swing I hate myself, but I keep my hands back and manage to pull a seed and it stays fair. It hits the third-base bag and pops up into the third baseman's hand, he steps on the bag, then around the horn with the throw beating me to first by three steps.

Coach claps his hands. Look alive, look alive.

From the pay phone at the Dairy Queen I call my brother in his dorm room and hope he's not in the middle of rubbing one out.

The skirt shouldn't surprise you, he says. Skirts'll crawl out of the dirt looking for a free meal. At least he's getting some ass.

Richie, it's like he thinks I don't see him. He hasn't come by the house, hasn't talked to Mom. I don't even know where's he staying.

Or he's talked to her and it's when you're not around. Maybe they're talking about you.

Then what the fuck does he want?

How the fuck would I know, Jerry? I gave up trying to figure out Dad when he became a day trader. You remember that shit with him tying up the phone all afternoon? Stacks of folders and nowhere to sit at the dining room table? All boys-now-please-don't-bother-me-when-I'm-working,

when it was all so we could watch his crisis. You and me and Mom were the audience. Try to puzzle it out any more than that and you'll only end up hating yourself.

Then he asks, Did you wave to him?

No. Are you kidding? God, no.

You oughta. You wanna get back to your life? Make him shit or get off the pot.

My brother talks differently now, these wise-owl phrases. He is taking an Introduction to Philosophy course that all freshmen at his school are required to take. I know he is dipping again, because I can hear the puh that echoes into the cup.

Then he says, when the fuck did you start swearing?

In my next game I reach on a blooper that hits a rock or divot or some other lump of mercy and skips past the left fielder. I leg out to second base and the crowd cheers the way you cheer special-ed kids for getting off the bus by themselves.

I try not to look where my father is but the itch is too much. The people around him are clapping and he's making his way down the row to get out. The sun's in my eyes but I wave in his direction. The lady stops him, points at me standing on second, and like a fugitive caught by a searchlight, he waves back.

After the game we're in line at the Dairy Queen—me and C. J. and Kimmi and Dierdre and Plato and a few others, for once I'm in no hurry to leave—when he comes up like a shadow behind me, him and the lady. Gerald.

It's not like I can pretend this isn't happening.

Dad.

Mr. Whitney.

Nice whack out there. Tommy, Kimberly. Good to see you again. This is my friend Lee Ann.

Hello.

Your dad's told me a lot about you, she says. I like watching you play.

Lee Ann has a smile like melted crayons and with her sunglasses on top of her head she gives me that uplook that adults give you when they're afraid of you, to make themselves smaller. Kimmi and Donleavy and everyone scoot like a bad movie's about to come on, and I'm standing there with my money in my hand, sweaty and dirty and thirsty, sensing I'm about to be sold something.

My father is wearing a beige Members Only jacket that hangs lamely on his shoulders like a cape. There is a coffee stain on the front pocket. Lee Ann is still holding him by the arm like he'll fall over if she lets go.

Hell of a game, kid. I knew you'd break out.

Thanks.

His handshake isn't the squeeze I remember. It's thinner, bony: My hands have grown while his haven't, like they've caught up.

Notice you're slinging your throws now. Where'd you pick up that three-quarters crap? Remember like I taught you? Make the L with your arm?

I don't know what he's remembering, but he sure taught me fuck all about throwing a baseball. I could remind him that I won a Gold Glove last year and we have a chance to play States if we do well in Kalamazoo, but if I do that, he'll think I'm asking him to be proud of me.

Where I really learned to throw was in the woods of my grandmother's backyard, when we had to live at her house for a year until my mother pulled herself up, me and Richie pretending to be Roger Clemens and Jack Morris, hurling crabapples and watching them explode against the tree trunks.

I'm waiting for him to offer to take me out for milkshakes, or to pull a mitt out from under the seat of the Miata and ask if I have time to maybe have a catch with him, none of which I want to do, fuck this sad scramble sideways and upside-down.

So I ask, What are you doing here?

That's when he looks around to see if people are watching, then pulls out his money. The bills are folded in half and cinched by a gold-plated clip in the shape of a golf ball. My brother and I might have bought him that clip a few Christmases ago, I don't remember.

Business first, Jerry. Your mother and I agreed that I'd pay your way to Kalamazoo. Do me a favor and make sure she sees this.

He takes my hand and stuffs a wad into it. I can tell by how they fan out that there are a couple twenties and a bunch of singles in the middle. Now I've got cash in both hands, double-fisting like a warrior.

You must be so excited, Lee Ann says, the way you talk when you need to fill space.

I don't want your money, I tell him.

I shove the wad back into his hand. He's not ready for it and it drops onto the asphalt. He has to step on it with his foot so it doesn't blow away.

Doesn't matter if you don't want it, Gerald. That's for your mother. We agreed I would pay.

But I don't want it.

He leans toward Lee Ann and says, my kid thinks he's showing off for you.

It sinks in that this whole time I've been waiting for my father to show himself, I was auditioning for something, and the deal smells like rotten fruit.

Lee Ann bends over to pick up the money and hands it my father. He stuffs the wad back into his jacket.

When you get your voice back, young man, you can say thank you. That's what you do when someone does you something nice.

And then, to my back: Must've been after I left, when you learned to be this rude.

I wait for him to leave. Dierdre gives me a hug and asks if I'm okay. C. J. asks if I'll still be able to go to Kalamazoo. I say I don't know. I can try to scrape up the money, I'd rather owe it to anyone else.

Over my shoulder, my father and Lee Ann each buy soft-serve cones at the window. When they are finished they get into the Miata and pull away. The top is down so I can see the back of my father's head, grayer now, tufting out through his visor, and the gold watch on his wrist as his hand droops over the door.

I don't know why I want to remember this. It's not like I won't see him again. He'll show up the next time he's alone, or he thinks he's got a deal for me.

One thing my mother told me was to watch for people out to slow you down. Some kinds, they're not going anywhere, so they'd rather everyone else hang around the middle with them. I suppose that's a cozy way to live.

Andrew Elsagr



About a Girl

It's been three days since I've seen her and my last text message (a pretty lame joke actually, a feeble effort to remind her of what a funny and un-serious guy I can be) went unanswered. It seemed like my life was on fast forward too, everything happening so fast to me, a year flying by faster than a bullet, but then we decided to have our little "catch-up coffee" and she said some things and I said some things, and now, every hour drags on and every waking minute is stretched out into an eternity. My friends (and this is friend in the loosest sense of the word) tell me I've got a bad case of heartbreak, but I deny it fervently. I do not have a broken heart. I did not like her that much, and I certainly wasn't in love. I just liked her company and miss her. Nothing more.

Since our last date I haven't really had much to do. I've gone a couple times to the grocery store where we first met, looking over my shoulder for her every so often, making a special effort to linger by the can of beans which actually sparked our first conversation. Unlike most good memories, I remember that day well. The forecast had said it would be eighty, almost ninety degrees, so everyone wore their summer outfits, but by noon it had shot down to the forties, and suddenly everyone in town was underdressed and freezing. I always keep a jacket in my car, and I can recall how people gave me envious looks as I wore it around that day, warm and snug. I had been given a list of groceries to buy for my grandmother, and since she never specified (or cared, really) which brands I bought, I just got whichever and tried to get out of the place as fast as possible. When I got to the canned goods aisle I saw her standing there, radiant, lost in thought. I tried not to stare so she wouldn't think I was a creep and kept my head down as I snagged the first can of beans that I saw. I didn't even try engaging her in conversation—she was in a whole other league, tax bracket, and area code.

I was walking away from her when she called out after me.

“Hey! Hey, wait a minute!”

I didn’t think she was talking to me so I kept on walking briskly, not wanting to turn around and embarrass myself.

“Excuse me,” she said again as she placed her hand on the back of my shoulder.

“Hmm?” I hummed awkwardly, turning around cautiously to face her.

“This may sound weird, but how did you know which one to choose?”

“What? You mean which can of beans?”

She nodded her head.

“Beans are beans,” I laughed. “I don’t think it matters what brand you get.”

“So you just came up and chose a random one,” she said, frowning.

“Pretty much.” I paused for a moment, realizing that this was the point where she either said thank you and I left, or I kept going and tried to get her number. I realized it was a long-shot, but why not?

“You try it,” I said.

“Sorry?”

“Come on, try it. Try to pick a random one without even thinking about it.”

“I don’t know,” she looked down with a shy smile appearing on her face.

“You can do it. I’ll guide you every step of the way.”

“You’re screwing with me,” she said playfully.

“I’m just trying to introduce you to the can of beans that will change your life.”

She chuckled, “So it really doesn’t matter which one I get?”

“Hey, at the end of the day, it’ll smell the same no matter what brand you get.”

Damn it, I thought to myself. Damn it, damn it, damn it, a poop joke, leave it to me to make a goddamn poop joke to a hot girl I just met.

But she just laughed. “That’s funny,” she said. “What’s your name?”

“Elmo.”

“Elmo? Like the—”

“Yes, like the furry red monster. I know.”

“Your parents named you after a furry red monster who’s in love with his goldfish?”

“It’s a family name, actually, but they’re the type of sadists who’d do that to a kid. So, anyway, about these beans. Here’s what I want you to do. Close your eyes and spin around three times. Then reach out in front of you and take the first can your hand touches. Got it?”

So we went on like that, making jokes, daring each other to do various things in the grocery store (embarrassing things on my part, but hey, when it’s for a girl does it really matter?), until I worked up the balls to ask for her number. I remember sitting in my car staring at the sheet of paper

with its seven holy digits. It didn't feel real; I didn't think I was capable of taking down a girl like that, but I just had. And I was happy. I thought we were going to be golden, but I should've known right from the start. When your first conversation involves shit, that kind of sets the bar for the rest of your relationship.

I've been reading a lot of Hornby lately, *How to be Good* especially. It amazes me how he writes from the point of view of a woman so convincingly. If I hadn't known the author's name I would have had no trouble at all believing that he was female. After reading it I even tried to mimic him, you know, write a story from the point of view of a chick, but I just couldn't do it. Whenever I read over the story, I discovered that my protagonist thought like a man, spoke like a man, saw the world through the eyes of a man. It made me realize that, after everything I've been through, I still don't know jack shit about women.

She's read my stories before, and I've read her a lot of her poetry. Unlike my writing, her poems are very satirical, purposed to make a mockery of everything she hates in this world. A few of these objects include high heels, olives, walk-in showers, hummers, and basically anyone who makes over fifty grand a year (so you can imagine how she reacted the first time my parents invited her to dinner—the silverware alone was enough to make her vomit). She also had no shyness when it came to her work. I mean, the girl gave me a whole portfolio of her poems on our second date for crying out loud, and she would get this strange kind of buzz off my approval. I, on the other hand, am extremely timid when it comes to my stories. I've only shown them to her and my sister (not a fan of my work, under the belief that the short story was created for wannabe writers with neither the talent nor diligence to write a novel) and my grandma. When I asked my grandmother what she thought about my stories, she said, "The writing is good, but there is so much sex! Sex, sex, sex! Don't you have anything else to write about? Is that all you can think of?"

And to this I responded, "Well when I was younger I'd write about murder, but these days murder is so cliché. Sex is the only type of murder that can still surprise people."

And my grandma just rolled her eyes like she does whenever I try to be deep. She's the only one who can always see right through my phoniness: the truth is that I write about sex because I'm a horny bastard.

I call up Stan, tell him I'd like to take him up on his past offers to take me golfing. When I pull up to the country club an hour later, I see that I am vastly underdressed in my sweats and Metallica t-shirt. Stan tells me

it's all right, but I know from past experiences (his critiques of my table etiquette when we used to eat out at restaurants in college, his disbelief at how "lazy" the knots I use in my ties look, the way he tends to "forget" to invite me to parties with his old private school buddies) that he's already regretting inviting me.

We start on the driving range and he lets me use one of his irons. I fail to make contact with the ball my first ten swings and he tells me to keep trying while he goes to work on his driver. He hits the ball a good "two football fields" and just tells me to do what he's doing. In the next fifteen minutes I hit the ball maybe three times, and the farthest one I hit isn't even close to the fifty yard flag. Eventually, an old-timer Stan greets as Mr. Knox comes over and tries to help me out but gives up politely after five minutes. Finally, Stan says I can take a break and we head over to his golf cart. For the next hour I sit in the passenger's seat as Stan plays a game of eighteen holes with his dad, the two of them arguing like a divorced couple the entire time.

Stan invites me to stay for dinner at the club with his dad and his dad's girlfriend, but I tell him I've got plans and I see the ensuing relief in Stan's eyes. When I get back home my grandma asks me if I had fun. I say I did.

It's a full week, a week of doing nothing, a week of being unable to write, a week of being unable to read, a week of still no calls from my job interviews, a week of checking my empty inbox for emails from literary magazines I sent submissions to nearly a year ago, a week of my text still unanswered, a week of Grandma asking if I've found an apartment yet, a week of saying not yet, a week of my parents' unrelenting invitations to move back in with them, a week of my stubborn refusals, a week on my couch, a week still sad. It's a full goddamn week.

Then my cell phone rings. It's Scarlet, my sister.

"What do you want?" I ask.

"Nice to know you're happy to hear my voice," she says.

"I'm a busy guy, Scarlet, can you get to it?"

"Well it's not just me," she says. "It's dad, too."

"Hi, son." I hear my dad say. Great. A conference call with my two favorite people.

"Dad, I'm not going back to school," I say in a way that probably sounds rude to anyone who hasn't gone through the shit he's made me go through. "I know that whatever you've got to say next is just another one of your schemes to convince me, so I'm gonna hang up now. Bye."

"Wait, son, wait. Just wait a moment. Please."

"What."

"I haven't seen you in a while. Neither has Scarlet," he says.

“We miss you,” my sister says, but even as she says it, I don’t feel missed at all. I feel like the opposite. What would that be? Unwanted? Forgotten? Patronized? Yeah. That’s more like it.

“Well that’s sweet,” I say, but neither of the two are very good at picking up sarcasm so I continue. “Is there a point to all of this? Because if you guys just called for a little chit-chat you can come to Granny’s and do it in person. We live in the same city if you haven’t realized.”

“Elmo,” my dad says, “I just want you to know that I feel bad about not spending enough time with you—”

“We both do.”

Shut the hell up Scarlet and let the man finish.

“Yes, Dad?”

“Well,” he pauses dramatically, like they do in movies before saying something intense that always winds up in the trailer. “Scarlet and I are going to DC. We want you to come with us.”

“No, thanks. I’m good.” And I hang up the phone.

“Who was that?” I hear my granny call from the kitchen.

“My father.”

“What did he want?”

“To tell me he misses me.”

“That’s sweet of him.”

“Yeah. That’s what I said.”

The next day, during the middle of Family Feud (this episode was a special. instead of two families it had strippers versus wrestlers and every question had some sort of sexual connotation. my personal favorite: name something you might see a squirrel at the park doing with his nuts. strippers won.) I hear the doorbell ring and answer the door to find my mother with a slightly disappointed look on her face. I kiss her on the cheek and invite her in. I ask her if she wants tea but she just sits down on the couch and gets right to it.

“Your father told me you weren’t too happy with him on the phone yesterday.”

“Well excuse me for not being overjoyed at the sound of his voice.”

“No, stop it. We’re going to have a mature discussion. Can you be an adult?”

“Fine,” I say. I give my mom more of a chance than my dad. Even though she’s also a doctor, she isn’t always trying to get me to go back to college to fulfill the med school requirements. With my dad, I’m afraid to say anything because he’s good at using my words against me. Any hint of unhappiness from me, and boom, he tells me about something that’ll make all my problems disappear: a big fat MD after my name.

“The way I see it, this trip will be totally harmless for you. You don’t have to pay a dime, you get to stay in a nice hotel, eat good food. Wouldn’t it be a good idea to get out of this place for a bit?”

“I don’t know, Mom. I’m doing all right,” I say, but we both know that isn’t true. I’m watching *Family Feud* at one in the afternoon for Christ’s sake.

“What about Kasia? You could bring her along,” my mom says, and there it is, the first mention of her name since the day the two of us split. Should I tell her or should I—

“She’s busy,” I say, and leave it at that.

My mom tells me to think about it before leaving and I do think about it. I think about it the rest of the day as I go from channel to channel, from movie to movie, from book to magazine to YouTube to my notebook, to the story I’ve been working on, frustratedly, unsuccessfully, the story that baffles me and angers me, and the story that I now find myself unable to write, incapable of finishing. It is the story that makes me put down my pen and make up my mind about DC.

Six months later. Time has passed in the way that it does, slowly yet quickly, refusing to allow your mind to catch up. I have changed (for the better, I think), the people around me have changed, and the world has changed. It’s half a year later and I’m pushing a row of shopping carts through the automatic sliding doors of the grocery store where I now work. I take off my fluorescent yellow vest and my boss tells me he needs me on register number three for the next hour until closing time. Since the store is practically empty, I bring my backpack along with me. I sit on the stool behind the register, putting the backpack on my lap, and I reach inside for my anatomy textbook—my professor’s assigned nearly sixty pages and I know I’ll be too tired to read if I wait till I get back to my apartment to start (plus, my roommate hasn’t yet discovered the innovation of headphones)—but while I’m rummaging around, my hand comes into contact with something familiar, something I have completely forgotten about. I pull out the thick notebook and open it up, flipping through the ruffled pages containing all the stories I’d written at a point in my life that feels like a bad dream I can’t forget. I skim over some of the stories: stories about me, stories about her, stories about failure, stories about dreams, and I realize how sad I used to be, how pathetic my life was not so long ago. So I shut the notebook, toss it in the garbage can at my feet, and put the anatomy textbook in its place. I take one last glance at the notebook and force myself to say goodbye. Goodbye forever.

I’ve finished twenty-five pages and it’s almost closing time when I see her walk in. She isn’t Kasia but I think it’s safe to say she’s a lot more beautiful.

She's got on a tight tank top and a pair of Nike shorts that make her look like she's been jogging although she doesn't appear sweaty at all. I watch her as she shops and notice that she has this systematic way of doing things. She holds a list in her right hand while she pushes the cart with her left, she knows exactly where everything is, and instead of asking for help when she needs to reach a box of cereal that's too high for her, she retrieves the footstool we keep in aisle three as if this place is her own house. When she finally places the last item into her cart, she heads over to me, her brown bun bouncing with every step.

"Hi there," she says with a smile.

"Hi," I say back. She's got a lot of groceries but I take my time, trying to think of something to say to her.

"So," she says, eying my textbook, "you're in school?"

"Indeed I am."

"What are you studying?"

"Medicine."

"That's cool. I'm pre-law. I've got exams coming up, actually, that's why I've got all this junk. Me and my study buddies slash roommates switch off and today was my day to make the run."

So it goes about as boringly as that. I introduce myself as Mo, she introduces herself as Rachel or Rebecca or something else that begins with an R, and, after briefly debating our views of America's educational system, she gives me her number. I'm not ecstatic but I can't say I'm disappointed either (imagine bringing a girl like this home to my parents—they'd go bonkers).

Finally, I get to the final item on the belt. It's a small can of Ortega black beans. I pick it up, scan it, but in the moment before I place it in the bag, I hesitate.

"This is going to sound weird, but just tell me. Why did you pick this can of beans out of all the ones you had to choose from?"

"This one's the cheapest," she says back without pausing to think. "I'm a smart shopper."

"I can see that," I say, and look down to avoid her eyes.

She pays debit, and (of course) she's a member of our rewards program so I give her a discount. I thank her for shopping with us and she tells me to call her sometime. I tell her good luck with exams.

By the time she's gone it's closing time. I look at the piece of paper where she wrote down her number and put it in my textbook as a bookmark before shutting it. I put it into my backpack and then look back at my notebook, which is still sitting there in the garbage can like a stick of dynamite, waiting patiently for someone, for me, to ignite it. Sure enough, I find myself picking it up and opening it to its final story, which I left un-

COBALT REVIEW

finished all those months ago. My boss stops by on his way out and tells me not to forget to lock up. I look back over at him with a pen now in my hand and tell him that I'll try not to stay for long. I'll try. I'll try my best.

Donora Hillard & Goodloe Byron
Excerpted Poem and Illustration



Jeff Bridges

You visited for the weekend
and I am running away with you to Mississippi.
You visited for the weekend
and I chipped my pedicure on very many walls.

That was overly specific but felt necessary,
like the gong in Jeff Bridges' driveway.

It was better than you in a hat.
Better than you on a Vespa.

Better than Jeff Bridges
healing that deer with his hands.



Christopher Malcomb

Frank McCourt Nonfiction Prize Finalist



You enter the teashop's courtyard by slipping through a street-side iron archway and down a dark hallway. The cloudless sky opens up as you hit the curved path and ascend, past terraced waterfalls and miniature natural landscapes, towards a smooth concrete patio. It is late afternoon, a time when you feel most at peace here, the shadows now beginning to darken the young Japanese maples, the border of green bamboo, the rust-colored metal tables. The sun is hot today, but those shadows are cool and inviting, and you are optimistic. For the first time since you began meeting strangers here, it was your date that suggested this place.

You began dating again a month earlier, a year after your last break-up, a year in which, amidst the responsibilities of graduate school, the sting of approaching forty, and the efforts to heal your heart, you surprised yourself and found a hobby.

Quietly, methodically, you have read books, attended classes, visited teashops, and assembled a collection of tea wares for practicing proper steeping and pouring techniques. You have memorized the ritualized, meditative movements of traditional Chinese *gong fu* tea service, finding them to be both a distraction and a balm; and you admit—albeit reluctantly—to the pleasure of sitting alone in your apartment at night attempting to coax forth a particular tea's subtleties: a full, buttery smoothness; a delicate stroke of jasmine or honey; a salty tinge followed by a mellow, warm bite of spring grass. Tea has become your most reliable companion, which makes it all the more upsetting when, despite your efforts, it doesn't cooperate, forcing you to sip a bitter brew and wonder just what you are doing wrong.

You see her first. She is heavier than you expected, but has soft features and walks with sexy confidence. Her lips are full, her eyes dark, and her hair cinched into a glossy black ponytail. She adjusts the bag on

her shoulder, glancing sideways as she passes the bronze Buddha statue nestled amongst the low green ferns along the walkway. Her clothes are casually stylish—khaki pants and a white cotton blouse with a wide collar—but as she approaches you see the remnants of a day in a classroom: juice stain on her knee, stray streak of blue ink on her cuff.

She asks if you are the man she's supposed to meet. Yes, you say. She extends her hand; her grip is strong and slightly slippery. There is chalk dust under her fingernails, a few of which are bitten down to raw nubs. You smell the sharp tinge of her sweat, softened slightly by fading perfume. You feel slightly turned on.

She is the sixth woman you have met in this fashion. You place an Internet ad seeking a tea date. You list your vital statistics and cite your interests: yoga and hiking and meditation and travel and bookstores. You mention that you are a writer, a former teacher, a current graduate student. You always state your love for tea.

If initial emails are promising, you suggest meeting at this teahouse, where the manager knows your name and the attendants let you make tea in the traditional style, using a three-piece *gaiwan* cup, a small serving pitcher, and a separate drinking cup. Other guests drink directly from the *gaiwan*, as the casual Chinese person might, but since it's easy to ruin the tea this way, you worry that many will leave the teashop not fully understanding the possibilities of truly good tea. Still, you try not to pass judgment. If someone inquires, you eagerly introduce him or her to *gong fu*. Otherwise, you remain quiet.

Your date moves past you and up the stairs to a balcony overlooking the courtyard. You follow her to a table poised halfway under an umbrella, where she drops her bag and sits in the chair in the shade. You sit in the sun, slightly perplexed, but assured that she knows you must order your tea inside the shop. Maybe she wants to chat first, or discuss her favorites before choosing the tea you will share. At least this is what you *hope* she wants. Then you can brew it for her, demonstrating your skill with the tea implements while casually dropping tidbits about the health benefits of aged *Pu-erh* or how an Alishan oolong is fired, rested, then fired again until the tea master's desired flavor is evoked. While this may seem manipulative, you prefer to label it altruistic. You want your date to be relaxed, to experience the best sides of *Camellia sinensis*. Even if you never see her again—which has been true for each date you've already met in this courtyard—at least you will have treated her to a good cup of tea. That counts for something, right?

It is hot in the sun, and a trickle of sweat rolls down your back. Your date, still silent, is now looking over the railing into the courtyard. Again, you consider mentioning ordering tea. Instead, you ask her about the

presentation she was to give before meeting you today. You ask how it went, momentarily fearful that your tone—or the question itself—might appear overly familiar amidst first-date awkwardness.

“The meeting was postponed,” she says.

“Oh,” you say. “Well, what were you supposed to talk about?”

She looks directly at you, mildly annoyed. “It was no big deal. Just a new curriculum.”

You blush slightly and glance down at the courtyard filled with people. The attendants, who don’t know you are here, are carting *gaiwan*-filled trays and pots of hot water to and from tables. You see a college-aged couple, backpacks slung over their shoulders, sit down at the table near the door, in the shade. A week earlier you sat at that very table, suffering through a half-hour with a 35-year-old Japanese astrophysicist who answered all questions with one or two words. You expect some anxiety, even fear, on these dates, but nonetheless were relieved to politely withdraw after three awkward infusions of White Peony. As you left, she handed you a gift, a small bag of dried heirloom flowers, folded into paper resembling an origami butterfly and complete with steeping instructions etched in delicate pencil strokes: glass vessel, 160°, 6-8 minutes. Later, you steeped some and sipped it while watching hummingbirds from your porch. It was a delightfully sweet, marigold-colored infusion that you felt guilty for liking so much.

You turn back to your date. “So...you teach?”

She nods.

“What subject?”

“Wait,” she says abruptly, leaning forward. “What is it *you* do?”

This startles you. You have already exchanged several emails, not to mention the details in your original ad. But maybe she confused you with someone else. Or just forgot. Online dating can be disorienting. “Well, right now I’m getting my MFA in creative writing.”

“What will you do with that?” she says. “Like, counsel people?”

You politely explain that MFA stands for Master of Fine Arts. It’s not a therapy degree, but you do “counsel” people in a sense, as writers. Your chest tightens slightly; you glance over the railing again. Maybe she *does* think someone will bring tea menus up the stairs. You wish they would.

“I don’t know,” she says. “Writing doesn’t seem like much of an *art*.”

By now you are sweating not only on your back, but also under your arms and behind your knees. You offer a stock reply about the writer’s “art” being careful word-choice, sentence construction, and the like, which, if done properly, elicits a certain feeling, creates a desired effect, or makes a particular aesthetic, political, or social statement. She doesn’t seem much interested, so you repeat your inquiry about her teaching,

adding that, yes, you have also taught.

“What school did you work at?” she says, ignoring your question. You notice that a strand of her black hair has fallen loose and is dangling across her cheek. It looks sexy to you, bold and shiny above the paleness of her skin. She flips the hair back behind her ear as you answer her question.

“So you left to go to graduate school?” she says.

You nod.

“Huh,” she says. “Couldn’t you just go during summer? That’s two whole months. Plus Thanksgiving, two weeks in the winter, and another week in February and March. And then those long weekends. Seems like plenty of time to do graduate school. I actually am halfway to my Master’s.”

She keeps talking for another minute or so, during which time you recall a friend’s blind date story. He got his coffee to go, met the woman, asked a few questions, and answered some others. He felt zero connection, so after five minutes he stood up, extended his hand, and thanked her. Then he left. Just like that. “Why waste your time? Or hers?” he told you.

You had laughed heartily when you heard his story. How authentic! How honest! If you’ve made a mistake, just admit it and move on. No harm done, right? Still, you could never imagine being so bold. Not that you’ve ever needed to. The previous week was uncomfortable, but your date was just enormously shy, a forgivable trait. Others you’ve met have been gregarious and interesting, and although that elusive “chemistry” that everyone seems hopeful to experience when they meet in person seems to have evaded you, the dates were fun and the partings amicable. Besides, you know the slippery nature of true connection, how early signs may not always indicate where something is actually going (or who someone truly is). Although it’s a bit cliché, you try to focus on the *journey*, not just the destination.

And so you don’t bolt. Instead, you defend your decision to leave your job and try the writing life. You speak about the desire to focus exclusively on your art, about fully embracing your studies without distraction. Still, you feel weakened, as if she’s seen through your façade and knows that your debt is mounting and “literary success” isn’t exactly knocking down your door. Despite this, you resist suggesting that she’s calling you lazy. Or stupid. Or that she resents you for doing something that she lacks the guts to attempt. You don’t call her rude. You don’t tell her to mind her own business.

She nods, unconvinced, and turns back towards the railing. Below, you notice that an attendant has brought two gleaming white *gaiwans* to the table with the young couple, removed the lids to reveal two small

mounds of bright green tealeaves, and poured a stream of water into each cup. Steam rises, then disappears into the air below you. The attendant replaces the lids, says a few words, and turns back towards the teashop. You imagine the curly green leaves starting to unfurl, the liquid turning a slightly pale yellow. Then you start to worry. Do they know how long to let it steep?

You recall the night when your tea teacher, after a class months earlier, taught you how to properly prepare an infusion of Lu Shan Clouds & Mist, a green tea whose tiny, delicate leaves are so fragile that she dropped them *into* the water rather than the other way around. Prior to that moment, you had wasted a whole 2 oz. bag of Lu Shan trying to get the taste right, your efforts only resulting in a liquid—you hesitated to even call it *tea*—that was watery, or bland, or burnt, or so astringent it was nearly undrinkable. Now, noticing that the couple seems almost unaware of the two *gaiwans* on their table, you begin to feel an odd, yet unmistakable, sense of sorrow.

“So,” you say, leaning slightly towards your date. “What did you say you teach?”

“I didn’t,” she says.

“Oh, right,” you say.

“Bi-lingual education,” she says.

“What grades?” you say, slightly shocked, but renewed with a bit of hope.

“Elementary.”

“Where?”

She leans back, crosses her legs, and drums her fingers on the table. *Ting. Ting. Ting.* “Can we not talk about it?” she says. “Can we just relax and have an easy conversation? Enjoy the afternoon?” *Ting. Ting.*

Conversation? Relax? Enjoy? What is she *talking* about? Prickly heat dances over your skin. You grip the edge of the table, pressing your thumbs into the surface, feeling the vibrations of her drumming.

“Listen,” she says, pausing her movement, her hand a frozen spider on the table. “Once you get to know me I’ll share more. But right now some things just have to remain private.”

You look at the table in front of you, biting your lip to restrain your smile. The table is empty. No *gaiwan*. No pitcher. No cups. No tea. It’s amazing that you don’t laugh aloud. *Once you get to know me?* Is she kidding? You stare back. When you saw her down by the steps, next to the bamboo, her eyes looked warm and inviting. You wondered about running your fingertip along her pale cheek, down the nape of her neck. You imagined the hidden curve of her hip, the softness of her belly. It was a grossly premature notion, for sure, but a natural one given the prolonged state of your aloneness, the hope that she might be searching for something similar.

Yet now you see what she *really* is: a stranger. What was mysterious and alluring mere moments ago is now unfamiliar and repulsive. As you sit there in the sun, baking in the awkwardness of this rejection, you begin to hate her. You hate her flirtatious emails and her dark, sexy eyes. You hate the way she walks, the scent of her perfume, the inviting stray black hair now tucked behind her ear. You hate her for the sun, and sweat, and uncomfortable chair in which you now sit. You hate her for being—just like you—in this frightening world where people are alone, and don't want to be alone, and waste so much precious time trying not to be alone. By the time she asks if you are really the age you posted in your ad, explaining that most people on the Internet are dishonest, that there are a lot of lying weirdoes out there, you have realized where all this is heading.

You stand up, lifting your jacket from the back of your chair. "Listen," you say, shocked by the words forming in your mouth. "I'm not a weirdo." Your voice trembles, your heart pounds. She watches you, her lips now a tight line, her eyes black marbles. "I was only trying to get to know you, to act like people do on a date. But I guess that made you uncomfortable." She looks down at the empty table, appearing slightly surprised but not shocked. You feel a sudden pang of sadness. Your shirt sticks to your skin like wet paper as you slide your arms into the sleeve of your jacket. You pick up your bag, heart still pounding. "I'm going to leave now," you say, still trembling, still sweating. She says nothing. You turn, step onto the stairs, and start down.

Months earlier, when your teacher first dropped the Lu Shan Clouds and Mist into the glass *gaiwan*, you watched the leaves slowly drift to the bottom as they began to unfurl. She set the lid back in place, let it sit for a moment, and then dipped its edge into the water, rolling the leaves until they swirled like green confetti. When the tea was ready, she poured it, first into a pitcher, then into two small glass cups. You raised yours and sipped. The warm tea was at once simple and complex. There were hints of grass, and salt, but it was also sweet and buttery. Suddenly, as the tea washed over your tongue and down your throat, a wave of emotion quietly erupted in your chest and pulsed through your limbs. Your toes tingled. Your eyes began to water. You exhaled, and your body relaxed. You didn't see visions, or hear angels, but you knew that something had shifted. You felt present, and clear. You felt opened. *So this is tea*, you thought.

Now, down in the courtyard, where everyone is drinking tea, white ceramic *gaiwans* and pots of water adorn every table. But there are no pitchers, no drinking cups. You sling your bag over your shoulder. Sweat continues to trickle down your back, under your arms. You shakily step towards the curved pathway, the wall of bamboo, the Buddha statue, the

gurgling water. Just after you pass the table by the door, however, you pause. The young man and a woman are still there—talking, laughing. Now, though, he is holding her hand across the table. She is squeezing his fingers, her eyes bright and happy. They are smiling. On the table between them are two covered *gaiwans* and a pot of hot water.

Suddenly, you know what you must do. You must tell them about the serving pitcher and drinking cups! And that tea drunk directly from a *gaiwan* will be too bitter! You must inform them that tea can be so much *more* than they recognize, so sweet and floral and nuanced and complex. Yes! Tea can be meaningful. Tea can be *magical*. You start towards them. A few feet from their table, however, the realization of your folly stops you in your tracks, surging through your body, stinging your skin, cinching the muscles in your shoulders. You bite your lower lip to stop the tears that are welling up. Your heart sinks and you drop your head. The couple continues to gaze into each other's eyes, smiling, whispering, laughing. You are steps away from them—in the middle of the courtyard, just outside the teashop—but they don't see you at all. Nor do they see the *gaiwans* on their table. Or the water. Or the missing pitcher and cups. No, they don't see any of it. They only see each other.

Danielle Weeks

Tiger Bone Wine



At Guilin Park, the beasts are bred for bones
the wealthy pour into their porcelain cups
with every rising sun. The medicine
that lurks in tiger skin, they say, revives
the weakest man and makes a happy wife.

The Park knows better than to kill a tiger
outright. Instead: the starving down to stripes
and feigned concern, the maddening of the beasts
until they crush their brothers' throats, who learn
the brutal mercy of beings already dead.

Their fur is stripped like sheets from a death bed.
The fifty-five pounds of skeleton
are steeped in thirty-eight percent wine —
a heavy set of numbers, wed to bills
that curl from pockets of tailored, imported suits.

The tigers end in Pepsi bottles, hidden
in the bags of auction-winners flying home.
They gurgle down the throats of men who dream
of bone-fed youth, of taking in a life
to mask the certain fade of flesh.

At dawn in Guilin Park, the walking wine
is pawing at the walls and going blind.
Its stripes embrace the latticed shadows of the cage,
a blur of ribs and slowing blood that bows
to ending in the place where it began.

LD Zane



Separated at Birth

All parties were present in the attorney's conference room. Gertrude Heller and her oldest son, Henry, traveled from Florida and sat next to each other on one side of the spacious table; Ian Heller, her youngest son, sat on the other. They were contentious, opposing parties in every sense of the word. The attorney—a family friend and Gertrude's long-time counsel—sat at the head. This was uncomfortable for Gertrude, the matter-at-hand aside. She was always used to being seated at the head of any table after her husband passed away thirty years earlier. The attorney was not only there to officiate and give legal advice for these proceedings, but also to act as referee.

Every year Gertrude Heller made four pilgrimages from Pennsylvania to Florida—one trip per season—to stay with Henry. Normally her stays would last no more than a month at most, and then she would return home to gloat to her friends how wonderful it was to be with him. She almost never mentioned how good it was to be home with Ian.

Henry would always send Ian an e-mail with their mother's flight itinerary. It was Ian's task to print it out and give it to her. But this last time there was a noticeable difference. Ian didn't ask his mother about it; he knew if he did she just would have said, "Ask your brother. Henry makes all the arrangements. He always does." Although Ian found talking to his brother almost as distasteful as talking to his mother, the question nonetheless begged to be asked. Ian decided Henry was the lesser of two evils.

"Hey kid, what's up?" Henry always answered a call from Ian the same way. Even though Ian was now in his mid-sixties, Henry called Ian "kid," just to make the point—like an alpha dog—that he was five years older. Henry took the role of being the big brother with the same solemnity and seriousness as if he were a Knight Templar guarding the Holy Grail.

"Not much, Henry." This was Ian's usual response, as he never wanted

to give Henry any opening to ask questions about his life. Ian knew that whatever he told his brother would find its way back to their mother as soon as he and Henry hung up. Ian guarded his life, and his privacy, with the same passion as the Spartans defended the Hot Gates at Thermopylae.

Henry knew this would be Ian's go-to answer. "So, why the call?"

"I got the itinerary and printed it out, but noticed there was no return flight. Did I miss something?"

"No, Mom didn't want a return flight. She said she would decide that when she got here."

"Whose idea was that?" Ian never missed an opportunity to poke a finger in Henry's proverbial eye.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means whose idea was it for her not to want a return ticket, that's all." But Henry knew what Ian meant.

Henry did not even attempt to hide his irritation at being challenged. "It was her idea. I did as Mom instructed, Ian."

Yeah...you're her bitch. You always do as Mom instructs, Ian said to himself. "Well...it's her visit. I suppose she can stay as long as she likes," he said, with a not-so-subtle hint of glee. Before Henry could launch into one of his usual sermons about how Ian should be a more loving and doting son—like he was—Ian cut off the conversation: "Gotta go, Henry. I'll give Mom the itinerary"—and hung up.

The animus between Ian and his mother and brother started long before that call and that flight itinerary, and before Ian found himself forfeiting much of his life these past seven years to care for his now ninety-three-year-old mother almost daily, since he and his mother happened to live in the same city. Henry always professed a greater affection for, and devotion to, his mother. Yet he made sure he kept at least five states between him and her for over forty years. Even when she was hospitalized on several occasions for minor falls or some other ailment, Henry's usual excuse—which their mother readily accepted without hesitation or reservation—was that his singing group's schedule didn't allow for side trips to visit her.

But if Ian could not take her where she wanted or needed to go—and usually without any advance notice, because of his work schedule—all hell would break loose and she would call Henry to complain. Predictably, within minutes, Ian's cell phone would light up. Even though Ian knew he would get a call, he nonetheless would cringe. And just as predictably, Ian would let the call go to voicemail. The resulting message was always deleted without being listened to. When asked by a co-worker why he never listened to the messages, Ian responded, "Why bother?"

They're just variations on the same theme," and shook his head, sighing in exasperation.

The pattern that followed was always the same—meaning a text or two, or maybe even an e-mail from Henry—asking if Ian got the call and listened to the message. The same thought would always cross his Ian's mind: *Christ...doesn't he have anything better to do? He's like a dog with a bone.* "My brother is a freakin' cyber terrorist," Ian commented to the same co-worker. He would finally text back that he had listened to it and that his work schedule didn't allow for spur-of-the-moment changes to chauffeur his mother. No, that animosity started at birth, just as Jacob's and Esau's did.

Henry was conceived on his parent's honeymoon in 1943, just before his father shipped out to England to prepare for D-Day. Gertrude moved to Chicago to be closer to her husband's family, being she didn't have much of one back East. Henry was born in May, 1944, exactly one month before his father hit Omaha beach in Normandy. For over a month Gertrude Heller didn't know if her husband had survived the invasion, and if her new status would be a widow. Larry Heller, however, made it all the way to the German border where he received his third and most serious wound in 1945. This one sent him stateside to recover in an Army hospital in Kentucky. He would remain there until the spring of 1946. When Larry finally returned home to Chicago, he was a stranger to Henry. He and Henry never did bond.

Larry eventually agreed to move back East so Gertrude could be in closer proximity to her older sister and estranged father. Ian was born a year later. It was then that Gertrude told her husband, "I raised Henry—he's mine. This one is yours." And that is how Gertrude would henceforth refer to Ian, whenever he was in her presence where there was any conversation or discussion in which Henry's name was uttered in the same sentence: "Henry is..., and this one..." as she pointed to Ian.

Five years is a huge age difference, especially when brothers are being raised and influenced by different parents. They were never kindred spirits, best friends, or playmates. The only thing the brothers shared was a bedroom, and that was by decree when Ian's room was confiscated by eminent domain so it could be converted into a walk-in closet for his mother. The only remnant of Ian's former room was the glass shade covering the ceiling light fixture, depicting four cowboys riding bucking horses. His father installed it when he originally made it into Ian's room. Although Gertrude protested, Larry refused to remove it.

To the most casual observer, it was unclear if the two boys were even brothers. They didn't look alike, with Henry resembling their mother

and Ian resembling their father. It was only when all four were together that the puzzle fit, and where it became crystal clear to whom the brothers owed their allegiance. But looks and age weren't the only thing that separated them.

Henry had their mother's temperament: he was argumentative, prone to drama, controlling and demanding, and always had to have the last word. Mother and son shared one view of the world: theirs. They would verbally bludgeon their victims about the head and shoulders with their argument, until the intended target surrendered to their point of view. Once either of them got an idea stuck in their heads, it took a stick of dynamite to break it free.

Henry rarely disobeyed his parents, diligently studied, and held part-time jobs of which he dutifully, and willingly, gave his mother her cut. He was a talented musician and singer and that is the path he followed through college, plus a stint with the Navy Band. It eventually became his chosen profession with some rightfully-earned success. When he spoke or wrote of his mother, it was always with admiration and adoration. Gertrude bestowed upon Henry the moniker of the good son.

Ian could not have been more different. He, like his father, had a quiet intellect, was quick-witted with a sharp tongue, and was a voracious reader. Father and son also shared a deep independent and rebellious streak. His father's manifested itself growing up on the streets of the south side of Chicago with his three brothers; Ian gained notoriety with the local police as a juvenile delinquent. And although Ian was a recalcitrant ruant, he still had better grades than Henry, much to the chagrin of both Henry and their mother, but to the delight of Ian and their father. Larry Heller always stood between Ian and his mother, no matter what trouble he was in. The same clock made them tick.

Ian also had a hunger for making money, a trait which did not go unnoticed by his bookie, maternal grandfather. Running numbers by the time he was ten, by age sixteen Ian and his best friend became his grandfather's collection agency. He learned from both father and grandfather to keep his own counsel. Ian never told his mother how or what he earned, let alone gave her a cut.

Ian, too, joined the Navy. But unlike Henry, he didn't stand behind his voice or a musical instrument; he stood behind twin fifty-caliber machine guns on a river boat in Vietnam. Severely wounded when his boat was ambushed, he spent four months recuperating in Hawaii, and then returned to active duty serving five more years aboard Fast Attack submarines.

It might have seemed to an outsider that Henry and Ian were competing with each other, but no one knew what the prize was. When Ian would speak of his parents, he would only mention his father. If asked

about his mother, his response was always, “What about her?”

Gertrude decided Ian was not the good son.

The text message from Henry to Ian was simple enough: “Mom has decided to permanently stay with me in Florida. We need to talk about finances.” To Ian, the message might just as well have read: Mom and I need to find a new way to pick your pockets.

“Hey kid, what’s up?”

“You text me that Mom is staying in Florida and you wanted to discuss finances—whatever that means. By the way, where is she going to live?”

Henry was rrankled that his status of the good son was being called into question, and might possibly be tarnished: “With me, of course. Where did you think she would live?”

Christ...he is so thin-skinned. “In a nursing home. I mean, who’s going to take care of her with your travel schedule?”

“I’ve taken care of that, but you need to share in the expenses. After all, she is our mother.”

Whenever Henry would correspond with Ian about how he should be more dutiful, kind, and attentive to their mother—which was at least weekly—he would always write, “After all, she is *our* mother.” Somehow, Henry thought putting *our* in caps would strike a more benevolent chord in Ian.

“That’s not happening, Henry. I didn’t see you come across with any money to help Mom with her expenses when she was living here, or offer to cover any of my expenses for running her around. In fact, I never asked you for a cent. So where do you come off asking me to help front your expenses?”

“Apples and oranges, Ian. She was living in her own house and had the money to pay for her own expenses.”

“She still has the money. Use it.”

“But who’s going to cover her household expenses?”

“Do you know how stupid you sound, Henry? Use her money to pay for her household expenses here and whatever she needs down there, and use your money to care for her. I did. There...is...no...difference. And speaking of caring for her, you were MIA when I was basically living at her house for the month of October while she was recuperating from her fall.”

“I was traveling and both you and Mom knew that. I called her every day.”

Ian rolled his eyes. “Wow...a phone call. That really helped me. Your travel schedule is always your fallback answer, Henry.” The anger in Ian’s voice was now tinged with pain. “And where were you and Mom when I was in Hawaii for four months recuperating from my wounds?”

“My God, Ian, that was, what...some forty-five years ago? I can't believe you're still bringing that up. But since you asked, you know they didn't have the money to travel to Hawaii.”

“Yeah...I keep bringing it up because I've never gotten a reasonable answer from either you or Mom. Dad found the money to come. Where was she? Mom never once, not once, wrote a letter or called me. All the letters and calls came from Dad. And were you too busy traveling? You never wrote, called, or came either. Four months of hell living with excruciating pain from learning how to walk again, Henry, and not one word of encouragement from either you or Mom.”

Henry had no answer. He knew he was being skewered and remained silent for a few moments, and then changed the subject. “She's always been there for you, Ian, and you owed her that attention.”

“Yeah...she helped me through my divorce because I was broke. But I paid back every cent. If I recall, she also helped you a number of times to pay your mortgage? Did you pay her back?”

“Yes, I did...in a way. I always paid for her trips and she always stayed with me. Besides, Mom never asked me for the money then, or now. Using your money for running her around was the least you could have done.”

“If she is our mother, Henry, why would she have to ask? Why didn't you just offer it? She never asked me to repay the money or care for her—I just did. It's more than she ever did for me! I would have thought that would have been the least you could have done. You're the good son—so do it now, you cheap bastard.”

Again, Henry had no retort other than, “I did my best to offer you advice on how to arrange for her care.”

“Are you kidding me? I did all of that. Yeah, you gave some advice, which was mostly crap because you didn't have a clue how any of that worked. I had to learn on the fly, but yet you and Mom questioned every decision I made. Then, you came riding in like some white knight at the end of October to take her to Florida, and I was the one who cleaned up the aftermath with her doctors and the care providers. I had to take care of making sure all of her records and medications were transferred to Florida. I did it, Henry, just like I had to make all the arrangements for Dad's funeral. You strutted around like a peacock and sucked up sympathy like a vacuum cleaner, when you told everyone how difficult it was going to be to deliver the eulogy for your beloved father. But when the time came to perform, who was the one who delivered the eulogy? Me, you pompous blowhard. The big-time performer choked. You and Mom sat there bawling as you held each other.”

In retrospect, even Ian was surprised just how much animosity he had

developed for his mother and brother. *I am truly starting to hate them.* But his response was automatic. Ian opened his mouth and the words just fell out. What Ian didn't realize, or admit, was that he wasn't that different than Henry. He was just a different dog with a different bone.

And his volume ratcheted up: "You and Mom decided it was best for her to live in Florida. You never asked my opinion. So as far as I'm concerned she is your expense, because she is your mother—not mine. And you can put *your* in bold caps. Suck it up, big brother."

Henry was stunned. For years he had asked Ian why he was so resentful towards him and their mother. Years of multiple, rambling e-mails lecturing Ian on how much pain he was causing him and their mother with his shitty attitude, resentment, and defiance towards both of them. He pleaded, even begged for an answer, saying he was asking out of love as a big brother and a son. But he never got one. Now that he was getting his answer, he didn't know how to respond except to say, timidly, "She's our mother, Ian, and we both need to share in that obligation. We have a duty to help her."

Ian now screamed into the phone, "Listen the hell up, Henry. I've done my duty, with no help from you, thank you. She's your mother, not mine." Ian hung up.

"Now that you've decided to live in Florida, Gertrude, it would probably be a good time to update your will. I'll make sure it complies with the laws of Florida." James Farland was a solid attorney who entered his father's practice after law school and knew Gertrude and Larry through church, where Farland's father was also a member. He took over the practice after his father died. Although semi-retired, he still maintained his relationships with his existing clients leaving his oldest son to build the practice. Gertrude and Ian both trusted Farland because of their long-standing relationship; Henry trusted him because his mother did.

"Any thoughts on how you wish to dispose of your estate at your death, Gertrude?"

"Yes, I do," she said with absolute certainty. "We have already gone through the house and I allowed the boys to take any items they wanted for themselves or their children, which I no longer want."

"What about the property itself and your other assets, like your cash and investments?"

"Since the house is free and clear, I've decided to give it to Ian...now. Of course, I want to be paid for the furniture. All of my cash and investments I wish to give to Henry—now—with full Power of Attorney. He can use the money for my expenses while I'm living and whatever is left at my death, I will leave to him. I'm sure Henry will be prudent," and

touched Henry's hand, although she looked straight at her attorney.

"Gentlemen, any thoughts?"

Gertrude snapped back authoritatively, "Their thoughts aren't relevant, James. This is my decision."

Ian sat there in total disbelief. *Son of a bitch. He wants me to help pay for her expenses when he's getting all the money. Cheap bastard wants to hold on to every penny of her money, to make sure he has as much of it as he can when she kicks. And now she wants me to buy used furniture? Are they kidding?* "Well...my thoughts are relevant, despite what my mother says."

"How so?" asked Henry.

"I'll tell you how so, Henry. You want me to help pay for Mom's expenses when you're getting all the money. And on top of that, Mom wants me to buy fifty-year-old furniture. How is any of that fair?"

"First of all, it's good furniture no matter how old it is, and I would think you would want it so you wouldn't have to buy any. Second..."

"I don't like it and I don't want it. It isn't worth shit to me and I have the money to buy my own. There's nothing there that is exactly antique quality. And if I'm moving in, I want it out so I can remodel the place to my taste. But just out of curiosity, Mom, what price did you have in mind?"

"What do you mean remodel it, Ian?" asked Gertrude with a shocked look on her face. "I don't want it remodeled." She paused then, stated with finality, "The house is fine the way it is."

Farland could see where this was going. With professional firmness he said, "Gertrude, if you are giving him the house and he is responsible for all of the expenses to maintain it, you don't have the right to tell him what to do with it. He can do with it as he pleases, assuming it's legal, and that means he can even sell it. Simple as that."

"Well, then, I will give him the house with the stipulation that he can not alter or sell it without my permission."

"Then forget it, Mom. No deal. I'll stay where I'm at and you can do whatever you damn well please with it. Next!" Ian leaned forward and folded his arms on the table and remained silent. He'd been in sales long enough to know that when he made his pitch he shut up, and knew the first person who spoke—lost.

Everyone remained silent for what seemed like an eternity. Henry and Gertrude stared at Ian. Ian stared at Henry and Gertrude. Farland stared at his legal pad.

Gertrude clasped her hands so tightly together that her blue veins bulged, and set them in front of her. She looked directly at Ian and with a haughty voice said, "Fine, Ian, do with it as you wish. Just don't ask me or Henry for any advice or money."

"Trust me, Mom...I won't. Besides, Henry's advice is usually worthless

and I doubt if he would part with any of the money.” Ian shot his older brother a Cheshire Cat smile.

“There’s still the issue with the furniture, Ian,” said Henry.

“What about it? I told you how much I thought it was worth: nothing.” Ian fixed his stare once more at his mother and brother.

This time Henry broke the silence. “We think it’s worth at least two thousand.”

“Where in the hell did you come up with that number?”

Gertrude slapped her right hand on the table and raised her voice: “It’s what I want, Ian,” growing more annoyed at Ian’s perceived insolence. “It’s either that or you keep it in the house. It’s still my furniture.”

She turned toward Farland. “Henry has always looked out and cared for me, and has never asked me for a cent but this one,” pointing and glaring at Ian, “is never satisfied, James, no matter how much I’ve helped him. I don’t understand why he is being so unreasonable.”

“I’ll tell you both this one’s idea,” Ian said belligerently. “If you think the furniture is worth that much, then ship it to Florida and sell it yourself. See how much you get for it.”

“That’s not practical, Ian,” said Henry, “and you know it. It would cost a fortune to ship it—probably more than it’s worth.”

“My point exactly.” Ian decided he was willing to lose this battle in order to win the war. “So give me a real price, not what the two of you want.”

Henry was infuriated at being called out, especially in front of his mother. “You know, Ian, Mom’s right. There’s no pleasing you. We give you a fair price for the furniture and you get a house for free...”

“Free? I’m paying for all the utilities, maintenance, and taxes. And you call that free?”

Henry stood up and slammed his hands on the table. His right hand shook as he pointed at Ian and shouted, “Look, you ungrateful piece of shit, I don’t care what Mom or Jim says. You will either keep the furniture or pay what we want for it, and you will not change one goddamn thing in that house. It’s Mom’s house, and the house where we both grew up, and that’s the way Mom and I want to keep it. Period.”

Ian now stood and leaned over the table so that he was almost nose-to-nose with Henry. “Step off, Henry. You don’t want me to live there. You want me to be the curator of the Gertrude Heller museum—but I refuse to live in some stinking museum. You’re getting all the money and yet you still want more from me. If it’s not covering her expenses, it’s paying for worthless furniture. And don’t ever refer to me as an ungrateful piece of shit you cheap, money-grubbing bastard. Quit hiding behind your mother and fight your own battles.”

“And you—” Ian said, returning the gesture and pointing at his mother as if his finger were a loaded gun, “you always found the time and money to go and see Henry at one of his shows, but you couldn’t find the time or money to visit or call me, or write one miserable letter while I was laid up in the hospital, just like you couldn’t find the time or money to visit your husband—my father”—pounding his chest with his right hand—“while he recuperated from his wounds. Neither you nor Henry lifted a finger to help me bury the man or give the eulogy. So, here’s a news flash for both of you—you’re Henry’s mother, Gertrude, not mine. You never were, and never will be. You can take the furniture and the house and shove it up your collective asses. Stay the hell out of my pockets and out of my life.” With a sweeping motion of his right hand he said, “You’re fired—both of you, and I’m done here.”

Ian turned to Farland. “Sorry, Jim. Now you see what I’ve been dealing with my whole life. Please don’t include me in any more of these idiotic discussions. I have to get to work,” and walked out of the room.

Farland had been here before with other families and knew when to play referee and intercede, and when to let events unfold unimpeded. This was one of those times, knowing the family history, to let events ebb to their natural conclusion.

“James...please do something,” pleaded Gertrude. “Get him back in here so we can finish these discussions. We have a flight to catch and I don’t want it to end like this. They’re brothers, and now they’re behaving like enemies. Please?”

Farland sat back in his chair, clasped his hands together, and looked away as he chose the right words as an attorney is supposed to do. Finally, he spoke, looking at Gertrude and Henry. “No, Gertrude, I won’t. Ian is right, and you and Henry are wrong. Henry is getting in cash and investments three times what that house is worth, and yet the two of you are trying to squeeze every dollar from him. Ian shouldn’t have to pay one penny for your expenses or for the furniture. You forget, Gertrude, I’ve been in your home and, although it’s good furniture, I wouldn’t give you anything for it. Both of you...let it go. You may think you’re losing some money, but what you’re really losing, Gertrude, is a son. And Henry, you are losing a brother. Is that what the two of you want?” Farland searched their faces for how his message was being received, but both Henry and Gertrude had turned away.

Long seconds passed. Then Gertrude again faced Farland. “James, you’ve been a good friend and attorney to our family, but don’t ever forget who paid you. Who are you,” leaning forward and wagging her right index finger at Farland, “to lecture Henry and me about family? We’re

not the ones who walked away—Ian did. Now do your job and settle this so we can go.”

Farland closed his eyes and looked down, clenched his lips together, and nodded his head slightly. Then he looked up, slowly raised himself out of his chair, stood straight, smoothed out his tie, buttoned his suit coat, and walked to the door and opened it. He turned to Gertrude and Henry. “Friend and attorney to your family aside, Gertrude, don’t ever think you can come in here and lecture me on how I do my job. I’m not going to charge you for this meeting, because I know you would just try to haggle with me as you did with Ian. In return, I’ll consider this meeting, and our relationship, terminated—indefinitely. Gertrude. Henry. Good day.” Farland, too, walked out of the room.

On the ride to the airport, Gertrude asked Henry, “Why is Ian so angry at us? What did we do to deserve this? When did all of this start, Henry?”

“I truly don’t know, Mom. I wish I did. Don’t worry, I’ll talk to Ian. Remember, I’m his big brother and Ian will listen to me. He’ll eventually come around.”

Matthew Hohner

2015 Earl Weaver Baseball Prize Finalist



Ground Rules

In the small field outside Steve's house on his dad's churchyard, first base was a bare patch of dirt by the rusty fence; second base, the rotten railroad tie across the driveway that on hot days reeked of acrid creosote; third, a rock, stick, or shirt dropped in the grass. A home run made it in the air into Steve's yard, or pounded off the aluminum siding of the chapel where Alcoholics Anonymous met, behind which Steve would smoke pot and drop acid all through high school. Over the chapel roof, grand slam. Ring the bell in the open belfry, win the game—instant walk-off, regardless of inning. Any ball we couldn't snag before the runner touched second, ground-rule double. Fouls went past the trees in left; over the alley fence in right. Put-outs at home were thrown over home plate before the runner scored. Phil spray-painted the rough average of our stances as a strike zone on plywood set against the fence behind the batter when Brian, in his hockey pads and mask, wasn't around to catch. How many times did Steve's dad scold us for diving after screaming line drives into his century-old boxwoods? How many hard slides into home in shorts to earn a win and road rash that lingered for days? The dents on that chapel have outlived Steve and his father. Our diamond now grows a community garden. The four of us played those humid dusks until well after the lightning bugs began to dance for mates in the infield that last fleeting summer, before we retired our bats and gloves, the four bases shifted from our dirt field to girls' mysterious bodies, and the ground rules for everything became lessons we'd spend our lives trying to unlearn.

Tennae Maki

Revolvers. Somewhere Else, It Remains Awake.



There was a thin line that ran the circumference of the room. She was the only one that could see it.

Free of imperfections, a circle is perpetually, habitually flawless.

The morning glory had been clipped from its vine days ago.

It remained open, whilst the other buds had returned to their dormant state.

It faded earlier than late.

Dawn.



+ GAMMA RAYS

DEADLINE 8/31