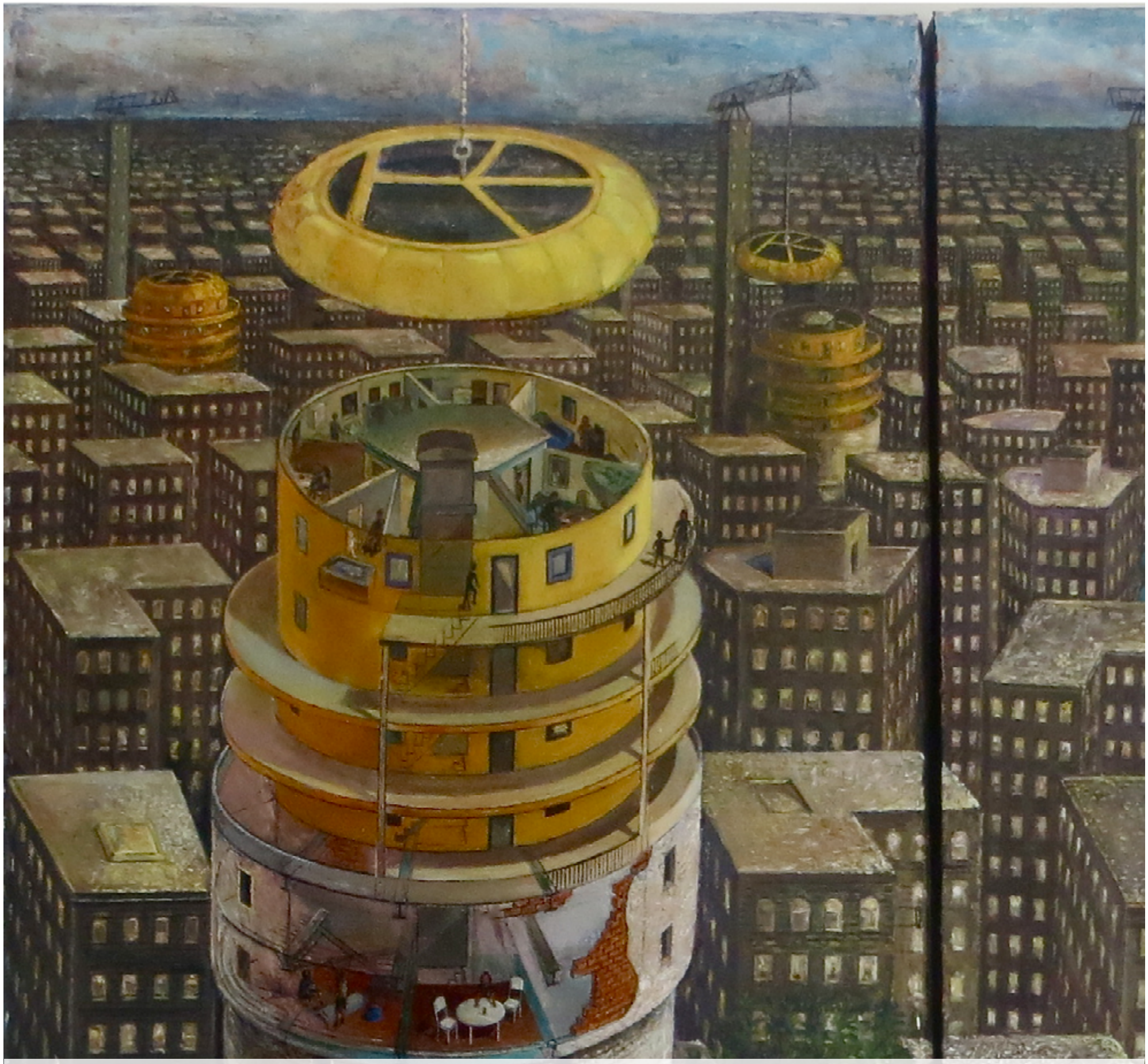

The Fourth River

A publication of the Chatham University MFA in Creative Writing Program

Issue O.1: The Best of the First Ten Issues

Autumn 2014

The Fourth River takes its name from a subterranean river beneath Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a city famously sited at the confluence of three rivers: Monongahela, Allegheny, and Ohio. This fourth river, unseen yet indispensable to the city's riverine ecosystem, is actually an aquifer geologists call the "Wisconsin Glacial Flow." *The Fourth River* literary journal grew up from the idea that between and beneath the visible framework of the human world and the built environment, there exist deeper currents of force and meaning supporting the very structure of that world.

Jeffrey Thompson, Founding Editor
The Fourth River
Issue No. 1

Issue O.1 Autumn 2014

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The Fourth River is a publication of the MFA in Creative Writing Programs at Chatham University. We welcome submissions of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction that explore the relationship between humans and their environments—writings that are richly situated at the confluence of place, space, and identity, or that reflect upon landscape as culture, and culture as landscape.

The Fourth River publishes one print issue and one online issue per year.

Submissions: *The Fourth River* only accepts work via Submittable. For guidelines, see our website at www.thefourthriver.com. Emailed submissions will not be read. Mailed submissions will not be opened and will be recycled.

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Editor's Note

Did you ever overhear a conversation that was already mid-stream, spoken by people who clearly knew and cared for one another deeply? It's not that you were snooping, exactly, but there they were, in the quiet kitchen during the party and you, trying to find your way back from the restroom, wandered around the wrong corner and straight into words that seemed purposeful and precious, steeped with meaning and import. So you lingered there a little, before heading back into your evening, and listened a little. Before long, you found yourself rapt, straining to hear every syllable, your date (almost) forgotten by the artichoke dip. Just a little longer…

This is how I felt joining the staff of *The Fourth River* with the publication of its tenth issue one year ago. It was almost exactly like eavesdropping to thumb through the pages of the journal, going all the way back to its beginning in spring of 2005. How easy and thrilling to linger and listen to the voices there, speaking of the natural world, of the places humans take up and leave, the ones we call home. It's a conversation we need to continue in this epoch some are calling the Anthropocene, after the machinations of our fraught engagement with the planet—all the natural and built places we inhabit, develop, destroy and try, now, desperately, some of us, to fix.

Since its inception, *The Fourth River* has been a clarion voice speaking fiction, poetry and nonfiction by writers with the vision to illuminate, interrogate and conserve our collective human experience. To commemorate our decade moment, we're happy to beckon you out of the hallway and into the kitchen by sharing our first online issue, O(n-line).1, an anthology of the best writing of the first ten print issues of *The Fourth River*.

It's always a delight to give voice to writing that has the capacity to change us, but I am especially excited to give these pieces a new way to reach an audience which needs them. If you've been with us since the beginning, they will perhaps be happily familiar. If you're new to us, we hope the work here will give you pause, tempt you stay a little longer. Listen. And then share the link with others. Continue the conversation tomorrow and tomorrow.

No issue of *The Fourth River* happens without the work of many hands. I thank, as always, our Executive Editor, Sheryl St. Germain for her guidance and support, and my colleagues Heather McNaugher and Marc Nieson for holding us to the high standards to which we aspire.

Thank you, Erin Southerland, for behind-the-scenes everything.

To Corey Florindi, my Managing Editor, thank you for maintaining order, momentum and morale.

To my staff of assistant and associate editors who, thoughtfully and with great care, read and debate every piece that finds its way to us—thank you for your good work and ideas, one of which was to make this anthology in the first place!

Finally, to the editors and the writers who got to the party long before we arrived. Thank you. We dedicate this issue to you.

Sheila Squillante
Editor-in-Chief
The Fourth River

Erin Jourdan

Girl Ash, Issue 1

We wear fishnet stockings and skirts full of bloom as we lightning strike. We are a meadow filled with patterns—hourglass becomes sassafras, to weeping willow and sandspur. Our music is fringed and tasseled, it is dusty old furniture airing in the sun. The notes lift our skirts and show saplings and wild plum. We drink in dandelion across meadow. We synchronize our angel dance to the flight of partridge. We knock over flowerpots, divide privet hedge, eat spongy lichen, catch moths on the wing. We become a flock of honey locust, an army sweet. We anchor to rock, we soil, we run of sap. Our dance is your breath. Take your magnifying glass and read the words on our lips. The glossy pods, the subtle shade, the quick movement of secrets beyond tesseract, beyond time travel, beyond the skin where earth meets air. All plants have words in their pollen, scented with wild geranium, written with dahlia ink as ornate as lace.

Richard St. John

Pluto 2, Issue 9

It was a schoolgirl who named Pluto, her entry picked
because the god could make himself invisible. I like that
for its reticence. I like to see the underworld
not as a dreary place of death, but as a school
of mortal limits, where even Eurydice has merely
the beauty of the girl next door, her long red hair
flown frizzed across her shoulders. She listens to Persephone
describe her husband's gift, the cut red facets
of the seeds, which even in the sullen light, gave off
an ember's radiance. And where, though Orpheus *wishes*
for the genius to entrance the very stones and trees,
he's just another singer from a punk garage band
who always follows her around. This afternoon
I'm watching the school guard in her chartreuse vest, blue cap,
who stops the traffic outside Martin Luther King, who helps
the children crossing to the other side, who sets her white-gloved hand
on the shoulder of a sobbing girl (red plastic beads
are glowing in her shaking braids), a girl who might have
submitted "Rhinestone," one of the many names that didn't win.

Abby Geni

Fire Blight, Issue 9

After midnight, Cosmo found himself in the baby's room. The crib was half-assembled, missing its front panel and the carved headboard. A mobile of paper flowers hung from the ceiling. The diaper genie was already in place, gleaming beneath a bare bulb. Cosmo had brought a trash bag. He set about gathering up the stuffed animals and tossing them into the depths. His instructions had been specific—everything was to be thrown out, none of it given to friends or donated to charity. His wife wanted these things removed from existence; she did not want to think of the sturdy cardboard books and Earth-friendly pacifiers she had shopped for so carefully being used out in the world somewhere, treated as though they were ordinary, handled until they broke or were discarded. Cosmo would strip and repaint the walls, which had been papered on two sides with ducks and bunnies. He would take down the yellow curtains his wife had hemmed. Elaine had been firm.

She had asked this of him as he had helped her down the walkway from the hospital to the car. She was out of danger then, but still weak, her face shadowy and wan. Her hands had trembled where they gripped his shoulder.

"It'll take a few days to get all that done," Cosmo had said.

"Fine," Elaine said at once. "I'll go away while you're working."

But he could not manage it—not tonight, anyway. After a while he headed out to the garden. The wind was cold, and Cosmo zipped up his coat as he waded among the zinnias, searching for any hint of slugs. He had been waging war against these creatures for several months now. First he had placed beer cans around the flowerbeds—an odd little trick he had read about in a magazine—but though some of the slugs had been drawn to the smell, fallen in and drowned, it had ultimately done more harm than good. The cans blew over in the wind and got knocked down by inquisitive birds, so that the whole yard stank like a pool hall for a while. Then Cosmo had tried to achieve détente. He knew that slugs were essentially a mini-recycling center, and he had gone so far as to put edible flowers in his garden, off behind a bush where Elaine would not have to see them sitting there sadly riddled with holes. But the slugs were not satisfied. They were encroaching again. In the moonlight, the silvery network of their slime trails showed up clearly on the leaves.

In the redwood forest, Elaine woke to the sound of an owl. Her first thought was for her physical person. Was her lower back aching? Did she have pressure or pain? It took her a moment to get her bearings. The tent was rustling in the wind. Indeed, the cacophony of unfamiliar noises around her seemed loud enough that it ought to have woken her long ago. Tree branches creaked far overhead. In the distance, a bonfire was crackling. There were crickets and frogs, their disparate songs meshing in a staccato, high-pitched chorus. Elaine lay still. She was perfectly well. Mentally she ran a finger down the list of possible symptoms, ticking them off one by one. She had not been suffering from nausea or dizziness. The infection had passed over without trace, and her surgery had left few visible scars. There was, perhaps, a little soreness, but that could easily be all in her head. It was tempting, she knew, to prolong the somatic side of things, fixating on any small twinge and even calling up phantom pains in order to have something concrete with which to cope—something that could be managed with a few pills—something that would heal in an orderly, measurable way.

Elaine remembered the look her husband had given her as she had stood on the front stoop, her suitcase in one hand. She had unearthed the old tent from her college years. She still had a few sick days left at work; they would not expect her back yet. Cosmo had offered to come away with her—he had spouted a few facts about the redwood trees, looking excited—but Elaine shot him down. Even in the moment of parting, she had stood away from him, unwilling to let him touch her.

"You will come back?" he had asked at last.

"Yes," Elaine said. And then, unable to stop herself, annoyed by his naïve hopefulness, she added spitefully, "I'm sure the redwoods will make everything better. I'm sure I'll come home cured."

But her husband had nodded, as though satisfied.

The telephone rang just before dawn. Cosmo was flipping through a gardening magazine, avoiding his wife's empty side of the bed. He was pricing out copper edging, which, if used to line the flowerbeds, would keep the slugs away entirely—they could not cross it without receiving a small electric shock. When the telephone rang, Cosmo glared at it. It was not hard to guess who might be calling. He ran a gardening hotline, and his more obsessed clients tended to seek his advice at all hours. They phoned in the early morning, before heading off to work, to ask him how to get rid of snapdragon rust. They called from cell phones on the highway to describe in detail the waterfall they were thinking of buying. They called after midnight, having spotted something that could be a shrew hole among the marigolds.

Cosmo hefted himself up and took his time fishing a t-shirt from the closet. He caught up the cordless phone and shuffled down the stairs.

"Cosmo? It's Art," said a man's deep voice.

"Ah, yes. Morning, morning."

Art was one of his regulars, a sweet-tempered neurotic who called on an almost daily basis—and whose garden Cosmo could now picture intimately, from the weathered paving stones to the pear and quince trees by the fence.

"Listen," Art said. "I'm about to leave for the office, but I've just stepped outside to take a look at the orchard. There's something really obscene going on over there."

"I see," Cosmo said. "How upsetting."

"I don't know exactly how to describe it. At first I thought it might be aphids. I have to tell you, that would be bad enough."

Art went on, rattling through a list of possible dangers. Cosmo reached the kitchen, and his mood soured. There was no warm smell of coffee. Elaine—who typically rose even earlier than he did—usually brewed a pot before heading out to the city, and he was accustomed to being greeted by that friendly scent, the sense of being cared for. The kitchen was silent, too. His wife usually left the radio on, quite accidentally, so engrossed in NPR's morning report that she forgot to switch it off before stepping out the door.

"—looks like it's been *burned*," Art said at last, coming to the point, and Cosmo snapped to attention.

"Did you say burned?"

"Well," Art said, "I noticed it on a couple of the pear tree branches. At first I thought some kids had actually come in and, you know, torched them. But then I looked closer. There are sores on the wood. Oozing sores. And there are dark streaks on the trunk, too, different from the bark. But mostly they just look—"

"Burned," Cosmo said. "Your trees have fire blight. Art, this is very serious."

He did not bother to chastise the man for letting his orchard pass unnoticed during the bloom, when the disease could be spotted in its early stages and stopped with a simple spray of bleach solution. The spring in Santa Clara had been wet and balmy, ideal conditions to spark a plague, and Art was not the first to call the hotline asking whether his trees could possibly have been set on fire, the branches and leaves blackened and withered. Cosmo explained how to scrape away the cankers to check for reddish flecking. Any sign of pink tissue was bad news.

"And this is urgent, right?" Art asked. "I mean, the trees might die?"

"It depends on how far gone they are."

"Oh, hell. This is the *last* thing I need just now."

"I understand," Cosmo said gently. But there was a clatter on the other end of the phone, and Art hung up with a bang.

The hotline rang all morning. Cosmo fielded calls as he made coffee, fed the cats, and tinkered with the sprinkler system. He had no time to brood about his wife. His clients called with descriptions of wilted leaves and larvae they had found. They called to ask about soil solarization. They wanted to know how to create a butterfly garden, whether to plant dill or thyme, milkweed or cabbage. Cosmo was sometimes amazed that people would choose to spend their money (the hotline was cheap, but not toll-free) on an hour-and-a-half discussion about the pros and cons of planting coleus or the best kind of lily to choose for their ponds. These were rich Californians, amateur gardeners with time to spare. There was something soothing for them in the simple, immediate fact of a human voice on the line.

Cosmo had learned about plants as a child. His boyhood had been "rocky"—Elaine's term—with an alcoholic father and a milquetoast of a mother who could not stand up to her husband. The only good times Cosmo remembered had revolved around the garden. His mother would suit up with her apron and trowel. As Cosmo knelt in the crumbling earth, she would guide his fingers over the plants, muttering instruction. She had taught him to tell the difference between

a sun-loving vine and one that required shade. She had taught him to recognize the reddish sawdust left by a peach tree borer, the white tint of fruit infected by a mosaic virus, and the yellowing of leaves that could indicate chlorosis, the floral version of anemia. There was nothing about plants that she did not know.

This intelligence had been passed down the matrilineal line, mother to daughter, and if Cosmo's father had been normal (the kind of man to drag his son out from among the flowers and off to the baseball diamond or a Boy Scout meeting), the knowledge would have been lost when she died. Instead she had passed it along to him. Sometimes, as Cosmo answered calls on the hotline, he heard her dreamy voice echoing beneath his own. In another period of history, they might have burned her as a witch, and her son along with her.

Elaine tramped along the trails of the redwood forest, drinking in the silence. The massive orange trees looked like something from another world. Some were large enough that it would have taken twenty men to span their girth, standing fingertip to fingertip. One or two trunks were actually split, and the trail dipped neatly between them, like a road passing through a tunnel in the mountains. Armed with a walking stick she had bought at the gift shop, Elaine hiked until her legs began to cramp. She stared up at the frothy, distant canopy, which admitted a watery light, ghostly and golden. The smell of the trees was overpowering. One of Elaine's friends—a true California hippie, complete with swinging braids and handwoven sandals—had said that the redwoods were possessed of an overwhelming chi, a pulsing life force that could be felt by gurus and their more gifted disciples. Elaine stood for a while with her hands pressed to the trunk, but apparently she didn't have the right stuff. She felt nothing except rough, mossy wood.

At last she reached the crest of a hill and gazed back down the trail, which wound beneath the shrubbery and disappeared around a bend. She was quite alone. Few of the tourists managed to come this far; they tended to peter out in the valley. A brook rushed and sputtered between the trees. Elaine took off her shoes and sat on a dusty stone, kicking her feet in the water. A dragonfly buzzed over a stagnant pool. This was as good a place as any.

With a lump in her throat, Elaine took the canister from the pouch at her waist. It was shaped like a hip flask—small, metallic, and carefully sealed. In the hospital, she had asked specifically that the remains be cremated for her. She had been in a delirium, sweat-soaked and aching. The faces had swum before her—impassive doctors, genial nurses, and Cosmo, omnipresent and helpless. Phrases had caught her ear: *episodes of absent breathing, neonatal respiratory distress, unusually inactive*. The infection in her womb had taken away her rationality, her clear head. She had wept and tugged at the blankets. She had tried to stand up and was eventually restrained. There was blood everywhere, on the sheets, on her gown, on the fuzzy socks she had brought from home. The pain was a constant thing, like a musical note struck on a tuning fork, high and unending. Cosmo himself had seen the baby—the not-yet-a-baby—being carried off, hairless, the skin transparent, the wrinkled hands bobbing. It was born too soon, only twenty-one weeks in. It had no chance.

Normally, Elaine knew, the tiny body would have simply disappeared. The hospital took care of that side of things. But she had insisted that she be given the ashes—she had cried and begged—the nurses had tried to soothe her—and at last poor Cosmo had stepped in, not understanding at all, but shouting on her behalf anyway. Then Elaine had slept. She had slept for days, buried beneath her fever. The surgery had taken place without her knowledge or consent. Cosmo had signed the papers that would save her life and seal off her fertile organs permanently.

Slowly she uncapped the canister. The ashes drifted on a slight breeze, coating the wings of a white moth, dappling the surface of the water. Elaine waited, expecting to cry. A bird began to sing in the far distance, and the redwood leaves surged overhead. Perhaps she did not have any tears left.

In the afternoon, Cosmo worked on the baby's room. He carried the wooden dresser out to the dumpster. He stripped the wallpaper, leaving ragged curls on the soft yellow rug. The crib fell apart in his hands, and he wound up having to wrestle it down the stairs in several trips, spar by spar, the screws and brads raining onto the landing and frightening the cats. He was pretending—as much as he could—that Elaine was just on a business trip. She had a powerhouse job as a district manager for a clothing boutique, and she was often required to travel up and down the coast. It was normal for her to be gone for a few days, even a week.

They had planned for Cosmo to be the stay-at-home dad, answering calls as he changed the baby's diaper and prepared lunches of strained peas. Elaine, having amassed a slew of parenting books, advised him on the best schedule for naps and worried about the pros and cons of failing to breast-feed. Cosmo was less scientific. Now and then a bright image

would unfold in his mind. Himself with the baby in his lap, flipping through a picture book. Teaching the boy (or girl) to kick a soccer ball. Walking the child unsteadily through the garden. The pastel-themed bedroom now seemed a bit like one of these daydreams—foolishly optimistic, shining there at the top of the stairs for just a few sanguine months. They had waited until Elaine passed the crucial benchmark of the first trimester before upending what had once been a storage room and stocking it with bibs and booties.

Presently Cosmo unearthed the rattle his mother had shipped to him specially. He sat holding it in both hands for a while—painted wood, intricately carved with his and Elaine's initials. This seemed like a good indication that it was time to take a rest. When the telephone rang, he answered it with every semblance of calm. He was settled in a lounge chair, a glass of iced tea at his elbow. One of the cats was on the patio beside him, hissing and spitting as it stalked honeybees.

"I'm sorry to bother you," Art said earnestly, and Cosmo sighed to himself—the man was, after all, paying for the privilege. "But I *really* need your help. I went out to look at the fire blight one more time, and I found it in the *quince* trees too. The quince trees, for God's sake!"

"Oh, dear," Cosmo said.

"This is all my fault," Art said, and he launched into an apologetic tale about his ineptitude in the garden. Cosmo smiled wearily. Over time, he had formed a mental image of Art, and of all his regulars. There were more than a few lonelyhearts who called often enough to be on a first-name basis—Janice, the dog lady; Kyle, the hypochondriac; and Art, the flaming homosexual. From time to time they would drop tidbits about their lives, which Cosmo had gathered up into an incomplete but interesting collage. Art was one of his favorites. He had a math-related job—a teacher, an accountant?—that required a large chunk of his time. He was obsessively neat. Cosmo suspected that he had a steady partner, since Art made the occasional reference to a significant him, as in, "He said he'd fix the gate yesterday, but of course he didn't." Once, in the middle of a monologue about birdhouses, Art had said breathlessly, "Oh, that's him on the other line!" and hung up.

"You're sure this is a bacteria?" Art cried now. "It looks like the whole damn place has been set on fire. It looks like arson!"

"Remember the sores," Cosmo said. "It's definitely a bacteria."

"Oh God," Art said. "I can't handle this right now. These aren't even my trees! They're not—" He broke off on a high note, with what sounded like a sob.

Cosmo waited curiously. There was a pause, and then Art said in a husky voice, "I'm sorry, you must think I'm a nut. It's just that planting these trees was not my idea. And now I'm in charge of making the place nice to sell it. I can't have dying trees. That's a real estate no-no."

"You're selling your place?" Cosmo asked, stunned.

"Well—" Art took a shaky breath. "Yes, I have to. And you know how much work I've put into it. You know better than anyone."

"Yes, of course."

The very thought sent a shiver up Cosmo's spine. He knew his own house so well—the layout of his yard was printed into his brain. He had arranged the patio himself, tended the tiger lilies, stocked the koi pond with goggle-eyed carp. The place was a work of art, years in the making.

"Anyway," Art said, pulling himself together. "This has to be done quickly. I'm no good with trees, but I'm a competent gardener." He sniffed dramatically. "I have a lot of skills, in fact. A *lot* of skills."

"You know," Cosmo said carefully, "if the blight is as bad as that—if it's spreading to your other trees—it might be time to call in a professional."

"There's no *time*," Art wailed. "I've got people coming in to see the house. It's got to be done now!"

"All right," Cosmo said. "All right."

They went through the process, step by step. The sick branches would have to be pruned. It was unpleasant, sometimes, to cut so far into the healthy tissue of a weak and ailing plant, but there was no other way to stop the blight. Cosmo was surprised by Art's depth of feeling. He had known the man to be peevish, excitable, and occasionally paranoid. Art was the type of gardener who saw invasion everywhere. A half-chewed leaf meant earwigs. A stray mound of earth meant gophers. Cosmo had talked him down from many ledges—from spraying everywhere with caustic pesticides, from throwing out an entire rosebush that showed only the slightest sign of wilt. Art's voice trembled dangerously through the rest of their conversation, and Cosmo soothed and murmured. He attempted again to raise the idea of a professional gardener;

he did not like the idea of his tearful client wielding a saw. The last thing Art would need was to lose a few fingers.

"I've got it," Art said finally. "I'm ready."

"Fine," Cosmo said. "But please call me later to tell me how it's going. And can I suggest again—"

"I've got it," Art said firmly. He hung up, and Cosmo sat for a moment clutching the phone.

In the evening, Elaine lit a fire and stewed pasta in a billycan. These were skills she remembered from years ago; she was surprised at how the details came back, the fact that the kindling should be stacked in a tripod so that it would catch fire, the right way to hammer the tent stakes into the ground, in case of wind. The redwood forest looked spooky in the failing light. The sunset was broken, uncertain, and the birds called from so high up that they seemed to be miles away. She knew nothing about these trees except what Cosmo had told her—thousands of years old, among the largest living things on the planet. Elaine shivered as she huddled beside the flames. The scar from her surgery was definitely burning now, but she had elected to tough it out, eschewing pain medicine. In a way, the ache felt good.

She had suffered through four miscarriages before this final one. She and Cosmo knew the routine by now. For some reason it had often begun at night. There would be a bit of dull cramping, which Elaine would steadfastly ignore, flipping through her magazine as Cosmo glowered at his *New York Times* crossword puzzle. The bedroom windows were usually open, the blinds billowing in a breeze. One of the cats might climb drowsily over her feet. The pain would begin to worsen, eventually shifting from her belly to her lower back. She might feel a tensing in her buttocks. And then there would be wetness, pooling around her thighs.

"Cosmo—?" she would say. He would glance up absently, the pencil still poised in midair. Elaine would watch his expression change as he registered her anxiety, the slight contortion of her posture.

The rest of the evening would pass in trips to the bathroom and pads tucked into her underwear. She would call the doctor, and they would discuss exactly what kind of blood flow she was seeing, whether there were any clots or bits of tissue. Cosmo would hover around, asking whether she wanted any tea, if he should get her a heating pad, until Elaine was ready to scream. The doctor would be kind. He would be soothing, unwilling to commit himself to any particular diagnosis. They had run so many tests. Elaine's womb was normal, no growths, no fibroids. She was not suffering from any underlying illnesses like diabetes or lupus. Her immune system was not attacking the fetus. There was simply no medical reason why she and Cosmo could not conceive naturally. The doctor would be calm and reassuring as he reminded her of all these things. But Elaine would know. She could feel it happening inside her, a solid structure beginning to crumble, like clay in running water.

Over time, she had found ways to cope with the terrible aftermath. She would close her ears to the well-meaning friends who told her it might be all for the best. She would throw herself back into her career. There, at least, there was no sympathy to suffer through, no one to squeeze her hands and glare meaningfully into her eyes. At home, she and Cosmo would bear up well enough. The doctor had warned her that the psychological fallout could be severe, that many happy marriages had been destroyed by a lack of communication. Elaine had listened politely. Cosmo, she knew, would cope in his way, puttering around the garden, chatting ad nauseum with his clients about millipedes and green tomatoes and who knew what else.

Elaine had learned to manage the sadness on her own, counting to ten and waiting for the crest of the wave to pass over her. She had learned to control the urges that sometimes struck when she passed a playground and glimpsed a little girl in the sandbox, her entire attention absorbed in burying her doll, or a towheaded boy toddling after a ball. She had learned not to speak of the dreams that plagued her. Baby powder and milk. Pink bellies and downy heads.

Cosmo spent the evening in a state of mounting concern. The telephone shrilled, and he leapt to answer it, hoping to hear Art's voice. Instead he was inveigled in a long discussion about whether to pollard a difficult willow tree. He got a few of those odd calls he used to savor, as they had made Elaine laugh—sometimes people rang the hotline with issues so strange they clearly had no idea whom else to ask. A woman called to inquire how many snails her daughter would have to eat before it was time to head to the emergency room. A man with a gruff voice wanted to know how deep he should bury his dog's body. (Elaine's favorite, years ago, had been a young woman, who—sounding mortified but determined—asked if it would be all right for her to poop in the backyard while the plumbing in her house was being fixed.) The sky darkened outside, and a light rain began to fall.

When Art finally called again, Cosmo was seated in his favorite armchair, the cat a warm puddle of fur in his lap. The clock had just struck nine.

"It's done," Art said.

"Ah, yes?" Cosmo let out a long breath. "Glad to hear it."

"The trees are gone."

"Beg pardon?"

"*Gone*," Art said. "I tried to do what you told me, I really did. I got the saw. I went to the sickest tree, and I cut wherever I saw the sores. There were branches all over the ground. I dropped a big one on my foot. But I kept finding more of the sores. I kept cutting. And by then, the tree was—" He paused. "It just looked so sad, only one branch left sticking up, and raw places cut all over the trunk. So I sawed it down. Put it out of its misery."

Cosmo shifted involuntarily, and the cat let out a yowl, dislodged from its sleeping place.

"Then I went to the next tree. But it was the same thing. It looked like a person with leprosy, you know, everywhere you look there's another little patch of blisters. I kept thinking I was done, but then I'd see a twig I had missed, black and charred—" He paused again. "So I cut that one down, too."

"And the quince trees?" Cosmo asked, finding his voice.

"Oh," Art said. "They were the sickest of all. I think the fire blight must have started there. They were goners. I sawed and sawed, but the tissue was pink all the way through. No healthy bark left."

"I see," Cosmo said.

"I carried all the branches out to the alley," Art said. "I'm dead on my feet. I'm a mess, really, my hands are all torn up. But I think it will look okay. I mean, right now it's just stumps, and a lot of sawdust, but—" He took a heavy breath, and then he began to cry in earnest. Cosmo listened, aghast, as the man broke down. The cat, disliking the noise, sprinted from the room.

"Art," Cosmo said softly. But there was no stopping him. Art let out a sniffle and then almost screamed in anguish. Not knowing what else to do, Cosmo got to his feet, the phone crooked under his ear.

"Can I—" he began. "Is there someone I could—?"

Art moaned, and Cosmo heard him blowing his nose.

"I'm so sorry," Art said. "This is ridiculous. Honestly."

Another sob escaped him, and for a moment he was overcome. Cosmo stood in the living room, his mouth open. The rain picked up, and a burst of spray misted through the screens.

"You see, he left," Art said at last. "I was living with— Well, I'm sure you know I'm gay. We'd been together for nine years. And then one day I walked in, and there was a note on the table."

"A note," Cosmo echoed.

"Yes, a little Dear John letter. Nine years ended by a slip of paper. I felt like I'd been fired." He laughed wildly. "And Steven was gone."

Cosmo grunted.

"For a while," Art continued, "I thought I'd live in the house anyway, you know, just buy out his half. But God, Cosmo, here I am, the only *faggot* on the block. I've got the dog—Steven left his *dog*—and it's not even a pretty dog. It looks like a hyena. So I walk his damn mutt, and I work on my garden. The neighborhood kids are scared of me. I'm the creepy guy who lives alone in the big house. I'm Boo Radley!"

He burst into tears again, and for a time his words were lost. Cosmo tugged open the door to the garden. The rain had dwindled. The air was hung with damp curtains of chill. He kicked on his boots and stepped into the soaked grass. Art wept, and Cosmo moved quietly among the plants. Heavy leaves, bowed under the weight of moisture, brushed against his legs.

He was aware that he ought to confide in return. That would be the normal thing to do—the polite, friendly response. Cosmo ought to share some part of what he himself was suffering. But he could not manage it. The words were stuck in his throat. He could scarcely breathe.

"My wife—" he began. "Elaine—"

"Hm?"

Cosmo faltered. A cool wind blew up around him, and there was a moment's pause, during which Art blew his nose.

From the distance came the chuff of a train. At last, somewhat feebly, Art said, "Anyway, I did want to ask—would you recommend that I put some stones over the poor little stumps? You know, some big boulders? Just so it doesn't look like there was a natural disaster back there."

"That would be nice," Cosmo said. "But make sure you wash them before you put them in the garden. Sometimes rocks will bring in lichen or pests you don't need."

Art sighed. "It's perfect in a way. Those were Steven's trees. His one contribution. And when he left, they just withered away to nothing."

Cosmo moved deeper into the yard, sniffing the air.

"Well," Art said, now sounding mortified. "I suppose I ought to go."

"Mm." Cosmo was steeling himself. If he did not speak up now, he never would. If he did not speak up now, Art would not call the hotline again, and God only knew what the net loss of income would be.

"My wife," Cosmo said loudly. "She lost the baby."

"What's that?" Art gasped.

And then it was easy. Once the dam had broken, a veritable tide of words came tumbling across Cosmo's tongue. He told Art about Elaine's surgery. He told Art that he had not really talked about it, not to anyone; if he did not verbalize it, the knowledge tended to stay somewhere else, at the back of his mind, like a bad dream. He told Art that he could not imagine his wife out in the wilderness; she was a city girl, unaccustomed to sleeping under the stars. Elaine had been gone nearly a week, and in an odd way he was having trouble calling up an accurate picture of what she looked like. During the pregnancy, she had been swollen and blossoming, almost fey in her giddiness. She had not moved with the usual languid weight of a gravid woman, but seemed buoyed up, drifting as though through water.

The miscarriage had come on so suddenly. The two of them were walking back from the ice cream store when Elaine had doubled over. Ten minutes later Cosmo was screaming for an ambulance. He told Art that he barely remembered the hours in the hospital, doctors bustling, doors slamming, Elaine groaning. There had been a terrible moment, after they had carried off the remains of the baby, in which Elaine had wailed that she wished she were dead too. She had shouted it for everyone to hear. He tried to hold her, but she slapped him away.

As he spoke, Cosmo's senses were abuzz. He could smell the wet coals of someone's outdoor barbecue, releasing, after the downpour, the scent of yesterday's meal. He could hear the flutter of a moth, the lonely, faraway whistle of a train. Art was soothing and kind. Chuckling, he revealed a few hilarious details about Steven's little quirks—his penchant for eating jam on scrambled eggs, his horror of having his toenails clipped. Cosmo murmured that he was afraid Elaine might never return. He paced the wet grass, listening as Art poured himself a glass of lemonade and fussed with his icemaker. The sky was filled with the eerie calls of bats, the swish of swallow's wings. The moon rose between the leaves.

Gradually the talk turned to boulders, and real estate agents, and the best neighborhoods in which to invest. But Cosmo's thoughts were elsewhere. It seemed as though some doorway in his mind, thus far shut tight, even to himself, had suddenly opened. Inside that private room was a mess of conflicting emotions. He was angry with Elaine. She had treated this tragedy as her private sorrow, as though Cosmo, too, had not lost a child—as though he had not lost his chance of ever having children. He had been so busy caring for Elaine that his own heartbreak had been steamrolled over.

Cosmo had wanted to be a father, a good father, unlike his own. He had wanted to see his grey eyes and Elaine's snub nose duplicated in a small, soft face. He had been ready for parenthood, and it felt now as though some part of him had died. Some part of him had been sliced down, toppled, and excised from him—a stone rolled over the place where it had stood. Those last moments in the hospital would haunt him forever. The baby had just looked so lifelike as it had been carried away, its tiny hands reaching for the air.

When Elaine returned home, two days later, she was struck first by the stillness. Standing in the front hall, she set her suitcase down uneasily. She had learned over the years how to discern where her husband—naturally more silent than other men—might be hiding; she could tell, like a spider seated in its web, one leg poised on each strand, how to go to him unerringly. Today, however, the house felt abandoned. An odd smell hung in the air, earthy and damp.

There was dirt on the living room floor. Cosmo had left a mess for her to clean up. With her nose wrinkled, Elaine followed the muddy trail to the staircase. There were footprints on the steps. There were twigs and leaves caught in the banister. Cosmo had apparently gone to pieces in her absence. The hallway was strewn with pebbles and clay, leading into

the baby's room. Elaine sucked in a brave breath, turned the corner—and stopped in her tracks.

A tree stood in the center of the room. Cosmo had piled a waist-high mountain of crumbling black soil on the clean wooden floor. Buried in the heap, listing slightly toward the window, was a five-foot sapling. The thing looked brand-spanking-new, as though Cosmo had picked it up at a nursery and transported it directly here. Its fronds were pale green, the bark a glossy copper. A few roots poked out of the dirt. The cats had made merry with their new plaything; there were inky footprints on the floorboards. Not quite trusting her senses, Elaine stepped forward, her hand outstretched, and let her fingers close around the wood.

The rest of the room was absolutely bare. Cosmo had repainted the walls and spirited away the crib and baby clothes. The framed pictures of lambs had been detached from the walls. There were no more packages of diapers. The mobile had been tugged out of the ceiling, and even the holes left by a nail or two had been carefully spackled over, all evidence of their hope removed. The pile of earth was the only thing left, with silt and loam scattered right into the corners. A breeze wafted through the window, and the sapling trembled. Its limbs were delicately sculpted. A few fragile flowers gleamed among the twigs. Elaine gazed for a while with her mouth open. Then she buried her hands in the branches, the bright, cold leaves against her skin. She ought to have been upset, she knew. She ought to have been furious, or at least concerned, but the first emotion that came to her was a kind of wrenching joy, as she took in the wild, blooming layout of her husband's creation—this strange, new living thing.

Lindsay Coleman

Stir, Issue 4

It's been one week since the great blizzard
began. Snow has swallowed the house
sealing the doors, windows
on the second floor. The only light
from outside comes through

a circular window in the attic, and soon
that will be buried too.
My family huddles near the pane, floaters
on a dark tide rising. We see
tips of the pines make miniature pines

above the drifts, points from neighboring roofs
make miniature roofs. Around us the house
is shrinking. We hear mice whimpering
in the cellar, cream in the fridge
going bad. There are twenty-seven termites
gnawing the rafter. Stones breathe the cold from
the other side of the wall. My parents say
we should be grateful for
the blessings of family and shelter.
Up close their eye sockets
are dark and empty
as fireplaces.

John Poch

Nutgrass, Issue 1

I'm reading my colleague's, William Wenthe's, most recent manuscript. He has promised to read mine (my second), though he's reading another by a different friend, first, and then he will get to mine. About halfway through, I've come across the word, *nutgrass*, in one of his poems. A blue jay in his poem pokes around in the nutgrass.

I feel bright, at this moment in the poem, because I know what nutgrass is. I venture to say that if I walked around Lubbock and asked a hundred people, from students to mechanics to doctors, only a handful would know nutgrass. If someone else were reading this poem, what would they imagine when they came to this word? I know most people wouldn't go look up nutgrass in the dictionary or even on the World Wide Web.

They would do as I often do when I come to a word that is somewhat self-descriptive and understandable in its context; they would pass over it and make sense of the poem as best as they could without fully understanding. If they are anything like me, a tinge of guilt the color and taste of an old penny will, for a fraction of a second, make them think they should probably figure out what exactly is this nutgrass, but of what importance is it to the poem, really? Or to life? If I don't figure out what nutgrass is right now, then what will become of me? Probably nothing disastrous, so I, we, pass over it as if it were, well, a sprout of nutgrass coming up between the stones on a walkway. No biggie. If I didn't know what it was, I'd just picture in my mind some sort of grass. Maybe it smells like a nut when you roll it between your fingers.

I try to embarrass my students into looking things up that they don't know in the poems I've assigned. Often, they won't know a word a fellow student uses. Didn't you care about Walter's poem, I ask? They look at their shoes. I say proudly, jokingly, I looked it up, and I try to show them how this word cannot be ignored, in fact that it may be the very center, the crux, the hinge, the fulcrum of the poem.

I know what nutgrass is because it grows in between the stones on the walkway on the east side of my house. This side of the house was a complete disaster when we moved in, overgrown with vinca and pigweed and all other manner of weeds with all manner of trash hidden below the foliage. Now, my wife has cleaned up most of this area, and we have some tomatoes, some peppers, cilantro and a walkway where the nutgrass is coming up.

If you are still reading along with me here and haven't looked up nutgrass by now, don't worry, you are not a bad person. Not by virtue of not looking it up, at least. Does it go through your head at any moment, well, now I'm certainly not looking it up just to show that writer I don't need it? I doubt too many people would be like that, but it just occurred to me that one or two might think this way. Maybe that says something about me or my imagination. And that I've been reading Lydia Davis, who's always, in her writing, flipping over the other side of the coin, and then inspecting the portrait and date, even the ridges on the side.

Maybe some reader will think it's a trick. I wish I were this clever. Like when Wallace Stevens, in "Earthy Anecdote" talks about that "firecat" who "bristles in the way." This reader thinks, there's really no such thing as nutgrass, just like the firecat. But I'm not doing that at all, even though I love Stevens' poem and what I think he's doing with the imaginary firecat.

But the fact remains: the greater percentage of people reading this, those who don't know nutgrass, still, by the time they have read the end of this paragraph, don't know what it is.

If you don't know that Stevens poem, have you looked it up yet? Some readers already know it. It's curious what we let go and what we follow to its end. And to *what* end? Most of us don't go far enough to uncover, to discover, the possibilities, the knowledge, the facts of the world around us. It's no wonder that our environment, our world, is going "to hell in a handbasket."

I actually looked up that phrase recently and found out that scholars really don't know exactly where it came from. My neighbor Joe and myself were in line at the local home improvement store and something we were talking about was going to hell in a handbasket. Where did that phrase come from, I said. He didn't know, and neither did another friend with us, so I ventured it might just have to do with the imagery. Just picture Little Red Riding Hood, I said. You know, the

wolf waiting for her. I laughed at my joke.

When I got home I didn't look it up. I ran into Joe about a week later, and he asked me did I figure out where "hell in a handbasket" came from. I looked at my shoes. I'm supposed to care about these things. I'm an English professor, a writer. And I was the one that brought it up in the first place.

I'm a little far afield. Is nutgrass a grass that has small nut-like fruit instead of grains? Does it emit that nutty smell? Or does it just drive you nuts because it keeps coming up when you're trying to get rid of it? That, yes, but this certainly has nothing to do with its etymology.

I have to mention my neighbor, Joe, again because he is the one who told me what nutgrass is. He's a horticulturist by training, but he's also the director/curator of the art galleries at the university where we both work. To introduce himself when we first moved in across the street, he brought over some tomato plants. I planted them over on the east side of the house where we've got the walkway. After a while, I'd weed around the tomatoes, but this grass kept coming back. Joe let me know this is nutgrass. He said, You have to get the nut. You can't just pull up the green stuff. He took the shovel from my hand and dug around some of it, getting down to a root system with a kind of bulb or knot the size of a demented pea at its stringy base. If you don't get that, he said, it's just going to keep coming back.

I dug around and unearthed a few. I had to admit it felt quite satisfactory to have the nut right there in my hand and know that I had the life of the thing under my thumb. My green thumb, I hoped, for the sake of the coming tomatoes.

In Stevens' poem, the very first in his *Collected Poems*, we see that "Every time the bucks went clattering / Over Oklahoma / a firecat bristled in the way." In reading the rest of this very short lyric, you see these bucks who swerve to the right and to the left "Because of the firecat." If we look it up, even in the *OED*, and see there is no such thing as a firecat, then what? How can something that doesn't exist make something "swerve" so dramatically?

Stevens loved to ask just what exactly is it that happens when we imagine. You know, imagination: when we create in our mind some image, something that may not, at that moment, exist in the physical world, the world right before us. It seems to me that he's asking this question from the very beginning in his poems. Like this one with the firecat. So when we look it up and fail only to find out the firecat is an imaginative creation, Stevens' poem and firecat are all the more vivid in their purpose and possibilities.

But the firecat does exist in another form, as well. As allusion. I always picture William Blake's "Tyger, Tyger, burning bright" as my own personal firecat referent. In other words, I think Stevens is talking about Blake when he's writing this poem. William Blake—who was so imaginative, he invented his own religion.

So Stevens' "fearful hand" has formed this creature, this firecat, and I'm paying attention. Other readers invent something else symbolic for their own personal firecat. In any case, the bucks must swerve. You shouldn't ignore the firecat. Or the nutgrass.

It hasn't rained in weeks and this nutgrass keeps coming. Ornery stuff. I don't really feel like tearing up the whole stone walkway to get to the nuts, so whenever I walk by, I'll just yank or kick at some of the greenery thinking it's going to give up. It grows back up about an inch a day. I got most of it out of the tomatoes, but around the walkway, it doesn't surrender. Isn't ignorance like this nutgrass? Maybe ignorance isn't an absence, like we usually think of it. Maybe it's an act of not tending to something. Unless you get to the nut, the problems just keep resurfacing.

I don't really feel like making a moral out of this, as any reader worth his nutgrass can see where I'm going and can take it as far as he likes, so maybe I'm just making a public statement about my own need to understand better, to know the world around me so that my tomatoes can grow and so that I can be a more skilled reader, to embarrass myself with the riches of a language. If I can get to the nut, I will achieve more fruit on the vine and more pleasure from the line.

In Bill Wenthe's poem, the nutgrass, as far as I can tell, isn't at all central to the meaning of the poem. I wish it were, so then I'd have a real strategy here, a thesis. But the poem is all the more vivid for anyone who knows what nutgrass is, sprouting up in its delicate lime green clusters, as it does in Lubbock, Texas, even if we're in a drought.

Despite all this, as of this writing, I still haven't looked nutgrass up myself. I don't know how many varieties or what genus or family it belongs to. I don't know its proper Latin name and don't, just yet, care to, and this is strange to me.

Claudia Serea

Real Good Cabbage, Issue 6

The sun is a peeled tomato,
rolled on the highway near Arad.

The eighteen wheeler toppled and split, suddenly,
like an open artery:
tomato juice, jars and cans that killed the four teenagers.
Tonight, the highway drinks a Bloody Mary
stirred with mangled metal stalks.

Dark sky, smeared with tomato paste.

Horses' hooves slip in the red mud.
The villagers hurry through evening's pulp
to pick up the cans from the crash site.
They pile the carriages high;
they will wash the cans, sell them, use them for cooking.

A woman makes a sack from her skirt,
to carry the load:

A mother's kiss for you, my boys.

I'll cook for your souls,
and the crushed tomatoes will make the cabbage real good.

Leonard Gontarek

Stones (drawing), Issue 5

A woman washes her feet in clear water. A rippling moon blurs the stones.

These are feet I have held, stones I have kissed.

A helicopter rustles the trees. Flowers, boulders, inchoate forms the
flickering light has made.

To hell with these poems that reveal the self. Hell, carpeted with violets.

Rachel Mangini

My Sister, The Tiger, Issue 9

Seventeen raisins. Her sister's breakfast. Seventeen golden raisins, three cups of green tea, and a laxative. Her mother called to tell her. Her mother had installed a camera in the kitchen. An invasion of privacy, they all insisted, but still, her sister's life hung "in the balance." Her mother's phrase. Ironic. In the balance, the weight of her sister could barely offset anything. Certainly not an intervention. Not accusations. Not love or being hugged very tight. Not winter, even beneath wool sweaters and down-filled coats. Her brittle bones would snap after a slip on the ice, the doctor warned. Try two cups of milk a day. A few spoonfuls of ice cream. Her sister sat in front of the mint chip for an hour, watching it melt into a puddle in the bowl. They had all seen the footage.

She has a photograph of the two of them framed on her desk. She, about four, her sister, six, at the mall. On their laps, a tiger cub from an exotic animal show. She remembers the paws of the tiger being so heavy. The weight of the kitten more than seemed possible for his surface area. Marrow in his bones. Flesh heavy with blood. The tiger looks to the left of the photographer, his head cocked in curiosity. Her sister looks directly into the flash, her cheeks high, bony, her eyes fierce with something she drained from the predator in her arms. Her fingers are buried in the kitten's fur, closing in on his neck as if she might tear him in half and gorge on his insides.

Susan H. Case

Bird or Plane?, Issue 1

A bird the size of a small airplane was recently
spotted flying over southwest
Alaska, puzzling scientists…
Reuters, Ltd.

Winged something, east of Igushik River, down
the road from Weary River
if there were a road, which there isn't and where
there has never been anyone like Superman.
Perhaps if fishing season were not over,
everyone come home to Togiak
to Manokotak, nets prepared through long freeze
for next season, no one would have seen a creature
with a fourteen-foot span. (Keep the children in.)
Nothing like that alive
in one hundred thousand years. Something
is eating the herring.
From 225,000 down to 180,000 tons.
Now practically worthless except the roe.
Who can be sure if a raven set under a large
cooking pot might not ferret out the thief
or itself snatch some fish. Who is to say if
this monster jiggers the fantasies that come from too long
a night and not enough day in the day.
Who is to know if the child that disappears
into the crisp of frosty air, was apparition—
never even here.

Nancy Pagh

To the Woman Who Stole My Visa Card, Issue 5

Maybe it was because I was wearing my nice charcoal skirt,
could finally zip it up that day after three months of exercise
and was consequently feeling a little bit full of myself.
Maybe the set of my neck was slightly haughty or perhaps
I even waved a finger at you when I called you from your chair
where you leaned over a man with a nose shaped
like a lava formation as you styled his hair. I know what
a nice skirt on someone else can do to a woman who works
for next to nothing all day at the mall and even has to sweep
the little triangles of other people's drying hair up from the floor.
I've been there. Never in the mall, but cleaning toilets
in the bookstore, washing dishes at the pizzeria, pressure
spraying the effluvial slime from the copper-painted bottoms
of pleasure craft down at the marina. The worst, I think,
was picking cucumbers on the graveyard shift next
to the pig barn—although I concede the mystical sunrises.
Or, no: the worst was passing frozen sockeye salmon through
a waterfall of glaze then packing them into crates with hands
that had lost all feeling by seven-thirty in the morning
and were bruised that whole summer in the webs of my thumbs.
Once I went to a new friend's beautiful home for a sleep-over
and there was something about the gas fireplace and the Italian
stonework above it and the perfectly vacuumed Delft-blue
carpeting that made me consciously wipe a booger
on the davenport during the night—and I was almost
thirty years old. What I am saying here is not that I understand
theft or what exactly drove you to fool me into thinking
you gave back my Visa card then carried it in your wallet
to FuelExpress and charged one hundred seventy dollars and
seventy-two cents. No. What I'm saying is I understand
that second charge, processed moments later, for $2.75.
I imagine it was a muffin, a little afterthought, a tiny indulgence
perhaps accounted for by the extreme ugliness of that man's
nose earlier in the day. I hope it tasted sweet in your mouth
as you drove home that evening from the FuelExpress; I hope
that you stepped into your apartment holding your head up
on a slightly haughty neck and believe me it was really my treat.

Isaac Anderson

Regarding the Water, Issue 6

Remind me why I'm doing this—withering under artificial light, another airport terminal, disembarking a marathon fourteen-hour flight. This journey started yesterday in my hometown, Kansas City. In the belly of a whale I flew to Denver, then L.A. Now, through blackness, through the International Date Line, to Taipei. The only English: "DRUG TRAFFICKING IS PUNISHABLE BY DEATH," which makes me feel I'm being watched. I will layover two hours then continue to Phuket, Thailand, meet my host, and travel by car up serrated western coast to Khao Lak, my final destination. It is April, 2005. I've been traveling west for nearly 27 hours, with hours to go before I sleep. Exhaustion is setting in, and I am second-guessing myself.

Remember—two days after Christmas, I was at Starbucks sifting through *The New York Times* when I read about the wave that had just spelled the end of the world for untold thousands in Southeast Asia. Only hours earlier, the Indian Ocean had rushed in, avalanching lime dam-burst, swallowing coastal villages whole. Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand were drowning in grief, and I could hardly fathom an adequate response.

So I kept reading—each *New York Times* article covering the disaster on December 27th , the day following, and the day after that. For weeks, I read every piece The Times printed about the tsunami and its aftermath—out of respect for the dead, I think, though my compulsions are never too easily deciphered.

PHI PHI ISLAND, Thailand, Jan. 11—"Remants of…lives lie everywhere: pages from a photo album full of Thai faces; a Santa Claus hat; suitcases; playing cards; a wine list and half-written postcards."—Abby Goodnough

CALANG, Indonesia, Jan. 13—"This town was not just destroyed. It vanished. … There is no hint of the 5,627 people missing, and the reality is settling in that 8 in 10 people on Calang were whisked clean away."—Ian Fisher

The stack of articles grew and so did death tolls. Like dead leaves, individual lives were being grotesquely and necessarily swept into piles of statistics. In mid-January, Indonesia's Health Ministry raised the country's casualty estimate to 166,320, lifting the regional death toll to 226,566.

Remember—an acclaimed author reflecting on the crisis one morning on NPR. Her young daughter, in trying to imagine an ocean consuming so many, had described the picture as "lots and lots of dots, in blue water." Her daughter, the author commented, was not yet old enough to grasp the supreme importance of each human life. Of course, we adults knew better: these were not dots, but living, breathing, dreaming, dying, people.

Which reminds me, now, of why I'm here.

The stories caught up with me. Or the numbers did. And I felt that kick of consciousness that periodically trips awake, when you thought you already were. And I knew that given the insane losses, nothing could be done to stem the grief, and that I had to do something even so. Which is to say that you can only read so much, then you implicate yourself.

My host is John Graves, a tanned American expatriate with face creases like a middle-aged desert nomad. He is waiting in the Phuket airport and the first thing he wants to know is how old I am. His tone is wary, like he has dealt with younger aid workers before, to his detriment. I am twenty-six, unsure if this helps or hinders my credibility. We exit the terminal into equatorial heat and drive north up the coast toward Khao Lak.

Thailand's rainy season is underway. So is Song-Kran, the yearly water-throwing festival. Ebullient Thais have taken to the streets. They celebrate by dousing anyone they can. Boys armed with water-bazookas ride on the beds of pickups, aiming at pedestrians. Drive-by sprayings. Men on foot retaliate, grinning, heaving bucketfuls of water back toward the moving traffic. Keep your windows shut if you want to stay dry. Given recent events, such festivity surprises me, but what

do I know?

I know we're driving on the wrong side of the road, and it's good I'm not behind the wheel. Most streets are two narrow lanes that keep converting to three as slower traffic gets pushed to the shoulder by vehicles muscling up the middle. To relax, I preoccupy myself wit the cityscape. King Bhumibol's image appears on billboards and bumper-stickers throughout town. (He has ruled the country over 50 years and is revered by many Thais as semi-divine.) Nearing the city's outskirts, I notice a sign posted outside a dreary-looking compound. The writing is in English, which again catches my eye. It reads, "DEATH BODIES CONTAINER." We are passing a makeshift morgue, and what is for me the first grim landmark connected to the tragedy. Set next to the jubilation of Song-Kran, the sight is a jarring reminder of how swiftly life's pendulum wings between celebration and mourning, festivals and funerals, containers of life, containers of death—a jarring lesson of the tsunami itself, given its occurrence the day after Christmas.

My body keeps reminding me I've traveled halfway across the globe. (Kansas City is exactly twelve hours behind Khao Lak.) But it's only late afternoon when I am dropped at my one-room bungalow, so I resist crashing immediately. The bungalow is sparsely furnished with a wooden table, chair, nightstand, and bed. It is clean, however, and at ten U.S. dollars a day, dirt cheap. For nine days, this will be home.

The wind picks up outside as I unpack. By the time I fall into bed, the rain has come and gone.

HAFUN, Somalia, Jan. 12—"Ali Mohamed Ali was fishing when the tsunami arrived, and he and his brother were thrown overboard. They both grabbed a raft but the brother, Jama, eventually slipped off and disappeared. Mr. Ali managed to hang on, for several days, in the sea. He said he survived by eating some dates that had been in his pocket. Another fisherman rescued him, groggy but still alive. 'I'll have to go fishing again,' Mr. Ali said. 'But not now. It's too soon.'" —Marc Lacey

Khao Lak is one of Thailand's premier vacation spots, though it's hard to tell these days. It has the look of a town deserted by industry, in that time after factories are left to rot, but before the bars close down. This morning, John—who has warmed up since yesterday—gives me a tour of the area. The main street is intact: the Viking Steakhouse, Happy Snapper, Khao Lak Internet Café, all open, if mostly vacant. Outside the city center, water has scarred the terrain for miles. Beachfront cottages are decimated—empty shells. A marsh is littered with debris—a muddy stew of rubber tires, roof shingles, and corrugated tin. Palm trees uprooted. Faint green waterlines streak the second stories of buildings. On Highway 4 (Petchkasem Road), I gaze east, away from the ocean, to see a police patrol boat stranded on wasteland at the edge of jungle. The hulking metal boat must be 40 feet long and appears to float on churned earth, over a kilometer from sea. When the wave bearing that vessel crossed this road, says John, it was 13 feet high.

Thirteen feet. Even here amidst the detritus, at Thailand's ground zero, the thought of roiling liquid surpassing rooflines defies belief. Equally hard to imagine is the plane of red dirt on which the police boat sits having ever been anything but barren. The salt-water destroyed the vegetation, turned a previously grassy field into this desert containing only silt—silt and that desolate boat, which looks as out of place as Noah's ark would have after the deluge, set down on Mount Ararat or whatever remote topography where it came to rest, monument to water's fluidic strength.

Running parallel to telephone lines along Highway 4 is white string Buddhist monks have woven through tree branches and underbrush. It is meant as a blessing and gives this tour the feel of an earnest connect-the-dots exercise. I keep an eye on it as we drive, following its dips and climbs. Sometimes the thread stretches for a mile uninterrupted. Sometimes it snaps, disappears.

▲

I am anxious to be useful. After breakfast, four college students from Bangkok will be visiting refugee camps with Achara, an effusive Thai woman in her early forties who gestures excitedly when she talks, and today, is wearing a T-shirt that says, "WE LOVE THAILAND." One of the students, Si, knows some English; he will translate for me. We ride in the back of Achara's beige truck, down bumpy roads, the wind hot on our faces, like we're passengers in a clothes dryer.

Here in the camps, everything is temporary. Children climb temporary jungle gyms outside temporary day care centers. Families crowd into plywood barracks or live in tents. Meeting refugees, I have trouble knowing whether to smile,

or rather how to smile while simultaneously showing concern for their situation. I have the same difficulty when encountering homeless people on the streets of Kansas City—wanting my face to speak a language it doesn't know.

At one camp, I meet a volunteer in her early twenties, an American with blond hair, who happens to be from Kansas City. It turns out that back home, the girl works at a restaurant five blocks from my apartment. For the last couple weeks, she has lived among the displaced, sharing a cramped room with a Thai woman, while she assists with cooking and plays with children.

Under different circumstances, the encounter might have seemed romantic: two restless souls from the same neighborhood traveling far from home to serendipitously meet in a foreign paradise. But this is less a paradise and more a purgatory, this in-between place where families wait indefinitely, in heat and dust, for permanent housing that may take years to complete. And there is no romance as we traipse narrow lanes between plywood shelters, greeting faces that peer from the dimness.

The tsunami crippled the fishing industry here—Khao Lak's other economic engine, besides tourism. Relief agencies have donated lumber, and at another camp, fishermen toil to fashion new boats themselves. They stand under tents sawing large planks of wood, arranging curved timbers like a ribcage to frame the hull.

I'm wearing running shoes that say "COURAGEOUS." Later, I think about the fisherman. If I were one like them, would I have the will to persevere? You grow up and learn a trade. Your life is on the ocean. Working every day you sustain your family, you stay afloat. The work keeps you afloat. And then one day, it almost kills you. You are thrown overboard, you and your brother, grasping for a raft. Your boat is in shambles. Land is nowhere in sight. Do you wait it out for days on end, eating dates from your pocket? Or do you let go, surrender to the sea. And if you make it back to solid ground, do you dare leave it again?

Yes. Necessity compels you. You risk your life, again, for fish.

I have learned a few Thai phrases since my arrival four days ago. Enough to make me polite—*kop khun* means thank-you—but not nearly enough for real conversation. I have also learned to hitchhike. Here it's a common form of travel, a way Thais express hospitality. Give the signal and vehicles of all sorts transform into taxis, some carrying several passengers at a time. (Once, I'm picked up by a man with a four-wheeler, pulling a small flatbed trailer. I sit on an iron rail, across from his wife.)

Today, I hitch north, following the Buddhist string, to Ban Nam Khem. This village was among the hardest hit—almost 2,000 lost. It too was filled with fishermen. Two commercial fishing boats have become spectacles to people passing through. The first sky-blue and triple-tiered. It has run aground some 200 yards inland, its splintered hull resting on elevated concrete, its bow flush against the back porch of a house. The other boat is bright orange, also triple-tiered, and sits near the village center, 10 yards from an open-air restaurant. I take pictures.

American relief workers have been on-site for weeks, fabricating new homes from cinder blocks and cement. Tyler, a site foreman, introduces me around. Here, I meet a villager named Pops. He is frail looking, late forties, early fifties, with ashen hair and interesting skin. He seems pleasant. But when I reach to shake his hand, he looks away. In the momentary awkwardness, Tyler speaks up. Pops has leprosy.

I figure Pops is contagious until later that afternoon I see a relief worker give him a hug. It takes me a while, but I finally put it together. IT was a conditioned response—Pops not shaking my hand. He is worried that outsiders might recoil at touching a leper. He wants to spare them that discomfort. So he has learned how to diffuse the moment, and how to save face. Just look away.

Pops is too weak to work. He spends most days reclining on a mat in the shade, watching the action. When he smiles, he seems content, though I can't help feeling desperately sorry for him.

Walking to find lunch in Ban Nam Khem, I experience my first humiliating moment of the trip. I stop at a clothing shop, a thrift store of sorts, that specializes in military clothing. The clothes hang on racks out in the sun, and I am browsing for a green, standard-issue army jacket. Nearby, Thai soldiers unwind beneath a canopy. They grin, nod in my direction. I try on two or three jackets before the shop owner steps outside. He waits hospitably as I look at my reflection

in the sliding-glass door. I choose a jacket and in broken Thai, inquire about price. He looks amused. No, he signals, not for sale. The reason: He is not a shop owner. He is in the military. It seems I've been rummaging through his closet.

▲

I have been meeting volunteers all week. These are the curved timbers that form the ribcage of healing. As we work, I learn their stories. Lee Boss is a traveling psychologist and grief counselor. He is sixty-eight or nine and is spending his retirement years crossing the globe, self-funded, giving free counseling to people who dearly need it. Brandon is from Michigan—the Upper Peninsula. He's been living, bearded and barefoot, in a refugee camp named Ban Maung. He plays with kids, cleans the camp, cooks, and teaches English. Shaneen left home the week after high school graduation. Her mom is on drugs back in Canada. She wants to move to Ethiopia and start an orphanage for street children. Then there's the girl from Kansas City—whose name I've forgotten. And there's Wade and Sabrina, the Californian couple. They divide their years down the middle: half work, half travel. They've been in Khao Lak a month, also self-funded. And there's Öm. Her father is a high-ranking officer in the Thai army. She is a junior in high school and hitchhikes to build houses with the foreigners, despite her father's apprehension.

Like new lumber, they have all arrived from somewhere else, drawn and held by a compulsion to help any way they can.

Pops wants to help, too. We have been mixing concrete in the afternoon sun. Several of us are constructing a wall. We stack cinder blocks on top of each other; we seal them with the concrete. I'm using a pointing trowel in the first room when I see Pops quit his mat. He steps gingerly inside his own house and emerges carrying a metallic bowl. He moves slowly, cradling the bowl with abraded hands. He is walking toward the house where we work. No, he's walking toward me. Pops comes to the stoop, presents me the bowl—a bowl brimming with cold water. Pops wants to give me a drink. I am surprised by his kindness. I'm also a little embarrassed: relief workers have been instructed to drink only bottled water. I cannot accept the gift. But Pops is beaming anyway; he appears to understand. I place the filled bowl on a windowsill. Then, when preparing to leave for the day, I give Pops a hug. *Kop khun.*

HAMBANTOTA, Sri Lanka, Jan. 12—"Always, there is a search for signs, as in the conviction of Rose Jayasuriya, 59, that her older sister Patricia, 74, still missing, died blessed…[Patricia] had just taken communion when the sea invaded their church."—Amy Waldman

Princess Ubolratana and her twenty-one year old son were in Khao Lak on December 26th, according to The Times. They were staying at La Flora Resort on Bang Niang Beach. Her son, Khun Poom Jensen, did not survive. Yesterday, I spoke with a subdued man who left for the market with his wife and son five minutes prior to the wave hitting shore. When they returned, three family members were missing. The man lost his father and sister. His wife lost her mother. There is an experience I have when hearing these stories—the feeling that I should weep, and that I can't. The loss is too surreal. Over my head. All I can do is feel ridiculous and say I am so sorry.

These survivors trying to piece together a life for themselves, refugees trying to saw a new life from large planks of wood—these, I am reminded, are the lucky ones. By fortuitous circumstances alone did they escape the flood. But what kind of fortune leaves so many people so heartbroken? On the flight to Taipei, I read the story of Job. This region is filled with Jobs, people stripped of what was most dear to them. *Naked I came from my mother's womb, / naked I shall return again. / Yahweh gave, Yahweh has taken back.* What unanswerable questions these people must carry. Job's narrow-minded friends came with their ideas, convinced that Job deserved his fate, that he had surely provoked God's wrath. They tried to rescue Job from himself, from his disintegrating belief system. I have no patience for them. Their logic is too airtight, their pronouncements too self-righteous. More importantly, God has no patience for them. And they are spared, in the end, by Job's prayers.

▲

Back in my bungalow, I keep wondering if this trip has been worth it. I have come a long way to stand with tsunami

victims, but other than raising a few walls, I'm not sure I have been much help. My first night in Khao Lak, an official from Thailand's Interior Ministry paid a special visit to the refugee camp where we were working. I took a picture of Achara speaking with him, waving her excited hands, a bodyguard eyeing her closely. Making his rounds, the official noticed me and asked if I was a tourist or a relief worker. I didn't hear the first part of the question. I said yes. He had to repeat himself: "Tourist or relief worker?" The man has been repeating himself all week. When I realized my mistake, I apologized and said what I hoped was true. But relief has often felt like too strong a word, too ambitious or aggrandizing. I have wanted to be a relief worker, though on most days, the best answer to that man's question has still seemed to be Yes.

With my time in Khao Lak growing short, I get up the courage to borrow a truck and make the somewhat harrowing drive to Bang Niang Beach, the string coursing through scenery out the passenger-side window. Before long, the sun will set, and from this western shore it appears cast into the ocean like a shimmering fishing lure. Princess Ubolratana was staying near here.

The breeze is billowing off the Andaman Sea and except for a group of picnickers, the beach is mine. Roaming, I notice the water. There is something unique, in my experience, to how the surf lands on the shore. The waves don't break farther out before rolling in. More like a lake, the water sloshes, undulates. Swells and sags. And when it hits land, it hits land, in a quick surprising collapse onto the sand. It may be due to time of day, or to Khao Lak's position on the Malay Peninsula, sheltered slightly by the Nicobar Islands.

Whatever the reason for it, this phenomenon unnerves me. I wonder if it kept people from seeing the wave sooner. The Bay of Bengal had no warning systems in place, nothing to send people running. In the future, there will be sirens, like we hear in the Midwest when a tornado touches down. But in this interim, I find myself regarding the water with a certain trepidation, like it's a wild animal that can't be trusted.

Regarding the water saved the Moken sea gypsies. For decades, they have lived in isolation, without electricity or schools, on South Surin Island, 40 miles off the Thai coast. The Moken are animists, using totem poles to placate spirits of the sea. *The Times* reported that their thatched village was directly on the beach. But by the time the ocean crashed down on their huts, the Moken—"including wizened old women and parents with babies on their backs"—had already fled to the hills. They call it "wave that eats people," and Salama Klathalay, the village chief, knew what to look for. He was taught by elders to be concerned if the tide ever receded far and fast. And when he saw the tide that December morning, he started running, sounding the alarm. (That's what all these countries needed—more village chiefs. More totem-shaking mystics attuned to the water.)

Moken believe tsunamis come because the sea is angry. They hold a ceremony each spring, asking its forgiveness. This time, I think they should ask for something different. This year, the sea should apologize to them.

BANDA ACEH, Indonesia, Jan. 6—"Orphan…is an uncommon word here, and Unicef is describing children without parents and no place to go as 'unaccompanied children.'…Chaidir Syamsul, 58, an architect, found three dazed children wandering for hours after the tsunami…Two of the children found relatives and friends…He plans to treat Iqbal Fernando, 12, as his own…'How much love I give to my own son I will give to him.'"—Jane Perlez and Evelyn Rusli

My last evening in Khao Lak, I eat at The Viking and purchase four T-shirts that say Coca-Cola in Thai—I never know what to buy—to carry home as souvenirs. It is still early, but I am anticipating airport terminals, the artificial light, and I decide to get some rest. There's a stillness in the trees as I turn up the gravel road that meets the dirt path angling back to my bungalow.

A relief coordinator named Byrd has given me amateur video of the tsunami hitting different parts of the Thai coastline. The video segments were compiled to help raise funds for reconstruction. I put the DVD in my laptop as I pack. Then I lay in the dark and watch some of the footage. Predictably, the wave is shown at varying heights, barreling over beachfronts and seawalls, dragging what it can back into the swirling surf.

But there is a scene I am not prepared for. The camera is on a bluff, high above a bay. The tide has receded drastically from a now muddy beach. The beach looks deserted, but as the water begins to return in force, the camera tightens on a dot situated mid-frame in the dark sand. The dot, it turns out, is a boy of four or five wearing red swimming trunks. He has been sitting down, and he climbs to his feet as he sees the wave approaching. Where are his parents? They can't be far off. But there is no time for a rescue. The sea is charging too fast. For a moment, the boy stands facing the ocean, chin out,

arms to the side. Just as the water reaches him, he turns his back, bends over at the waist.

This is the story statistics cannot tell: how one casualty, up-close and personal, is enough to take your breath away. Yahweh has taken back. And the sea is angry. And someone deserved this, and nobody did. I have no understanding. And I feel ridiculous. And though I want to weep, I still can't. Instead I gasp, then my grief just hangs in the air, like an aborted sneeze.

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The string stretches farther than I thought. It followed me as I said goodbye to John Graves and took a cab to the Phuket airport. It wove itself through open tray-tables, around passengers' ankles during the fourteen-hour flight home from Taipei. Back in Kansas City, the string stitched itself into my routine as time slowly siphoned off memories. Once, in midtown, I ran into the girl whose name I can't recall—the one from the refugee camp. Once, I heard an NPR segment about tsunami relief. A woman was reporting from Ban Nam Khem. Once I dreamt, bizarrely, that my friends and I were in a park in Manhattan, Kansas, when a wave came out of nowhere and landed on top of us. I woke in the dead of night, gasping for air, wondering what it could mean.

A wave is coming, and we don't know when it will hit. Early warning systems will fail. There is no Moken wisdom to keep us safe. This is stark reality, but good medicine—the kick on consciousness that keeps on tripping me awake.

It always takes me a while to get film developed, and I am sitting, now, on the couch in my apartment, leafing through the pictures. A roll has been overexposed. Imbedded in the stack of mostly ruined photographs I have uncovered a picture, the beauty of which startles me because I took it carelessly, not expecting much, not even looking through the viewfinder, yet the composition, if it can be called that, is stunning. The photo shows six children laughing, jostling for position in front of the camera. Their bodies have squeezed into a diagonal column set against white sunlit pavement. Four of their bright faces are looking directly into the camera's lens. One of the middle girls has on a pale yellow shirt. She has big teeth and dark brown eyes and is draped over the shoulders of the girl next in line. With her right hand in front of her smiling face, she is flashing the peace sign. And, as it happens, her two fingers have splayed in such a way that they perfectly frame the life in her left eye.

Regarding the Sources

All New York Times *quotations are taken from the original stack of articles I collected in the weeks immediately following the tsunami—except for the one beginning "Orphan…is an uncommon word here…," which I found later, while writing this essay. The article mentioning Princess Ubolratana and her son was written by Lisa Kalis and James Brooke. The article about the Moken is by Abby Goodnough. Reuters provided the information concerning death tolls.*

It was Annie Dillard's daughter who conjured the picture of dots in blue water. Though Dillard was addressing the crisis at hand, her daughter's comment about the dots was made years earlier (when the girl was seven) in reference to the tsunami that drowned 138,000 in Bangladesh—a fact I didn't realize until after I returned from Thailand. In the essay, the quote is presented as I remembered it while on the ground in Taipei Dillard's commentary was broadcast on NPR's Morning Edition (Jan. 6 2005).

"Naked I came from my mother's womb, / naked will I return again. / Yahweh gave, Yahweh has taken back" is from The New Jerusalem Bible.

K.T. Landon

Catch and Release, Issue 5

"This is dumb," says my husband. "K.T., I love you, and I respect you, but this is just dumb."

Ben is on his fourth trip to ferry a fly, trapped between an inverted cat food can and a piece of cardboard, from our bedroom to the front yard. Strictly speaking, it's the third trip for the second time, since he tried to just fling the last one out the front door, and the little bastard turned and made it back inside before Ben could close it. But I'm not criticizing, since I'm already in my pajamas, and he's indulgent enough to get up from the computer and deport each fly as I hunt them down. I am not going to be able to relax until I know the house is free of insects that will fly into my mouth while I'm sleeping.

"Why don't you just swat them?" he asks.

"Too much aftermath," I reply.

I could probably live with it if he would swat them and clean up the pulpy remains. But he doesn't. He watches contemplatively as they circle our kitchen and living room like dive-bombers. With each revolution, my paranoid fantasy—the one with the catastrophic infestation that eventually drives us from our house and makes us ineligible for homeowners' insurance ever again—gets a deeper hold, but Ben takes it in stride.

"Flies are just a fact of summer," he says.

"They are *not*," I reply, my voice rising. "We didn't have flies like this last summer, and we have got to find out how they are getting in and *STOP THEM!*"

It's not like I'm some wussy girl, standing on a chair, clutching my skirt in my delicate little hand and screeching for some man to come and help me. I'm tough. I've rafted the Colorado and backpacked over the Continental Divide. I've cleaned cat vomit out of my hair. I've bailed raw sewage out of a flooding basement apartment. Twice. But the sight of a fly in my kitchen can reduce me to tears and an unattractively shrill tone of voice in seconds. Wild-eyed, I root around in the garbage for an empty coffee can and grab a postcard off the fridge. I pursue the fly around the house, telepathically willing it toward any flat surface—a wall, a table, the ceiling—where I can pounce and trap it under the can. I then slide the postcard under the can, trying to avoid the amputation of any fly extremities in the process, and rush it back to the great outdoors, where I'm sure it's happier anyway.

With flies, it's important to succeed in the first couple of attempts. They're smarter than they look and quickly adapt their strategy to one optimized for avoiding pursuers.

"You can run but you can't hide," I mutter, dragging a kitchen chair behind me in case the current suspect heads for the ceiling again.

It's a drawn-out battle of wits, but the superior reasoning skills are on my side. When all else fails, I switch off every light in the house but one. Flies may be the Einsteins of the insect world, but they're still slaves to instinct.

"You'll be back," I tell them. "And when you are, I'll be waiting."

I never have to wait long.

For the record, there are four classifications of indoor animals.

The first and most favored group is Our Animal Friends. This category includes the cats, of course, and also spiders, in recognition of their ongoing assistance in eating many of the offenders in groups two through four.[1]

Group Two is comprised of the Neutral Noncombatants. Here we have animals that provide no positive contribution to the household economy, but also do not significantly drain any resources, including my patience. This category includes: any group of ten ladybugs or fewer; various unidentified flying and crawling insects that are willing to leave me alone; millipedes, provided they confine themselves to the basement, and I never see more than one of them at a time;

1 You'd think the cats would also be of assistance in that regard, but, at least in our house, it hasn't been the case.

and the occasional moth.

Group Three covers Undesirable Aliens, or Those Whose Visas Have Expired If They Ever Had Visas At All, Which Is Doubtful. Members of this group, although they do not inspire actual revulsion, are required to depart upon discovery. They include: hornets; yellow jackets; bats; the damp, crawly things that come through the bathroom window; and that flying squirrel that was apparently residing in our air conditioner when we brought it in last fall.[2] All members of this group are escorted from the building by me, generally via the coffee-can method. The flying squirrel I chased around the house with a broom for 20 minutes in an ultimately successful attempt to "steer" it out the open front door.[3]

The final and lowest class of indoor animals is Vermin. Flies. Ants. Mice. They know who they are.[4] This is the category that drives me right over the edge. Vermin imply filth, germs, disease. Their very presence marks me a slattern—the kind of woman whose housekeeping my fastidious mother and grandmother would have sniffed at. Never mind that I don't particularly pride myself on my housekeeping. Never mind that *everyone* gets ants sometimes, or that half the houses in my suburban town have problems with field mice in the fall. These creatures are making seriously damaging statements about me, and they're making them to the guys down at the hardware store, where I spend significant amounts of money and time trying to find humane means of getting them the hell out of the house.

Our last delegation of ants arrived three days before a visit from my in-laws.[5] One afternoon I saw a single diminutive reddish-brown ant crawl across my kitchen counter. I swept him into a dustpan and transported him out the back door. The next day he was back with friends—*lots* of friends—forming a tiny, joyous conga line that stretched from the door to the sink. Frantic, I swept them up four or five at a time, but I was emptying the ocean with a teaspoon.

"Step on them," Ben urged. "They're *ants*."

I couldn't.[6] It's not that I have moral or theoretical objections to killing animals *per se* – I'm not a vegetarian, for example – although I do distinguish between killing for food and killing for sport or, in the case of ants, convenience. While the ants were making me miserable, it wasn't personal. They didn't care about me, didn't even really know about me except as an obstacle to their own progress. They were in trouble—winter was approaching—and they were just looking out for themselves, trying to find a safe place with enough food and water to keep them until the danger passed. How could I blame them when I'd do the same?

I can be accused, justly, of anthropomorphizing the vermin. But I contend that no one knows what the consciousness of an ant—or a mouse—is like. Even with fellow humans it's hard to get more than an approximate understanding of someone else's experience of the world. I'm willing to err on the side of empathy, to consciously risk appearing foolish rather than risk being cruel.

So call me dumb if you want. I don't care. The bottom line is that if you're not helping to pay the mortgage (Ben), providing affection (Ben and the cats), or contributing what I deem to be a useful domestic service (Ben and the spiders), then you're a freeloader here at my discretion. You may be deported—or "renaturalized," as I like to say—without notice. Go quietly, and nobody gets hurt.

THE END

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2 The cats were *definitely* interested in helping out on that one.

3 Hard to say who was most traumatized by that incident, which also involved several breathless telephone calls to the local police station, my veterinarian, and the state wildlife bureau, but my money's on the squirrel.

4 An interesting side note is that rats fall into Group 3, not Group 4, as might be expected. If one lives, as Ben and I did for two years, in what is euphemistically referred to as a "garden apartment" in Boston's Back Bay, the rats are just a fact of life and no reflection on oneself at all. Other notable rat facts:

- You can tell the difference between rats and mice by the shape of their ears: rats have pointed ears, mice have round.
- Dry cat food is fortified with Vitamin K, which is an antidote to the blood thinner that is the most common rat poison. Not only did our cats not kill the rats (except the one morning they left a half-consumed carcass on the floor and then vomited the intestines all over our rug), their insistence on having dry food available at all hours of the day actually contributed to the maintenance of the rats. To this day the cats have failed to express remorse.
- The difference between street and sewer rats is that the former are brown, while the latter are dark gray. We had both.
- If you call the Boston mayor's hotline at 10:00 p.m. on a Tuesday night because you have trapped a juvenile rat under your stereo cabinet and then "encouraged" it into a shoe box with a barbeque spatula, and now you want to know what to do with it, they are not enormously helpful, although they are very nice. "Just don't bring it here," joked the horrified lady at the other end of the line.
- Morning glory seeds are a rat hallucinogen. Our landlord's exterminators – five strapping Irish-American brothers from South Boston – were astonished to hear that we were seeing rats, which are normally nocturnal, in the middle of the day. They were less surprised after they arrived to find them running up and down the trellis on which we were training some morning glories. Apparently, the rats were stoned out of their gourds.

5 In addition to teamwork, ants are also known for their excellent timing.

6 Ultimately, I went with ant cups, after trying every "natural" remedy I could find on the Internet, including wiping down the entire kitchen several times daily with a solution of Dr. Bronner's Peppermint Oil Soap and water. I rationalize it by telling myself that the ants have a choice—they don't have to take the bait; they can just leave on their own. I secretly believe that, after the first few of their comrades kicked the bucket, that's exactly what they did.

When I saw Suja waiting for me at the airport, I had reason to hope that Dr. Aronson had been right. We were different people. Suja was the beauty now. She was wearing a milky blouse with an elaborately embroidered neckline, and her hair was like a black silk veil against it, falling almost to her waist. I remembered her fingering my hair. How much time had she spent brushing with her head upside down, trying to make her hair wavy like mine? Now there was no need for that.

Two girls in their early teens were gawking at her and whispering. When Suja turned around, they waved, giggling. She waved back, looking amused. I had forgotten she was a celebrity.

When she embraced me, I noticed that she also smelled different. When we were kids, she had always smelled of Pond's talcum powder. She used to cover her face and arms with it. She thought it made her skin look fairer. I had never wanted to tell her that it only made her look ashy. Now she smelled of a musky perfume. This was progress, I thought.

But we fell easily into conversation, as if we had not changed, as if seven years had not passed, as if the banner-carrying incident had never happened.

Sri Lanka had changed too, I thought. My plane landed after midnight, so I could not see much of the countryside on the way to Colombo. But even in the dark, I noticed that the roadside shops were different. The familiar thatch- and tin-roofed shacks filled with biscuit tins, powdered milk and soap had given way to glass-fronted two-storey structures selling ladies' garments and ceramic tiles. I remembered that the shacks had been set back from the road, their ramshackle doors open in a way that was welcoming but not pushy. These modern-looking shops were pressed up against the road as if they were too eager for business. There were few stretches of road with no shops; I saw hardly any open fields and wild lantana bushes. The airport road was better, though. It was wider, and the ruts were no longer deep enough to throw us up against the car roof.

"Remember what a hoot it was, going to the airport? How we used to shriek," Suja said. "All those holes in the road, and the lorries thudding over them. Your father muttering at the pedestrians. Remember how irritated he used to get?"

"Donkey! Goat! Bloody cattle!" I said, laughing, mimicking my father's growl. "He still does that. Even in Berkeley, he mutters at the SUVs that cut him off."

"And your mother still gets that martyred look?" Suja said. Her laugh was still the indelicate snort I remembered.

"Plus she gives him the cold shoulder until he apologizes. Then she goes on about how she doesn't want to put up with road rage." Suja understood my parents almost as well as I did. Until the banner incident, there had not been a day when she had not spent time at my house. "Nothing's changed with them," I said. Unlike with us, I thought, hoping that Dr. Aronson had been right. "But around here, things look different."

We talked companionably about the traffic on the road and the shops full of export surplus clothes until we passed a billboard showing a beige-skinned young man entering a Land Rover. His dark suit, which was unsuitable for the heat, looked crisp. He was wearing a felt hat, oblivious to being in a country of bare-headed people. "Look at that man," I said. "Some things don't change. Remember that crayon color we used to call 'flesh color'? That pinkish-beige? Wasn't it weird that we colored all the people we drew with that? Didn't we realize we were brown?" I thought I saw her flinch and realized I had let my guilt steer me to a topic that was too close to trouble.

But she started talking about Miss Matilda, our Grade Five teacher, who had always wanted us, inexplicably, to draw feet and shoes in art class. It was only then that I realized how tense I had been. The banner incident was so far in the past, I reminded myself. From an adult's point of view, it should have seemed trivial. But the guilt I had held for seven years was still there. Although it had got smaller, it had enough weight to influence my interactions with people. Dr. Aronson said childhood experiences could leave a long trail. But he had pointed out that Suja and I were grown-ups now. I believed him when he said we could leave our childhoods behind. That was why I had come to Sri Lanka: to forge a new, adult relationship with Suja.

We went to St. Catherine's the next afternoon to look around. It was the August holidays, so school was not in session. The metal gate looked smaller than I remembered. When we banged on it, the gatekeeper who peered out was Jamis. His face had shrunk and he had a bald spot, but otherwise he looked the same as when I had last seen him, when I had been in Grade Six. New multi-storey buildings stood in the school compound and a concrete walkway circled its perimeter. I felt as if I were in a dream, the kind where you are in a strange place that seems oddly familiar. The sun was merciless, and I was groggy, maybe from jet lag or maybe because my memories were weighing me down. I looked past the recently-tarred basketball courts to the playing field. It had not changed. Around it was the hard-beaten dirt of the track where we had held the march past.

In Grade Six, Suja's dream had been to carry the Aloysius House banner for the march past at the school's annual Sports Meet. She wanted to start practicing early, months before the meet. She insisted that it was the only way to ensure success. We were both in Aloysius House, but she knew I had no interest in being the banner-carrier. She persuaded me to practice with her so that she could learn to synchronize perfectly. We marched around each other's gardens after school, our backs straight as broom handles, our arms swinging stiffly, yelling, "Laaayft, right. Left right left!" Suja carried a broom with its business end in the air, raining dust on our heads, to simulate the banner. During these sessions, I giggled and horsed around, kicking my legs in random directions, or pretended to be other people: Saddam Hussein, Charlie Chaplin, the army guards outside the Prime Minister's residence. But Suja was deadly serious. Sometimes I saw her practicing marching on the spot before the full-length mirror in the dining room of her house, her face set in fierce concentration. By the time we began doing synchronized marching in our physical training classes, she had perfected it.

Five days before the Sports Meet, the three prefects in charge of picking the banner-carriers had all of us girls march past them. Suja and I, with our hours of practice, were the finalists for Aloysius House. I misstepped on purpose and lifted my knees lackadaisically when the prefects shouted, "Maa-ark time!" At least, that was how I seemed to remember the scene, although much later I began to doubt myself and wonder whether I misremembered what I had really done. The prefects had us stand at ease while they debated our merits. They were in Grade Twelve. They must have been a foot taller than us, and they had plucked eyebrows and fashionably cut hair. They were whispering but we heard them clearly.

"Not that one. The other one can practice and then she'll be fine," one prefect said. I remembered how she kept pinching a raised black beauty mark on her cheek.

"Like milk and molasses," another said, snickering.

"No question," the third said.

"Beauty and the beast," the snickering one said, pulling at a dangling earring that had somehow escaped Sister Bernadine's censuring eyes.

That was how I ended up carrying the banner for Aloysius House. Suja said hardly anything to me the rest of the school day. She was silent during our drive home together too. I could not recall what I said to her. Maybe I did not say anything at all. I was only twelve.

Because we were next-door neighbors in addition to being first cousins, we usually had our after-school eats together, either at her house or mine. But that day, I had my snack alone; I remembered trying to eat a roti with fish curry and having no appetite. Suja refused to play afterwards. I sat on my garden swing and read the same page of Tintin and the Prisoners of the Sun over and over again.

The next day, Suja stayed at home with a stomach pain. Over the years, there must have been other days when she had been sick and missed school, but that was the first time I could remember it happening. When I got back home, I found out that she had been hospitalized for appendicitis. For years afterwards, I believed I had been the cause of it. Children do not think in terms of coincidences.

Suja did not come to the Sports Meet. She needed to recover from the operation, my aunt said. Neither my aunt nor my mother knew that I had been chosen over Suja. I never said anything to them, and apparently, neither did Suja.

I remembered a few things about the Sports Meet. It was one of those cloudy days, not too hot to enjoy. The place was teeming with all of us in our starched white divided skirts. It was noisy. You had to shout to be heard. The Aloysius House tent was decorated in yellow, our house color, with nylon ribbons, crepe paper streamers, and masses of araliya flowers. Some of the flowers had fallen onto the grassy ground and got crushed. Their thick smell was in the air. I sat with

a group of other girls on the grass inside the floorless tent, watching the track and field events. Clouds of dust fogged the track every time girls ran a race. The cheering inside the tent sometimes turned into screaming. Whether the girls came back to the tent triumphant or dejected, they streamed sweat, their uniforms dusty and plastered to their backs.

By the time of the march past, I had finished the Necto in my drink bottle and eaten two of the small boxes of powdery glucose girls were passing around for energy. That might have accounted for the excitement I felt. The Aloysius House girls selected for the marching squad lined up behind me. Someone handed me the banner, a yellow satin flag embroidered with the house crest and mounted on a wooden pole that was planed smooth. Because Aloysius House came first in the alphabet, we were the first squad to step onto the track. Silence descended, and then the marching band began playing. I followed the band, feeling the ground vibrating with the stamping of our feet and the thudding of the big drum in front of me. For the four minutes it took to march around the field and past the guests of honor, I forgot everything else. I was lost in the experience: the dust and the sticky air, the rumbling music and the rhythmic pounding of our feet, the landscape of watching faces, the taste of leftover sugar on my lips, and my hands clutching the banner pole. I loved it.

Later, when I got home, I found out that an infection had ambushed Suja. My mother and my aunt had rushed her back to the hospital. Then I remembered how Suja had cried silently when the prefects had picked me. She had stepped to the side, the tennis shoes that she had painstakingly whitened the day before soiled with dust from the track, her face wet with tears that smeared messily across her face as she rubbed her cheeks. I thought about what I could have done differently. I could have refused the honor for which I had been chosen. Even if I had not done that, at least I could have not enjoyed the march past.

After she recovered, Suja and I stopped hanging around together in and out of school. I could not remember whether and how much I tried to talk to her about other things. I knew I did not bring up the Sports Meet. There was no big confrontation. Our time together just petered out. After school, I sat for endless, friendless hours on my swing, reading or staring at the squirrels chasing each other on the cocoplum tree.

▲

"Ready to go?" Suja said, turning back towards the basketball courts. I must have started, because she said, "Were you dreaming? You must be sleepy still from the flight." That was when I realized she had put the incident behind her. Maybe she did not even remember it. That seemed strange when the incident and its aftermath had affected me in so many ways. At the end of Grade Six, my parents and I had emigrated to the U.S. In school, I did well in my classes but poorly at any big exam. The only prize I ever won was for an essay I had written in my tenth grade history class, not knowing that it was going to be entered into a contest. I scored low on the SAT although the tutor my parents had hired predicted an excellent performance. My teachers had said I was Stanford material but I ended up at a modestly-ranked state university. In university, I joined the debate club to get over my fear of public speaking. I was always afraid I would talk too much. At a debate on stem cell research, I froze up at the podium and let my team down. I abandoned the debate club after that. I joined the drama club and got a star role in the season's play. But I lost my voice on the day of the show; my understudy, who was one of my good friends, got her chance in the limelight. That was when I had first gone to see Marcus Aronson. In the course of months of talking to him, he had pointed out the many other incidents involving Suja that had affected me, but the only one that I could not get out of my mind was the march past.

It seemed unfair that Suja had been unaffected, although, of course, I was happy for her. All she talked about on the way to tea was her hope that she would get picked to model for the new Neemia Shampoo advertising campaign.

▲

The days flew by. The term paper I had to e-mail to my Asian Studies professor was overdue, but Suja liked to shop, so we went to the Liberty Plaza and Majestic City shopping arcades instead. I craved the pastries from Sena & Sons, the bakery near St. Catherine's that we had haunted during our school days. Modern chrome furniture had replaced the old wooden chairs and tables, and ceramic tiles now covered the cement floor. The glass cases looked new, but there were still a few flies flitting around inside, as if for old times' sake. The pastries had not changed: Cornish pasties, steak and kidney pies, bacon and egg rolls, mince pies, and the sugar-topped cakes I especially liked. Suja insisted on paying but she did not eat

much; she had to keep her figure, she said.

Once, when we were lounging over a table littered with pastry crumbs, a round-faced lady stopped near us, clutching the end of her sari to her chest.

"Rupa, no? Still so lovely!" she said in a voice that could have carried to the road.

It was only when Suja said, "Hello, Beryl Aunty," that I remembered her. She had lived down the lane when Suja and I had been neighbors. Climbing her jambu tree had been one of our pastimes. She had appeared so suddenly from her kitchen once, bellowing at us, that Suja had fallen off a branch and sprained her wrist.

"Beryl Aunty, how are you?" I said, rising.

Beryl Aunty patted my cheek with her plump fingers. "Good, good, but how are you, Rupa? I ran into your aunty and she said you are visiting for only two weeks."

"I have to get back home to California," I said, wiping flakes of pastry off my hands. "My Fall semester classes start soon."

"Already in university! My, can't even believe," Beryl Aunty said, as if she had expected me to be twelve still. "Growing up to be a beauty. Even fairer now that you are living in the States." She laughed. "Not so much sun there to make you black, no?"

I thought I saw Suja's back stiffen against her chair.

"Only because I've been inside the library studying," I said. "But this is the beauty queen." I nudged Suja's chair forward.

"Of course, of course," Beryl Aunty said. "We were all so proud when she won."

Suja smiled, but her back still looked stiff.

There were times when people we did not know recognized Suja. They would stare until Suja smiled at them. Sometimes she pretended not to notice, but I could tell how much the recognition pleased her.

I was ten days into my stay when I found the Lanka Chitchat website. Suja and I had been lolling on the sitting room sofa. It was overcast outside. The sitting room was dim although it was mid-afternoon, so we had turned on the glass-shaded lamp that sat on the side table. We were Googling ourselves on my laptop computer. The only hit I had was about the essay prize I had won in high school. Suja, on the other hand, had dozens of hits, all having to do with her Miss Green Sri Lanka status and her participation in the Miss Planet Earth pageant. There were pictures of her with other semi-finalists in newspapers from India, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Sweden, Indonesia, the U.K. and the U.S. One picture had her in a modest one-piece swimsuit going down a waterslide with some of the other contestants. There were also pictures taken during the pageant's swimsuit and evening gown competitions. The Los Angeles Post had interviewed several of the semi-finalists on the day of the pageant. The newspaper quoted Suja saying, "I've always dreamed of this." Clearly, being a national beauty queen was much better than being the Aloysius House banner-carrier. I thought of saying that out loud, to confirm my absolution. But I did not.

I had watched the pageant on TV in my off-campus San Diego apartment with three of my friends. We had eaten samosas from the Patel Brothers store and cheered during the question and answer segment, when Suja talked about wanting to get people to stop polluting the Indian Ocean.

"Look, you're famous," I said, clicking on one link after another.

When I clicked on the Lanka Chitchat website, I was probably slower to read the comments than Suja. The comments were transliterated from Sinhala into English, and it had been a while since I had spoken Sinhala. Later, I wondered if I could have read faster and shut my laptop as soon as I realized what we were seeing.

The first comment was, 'Did you see that Suja Tissera?'

The second said, 'The one they sent to Miss Planet Earth?'

The next comment was, 'A she-devil.'

I laughed, pointing at the screen. "What do they mean by that? You're so hot you're a devil?"

After that someone had written, 'I wanted to vomit.' It confused me, and then I thought the commentators had gone on to another topic. But I saw that Suja was craning forward, gripping a sofa cushion, so I kept reading silently.

'No wonder we didn't win. Which idiot sent her?'

'Must have given a bribe to get in.'

"This is stupid. Let's just close it," I said, although later I had to admit I had been curious. Suja pushed my hand away and kept scrolling down to read the rest.

'If they told me, I would have found them a good-looking girl.'

'They don't want a good-looking girl. All they want is one who will show herself.'

'The showing ones are the ugly ones.'

'If they don't show, how will they get noticed?'

'Should have put coal on her face. Then she would have been fairer.'

'Did they pick the blackest girl on the island?'

'Black like a devil.'

'Maybe she'll see these comments and drink poison.'

'Then there'll be one less ugly one.'

There were no more comments. I snapped the laptop shut and shoved it onto the coffee table. "Can you believe how ignorant people are?"

Suja did not say anything. She was slumped against the sofa back. Her face looked as if it had fallen in. My mouth was dry. I could not think of anything to say.

Finally I said, "They don't even see they're still under the British sixty years after Independence." I tried to laugh, but I sounded as if I were choking.

Suja did not even try to laugh. She leaned over and fumbled with the lamp switch. After she had turned it off, she curled herself into the corner of the sofa. "Look at what everyone is thinking," she mumbled.

"Don't be crazy," I said. "You should have heard my friends when we were watching you on TV. You know you're gorgeous."

"I don't care what people say over there," Suja said. "But here? I can't believe everyone here is saying this kind of thing." Strands of her hair were straggling over her eyes, but she did not try to wipe them away.

"This is not everyone," I said. "This is a bunch of people who are still caught up in the old ideas. They sound like they know each other. All people working at the same company probably."

She went on as if I hadn't spoken, squeezing a cushion as if she were trying to burst it. "I didn't show anything. That swimsuit was the most modest of the ones I had to choose from. My evening gown was so covered up."

"Don't worry about it, Suja," I said. "You can't let yourself be affected by every little thing." I wanted to say more, to ask her why she cared so much about the way she looked to other people. But I did not want to jeopardize our relationship further. My chest felt compressed. I tried to put my arm around her shoulder, but she brushed me off. She slipped into her bedroom and shut the door.

♟

The next day, a Saturday, was busy.

Ratna Aunty, who knew nothing about what had happened the previous day, was rushing around, cooking the kind of dinner you might expect at a wedding. Upul, the suitor I had heard so much about, had returned from a trip to the hill country, and he and his family were coming to dinner. Suja and I helped in the kitchen, stuffing chilies, scraping coconut, rolling cutlets, and frying strips of brinjal. The rain that had been threatening to come down since the day before had not yet arrived, and it was muggier than usual in the kitchen. Ratna Aunty did not want the fan on when the oil was hot, so we were sweating as we did our tasks. I was grateful for the heat and the work because they seemed to be keeping Suja's mind occupied.

When I went into Suja's bedroom before dinner, she was standing in front of the mirror wearing a blouse with ruffles at the neckline, the ends of her hair still damp from her bath.

"Is this too transparent?" she asked, considering her reflection.

"It's fine," I said, adjusting the narrow straps of my own dress.

"Upul is conservative. And even more, his parents. Old-style." Suja brushed out her hair. She stretched her lips wide

to apply lipstick. “But still his mother thinks we’ll be a good match, he says. Mummy also thinks but she won’t admit.”

“So you’re really thinking of marrying him?” I said. “I thought you had been joking about that.”

She turned around to look at the back of her pants in the mirror. She was at least five inches taller than me in her high heels. “Why would I be joking? He’s a good catch, I told you.”

“Yeah, but,” I said. “You’re so young. Don’t you want to have a career? Get a job you like first?”

There was scorn in the look she gave me. “What for? Of course I’ll do advertisements. The Neemia job….” She paused and looked at herself in the mirror. I could tell she was thinking about the Lanka Chitchat website from the way her expression turned somber.

“You are going to make a great Neemia model,” I said.

She turned her head this way and that, grimacing. Then she turned to look at me. “But not without getting married. What would be the point?”

She had always been more into boys than me. After I moved to the U.S., we hardly communicated at first. The first two years, we only exchanged Christmas cards. Then she started writing occasionally, about boys she had met. When I was in the eleventh and twelfth grades at Berkeley High, she wrote me some real letters, not emails. They were on old-fashioned notepaper with leaf borders. I used to read them after school when I was in the public library doing my homework and trying to study enough to not go blank during exams. Those were the first two of the three years Suja lived in Manchester, after her father, Neil Uncle, had been posted in the U.K. She seemed most interested in the boys who showed no interest in her, although there were few of those. She had become popular when she moved to Manchester; boys offered to carry her books and begged to take her out. It was those few years in Manchester that gave her the confidence to try out for her first pageant.

♟

Upul held an umbrella over his parents’ heads although the walk from their Volkswagen to the front door was a few feet and it was only sprinkling when they arrived.

“See how well he treats his parents,” Suja whispered to me. “I told you he was a good catch.”

Upul was several years older than us. He was a few inches shorter than Suja, which surprised me. Suja liked tall men. But he did have the kind of wolfish face and runner’s build that attracted her. From the beginning of the evening, he went out of his way to engage me in conversation. It did not seem to bother Suja; I was not sure whether she was making such an effort to make a good impression on his parents that she did not notice at first, or whether she wanted him to get to know me.

While Upul’s parents were telling Suja about a car accident they had seen on the road from the hill country, Upul was leaning over the arm of his chair, stroking his thin mustache and asking me about my university studies.

“Ah yes, I was also a big reader before I started working,” he said when I told him I was majoring in Comparative Literature. “All the good books. Dickens, R.L. Stevenson, Sherlock Holmes. And when I was small, the usual Tintins. And also Enid Blytons, Biggles, Billy Bunter. You can’t get those books so easily nowadays, but my parents had them from when they were small.”

“My parents also had those,” I said, trying not to feel flustered at the way he was watching me. “I loved those books, but can you imagine what they must have done to all of us? Remember the Nabob of Bhanipur in the Billy Bunter books? He was the only brown kid in the whole school. Everyone calling him Inky this and Inky that wasn’t so bad, I suppose, but remember the way he talked? ‘The awfulness of the esteemed class is terrific’? A complete laughingstock.”

“Yes, yes, I remember. He was very funny,” Upul said, taking a fish patty from the plate Ratna Aunty had set on the coffee table.

I wondered if I had been too incoherent in my self-consciousness; he seemed to have missed what I had said. “Too bad we didn’t have any books in English around with Sri Lankan characters,” I said. “Actually, when I was small, I don’t remember reading any books with characters from the subcontinent. Indian, Pakistani even. Real characters, not ones that were there for laughs.”

He dismissed the idea with a wave of his hand. His fingers were surprisingly slender. I wondered if he played a musical instrument. “Sinhala books, of course there were,” he said. “But no good compared to all the English stories. You

know our Sinhalese fellows can't come up with those kinds of things."

"But don't you see?" I said. When I smelled his aftershave, I realized that I was leaning too close in my enthusiasm to get my point across. I settled back in my chair. "Why we think that? Everything from when we're small stays with us."

He did not say anything to that. He smiled and fingered his mustache. He did not agree, I thought. He sipped his whiskey, still smiling, and it dawned on me that maybe he had not even been listening. Then he said, "Maybe you can write some stories yourself. With your American education, you could come up with some good stories."

"I'm no writer," I said. I crossed my legs and tugged the red linen of my skirt over my calves. "I want to teach. But that I can only do after graduate school." I had a little of the sherry Neil Uncle had poured for me. The wind had picked up and the branches of the neem tree outside were scraping the windows. Rain started to patter on the roof. I heard thunder rumbling in the distance.

Upul swirled his whiskey and looked at me over his glass in a way that made the hair stand up on my forearms. "Very lucky your students will be," he said as if he had known me for much longer than thirty minutes. Before I could say anything else, Suja turned to ask if he wanted another drink. He waved a no with barely a glance in her direction.

His mother twisted her sari pota over her shoulder. "So you're at university in the States, I hear," she said.

If I had been quicker to answer, maybe Upul would not have jumped in. "Not only so lovely and fair," he said, raising his voice over the sound of rain on the roof. "But so accomplished. You should hear her talk."

"I wish," I said, a familiar panicky feeling in my chest. "I can't hold a candle to Suja." It was no use though. Her face had crumpled, although maybe only I noticed because Upul, his parents, Ratna Aunty and Neil Uncle continued talking as if nothing had happened.

▲

Upul came to the house every day during the few days I had left in Colombo. I tried to stay out of the way. I said my hellos and excused myself on some pretext or other as soon as possible, although it was flattering to have his eyes following me. I knew Suja noticed because of the way her attitude towards me cooled. By the time I left the country, we could have been acquaintances.

Shortly after I returned to California, Upul joined my Facebook. After I had let him join, I wished I had not. I worried that it would upset Suja, who was also on my Facebook, so I suspended my account. Because of that, I no longer had any contact with her. I did not email her. Maybe it was because she did not write to me.

I tried to put my trip to Colombo out of my mind. When the leaves began to fall from the oaks outside my apartment, I began going to drama club meetings. Auditions for the Spring play, A Raisin in the Sun, began, and I got the part of Beneatha. I was thrilled for a day, and then terrified that I would lose my voice on stage. I told myself I would see Marcus Aronson before practice sessions began in January, after the holidays. I had not seen him after returning from Sri Lanka.

I went home to my parents' house in Berkeley for the holidays, where I spent long hours reading while my parents were at work. It was late December, suicide season according to an urban myth, when my mother called me from her office downtown. She told me, crying, that Suja had overdosed on a mixture of alcohol and sleeping pills.

It took me twenty-five minutes to get through to Ratna Aunty's mobile phone. I dialed and redialed. My fingers were shaking. The guilt was like a rock in my gut.

Ratna Aunty was at the hospital, watching Suja sleep after having her stomach pumped.

"She is okay now," she said, her voice wobbling. "But how can I leave her alone?"

I tried to think of something to say, but all that came out was, "I'm so sorry, Aunty," over and over again.

"After Upul lost interest, she got depressed," Ratna Aunty said. I couldn't speak. I had not known that Upul was not in the picture. Ratna Aunty blew her nose and continued talking. "I don't know if that was why she didn't get the Neemia job. She lost her confidence. And without confidence, how can she model?"

That told me everything. The day before I found the Lanka Chitchat website, two days before I talked to Upul for too long, Suja and I had gone to see a Harry Potter film at the Regal cinema. The film had not yet begun, so the lights were still on in the theater. When we walked down the aisle, stepping over bits of discarded peanut shells, a few people began whispering. I heard someone say Suja's name. I could tell how pleased she was to be recognized. After we sat down, a young girl in high heels tottered over to us and asked for Suja's autograph on the back of a crumpled envelope. Suja was

thrilled. She had been confident then.

Dr. Aronson insisted that I was ignoring the societal causes of Suja's depression. He said I was blaming myself too much and forgetting that Suja's dreams had repeatedly been squashed simply because her skin was a few shades darker than mine. He reminded me of anecdotes I had related to him: how my aunt Ida had asked a matchmaker to find a fair wife for her dark-skinned son, even if that meant someone uneducated, and how my mother's friend Lakshmi had expressed disappointment at the birth of her first granddaughter, a beautiful but dark cherub. He pointed out that I had not written the comments on the Lanka Chitchat website, or talked the prefects into choosing me for an honor at the Sports Meet. I tried to keep Dr. Aronson's words in my thoughts as I biked down endless park trails and cleaned out my parents' garage to keep myself occupied. But the sounds of marching feet and band music plagued my dreams. Rows of rapt faces watched me step across a dusty track as I slept. When I woke up in the mornings, sometimes I'd taste glucose on my lips. All I could think of then was how much I had enjoyed carrying the banner for Aloysius House.

Astrid Cabral

Calamidade, Issue 6

Águas na sala! Peixes nos quatros!
Quem entenderia?
Degredados das paisagens
contidos em urbanas grades
ele encharcavam
não só os chinelos de lama
a alma também de espanto.
Todos esquecidos
dos troncos derrubados
dos leitos rasos—antepassados
das chuvas dilúvio.

Astrid Cabral
translated by Alexis Levitin

Calamity, Issue 6

Water in the hallway! Fish in the bedroom!
Who could understand it all?
Exiled from the countryside
confined within an urban grid
not just their slippers
soaked in mud,
but their souls in fright.
Every oblivious
to the demolished trees
the silted river beds—forefathers
to the diluvial flood.

Jo McDougall

Leaving the Summer Rental Near Bar Harbor, Maine, Issue 5

We fashion a memorial to our daughter,
dead this Spring,
and place it on the mantel—
a photograph of that rocky point she claimed,
a heart-shaped stone,
a card with her name—
knowing that little or none of it
will endure
those who may come here after us:
a novelist
mistaking the stone for a paperweight;
a couple on their honeymoon,
disbelieving death;
the cleaning woman
tossing it all out
with the stale milk and cigarettes.

Ivan Hobson

Cutting His Teeth, Issue 9

My son has become old enough
to deny the ballerina
that balances herself
inside his body.

He has taken off his tiara,
stepped out of the caverns
of his mother's heels,

his world now as blue
as the cobalt
stacked in the scrapyard.

I am worried
he will pick up a steel bar;
that his hands
will come away red and wet;
that we will never see her again.

That he will become
like other men in this town,
dusted with the expectations
of the mill,
huddled in the corner of the bar
swollen with whisky,
afraid to dance.

Okla Elliott

The Philosophy Student, Issue 8

Oksana remembers the stories about her grandfather being ordered
by his Soviet bosses to clear out the forests and cities near Chernobyl.
He used his soldier's rifle to shoot potentially contaminated
animals, chopped them apart with an axe, doused them in gasoline,
and burned them to nothing. He shoveled up grass, poured tons of
sand on the ground, crowbarred wooden shacks apart. She remembers
this now, standing outside her brother's bedroom door, imagining
herself naked with his friend who is sleeping. He stopped by on
his way to the Chechnyan front; her brother is already there. She is
standing in the hallway, imagining herself naked, imagining this boy
with his soldier's muscles as she reaches down and rubs her clitoris.
But she stops, losing all interest—in the boy, her country's history,
life itself. *There is no convincing proof that we have any right to happiness*,
she thinks and walks down the hallway to her room, where at
her desk she will continue her studies.

TJ Sandella

An Offering, Issue 10

On the path where I walk my dog
a dead cardinal is becoming

my mother

phones to say she's returned

to the treatment center where twelve years earlier
chemo almost killed her before the cancer could

so she's

more immaterial

or is it less material

the body disappears
decays
rots
a little more each day
as ants
haul away the carrion

until all that's left
is an outline

a shadow
drifting through the hallways
where not even a new coat of paint stops
her body's remembering

the immediate

surge of vomit just inside
the entrance doors

but she is

perfectly

a cardinal
beak prominent
wings spread

stoic
at least
doing better than her friend
the one who didn't make it

who lost his meals when he saw hospital
employees at the grocery store or walking their
dogs but

now she says she's

flying
against the gritty sidewalk
so not of this world

that my dog no longer sniffs
where there used to be feathers
and bones and

what I need to know is
do I scrape the bird's silhouette
with the blunt side of my pocketknife

to see if anything
can be salvaged

and
can I travel these phone lines
to offer
the dust
to my mother

in two cupped hands

and will she take it

and will she know what it means?

Lori Jakiela

Belief Is Its Own Kind of Truth, Maybe, Issue 9

Phelan, my daughter, has to wear a leg brace. She has problems with her hip. She is not yet a year old. The brace keeps her legs apart, divided into two parentheses, like she's always on a horse. It's hard to hold her close. When I rock her before bed, I take her out of the brace, even though I'm not supposed to do this. I rub her legs and feel her skin on my skin. I think the brace hurts her, but she's such a happy baby, almost always smiling.

I worry that the problem will spread, that she'll be like me, with my two clubbed feet, my crooked legs, in casts to my waist for years, so many surgeries. This worry is one of the reasons that, at 40, I started to search for my birth mother. This is what I told the counselor at Catholic Charities. "I need a medical history," I said. "For my kids." There was more I didn't say, but the counselor didn't ask, either.

"I was adopted. I don't have a medical history," I tell the orthopedic doctor now. He's moving my daughter's legs open and closed like a gate. Phelan and I are in his office. Everything is white and silver, all knives and bone. Even the air is sharp, rubbing alcohol and bleach.

"Hereditary, yes," the doctor says now about the hip. The only color is a painting on the wall. Noah's ark. A rainbow of smiling balloon animals, walking up a plank in twos, each a mirror match. I've always thought the story of the ark seemed cruel as a shrug, all those forgotten left-behind lives.

"Don't worry, Mom," the doctor says, and smiles up at me.

I keep my arms tight across my chest and don't say anything. We waited two hours to see this doctor. He looks like a game show host. He looks like a news anchor. His hair doesn't move. The skin on his forehead doesn't move. I imagine him shooting himself with Botox, a needle full of poison, right between his pretty eyes.

Phelan's first word was *abre*, Spanish she learned from a cartoon, the word for open. When she says it, she *opens* her arms wide, like she's trying to take in the whole world.

"She's not like you," the doctor says and winks.

The doctor is Polish. He has the same accent my father—the father who adopted me and raised me and paid for all those surgeries—worked hard to hide.

"I speak American now," my father used to say.

The doctor wears gold chains, big rings. A gold pendant of an eagle peeks out from under his scrubs. His scrubs are blue, the same color as his eyes. He wears clogs, white ones, expensive and European-looking.

A pretty nurse comes in to strap Phelan into a brace. Something about this—the look of the brace, the sound of a door shut too hard, the doctor's hands still clamped on her legs—makes Phelan start to cry. Neither the doctor nor the nurse seems to notice.

"Ah, here she is, my beautiful assistant," the doctor says, and the nurse blushes. Phelan cries harder. The nurse wears pink scrubs with smiley faces poxed all over them. She stuffs Phelan's legs into the brace, one, then the other, two bread loaves, and pulls the Velcro straps tight, the sound of tearing.

The nurse says, "Oh, doctor," like she's a character on TV.

It's Halloween. My son Locklin is dressed up as Spiderman. He's almost four. His costume has built-in muscles, all padded abs and biceps. "Twip," he says as he swings by, shooting invisible webs between us.

"How does it feel?" my friend Jan asked me once about parenthood. Jan is adopted, too. She'd run into Locklin and me at the mall. I didn't know what she meant at first. Locklin had been grumpy. He was very small then, and I carried him in a Baby Bjorn pack across my chest. He'd finally drifted off to sleep when Jan saw us. We must have looked peaceful, but there was dried milk on my clothes, baby spit in my hair, what felt like a dampening diaper against my belly, and, underneath the Baby Bjorn, Locklin's hands were balled up tight as rocks. I was terrified he'd wake up.

"To have, you know, that connection," she said. "Blood."

It sounded romantic. Magical. A blood connection. My first. My only.

And it was.

And it wasn't.

"Good," I said, "I'm tired a lot."

Jan is a poet. I know she wanted something better than that. But even now, I can't think of the right, more profound thing to say.

I love my children.

My children have so many needs, all of them bigger than my own.

"I know I could never do it," Jan said, about children. It's almost a boast.

When Jan talks about her adoption, she calls it *the severing*. She calls blood *red sugar.*

"Twip," Locklin says. He holds both hands palm out to shoot his webs, like he's offering me everything he has, all those threads between us that can't be cut.

In a poem he wrote shortly before his death, Raymond Carver asked himself what he wanted from this life. The poem was "Late Fragment." His wife found it on a scrap of paper, tucked into the pocket of his bathrobe.

Carver's answer: "To feel myself beloved on this earth."

Lately, even out of costume, Locklin's taken on an alter ego. He calls himself HS. The Human Spider. My husband and I let him draw the letters on a red turtleneck. When he wears it, he pulls the turtleneck up over his nose, with only his eyes showing.

On the fridge, there's a self-portrait he's made of himself as HS. Beneath the drawing—a good likeness, all wide-eyed and spike-haired—he's written the word *Helps.*

My husband spelled it out, but Locklin wrote it himself. The letters shaky, but insistent.

"I'll save you," he says, and swoops into the room.

Phelan can't wear the costume I bought her, a fuzzy Winnie the Pooh. It won't fit over her brace. I bought it because of the mobile that spirals over her crib, tiny Pooh bears chasing jars of honey, a kind of baby Grecian urn thing. She reaches for the bears, giggles, tries to kick her legs up and out of the brace to get at them. The mobile is the first thing she's ever loved.

It's ridiculous, but I cry over the costume. I save it in a box in Phelan's closet, I don't know why, and cry the whole way to Target, where I'll buy her another costume, a lady bug.

The lady bug costume is okay—a sack, open at the bottom, enough room for her brace and spread legs. It comes with fuzzy red and black socks, and a pair of pompom antennae strapped to a headband. I'll carry Phelan door-to-door for trick-or-treating. I'll carry her past the judges' stand at the town Halloween parade, where she'll win $5 for cutest costume.

"Cute as a bug," one judge will say.

I'll carry her the way my parents, the ones who adopted me and raised me, carried me, though they did it for years with both my legs in casts to my hips. They talked about the bruises they had, strings of them chain-linked around their waists and thighs, from where I bounced and banged the casts against them, eager to get down and walk.

Back home, my husband snaps pictures, Phelan flat on her back in the lady bug sack. Her eyes cross when she tries to focus on the antennae that flop just over her forehead.

She looks confused.

The Catholic Charities counselor calls. She tells me she's been in contact with the birth mother. The birth mother refuses everything—a meeting, a medical history, correspondence of any kind.

The birth mother wants no contact.

The birth mother believed the records were permanently sealed. The birth mother wants the records permanently

sealed.

The birth mother is immoveable on these points.

This is the word the counselor uses, immoveable.

The counselor does not say "your birth mother." She does not use the birth mother's name, which, unspoken, feels forbidden, as if I should forget everything I already know, as if this phone call has the power to make that happen.

I am standing in my real mother's kitchen when this call comes in. I am leaning over my mother's sink, where she leaned and did dishes and filled my father's coffee pot with water. I am looking out at my mother's lilacs again, and at her flowering dogwood, her most prized tree, grown from a sapling, kept safe from my father's mower for years.

The dogwood is blooming, its white petals spotted with red, another cluster of deeper red in the center. My mother, Catholic, believed the stories: that Christ was crucified on a cross made from the wood of a dogwood tree, that the tree's growth was stunted—retribution for eternity—and that the flowers symbolize his wounds, the red center the crown of thorns.

"Dogwoods are hard to grow," my mother always said, proud of her care and skill, proud this one survived.

I don't think it's true—dogwoods are everywhere—but belief is its own truth, maybe.

My mother's been dead two years now, my father more than seven.

"The birth mother has health issues," the counselor says, and mentions throat cancer, a voice box partially removed. "Still," the counselor says, "she was *quite* spirited."

And then the counselor does something I didn't think possible. This woman—with her bone-colored shoes and clothes, her office full of files and clipboards, the picture of her dog on her desk, a bone-shaped birthday cake between its paws—laughs. She laughs so hard she has to pull the phone back for few seconds—I hear it, the distance—to try to get her balance, but it doesn't help.

"I have to say, she really gave me a go," the counselor says. "Swore at me up and down. She screamed at me, I mean screamed. No voice box and all. Imagine!"

The counselor says, "That's never happened to me."

The counselor says, "Not in all my years of doing this."

The counselor says, "Sometimes it doesn't go well, but never like this."

She stops, finally, catches herself, pulls her laugh back in. She says, "Well then." She clears her throat, says, "I wish I had better news."

She says, "I'm here if you need to talk."

She says I should let it go. There's no reasoning with the birth mother on any of it.

She says, "We have to honor the birth mother's wishes. I'm sure you understand."

She says, "I really am sorry."

I think of my daughter lying on her back, her legs in the brace, her arms open, reaching.

I say thank you. I say I know. I say I understand.

None of this is true.

Her parents bought things, baby crap, monitors, a changing station and clothes, and though Katie had wanted to leave Iowa before, she didn't want to leave when her family was helping out so much, so we hung around. Then the next month her period came. Katie's doctor explained that new birth control may have given us a strange reading, and then he told us the more likely reason for the positive tests was that she had had a chemical pregnancy, where pregnancy hormones are present, but that's all. Her period should now have cleaned her out, he explained. That's when I decided it was time to go. Katie agreed. I had a job waiting in Flathead Valley in Montana that needed a geologist to scout a possible mining operation. I remember being glad for a lot of things then. We were away from her family, there was no baby, and I was finally putting my degrees to use.

In mid-summer, we moved into a house situated in a valley off a gravel road called Farm-to-Market Avenue. Our place was small, two bedrooms, and all cold wood floors. We covered the floors with thick rugs that Katie said would make a difference in the winter. We had a small attic that someone had converted into a family room. We used it only for boxes and junk, the baby furniture that her mother had bought, the crib, dresser, and changing station. Pines surrounded the house and it was always dark inside, even with all the blinds up.

We stayed in the first couple months, holding close to each other, but not saying much. It was the first time either of us had lived in another state. Katie grew her brown hair long and her face looked different with so much hair, thinner, older.

I worked out of a cabin with two other guys, Daryl and Tad. They each brought flasks to work and I brought Katie most days to get her out of the house. She hadn't found a job yet and Daryl and Tad didn't mind. Katie liked the cabin. It had an old-fashioned black stove that we built a fire in, and she made us tea and cooked us hotdogs in the fire while we played euchre. The cabin had windows on all sides except the back, and my desk, equipped with a laptop, looked onto a prairie that led to a mountain base. One day I was at my desk, looking at a sample of alluvium sediment and Katie asked what I was doing.

Basically I'm just looking through dirt and sand, I said.

Are you looking for Alkali? she said.

Not even close, I said, and looked up. She had a hotdog on a stick in the fire. It was charred on one side.

You better pay attention to that, I said.

Oh yeah, she said, looking at the hotdog, and then she took the stick, flicked it around, cooling it. The hotdog flipped off and hit me in the chest. I grabbed it and burned my hand.

What the hell? That's hot.

I didn't mean to, she said.

Bullshit.

Okay, I'm glad it hit you. Let's do something. I want to do something. We should get a gun so I can hunt.

We don't need a gun, I said. I looked at the dirt and sand in the tray on my desk and then I grabbed Katie's hand, threw the stick and hotdog into the fire, and we went for a walk.

Katie came to work often. The first snow fell early that fall and in the afternoons we walked the base of the Swan Mountains collecting samples. Katie walked with me and it reminded me of being with her in Iowa, before we had moved so close to her parents, before anything with the pregnancy happened. When we were in college, she had wanted to be a painter. She used to take me to places, rundown antique shops, broken farmhouses, junkyards, and I'd follow her, watch her watching things, doing what she called trying to get an angle on things; she was a dedicated artist then, but not a very good one and she eventually gave it up. She sometimes sketched me, or took my picture. I liked the way she looked at me then, focusing hard to draw a cheekbone, getting a line right on my nose.

When she walked with us, I didn't show her rocks or mineral formations or anything; I didn't try to talk to her. I let

her come to me, and she did. It was like we were new again, like being away from Iowa in some new place opened things up for us. Sometimes we found things other than rocks. Once, when walking near some trail, we found a cross-country ski.

This is mine, Katie had said. This is so mine. She took the ski and tried to stick her boot into the bindings. She got her foot in there and skied one-legged down small rolls in the fields, falling in the snow.

I began to hunt for other things for her. Another time we found a hatchet in a tree, and Katie walked with the hatchet, hacking off tree limbs in the forest, clearing brush and clearing a way for us. She cut her name deep into the bark of a tree, thick slashes in the wood. She broke through the ice in a pond with the back end of the hatchet. When she got tired of the hatchet, she dropped it.

You're not going to keep this, I said, picking the hatchet up off the pine needles.

What for? she said, and walked on.

You should keep a collection of the stuff you find, I said. You could decorate the cabin with it.

You keep it then, she said. It's only fun for a minute. What am I going to do with a hatchet?

I kept the hatchet and put it in the attic.

Another time it was a bucket hanging from a tree, filling up with sap, which Daryl stole to make syrup with. We saw blacktail deer several times, a sturdier, bigger animal than Midwest deer, and Katie tried to take pictures. She took pictures of birds, stray dogs, squirrels. A couple times she tried to photograph fish in a creek. She talked about photographing a bear or deer. When we came across blacktail, Katie's pictures always came out a blur, the deer sprinting off. Katie would look at her digital camera, show me the blurry photograph, and she'd say, I can't ever get a good one. And she'd go off on her own, taking pictures of the trees and mountains.

One afternoon when Katie didn't come to work, I hunted for mineral deposits with Daryl and Tad. We found a dead moose instead, the body preserved in the snow, the antlers intact. The moose lay on a downslope of land, near the forest, and its head pulled backward toward its spine, like it had slipped coming down from the woods and broken its neck.

Let's say we killed it, Daryl said.

I don't own a gun, I said.

My wife made me get one when we moved up here, Tad said. It's a little revolver. We could say we shot it.

I don't think that would do the trick here, Daryl said, watching the moose. Unless you and them moose were playing Russian roulette or something.

Daryl knelt down next to the moose and searched it for wounds, buckshot or anything. His hands crawled through the fur of the thing, messing it. On the back left haunch of the animal, a patch of fur had been scraped away, leaving a large scabbed area of skin. Daryl shook his head, finding nothing.

Let's cut his head off and mount it, Daryl said, still kneeling, holding the antlers with his right hand like he was posing for a photo.

How are we going to cut the fucking head off a moose? I said.

With a saw, Daryl said.

It's not like a piece of wood, I said. You can't just saw it right off. There's bone to get through.

It'll be messy, Daryl said. It'll be messy as hell, but I know a guy in town who'll fix it all up stuff it and everything.

I pictured the moose head mounted on the wall of our little cabin, overlooking our desk and laptops, and I liked the thought of it. I didn't like the idea of cutting off the head, though. I looked at Tad. He held a notepad to his chest, his arms clasped tight around the pad. He wore thick earmuffs that his wife must've given him, and a rugged looking flannel coat. His hands and his face were soft, though, almost womanish. He stuck a pen in his mouth and shrugged and said, Okay. Let's do it. He put the pad in his backpack and we hurried back to my house to get a saw.

Our garage was a two-car, separate from the house, and the door wasn't electric-powered. We only had one car, a Jeep SUV, and the other side of the space was empty. Daryl and Tad stood behind me, talking about where we could mount the head in the cabin. I pushed the garage door up too fast, and it crashed into place, knocking shovels and saws from the back wall, leaving a clanging echo. It was dark inside the garage, and when my eyes adjusted, I saw Katie huddled in the empty side, a large coke next to her on the ground and a hamburger in her hand. She was trying to get a small goat to come

to her. She wore long pajamas and her heavy winter coat and scarf. She was crying, too. Daryl and Tad went quiet behind me. My face flushed.

We'll be on the front porch, Tad said.

Hi, Katie, Daryl said, and their feet crunched away on the snow and gravel. I stepped into the garage and pulled the string for the light. The little goat looked at me, shivering. It was small, too small, a premature goat.

What's this doing here? I said.

I don't know, she said.

Why'd you bring him in here?

Can you stop asking questions? she said.

We didn't say anything for a minute. Outside the quiet of the garage, the wind hissed and inside a faint little voice, like from the radio, echoed. A puddle of light from her cell phone glowed on the hood of the Jeep, and I picked the phone up, still on, the voice coming out of it. Her mother's number on the screen.

We should keep him, she said. I think it would be a good idea if we keep him.

Why? I said looking at the phone.

I mean because we should take care of something and raise it.

I didn't look at her; I had thought everything with the baby was past. I think you left her on hold, I said, handing Katie the phone.

She grabbed the phone, told her mother that she would call her back. The wind blew and the garage door shook. Katie rubbed her cheeks with the palm of her hands, the hamburger still in her right hand, gripped between thumb and pointer finger.

You're going to get grease on your face, I said.

She stared at me and threw down the burger. The goat sniffed it. I walked to the back of the garage. In front of the Jeep, shovels and hoes and saws were scattered on the cement. I reset them on the wall, for some reason trying to be very quiet. Then I picked a bow-saw and walked by Katie. I turned back before opening the garage and said, I don't think they like meat. You might try a little grass from the yard. I opened the garage door.

I know they don't like meat, she said. I wasn't feeding him the hamburger. I was using the lettuce.

You might try a little grass from the yard, I said.

And all the grass is dead. There's snow covering everything.

Well, keep trying the lettuce then, I said. Do you want this closed?

She nodded and I pulled down the garage door.

I got the guys from the porch and we drove back to the moose, a little rain sprinkling down, washing away the snow, patches of grass and rock showing on the fields beside the road. On the way, Tad asked if Katie was okay and I didn't answer him because I didn't know the answer. Part of me wanted to be back there with her, and the other part wanted to be far away from whatever it was she was feeling. Daryl got to talking on the moose, saying we should cut off the head, and for most of the drive, I thought it was a good idea. Daryl kept going, telling about a deer he killed with his Bronco in Denver, how he got venison for a year, and when he stopped, Tad said that his wife didn't like it up here at first either.

The people are different, he said.

She likes it fine, I said. It's just cold.

When we got to the moose, its head was heavy against the snow, its one eye glazed white and looking at us, I knew I couldn't cut the head off. I thought of Katie with the goat; I thought of her dog and cats in Iowa, how they always wanted to be near her, how she had once wanted an animal called a sugar glider. I thought of her standing behind me, watching me, and I didn't want to see the moose opened up, having to hold the animal's head steady, the skin coming loose, the rasping sound of cutting through bone, blood leaking everywhere. It looked like it would take a while, too. We decided we would just cut off the antlers, to keep things cleaner. Daryl sawed. He cut them off just above where the antler met the head. I didn't expect it, but the antlers bled and bled.

In Iowa, I worked in Katie's mother and father's butcher shop. The shop was called Cline's. Her father, Owen Cline, also owned the town paper, but her mother told me they didn't have a position for me there. So I told Mrs. Cline I would

handle the finances of the butcher place, but I wouldn't work with all the meat. I don't know why I said this. I didn't mind cutting meat. It may have had something to do with having a master's degree; a person with a master's degree doesn't cut meat all day. When I told her I would be glad to handle the finances and the marketing of the place, she started laughing.

The finances? she said. The marketing? Oh, we gotta take you to Mr. Klegg.

Two days later we drove in Owen's pickup down to a farm on the edge of town, in the middle of Iowa flatland. I wondered what kind of farm work Mrs. Cline was going to have me do, and thought it stupid of her and immature not to tell me the reason for taking me to a farm. Mrs. Cline has a flat, oval face, and she kept her lips pursed as we drove, as though she was holding a surprise for me in. I turned the radio on and she turned it down a little.

Then she said, We get the cows from another place now, already slaughtered, but I wanted you to see how we used to do it. You've been in school most of your life, so you've probably never had to do work like this. Has Katie ever told you about the farm work she did for Mr. Klegg?

I told her no.

This is part of it, she said.

It was nearing sundown when we got to the place, the sky white and grey, the farmhouse and barn the only thing for miles. Rows of soybeans stretched away on the other side of the road and it looked as though you could walk right off the earth. A dead tree, stark as bone, stood in the middle of the field. I waited in the driveway of the farmhouse while Mrs. Cline got Mr. Klegg from around back.

Klegg was a very old, very short man who wore glasses, and when he shook my hand, he looked past me, like he was trying to see something behind me. They took me to the barn that looked like hell on the outside, the paint stripped from the wood, but was clean inside, hard-packed dirt floors and cleaned out pens, even the stench of livestock wasn't terrible. At the back of the barn, Klegg brought out a cow, its head with rope around it, almost like a dog's muzzle. We walked out the back of the barn, passing the other animals, and the smell of shit and hay grew fainter. Flies buzzed around the cow's ass. I walked at Klegg's side and Katie's mother walked behind us. We stopped at the end of the fence surrounding the barn where Klegg had laid out three pails of cold water, a length of chain, a hoist, a .30-06 rifle, and a large knife. He told me and Mrs. Cline to grab everything except the rifle, which he picked up and carried. I grabbed the water pails, which I later learned were to hold the heart, liver, and kidney. I stuck the knife in my back pocket, the handle up underneath my shirt. Mrs. Cline grabbed the hoist and chain. We walked on, Klegg leading, water from the pails spilling onto my jeans. We walked far, down into a pasture behind the barn, toward a large tree with a long thick limb extending out parallel with the ground. My heart raced. The cow seemed to sense something, something about the strangeness of being away from the other animals, surrounded by the three of us. We stopped when we got to the tree; there were striations on the thick limb, bark rubbed away from where other cows had hung to drain.

This'll be your first one, Mrs. Cline said, coming around the animal to us. We'll teach you how to butcher it start to finish.

I said that they didn't have to do this for me.

This isn't for you, Mrs. Cline said. We do a cow every year for Mr. Klegg. She looked at Klegg.

Every year, he said, checking something on the gun. Klegg looked at us. Step back you two, he said. Then he looked at me. If you need to walk away, just walk away.

Without thinking, I asked if the cow would feel anything and then felt foolish for asking. Klegg stopped, lowered the rifle, and took my question in a serious manner, rubbing his forehead with the palm of his right hand.

Not if you do it right, he said. You just watch me. We'll make sure we get it the first time.

After the goat came, Katie changed. She kept him in the garage, chained up. He pissed and shit in the garage and I had to clean it. I found her out there feeding him, talking to him, asking if he wanted to go on a walk. And she took him on walks, at first just around our yard, then up and down our street in the snow. When she came inside the house, she smelled like goat and hay. She wore worn jeans and turtlenecks and was quiet even when she spoke. She was distant, like there really had been a baby and it was miscarried or lost in some other way. I stopped her one day on way her to the goat.

Is he a permanent thing, I said. Don't you think we need to find a place for him?

He's my job now, Katie said. He's what I do. You know, I thought about taking care of some other strays.

You can't do that, I said.

You get to go to work everyday so I get to take care of him.

You can come to work with me still, I said. You can get a job.

I don't want a job, she said. I want to do this.

In November, Daryl, Tad and Katie and I hiked onto a man named Ronnie Telford's ranchland without knowing it. We didn't know Telford then, but we would. We were walking to a part of Blacktail Mountain shorn off by a glacier, granite rock exposed. We hiked through an area of woods and then came across a stretch of field, Telford's fence down. Farmland cut into the middle of the forest, bisecting it for about a hundred yards. We walked on, and I was surprised at how quickly the land opened up. Behind us, Blacktail Mountain stood ringed in clouds. In the distance, to our right in the valley, sat a one-story house, looking part of the land, and a road, and then a white Ford truck bouncing toward us. We all four stopped and watched it coming. The truck ducked down and up from the long hilly road leading up to the house. It moved fast, faster than I first thought. The diesel growled in the distance and smoke billowed out of the back of the truck, the engine getting louder, the truck going faster, dirt and rocks spewing from under the tires. Tad put his hands up. Katie did the same.

He's not going to shoot us, I said.

Then why's he driving so fast? Tad said.

The truck suddenly cut off the road, an explosion of dust behind it, and headed right at us. I got scared and raised my hands. Daryl's went up, too. The truck slowed down when all our hands went up, and Katie laughed, Tad let out a breath, and we all lowered our hands. Then the truck sped up again, kicking rocks from beneath the tires, spinning out in the dirt, and Tad said, Run. And I turned to go.

He's messing with us, Daryl said, grabbing my coat. It's cool.

The truck fishatailed to a stop. A skinny man with a beard and a flannel shirt rolled down his window. He asked us our business on his property. Daryl and I stepped forward, and I showed him my papers and my NMGA card and explained about looking for outcropping mineral deposits or nay deposits under heavy sediment or regolith. He squinted his eyes at me and looked confused. Behind him in the truck hung an empty gun rack.

A company hired us to find a place to mine, I said.

Any luck? he said.

Not a thing, Tad said. Sorry we're on your property.

The man squinted at Tad, then looked back to me. He handed me my papers from the cab of his truck, nodded, and said, Just ask if you're going to pass through my land. He was about to drive off when Katie spoke up.

What kind of farm do you have? she said.

It's a ranch, he said. We've got horses mainly.

I used to ride horses, she said. My dad used to take me out.

We do rides here, the ranch man said. It's a little way to make money. I could set you up if you all wanted.

Do you have any goats? Katie said.

We've got a few goats, he said. A lot of folks around here have goats. My brother lives in Copper Falls and he's got goats in a residential area, just in his backyard.

We have one, she said.

We don't *have* one, I cut in. We're looking to give one away. It's a stray.

A stray goat? Daryl said.

Katie looked at me. I found one is what I meant to say, she said, looking back at the ranch man. Just a baby one. I can't get him to eat.

I'd be happy to take a look at him, the ranch man said. He didn't say anything for a minute, then he swung his arm, motioning to Katie. Let's go take a look at him, he said.

Katie climbed in the cab of the truck. They shook hands and I heard the man say, Ronnie Telford. Katie smiled at him and said her name. She leaned across the seat, near to the ranch man, shoulder to shoulder, and said to me, I'll meet you at home. They drove off, back toward the ranch house.

She seems happy today, Tad said.

Did she not before? I said.

Some weekends we watched her parents' house. They had a condo on Lake Michigan and took a boat up there once a month. We looked after the dog and two cats and got to stay in the two-story house. It was an antique thing. Around every corner sat a wood end table with a lamp and doily and a photo on it. Faded black and white photographs of people and old houses hung on the walls in the family room. An old brick fireplace, blackened and cracking, sunk to one side in the family room. When we thought Katie was pregnant, her parents still took the trip to Lake Michigan, and stayed longer than usual. I think it was her father's idea. They stayed away for about a week, to give us time to talk things through. We didn't talk, though. We pretended the problem wasn't there. Or we pretended it wasn't a problem.

Katie went on walks a lot or went to the Y to swim. She said this was because she needed to be out of her parents' house. She'd come back, smelling of chlorine each day, her hair still wet. She didn't take showers and said the pool got her clean. It was clear to me that not only did she want to be out of the house, she didn't want to be around me. And I suspected things then. I suspected the chlorine-smell maybe hid some other smell. I thought she might be seeing some other swimmer, doing laps with him, or synchronized swimming, or letting one of the lifeguards watch her body.

After she got home one afternoon and was sitting on an upstairs bed, dripping into the comforter, I asked if she'd mind if I swam with her.

Actually I would mind, she said, ruffling her still wet hair. Nobody's ever there when I go in the morning. It's my own thing. You go under water, you stay under, and it's like your own little world down there, and you can feel that world, *feel* it against your limbs.

Limbs, I thought when she was talking. What a word.

It's quiet and different and it's yours, she said. Plus, I've never known you to be too into exercise.

So there's not some good looking lifeguard, I said.

You're a perverted idiot, she said.

How's that perverted? I said. Your use of the word limbs is perverted.

Is it going to be like this? she said, standing up, the butt of her bathing suit sagging. Is it going to be like this when I have the baby?

I told her it probably was and she went off to take a walk.

I remember, when Katie was gone somewhere during the day, how I walked around the house, looking at the empty rooms. There were rooms no one used anymore. A living room with neat beige furniture, an oriental rug, and a coffee table. The sofa faced two windows with a view of the flat fields behind the house, and when the sun set, the room turned yellow. Katie told me about playing with her dog in there, but I couldn't picture it. Three bedrooms upstairs with neatly made beds and large oak dressers. Leaves of a nearby tree made shadows in the room farthest down the hall, and I sat in there a lot, listening to the tree rustle in the breeze. In that room, I found two rusted pistols in a drawer, a broken light gauge device, a box of bullets, an inhaler, fountain pens, pictures of when Katie was little, eyes wide and smiling, and two degrees that Katie's father had taken, one in journalism, the other in business. The other drawers were full of stuff, too. The bedrooms had turned into junk rooms, places for storage, nothing more.

Ronnie Telford had run a ranch for nearly twenty-five years. He was our parents' age and had lived in Montana all his life. His second wife, Tammy, helped him run the ranch; his first died in a skiing accident, though Telford told us little of that. He had two children with his first wife, both girls, and they were away at college.

Once a week or so, Telford brought a small bale of hay for the goat. He gave it shots, and a de-wormer, but wouldn't take the thing. He and Katie talked in the garage, standing around with the goat. Sometimes I went in, but I didn't say much, I just listened to the two of them. Katie stopped coming to work with me.

I got home from the cabin each day to find Katie and Ronnie and Tammy outside building a small fence on the back of the garage. At the back of the fence, they put a little shelter, a little hut, and filled it with hay. A week or so into the work, they got the whole thing pretty much finished just as I got home. I walked up to the fence, rested on it, and was about to say that it looked good, when Telford said, Hey, would you mind getting some bedding down here? She wants bedding in here.

I wanted to tell him to go get the bedding himself, but I said yes, and went inside to the loft filled with boxes. The antlers we had cut from the dead moose were in a corner of the room on the floor. Next to the antlers was the hatchet, bring them to the geology cabin, but I hadn't done it yet. I reminded myself to do this and then searched for old bedding.

In the first box, I found a good blender and set it out, along with three pairs of broken earphones, and sketches Katie made. The first two were of me, looking away at the ground. In another, I stood, looked out a window. I could tell the window was from our old apartment. I didn't remember doing either of these things, but it didn't matter. That Katie had drawn them mattered; that I had somehow captured her attention, her love, in those moments—I wanted that back. I flipped through the drawings. Other sketches: her mother walking the dog; her father in their backyard; a whole assortment of Iowa landscapes; a pond; a field with snow; ducks in the sky; a woman and a boy on a road in the small town.

What're you doing? Katie shouted from downstairs.

I put the sketches away. I found a blender, I said.

Bring the bedding, she said, coming up the stairs. Isn't this great? It's pretty much finished; we could probably have a couple more goats. Or a dog or whatever. She came up further into the loft and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

We don't need any more goats, I said. We don't need anymore anything.

You suck sometimes, she said, and grabbed the bedding from me.

After giving the bedding to her, I walked down our driveway to get the mail. When I came back up, Ronnie was loading tools and extra fence slats and wood into his truck. His wife said goodbye to me and got into the cab of the truck. I walked up to the truck, put my hands on the bed. I asked why he didn't take the goat.

Your wife wants it, he told me. And I don't need anymore goats. I'm scaling back. I'm nearing retirement, he said, showing his teeth, one front tooth with a little black hole in the top of it. Hey, he said. Tell Katie we'll be ready for dinner around seven. Just stop by any time before then.

I told him okay and went inside to ask Katie about dinner.

Sometime after Thanksgiving, a package arrived for Katie. She was gone, at the Telford's, and I opened it. The box contained a videotape and a small note, written on a piece of scrap paper, that read, *Katie, We thought you'd like this. Hope it's not too cold up there. Go skiing, go to the Y, get some exercise, you'll feel better. We'll visit soon; we want to do a cross country trip. And let us know how the goat is? Love, M and D.*

It was her mother's handwriting. When her mother called and I answered the phone, she didn't acknowledge me, didn't ask me how I was, what I had been up to, or even what we had been up to. The note was addressed only to Katie and that annoyed me, made me want to throw it out, along with the tape. I didn't, though. I cooled down.

I decided to wait for Katie to watch the tape, so I put on coffee, then decided I wouldn't wait and sat in the family room, on one of our heavy rugs, and put in the tape. It began with a view of her house in Iowa, and I couldn't believe someone would send such a thing. We had just moved, after all. After watching a minute, though, the tape felt gentle to me, desperate even. The camera zoomed close to a fuzzy window, then zoomed out again, bringing almost the entire house in clear, the white siding dirty in spots, the blue shutters around the window faded grey. A wind was going and the tall tree on the right side of the house rustled. The tree trunk bent in the middle, away from the house, as if trying to get out of the shade, and I had never noticed this before. The camera danced from the tree to the house. Wind made a hollow gushing sound in the camera, but other than that, there was no voice, no commentary. I wondered about that for a second, but then knew there didn't need to be a voice. Katie already knew all the details. The camera readjusted, followed the path of the front walk up to the front door, then panned up to the roof. Slow. The hand of the camera tried to remain steady but jerked up to the top windows, but still, the camera moved around the house like a blind man's hands would, feeling it out, loving it. A quick cut to a shot of the empty road leading to the house, a soybean field to the left, a white and blue sky, clouds motionless, and again, no other sound but the wind. I got a sense of the quietness of things. Then the dog jumped into the shot and Mrs. Cline's voice said to sit, sit. The dog whined and barked, its nose in the camera. The next shot began in the upstairs bedroom, the one I liked to sit in, and the camera zoomed in close to the window. I could see the shadows of leaves in the window. Inside the house, it was even quieter, and as the camera panned around the room, I could hear Mrs. Cline's feet shuffling and her breathing. The camera stayed in the room, zooming in on the bedspread, along the corner of the blue wall, to the oak dresser, then panned out, finding the whole room. In a corner of the room, above the bed on the dull white ceiling was a water stain. The tape went on like this, recording each room, ending with a shot of the backyard. Katie fell asleep to it that night, and each night afterward for a week or so.

Six bears? Katie said.

Six, Ronnie said, pouring himself another cup of some spiked cider. Two with a bow, he said. But I used all that

goddamn meat. And I've used the hides. This one here, the big guy, I kept. The other ones, I gave away. That animal gave its life.

We sat in the Telford's house around a coffee table, behind Katie a fire in the fireplace. Out one of the windows, Blacktail Mountain was visible in the darkening sky. When I looked out the window the first time, I thought it was night, but I was really looking at the dark of the mountain, and when I went close up to the window, a grey afternoon sky outlined Blacktail. It was a strange feeling, that mountain looming so close to the house. On the walls of the Telford's place were all the typical things. A couple deerheads, antlers, and we sat on a bearskin rug, one of Ronnie's, the big guy he kept calling it. A wood gun case with a glass door sat in the corner of the room, in place of a china closet. The house made our geology cabin, with the little stove and laptops on plastic desks, look ridiculous.

He's never even picked up a gun, Katie said, looking at me. He wouldn't cut meat at my parents' butcher shop.

Ronnie smiled, his teeth showing, that little black hole at the top of his front tooth. He and Katie were doing all the talking. Tammy got up either to get more cider or to bring out more cheese and crackers. The cheese, some block of white stuff, was very good.

I prefer not dealing with dead animals all day, I said.

You're not a vegetarian, Ronnie said. We've got some good elk I wanted you to taste.

I shook my head. No, I said. I like meat.

Ronnie laughed hard. Well, I like meat, too, he said, and continued laughing. I like meat, he said. That's funny. He slapped me on the back and got serious looking. It's the blood, he said. I know. It's got a smell to it, even all cleaned up. I don't enjoy that part of it.

I felt like saying I had a degree in geology, two really, but I didn't. I didn't like being in the Telford's house. It was a forty-five minute drive from our house and meeting at their place was becoming a regular thing. I'd already missed a couple euchre nights with Daryl and Tad.

The first thing I killed was squirrel, Ronnie said. I was maybe ten or twelve or so. I killed it with just a twenty-two, picked it out of a tree. I was a good shot even then. Well, I was going to leave that little piece of shit. I was ten or whatever. No respect for this animal. No idea I'd just took a life.

My dad had me kill a deer with him when I was about ten, Katie said, sounding like a little girl. We butchered it together. He taught me how to hide the thing, drain it, do it all.

Ronnie leaned on the coffee table with both elbows. That's the way to do it, he said. I can tell something about your old man right there. My own dad wasn't quite like that. He wasn't as hands on and there as yours, he said.

The women were listening hard. Ronnie's face flickered in the firelight.

After I shot that squirrel, well I'm off to shoot something else, he said. But my father finds the squirrel, and he can see the gunshot in it. He finds me around the house, aiming at god knows what. I remember that. He found me lining up some other animal. To this day, I don't remember what, but there I am, lining up this other animal after I killed this little squirrel. And he yanks the gun out of my hands, empties the bullets, and tells me I can't shoot another goddamn thing until I finish that squirrel. So I go to throw the thing away, thinking I'll toss the fucker in the trash. No. No deal. He makes me skin the thing, gut it, build a fire, cook the thing, and eat it. I didn't shoot another thing for a year.

Katie kept her eyes on Ronnie, waiting. Ronnie grabbed my right shoulder hard, smiling across the table into the fire, his eyes set in shadow.

Another tape from Iowa arrived. Katie watched it then put it upstairs in the junk room with the first tape, the deer antlers, the hatchet, the baby furniture. She went to Telford's a couple times a week or more and we scheduled New Year's with them, after they got back from a trip to visit Ronnie's daughters. I found myself alone in the house after work most days. I often went upstairs and got the tapes. I'd sit with the lights off, watching our old campus pass by on video, trying to see us into the little shops, walking along the roads, before we had any worries, when it was just the two of us, when we lived slow. The tape cut from our campus to the little town, into the Cline's butcher shop where a man I've never seen before waved at the camera, and then the camera dove back out onto the street, and I tried to put us back there, together, when we liked to be together so much, but in my head all I could see was Katie. The memory of her walking on the Iowa street; the moon in the sky lighted her face grey. I wanted to be back there, in Iowa. I remembered walking back from the butcher shop, how she came to meet me and walked me home. She stopped to look in a window at clothes. There were two

of her, one on the sidewalk, one in the window.

Let's play euchre tonight with Tad and Daryl, I said. We haven't seen them much lately.

You see them everyday, Katie said.

This is true, I said. But that's in a work environment.

A work environment? she said. All you guys do is jerk off all day.

I think you're confused, I said. That's what you do all day.

She took a spoonful of yogurt. Have you tried the key lime pie? she said. It's delicious.

Then she flung a spoonful of yogurt at me. It hit my shirt. She laughed. I'm sorry, she said. I am. She wiped the yogurt off my shirt and said, I'm going to the Telford's tonight, she said. You can come if you want. You know, I want you to come.

I washed my hands in the sink and she put a hand on the back of my neck. Why? I said.

Because I want to be with you, she said.

At the Telford's, I said.

I already told them I'd be there.

Why do you like it there? I said. It's cheesy and silly and all Ronnie does is tell old war stories.

Jesus, she said. It's better than here. It makes me feel like I'm at home.

How's that possible? I said. There are dead animals staring at you from every angle of the place.

It's possible. And those animals were killed for food, she said. You better get used to it, too. He asked me to help out on the ranch and I think I'm going to do it.

Do whatever you want, I said, and walked outside to get away from her. Neither of us went anywhere that night, and I slept upstairs in the loft, surrounded by boxes.

Sometime before Christmas, I heard Katie get up early. We'd been sleeping in separate rooms. I had taken the loft upstairs, the converted living room. We didn't have a sofa up there, but I put all the boxes into a crawl space and made a bed on the ground with blankets, the crib and baby furniture in the corner of the room.

I woke up to the sound of the front door opening and closing, and I went to the small triangular window. I saw our Jeep SUV in the driveway, and Katie and Ronnie were piling suitcases into the back of it and into the backseats. It was early, snow had re-covered the other snow, making everything white again. A grey light made shadows down in the pines. Everything was quiet. My little room was quiet, and I could just hear the noises Katie and Ronnie made putting the suitcases in the car; their feet had already cleared a path in the snow from the front door to the back of the Jeep, and I listened to the gravel sound. They said little. I put my ear up to the window and felt the cold. They made trip after trip, first the suitcases, then boxes of things, stereo stuff, movies, and I listened to all the junk quietly rattling when they brought it out. I closed my eyes and listened to it. Then I opened my eyes and watched. Katie must have not been able to see in my window. Sometimes she looked up to the loft to see if my light had come on. She'd stop what she was doing and stand, looking up to my window. It was strange to see her face looking that way watching for me. After some time, I went downstairs, went out the back door and stood by the car. She came from the front door and saw me right away.

I'm not moving out, she said.

I didn't say you were, I said.

I'm just taking some of our stuff to the Telford's. They want me to watch their place while they're on vacation. I'm taking care of the goats and horses and everything. It's just for a little while, she said.

You're taking a lot of stuff for a little while, I said. Are you sure you need it all?

Probably not, but I just want to be sure. It's my stuff anyway.

So let's be sure then, I said. I went inside and Ronnie was huddled over some drawer in the kitchen. He looked at me. I started in the family room. I grabbed all the copies of *National Geographic* that were hers and put them in a box. I pulled some decorative tea set down from the bookshelf, a tea set I'd bought, and put that in. I filled the box up with CDs, mine, hers, it didn't matter. I went upstairs and grabbed the hatchet she'd found, the moose antlers and put those in the box. Then I brought the box out to the car. My hands were freezing, holding the thing, and I dropped it in the back of the Jeep. Clouds broke in the sky and I saw a little blue behind the grey covering.

That's not all mine, she said. I don't want any antlers.

I got them for you, I said.

You didn't get them for me.

Ronnie clapped his hands together and said, anything else?

Yeah, I said. There's a lot more. Fuck. There's fucking plenty more.

Let's go, Ronnie, Katie said. This is all I need.

Ronnie looked at me. Then he went and got in his truck. Katie got the box I had just put in the Jeep and set it in the snow.

Take this back in, she said.

I didn't pay her any attention and went back inside the house. I could see my breath in the air. There's a lot more of your shit, I yelled out to Katie. I stood in the family room, no longer angry, just tired and embarrassed. I heard the Jeep start up and then Ronnie's diesel truck. I waited until I heard the truck going and then went outside again. Ronnie's truck was already down the driveway, signaling to turn onto the road. I was glad he was gone. The tires of the Jeep crunched snow and Katie tapped the brakes, rolled down her window.

It's only for a few weeks, she said. I'll invite you for dinner some nights. Ronnie told me I can cook whatever deer meat I want.

I didn't say anything for a minute. Exhaust from the Jeep curled around my legs.

Take care of the goat, she said, and started to roll up her window.

I'll surprise you, I said fast, putting my hand on the window.

She didn't say anything to this. Her window buzzed and rolled down again and I took my hand away.

I'll get Daryl to drive me and I'll just surprise you, I said.

She smiled at me and then rolled up her window, waved, and drove off.

I picked up the box off the ground and brought it inside. I sat on the rug in front of the television. Snow clung to the bottom of the box and melted into the carpet. I thought about Katie living in the Telford's house, cooking herself dinner, feeding the horses on the ranch, taking care of the few chickens they had. I thought about her alone, moving through their rooms, maybe looking in their drawers, trying on some of Tammy's clothes, wearing overalls to do ranch work, stepping into Ronnie's boots for a quick walk to get the mail. I went upstairs and got the videos her mother had sent. I decided that I might drive them over and bring the goat, too. I'd help out with the ranch and feed the animals and we'd ride horses and I'd get my work done that way. But it would be her way, too. Then I realized I didn't have a car. I sat on the floor again, the videos in my lap, and pictured the drive over with Daryl, how I'd wait to do it for a few days, maybe a week, but then go around dusk. I would wander the property like a stranger, pretending to be lost and in need of shelter, would creep close to the house and peek in the windows, and see her through a window as though I'd never seen her before; I'd watch her doing whatever she might be doing. Watching TV, calling her parents, sleeping, and then I'd just walk right in.

Jim Daniels

Landfill America, Issue 5

To the landfill with a load of rotten wood
pried from my porch. Stuck in my minivan
between two reeking mammoth garbage trucks,
I climb half-washed-out switchbacks high and higher
into summer drizzle. Lights on, wipers slashing, radio
playing only songs with the word "babe" in them.
I'm driving on packed trash. Beneath me,

who knows what's happening? Not the guy at the gate
with the twisted scar on one cheek who tells me
to unload into his pickup and he'll take it up later—
my van might slip into the big pit and never be seen again.
Next time just slip your garbage man a twenty
to take this little shit.

I peek into the abyss of Waste Management Co.
in Monroeville, PA: miles of mad rubble. Managed
as in dumped in a hole and buried. Not like I have
a better idea. I don my enormous hard hat
and official orange vest to unload my little shit
into his truck. The hat slips over my eyes and clunks
off into mud. *Rain's really fucking us up*,
the man says, pulling on a bent cigarette.

I stare at the swelling sea of wet trash.
It feels like a stadium full of drunken fans
the moment it becomes clear that the game is lost.

Empty trucks turn at the top
and file back down to make another run
like the giant black ants who tunneled
through my wet, rotted wood till I ripped it out.
The exterminator's coming tomorrow.

It cost me $57.86 to get rid of the wood. Minimum
charge for up to one ton. I could've brought at least 1000
more pounds at no extra cost. The exterminator won't be
cheap either. Maybe I should slip the ants $20
and see if they go away.

Back home, I watch the ants, picking out which ones
to squish. The biggest ones. They carry off their dead

to eat them. Last night a homeless man held out his cup
like he does each time I pass, and I gave him nothing,
as usual. What if I slipped *him* a twenty?

Every week I drop my trash at the curb and somebody
takes it away. Except "construction debris"
like rotten porch wood. Slip me a twenty
and I'll keep quiet. Slip me a twenty, and I'll do a little
dance called the Exterminator. Do you have any idea
how many songs have the word "babe" in them?
I thanked the man for the tip on future waste management.
He'll always have a job.

When my children got back from school,
I told them I'd been to the moon.
That I'd worn a helmet, stood at the edge
of a beautiful crater. That I threw
a twenty dollar bill up in the air
and it never landed.

Bonnie Jo Campbell

Garlic Mustard Diaries, Issue 5

April 13: My enemy does not rest but recoups in the night, so that each morning I awaken to new battles. Daily I fight, daily I kill, daily I am nonetheless defeated. This enemy of mine lurks in the ditches along every country road, in every wood, every garden. Day after spring day I crush my enemy's forces, but he is able to sustain tremendous losses, and everywhere I look, there are more of his troops at the ready. Yet most folks around here, including my brother George and my new next-door neighbors, the Heartstones, go about their lives as though we were not under attack.

"Geez, Bon," George says when he comes over to borrow a ladder. "It's just a weed."

I send him away with my husband's twenty-four-foot extension ladder, and I begin a two-hour stint of pulling garlic mustard plants from the mucky woods behind the garage, muttering to myself, "just a weed." George knows better. He knows perfectly well that garlic mustard is an alien species that threatens the very character of American middle west flora; he knows well enough that this foul weed, *Alliaria Petiolata*, this zebra mussel of the woodlands, this kudzu vine of the north, threatens to relegate our native shade-dwelling wildflowers to the status of sweet memories. Though this biennial Eurasian weed is eaten by sixty-nine different insect species in Europe, it has no natural enemy in America. No enemy but people like me.

April 14: Winter has finally melted away, and spring is boing-ing into blossoms. Butterflies flutter by, and the warm wind carries the scent of honeysuckle and new grasses onto my screen porch. I have turned in my grades, and I am finished teaching for the season; my taxes are completed. My tulips are sublime, tall and elegant, and my windflowers seem likely to tumble off their stems and blow about in my yard, but I cannot relax into the contemplation of beauty just now. My battle is heating up. As any well-informed local environmentalist knows, there are only a few weeks before the garlic mustard goes to seed. I lay on my belly beneath our privet hedge and pull one plant at a time.

April 15: Christopher and I take an early afternoon wild flower walk at the nature center, to admire the blue eyed mary, the Dutchman's breeches, and squirrel corn, flowers that don't grow in our woods. A woman ahead of us veers from the path; she reaches down and yanks a stalk of garlic mustard without comment to her companion, without missing a stride. She wears a brilliant headscarf. Members of my army (this coalition of the informed) come from all walks of life: my mother the farmer pulls, as does Thomas Bailey the professor and Mary Powers the Drain Commissioner. In an effort to be positive, we might say to one another, "Thank goodness the weed is easy to pull." Normally, a well-placed hand can yank up the whole S-shaped root. Later today, though, when I am pulling plants from alongside our dirt road, to free up space for the blackcap raspberries, I find that the garlic mustard roots are breaking off at the level of the hard-packed gravel, and, truth be told, a broken root results in re-growth. My new neighbor, the tiny dark-haired Mrs. Heartstone peers over at me when I curse. She is out in her yard with her girl toddler. My husband has told me that her husband, Mr. Heartstone, is a pilot, and that is why he is out of town so much. My husband suggests I go over and talk to her, and I will soon. When I have some free time I'll bake her muffins to welcome her to the neighborhood.

April 16: I've consulted last year's journal, and if this year is like last year, there is approximately a week before the garlic mustard flowers begin to open and about ten days more before the seedpods form. For a few weeks after they form, I can still burn the plants, but once the garlic mustard seedpods open, there is nothing I can do to prevent the horrific re-infestation. Today I work for three and a half hours on my knees, on ground that is still quite cold. I pull until my kneecaps are frozen, all the while thinking about phone calls that I've promised to return at the end of the semester. I notice my dark-haired neighbor is out weeding her small flowerbed, wearing cotton gloves and a pretty straw sun hat. Her daughter wears a matching sun hat. I'm glad to know Mrs. Heartstone is a person of gardening habits like myself. Soon I will bake something for her—banana bread, perhaps—and welcome her properly. My husband has told me she works at the county

courthouse and is involved with the humane society. I suspect Mrs. Heartstone and I could be friends, and she might even want to become involved in the movement to eradicate garlic mustard. Seeing how people are so busy with their work and projects nowadays, a friendly neighbor is a godsend.

April 17: At the health food store, amidst a whiff of sage, I mention garlic mustard to the guy with dreadlocks who is refilling the bulk spice bins, and then to the girl, also with dreadlocks, behind the cash register. Undoubtedly she's a vegetarian, smug in her confidence in the goodness of plants. "Garlic Mustard is evil," I say, as I hand her my money. She barely nods when she gives me my change. "I don't want to use pesticides if I can avoid it," I say and level my gaze at her. This gets her attention; I can tell that pesticides would hurt her feelings, her being a plant lover and all. Garlic Mustard is an unfortunate name for the weed—it sounds like something that would make a good sauce, a healthful plant that downtown liberals would buy at the farmer's market. In fact, it is potentially edible, has a high vitamin C content even, but tastes awful. Even in the deadest coldest winter, when there is nothing else for deer and rabbits to eat, these creatures will starve and die before they will eat the garlic mustard growing beneath the snow. People like Miss Dreadlocks need to know this, and she should also know that the average garlic mustard plant produces about 350 seeds and that a robust plant can produce thousands of seeds. Also, the plant can self-pollinate, which means that one plant can take over a whole forest. Later, after a few hours of pulling, when I am limping back home with frozen fingers and knees, lugging two buckets of weeds, I wonder why people with dreadlocks always work around food.

April 18: Our woods have sprung from black muck, part of what was once the largest celery field on the planet. My husband and I own the nine acres of woods stretching behind the houses here, and everybody thinks of the land as public property. While I am pulling garlic mustard in the cool shade today, from a little rise I call the White Trillium Mound, I meet a pair of heavily bearded men in coveralls looking for morel mushrooms— the black morels, they say meaningfully, as though they and the mushrooms are aligned with a mysterious cult. Later I meet a gang of trailer park kids chewing gum and knocking bracket fungus off a stump, and when I tell them to stop throwing their candy wrappers in my woods, they tell me to go to hell. Like most folks in my Kalamazoo River Valley neighborhood, they go about their business, unaware that I am defending them from hostile weeds. Even my husband goes about his business, aware but largely unmoved; he is my ally in this war, the Britain to my America, but he cannot be relied upon to provide overwhelming force. He has his own wars, he says. He reminds me today that he is trying to keep cowbirds from laying eggs in warbler nests.

April 19: To defeat an enemy you must know as much about him as possible, and I have spent much time learning about this Eurasian weed that first appeared in America in the middle of the nineteenth century. Most recently I have read about a study revealing that butterfly eggs laid upon garlic mustard leaves do not even hatch! And by experience, I have learned that when garlic mustard moves into an area, it refuses to coexist with the other plants; its only goal is to wipe out the natives, including jack-in-the-pulpit, which provides nourishment to deer and rabbits. Listen when I tell you that all our beautiful woodland plants are under threat: trillium, toothwort, trout lilies, wild ginger, all in danger. When I enter my woods this afternoon, I shout to the flowers, "I will save you, trillium, trout lilies, wild ginger." I kneel on the ground to address a particular jack-in-the-pulpit flower. I lift the tip of its green spathe pulpit, to directly address the spadix: "I will save you Jack!"

April 20: I've gotten my bike tuned up at Village Cyclery for the first time in years—it's gliding smoothly now, without any more grinding in the crank set—and I get out of the house this afternoon to ride in the farmlands, an activity that has always given me great pleasure. The fields are newly turned, revealing dark, rich soil, and birds glide over in search of bugs and worms. The horses in the field overlooking Kilowatt Lake are munching new grass, and two quarter-horse foals are suckling on their mothers. In the patches of woods between houses and fields, however, there is a most unwelcome arrival. Upon scrutinizing the roadside ditches, I see a preponderance of garlic mustard here as well, a hundred times more than was here last year. When I return home, I sit down and write a letter to the county road commission and tell them they should mow the sides of all the county's roads just before the garlic mustard goes to seed. Then I venture east of our house and pull a five-gallon bucket of the evil weeds from around the base of the big oak where my husband has attached the owl box. A squirrel comes out of the box and screams at me. Is he grateful for the corn we've fed him all winter? Is he

grateful that we have thus far preserved the woods for him, kept him safe from garlic mustard so that edible plants will grow? If so, he isn't showing it.

April 21: Along the main north-south deer path, there's a thick trail of garlic mustard that needs my attention today. That's because after the plants produce their hundreds or thousands of seeds in the month of May, these seeds are carried by white-tailed deer or by hiker, biker, car tire, woodchuck, or even the wind into some new soil. There the seeds grow or else lie waiting for the right conditions: a bit of disruption in the soil caused by a boot heel or a white tailed deer hoof, a mole tunneling below the surface or a tree falling above. In the first year, the small innocent-looking plants, always referred to in the literature as "rosettes," grow close to the ground, and then in their second year, they send up stalks two, three, even four feet high. The plant is very clever to use our animal friends against us. When I deliver Mrs. Heartstone the baked goods, I'll be sure to mention that she can expect to see deer around here.

April 22: I visit my brother George today to borrow some sawhorses. The garlic mustard is beginning to flower, which means I have only ten days before the plant goes to seed. Not much longer will I be able to toss the foul stalks on my compost heap as I have been doing. Once it goes to seed, I will have to burn everything I pull. That is why I need the sawhorses, along with some expanded metal mesh: to make a drying rack. Before garlic mustard, I did not understand the obsession certain Christians have with the devil, but now that I see how omnipresent garlic mustard can be, I get what they're talking about, how they see evidence of Satan's work everywhere. I see evidence of garlic mustard at every turn. From several hundred yards, I can identify a garlic mustard plant. It is growing at the edge of my brother's mowed lawn, and I point it out to him just as a religious fanatic might point out the wages of sin involved in his Friday night poker parties. I battle for the integrity of American woodlands just as holy rollers battle for human souls.

April 23: I call my mother across town and ask, "How is your garlic mustard situation?" My mother was the first to point out garlic mustard to me several years ago, when it began taking over her woods. She says she's started throwing the stalks in the driveway and running over them with her truck—she's doing this because the ones she's been throwing on her compost pile look too perky days after they have been yanked from the ground. After we hang up, I trek out to my compost pile and study the situation critically. I pick up the perkiest looking stalks and bash their flower ends and roots against nearby trees to assure they don't think they can continue growing and forming seed pods. Dirt sprays through the air, and some of it bounces off the bark and stings my face and gets in my eyes. Then I wrench and tear the stems in two.

Occasionally in my life I have tried to hate people—the girl who stole my eighth grade boyfriend Butch, or more recently the girl who wrecked my truck—but I cannot hate a person the way I hate garlic mustard. Finding your true enemy is something like finding your true love; you know in your soul when you've found either. As you are bound to that which you love, you are bound to that which you passionately hate. When there are no perky weeds remaining on my compost pile, I rub my eyes and say, "Take that, garlic mustard! Every one of you must die!" I am wiping my face on my dirty sleeve as I look up to see that my neighbor, Mrs. Heartstone, has been watching me from her deck. Her mouth is open in a little "o". My eyes are stinging and I am grimacing but I try to smile at her in a friendly way and I wave my handful of spent stalks in her direction. Her eyebrows furrow.

I look down at myself, in my usual woods garb, ancient and unwashed Carhartt coveralls, about the same as the ones the bearded morel hunters were wearing. I hope that she has seen me earlier in my teaching togs, which are always clean and sporty. I need to take some time to explain to her about garlic mustard. Later, when she and I are close friends, we will probably laugh about this initial awkwardness between us.

April 24: Peeking ahead to next month in my Borgess Hospital Michigan Wildflower calendar, I discover an eight-by-ten glossy of May's feature, to my horror, *Alliaria Petiolata*. The photo focuses sharply on a cluster of dozens of tiny four-petaled white flowers; the jagged triangular leaves are presented in soft focus. This would be the equivalent of a Great Lakes fish calendar featuring a zebra mussel. Or a Cute Kids calendar featuring Jeffrey Dahmer. I tear the calendar off the wall and toss it into the kitchen garbage can, but I still see it when I'm standing at the sink. After some consideration, I pull it out of the can and march out the back door and toss it into the burn barrel. Then I open the garage and find my husband's propane torch, and I blast the calendar where it lies. "Arg!" I say aloud. "Take that, horrid weed." It takes a surprisingly

long time to burn the thick glossy pages, and I continue to curse and taunt the blackened picture as it flakes and disintegrates in the barrel. I detect movement out of the corner of my eye as Mrs. Heartstone, who has apparently been sitting on her deck, takes her toddler into the house.

April 25: Killing any given individual plant is no problem, but there are so many plants that nobody could pull them all. In past years, I've done what the nature center suggested, chopping down clumps of newly flowering garlic mustard with a weed whip, leaving swaths of plant stumps. However, contrary to the nature center's promises, the plants simply sent up new stalks, which then flowered and seeded. That is why today, now that the temperature has reached almost seventy degrees, I have begun to employ my weapon of mass destruction, the chemical weapon Round-up, active ingredient *Glyphosate*. This expensive product is the only poison permissible in delicate woodlands, because it breaks down when it hits the soil or water. Any sort of chemical warfare is risky, however, because garlic mustard often hides among other plants. The collateral damage—dead buttercups, dead trout lilies, dead spring beauties—can be heartbreaking.

April 26: Early afternoon, while the candy-wrapper-tossing kids are still in school, I venture into the vacant land owned by the trailer park. Dogs bark at me from the ends of chains, though as far as I know they aren't supposed to have dogs in the trailer park, especially not dogs with long pointy teeth and frothing mouths. I keep low when cars drive by. I spray a thousand plants with Round-up, picking my way through the broken concrete and old tires. There isn't much that's natural to preserve in the trailer park's acre of land, but if the garlic mustard seeds there, it will spread wholesale to my woods.

April 29: My hands are spotted with poison ivy today, but I am not at war with poison ivy. I lather my hands with cortisone cream and take liberal doses of Benadryl so that I can continue pulling. I used to spend a few afternoons a year killing poison ivy, but nowadays I see that poison ivy is a native plant that supplies nutrition in the form of leaves and berries to birds and other creatures. It is poisonous only to humans. Most importantly, poison ivy grows exactly where garlic mustard wants to grow and seems to create a small garlic mustard-free area around itself. The enemy of my enemy is my friend. Perhaps the poison ivy sends out a toxin to kill garlic mustard the way garlic mustard sends out a subterranean toxin to kill toothwort (or so I have heard). The poison ivy also might serve as a warning for the local trailer park hooligans.

April 30: As I am spraying poison today, I notice Mrs. Heartstone is out in her front yard with her toddler, who is walking clumsily, on her own, toward the mailbox. Either Mrs. Heartstone has a beer belly or she is pregnant with a second child. I wave, and Mrs. Heartstone runs forward to grasp the toddler's hand before rigidly waving back. I hold up my three-gallon poison sprayer to show her that I cannot come and chat with her just now. My husband and I have not been planning to have children, but this evening I suggest to him that I might create from my body a human crusade against garlic mustard. Just as a Christian woman might envision the Lord's army she could build with her womb, I suspect I still have the ability to create a dozen babbling tow-headed soldiers, who would learn to yank the weed even as they learned to talk. Their skills at identifying the plant and removing the entire root would be unparalleled. I would not send them to public schools, but would keep them home, drilling them daily on the importance of preserving native flora. My husband changes the channel with the remote control and sighs. I sense he wishes I would embark upon a new subject.

May 1: I am exhausted. Not only because I have pulled for two hours, but because the truth is staring me in the face. The slender green spikes rising an inch or two around the clusters of white flowers are hardening into seedpods. It is no longer sufficient to toss the plants on the compost pile, for the seedpods continue to develop several days after being pulled. Round Up is useless at this stage, for it does not kill the black oblong seeds nestled in rows inside the pods. Nobody would blame me if I relaxed now and said I'd done my best, if I sat on my screen porch, put my feet up, and enjoyed the daffodils and crab apple blossoms, the scent of my spice bush. But if I close my eyes to the horrors now, then the next generation will never know the beauty and fertility of this low-lying wood full of May apples and wild geranium. Instead, I will prepare for the burning.

May 2: Today I construct my drying rack and begin stacking the plants. Though I must wait for them to dry, already I yearn for the stench of the burning flesh of garlic mustard. This promise of fiery fulfillment inspires me to bring home five

wheelbarrow loads full of the weed, thus completely filling my drying rack. When I close my eyes to rest, I can see on the insides of my eyelids the leaves of the garlic mustard curling as they succumb to the flame.

May 7: Because of lack of spring rains, a burning ban has gone into effect today, the very day I was to begin burning. I pull until dark, and after dark I draw up a comprehensive map of all our nine acres plus surrounding areas. There are several garlic mustard-free zones now, and I feel mildly triumphant. Tonight when my husband sees my map, he suggests I get out more, socialize perhaps. He is surprised I still haven't gone over to talk to Mrs. Heartstone.

May 10: On my husband's advice, I get away from the woods, by traveling across town to help my mother weed her garden. She thinks that pulling garlic mustard is giving her carpal tunnel syndrome. She says that the garlic mustard is about the only weed her chickens won't eat. We dump all the other weeds in a pile in the chicken yard, calling the mixture "chicken salad." My mother reports that, in a pinch, cows sometimes eat garlic mustard, but that their milk tastes bad when they do. Of the sixty-nine bugs that eat garlic mustard in Europe, five of them will eat nothing else. Naturalists are understandably wary, however, of importing any of these bugs to America, for what if a bug gets to America and decides it prefers trillium or wild ginger?

May 13: Today I try to explain to the clerk at the Beer Store what garlic mustard looks like, and he just isn't getting it. I hang around while he waits on several other customers and I try not to stare as his nose ring, which has a little booger on it, but he merely shrugs at my description. I'm going to start carrying around photographs, copies I can give away to potential recruits. I pull up garlic mustard from a difficult area across Olmstead Road, on county land, among the thorn bushes and stinging nettles. I keep getting thorns stuck in my head and arms—next time I'll wear long sleeves and my husband's indestructible Filson hat. Though I haven't found time to bake banana bread or muffins, I print a picture of garlic mustard off the Internet, and I knock on Mrs. Heartstone's door.

"You must be wondering what I'm always doing," I say, and hand her the color photo from the inkjet printer. "I'm pulling this garlic mustard weed. If you see it, you should kill it."

"It's pretty," she says. "Is that what those mounds are?" She nods over my shoulder at my piles, one of them nearly as tall as the garage.

"I need to burn it. My drying rack is full. It's actually not pretty if you look closely."

"Did you know your head is bleeding?" she says.

I wipe my forehead with my hand and look at it, and indeed there is blood on my hand. "Darned thorns," I say, wiping my hand on my dirty coverall. I wish I'd looked in the mirror before coming over. Mrs. Heartstone is dressed neatly in a breezy white blouse, draped loosely over her front. She must have just gotten home from work. Yes, she is definitely pregnant, I think. She wears shiny make-up and her eyebrows are thin and expressive.

"Your head is bleeding in a couple different places," she says. Mrs. Heartstone has small hands, hands that would be good for pulling, I think, though her neat fingernails would suffer. I wonder if her toddler daughter is old enough to start pulling.

"How's your daughter?" I say, leaning to look around Mrs. Heartstone. "What's her name?"

"She's napping now. Nice to meet you, but I've got to go." Surely Mrs. Heartstone doesn't mean to be rude but she shuts the door in my face. I chide myself for forgetting to say, "Welcome to the neighborhood."

After I get back to my drying rack, I decide that it's just as well I didn't ask her and her daughter to pull weeds with me. I'd feel terrible if the little girl got poison ivy.

May 22: Time is running out. The flowers are gone and the seedpods are rigid, which means they will start bursting at any moment. My drying rack is full, bending beneath the weight of the plants. Nearby, taking up much of our lawn, are three great heaps, big green igloos of garlic mustard. My husband tells me the grass is dying beneath the mounds. My own concern is that the seedpods might burst right there, and the dry wind might disperse the seeds, making folly of all my hard work. Slugs are crawling over the weeds—apparently slugs are not disgusted by garlic mustard. I hate the thought of burning the slugs, not only because of the cruelty of burning them alive, but because their watery bodies might hinder the fire.

May 27: Deep in our northern-most woods, the part that sticks out like a tongue into somebody else's property, I find the infestation so severe I hardly know where to start. I need a military strategist to help me figure out whether it is better to pick off the stragglers, the spies, the individuals lurking away from the great massive center of the infestation, or whether it is better to drop a big bomb right into the main company and worry about the outliers later.

May 29: I call the nature center today to ask what I should do if the township won't allow me to burn the weeds. (In Michigan it is illegal to put yard waste such as weeds into the regular garbage.) No, the gal says, I cannot bring the dry weeds to the nature center in my truck. She suggests I bag them, store them, and burn them later in the summer. I don't think I can bear the thought of living with the garlic mustard for that long, bagged or otherwise.

May 30: I must burn! Somehow I must burn!

June 2: Today I start a fire in the driveway at four p.m., and after about twenty minutes when it's roaring, I call the fire department and say in a voice sweeter and sillier than my normal voice, "Oops, this is Mrs. Campbell, and, I just didn't realize there was a burning ban until my neighbor told me. I was just out burning some weeds." The fire official says, "Well, ma'am, you need to put that fire out immediately," and he takes my address. As I talk to the fellow, I watch through the window the great blaze of dry weeds fed by wads of newspaper and generous application of kindling. "Can I just let it burn down? I promise I'll watch it closely, sir. I'll keep the hose handy." He says, okay, fine, and so I burn, and the fire is glorious, a pyre to the gods that protect native plants. The crackle! The sizzle! I toss more weeds on the blaze. The smoke billows from the pile in great gray steaming sheets like the duller versions of aurora borealis, carrying aloft the rotten garlicky-feet scent. Birds scream in their nests, and I shout my apologies to them. ("Sorry downy woodpeckers! Sorry robins! Sorry flickers!") I hope I am not smoking out a nest of warbler babies that my husband has carefully protected from cowbirds. When the wind changes direction and carries the smoke next door, Mrs. Heartstone coughs—I didn't even noticed her on the deck or I would have warned her—and she ushers her choking toddler back into the house. She closes the sliding glass door with more force than seems necessary. The toddler puts her hands and nose against the glass and continues to stare out. Whether or not Mrs. Heartstone is calling the police, they will probably be here, and probably sooner rather than later, but until then I will burn as I've never burned before. My passion has temporarily made me a fanatic—of that I am aware—but if the alternative is to not care, then I will take fanaticism. There are others like me, and I hope that as I burn, those others are doing likewise, throughout the county, throughout the middle west; I hope our foul garlicky smoke is mingling high above the land, creating a protective fog, so that regular folks—mothers and toddlers, brothers and mushroom pickers, hooligans and husbands—can relax and enjoy this season of beauty and rebirth. That is the reward for fighters in any war, the knowledge that their sacrifices allow others to live in peace.

José Antonio Rodríguez

Fuschia, Issue 7

A curtain
brown with paisley drops of fuchsia
hangs between the one room
and the kitchen.

I lean close,
lay my cracked lips
against the drops hoping to grow
long limbs from this cotton constellation.

My older sister lays her bridesmaid dress
(on the bed) a red gown of soft
fabric that I hold tight like the roof
holds the walls of this dead house.

The fabric tears because it is generous
and my sister yells words that taste
like raw potatoes
that I'm supposed to swallow.
To not do so would be cruel.
So this too is beauty.

I imagine the curtain,
how it must be tired
of hanging from a rope
nailed to the corners,
tired of pretending to be a door
because it must,
how it can't let itself be carried away,
the fibers teased by the dusty breeze
that lengthens my afternoons.

All night I smell the fuchsia
and I hem the door frame
look away,
expand so as not to touch the cotton
in the middle of a house without floor
or ceiling.

Not even the flies respect its borders
though the occasional butterfly does believe
the paisleys are flower petals.

My mother calls me to the table to eat
the twice refried beans that sit
on one end of the plate,
opposite the hole of enamel rusted away
shaped like a paisley drop
that is not fuchsia, not red.

Every piece of tortilla must detach a morsel,
sliding away the part from the sum,
feeding without waste,
such dedication to the business of living.

I fling the plate outside
where the beans drop away like mud off shoes.
The plate falls to the ground,
wobbles like an old tire.

A big spoon lands hard over my head
and I hear the enamel break,
though I don't bother turning to see who it is,
but run out and throw myself on the ground.

The sunlight crossing over my eyelids
makes everything fuchsia,
or a red close enough to beautiful.

Jeffrey Alfier

The Woman at Redondo Pier, Issue 8

Ancient but timeless, a woman suspected
mad holds audience with our sane glares.

Around her waist, above a green skirt, she's
tied bright sweaters—an archive of colors.

Before they can be asked, boardwalk vendors
hand her free cupfuls of hot or cold liquids.

She totters along the pier, pausing at boat slips—
this woman miswandered from Joyce's Dublin.

Her neck a crooked arch, she rolls a cigarette,
head oddly canted as if peering down a staircase.

As gulls glide through each other's shadows,
she wears that stiff smile only the manic know.

The overcast sky feints a promise of sunlight.
She speaks to no one visible, and we all listen.

Evan Morgan Williams

Leaf on the Water, Issue 2

My brother was ten years older than me, and my memory is that he was strong as a bear. After wrestling the river all day, he would walk up the sandy beach, drop his shovels, and catch me leaping from the porch into his wet arms. He smelled like gold, as everything did around here—the clouds of mist that sat on the water like tired old dogs, the yellow smoke from the maples we burned for heat, the sparkling dust I was always combing from my hair. Even after the accident, when I could no longer leap to meet my brother, and the house became a box with no way out, my brother would climb the stairs to the kitchen, wrap his arms around me like a blanket, lift my weight from my wheelchair, and rock me—and still he smelled like gold. During the wildfires that blackened the mountain forever, my brother scooped me from my bed, carried me out of the house and into the smoke, and he stood in the river up to his waist while I dangled from his arms. Our dad made it out of the house, our mother did not. I remember tipping back my head and gazing at my brother's face, his eyes absorbed in mine. My hair trailed in the muddy water. My brother was the strongest boy I knew, and I admired this above all else, and I curled into his chest, his muscles like thick currents of dark water. That's what I want to say: riding in his arms was like floating on a smooth fast river that wanted to carry me away. So you see, despite my useless legs, I trusted that my life would never be hard, and that my brother would take me away from this place someday. He gave me a secret name, Leaf, and he was Water.

At night, he dressed me in my nightgown, lay me on my bed, and told me stories. He told me about the ocean, about blue burning skies and white sands and kindly waves that lifted you up and set you down again; he told me these things because I asked for them. We didn't know whether the stories were true—like the river beside our house, neither of us had been to the ocean—but like the river I wanted the ocean more than anything. After the stories, I would kiss him, and he said my kisses were sweet and soft as those tender slices of peach our mom used to can. If this tenderness and devotion were hard for him, he did not say, but I know he trusted me enough to show these things. Maybe he thought it was his fault, that warm day on the water—he was supposed to be watching me, and then I was caught in the current and carried over the falls. He trusted me because he knew I had forgiven him. He was right, too: every night, with my head against his heart and my legs arranged neatly and stiffly like a doll's, I forgave my brother again and again.

My brother told me stories, and in the gaps when we should have heard the whispering river we heard our dad in the yard, hammering the rusty machines that sorted gold from slag. A shadow limping among muscular iron, dragging a come-along and a chain over his bent shoulder. I am sure we both heard the man weeping. Was it the pain in his back? Was it the pain of being away from the river, looking for the thing he loved? He would labor out there all night and wait for the light to rise over the river again.

The river tumbled from the mountain, and through the twists and batterings of the canyon, it gave up gold. Anyone who made his living from the river was sure it was a gift. What was left on the river's bottom was a gift in the same way an elk sheds its antlers once a year and nudged them into the brush, sharp points in the leaves. I used to wheel onto the porch and watch my dad and my brother wading past their hips in the thick cold brown. Far above them, draped in clouds, the mountain slumped from the rain, crumbled, and washed away. The slow bringing down of an elephant with tiny spears. At night, my dad and my brother laid down their tired shovels in the same pile, with this critical difference: my dad stayed outside with the rusted machinery, assembling his failures around him, while my brother found enough strength to lift and carry me, floating through the house like a bird.

By the time I was fourteen, I was able to stand on my own and lean my hip against the table as I cut deer meat and bread for the day's lunches. I could see my reflection in the steel cabinet doors. My long hair. My mom's face. And because I had always known trust, I trusted my dad when, one morning, I saw him appear beside my reflection, felt him floating behind me as I sliced the meat and slid the pieces onto a cold plate. His thigh against my hip. He carried me to his bed, and he was weeping, and he asked me to sing to him. My brother was asleep. The deer meat lay on the counter all morning.

My brother found me crying in the closet where I had dragged myself. He could see the muddy fingerprints on my

body, and he knew, and he went into my dad's room and cracked him over the head with a shovel. It took three days for my dad to awaken, and when he did he was hungry. I was making a good soup in the kitchen, and there was a bowl of apples on the counter, but he walked right by. Stood in the doorway with a gun in his arms and a bloody towel around his head. The doorway let the sound of the river into the house like a lost dog, and I hoped I wouldn't hear the rumble of my brother's truck up the gravel drive.

I leaned against the stove and stirred up carrots from the bottom of the soup. With the rattle of the spoon, my dad's shoulders flinched. He looked towards me, but he was too absorbed in his anger to see me, as when he looked at the river and saw only the sediment below, not the pretty water shimmering and rippling and running.

I heard my brother late that night. As I lay in bed, I propped myself on my elbow and listened to him empty the pantry, paw through the tool shed, and grab jackets and boots from the mud room. I heard his footsteps as he ran down the porch stairs. His truck grinding through its gears as it crossed the low part of the river, splashing like a bear. The river slid back into its banks, grumbling to sleep, and I lay down.

I didn't see my brother for months, but I knew he was on the river, and I could tell when he had come through the house at night. I always left out food for him, and always it was gone. Maybe it was a bear. I don't know. He sent me letters packed with dust, and you could tell by the heft of the letters he was on a good part of the river. I pictured him slogging through the water, the same water the trucks splashed though, teetering with logs, on their way somewhere else. Pictures of racy women painted on their sides. The brown water pushed on his body like a dozen strong hands. The brown water stuck to his clothes.

He was missing all the good things happening in my life. I was doing well in school. A little yellow bus with a lift came for me. I was learning to put myself to bed, to tell my own stories, to dream on my own, although the sensations of walking or running, or just the warm bath-water on my legs—even in dreams these things were lost to me. Leaning against the porch railing, eyes closed, I called my brother's name, and I heard the sound of my voice echoing back; like the river, my voice sounded restless and ready and sure of itself, and sad. I understood this as the one great longing in my life.

He was in the high-school parking lot, standing by the special yellow bus. As I wheeled myself onto the lift, he handed me gold in an artichoke jar. It was the best stuff I had ever seen. Nuggets like raisins. I looked up, saw the outline of his arms beneath his jacket, muscles tense and tight. I wanted him to carry me. His fingertips lifted the hood of my coat. My hair: he wanted to know what I had done with my hair. I looked down. The jar of gold felt heavy in my lap.

The river ran thick and black in the rain. The mountain swam in gray clouds. Even the highest slopes, where you expected snow, it was only rain, and the topsoil dissolved like crumbs rinsed from a dinner plate. Plants clung to scrubby outcroppings because every gully was awash, thick torrents meeting in one great braid of brown water. Falling out of the water, swept along the riverbed like grit on the kitchen floor: gold.

He was in the house that night. He grabbed a clatter of tools. Hauled them to the river. My dad ran after him. I watched from the porch, expecting a fight, but instead they waded into the river together, sluicing through the mud, getting the good stuff before it washed downstream. Their shoulders brushed a dozen times. In the morning, the river was down again, and it slid silently past, dark brown, simmering with resentment. Machinery lay beached like tree stumps. He was gone. My dad bent over the machines and wept. This wasn't settled. Gold: gristly nuggets, easy to grip, hard little wads in his fist.

At my request, my dad moved my things to a room on the second floor. A window over the water. Gladly I would drag myself upstairs for this. I lay on my bed and listened at night, and I knew the sounds. The water hissed and rattled, groaned and popped, gurgled and schemed. Then I heard this: a creaking on the floorboards. My dad came in the morning. Thick red scar on his temple. He sat on my bed and asked me to brush my hair. I was not afraid anymore. I was not afraid because I knew what hunger consumed him now. I brushed my hair and released sparkling dust into the air. He gathered the gold dust that fell to the floor, fine as flour, lost in the lines and grooves of his hand.

The old man came always at sunrise, his skin hanging from his body like an old coat. He was so tired he could not clench his fingers, and on some days he had nothing to show for himself, tons of rock sifted for nothing, and he must have known his time was growing shorter than the mountain's. Twenty years for powder so fine you could rub it on your cheeks and forget about it. He would never be done, the mountain would never lie in neat rows of tailings. All he had were a few mayonnaise jars splitting apart from the weight of gold that spilled like honey. He was tired, and very hungry, but not for me anymore, and every morning I brushed my hair, and the air sparkled silently around me.

I still set out sandwiches of deer meat and white bread for my brother. Mayonnaise and black pepper, and a white paper wrapper, folded the same way so many times I could do it in the dark. The same leaden heft to the bundle of meat and bread. That's how I came to realize that my brother's life, my father's life, and mine, would never change. The big strike would never come. I settled into my disappointment, the days with my hands spreading cool mayonnaise on plain white bread, my hip leaning against the counter. I stopped looking on the other side of this. I would never see the ocean. The ocean was a sound in a box.

I had not seen my brother for five years, and during this time a drought had made the river shallow and clattering. On my crutches I picked my way to the edge of the river and cried for my abandonment. Dry leaves, their brown edges curled inwards, bobbed like little boats. I waded in. The middle of the stream measured only to my hips. He knew where to find me. I let go of my crutches and watched them drift away.

His voice sounded tired. "You can't swim. You're going to drown, and your body will wash up somewhere."

"Like it did the first time…" I leaned back, felt myself falling.

His arms around me. I remembered. They smelled like gold.

"Let me go." I didn't mean it.

He lifted me and set me on the water as gingerly as a pie crust, as though I might tear apart. I felt his hands leave my body, felt their warmth replaced by cold water against my trembling skin. I was floating on my own.

"Let me go. Walk away from me." I didn't mean a word.

"Stroke the water like this."

I turned my head to watch him, and my wet hair stuck to my mouth. I waved my arms, feeling surfaces of water under my wings, and the motion of my arms spun me farther into the flow. When I reached the current I began to go under, and then his hands were lifting my broken body from the water as they did long ago.

He stayed with me the entire evening. We sat on my bed. He brought me gold. A golden bowl. A ring. A bell. These things I gathered on my blanket, clutter, noisy as empty tin cans.

"Stay. Please stay. You don't have to hit it big. You just have to come home."

"When I have enough to send you away from here."

"No one hits it big. You just dig deeper."

"Goodbye, Leaf."

"Take me with you."

"Good-bye. He's coming."

I don't know how they passed each other in the same house that night, ponderous bear shapes, every footstep a firm thud on the floor, but they kept apart, knowing perhaps that in collision there would be heat and pain.

The last time I saw my brother, I was leaning against the windowsill above the river. Bats skimmed the water, in and out of the mist. I had taken off my clothes. My leg braces. You don't have to understand what I was about to do: I threw my leg braces out the window, and they sunk beneath the water quick as stones. Of course I would need them to get around the house, but I didn't care. I wasn't going anywhere. Why pretend that I ever would? I heard the creaking of boards. His footsteps. I did not cover my body, just let his bear arms lift me and lay me on my bed. His wet hands. This was not so easy anymore; his muscles were not what they used to be. He removed a jar of gold dust and painted it on me. It was not nakedness or shame but patience and trust, feeling his fingers daubing on my skin, golden streaks down my arms and legs. A sparkle of gold dust on my eyelids. My chest slowly rising and falling. He covered me with a sheet, and the sheet stuck to my wet skin.

As I drifted asleep, he told me stories that helped me remember running, swimming, climbing trees. I dreamed he carried me to a place where I could hear the ocean waves and feel the warm wind in my hair. He set me on the hot bright sand, and he said he could carry me no closer to the water. I would have to do that on my own. He said the sand was made from rocks that had been beaten down by life. I cried and waited for the waves to find me.

I awoke to the sound of bears thrashing in the river. It was my brother and my dad, and they were finally having it out. My dad gripped a shovel, and he swung it at my brother, but my brother ducked and lunged. The shovel caught him on top of his spine, and my brother stumbled forward, into my dad's hips, and together they fell into the muddy water. Their punches and blows sounded softer than I expected: wet fists, cold fingers, muscles worn out by life, but this meeting was the one moment either man had lived for, and now they were too tired to stop what never should have started. They rolled

over and over, deeper into the flow, until the brown water enveloped them with comment. I never saw my dad again. My brother's body floated up, gold seeping from his pockets like tea, his great bear arms wrapped around nothing.

A mist that smelled like gold gathered over the water, little clouds that bled at the edges until they blended together, seamless and silky.

Later that morning, I washed my skin in the bathtub and let the water drain away until I was shivering. In the bottom of the tub, silky sparkling swirls of gold settled beneath my legs. They weren't going anywhere.

Jan Beatty

White Girl in a Record Store, Issue 9

> *Ho-tel, Mo-tel, what ya gonna do today (say what)/*
> *Gonna get a fly girl, gonna get some spank*
> *n' drive off in a def O.J.*
>
> — Sugarhill Gang

I walk into Stedeford's on the North Side
looking for *Rapper's Delight* twenty years
late, see the *Black Power* reissue & want
Curtis Mayfield & the speech by Stokely.
The owner yells: *Hey Art, grab #8604, Black Power*
& everybody looks up:
white girl in a record store wants
diamond in the back/sunroof top—
the ten-year-old begging his mother for some
Ne-Yo & the drugged-out guy with an
arm cast who's falling into the stacks—
then heads back down to slapping
CDs in their bins.
The owner puts on James Brown: *I'm Black*
and I'm Proud—yells back at me:
we just got in that Obama song, what's
it called, Art?

A deep voice from the back: *Yes We Can—*
& I want to hide, like he thinks now
Obama's in, I've had my awakening (maybe
he's just making a sale) *Art, why don't you*
grab that one, too.
[Art, a.k.a *The Funkster*,
knows every R & B album, is president
of the George Clinton Parliament Funkadelic fan club]
& inside
not wanting to be that *white*/
that clueless—whatever cool I had is gone/
I slide toward the door/
Art yelling after me: *We got some Tupac shirts*
on sale out front—I leave with the Isley Brothers,
Fight the Power.

Jeff Oaks

Kissing the River, Issue 10

One friend reminds me kissing the dog
means kissing the river, which she knows
is full of things I wouldn't ordinarily touch.

And I suppose she's right. I don't know
anything about what's in the water.
I only see my dog come running out of it,

his black tail wagging around him like a sprinkler,
in wild circles, the pleasure he gets
shifting and shaking his skin, and it's hard not to

put my lips against his dark head,
as it's always been difficult not to put
my mouth to anything I want to steal something from.

Colleen Abel

Fukushima, Issue 10

First the earth broke. Then the water
broke over the earth.

Dozens of kilometers away,
I listened to the radio,

which broadcasted mostly
confusion. Inside the plant,

you waded through flooded halls
with a stolen flashlight, dosimeter

blinking danger.
        Oh my glow boy,

my gamma sponge, you were chosen.
To open the valves, to cool the core,
thrust, like Yoshitsune, into the land
of deadly spirits. You came home

and I learned the words,
the millisieverts your skin had soaked.

Now, you like best those things
that you can touch and feel:

the firelight, the spark, the florescent
lightbulb. Yoshitsune survived

by taming the demons. I picture
the invisible cells flickering in you,

imagine them, harmless as fireflies.

David Murphy

A Poem for the Man Committing Suicide in the Streets of Kabul, Issue 6

You have already begun the process of becoming
dust. Dirt on your robes, namelessness.

You are what people fear becoming:
Hopeless Poverty, one of its many faces.

There is no surer way to die here
than in Kabul traffic,

sitting in the middle of the road,
your back to the blind corner.

Some unlucky driver is sure to kill you,
but none of the vendors help, no mother cries,

"Get out of the street!" You are ash
already, meticulously ignored by your own people
until the screech of brakes, the mangling
of the spine, the crushing of the head and legs.

Tonight, my first night in Afghanistan, I
lay back and watched the stars,

bats winging directly above me,
between me and the heavens.

In a corner there is a couple sipping beer,
while a mangy starved cat stalks toward me.

Music comes from a distance
while outside the compound's walls cars roar.

Would it have been unkindness to lift you
from the place where blood now cakes the dirt clumps,

to lengthen your hopelessness without
understanding lamentations?

I am so sorry it is come to this
in the land where there is not enough honey

and I am not a Godly man, but I know
there is a time for everything, a season

for every activity, and a prayer for every
occasion. “Eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani”

is the one
for this.

Kim Liao

Bodies in Motion, Issue 8

> *My spirits heightened whenever I felt in my pocket the key to this apartment; with all its gloom, it still was a place of my own, the first.*
>
> — Truman Capote

New York was my first city. And like a first love, even though I've loved some great cities since then, I may never quite get over it. Whenever I visit, I do my best New Yorker imitation and hope people think I'm local: I walk fast, avoid tourist attractions, don't make eye contact, and ride the subway the way my father taught me to.

In the eyes of my childhood self, New York belonged to my father because he wore the ridges and cracks of the city sidewalks on his hands, because he felt the pounding of the subway pumping through his veins with his blood. He showed me his version of the city when I visited him on weekends. We would ride the subway to all of his old haunts—through Brooklyn, Chinatown, and Greenwich Village, often ending at John's Pizza Place on Bleecker Street, where we would share an impossibly crisp, thin-crusted gooey pie. I'd study the graffiti etched on the dark wooden booths, where several of the carved initials sported dates from before my birth, and my father would reminisce: "Back then, the pinball machines at Coney Island were completely mechanical—beautiful, intricate, wooden levers and gears," or "We would sell *chao siu bao* in a steam cart on Wall Street to the stockbrokers at lunchtime, and tell them it was a Chinese hamburger."

But it was his knowledge of the subway system that made my father a real New Yorker. He knew every stop on every line, and when the train arrived, he'd dart onto it and hold the doorway open with his shoulder, as if he were holding an elevator door. I would spring onto the train after him, chugging my little legs as fast as I could to keep up with his quick strides. If there weren't seats available, he would show me how to keep myself steady by holding onto the vertical bar, planting my feet to anticipate the jarring quake of each start and stop. "Like a tree," he would say. "Rooted." He showed me this life, and it seemed much more exciting and alive than my quiet childhood in a small town on Long Island. I longed to be part of this mysterious world of his, to someday lay claim to a city the way he claimed New York. But as I grew up, I hesitated to gamble my youthful fantasy of New York by moving there—just in case reality didn't live up to my expectations.

Whenever I arrive in a new place, whether it's a city, town, or campground, the first thing I need is a map. I always want to know where I am, where I'm going, and how to get there. But I've realized that maps also expose a certain character of a place. For me, the pattern of streets—intersecting, twisting, and meandering—describes the texture of a city in a different way than photographs of individual locales. Maps of subway and bus systems evoke a city's rhythm: the direction, speed, and volume of several hearts all beating together in an orbit that gives the city a life of its own, greater than any single person, street corner, or landmark.

After demystifying the vertically-oriented edifice of Manhattan's public transportation system, I studied abroad in Paris, where the Métro offers a surprisingly user-friendly spider web of train lines. The Métro map tea towel hanging in my bathroom still conjures up favorite recollections of the Métro routes I took and where they led me: the night my friend Kee and I told terrible jokes all the way back up the Champs-Elysées line from Bastille; the bustling little bakery at the St. Sulpice stop that made the best chocolate almond croissants in the city; and the time I went home from a club near Pigalle with a French student named Yann, only to discover the next day that we were the two unlikeliest, most inept people to ever have a one-night stand with anyone, let alone each other.

Since the whole point of the Métro system is to go from anywhere in Paris to anywhere else, with minimal travel time and transfers, the fourteen lines intersect with haphazard elegance, in a manner that few larger cities could even dream of attempting. But in Paris, such a system is ideal. After my three months there, I adored the quirks of each individual Métro line, and savored my status as an expert in urban navigation.

So when I decided to move to Boston, I expected the T to be a cinch. Only four lines, going either inbound or outbound, labeled by colors, not numbers—*a five-year old could negotiate this,* I thought. But as I searched for apartments and roommates from afar, and tried to decipher the differences between neighborhoods like the South End, East Boston, Cambridge, Jamaica Plain and Brighton, I began to realize that the Boston T Map is oddly secretive, betraying little of its personality to the casual observer. Stations are rendered in uniform, evenly spaced dots, with minimal angles of movement (in Paris, the Métro map delineates even the slightest change in direction, so one could sketch a street map of the city underneath it).

Finally understanding the profundity of the statement "not drawn to scale," I realized that I couldn't read Boston through its T map—I only knew that my new apartment in Brookline, near Washington Square, was at least twelve dots away from my daily commute downtown. I moved to Boston with little idea of what to expect from its public transportation. Like going on a blind date, with a one-year lease attached.

During that first year, I judged Boston locales by their relative proximity to my T line and avoided any destination that might involve too circuitous a route. (Or, God forbid, having to take a bus!) I even began to associate the personalities of my new friends with their T lines. *(She's just such a B-liner. He even looks like a Back Bay-er. Yup, she's a JP girl alright.)* As for me, the Green Line "C" branch, which ran as an above-ground trolley outside of Boston proper, was my lifeline to the city and its surrounding neighborhoods. Ebbing and flowing, it was the tide that passed by my living room window with its clanging bell and squeaking wheels.

The groan of the C Line going uphill from Washington Square to my stop at Tappan Street became as familiar as the creaks in the my hallway floor, or the protesting rattle of steam trapped in the radiators. My metallic night watchmen, the trains kept time on Beacon Street, bright green headlights providing a comforting glow as they illuminated shadowy corners. Living across the street from the T reassured me of the city's rhythm, knowing I could depart from my neighborhood to explore of the edges of my urban landscape and safely return.

In that first year in Boston, the T dictated many social arrangements—I made friends who took the same T line home from work or class, and unwittingly found myself in my first transportation-mediated relationship. His name was Kurt, a friend of a friend, who was doing a PhD in Chemistry at MIT. Since he lived all the way across the river in Cambridge, one could say the momentum of the T (or lack thereof) brought us together. Ostensibly because of its relatively early stoppage time (between midnight and 1 am), he crashed at my place twice before we made things official. The first time was the first night I met him, after staying out late at the bar across the street from my apartment. He slept on the couch while our mutual friend Darrell curled up on a spare mattress on the floor. The second time Kurt stayed after hours was after a Halloween party I had thrown with my roommates.

The morning after the party, we slipped out of my room and shuffled down the hallway to avoid waking anyone. We ate scrambled eggs wrapped in tortillas sitting in the living room. Mid-morning sun was shining down on the detritus of last night's revelry: crushed potato chips, beer bottle caps, and one set of anonymous rubber vampire-teeth, abandoned on the coffee table. After breakfast, Kurt helped me clean up, ignoring my weak protestations, and I felt the force of his hold on me increase. Before he left, I handed him the extra toothbrush I'd lent him the night before. It was purple. He had wrapped it in aluminum foil so as not to drip on my bedside table.

"What should I do with this?" He stood in the kitchen doorway, holding up the metallic package like a radio antennae.

"What do you want to do with it?" I countered, slouching into the doorframe, facing him.

"Should I leave it here?" he asked.

"Well, do you want to come back?" I was teasing, kind of.

"Yes."

"So leave it here." A bell on the C Line clanged, and the thin foil package found its place on my bathroom shelf.

Sometimes I worry that my fixation on the ephemeral motion of public transportation betrays my lack of a connection to any physical home. I think of Newton's first law, that bodies in motion stay in motion unless acted on by an external force, and I see the way that my father has always approached his city in motion. He's spent his life embodying the movement of New York's streets, as opposed to staying in one small corner of one borough. I think of how it took him 50 years

to settle down into one apartment and one job and one way of life. I sometimes still see that glint in his eyes, remembering his younger years of working different jobs, traveling on a whim—he told me once that he hitchhiked across the country with his friend and a rainstorm followed them the whole time, until it turned to snow in Yosemite—and I wonder if he sometimes thinks that maybe he has been settled for long enough and is ready to move on again. Or if perhaps, the gene for restlessness really does mellow with age into an appreciation of comfort and security.

I grew up in a beautiful tiny village and all I could dream of was the city. At the time, I saw in my town the worst kinds of stasis: claustrophobia, the watchful eyes of my mother and incestuous gossip of its residents. I now recall my hometown with a wave of nostalgia, but new places are what I long for: places where I can lose myself, oceans and large expanses of land greater than I could ever span with my limbs or eyes. Cities are my favorite natural expanse—a jungle of people, a forest of culture, an ocean of opportunity. And for me, subways most approximate the kind of motion that Newton described. Sometimes when I ride the subways of New York, I think about our train's swift movement through the dark tunnels, and wonder: could a train really continue on forever in a vacuum, unhampered by such inconveniences as friction, inertia, or dirt on the track? Such hypothetical motion seems perfect.

Occasionally, I can almost imagine what that kind of perpetual motion would feel like, when I stand on a Local train and hear the rumble of an Express gaining on us. The two trains thunder through the tunnel, until they meet and continue side by side, and for a second, I catch sight of the passengers in the other car through the brightly lit oval windows. Then the Express roars by; our train seems to catapult backwards and for a moment, I feel myself suspended between time and space, floating.

Sometimes I wonder what forces of physics propelled me out of my hometown, across the country to go to college in California, across the ocean to Paris and back, to live in Boston, as I continue my search to find a city that is my own. Like my father, I see wanderlust embedded in my love of public transportation: the promise of potential, the wind on my face when a train pulls into the station.

If knowing a city is mastering the public transportation system, then the Boston T system is slowly etching itself into my mind: every groove of the floor, the hard softness of the seats, the lattice of horizontal and vertical bars to hold onto. Kurt used to love trying to balance himself with no hands, as if he were surfing the waves of the tracks, metal and rubber of the floor. He would look at me with a child's delight as if to say, "Look Mom, no hands!" and I would smile and roll my eyes.

"You don't think the T is cool?" he'd say.

"I take it twice every day, at least," I'd reply.

Sometimes when the green line rattles loudly between Hynes Convention Center and Kenmore, I think of taking the T home with Kurt one night after dinner in the North End, when these drunk guys were running back and forth in the car, up and back, like pinballs at the mercy of an expert player. On one of their runs, a drunk guy crashed into me, spilling my cup of hot coffee all down my left side.

When the offender didn't even notice, I spluttered, "Excuse me, sir, but do you realize you've just spilled coffee all over me?"

The offender eventually apologized, even grudgingly offering me money to dry clean my coat. But then he and his friends got off the train and I was left embarrassed, incensed, and coffee-soaked. Kurt gave me a hug, and then teased, "'Excuse me sir?' Them's fighting words."

I smiled in spite of myself, and let my arm drape over his, holding onto the vertical bar. He turned away, satisfied that the situation was resolved. But I couldn't help thinking that this never would have happened in New York. There, public transportation tends to silence its riders, respectful and reverent of its primal force, like the crashing waves and powerful undertow of the ocean. Whereas the Boston T is far more intimate and accessible—people chatter on cell phones loudly and unselfconsciously debate personal issues. Perhaps for all the ease of the Boston T system, it can't necessarily protect passengers from each other.

As we emerged from the tunnel that night, rumbling towards the St. Mary's stop and into the inky black, star-dotted night, I wondered how much of my father's restlessness I'd inherited. How much of that yearning tug was in me to keep moving, to get on another train, to take a new route. When I would stop jumping onto the next train that pulled into the station, blowing back my hair in a rush of warmth and the pungent smell of grease.

In the end, it was an external force that changed our momentum and drove Kurt and I apart. I didn't blame the T, but it illuminated the distance between us in sharp relief. It wasn't my fault but I blamed myself. It wasn't his fault but I blamed him. When our paths began to diverge, I went to see him up at MIT and we talked about everything we knew how to say and said nothing of importance. Kurt walked me back across the Mass Ave bridge, and we came to a stop outside the Hynes Convention Center station.

There was no urgency dictating our goodbye like there is when you're on a moving train and your stop looms large on the map overhead. Instead, the warm humidity of the foggy night pressed down on us, the sky hovering just above our heads. I didn't know what to do without my rushed goodbye, at least that I'd mastered.

The lights of a bus came up behind him as we stood in the doorway to the station entrance. The silence hovered between us, and a train rumbled underground, sidewalk vibrating under our feet. I had no idea which T it was, inbound, outbound, what letter. Whether I should run for it, not that I could even catch it from here. I wished I were in a moving vehicle just so I could jump off at the next stop. But there was no next stop.

Before dating Kurt, this would have been the moment that I cut ties and left—I was good at breaking things off at the first signs of difficulty. But now I hesitated; the faint hope that we could sync up our lives again kept both of us standing there, waiting for the other to make the next move.

"Well?" I said.

"Have a good night," he said. Kurt's tone was always disarmingly opaque. He never broke his composure.

I felt caught, as if suspended by the relative motion of two trains passing each other in the dark, with nothing to do but watch helplessly as the Express barreled by. It was the worst kind of weightlessness. I gave him a hug, full of indecision and optimism. This was the first time that I stayed to see how it would end.

It ended with him leaving on the T some nights later. I watched it depart, sitting on the cold marble steps of my entryway. Betrayed by my trusty night watchman. It was the only time I've ever been physically left behind at the end of a break up. I looked up at the train speeding away, red taillights soaking the wake of its path with their bloody gaze. The longing was excruciating—I just wanted to leave, to go somewhere else, anything to not be left behind. Stuck there, with myself, with nowhere to go.

I looked down at my moist hands. In them, for the first time, I saw my father's hands. His big capable palms, and the fingers that had smoothed back my hair when he tucked me in at night, days upon days just out of reach of my memory. The hands he wears New York City in; my hands resemble his but echo my own path. Crooked pinkies offer lingering reminders of childhood sports accidents; a permanent callous on my right ring finger from the way I grip a pen. Palms broad like my father's, fingers long and slim like my mother's.

But more than genetics, I saw the way we both put out our hands for balance. My father and I are alike in the way we move forward with our mix hopefulness and abandon, ready to catch ourselves. The way we walk forward, hands first, reaching out. From him, I have learned how to keep reaching for the next bar to hold onto, on the next train, how to always keep moving—and I realized then that I had never learned how to stop.

Kurt left, and I stayed. Bodies in motion continued in motion, and then were acted on by an external force. Years later, I am still in Boston, and take the vastly more efficient yet impersonal Red Line. But every morning, and every afternoon on my way home after teaching, my new T line takes me across the Charles River on the Longfellow Bridge, and I look out over the Boston skyline. It may seem quaint and horizontal as compared with New York's vertical prowess, but I find it charming in its sprawling, awkward glory. I watch the light change with the weather and seasons: the early mornings, when the glow of a foggy sunrise frames the skyline as if the whole city were floating; the late afternoon sunsets. The fiery shimmer of the Charles River. And its crystalline precision when it freezes in winter.

This fall, when idly watching the river as we crossed the bridge one afternoon, I saw a lone sailboat tracing its path across the Charles, untethered from the usual sailing class or college team practice. I watched the sole navigator aim his boat back towards the Esplanade, and raised my eyes to the Boston side of the river, taking in the expanse of red, orange, and gold leaves that framed the riverside walkway winding west. And thought to myself that if New York was my first love, all-consuming and overwhelming and intangible, then Boston is the first city I can really call mine. It has resisted my urges to flee, taking hold of me with a day-to-day, week-to-week sense of stability. Even if I live in New York someday, it will cease to be a fantasy and become a real, living, breathing place like anywhere else. Exceptional, maybe, but not ephemeral.

The momentum of public transportation may always fuel my spirit, and I may continue to dream of perfect, uninterrupted perpetual motion. But motion in a vacuum and motion in reality are two very different things.

Chad Hanson

Creatures That Don't Exist, Issue 10

His third grade teacher told him not to mention things that were impossible. Now he has trouble remembering if there is a creature called a "mud puppy." Their gills were on the outside. He thinks he saw one. In a river? At the state fair? His imagination fills the space in the record. Then he feels the old scold, like in school, so he ditches the memory. His sister lost a child in a complicated birth. He recalled that someone said the souls of dying children enter birds. Then they visit their families as nuthatches. He didn't mind telling her that story.

Craig van Rooyen

Farmer's Market, Issue 7

She rides my shoulders through
the evening: Lavender mingling
with Mo's Barbecue—floating
down the street past the bug-eyed puppeteer
and all those belly dancers.

We pick our way upstream,
she sticks above the crowd,
a sniffing periscope.
"This way to the kettle corn,"
grabbing handfuls of my hair to steer.

The weight of her:
This is how she pins me, in my suit,
keeps me rooted to the ground
through polished oxfords (thinning at the soles)
while tuber roses open, dying in the evening air.
"Daddy are *we* meat?" (The smell of ribs.)
"I suppose we are."
"But are we *organic* meat?" I don't know where to start.
We shuffle down the street to sample
berries, watch the tying of balloons.

It matter just to name these things,
(I tell myself) to list them as they are.
A caramel apple—just a caramel apple—not
the end of innocence. A red wheelbarrow
is a red wheelbarrow and nothing much depends on it.

This is a market, after all, not
a hall of mirrors or a church.
No ghosts lurk behind the produce booths.
The strawberries bleed real juice, rolling
down her chin, dripping on my neck.

The belly dancers—just costumed housewives,
not the incarnation of suburban desperation.
The balloon man, blowing colored shapes into the air,
is not atoning for the years spent
with a wife who steals his breath.

As for me, I'm Ulysses, with long-ships
pulling at the ropes. All right. All right.
Just a father, meat
steered by hair, some
kettle corn between his teeth
without a thing to sell.

Robert Peluso

Raking Leaves, Issue 10

"Hellooo!" Sun sparkling off her teeth. Late twenties. Early thirties at most. "Ina May. From just over there." A pretty chin toward the newly sold house. Sun-struck windows, immaculate lawn, young shrubs the size of puppies and that low to the ground too. Men descend on the place once a week. The grunt and skirl of mowers and blowers and trimmers and edgers.

I straighten, shift the rake to my left hand as if it will disappear there. Or become a fabulous decoration. It's not that kind of neighborhood. Ina May. Pale eyes like this November sky, lashes like willow frond. And a body as lithesome. Mine, heavy and worn from babies. Who uses two names? Celebrities, and anyone pretty enough and young enough to get away with it. High, bare branches from these old oaks aching with memory. What kind of dreams bloom in her nights?

Her hands, delicate and fine-boned even inside the gloves. Lambskin. They must be back in style. A small gold button and loop at the wrist. She didn't get them at Kohl's. She eases a button through.

And there it is. Small and pale like the movies. I scan the yard. Cool air coaxing tears. Wipe my eyes with the back of my own hand, return the handshake. Strange in a woman no matter how many times you've done it. It's what men always do. Always. The glad hand at the drug store picking up prostate meds, at the liquor store for that drug, at the gas station and car dealership or the stadium. Those drugs too. The not-so-secret bond. Her skin warm against the cold gnarl of me. I suppose I should offer my name. Joanne, I say.

"Ina May Carlton. We're up from Atlanta. Jason got transferred…" Laughter like silver dust. "My husband." Her fingertips, four angels on my forearm.

"Saw you…" She doesn't want to say it, doesn't want to say, saw you raking leaves, you crazy old bitch.

Yes, I say.

She puts the soft hand away, slips the button into place. "You probably haven't seen him much. Working a lot." Snugs it back into the chocolate-brown merino wool coat. Stitching on the lapels in contrasting thread. Probably Italian. The kind of detail Italians love. "A promotion," she says. "There's always so much to do with a new position."

A new position. A promotion! Actually no, I don't know what you're talking about, I want to say. I want to say, I no longer know about promotions or moving. At least not moving away and moving up, just moving out. The wind kicks up a small applause of dried leaves, a reward for my restraint. Then I tell her. I say, I don't live here anymore. I say, my husband does.

"Ohhhh." The day sits upright. "I heard…" She still can't say it. She says it. "Why are you raking?" Someone with a body like mine. With a life like mine. What is she thinking? I shift the rake in front of me, cap it with two crossed hands, angle it toward her. The tartness of leaves on my clothes, my hair.

The children, I say. Her blemishless skin. The sweetness of her perfume. I want to tell her, *my* "Jason" is upstairs watching television or jerking off and can't be bothered getting his skinny ass out here to pick up even one leaf or a twig. Not even if someone's life depended on it. And that, I want to shout into the tidy gleam of her, is why I was raking leaves. Because as you now know, *I don't even live here!*

I say, I had wanted it to look nice when the kids came for the holidays. Do you have children?

Colin Rafferty

The Yellow Flowers, Issue 10

/10:00/Warsaw Central Station

Here's how it happened: the locomotive picked up twenty cars and took
them to the camp. That took maybe an hour.

Underground. Double checking my train's departure time on the encased poster, I pass a note to the ticket agent. I do not speak Polish, nothing beyond a weak *do you speak English?* and so all my communication in this country is written out, copied carefully from my phrasebook.

She looks at my note, crosses out the part where I have written *miejscówka*; evidently, there are no reservations on the train to Bialystok. She writes a number on the sheet and pushes it back under, and I, acting out the agreed-upon choreography of all retail transactions, hand her thirty zloty, a little under ten dollars.

Walking away, I roll my change in my hand, a five-zloty coin; enough for breakfast. My train ticket, *Warszawa Centralna-Malkinia*, rests in my bag, next to my camera, next to my guidebook, next to my notebook. My feet are covered in blisters from the last three days of walking around Warsaw; one, on my left heel, looks like a fat slug has taken up residence. It will be nice to sit down for a while.

/10:30/Warsaw→Malkinia

I was together with them. I know in my heart that something is not good,
because if they take children, if they take old people, they send them away,
that means it is not good. What they said is they take them away to
a place where they will be working. But on the other hand, an old woman,
a little child of four weeks or five years, what is work? It was a foolish
thing, but still, we had no choice—we believed in them.

If there are other people in my compartment, I don't see them. Men stand at the windows of the train's passageway and blow smoke into the Polish countryside. Farms rush past us, fields starting to grow to noticeable heights at the very end of May. The sun shines brilliantly upon them.

I thumb through my guidebook again, though I have read the slim paragraph on Treblinka too many times already, enough to have memorized its advice. *Not many tourists visit Treblinka*, I repeat to myself, *which only adds to the poignancy of the site.*

I'm here for a few weeks, touring around Poland. I'm a Catholic—I even went to Mass yesterday at the Church of the Holy Cross in Warsaw, where Chopin's heart is buried (another check marked off in the guidebook). But I am drawn to Treblinka for a number of reasons: guilt, curiosity, the desire to see how the biggest murder of all time is memorialized. Back in college, I saw Claude Lanzmann's massive documentary *Shoah*, and I still remember his camera moving through the Polish forest to come upon the Treblinka site. And so I am on a train.

The guidebook suggests what sounds to me like a complicated route, involving a train, a bus, and a walk along a Polish highway. I focus instead on the entry's last line: *alternatively, go to Malkinia and negotiate a taxi.*

Yes. Of course. I turn to the appropriate page in my phrasebook and write, on another sheet of paper, "I would like to go to the Treblinka camp. How much will it cost?"

/11:00/Warsaw→Malkinia

There was a sign, a small sign, on the station of Treblinka. I don't know if we were at the station or if we didn't go up to the station. On the line over there where we stayed there was a sign, a very small sign, which said "Treblinka." That was the first time in my life I heard that name "Treblinka." Because nobody knew.

The train shakes on the tracks. I sit in the sun, starting to sweat. *What is Treblinka?*, I wonder. *What was Treblinka?*

An easy recitation of facts: eight hundred thousand dead, brought by trains from as far away as France and Greece, as close as the next town over. In 1942, the Warsaw Ghetto was liquidated, its three hundred thousand inhabitants sent to die in the gas chambers of Treblinka, rooms hooked up to tank engines that pumped in the carbon monoxide. Its momentary prisoners' revolt, combined with the opening of more efficient gas chambers at Auschwitz-Birkenau to the south, led to the closing of Treblinka in 1943, to its erasure from the field, the demolition of all the bunkers and buildings, the incineration of every corpse.

Beyond that, there aren't many facts about Treblinka. Although it was the second most lethal camp, it lacks all the evidence Auschwitz provides. No remaining crematoria, no barracks, no ash ponds to sift through. No dozens of informative signs dotting its landscape, telling visitors what happened, what the function of this building was, where to go next.

Auschwitz remains the best-known camp because it is the best known, because of the thousands of survivors who walked out alive, because of the evidence abandoned by the Germans in the face of the advancing Red Army. Those piles of shoes and eyeglasses, those piles of hair.

Eight hundred thousand died, and at the later trials of the officers, only fifty-four survivors of Treblinka were left to testify. Add the Germans who worked there and the Poles who lived nearby, and perhaps only one hundred people existed who could have still told us about this place where, seventy years ago, the flames reached into the sky.

Auschwitz is history, proof; Treblinka is memory, projections at best.

/11:30/Malkinia Station

Then, on the second day, I saw a sign for Malkinia. We went on a little farther. Then, very slowly, the train turned off of the main track and rolled at a walking pace through a wood. While he looked out—we'd been able to open a window— the old man in our compartment saw a boy... cows were grazing...and he asked the boy in signs, "Where are we?" And the kid made a funny gesture. This: (draws finger across his throat).

With the few other people disembarked here at Malkinia already dispersed, I'm at a loss for what to do. I'm prepared to negotiate a taxi, but there are none to be seen. I walk around, enter the little snack shop by the station, look around, walk back out. I walk to the road, look down both ways. I don't even know which way I should walk.

I sit on the bench at the empty taxi stand, and as I retie my shoes, trying to relieve the pressure on my blisters, a taxi pulls up. I take the slip of paper out of my pocket, read it over, think maybe I could give the Polish a try. Before I can do so, the driver, a man in his sixties, looks at me and says simply, "Treblinka?"

"Yes," I say, standing up and shrugging on my backpack; then, remembering my little Polish, I add, "Tak."

We do not negotiate. I want too badly to see the site, have already come an hour and a half and one hundred kilometers from Warsaw to see it. I get in the car.

/11:40/Treblinka village

At that time we started working in that place they called Treblinka. Still I couldn't believe what had happened over there on the other side of the gate, where the people went in, everything disappeared, and everything got quiet.

Treblinka is a town. Treblinka was a death camp. Treblinka is a monument.

The taxi speeds along roads, around bicyclists and other cars, past fields. I never would have been able to negotiate the necessary turns. We speed through Treblinka, the village from which the camp took its name, and over the Bug River.

The taxi driver turns to me, and asks, "America? New York?"

"America, tak," I say. "New York, nie—Alabama." I add a little rise to my voice at the end, questioning if he's heard of the state. If he has, I can't tell. We continue the drive and soon reach the site's parking lot. After some odd gesturing and a bit more scribbling on scraps of paper, we agree that he will return in two and a half hours to pick me up and return me to the station for the last train to Warsaw.

I pay him, and with a wave, he drives off. Looking around the parking lot, I note not a single car. The only other person here is manning the information kiosk. I walk up to her, buy a map of the site, and set off, into the trees that have grown back in the last seven decades.

Near here are forests and wetlands, untouched by man. Bison roam, the guidebook says. I am in the last wilderness of Europe. I am by myself.

/11:45/Treblinka II

We couldn't ask what had happened to the wife, to the kid. "What do
you mean— wife, kid? Nobody is anymore!" How could they kill, how
could they gas so many people at once? But they had a way to do it.

Treblinka is dual. The first camp, Treblinka I, served mainly as a labor camp in which Polish prisoners worked; about 10,000 of them died there. Treblinka II is the better-known site, the execution camp, location of the gas chambers and the endless fires and the false train station, complete with a fake clock whose hands were pushed to the right time just before a transport came in.

Post-war, the road to Treblinka from Warsaw took five hours to travel, through small villages and along dirt roads. People rarely visited the site; too awful to see the bones and skulls that still lay among the trees and fields planted by the perpetrators. For 14 years, the site stayed empty, mostly unvisited. Poland struggled with its own sense of martyrology, its own loss, its own six million.

In 1957, the site was set aside, preserved for its monument, and on February 28, 1960, the Warsaw Regional Council accepted a design by architect Adam Haupt and sculptor Franciszek Duszenko. It aimed to recreate the camp symbolically, using very few words and no plaques. Fitting Treblinka's status as a massive graveyard, they chose to finally give the site its tombstones.

Forty-five years later, I stand at the reconstructed gates of Treblinka, about to enter. Haupt and Duszenko have set two granite walls at an angle, leaving a gap between the two, a stylized map of the camp's trapezoidal shape carved into one of them.

I could enter here, but it seems wrong, or worse than wrong. Very few of the camp's victims arrived on foot or drove in through this gate. They came by train.

I turn around and walk back to the road that leads to Treblinka I, and follow it for a short while before encountering the designers' recreation of the railway line that once led into camp: a series of concrete ties, running parallel to each other, that lead out of the woods. Looking forward, I can see a flat concrete platform, the symbolic sorting ramp where the guards pulled out the few prisoners who would not be killed immediately and told the others to undress for disinfection. Nearby, a series of tall stones loom, perhaps fifty meters between each one, marking the outline of the camp's boundaries.

The site of an atrocity—no matter how much preparation and research one might do before going there, no matter how many survivors' testimonies one reads, no matter how many films and books one absorbs—still holds in itself a power to shock. Standing next to the first concrete tie, I realize: *I'm here. This place is real. The things that happened actually had a place where they happened.*

I'm here, and I'm alone. I'm the only living person in a massive cemetery.

I start walking towards the ramp.

/11:50/Treblinka II

Clothes, suitcases, everything stacked in a solid mass. On top of it, jumping around like demons, people were making bundles and carrying them outside. I was turned over to one of these men. His armband said "Squad Leader." He shouted, and I understood that I was also to pick up clothing, bundle it, and take it somewhere. As I worked, I asked him: "What's going on? Where are the ones who stripped?" And he replied: "Dead! All dead!"

My eyes are closed. I can feel the sun warm my skin. Whenever I have thought about visiting Treblinka or any of the camps—and I have thought of this often since I was a child—I have imagined the weather as overcast and gloomy, the gray of ashes.

Here, though, the day is wonderful. I can hear birds singing in the trees, and I know if I open my eyes, I will see a blue sky with no clouds, green trees, and the fields filled with little yellow flowers, their blooms no bigger than my thumbnail.

And if I open my eyes, I will also see the central monument of Treblinka: an eight-meter high granite obelisk with a wide cap, split from top to bottom, surrounded by seventeen thousand shards of granite set into a concrete field. Haupt and Duszenko's design, named by historian James Young "perhaps the most magnificent of Holocaust memorials," will spread before me. All I have to do is open my eyes.

I have imagined this for so long, have seen dozens of still photos of it, stared at it in Lanzmann's documentary. I already know what it looks like. But to open my eyes, to make it real, to experience the memorial that will confirm the camp's reality, is turning out to be harder than I think.

Finally, I open my eyes. And there it is.

I have to confess it's smaller than I thought.

/12:15/Treblinka II

But it still hadn't sunk in, I didn't

believe it.

Snapping photos while wandering among the shards, I try to record what I see, hoping I'll be able to link memory to image later. Some of the shards are small enough to trip over, so I have to look down as I walk about, and each time I look up, I'm overwhelmed by how many stones I can see.

In memorializing something on the scale of the Holocaust, any design team will confront the problem of scale—after a while, numbers of victims simply become numbers, abstract, meaningless; it's easy to say "six million." How, then, to illustrate the scope of such tragedy while maintaining the individuality of each victim?

Yad Vashem, the museum and memorial in Jerusalem, undertook a project not long after its conception in 1953 to record the individual names and biographies of each Jew murdered in the Holocaust, resulting in the Hall of Names, a library-monument. This makes sense; after all, Israel was the site where the Jewish people were able to re-establish their identity after the destruction of their communities in Europe, where even the cemeteries were destroyed and the tombstones scraped clean from the earth.

Treblinka is different. At Treblinka, the victims moved anonymously, stripped of their clothes, from the sorting ramp, along the curved path (called the *Himmelweg*, the Road to Heaven) to the gas chambers. The women's heads were shaved, their hair shipped out from the camp to be used in industry. They were made anonymous, and they were killed as anonymous people.

To signal the start of the gas, a guard would yell, "*Iwan, wasser!*" At the camp's peak efficiency, seventeen thousand people heard this each day, the last thing they heard before the screams and panic overtook everything. Seventeen thousand.

Now there are seventeen thousand stones set into the concrete, surrounding the obelisk at the site of the gas chambers, surrounding the black metal that symbolizes the open pit where the bodies were burned. Seventeen thousand stones, each different, but each as unknowable as the sound of the door shutting upon the gas chamber must have sounded.

Some stones have the names of cities on them, cities from which Jews arrived. The Warszawa stone is the largest, but walking around, I see the names of other cities: Czestochowa, Malkinia. Many of the stones have smaller stones and pebbles balanced on them, as is often done in Jewish cemeteries to signify a visitor has paid homage. Appropriately so: I am at one of the largest cemeteries on Earth, and each stone that juts out of the ground stands for so many dead. Even the yellow flowers that grow here are a memorial, sown by the perpetrators as a cover for the ash-choked earth. Every spring, they bloom, a quiet remembrance emerging from the ground, as fragile as the shards are permanent, as anonymous as the dead are known. As countless.

/13:15/along the Black Road

At night we were put into a barracks. It just had a sand floor. Nothing
else. Each of us simply dropped where he stood. Half asleep, I heard
some men hang themselves. We didn't react then. It was almost normal.

Other sites await at Treblinka, so I set off down the Black Road that connects the two camps, so named by the prisoners of Treblinka I because of the awful labor they once performed, quarrying gravel from a pit.

Two kilometers stretch between the camps, and soon enough, I leave behind the boundary stones to walk along a bumpy road. After a while, I encounter a small, tent-shaped structure, concrete, near the woods. My map tells me this building is a guard bunker, yet there are no signs or explanations on site.

I look through the small window of the bunker at the Black Road. This is as close as anything comes to reconstruction at Treblinka, this small window offering a single point of view of a small section of road. Haupt and Duszenko's memorial allows for visitors to project themselves upon it, to understand the seventeen thousand as graves, as markers, as stone flowers growing from concrete ground. The bunker is simply a bunker.

/13:30/Treblinka I

There was Death, had to be Death, for no one was supposed to be left to
bear witness. I already knew that, three hours after arriving at Treblinka.

The monument at Treblinka I, built around the same time as Treblinka II's, is a red stone marker with a cross rising behind it; from that central monument, rows of smaller crosses extend out in three directions.

Something happens at Treblinka I that seems almost impossible at Treblinka II; the victims are named. Not all—there aren't ten thousand crosses here, not even one thousand—but most crosses have a name, dates, sometimes even a photo on them.

Close to the monument stand the foundations of the buildings of Treblinka I—the barracks and the bunkers, the warehouses, the guards' swimming pool. They have decayed—the walls of the root cellar are propped up with wooden beams and plants grow furiously through cracks in its bricks—but they are nevertheless there.

Treblinka I is specific, offering the possibility of understanding through reconstruction. Ultimately, its monument is redundant. As at Auschwitz, there's no need for a monument here to focus memory; the site does so by itself.

Only where erasure has taken place does memorializing become necessary.

I look at my watch; time is slipping away. I need to return the way I came, to do the impossible, and leave Treblinka.

/14:00/Treblinka II

There were also cases of children who for some reason arrived alone,

or got separated from their parents. These children were led to the "infirmary" and shot there.

But first, there remains one contradiction: the Janusz Korczak stone.

Added in 1978 on the centenary of his birth, the stone commemorates the head of the orphanage of the Warsaw Ghetto, who chose to accompany his charges to Treblinka despite an opportunity to avoid deportation. He is remembered everywhere as one of the heroes/martyrs of the Holocaust, in memorials in the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw, in front of his orphanage, even in a memorial at Yad Vashem, thousands of miles distant.

His name is the only one spoken at the Treblinka II site, the only person remembered out of eight hundred thousand, the only name out of the seventeen thousand that died on that particular day.

Korczak's stone is as covered with pebbles as the Warsaw stone. Candles sprout at the base; dozens brought here and lit, beside the piles of flowers left each year on the anniversary of his deportation. He is the first individual I have thought about in the entire time I have been here, an exception to the masses of anyonymous stone shards.

I step up to the obelisk, and run my hand along the vertical crack splitting its face in two. Looking up, I can see the twisted and tortured victims emerging from the granite cap.

I have only minutes. In all likelihood, I will never return here again, and so I slowly walk backwards from the monument, towards the loading ramp and the concrete railroad ties. Soon, I will have to go back to relying on photographs and testimonies, reels of film and rows of books. For a final moment, I stand, staring at the obelisk and the shards before following the concrete ties back into the woods, wondering how to make it real.

/14:15/Treblinka parking lot

It was impossible. The hollering and the crying was in your ears and your mind for days and days, and at night the same thing. From the howling you couldn't even sleep a couple of nights. All at once at one time everything stopped by a command. It was all quiet.

At the lot, the cab driver is waiting. I get into the car, and he looks at me, his eyes fixed. He reaches out, pats me on the knee a few times.

"OK?" he asks.

For a moment, I'm taken aback. When he asked me if I was from New York, it probably wasn't because of any generalizations about America but because New York is home to thousands of victims, survivors and their children and grandchildren, many of whom inevitably return here to the place where their families died. This cab driver, I realize, must pick up dozens of utterly wrecked and shaken to their cores by the memorial. People who sob openly in his cab with a grief that only actually visiting the site can confer.

He has learned, I realize, that he is a custodian of memory, of remembrance, and of this site. He, and the stones, and the sky, and the trees, and the yellow flowers that spring from the ground each year, custodians to the void of Treblinka, to extermination, to the eight hundred thousand dead who still reside here, anonymous, yet not overlooked.

I nod my head a few times, then add, quietly, "Dziekuje." My last bit of Polish. Thank you.

/14:30/Malkinia Station

Some of the Germans, some of the other people that were there, the Ukrainians and other ones, they start shouting and hitting us that we should do it faster, to carry the bundles to the main place where there were big piles of clothes, of shoes, of other things. And in no time this was clean as though people had never been on that place. There was no trace, none at all, like a magic thing, everything disappeared.

As my train winds its way back through the countryside towards Warsaw, I write postcards to friends back home, trying to explain myself, hoping the photo on the front of the card gives them some sense of where I stood. I scratch out a description, then add *that sounds stupid now that I've written it.* My blisters, quiet all day, start to ache once more.

The Treblinka memorial, though nearly wordless, says far more than any explanatory text. Faced with the unspeakable horror of the Holocaust, it chooses to maintain that silence, to leave the words to the survivors and historians. To those still willing to walk and witness, the memorial gives body to the voices we hear.

I tuck my clumsy postcards inside my notebook, next to the camera, guidebook, and phrasebook. Looking out the window, I watch the blossoming fields slip past, giving way slowly to more and more buildings, becoming city, until suddenly, finally, the train is shrouded in darkness as we enter the tunnel that leads to the Warsaw underground.

Terri Witek

Fear, Issue 1

calls on the phone, breathes “I’ve lost one of your children.”
We take it right in the teeth, noting their slickness,

and our limbs, which soften. For fear isn’t held
in the usual fashion: it’s the sandy roots of a laurel oak

as well as a case of TB in an old-time novel:
by the end we’ve got it though the hero’s cured,

marches off with his regiment, while at home
suppertime’s names stretch and fade under trees.

Then we hope it’s contagious,
though if fear ever rages like brushfire,

it’s because we know what’s coming,
like long-distance hikers, teens snaked into lines
for The Incredible Gold Streak (a coaster)
or a boy straddling his bike who’s been riding an hour.

Things as they are always end badly.
Hence fear’s love of palliatives: pillboxes in palms,

tongues over lips, tissues pressed on an hysterical bride
when the plane seems unlandable. Navigationally,

fear’s usual aim is down through the crown
(the fontanel is its first and best bullseye)

though when we waterski over jellyfish swelling
like belligerent skulls, fear tends to keep our feet planted.

And the upright among us are often fear’s friends,
like Mrs. Greer, carried off by the frost like she once carried

that gun. Fear’s public emblems thus often preempt it,
though fear’s arrival always finds us at home

and leads to strange, involved stories, sometimes miraculous:
the Greer’s youngest daughter, left behind at the cabin,

befriended a bear when she lay down for a nap.
This tale is sturdily American in its implied stand-off

between fear of the cage and our own formless hunger
and always ends up with us thinking we'll die—

though if we get close enough to be sure of that we won't
feel fear: we'll wait quietly, with honey-smeared hands.

Marsha Mathews

Secrets of the Sisala, Issue 6

One day a man who was dead refused to be buried. We tried to put him in the grave, but he put one foot on either side, folded his arms over his chest, jaw set.

We met to decide what to do. We could not leave a dead man standing. For him to have heard us, to move in death, he had what the white man does not. No white man who has come to New Ghana has understood. The white man has many things, yes, but he is weak. He lacks knowledge. You see, for a dead man to move, he must have strong *daluri*. Such a man deserves honor.

So we praised him.

Drums pounded. The *goka's* sweet voices rose and fell like wings. They trilled a litany, the feats of his ancestors. The dead man heard how his people disciplined themselves to make themselves invisible, how they speared the hearts of flesh-eating animals, but did not let their hearts bump at the screams. He heard how his people practiced to keep strong erections to maintain the fidelity of their wives. How his people grew in knowledge, steadied their legs to step into their graves. That night the dead man relaxed his knees. Stepped in.

Jill Christman

A Stone Pear, Issue 3

> The first thing I remember tasting and then wanting to taste again is the grayish-pink fuzz my grandmother skimmed from a spitting kettle of strawberry jam. I suppose I was about four.
>
> — from "The Measure of My Powers" (1912) by MFK Fisher

On every visit, my great Aunt Mollie warned me that the fruit in the bowl on her dining room table was not real. Table and bowl both were carved from a deep, dark wood and I remember still how irresistibly smooth the table felt beneath my fingers. This wood glowed, which I now know must have been the result of housekeepers wielding soft rags, but as a child I marveled at how these made objects showed off their glistening curves and joints, telling the story of their journey from the shaded forest to this well-lighted stretch of dining room in New Milford, Connecticut, and seeming—somehow—more real than real. So real, they were magic. I couldn't stop touching them.

The long, rectangular table stretches in my child's memory to seat at least twelve, and placed at the center, the focal point of the room, was that beautiful bowl, and in that bowl, the exquisitely fashioned fruit: two kinds of grapes, green and purple, two tawny pears, a handful of nectarines and a single red apple. The fruit is fake, my aunt would remind me, not for eating. If I was hungry there were oranges in the icebox, or we could go down to the garden, duck under the bird nets, and pick some blueberries for breakfast. Yes, she'd continue, after we swim, let's go down to the garden and get some berries.

Aunt Mollie didn't tolerate a slugabed, and we swam bright and early, before seven o'clock, in a sunken pool lined with flagstones and croaking with morning frogs. I stayed mostly below the surface back then, preferring the cool, pale blue of underwater, but Mollie swam laps back and forth in a careful breast stroke, her gray hair tucked neatly under her swim cap and her head held at a perfect angle to the water, as if she were swimming with a book on her head.

I cannot remember the exact day I tried to eat one of those pears, but I'd guess I was seven or eight, and that my aunt was probably having her afternoon lie down. For lunch, we would have sat at the long wooden table and eaten soup made from garden vegetables and served in bowls with round handles. I remember clutching that handle and scooping spoonful after spoonful because the soup was so sweet and peppery and fresh. And because at the scraped bottom of the bowl I'd find an animal—a rooster, a pig, a frog, a horse or a cow. After soup, we always had Pepperidge Farm cookies, two each, and some more of Aunt Mollie's special iced tea (her secret was the using the pestle to grind the sugar into the fresh mint and then soaking it in frozen lemonade). And then it would have been quiet time.

By then, I'd probably have been through all the tiny boxes in the miniature rolltop desk, crayons and postcards and stamps from faraway places, and I was bored. I wasn't allowed outside by myself, and for once I didn't feel like reading. I remember the rich smell of the dark wood and oil in the dining room and how one whole wall was made of glass to look out over the stone patio. The view was out of a fairytale, sloping down the terraced landscape, ridged with flower beds, and landing at the bottom with a break in the lilies: a shaded opening leading off the stone path to the pool.

All of which reminds me there's another character in this story I cannot forget: I had a verifiable wicked stepmother. By the age of eight, I'd overheard her telling one of her many sisters on the phone that I was a "little bitch." My stepmother cleaned without ceasing. She's the one who taught me how to make beds with taut hospital corners and then apply the quarter test—if the quarter doesn't bounce on the finished bed, rip out the tucks and begin again. Sometimes she'd be fun, a water balloon fight or a trip out for ice cream, but then she'd switch, fly into a rage, let me know the mint chocolate chip was headed straight for my thighs and I'd better watch it. Summers with my father and stepmother were not happy. I know now that my stepmother's wickedness was the result of mental illness, and I'm guessing this was true for Cinderella and Snow White as well, but back then, she was just plain mean. All summer long I was sick with nerves and when Aunt

Mollie called my father to ask if I could come out and stay for a week, I begged to go and nobody missed me.

So now I want you to try to imagine a bookish girl enjoying a respite away from her distracted father and wicked stepmother, a pair right out of the books, in their city loft that baked in the summer heat. Imagine this girl transported to the cool wood of a shaded heaven, with a kind old lady napping a room away. Imagine how anything might have seemed possible. If there could be a house with chickadees skipping at the windows, bullfrogs croaking in the pond, and trees dropping sour crabapple treats, then a pear made of stone might become real in the right moment. After all, I was a girl who lived at least half my life in books, and I knew that Lucy had stumbled into Narnia through the back of a wardrobe, Mrs. Whatsit had sent Meg and her friends through a wrinkle in time to rescue her father from the planet Camazotz, and Pippi Longstocking? Pippi got to live in her *own* house with a monkey named Mr. Nilsson and a horse named Horse and she was strong enough to lift them all—house, monkey and horse—without breaking a sweat. Despite Aunt Mollie's warnings about the fruit, I was convinced of the possibility.

The pear I chose—a model of a Bosc, although I did not know then how to name the lovely neck and buff skin—was made of stone. The convincing indentations in the smooth skin had been carved and the shading near the stem, a sign of ripeness, had been painted on. The pear felt heavy in my hand, not at all pear-like, certainly not ripe. I must have pressed on the fleshy looking belly of the pear and met total resistance. My hands should have told me not to bite the pear, so why did I do it? Why would I try to bite a pear I *knew* wasn't real? I don't know, but sitting at my writing desk, almost thirty years later—thirty years!—I want to think my failure to read the signs of the physical world had something to do with knowing I was part of a story being written and believing in the possibilities of that story's creation.

I didn't bite down hard, so I didn't hurt my teeth, and despite what we might now read as a failure of possibility, I don't remember feeling at all disappointed, probably because I never hungered for anything when I was at Aunt Mollie's. Not really. I remember my reaction went something like this: Yup. Aunt Mollie is right. This is not a real pear. This pear is a *rock*. Still, I was impressed. So life-like, that rock pear. So beautiful. I held the pear in my hands, rubbing away my spit, and looked out over the patio and down to the path. I couldn't wait until Aunt Mollie woke up from her nap. We were going down to the garden to pick snap peas for dinner, but first we were stopping by the pond to look for bullfrogs.

In Aunt Mollie's final years the dementia made her paranoid and she misread the cards I sent in my twenties: thank you, thank you, sweet Mollie, for the magic of early morning swims, leaf tracings, and homemade granola with just-picked blueberries. My notes came too late for her to believe in them, too late for her to know my gratitude was real and full of juice. Saddened, I heard that she read my notes as a ploy for inheritance, and that she died trusting no one.

When I was twelve, I had moved far, far away, all the way across the country to Washington state, and I only saw Aunt Mollie once as an adult, in my early twenties, mere weeks after I'd lost my fiancé in a car accident and instinct told me to go to her. I needed something to believe in again. Most of that final visit is lost to a blur of grief and comfort, but I remember consciously refusing any evidence that the world Mollie created, and Mollie herself, were more complicated than I'd known them to be. In my mind, perhaps, I wanted to stick to the storybook archetypes of that place and time: kindly fairy godmother rescues miserable child from evil stepmother. A simple story.

Aunt Mollie had made a world where a wounded child could believe in magic, and her mind's final betrayal of her heart seemed to me a cruel irony. In my unprotected girlhood, her home was a place of art and love, a place where a beautiful stone pear refused to yield and still did not disappoint. Her home was an oasis of all things that are good for a child, and the summer weeks she gave me—could it have been more than a couple of months all together if we strung them end to end?—may have saved my whole life.

Thank you, Aunt Mollie. You were more real than real.

Terrance Hayes

The Red Balloon, Issue 3

Except if an impossible bolt of daylight lightning
or possibly your pupil-sized bee-bee splits the brain
of Sister's red balloon in tow, and it falls

into Daddy's cabbage patch or into the kennel
where his black dog naps, Brother, that's bad luck.

Except if the red balloon swelling on the brow
of the afternoon was already contemplating its lack
of shelter and wanted to become a dog's tongue

or perhaps if it was dreaming of the luxuries of travel
and wanted to become a cloud moving backwards

over the yard like the shadow of Daddy's Cadillac.
You say when a dog's song is pressed
against the skull, it's hard to know
where the danger's at, and if a storm swings low,
the rest of the day cries like a goat brought to its knees.

When you lean from our bedroom window anxious
to test your trigger, the shaft of your bony weapon
reminds me of a chicken's neck just before it greets

an axe. When I don't have my knife, Brother,
you're the only weapon I can trust. No one else

loves you since the doctor's scalpel cut the cyst
from your eyebrow and I know the scalpel's work
is like the work of the axe. You say Daddy feeds

the insides of every chicken's head to the hogs
and doctors feed what ever they take from patients

to lab rats. Each time you try running off, the smell
of chicken grease calls you back. I'll pray for rain tomorrow.
Rain to hamper Mamma's fire, rain to ease Daddy's feet

into the ground. The dogs of warriors swallow
their tongues when their masters die in battle.

Except the red balloon will have no shelter.
It's going to kill Sister, but I won't stop you,
when your black muzzle swings down

or when you pack your bags and follow the rain
falling along the tracks. If you can learn to kill

the red balloon, you can learn to kill what ever idles
in this world. I'll tell them it was lightning
which Mamma says falls wherever God throws down his hat.

Tina May Hall

42°33_N0°33_W, Issue 8

When they lived in France, they had ducks in the yard, fat pillows of noise and stink. Their ridged feet scratched over hers in the mud. She was a child then, and she always went barefoot and drank the cream from the milk and was allowed to doze on her papa's belly in front of the fire while he talked to the neighbors and weighed the bundles they brought him.

When she was nine, they walked to Spain after some men of the town burned the haystack behind their house. They carried bags on their backs filled with leather and flour, dried fish and wooden bowls. Eurosia held the one duck they'd found dead in the yard by its thick flexible neck and then by its legs when her fingers grew tired. In her other hand, tied up in her winter dress, were two spoons, her family's treasure. As they walked over the bridge, the River Aragon beneath them, she clasped the spoons tightly to stop their silvery rubbing, whispered, "Hush, we're almost home."

In Spain, people called her Orosia and spoke as if they were holding sweet pieces of lard at the back of their mouths. They lived in the house farthest away from the bridge, the tail of the tadpole-shaped town. Morning and night, cedar burned in the fireplaces and tinted the air blue. Orosia loved the scent of it on her pillow, trapped in her hair, the long hair that her father refused to cut, that he untangled with his fingertips in the darkness before dawn, tugging at her scalp as if he could force the sun up by its roots.

In Spain, she washed the priest's clothes and his clay floor and the church benches. She washed the feet of the carved Jesus with the corner of a cloth and wiped the dust from his forehead with her spit-dampened knuckle. The priest told her stories and she liked to pretend she lived back then, that it was His linens she scrubbed, His floor that drank the water she carried, His hand resting on her head, calling up the sweat of her scalp.

In Spain, the year before the soldiers came, she started wearing a blue scarf on her head because her mother said she was too old to go without. Now, it was her mother who combed her fingers through Orosia's hair in the morning and she did it roughly, muttering about a father's foolishness, about the best way to break a duck's neck, the proper knots for a kerchief, for the marriage bread, for mending a hem.

The water was different in Spain, came out of the well red-tinged and bitter, like the spice her mother had started putting in everything, even potatoes. Her father traded for the spice with the soldiers who were camped all over town. Her mother cooked for these men and they stacked their curved swords at the door, a thicket of blackened metal, hammered moonslices that blocked out the sounds of the town. She and her brothers hid under the table, within inches of the rancid-smelling skin boots of the soldiers. From their feet they knew whom the soldiers had killed. The man with green-tinted laces had sliced open the priest and spread his entrails on the church steps. He had stolen her friend Cristina from the stable where she was hiding and had taken her into the woods by the bridge. Orosia had looked for her the next morning, before anyone else was awake. But she found only patches of broken branches near the cliff overlooking the river. And below, the beached rocks, grey as dead teeth, and Orosia knew that even after the priest's whispered instructions when the soldiers first came to town, even after her mother's sour mouth at her ear telling her the bad stories, she could never be as brave as her friend.

One night, after dinner, one of the soldiers caught Orosia on her way to dump the dish water in the woods. He was the youngest one, the one who wore sandals even though winter was already biting. He dragged her with him into the thickest part of the forest where the dusk lit only small patches and the bark of the pine trees tore at her skin. She could hardly keep up with him, burdened by the bucket which she didn't dare drop because it was their only one. Then he was sucking at her lips as if she was a scrap of duck snagged on the bone. And his hands were inside her dress, cupping her breasts and how wonderful it was to be held, to have that weight lifted from her. She felt him between her legs and it hurt, but mostly she felt dizzy and warm, her flesh as heavy as bread sopping up gravy. Dirty water spread around them. Then he was making loud noises and she butted her head into his mouth, fearful that someone would hear. Her scarf slipped back, around her throat, and he stepped away. He pressed something small and round into her hand. She bit it tentatively; it looked like a berry. He laughed and said something she didn't understand, pointing at her head. He took it from her and

gently tugged at a few strands of her hair, leaned in close, concentrating, so close she felt his skin prickling hers again. Then he pulled back, smiling, and ran off through the trees, as if she had startled him. She touched her hair, felt the hard thing. Back home, by the kitchen candle, she looked at it. It was a bead, dark red, very faintly carved, a bead from the priest's rosary, worn down from the touching.

When her father found the bead, he promised Orosia to the soldier with green laces. And when she cried, he punched her in her belly and said that to make a good trade, they needed to hurry. He said this calmly with the smallest bit of pleasure in his voice, the same way he used to tell her about the ways he had gotten the better of the townspeople, how he had passed off wormy flour for eggs, and old eggs for fabric, and leftover scraps of linen for a tin mug. *Papá,* she cried, papá, the same word no matter what side of the bridge they were on. When Orosia crept out of the house that night, she had the spoons tucked into her hair, under her scarf, and they numbed her scalp with their singing, like two cold fingers pressed to her head.

Once she found the cave, she made a fire, plied the flame with damp pine needles and wet cedar bark. Her hands warmed slowly in the dark corner of the mountain. She heard the men coming after her, their voices and the whisper of their swords. As the tendrils of smoke spilled out of the cave into the ruby dawn, she tried to imagine it was the young soldier in his sandals following her. She tried to imagine it was Him, freed from his thorns and his wooden perch, His forehead still black with her spit. She was happy and sleepy remembering her childhood, the mud on her feet, the sun sparking against her head, the weight of a bird, loose in her fist.

In the chickweed stream, in deep silt water
I move across the swimmers' legs
as if I am the water.

The boys' bodies are like mine,
mad under the skin for immersion.

Up for breath,
they flop in the grass
as if they are pike
caught on a nylon line.

When light off their backs changes them
coppery and masculine,

I see I can have
the surfaces of things
for my own without asking.

Ryder Henry

Artist's Statement

I love making science fiction objects and painting landscapes. The two interests co-mingle as I paint pictures of the miniature models which I build out of cardboard and other mundane, easily accessible materials.

About the Authors

Colleen Abel is the author of *Housewifery*, a chapbook (dancing girl press, 2013). A former Diane Middlebrook Poetry Fellow, her work has appeared in numerous venues including *The Southern Review, Mid-American Review, West Branch, The Journal, Cimarron Review, Verse Daily, Cincinnati Review, Ploughshares*' blog, and elsewhere. She holds a PhD from UW-Milwaukee and an MFA from the Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College.

Jeffrey Alfier is winner of the Kithara Book Prize for his poetry collection, *Idyll for a Vanishing River* (Glass Lyre Press, 2013). He is also author of *The Wolf Yearling* (Silver Birch Press). His recent work has appeared in *Poetry Ireland Review, Arkansas Review* and *New York Quarterly*.

Isaac Anderson's work has appeared in *Image, Portland, The Fourth River, Los Angeles Review of Books*, and elsewhere. He received an MFA from Ohio State and has been Writer-in-Residence at Lenoir-Rhyne University and Western Seminary. His piece "Lord God Bird" (Image, No. 72) received mention in *Best American Essays*, 2013.

Jan Beatty's fourth full-length book, *The Switching/Yard*, won the 2014 Paterson Award for Literary Excellence for Previous Finalists of The Paterson Poetry Prize. *Library Journal* named it one of ...30 New Books That Will Help You Rediscover Poetry. Beatty's work was featured in *The Huffington Post* as one of ten women writers for "required reading." Other books include *Red Sugar, Boneshaker,* and *Mad River,* winner of the Agnes Lynch Starrett Prize, all published by the University of Pittsburgh Press. Beatty is host and producer of Prosody, a public radio show on NPR affiliate WESA-FM featuring the work of national writers. She directs the creative writing program at Carlow University, where she runs the Madwomen in the Attic writing workshops and teaches in the MFA program.

Astrid Cabral is a leading poet and environmentalist from the Amazonian region of Brazil. She is the translator of Thoreau's *Walden* into Portuguese. Recent collections of her poetry include *The Anteroom, Gazing Through Water,* and *Cage*. Her poems have appeared in more than thirty magazines, including *Amazonian Literary Review, Bitter Oleander, Cat-*

amaran, Cincinnati Review, Confrontation, Dirty Goat, Evansville Review, Great River Review, Metamorphoses, Osiris, Pleiades, Poetry East, Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas, Sirena, and *Two-Lines. Cage*, poems of the Amazon, appeared bilingually from Host Publications in July, 2008.

Bonnie Jo Campbell is the author of the bestselling novel *Once Upon a River* (July 2011, W.W. Norton) and a 2011 Guggenheim Fellow. She was a 2009 National Book Award finalist and National Book Critics Circle Award finalist for her collection of stories, *American Salvage*. Campbell is also author of the novel *Q Road* and the story collection *Women & Other Animals*. She lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan with her husband and two donkeys, and you can check on her progress at www.bonniejocampbell.com.

Susan H. Case lives in New York City and is a professor at the New York Institute of Technology. Many journals have published her poems including *Cider Press Review, Hawai'i Pacific Review, Portland Review,* and *Potomac Review*. She is the author of *The Scottish Café* (Slapering Hol Press, 2002), *Hiking The Desert In High Heels* (RightHandPointing, 2005), and *Anthropologist in Ohio* (Main Street Rag Publishing Company, 2005). A dual English-Polish version of *The Scottish Café* is forthcoming from Opole University Press. Married to the artist Eric Hoffmann, she based *The Cost of Heat*, loosely, upon her life with him.

Jill Christman's memoir, *Darkroom: A Family Exposure*, won the 2001 AWP Award Series in Creative Nonfiction and in 2011 was reissued in paperback by the University of Georgia Press. Her first e-book, *Borrowed Babies: The Science of Motherhood*, is forthcoming from Shebooks in Summer 2014. Recent essays have appeared in *Fourth Genre, Brevity, River Teeth, Iron Horse Literary Review*, and *Brain, Child*, as well as many other journals, magazines, and anthologies. She is an Associate Professor of English in Ball State University's Creative Writing Program and teaches creative nonfiction in Ashland University's low-residency MFA program (where she is also a regular presenter at the River Teeth Nonfiction Conference). In 2013, Jill was elected to the Board of Directors of The Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP)

and is currently serving as the Midwest Representative. She lives in Muncie where she lives with her husband, writer Mark Neely, and their two children.

Lindsay Coleman is the Howard E. Morgan Chair of creative writing at The Episcopal Academy in Newtown, Pennsylvania. She received her B.A. and M. Ed from Harvard University and Harvard Graduate School of Education, and her MFA from Iowa Writers' Workshop.

Jim Daniels' "Landfill America" went on to appear in his book, *Having a Little Talk With Capital P Poetry*, published by Carnegie Mellon University Press in 2011. Jim Daniels' latest book of short fiction, *Eight Mile High*, was published in 2014 by Michigan State University Press. *Eight Mile High* is a series of linked stories that take place along Eight Mile High, the border between Detroit and Warren, Michigan. His latest book of poetry, *Birth Marks*, was published by BOA Editions in 2013 and won the Milton Kessler Poetry Prize and was chosen as a Michigan Notable Book. He is the Thomas Stockham Baker University Professor at Carnegie Mellon University.

Okla Elliott is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Illinois where he works in the fields of comparative literature and trauma studies. He also holds an MFA from Ohio State University. His nonfiction, poetry, short fiction, and translations have appeared in *Another Chicago Magazine, Harvard Review, Indiana Review, The Literary Review, The Los Angeles Review, A Public Space*, and *Subtropics,* among others. He is the author of the fiction collection, *From the Crooked Timber* (Press 53, 2011). His poetry collection, *The Cartographer's Ink*, is forthcoming in late 2014 from NYQ Books, and his novel, *The Doors You Mark Are Your Own* (co-authored with Raul Clement), is forthcoming in 2015 from Dark House Press.

Abby Geni's stories have won first place in the *Glimmer Train* Fiction Open and the *Chautauqua* Contest. Her pieces have appeared in *Glimmer Train, Chautauqua, The Indiana Review, Camera Obscura*, and *New Stories from the Midwest,* among others. As a student at the Iowa Writer's Workshop, she was awarded the Iowa Fellowship.

Leonard Gontarek's books include *He Looked Beyond My Faults and Saw My Needs* and *Déjà Vu Diner*. His poems have appeared in *The Best American Poetry, American Poetry Review, Fence, Field, Verse, Poet Lore, Spinning Jenny*, and as a tattoo. He coordinates Peace/Works and hosts The Green Line Reading Interview Series. He teaches poetry workshops at Musehouse and in the Philadelphia Artis in Education Partnership. Website: www.leafscape.org/LeonardGontarek.

Chad Hanson serves as chairman of the Department of Sociology & Social Work at Casper College. His creative nonfiction titles include *Swimming with Trout* (University of New Mexico Press, 2007) and *Trout Streams of the Heart* (Truman State University Press, 2013). His book, *Patches of Light: Prose Poems*, won the 2013 David Martinson--Meadowhawk Prize. The collection is available from Red Dragonfly Press (2014). For more information, visit: www.chadhanson.org.

Tina May Hall teaches creative writing at Hamilton College in upstate New York. Her first collection of stories, *The Physics of Imaginary Objects*, won the 2010 Drue Heinz Literature Prize and was published by the University of Pittsburgh Press. Her novella, *All the Day's Sad Stories*, was published as a chapbook by Caketrain Press in 2009. Her stories have appeared in *The Collagist, 3rd Bed, Black Warrior Review, Quarterly West, The Fairy Tale Review* and other journals.

Terrance Hayes is the author of *Lighthead* (Penguin, 2010), which won the National Book Award for Poetry; *Wind in a Box* (Penguin, 2006); *Hip Logic* (Penguin, 2002), which won the 2001 National Poetry Series and was a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Award; and *Muscular Music* (Tia Chucha Press, 1999), winner of the Kate Tufts Discovery Award.He has received many honors and awards, including a Whiting Writers Award, a Pushcart Prize, three *Best American Poetry* selections, as well as fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship and the Guggenheim Foundation. In 2014, he was named a recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship. He is a professor of creative writing at the University of Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania and lives in Pittsburgh with his family.

Ryder Henry is 40 years old and was born in Oxford, England. He lived internationally as a child because his dad taught university in Lebanon and later on in France. He spent his high school years in Austin, TX. He also attended RISD for a

couple years and dropped out. He lived in Portland, OR, in the mid-'90's, then moved back to Austin, upstate New York, and came to Pittsburgh in 2005. His website is ryderhenry.com.

Ivan Hobson is a graduate of San Francisco State University's MFA program. He is also a multi-generational machinist, working with his dad in the small shop his great-grandfather built in 1935. Ivan's poetry has recently appeared, or is forthcoming, in publications including *The North American Review, California Quarterly, Fourteen Hills*, as well as Ted Kooser and The Poetry Foundation's, *American Life in Poetry*.

Lori Jakiela is the author of the memoirs *The Bridge to Take When Things Get Serious* (C&R Press 2013) and *Miss New York Has Everything* (Hatchette 2006), as well as the poetry collection *Spot the Terrorist!* (Turning Point 2012) and several limited-edition poetry chapbooks. Her third memoir, *Belief Is Its Own Kind of Truth, Maybe*, is forthcoming from Atticus Books in Spring 2015. Her work has been published in *The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, The Rumpus* and more. She's been nominated for the Pushcart Prize many times, is the recipient of a Golden Quill Award for writing excellence from the Pennsylvania Newspaper Association, received a 2014 Independent Press Award for *The Bridge to Take When Things Get Serious*, and was the winner of the first-ever Pittsburgh Literary Death Match. She was recently appointed co-director of Chautauqua Institution's annual Literary Festival, and teaches in the writing programs at Pitt-Greensburg and Chatham University. She lives in Trafford, Pa. with her husband, the writer Dave Newman and their children. For more, visit ljwritesbooks.com.

Erin Jourdan, MFA Creative Writing, is a Los Angeles based writer and teacher. She is the recipient of a 2007 Djerassi Resident Artist Fellowship and a 2009 Jentel Foundation Artist Residency. She teaches memoir/writing from personal experience classes to private clients, workshop groups, MOOCs and through her website www.memoirclass.com.

K.T. Landon received her MFA in Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts. She is the 2013 winner of the Arts & Letters PRIME Poetry Prize, and her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Muzzle, Fugue, Jabberwock Review, CALYX, Ibbetson Street*, and *The Examined Life*, among others. Her essay, "Turf War," was nominated for a Pushcart Prize by *The Journal*. By day she works as a software engineering manager at a research institute.

Alexis Levitin's thirty-five books of translations include Eugenio de Andrade's *Forbidden Words* and Clarice Lispector's *Soulstorm*, both from New Directions. His most recent books are Salgado Maranhao's *Blood of the Sun* (Milkweed Editions, 2012), Eugenio de Andrade's *The Art of Patience* (Red Dragonfly Press, 2013), and Ana Minga's *Tobacco Dogs* (The Bitter Oleander Press, 2013). Forthcoming are Santiago Vizcaino's *Destruction in the Afternoon* (Dialogos Books, 2015), Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen's *Exemplary Tales* (Tagus Press, 2015), and Salgado Maranhao's *Tiger Fur* (White Pine Press, 2015).

Kim Liao was a 2010-2011 Taiwan Fulbright Research Fellow, and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She received her MFA at Emerson College, and her work has appeared in *Fringe, Hippocampus, Cha: A Journal of Asian Literature, Newtown Literary*, and others. Her essays were short-listed for awards by *Bellingham Review* and *Fourth Genre*. She is currently finishing her first book, *My Formosa,* a family memoir and adventure story. Kim lives in Brooklyn with her umbrella tree plant.

Rachel Mangini's flash fiction has been published in *Smokelong Quarterly, Camroc Press Review*, and *(Short) Fiction Collective*, amongst other places. She just completed a screenplay and is currently working on a novel.

Marsha Mathews is a writer and educator living in Dalton, Georgia. Her most recent book, *Hallelujah Voices*, presents unique voices of a Southwest Virginia congregation as they experience unexpected, pivotal moments. Her love poems, *Sunglow & A Tuft of Nottingham Lace*, won the Red Berry Editions 2011 Chapbook Award, and was published. Her first chapbook, *Northbound Single-Lane*, was released in 2010 by Finishing Line Press. This book follows the journey of a woman who finds herself suddenly single, with young children to care for. She leaves home and all she knows to travel north through Florida, Georgia, Tennessee, and Virginia. Marsha's poem "Kidnapping Mary" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Her story "Ride to the City" was honored the 2013 Orlando Prize for Flash Fiction. Marsha is currently writing

a book, *Beauty Bound*, which explores globally the human desire for beauty and the entrapment of beauty.

Jo McDougall's books include *Dirt* and *Satisfied with Havoc*, poetry, Autumn House Press; a memoir, *Daddy's Money*, University of Arkansas Press; and a chapbook, *Under an Arkansas Sky*, Tavern Books. Her collected poems, *In the Home of the Famous Dead*, is forthcoming in April of 2015 from the University of Arkansas Press. She has received numerous awards and fellowships and is widely anthologized. Her work can be found online in Garrison Keillor's *Writers Almanac* and Ted Kooser's *American Life in Poetry*. She travels around the country to read her work and offers a mentoring and editing service for poets and writers.

David Murphy is currently a renewing English Language Fellow in Toluca, Mexico, where he is seconded to the Ministry of Education and provides technical advice on English language teaching. He previously worked in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia as the Curriculum Supervisor at King Saud University´s Preparatory Year, which, with 11,000 students is the largest in the Middle East. From 2008 to the end of 2010, he worked as a Consultant-Lecturer and, later, as Administrative Director of a World Bank funded partnership between Kansas State University and Balkh University in Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan. In his free time, he reads, writes, takes, and has been skateboarding since 1996.

Jeff Oaks' newest chapbook, *Mistakes with Strangers*, will be published by Seven Kitchens Press in 2014. A recipient of three Pennsylvania Council of the Arts fellowships, Jeff Oaks has published poems in a number of literary magazines, most recently in *Assaracus, Barrow Street, Field, Mid American Review*, and *Tupelo Quarterly*. His essays have appeared in *At Length*, and *Creative Nonfiction*, and in the anthology *My Diva: 65 Gay Men on the Women Who Inspire Them*. He teaches writing at the University of Pittsburgh.

Nancy Pagh has authored two award-winning collections of poetry, *No Sweeter Fat* (Autumn House Press book award) and *After* (Floating Bridge Press chapbook competition), and one book of nonfiction (*At Home Afloat*). Her work appears in numerous publications, including *Prairie Schooner, Valparaiso Poetry Review, Canadian Literature, RHINO, Conversations across Borders, Crab Creek Review, Poetry Northwest, Rattle, The Bellingham Review*, and *O Magazine*. She was raised in Anacortes, WA and currently teaches at Western Washington University in Bellingham. More to explore at www.nancypagh.com.

Robert Peluso has contributed reviews, interviews, and literary features to the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, The Columbus Dispatch*, the on-air *Bayer Sunday Arts Magazine*, and elsewhere. He was awarded a President's Fellowship from Columbia University, where he received a Ph.D. in American culture studies, and his short fiction has won the Caliban Book Shop-Pittsburgh Quarterly Review Fiction Prize. He is Professor of English at the Art Institute of Pittsburgh and co-founder of Braddock Avenue Books.

John Poch's fourth collection of poems, *Fix Quiet*, won the 2014 New Criterion Poetry Prize and is published by St. Augustine's Press. He is director of the creative writing program at Texas Tech University and has poems recently in *The Nation, Poetry, Southwest Review*, and *New England Review*.

Colin Rafferty teaches nonfiction writing at the University of Mary Washington, in Fredericksburg, Virginia. He is grateful for George Wolfe, sponsor of the Wolfe Travel Grant, for the funds that made the trip to Poland which resulted in "The Yellow Flowers" possible. He is currently at work on a collection of lyric essays about the presidents.

José Antonio Rodríguez's books include *The Shallow End of Sleep* and *Backlit Hour*, Finalist for the 2014 Paterson Poetry Award. His work has appeared in numerous journals and magazines, including *The New Republic, Poetry, Green Mountains Review, RHINO, Memorious, Water-Stone Review, Lake Effect, Cream City Review, Huizache*, and elsewhere. His awards include the Bob Bush Memorial Award from the Texas Institute of Letters, the 2014 Founders' Prize from *RHINO*, the 2009 Allen Ginsberg Poetry Award from Paterson Literary Review, and four nominations for the Pushcart Prize. He holds a Ph.D. in English from SUNY-Binghamton University and currently teaches writing and literature at the University of Texas - Pan American.

Alan Rossi's stories have appeared in or are forthcoming in *The Atlantic, New Ohio Review, The Missouri Review, The Florida Review, Ninth Letter, The Journal, Hobart, Granta, Forty Stories from Harper Perennial* and many other places. He is an associate editor at *Juked* and recently won a Pushcart Prize. He currently lives and teaches in South Carolina.

TJ Sandella is the recipient of an Elinor Benedict Prize for Poetry (Passages North) and two Academy of American Poets University Prizes. He was a finalist for Agnes Scott's Writers' Festival Award, and has been nominated for the AWP Intro Awards and Best New Poets 2014. Most recently, he won a William Matthews Poetry Prize, which was selected by Billy Collins. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Spoon River Poetry Review, Passages North, Asheville Poetry Review,* and *The Tusculum Review*, among others. He lives, works, and wanderlusts in Cleveland, Ohio.

Claudia Serea is a Romanian-born poet who immigrated to the U.S. in 1995. Her poems and translations have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies from the U.S., U.K., and Australia, such as *New Letters, 5 a.m., Meridian, Word Riot, Going Down Swinging, The Lake, Cutthroat, Apple Valley Review, Green Mountains Review, International Poetry Review, Ascent, Connotation Press, protestpoems.org, Mudfish, The Dirty Goat, Harpur Palate, Contrary, Poets & Artists*, and many others. Her poem "My Father's Quiet Friends in Prison, 1958-1962" received the *New Letters* Readers Award in 2013.

Richard St. John's first book of poems, *The Pure Inconstancy of Grace*, was published in 2005 by Truman State University Press, as first runner up for the T. S. Eliot Prize for Poetry. *Each Perfected Name*, also from Truman State University Press, is scheduled for publication in early 2015. His long poem, Shrine, was released as a chapbook in 2011. St. John received degrees in English from Princeton University and the University of Virginia. In 2002, he completed a mid-career Loeb Fellowship at Harvard University. He lives in Pittsburgh where he coordinates small-group conversations that support relationships, shared meaning-making and renewal.

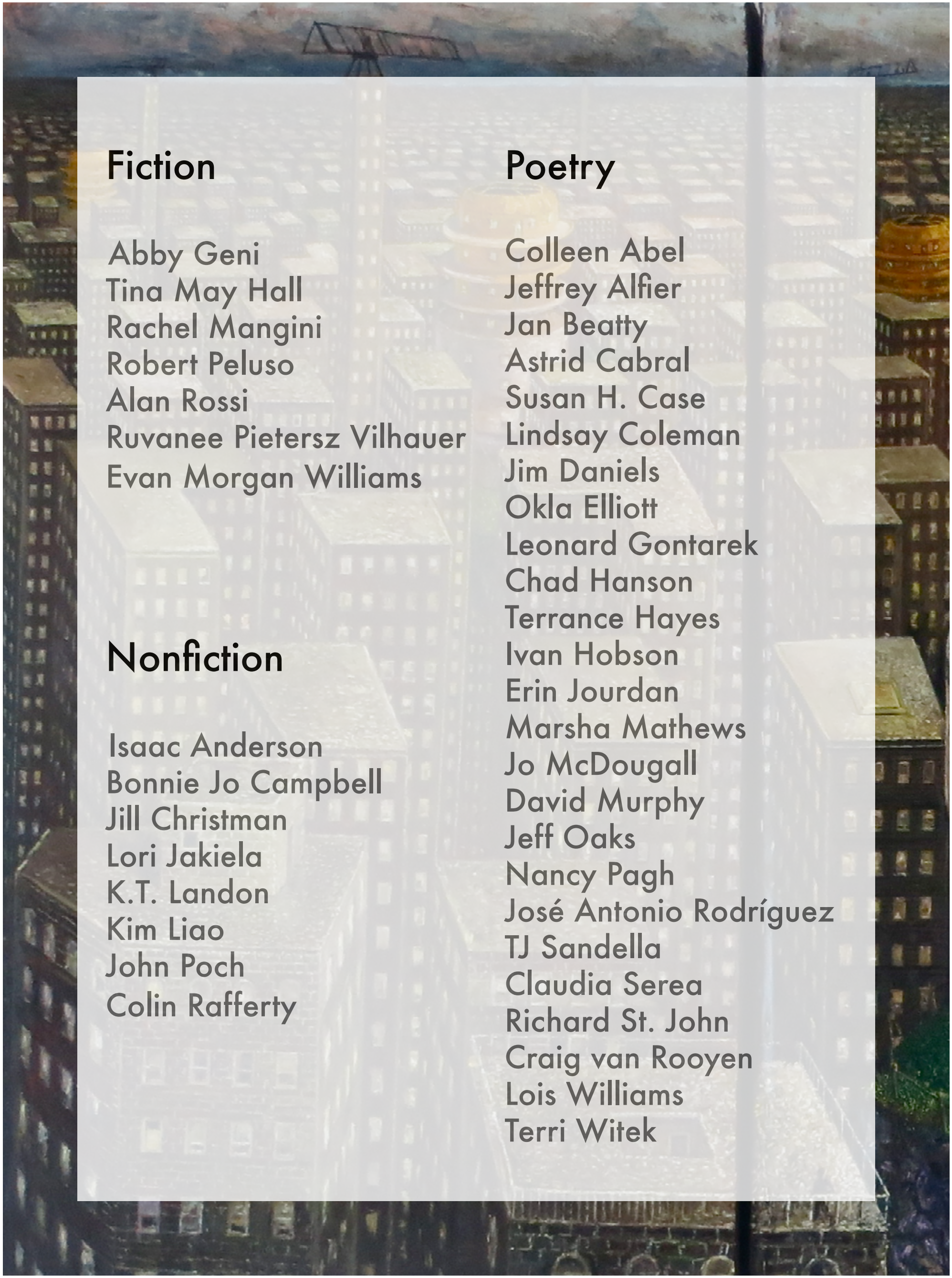
Craig van Rooyen is a lawyer living on the Central Coast of California, but studies online with The Writers Studio under the direction of Philip Schultz. His work has been published or is forthcoming in *Innisfree Poetry Journal, Christian Century*, and *The Fourth River*.

Ruvanee Pietersz Vilhauer's short fiction has been broadcast on BBC Radio 4 and her essays and short stories have appeared in *Michigan Quarterly Review, The Kenyon Review, Notre Dame Review, Stand, Quiddity, The Summerset Review, Hawai'i Pacific Review, r.kv.r.y. Yale Journal for Humanities in Medicine, Epiphany*, and elsewhere. She teaches psychology at Felician College. Her website is www.ruvaneevilhauer.com.

Evan Morgan Williams has published over forty stories in literary magazines famous and obscure, including *Witness, Kenyon Review, ZYZZYVA, Antioch Review, Alaska Quarterly Review*, and *Northwest Review*. A collection of Evan's stories, *Thorn*, has won the Sharat Chandra Fiction Prize at BkMk Press (University of Missouri - Kansas) and will be published as a book in 2014.

Lois Williams was raised in Britain along the North Norfolk coast and now lives in Pittsburgh. She teaches at the University of Pittsburgh and writes about family, landscape, and various kinds of migration. She is at work on a nonfiction book about the invention of home. Her recent poems and essays can be found in *Cave Wall, Fourth River, Granta*, and *New England Review*.

Terri Witek is the author of *Exit Island, The Shipwreck Dress, Carnal World , Fools and Crows, Courting Couples* (Winner of the 2000 Center for Book Arts Contest) and *Robert Lowell and LIFE STUDIES: Revising the Self*. Her collaborations with Brazilian visual artist Cyriaco Lopes have been featured in galleries or site-specific projects in New York City, Los Angeles and elsewhere. A professor of English at Stetson University, her summer faculty positions have included the West Chester Poetry Conference, the Prague Summer Literary Program and the DisQuiet program in Lisbon, where she runs "The Fernando Pessoa Game."



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Abby Geni
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Rachel Mangini
Robert Peluso
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