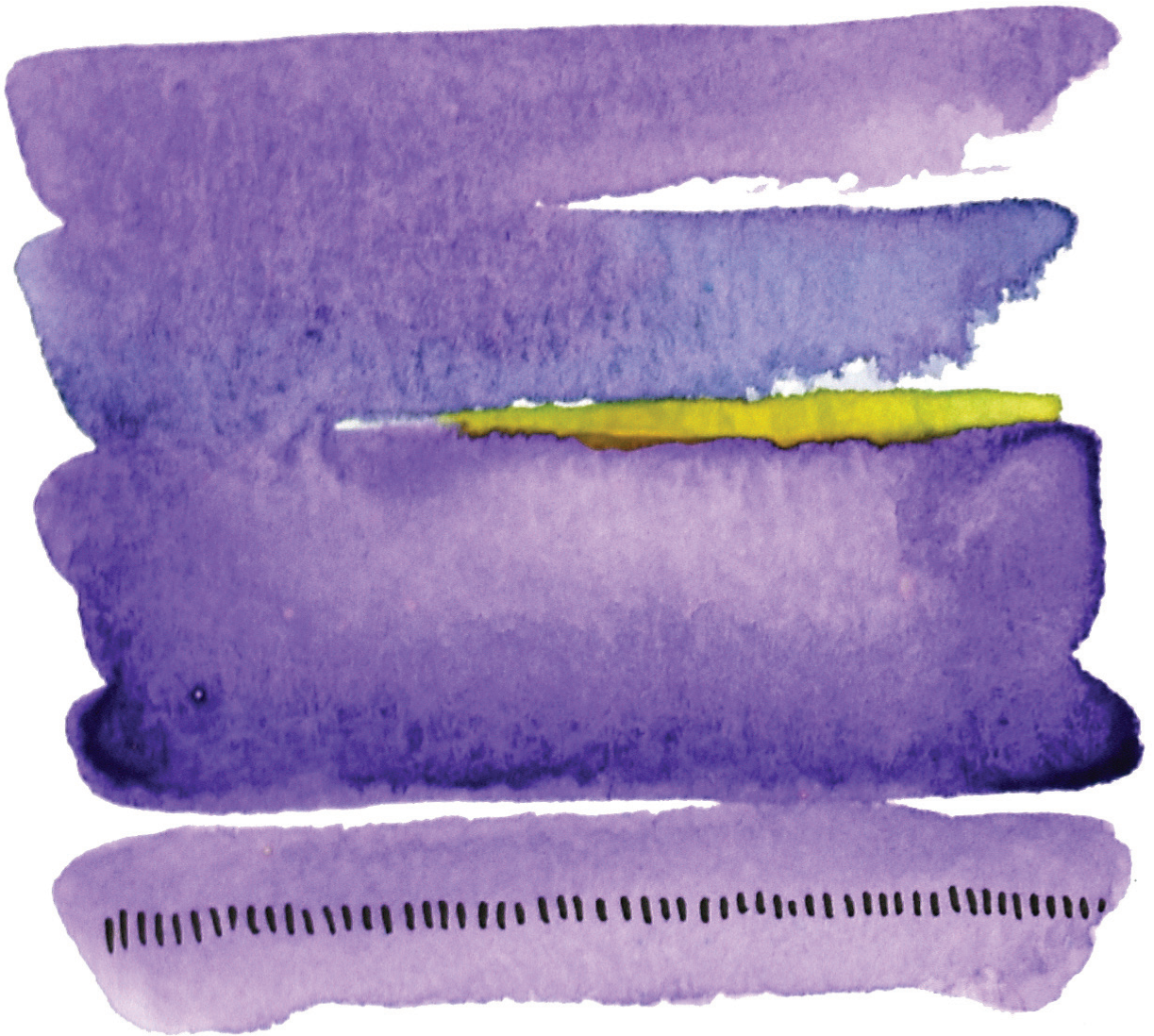


litmosphere

journal of CHARLOTTELIT



Featuring:

Jericho Brown
Clyde Edgerton
Maggie Smith

Issue Three • Spring 2024

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journal of CHARLOTTE **LIT**

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Kathie Collins

Editor's Note

We are so pleased to present the third volume of *Litmosphere: Journal of Charlotte Lit* and honored to be able to include an array of finely crafted poems and stories selected from hundreds of entries received last fall in our 2024 Lit/South Awards contest. As an editor, it was thrilling to read one captivating piece after another, to know with certainty we could have filled this volume twice more with truly worthy work. As a member of the reading team tasked with preparing short lists for our guest judges Jericho Brown, Clyde Edgerton, and Maggie Smith, it was also frustrating. I'd have liked to send many more poems and stories forward than was possible. In the end, however, this year's prize winners were clear standouts in their fields. Huge congratulations to Arielle Hebert for her poem "Athazagoraphobia," Michael Sadoff for his short story "Decoy," and Caroline Hamilton Langerman for her nonfiction story "The Difficult Child."

Along with my fabulous team of fellow readers—Nikki Campo, Christopher Davis, Jacqueline Parker, David Poston, and Paul Reali—I also offer congratulations to each of the finalists (including several judge-selected honorable mentions) and semi-finalists whose poems and stories grace this year's journal. We are grateful for the opportunity to share your work with our community of readers and writers—a community that, like the Lit/South Awards region itself, extends well beyond our organization's home in Charlotte, NC.

And, to all the resident (and former resident) writers of Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia who submitted to this year's contest—huge thanks! It was a privilege, often a humbling one, to read your entries. About this year's fiction finalists, contest judge Clyde Edgerton writes, "Any judgment about a story depends on the judge's literary leanings. I would not be surprised to see seven different judges find seven different winners in this contest. I felt an artist's care and love beneath each story's composition—and that composition was sometimes artfully simple, sometimes artfully complex. I found subtly, clarity, and also a dependence on a simple fact that lies behind much good fiction: meaning lies within the dramatic scene...I appreciated the suspense, the tension, and the portrayal of meaningful relationships that were evident in each story."

I dare say this assessment also applies to our poetry and nonfiction finalists—and throughout our contest submissions. Whether or not we selected your writing for publication, please know how much your voice matters. We learned something from every poem and story we read. You took us beyond our personal experience

and understanding, those limitations Arielle Hebert seems to argue against in her poem “Athazagoraphobia”: “We see what we want to see. We get to be / our own unreliable narrators.” In that light, I urge each of you to continue writing and sharing your work; by doing so, you contribute something essential to raising human consciousness.

With gratitude,

Kathie Collins
East Bend, NC

Lit/South Awards 2024

Winners, Finalists & Semi-finalists

Final Judges: Jericho Brown (Poetry), Maggie Smith (Creative Nonfiction), and Clyde Edgerton (Fiction). Readers: Nikki Campo, Kathie Collins, Christopher Davis, Jacqueline Parker, David Poston, and Paul Reali.

POETRY

Winner: Arielle Hebert: “Athazagoraphobia”

Additional Finalists:

Rosa Castellano: “A girl the color of sunshine on water...”

Erin Cowles: “Cut me, I won’t die”

Jo Angela Edwins: “The Carriage”

Nadine Ellsworth: “Three Portraits of Women on Fire”

Janet Ford: “Pizza Hut on Central Avenue, 1:00 am”

Caeli Faisst: “Withering”

Regina Garcia: “High John”

Eddy Hicks: “Soiled”

Christine Marshall: “The Evolution of Flight”

Eric Nelson: “O My World”

Em Palughi: “Radnor Lake, July 4th”

Maria Picone: “To the guy who made me a pretzel at the mall and wouldn’t give up until I told him where I’m really, really from”

Max Seifert: “The Incredulity”

CB Wilson: “Oak Gall Prayer”

Semi-finalists:

Isaac Akanmu: “parable of the young girl holding a basket of eggs”

Les Bares: “Crimes Committed in My Sleep”

AJ Baumel: “Cycle”

Tess Congo: “The Giver”

Barbara Conrad: “A Girl’s Perfect Circle”

Steve Cushman: “Ars Poetics or Why I Never Made It to The Writer’s Colony”

Morrow Dowdle: “A Universe, in Revolution”

Katie Dozier: “Time Traveling Haibun”

David Dixon: "If I Fell"
Mary Alice Dixon: "I seek the dirty god"
Tyler Dunston: "After the power outage"
Arielle Hebert: "Erosion"
Jenny Hubbard: "The evening darkens and comes on"
Justin Hunt: "Ghost Poker"
Paul Jones: "Only an Outsider"
Chanlee Luu: "Freezing Point Depression"
Christopher Massenburg: "Black Cloud"
G.H. Plaag: "Elegy for RHW Dillard"
Dannye Romine Powell: "Their Wedding Day, May 12, 1940"
Martin Settle: "Recovering Color"
Maureen Sherbondy: "Her Life as Ferris Wheel"
McKenzie Teter: "Stambaugh Auditorium"
Rebecca Valley: "A Long Time Ago This Was a Rich Man's Back Yard"
AJ Vilen: "Into the Headwinds on Knife Lake"
Mia Willis: "(BOI)STEROUS"
Alida Woods: "Forgetting"

NONFICTION

Winner: Caroline Hamilton Langerman: "The Difficult Child"

Additional Finalists:

Kristen Dorsey: "Vine of My Soul"
Sarah Gallucci: "Just Five Minutes"
Steph Gilman: "Revisions"
Terri Leonard: "Gurus: Water Oaks on Mothering"
Mary Tribble: "Our Mothers Map Our Lives"

FICTION

Winner: Michael Sadoff: "Decoy"
Honorable Mention: Melanie Raskin: "Wishbone"
Honorable Mention: Anna Schachner: "The Lovely Woods Are Yours"

Additional Finalists:

Michael Brown: "Belize"
Vicki Derderian: "Binder of Guys"
Stevenson Richardson: "The Get-Gone Man"
Yance Wyatt: "Barbicide" and "Broken Water"

Lit/South Awards 2024
Poetry Competition – Winner

Arielle Hebert
Athazagoraphobia

How to explain the restless way
I move through the world,
my glasses and my clipboard uniform,
ready for furious cataloging. Details,
the devils, appearing from all sides,
from the broken pine that threaded our house
like a needle in the last big summer storm,
from under the small body of the juvenile
goldfinch who saw only the reflection of trees
and not the glass of my window at the end.
We see what we want to see. We get to be
our own unreliable narrators,
wildly slinging memories
late into the night, when we can't sleep.
I said I'd never open the door
for a wolf again, but it's not like I don't
think about it. Remember what a life
of teeth was like. How naive I was
to suffering, trying to find beauty there.
Going back to my notes from that year
again and again, looking for the poetry,
the music of things, in the graveyard.
Raising our old selves up like Lazarus
for questioning, though each time

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they parade from their tombs,
the memories are different,
sliced thin by distance. No matter
how good a witness I was.
I start to wonder
if I've ever really seen a wolf.
If the dazed golden bird rose
up and flew away.

Poetry judge Jericho Brown writes: "Athazagoraphobia" is beautiful in its self-consciousness, a reflective awareness that allows every line to contain something of the lines before it. This makes for a lovely accumulation of energy and music based in vulnerability."

Lit/South Awards 2024
Fiction Competition – Winner

Michael Sadoff

Decoy

The Myrtle Beach Fire Department responds first. Alice is on the bathroom floor holding a towel to Lionel's head, his spindly legs bent into the cramped space. "Talk to me," she says. His eyes flutter. His ragged breath smells of sickness. She hears people come through the front door. "We're back here," she yells and struggles to her feet. They give him oxygen, bandage his head, and lift him onto an orange stretcher. She watches through tunnel vision, hears herself give his name and date of birth, tells them in a trembling voice that he has lung cancer. No, she's not his wife. *Do you know what happened?* She shakes her head.

Outside the single-wide, the day is cold with a biting wind. One of the paramedics, a small slip of a woman with a gruff voice, asks Alice yet again if she's the patient's wife. "We're not married. I already said that."

"Sorry, ma'am. I just got here. We're taking him to South Strand." She resumes loading the gurney into the ambulance. Lionel seems at peace with gauze around his head and an oxygen mask. Within minutes, the ambulance is gone, the fire department is gone, and the crowd of onlookers dwindles to one family, a couple with a little boy, who holds his mama's hand and stares at Alice in her Merrell boots and big blue sweater. Alice has never felt so alone.

Back inside, she sees that the firefighters managed to close the couch's stuck footrest, which, according to Lionel, was locked in an open position for years. She kept tripping over the darn thing these past few days, her shins now the color of blueberries and her ankles swollen. The coffee table is pushed away from the couch and cluttered with glasses and dirty plates. The TV blares the home improvement channel. She shuts it off.

She finds paper towels and a cleanser to wipe blood from the bathroom floor, closes the toilet lid and sits down to have herself a good cry. Not for Lionel. She cries for herself. For her foolishness in thinking he would appreciate her. For being lonely and broke and broken inside. For following him here. *How could I have been so stupid?*

*

She didn't know about his mobile home when Lionel disappeared. It was the week before Christmas, and he'd promised to take her to *The Nutcracker*. No call, no show, and he knew how much it meant to her. She drove by his apartment the next morning but the door was locked, the window shades pulled down. They'd been seeing each other for eight months and still she didn't have a key. His Buick wasn't in the parking lot. She walked around to the porch side shivering in the frost, hiding in shrubs from the neighbors, trying to get a glimpse inside. Tendrils from overgrown houseplants hung over his porch rail, withering in the cold. Not like him to leave his plants to die.

She tried his usual haunts but didn't see him or his car anywhere. Two days and two sleepless nights. A dozen voicemail messages. Calls to the police, none taken seriously. She could almost hear the detective smirk when she told him about the houseplants. "Ma'am, are you sure he wants to be found?"

"Isn't there something you can do?"

"Can I be honest with you?" A gentleness now to his voice.

She held her breath.

"Your, uh, boyfriend, this man Stallings, what we usually find in these cases is someone who would prefer to be left alone."

She let the phone drop from her chin and slide onto the couch. Maybe Lionel wanted to spare her the agony of watching him slip away. He was trying to be a martyr, but she couldn't let him die alone. She would find him and help him through this.

*

Alice stands up from the commode and tosses her wadded tissue into the wastebasket. Forty-seven and nothing to show for it. One screwup after another. Got herself pregnant at nineteen. That was 1973. Charlotte was a small city that hadn't changed much since the 50s. Her boyfriend did the right thing but was gone two years later. In the quarter century since, she's watched her sisters wed and divorce and wed again and has dreamed so many times of a nice man who would marry her for the right reasons and take her to live in a sprawling home on the water somewhere, if not the ocean, at least a sizeable lake. She wasn't picturing a mobile home at Myrtle Beach.

She sees in the bathroom mirror that her eyes are puffy and makes herself stop

blubbering. She should go to the hospital, but then what? Hospitals terrify her, and what if he isn't conscious? Will the doctors even talk to her with no kinship? They'll need to call his estranged daughter, Melissa, and won't that be a joy.

Besides Melissa, Lionel has a son, named Brandon, whereabouts unknown, who never calls. What exactly Lionel did or didn't do to earn the indifference or scorn of his children she can't say, but she can't judge him. Her own son, Nick, calls her by her first name.

The trailer's main bedroom might have been nice twenty-odd years ago. Coral-colored walls, teal bedspread and paneled bedroom set, all scuffed or faded. On a floating shelf above the window sits an old wooden duck decoy that Lionel said his wife bought from a roadside stand. When Alice first saw it, she told him it was collectible and worth money, but he laughed at her.

In the living room, she falls back onto the imitation La-Z-Boy with its faux leather and splitting seams. Only the TV has been replaced since he and his ex-wife bought the place, circa 1978 by the looks of it. She imagines a happier time in his life. A young wife slathering her little darlings with sunscreen, kids impatient with their buckets and shovels, Lionel loading juice boxes and light beer into a foam cooler.

*

After he disappeared, she realized how little she knew about his life. Only that Melissa lived with her husband and kids in Florence, South Carolina. Alice used the internet at the library, looked her up by her maiden name, found a Melissa Stallings Neely, age thirty two. Jotted down the number and called from her house phone. Straight to voicemail. "I'm trying to reach the daughter of Lionel Stallings. If you're Lionel's daughter, Melissa, could you please call me?" She hesitated. "He's very sick and he's missing. I wondered if maybe you had ideas."

A day passed before her phone rang and a tentative woman introduced herself as Melissa Neely.

"I'm sorry we never met," said Alice. "Lionel talks about you all the time."

"I know that's bullshit."

"He's very proud of you. You should hear the way he brags."

"Oh, really? What does he say?"

"He says you're a beautiful young lady and a wonderful mom and so smart and funny."

Contemptuous laughter. "Are you for real?"

"OK, I get it. You wanna skip the pleasantries. Do you have any idea where he might be? It's not like him to disappear like this."

"Boy, you're clueless. It's exactly like him to disappear like this."

Alice's kitchen floor creaked as she started to pace. Water dripped from the faucet onto a pile of dirty dishes. "Listen, I'm just asking if you could show a tiny bit of

concern. He's too sick to be on his own."

Silence. She wondered if Melissa had hung up.

"The trailer," said Melissa.

"Excuse me?"

"Have you gone by the trailer?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Of course you don't."

Alice tried to remember if Lionel had mentioned a trailer.

"He has a single-wide at Myrtle Beach. The name of the park is Ocean Miles or at least that's what it used to be. That's where he went if I had to guess, but I wouldn't bother. He prefers his own company."

Alice felt her dislike fade to pity. To be rejected and abandoned by her daddy. What a hole that must leave.

"What's he got?" asked Melissa.

Alice stepped into the living room. She had more bookcases than books, and coffee tables and end tables where they didn't belong, too worn to sell, too valuable to throw out. The plaster walls were cracking, and everything needed dusting, sweeping or scrubbing, from the ceiling corners to the wooden floors, the varnish long ago worn off. "Lung cancer," she answered feeling suddenly exhausted.

Melissa sighed. "Well, good luck finding him."

*

Alice peels herself from Lionel's recliner and wipes some crumbs from the fake woodgrain of his dining table. The table wobbles as her hand moves across it. One thing she and Lionel have in common, neither is big on keeping house. She looks at the stiff-backed chairs with their threadbare cushions, the original color of which she can't identify, then at the seafoam wallpaper with its pattern of sand dollars and conch shells, and finally at the kitchen range, half its coils broken, so covered with grease it's a wonder it hasn't caught fire. She dials Nick from the ancient yellow phone in the kitchen and is relieved when he answers on the fourth ring. "Oh, hey Alice. I didn't recognize the number."

"When are you gonna visit your poor mama?"

"Real soon. I just gotta ask the boss man for time off."

Liar, she thinks. At seventeen, he moved out after a fight and went to stay with her mama. Then he dropped out of school and started helping with Mama's antique shop. He was handsome as hell, like his daddy, and had the same boyish charm, with spiky, sun-bleached hair and a golden tan. He would wear the top button of his shirt undone and could con people into paying three times what a piece was worth. Mama loved every minute of it.

Now he's in Fort Lauderdale living with some jailbait girlfriend. Wayward. Possibly a drug addict. Another of her failures.

“How’s what’s-his-name?” he asks.

“In the hospital.”

“Sorry to hear that, Mama. Want me to pray? God owes me a favor or two.”

Mama, he called her. She can’t help feeling a little warmed by that and thinks of how he held her hand on the way to kindergarten, how every sentence from his mouth back then started or ended with “mama.” “Don’t call in a favor on Lionel’s behalf,” she says now. “You may need it yourself.”

“Words of wisdom. So, how ya been?”

She tells him about Lionel’s fall in the bathroom and about the firetruck and ambulance, then about her house in shambles and her garage filled with old furniture, how she needs to refurbish and sell it all, but the garage roof has started to leak. The money she could make if she only had the resources to refinish or reupholster, and now it’s all gonna get ruined.

He listens. Says he’s sorry, promises to visit and help with the house. She tells him she loves him and can’t wait to see him, and they say their goodbyes. She can’t blame Nick for anything. It wasn’t easy for him with no dad around.

She digs in her purse for the paper with Melissa’s phone number. Dials, reaches voicemail again. “Just letting you know he’s at South Strand Medical Center. Had a fall. I know he wasn’t much of a dad, but you may want to see him before it’s too late.”

*

Her own daddy dropped dead of a heart attack on the driveway arriving home late from work one evening. Before he died, he had bought Alice and Nick a two-bedroom house in a neighborhood where he’d known the values would appreciate. She was a single mom working as an office admin, her ex-husband a deadbeat, and Daddy didn’t want her to worry about keeping a roof over their heads.

Now, the roof needs replacement and leaks in a bad rainstorm. The last one-story bungalow on her street, the others around her growing new floors and bedroom suites, her property taxes growing with them.

It was the tax bill that day that sent her crying to Mama, scared she would lose the place. She had been fired from three different jobs. She would misspell words or misfile documents because of her dyslexia, so everyone thought she was stupid. Mama couldn’t help with money or job problems but helped her forget about things for a while. They were drinking fuzzy navels at the neighborhood watering hole when Lionel caught Alice’s eye. Tan and rugged with a full head of hair, not too much gray, thin for a man his age. Alone at the end of the bar.

Mama caught her looking and chuckled. “Why don’t you go up there and talk to him?”

“No, Mama, I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I just can’t.”

Mama called out to him. “You can join us over here if you want.”

He turned slowly on his barstool, stiff like he was in some pain. “Alright, you got me curious,” he said. He pushed his stool out, grabbed his light beer and came over. “You must be Lanie,” he said to Mama with a sly grin. In the last fifteen minutes, every person who’d walked into the bar had greeted her by name.

Mama, pushing 70 but still the life of the party, threw her head back and unleashed her raspy, contagious laugh. “I’m famous. My number’s on the bathroom wall if you need to reach me afterhours.”

His face brightened, and he took one of the empty chairs at the table.

“This is my daughter, Alice. Tell me a good joke and you can have her number too.”

He didn’t mention cancer until their third date and only then slid it into the conversation matter-of-factly. Stage IIA, he said. Surgery got most of it. The cancer drew her to him, gave her something to wish for, a reason to stay by his side. She would toast to his health, pray for full recovery. She felt transformed into a caretaker. When his health declined, and his days began to feel numbered, she felt their love a reason to live and clung harder.

*

Still clinging now. Hanging onto nothing.

In the tiny kitchen, ground beef sits on the counter. She puts it in the fridge, wipes where the package leaked. She was out buying ingredients for chili when he fell. Cans of diced tomatoes, hot sauce, a jar of minced garlic and some cornbread mix, left in the grocery bag when she realized something was wrong.

It already seems like another lifetime that she drove there, found the Ocean Miles Vacation Community and circled until she spotted his car. The look on his face when he opened the door, how his eyes closed in a dear-God expression. Wearing a flannel shirt, warm-up pants and moccasin slippers with the heat blasting. On his head a red hunting cap with the flaps pulled down. He stood aside to let her in the door.

She dials Mama next.

“What’s the matter?” Mama says. No caller ID, but she can always tell when it’s one of her daughters and usually knows which one.

“Lionel’s in the hospital and I don’t know what to do.”

“Are you his doctor?”

“You know I’m not.”

“Then why do you need to know what to do?”

How this qualifies as common sense, Alice has no idea.

“He’s not your responsibility,” says Mama.

“But I love him.”

“Honey, it’s not real. He’s a fake.”

Should have known better than to expect sympathy or any lick of sense. Rain starts to patter against the kitchen window. She leans on the counter, stares at the patchy gray sky, the outline of her reflection in the glass.

“You still there, Alice?”

“Yeah, I’m here. You said Lionel’s a fake.”

“Come on home. A fuzzy navel will fix you right up.”

Water thickens on the windowpane, a billowy pattern of smeared shapes and colors. Beyond them, a yellow haze. “Well, thanks for the pep talk, Mama.”

“You know I love you, but this isn’t the time for coddling.”

When has she ever coddled me, thinks Alice. “Anyway, I gotta go,” she says and ends the call.

*

Their old house in East Charlotte was a ranch with a wide yard and carport big enough for the family wagon. Mama could barely cook but had planned a birthday dinner for Daddy and was going to bake him a cake, an effort as likely to burn down the house as produce anything edible. *The Joy of Cooking* propped against the blender, Mama in powder blue jumpsuit and matching headband directing her and her sisters, planning to make chicken cacciatore, losing her place in the cookbook, flipping back and forth to find where she was and what to do next.

Alice didn’t know what she hated most, Mama’s bursts of energy or her crashes. The crazy ideas that turned their house into a circus or the sudden breakdowns that left them dangling from the trapeze or plunging through midair. Some days, Mama would lock herself in the bedroom, and no amount of knocking or yelling would get her out of bed.

She hoped this wouldn’t happen before dinner was ready. The oven was preheated, but the casserole and cake weren’t ready to go into it. Mama was pan frying the chicken with the burner too high. It was sweltering, so she set down the metal tongs and tried to open the window, but it got stuck, and by the time she gave up on that, the chicken was black on one side. Smoke was growing thicker, and sure enough the alarm went off.

Daddy came to the rescue. Turned off the stove, moved the skillet to the back burner and opened the window. Grabbed the step stool from the little closet, pulled the alarm from its mount and yanked the battery out.

A bead of sweat ran from Mama’s headband. She looked at the burnt chicken. The half-assembled casserole. The mountain of peeled potatoes, still whole and raw on the counter. Alice’s sister, Ginny, with her apron covered in flour and cake batter and the mixers dripping. Alice’s other sister, Mallory, knife in one hand, box of breadcrumbs in the other. Alice with the potato peeler. Barely enough room for them all. Mama grabbed hold of a chair back. “I can’t,” she said and walked out.

Grammy and Aunt Linda took over in the kitchen. They sent Ginny and Mallory

to play with their cousins and kept Alice to help. Order restored. Smoke cleared. Grammy scraped the black off the chicken and followed the cacciatore recipe. They boiled potatoes, put the casserole in the oven and poured batter into the cake pan.

Mama stayed in bed all night, and when the dishes were washed and dried and leftovers covered in the fridge, Daddy settled in his recliner with a book about D-Day. Alice stayed by him on the sofa, covered in an afghan. She hoped one day to marry a man like Daddy so she could take care of him the way he deserved, and he could be her rock.

*

She walks into Lionel's bedroom and starts to pack her things, grabs her makeup from the bathroom and crams clothes into her bag. Why can't she get a single thing to work? On her tiptoes, she pulls down the duck decoy. A hand-carved pintail with a brown head, white breast and striped feathers, the paint cracking with age. She knows a man in Waxhaw who collects them and would pay good money for it.

Lionel's a fake. A decoy. And that makes her the poor little real duck lured into a trap. All her life paddling around searching for a companion. Swimming toward crosshairs like God was a sport hunter. She wanted a family and a little pond to call her own. What she got was a dried-up mud puddle.

*

"You need to forget about me," he said the day she arrived, a spiral of smoke from the coil as he heated water.

"Go to hell, Lionel."

"I plan on going to heaven. I can be 29 again." The exhaust fan clearly didn't work and seemed to be spreading the smoke more than anything. The kettle started to hiss. He took a mug from the drying rack, a teabag from a metal canister.

"I'll have a cup of that too," she said.

He reached into the cabinet for another mug. The kettle sounded like an approaching train gaining steam, its whistle and plume finally erupting. He just stood there and looked at his emaciated hands, letting it blare, until Alice wanted to yell his name. Slowly, painstakingly, he dropped a teabag into her mug and removed the kettle from the burner, the room now hazy with grease smoke.

She exhaled slowly. "I'm glad we decided to come here," she said. "I love the beach in winter. It's so quiet and peaceful. Daddy used to take us girls to a little cottage near Savannah and we would roast oysters and build fires at night on the beach. And during the day we could look out the window and see whole families of dolphins swimming around out there. I have very fond memories of being in that cottage with my daddy. He was a saint."

Lionel held the teabag string between his fingers and moved it up and down in the hot water. "Must be nice living in delusion."

She closed her eyes. “Why would you say a thing like that?”

He started to cough, a painful hacking, the sound of a man drowning. His face turned the color of ash.

She used to fantasize about a miracle cure. How his hair would grow back, and his body would strengthen. He would realize life was fleeting and would start to live and love with abandon—to love the woman who was by his side through the whole ordeal.

When he recovered from his coughing fit, he poured some honey into his cup and stirred. “No one in their right mind falls in love with a stage-two cancer patient.”

*

If Daddy’s watching from Heaven, he won’t like her stealing, even if no one will miss it. “I’m sorry, Daddy,” she says. He was the only thing mooring her in life and was gone too soon. “Please forgive me.” She wraps a sweater around the decoy and slips it into her bag.

A cup of tea before she gets on the road. Fills the kettle from the sink, turns the stove on high and watches as grease smoke builds. When the water starts to boil, she leaves the kettle there blaring, the burner still on high, a tiny flame rising now from beneath the coil. She turns on the clogged exhaust fan, watches as it fans the flame, the coil erupting in fire. Brittle paint on the kitchen cabinet starts to crack and peel. Then, it sparks too. The smoke alarm surprises her that it still works.

She hoists her duffel bag over her shoulder and walks out. “Cocksucker,” she says and slams the door. Her car starts on the third try. Tires skid as she pulls out of the trailer park. She follows signs for the interstate, passes a fire truck racing in the opposite direction, its lights and siren on. Floors it past South Strand Medical Center on her way out of town, checks her rearview mirror and sees a plume of smoke rising into the air, black against a gray sky.

Fiction judge Clyde Edgerton writes: “Decoy’ contained supporting stories that did not kill the main story—and that accomplishment called for careful control of point of view, time, and scope. The story depicts life and relationships without decoration. It wanders—but not too far. And the main character is skillfully brought to life through interior and exterior depiction.”

Lit/South Awards 2024
Nonfiction Competition – Winner

Caroline Hamilton Langerman
The Difficult Child

My son had a nature like a pond. He was calm and cool, and reflected back whatever you sent his direction. If you laughed, he laughed. If you sang, he hummed along. If I cried, as I often did when I couldn't stop his new sister from crying, his little bottom lip jutted out.

My daughter yelled. She pressed my buttons. She inched toward the stove with one finger stretched out, threatening to touch the eye, until I said, "No Ma'am." The next day, she inched towards it again, eyeing me, and before I could speak, directed: "Say 'no ma'am.'"

"No ma'am," I surrendered.

She took her hand off the dial, victorious.

They tell you not to label your children but it's so hard isn't it, when one of them gives you a hard time?

*

When she was seven months old, we took a trip on an airplane to visit my parents in Vermont. Her colicky infancy had rolled into a tearful babyhood, and I was tense about the ruckus she was going to make. Crammed into our family row, with our duffle bags and diaper bags and snack bags, we waited for the other passengers to board: people with hands full of coffee, ears plugged with music, young women dressed in white pants and flowy skirts. People who looked like they didn't want to be disturbed by my baby.

"What a precious child," the flight attendant said.

"I hope she doesn't ruin the flight," I responded, giggling. "She's kind of a bad baby."

My husband looked at me fearfully. “Don’t ever say that,” he said. He took her from me, hoisting her little onesie out of my lap and into his own, smiling down into her blue eyes and rosy face. “No mother should say that. She’s not a bad baby.”

The plane took off. She rode in her father’s lap, not crying. I, the bad mommy, looked out the small porthole window with my eyes brimming and envied the men holding neon orange flags, waving their free hands. This was the daughter I’d always dreamed of having, but it hadn’t turned out right. It wasn’t cute. It wasn’t coming naturally. Maybe if I had *another* daughter, things could be put right? A *different* daughter. Was I really thinking this way? I let myself sink again into the competence of my husband until she really did start shrieking, and he handed her back, because her preciousness could be passed around, but her difficulty was mine.

*

The next spring, some forty-ish neighbors had us over for a drink and when the wife asked, “How old are they now?” I said, “One and two.”

“Well,” said my husband, chuckling, shifting in their easy chair—and life did seem so easy, here, across the street, with their teenagers working on homework upstairs—“That’s a little misleading. That sounds so dramatic.”

It was April and my daughter was about sixteen months and my son would turn three in June.

I leaned into the hostess, who was refilling my wine glass, and repeated, “They are one and two.”

“It sounds like they’re one and two,” she said in solidarity, turning to my husband with an apologetic smile.

*

Sometimes she cried so violently after a nap—for no apparent reason—even though I was holding her and offering her juice, and kissing the part of her forehead where her blonde hair reached her skin—that I considered calling an ambulance.

“You considered calling an ambulance?” my husband asked, on his work phone.

This seemed really very dumb now that he was saying it back to me on his work phone. Now she was happily watching some cartoons, later we would play outside with her brother and she would laugh coming down the slide. The weather in North Carolina was temperate. Bright red Camellias bloomed in February. Everything was fine.

Two doors down, our pediatrician lived with her family in a beautiful three-story house with a maple tree out front. She had a full, brown pony tail and someone had raised her to be generous and kind. I had memorized her schedule, and often our pediatric crises were happening on her days off, at a time when, probably, she was just home from having her beautiful brown hair colored and about to turn on an exercise video. Maybe I could just walk up the brick pathway to her door, planted

with white pansies, and knock. While holding my screaming child, and with my quiet little son in tow, I'd very casually say, with a small laugh, "Whatddya think's tormenting her?"

She would take her from my arms and assess, and shush. She would discover something, or not discover something—it didn't matter which. The important part was the "take her from my arms" part, because more than anything I wanted some fairy godmother to come relieve me. But day after day she would wail, and I didn't call an ambulance and I didn't walk down the street to the doctor's house. I held my baby to my chest. I rubbed her nap-wet hair and googled "why is my child screaming." If I had a fairy godmother, it was my iPhone in its cheerful pineapple case and the tiny blip of distraction I enjoyed as I typed out inane questions. *How long will my baby cry?* I asked. *Do babies have panic attacks?* Or, *Reasons babies cry for no reason.*

As she got older, my toddler could tell me her reasons, and at the top of the list: "my socks don't feel good." She and I were down on the hardwood kitchen floor like people in a drill, so upset over the socks. She didn't want to eat this food, or for the water to touch her head in the shower—"but Mommy has to clean you"—or not liking her car seat—"this will keep your little body safe." The more difficult she became, the more difficult I became. I was short with my pond-water son, who just wanted to be a pond, with the ability to hold all his wonders silently and organized. I had wanted to spend the day peering into the pond with admiration, but instead I brushed over it like a north wind. "Go to your room," I said to him, if he required anything of me during one of her spells, and he went, but I could see I had lost him, a tiny bit, and my heart ached inside of my body which was becoming as hard and slick as my iPhone case.

This little girl was as clever and articulate as the fantastic fox we read about, although at school, in the corner of Ms. Pam's three-year-old class, she withheld her words. "It's like she's just waiting for the day to be over," Ms. Pam told us in her grainy grandmother voice, with her arms crossed over her purple sweater.

Well, that made two of us.

*

"You're a disgusting mother," she whispered to me, one night, when I asked her to eat something new. She must have heard this word somewhere and latched onto it. There was no one I could blame—she did not have a slacker nanny, or a disease I could forgive. If I wanted to take any credit for my son's gentle way, I'd have to also own the war inside my daughter. In tennis, I used to love the sheer accountability of a singles match, one on one. There was no one to bring me down with a mistake and no one to split the glory with. But this was a competition I was no match for. I shouted back, proving how disgusting I was.

Was I not kind and competent as the ponytailed doctor was? Was I only capable

of parenting ponds? Could I not pivot one inch out of my own way to make space for another? I admit, I wanted control over my day, to line my children up like dolls—for us all to fit on the shelf like a family of Russian matryoshka dolls. In my belly was the third child, the other daughter, the one who would not be so difficult. Right? A cold fear rushed over me as I cleared the dishes, shoveling her plate into the trash, and noticing, with some heartbreak, that my son had finished his strange new food to please me.

*

Were her ears burning? Was she carrying strep in one of her orifices? I could never really tell if she had some small infection or not.

“This is an odd question,” said the doctor—not the brown-haired lady but the white-haired grandfather who goes to our church—“But does her mucus have an odious smell?”

I knew exactly how it smelled, but was it odious?

“Sometimes a way to detect an infection is by scent,” he said. All of our doctors were in our social circle. One felt, *I’m safe here, with my friend’s granddad*, and also, *I better not say the wrong thing to my friend’s granddad*. It wasn’t like in New York how the pediatricians were vendors we could summon like Ubers to carry us across a problem. Whatever happens here in this doctor’s room would follow us to Easter Sunday and the swimming pool. Even at my lowest, even when my body was pounding with cortisol, my hair was brushed and I tried to keep my eyes soft like Bambi’s.

Her ears were clear. Her chest was strong. The lungs were good. She and I played “I spy” in the examination room and she stumped me with the dark brown stain on my light-brown purse. I drove her home, in her odious car seat, back to our odious house, where we waited for the day to end together. “How’s it going?” my husband called out cheerfully over the speaker phone, from the airport in Dallas, or San Francisco.

Did her mucus smell? Well, sure, but I was so used to smelling it. My breath was foul in the morning, as well, but it was mine. My body smelled of sweat and salt and urine but I lived in it, not surprised to smell it. I could no more smell her odious mucus than I could smell the pond water on my brave little son, who, waiting for us in the kitchen, asked, full of hope for everything to be OK, “What did the doctor say, Mommy?”

*

One quiet afternoon, in a lull when we all sat on the blue sofa, I decided to have a Safety Talk. One of those take-a-deep-breath, here-we-go chats when you had to explain what to do if you found yourself alone in the house, or in a bedroom full of smoke. My son tolerated this, as if allowing a stick to fall on his peaceful pond, but I

could tell it disturbed him. My daughter caught the sticks in her teeth like she'd been expecting them, hungry for them even, something to stockpile.

We talked about how, if their parents couldn't be found, or were hurt, they could go out of our house and walk down the road and start ringing doorbells. "You would say, 'We need help at our house,' and the neighbors would help you."

My son played with a piece of his clothing, not looking. His sister looked eagerly into my eyes, as if taking mental notes. What else? What next? She had a half-smile. This information—this proof of the world being cracked and needing fixing—seemed to give her joy. Access.

"In the yellow house, the Hardys are there. Ring the doorbell twice. Then Doctor Melissa, she might be at work, but the nanny is there. Across the street, the Daltons live in the house with that big bush over the door. You can knock on their door and they are very sweet to children."

"Why are they very sweet to children?" She stared at me intently.

"Well, they had children. And they remember what it's like to have little people around."

I found that I enjoyed talking with her, when she was in this absorbent type of mood. She listened so deeply that I found myself going off script, telling her about not knowing for a long time whom I should marry, until I went out and found her dad. "That was the happiest time of my life," I said. I didn't know how we'd gotten there, but it was nice, and she was pleased. She looked at the ceiling smiling.

"And what was the *saddest* part of your life?" she asked, an interviewer who had won an opening. Anxiously, her brother moved into the next room to manipulate some blocks.

"The saddest part of my life was when your grandmother died."

"It's not fair," she said, remembering some of this, "that *he* got to meet her, and I didn't."

"No," I said. "It's not fair at all."

We sat, beholding each other, completely aligned. Both of us able to look at something totally disturbing straight in the face.

Later that night, I tucked her comforter around her body and placed all of her stuffed dogs—the hyena and the wolf and the coyote—where she wanted them. "Send Daddy in," she said.

"I will."

When he came back down, he said, "She was worried."

"Worried about what?" Maybe I'd scared her with our talk about house fires and injuries and cancer.

"Worried about finding her husband." He shrugged. Cracked open a beer. "I told her don't worry. He'll find *you*."

Her dad always made things better. I imagined her slipping into a happy, belonged sleep on her tiger pillow.

*

But still. Every time she had to wear socks, I was her disgusting mother and she was my bad baby. We were in parallel stories: she suffering to get her socks on and I suffering from her suffering. And I started to pick up on the fact that I was somewhat insufferable to my spouse, my friends, my mother. Just as she was overreacting to the daily tasks of putting on socks, I was way over-sensitive to this completely ordinary experience of raising a toddler. I felt everything. Every little demand on my body, every little noise in my ear. I was ultra-reactive. I needed to be about ten feet away from this, but I was right up next to her milky mouth, her wet hands, her toothless, ear-piercing wail and I was taking it all so personally. “My kid is hard,” I whined, but wasn’t I a grown up? When I said this to the other pretty mothers with their ruffy blouses at the playground, did they hear it the way I heard “my socks feel bad”? Was I the only mother on the block with sensory processing disorder aggravated by a miniature person with sensory processing order? If she could have another mother, a *different* mother. Things might be right for her.

When the third baby came, I hired a special education teacher to be our afternoon nanny. Nothing was more heavenly than hiding in my bedroom those first weeks, pretending the gentle newborn had set me back, pretending to be doing some sort of bodily recovery, while I listened as the nanny coaxed and pleaded, suffered and scolded. She could not get this girl on the potty, or into her bathing suit for swimming lessons. Here was a lady who rescued three-legged and one-eyed dogs. Here was someone with a major in Difficult. She was having a difficult time, I could tell, by the strain in her voice, each twenty-dollar hour at a time with my difficult child. I sat on the other side of the door, on my smooth bedspread with a silent newborn wrapped in my arms. My fairy godmother was here but it wasn’t quite working. I wanted to wrap my screaming, suffering, completely beloved daughter in my own arms, and let her explode onto plain old, familiar, odious me.

*

The nanny couldn’t continue with us when the pandemic started, but neither did my daughter have to be coaxed out of the house. It was March—new leaves were just pressing out of the branches—and there was no reason to pull on socks or buckle a five-point car seat. She did not have to go to the preschool classroom and play the role of a mute. Perhaps she would like to try to ride a bike.

We went to the neighborhood elementary school which had a big field with a track. Her dad got her on the bike and gave her a push. She went, wobbling, then threw her feet down.

Again, feet down.

Again.

And then she was flying. She was three years old, and she was peddling like the Wicked Witch of the West, so far from me that it would have taken me a whole

minute to sprint there if she wrecked. I stood next to my baby in the stroller, whooping.

She rode the bike every day thereafter. There were no cars in the road, so we let her soar down the hill in front of our house, never slowing her peddling even at the steepest part in front of the doctor's house. When I saw her grab the handlebars and fly, when I saw the complete lack of fear, I saw a window, an opening. Not a finish line, but a release. *Freedom*, I thought. *She wants freedom!* Maybe I didn't have to be offended by that. Maybe that's something I could get behind. Maybe I wanted it too, and maybe neither of us were monsters for wanting it.

The doctor with the brown hair saw her riding her bike and stepped out her front door. In her kind voice, she called "Go, girl!"

Panting, beaming, she came back up the sidewalk like a marathoner. The doctor went on: *You're strong, tough, amazing*. It was like a diagnosis, like medicine: she needs something to *do*.

My amazing daughter!

But I knew I could take no credit.

After the bike came art, with everything colored precisely. After the art came reading, and soon after that was the phonetic writing, where she sat at the kitchen counter laboring over novels. If I took her out to a tennis court, she chased down a forehand and really *tried* to whack it back. And after the doing came something so tender and natural that it floored me: the giving. She gave me pansies plucked from our planters and the jelly beans I'd hidden in her plastic eggs. "You can sleep with my hyena tonight," she said, gently. How did we get here? I wondered. She was my precious baby. How I had wronged her, I thought, as her baby sister cried, and I had to step away.

*

Now she was five.

"Can you tell me again," she said, "about the saddest part of your life?"

I reminded her about Mimi, about how it felt like robbery, like someone stealing something right out of my hand. Her little fists tightened. But I reminded her also about the way someone who was already gone could still embrace you, could still hold you steady, "sort of like you're balancing on a bike."

"So, I can ride a bike because Mimi is helping me balance?"

"Well, that's what I think, anyway. I think she's totally amazed by all these things you've been learning. And any time you see a red cardinal, it's a sign that she's watching you. She's seen you doing some really *hard* things!"

She looked out the window, where there were red birds in our magnolia trees morning and night.

"Have you done some hard things?" she asked.

I didn't have to go back too far in time to find that one. "You know when you

were a little baby? And you used to bang your head on the ground?”

She didn't really know but she'd been told.

“I think you were just mad that you couldn't ride a bike. And read a book. I think it just really was hard for you to be a baby because you wanted to do all the big kid things but you had to do the goo-goo-ga-ga stage first.”

“Yeah,” she said, laughing. “I did *not* like the goo-goo-ga-ga stuff!” She had this whole new sparkly attitude, one where she nodded and rolled her eyes around and smiled.

“I think maybe, even though being a mom is wonderful,” I paused here, and gave her my goofy smile, and she smiled back with her gap-toothed tom-boy grin, “I haven't been able to do some of my other favorite things while I'm doing it.”

“Like tennis?”

“Exactly! Like tennis, and writing, and working, and going on dates with your dad. So, I was kind of like, banging my head on the floor. Because I had a lot of feelings about not being able to do stuff.”

“I have a lot of feelings, too.”

“It's hard to feel every little thing. But it's also a gift.”

She was finished with this chat and started pulling out a bracelet kit, asking me to reach the string in the cabinet, but I needed to know one more thing. I held my breath.

“Do you think I'm a good mommy?”

I watched her—it was like she was changing and morphing so quickly from the difficult child into something else, something I'd never seen before, a huge, shining tidal wave that had sucked up so much energy but was now prepared to crest and give back.

“You're the best mom ever,” she said, absent-mindedly, making a pile of pink and blue rubber bands.

I put my hands on her scrawny shoulders and held her close. “And by the way,” I said, coming back around to see her freckled face. “Remember Ms. Pam?”

She nodded.

“You were so smart. You could talk so well. Why didn't you talk when you were at school?”

She looked up from her bracelet-making and made a long, surprised face like a ghost. “Ms. Pam had a scary voice. She actually did have a *very* scary voice.”

*

When I was a child, there was a pond my mother brought us to on Nantucket called Miacomet. Little kids could safely wade in, wearing a diaper or nothing at all. I remember the sunscreen, the red grapes in a baggie, the shallow tilt of sand that led down towards the pond and the cattails slapping the surface. Behind us was a big dune. On the other side of the dune was the ocean. It was huge and there were big

waves, boogie-board waves, surfer-dude teenager waves. When we got old enough, my brother and I ran out of the station wagon and went to the ocean, but when we were sunburned and finished, trudging back to the car, I often stopped in the middle and looked down at the pond. I hated to leave the beach, my mom said. I tantrummed and raised a scene and spilled the baggie of grapes and peed myself on purpose. But I don't remember that. I don't remember my mother coaxing me, battling me, suffering through it.

What I remember is that those were some of the happiest days of my life. Standing between the pond and the ocean. Loving them both and knowing I didn't have to choose. Feeling the nearness of my mother, who never gave up on me. When we had visitors, I always wanted to show them this place where you could have both kinds of beauty.

I may have been a difficult child but now I'm standing in the silence of my kitchen with the back door open to the four o'clock breeze. My son is deep under the surface of his pond, reading a book, and my daughter is writing furiously like a high tide. The baby is napping on a pillow, as still as a sand dune.

"Look," I whisper to myself, and my daughter picks up her head.

"What?"

Nonfiction judge Maaggie Smith writes: "This essay did what my favorite prose does: it made me want to speed up and slow down at the same time. The narrative was compelling in a way that spurred me on—I wanted to find out what happened to this mother and child, how the relationship changed or didn't over time—but I also wanted to read carefully and savor this writer's craft. This essay will stay with me, thanks to its combination of powerful storytelling and beautiful language."

Eric Nelson
O My World

When he's forgotten his motorcycle and suddenly spots it
under the couch, when the dog eats his graham cracker
off the coffee table, when the watering can he filled with rocks

is too heavy to lift—*O my world!* the two-year-old
exclaims, combining his mother's frequent call and response:
What in the world? O my goodness!

And now I can't stop saying it.
Because it's mouths-of-babes and because
how else can you answer this world of both

random horror and routine kindness without warning,
like my neighbor stabbed in the head and left in a dumpster
by a hitcher, and the college kid who stopped at night

on a busy highway to help me change a flat. And how
else to embrace the sudden wonders that show up like clues
just at the moment we look—

the bird hurled by a sudden gust beneath a passing car
and emerging from the pummeling ruffled but still
flapping, rising to the utmost limb of a cedar tree.

O my world, his small sandals beside the front door
are enough to break me. We all had feet that size,
our ten toes wiggling as if they weren't ours
but nibbling fish come to welcome us. O my world

what have we made him wade into, his wet footprints
bright on the wooden bridge across the creek, the creek
shriveled down to just the right depth for him.

Rosa Castellano

A Girl the Color of Sunshine On Water Is Asked to Stand Up By Her Teacher

Sit down

when the White kids stand.

Sit down

when Black kids stand.

Sit down.

You may not remain standing for both
even though the sky at this moment

is five different colors
all called blue.

Jo Angela Edwins
The Carriage

The girl held the baby, wrapped in yellow blankets, awkwardly in her arms. The girl was twelve and had learned from her grandmother how to scream directions to her younger cousins, but her cousins were not there that day, and a baby could not understand directions, could not control its own voice. Anyway, she did not want to scream at the baby, just hold it, but the baby seemed too heavy for her to carry, even though it barely weighed six pounds. The grandfather sat as he usually did in a dusty chair in the corner of the porch, watching the girl shifting the baby from one side of her body to the other. He never said a word. The girl did all the talking, cooing at the child, asking questions she knew the child could not answer. The child was not hers, could never be hers, she knew, but she loved the child, so she tried to rock it in her arms. But her arms felt too small, and the child began to slip. The girl rushed to the carriage, the one she would find empty in two weeks when all the women in church dresses and men in church pants were fussing with food in the kitchen or smoking cigarettes in the back yard. She would fill it with her dolls, cooing to them after she ordered the younger cousins to help her haul the carriage to the street for a stroll. Her grandmother would see her through the window as she pushed the carriage, and the grandmother's cracked voice would shriek, "That ain't a toy! Get back here!" And she would turn back. But none of that has happened yet. Right now, all the carriage is to her is a safety net, something to catch the beautiful baby slipping from her arms.

Isaac Akanmu

parable of the young girl holding a basket of eggs

-after A Young Girl Holding a Basket of Eggs
by Emile-Auguste Hublin (1874)

my eyes are up here.
boy, if you look away,
you die.
or you will see death.
they're the same.

my eyes, they are up here,
dark on the surface,
(aka the conception)
yet cream-colored
like eggshells,
the way hope is sometimes.

boy, the dirt in my nails
is your future.
but you shouldn't look there.
look at my eyes
until they transform
into bronze,
until my hair morphs
into a serpent
clothed in animal skins.

look here at my eyes
until you cannot look anymore
until your windows
become stained glass
able to be shattered
with one touch,

or one song
from the lips
you can no longer see.

*the crimson in my garment
flows for you—*

boy, that's the song
with which i will break you.

Barbara Conrad
A Girl's Perfect Circle

*inspired by Terrance Hayes,
"How to Draw a Perfect Circle"*

Hand like a vise on a yellow #2—first grade fingers
squeezing out a perfect circle. Gold-starred by Ms. Perry,

thumbtacked on the class bulletin board. And from here

bubbles, beach balls and perfect red bows in her hair,
balloons and full moons in purple air, sand dollars on a beach,

a planet grounding her, equal parts
blue and green. How it feels to be in solid orbit

with the universe. Wrist fluid as a mountain spring, body bending
onto itself in a somersault or a flip off the high dive at camp.

Raindrops and gumdrops and other summer lyrics

to tickle a girl's tongue, her round mouth learning
to pucker pink, unless her pucker isn't pink and camp

is moons away and balloons snag in the branches.

§

Headless chicken making circles in the dark,
a snake coiled in the hole of a bluebird box. That same snake
chasing its tail in a worn cliché.

And what about the hole inside the circle? Hole in a bucket,
dear Liza dear Liza, the hole a bullet makes, a backyard pond

clogged with algae, sinkhole, open well, open mine shaft,

open wound. A white peony in full bloom, black ants
signing their names. Fingerprint, more of an oval, neither white

nor black. A broken hula-hoop. Tears from sweet onion juice.
Fall off a unicycle scabbing the skin. A whirligig's dizzy spin.

Echo of a lonely baleen, a Bengal tiger's bruised eye sockets.
Men and women locked in a band of barbed wire.

Families in the desert swirling under a hot orb to find the way
in or out. Oxbow in a dry river bed, its rocks worn
by the water that used to be.

A burial hole. Sunspot on a vintage photograph.
The girl circles back, crawling slowly

on her hands and knees, the way a dream gets retold.

§

And what the dream might hold?

Brim of her dear father's hat, her mother's apple pie plate,
an apple pie, an apple unpeeled—Golden Delicious, Honeycrisp,

crabapple—its dark-spotted nubs, it doesn't matter.

The worm's already in its hole. The O in Hole,
the O in Oh No, the O in Omen. Double O in Look as in
look at the apple seed digging itself into the dirt, sprouting

a new tree, circle of life in the loop of memory.
The O in Hope, the O in Oh Yes.

And Oh Yes, for the girl, untethered at last,
released from those red perfect bows.

Mary Tribble

Our Mothers Map Our Lives

She answers on the first ring.
Damn. I was hoping for voice mail.

“Hi Mom. It’s Mary,” I say, as if she has a dozen daughters, not two, to choose from. I sense her curiosity as soon as she hears my voice. I don’t call her all that often anymore and certainly not in the middle of the day, a habit from the past when the rates were higher and such indulgences were saved for emergencies. I try to begin but the fear I feel is ages old. It goes back to her mother, her mother’s mother and so on, generations of women rewarded for their practical dispassion, rather than abandoned emotion. Each women learned it and, in turn, taught it to their daughters as deliberately as instructing them on how to piece a quilt or fry a chicken.

“Well, I’m in this workshop,” I say, deciding to tiptoe in on backstory. I know what she thinks about my “workshops.”

I’ve been participating in a two-day program with the Center for Intentional Leadership. We—entrepreneurs, business executives, civic leaders, and I—have gotten very deep, very fast. The leader Mike encouraged us to set aside the mundane chit-chat that businesspeople usually perform and to be courageous enough to reveal our true selves. Earlier today, the conversation became intentionally vulnerable as we were invited to share our regrets. I immediately thought about the night I said a horrible thing to my mother. Or rather, I thought about what I didn’t say to her. I felt Mike watching me carefully as I told the story, sobbing in shame over my actions.

He called for a break and the participants dispersed. He found me on the porch.

“You should call her,” he said. “You need to clear this up.”

“What? Well, yeah. I will at some point,” I said, looking down at my feet.

“Why not now?”

I shook my head. It was too much of an emotional risk. Our family wasn’t one to share our *feelings*.

“What have you got to lose?” He put his hand on my forearm, compelling me to look at him rather than the tiles below my feet.

“Not much.” My eyes welled up. “It’s not like we have much of a relationship anymore.”

“You shouldn’t go another moment without knowing if something different with your mom is possible. And she shouldn’t go another moment without knowing the truth.”

He left me alone on the porch. After a few minutes, I gave in. I was shaking when I dialed her number.

*

And here I am on the phone, visualizing my mother's lips pursing as she learns I'm in another one of my workshops, wondering what New Age mumbo jumbo I am swallowing now.

I do swallow and go on. "We've been talking about regrets."

Silence.

I'm really going out on a limb here and she's giving me...nothing. Is she even there? I keep on.

"Remember when we were talking about Nathan's parents?"

His name is bitter on my tongue, even still. Nathan, my post-marriage love disaster. Nathan, the Adonis with a five-string guitar and six-pack abs. The songwriter who wrote lyrics so dense with metaphor that you couldn't possibly decode their meaning. My friend Charlie later said, "That's the point. Nathan really doesn't want to be understood. He has too much to hide." I fell in love with his abs, not realizing his torso was empty, nothing inside the hollow Superman suit. Perhaps I can plead abdominal insanity for what I said to Mom that night, having just returned from a week in Hawaii with Nathan's parents, whom I had not previously met, who entertained me while we waited every day for Nathan's abs to fly out and join us, but they never did, every day a new reason, every night a new song. I ate Chinese with these eighty-year-old strangers and fell in love with them instead. They were cool and funny and liberal. We sat on the beach every afternoon while I read Barack Obama's memoir aloud, and we calculated his chances of winning with every new poll.

Flash forward to the day I sat across from Mom at lunch on a visit to Tallahassee, telling her proudly that I was bringing *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore's presentation on climate change, to Charlotte and she pursed her lips and spit out, "I knew you would fall for that global warming nonsense." I ran into the ladies' room and cried for ten minutes and couldn't speak to her until later when I was fueled on chardonnay.

That night at her house, crying, I was trying to tell her, trying to make her see that when she dismissed my ideas and ideals, I felt like a small and stupid child. I felt rejected and unloved.

So I said it. I started to say it, anyway—blurting out through sobs, "I wish, I wish..."

"You wish we weren't your parents," my mother said. "You wish Nathan's parents were yours."

And here was my sin, my sin of omission. I didn't respond. I didn't deny it. I didn't say, "Oh, don't be silly." I let her words thud between us on the blue velvet

couch. I didn't lunge for them as they slid to the floor and then bounced up into the air, lingering there. Those words followed me back to Charlotte and showed up during every subsequent visit and every polite conversation, infrequent as they were.

*

Now on the phone, I take a breath, trying to suck in courage. "I am calling to say that's not true. I don't want Nathan's parents. I don't want Walter and Carol. I want you and Dad. I choose you."

And just like that, the polluted air between us clears and for the first time in two years I can breathe.

*

During the summer of 2016, when Mom was in and out of the hospital, I was grateful I had taken that emotional risk, because once I did, our relationship began to heal. We still were on complete opposite ends of the spectrum when it came to politics and social issues, but we learned to ignore those differences and focus on the things we loved about each other, our sense of humor, our passion for learning, and our shared love of history.

One day in mid-July, I got a text saying she was short of breath and being taken to the hospital. I met her at the emergency room where we stayed all night, waiting for test results. I had my computer with me, so I opened it up to find a distraction for us both. I had a collection of scanned letters from my current thesis project—some of the hundreds of letters between our nineteenth-century ancestors, Samuel and Sally Wait, who founded Wake Forest College in 1834. I was enrolled in a Masters of Liberal Studies program at Wake Forest, hoping to write a biography of my fourth-great-grandmother. My mother had studied these letters decades earlier, when she had considered writing a book herself. She was well-versed in the Waits, whereas I was at sea, unfamiliar with these ancient people and their setting.

With equipment beeping and nurses scurrying by in the emergency room, I chose a letter written by Sally in the early 1820s to read aloud, stopping often to ask questions. With her answers, Mom transported me back in time, to a steamboat on the Delaware River when Sally Wait met the woman she hoped to pattern her life after. To the Columbian College campus where Sally finally was able to join Samuel down South. To the birth of their first child, Ann Eliza. No matter what I asked my Mom, she knew the answer despite her dazed hospital state. Her memory about what she had for breakfast might have been in decline, but she knew our ancestry. That night in the emergency department began a ritual for us of health care alternating with historical interpretation, a dance that helped get us through the medical lows and the relational highs of the summer.

Mom became a teacher to me during that time, conjuring up connections between the past and the present, making our ancestors real and three-dimensional.

As I sat at her bedside, she told me stories of Sally becoming a teacher to her grandchildren in her later years, telling them about her time on the farm in Vermont and meeting the Marquis de Lafayette in Washington, D.C. She told me about Sally's sister's engagement being called off, her brothers going off to study for the ministry, and the tragedy of Sally's son's death.

Our mothers are more than givers of life. As writer Elizabeth Gilbert put it, they are the chroniclers of our time on this planet. They remember the year we broke our arm, the time we twirled a baton in the parade, and the details of our doll show victories. And it's not just our lives, but the lives of the people who came before us. Since time began, our mothers have been the keepers of stories from our past, tellers of tales that would otherwise be lost.

Our mothers map our lives.

A few years ago, I met a Native American spiritual woman who helped me through a rough patch. She told me that when you heal your relationship with your mother, you create positive karma going back seven generations and going forward seven generations. Sally Wait is seven generations removed from me. Was there a healing that needed to happen, one that transcended my mother and me?

Perhaps. In the meantime, my mother needed all the healing she could get. After the night in the emergency department, she was sent home to await the results of the myriad of tests she had gone through. Once home, there was a diagnosis of an autoimmune problem; a few days later another doctor thought it was a reaction to medication. There were no clear answers, no assurances, no closure. Only questions.

One night in late August, I got a call that she had fallen again and I should come to her cottage at the retirement community. By the time I got there, a nurse and orderly had her upright on a dining room chair. She looked small, and frail, and frightened.

"Mom, what happened?"

"Well, I don't know. I don't remember falling, I just found myself on the floor."

"What do you remember?" I asked.

"I went to the store to get cat food around six o'clock," she said, holding her hand to her head. I noticed a large red bump which could be a problem—she was on a blood thinner and at high risk for an internal bleed.

"I was dizzy when I got home. I don't remember falling," she said again. "I just found myself on the floor."

"Did you push your panic button?" referring to the emergency button she wore around her neck.

She shook her head. "I didn't wear it to the store so I didn't have it on. I tried to get up, but I couldn't. I fell on my knees." She pulled her pants legs up to inspect her bruised legs. "And I fell once on my head," she continued. "So I had to crawl to there," pointing to the phone on the other side of the room.

"She called us about an hour ago," the nurse said.

I looked at my watch: 9:30 p.m. My stomach tied into knots. If her timing was correct, it took her over two hours to drag herself the twenty or thirty feet from the kitchen to the living room phone. It was so distressing to picture, I had to put it out of my mind.

When we arrived at the emergency department she was crying, something I rarely saw in my entire life. She was worried about her freedom. It was a fall that had started her mother's downhill slide to assisted living, then to the healthcare unit, which is the last stop before death.

I held her hands and leaned down toward the wheelchair.

"I know this is upsetting. But you'll be all right."

She raised her arms to say something, but she couldn't find her words. She slumped in the chair and her hands fell to her lap.

"I love you, mom. I love you." I said it over and over again, hoping to soothe both of us while we waited for the nurses to tell us what was next in this new upside-down world.

Her admittance into the hospital ushered in a new phase of our relationship, one that transcended all the conflict and tensions we had had much of our lives. She has always teased me about what a terrible pre-teen I was, overly bratty and unruly, especially compared with my studious older sister. As an adult, my political divergence from her conservative ideals created a divide that lasted twenty years. My apology for wanting different parents had mended the worst of it, but I wouldn't describe our relationship as close until that summer. Her illness, coupled with our shared interest in Sally Wait, brought us to a loving understanding of each other, our family heritage, and our lives.

I spent most days alternating between the office, the hospital, her cottage to feed and medicate her elderly cat, and home for a few hours of sleep before it started again. At the hospital, Mom was getting worse instead of better. She was coughing and shivering and found it hard to catch her breath. The nurses brought in ice packs to reduce her sky-rocketing temperature. She had pneumonia again and was also dealing with a liver issue that required a medication that exacerbated the pneumonia. Every day there was a new dance between getting her well and juggling different medications that were causing additional complications.

We reeled between sweet intimate moments to heartbreaking situations, like when she was on the toilet, doubled over with diarrhea while violently coughing up phlegm.

"I'm never getting out of here. I'm ready for this to be over."

I rubbed her back and told her it would get better, not believing my own words. We were both crying.

A caretaker in me emerged. When I combed her hair, it reminded me of the time I ran a comb through my father's hair after the undertaker had parted it on the wrong side. We talked about pets we had owned, my sister's kitten Snowball when

they lived in Washington State while Dad was in the service. The sad day our bulldog was hit by a truck. The time we had a colony of bees behind our bedroom walls.

In between her coughing spells, I would pull up Sally and Samuel's letters on my computer and read them aloud.

One afternoon, the nurse told us they would be coming in soon to take her temperature to see if there was any improvement. Mom absentmindedly took a sip of water and I yelled, "No! You are about to get your temperature taken!"

Without missing a beat, Mom looked at me with a deadpan expression, picked up the bedpan, and spit the water into it, causing me to burst out laughing. Then, another coughing fit aged her ten years, as she sat hunched over the edge of the bed, wishing for death.

"I guess I won't be here much longer," she said. "But that's okay."

"Well, it's not okay with me," I said.

"Good to hear it."

*

The coughing got so bad that she had to write notes instead of talking.

She was so miserable.

This was so hard.

The nurse came in and quizzed her.

"Where are you?"

"In the hospital."

"What month is it?"

"August."

"What year?"

"2016."

The nurse pointed at me. "Who is that?"

I answered this one. "The good daughter."

We all had a good hearty laugh that for Mom turned into a hacking, breathless cough.

Alida Woods
Forgetting

The drawer holds
nothing.
In it I have left space
for all I do not know
and what I will not keep.

Fugitive fragrances
of old linens,
my mother's lingerie lingers
in the spaciousness of memory.

*Was she happy?
Did she really believe in God?
Did she miss her mother
who she found Plath-like dead?*

Questions become the
slow sediment of forgetting.

From the house, I watch
the moon's milk
pour over the field.
The barred owl calls from the wood,
wind tugs gently at the spruce.

*Do owls mate for life?
How old is the oldest tree?
And the moon, how does she keep the waves
from pocketing the shore-line?*

Questions I won't bother to answer.
They take up so little space in the wondering.

My mother said she was tired of requiems,
 flags at half-mast.
She chose to forget
 and planted 1,000 bulbs
that bloomed
 yellow
year after year
 she watched twilight
collect in the pines.
 I loved her for her forgetting.

Caeli Faisst
Withering

You see her hands in dying orchid petals,
match the lines to familiar wrinkles, wonder
if flowers roll lumpia while watching K-dramas.

When asked why you sit back
curled, arms close, you talk about her
knees, say they were formed from metal and her chest
housed magnets. It's why every compass knew home
and every hug felt cold but safe.

Lately, you've judged lovers by how they cook rice—
teach one you love the way your mother taught you,
blame the tears from the steam when he asks you what's wrong.

The first time you call her, sobbing, it has already been
ten years without lumpia and the smell of hot oil,
a hundred something Sundays starting and stopping with "so..."

Your sobs, she says, remind her of curses,
old magic housed in the back of your throat,
something to scare off men and unmask devils.

You realize the woman whose face you share
is terrifying. You remind yourself to buy orchids.

In the Philippines, there are 800 species of orchids,
all beautiful all dying.

You've imagined her death a million times,
let the sobs rock your ribs; macabre, I know,
but you'd rather be prepared than devastated,
or at least be devastated and know you'll survive.

In January, you ask her how to make lumpia
“to taste” she says and your tongue swells with pride:
you are your mother’s daughter as she was hers,
a testament to slow burns wrapped in rice paper and oil,
of tears caught in steam, of women whose hands
know how to wither.

Erin Cowles

Cut me; I won't die

Each Monday I pour
my anger back in like cream to cut

the bitterness brewed dark
within me—strong enough to break

my teeth as I chew the morning
into pieces I can swallow.

Uptown, men in navy suits
swarm entire sidewalks, looking

not at but through me. I play chicken
and lose, shoulders bruised

as I'm pushed into traffic. No time
to die today, so I scream

only behind my eyes, keep the rest
jailed tight behind my teeth. But when

has it ever been different? My mother
taught me how to be small

before she taught me to read (but never
how to stop shrinking). Even now

the space I take up is deliberate, natural
as fluorescent lights buzzing

new holes into my skull. I burn
like a forest fire, like acid

at a plain white desk where nothing
can stay if it's mine. *What a joke,*

I type to my coworker, coffee spilled
lukewarm across my shirt front

—what a motherfucking joke
to live woman-shaped; to curate

myself for viewing like a butterfly
pinned living to its board. I burn still

like a dragon, like uranium
melting its reactor

each day as I peel my eyes open
once more, with feeling;

as I swallow the sun, piece by
fucking piece.

Eddy Hicks
Soiled

Genesis 2:16

But the steel stove did not look hot to me.
I read no smoke, saw no glow. Gray is cold,
I reasoned. I listened: No flickering
tongue spoke to me. I knew more than I was told.
I reached—my hand was ahead of me: It flew
back fresh apple red. Only then did I
hear chaos hiss. My body rose to new
nakedness at its own language, the whys.
My skin stripped juicy, the raw bubbling
into eyes steeped in primordial fact.
I felt a violent peace. Though troubling,
what I had done was not an evil act.
I let my tears fall free for summoning
the golden light that shines above suffering.

CB Wilson
Oak Gall Prayer

We walked the narrows with
damp sun pressing in, our skin
fizzing with chemicals.
The tulip poplar had lungs the size
of a whale. I pressed against the
slow beat, undulating out my gills.
L— handed me an oak gall,
whose many dark eyes revealed to me
edges of a nebula. I crushed
this universe-adjacent with the same
fingerprints I had as a child.
Jews used oak gall ink for centuries
to write out the Torah, they said.
Our laughter stratospheric,
touching the bright wide noon
in waves, in tucks and rolls, in ringlets.
And then Tishrei led us through
a river of roots
to the cold water, where we swam.

Lit/South Awards 2024
Fiction Competition – Honorable Mention

Melanie Raskin
Wishbone

“I’m having a baby,” Juliana says softly, and passes her grandfather Samuel an onion. Her grandmother Glenda drops the jar of rubbed sage into the massive bowl of raw stuffing. Juliana’s boyfriend Dray is slouched on the sofa playing Fortnite on his phone. Samuel pauses in mid-chop, closes his eyes, and takes a breath. He lives in perpetual motion. Starting at five in the morning, he carpools the people in his home to early shifts at work, to the elementary school, to the high school. Then he drives to his job where his sole purpose is to keep *other* people moving in style. It has been a tough week at the car detail shop. Customers wanted their rides bright and shiny for the holiday and he is bone-tired, his hands swollen into fists from clenching the rinse hose. But he has been waiting for this day, this very moment in their doublewide’s kitchen. Thanksgiving is the day when he stops. And everyone he loves (as well as everyone he puts up with) stops with him to help prepare the meal. And now, all he wants is to walk into the living room with his fancy Wüsthof chef’s knife and spatchcock the seventeen-year-old father of his beloved fifteen-year-old granddaughter’s unborn child.

*

“Just a few days,” Juliana had begged her grandparents three months ago when Dray, the troubled study hall friend, had dropped out of high school and needed a place to stay. She hadn’t even thought to talk to her own parents about it. They were squatters themselves, moving in with Samuel and Glenda “till they got on their feet.” That had been sixteen years ago and they were still crawling on hands and knees. So, Juliana’s parents had swiftly and prudently adjourned to the mosquito-infested sauna that is a Florida backyard to smoke a cigarette and left the tough talk about letting a teenage

boy move in to Samuel and Glenda. Samuel's castle, Samuel's rules. But how could he have forgotten to mention the one forbidding teen sex? Surely it would have been right up there with refusing rides from strangers, keeping your Solo cup with you at all times at a party, and not posting your little brother's picture and the name of his school on Facebook?

"His mom and dad kicked him out because he couldn't find a job after he quit school." Juliana's dreamy voice was tinged with sadness. Hers wasn't the impassioned righteous anger of the average fifteen-year-old caught up in the drama of which friend is grounded this week, who gets a thirty-dollar-a-week allowance *just because*, why Top Chef switched to Wednesday nights. Hers was the bone-deep grief over a line that would never have been crossed in her home. Samuel felt it. As a parent, he also couldn't understand how someone could kick their child out of the house—especially a seventeen-year-old whose only sin was not being able to find a job. Been there, done that sixteen years ago with his own daughter, Juliana's mother. But then he met Juliana's boyfriend Dray, recognized the insolent slouch, yearned to yank the holey jeans up from around his bony thighs, counted the piercings, cringed at the unfortunate Milky Way of acne sprayed across his face beneath the blue-tipped mohawk. It was all that acne and how hard Dray was working not to care about it as he flung himself into a chair at the dinner table that made Samuel let down his guard. That and the "Please, Granddaddy? You help everybody," from his granddaughter.

"I'm just not sure it's a good idea," Samuel had hedged.

"Then we'll just move out and live with friends for awhile," Juliana had answered in her sweet, slow voice. Samuel had nodded a thoughtful agreement, calling her bluff, daring her to remember, what friends, where, whose money? Quiet little girls with big eyes, sweet voices, and empty smiles were adorable, cuddly. But all that changed in middle school. Tweens were a different animal. Like sharks, they ate their young—and Juliana was forever young. He remembered taking a day off from the detail shop to hear the heartbreaking results of the IQ and learning tests when she was in elementary school. He had gladly taken on a second job delivering morning newspapers to pay for tutors who just couldn't seem to catch her up to her friends. He had even sucked it up and became the only male Brownie scout leader in town because Glenda couldn't make it work with her second shift at the convenience store. Samuel helped five little girls earn badges, led hikes of giggly eight-year-olds along the estuary, recruited parents to set up tables at the Wal-Mart to sell cookies. But once the pink hair bows came off and the skinny jeans went on, Juliana was on her own. She had no friends, except for Samuel. And friends stand by each other. Samuel sighed.

"Let's try it for a week and see what happens." Glenda had given him The Eyebrow, the same one she'd given him sixteen years ago when their own daughter

had moved *her* boyfriend in. Impotent, he'd given up and stomped out of the room to cook dinner.

*

A week later, when Juliana said good night, Dray had gathered up his pillow and blanket from the living room couch and followed her. He smiled at Samuel as he closed the bedroom door behind them. Glenda had physically blocked Samuel from barreling into the room and dragging Dray out, forcing her husband to storm out of the house and sit in the parking lot of the Winn-Dixie for an hour eating melting butter pecan ice cream. Returning home to the sound of teen sex, but unable to say anything because Juliana's threat to run away was out there, like a dirty Kleenex nobody wants to pick up from the middle of the floor.

So it went, night after night for more than two months, till now, this Thanksgiving morning. And he still isn't allowed to rage. Can't suggest an abortion or adoption. Can't kick Dray till he dies...or at least to the curb. No. He has to swallow it down whole: bones, feathers, and all.

*

Samuel pours the roux, a slurry of flour and cream, into the buttery onions. He pushes the mixture around with a spoon. His face is a hot splotchy red—not from the heat of the kitchen but from pure fury. His teeth ache from the clench of the last twenty minutes, his shoulders are shaking. While his touch on the onions is almost balletic as he gently twirls the spoon, his thoughts are pure break-dancing. He would love to shove the spoon right up Dray's butt, yearns to lever that kid's ass into the pan and fry it black and cindery. Instead he works away on Thanksgiving lunch in the kitchen of their trailer on a better street in a bad neighborhood with a dishwasher that hasn't worked in two years and a cheerful rug with a big smiley turkey on it covering a board covering a hole in the floor. But it is his. Samuel paid it off last month and is satisfied with the home he has made for his wife, his daughter and her slacker boyfriend, and two perfect grandchildren. Except now he is sharing it with Dray. And it just got much worse.

"So, I'm going to be a, a uncle?" wonders his seven-year-old grandson Rocky, staring up at his sister in pure worship.

Dray picks at a pimple on his neck encased in crude barbed wire he has drawn with a blue pen around his throat, smooth and slender and fragile as a girl's. Samuel can see where Rocky has taken a turn. He pictures his grandson's chubby hand clutching the pen. Sees his tongue poking out of the side of his mouth as he carefully colors in the sharp blue points. Admires the drop of red that can only be blood his grandson has added with a Sharpie at the tip of a tine under Dray's ear. Prays for art to become reality.

"It can share my room, I don't mind. OK, Granddaddy?" Rocky asks anxiously,

then doesn't wait for an answer. Instead, he races to his room and comes out with a cherished Matchbox car. He hands it to Juliana and Dray to seal the deal.

Samuel feels himself sinking. It's a pecan pie he's mired in. You would think with all those pecan chunks in there, he'd be able to get a leg up but it isn't happening. Every time he takes a step the nut just flips over, like a dead body in the sea, and he finds himself drowning in molten brown sugar.

He sees Glenda laugh and hug their grandson, hears her making it OK, just the way she did when their daughter's boyfriend moved in all those years ago. Nearly seventeen years and two children later, he still hasn't found The Right Job, is still drifting, has never thought to help his daughter with her algebra, couldn't tell you how to bandage his son's scraped knee. And now there is Dray and another generation on the way. Samuel pictures that barbed wire pinning his precious Juliana and her baby to this punk kid, trapped in his house for the rest of their lives too. Samuel pulls the container of oysters for the stuffing from the refrigerator and pops the lid. The fresh seawater fragrance mingles with the scent of roasting turkey, carefully brined in a complex two-day process of a cooler filled with a concoction of spices, chicken stock, and water iced-down in the master bathtub. His ritual Thanksgiving bath is a family joke, a forty-eight-hour baptism by brining.

It's the season of family stories. He remembers his mother telling him of Thanksgivings on the homestead ranch in Wyoming, of her and the rest of the children spending the morning plucking the pin feathers from the wild turkey their father had shot till their fingers were raw. Wrenching free the hundreds of tiny, sharp feathers stubbornly embedded into the skin till the bird was as pink and smooth as a newborn's bottom.

"Make a wish, Juliana," Samuel says every year, holding out the wishbone he's unearthed from the turkey. And they pull the wishbone, staring each other down till he, inevitably, snaps his end off, leaving her with the wish. "I wish there were more mashed potatoes," she says every year, then smiles at him as she carries the bowl to the table.

Thanksgiving is still an all-hands-on-deck meal; every person has a job in the day-long chore of creating something to signify another year of grace. First, his daughter's boyfriend makes the inevitable run to the store for another pound of butter or the can of cranberry sauce no one ever eats but absolutely wants to see, sliced and shimmering on the table. Juliana has been his sous-chef since she was four, stirring pots, adding pinches of salt, carrying dishes to the table. Rocky washes the potatoes for boiling and swears he's old enough to peel and slice them. Glenda, who hasn't cooked in thirty-six years, always makes the early morning run to McDonald's for breakfast McMuffins to hold them till the mid-afternoon feast.

"Doctor." "Baby shower." "Car seat." The words pelt Samuel as he stands at the stove and pokes boiling potatoes with a fork. They are done, gone soft. He can hear crying now, an occasional sniff, and is surprised when tears drop into the sink as he

washes his hands. He drags a sleeve across his eyes, sniffs again, and slides the stuffing from the oven.

It is quiet when Samuel walks into the living room to announce dinner. As the family sidles into the dining nook, Samuel imagines a Thanksgiving with a baby at the table. He closes his mind to thoughts of endless check-ups, diaper runs to Walmart, late-night fevers, and round-the-clock worry—about money, about the future, about the inevitable fights, about the equally inevitable starting all over again. He knows Dray won't last a year after the child comes...too much reality too soon. Instead he chooses to see tiny kicking feet and pudgy pumping fists, an "I ♥ My Grandpa" bib, and serene brown eyes that crinkle with joy whenever he speaks. Suddenly, Samuel finds it easy to clear his throat. He holds out the wishbone to his granddaughter.

Juliana stares with vacant brown eyes, as if trying to divine the future from a plate of sacrificial entrails—her gaze both dreamy and puzzled, as if she has seen the omens but just can't understand them.

"Jules," Dray gently nudges her and points at the forked bone, a fragile thing with the sole purpose of connecting the bird's head to its heart, and so, enabling flight. Samuel sees his granddaughter's empty eyes light up, with purpose, love—and yes, Samuel can see it plain as day—hope. She shines that light on Samuel, and meets him halfway, knuckle to knuckle. They pull and he sees Juliana twist her wrist in that move he has perfected all these years, snapping her side of the bone short. He pulls back the long end, finally. He wishes for the light in his granddaughter's eyes to shine always, and serves up his feast. This year, it is enough.

Fiction judge Clyde Edgerton writes: "The depiction of the grandfather's character and the description of a specific family's norms are notable strengths of this story."

Lit/South Awards 2024
Poetry Judge

Jericho Brown
Duplex

I still believe in God. What else keeps me
From slaughter? Who else holds the butcher's hand?

Sweet slaughter. Though I'd pray, *Give me butcher's hands,*
Matthew baked me cakes as if I could be saved.

He baked spice cake, humming as if we were safe,
As if this weren't the land of milk and money.

We can't survive this nation of white money,
Says the black man as his excuse for malice.

What black man needs an excuse for malice?
Why mask the salt? No sugar is that sweet.

My pressure's high. No sugar could make me sweet
If he came back today, if he forgave me.

Since he won't come back, won't forgive me,
I believe in God. Who else would keep me?

First published in Dear America: Letters of Hope, Habitat, Defiance, and Democracy

AJ Vilen

Into the Headwinds on Knife Lake

Faith is for suckers. Better for my father to grow mushrooms in the living room, build a treehouse and then a hairspray-fueled potato gun to shoot at cars. He unearths jack-in-the-pulpit from the ravine, roots out invading kudzu. Better for me to study the loon's velveteen body, ask my uncle to build a wooden canoe. Better to discard belief—haven't you seen men fabricating plywood crosses at 3AM on the side of the highway? Tomorrow they'll strap themselves up there at rush-hour, wait for the rubberneckers, proclaim resurrection. Better for my mom to buy a house near water, encapsulate her own crawlspace, dig up her drain lines by hand, wait for a bear to den beneath the deck. My love buys gold for impending collapse but decides, better to have it melted down into a wedding ring. We won't be able to retire and so I line the cellar with canned peaches and paranoia, my steampunk heirlooms. The FBI tracks my cousins by satellite, the air waves move like spiderwebs on their knees. Dust to dust, my aunts say. Better to drink the whiskey, eat the sardines. And so I won't wait for the bottom to rust out of my car, though it will—better for me to leave now and find the only solid things in this world—a forest floor in the cold north woods, the bottom of a glacier-dug lake. Better at least to know, if my canoe capsizes in the wind as the walleye rise to meet the dusk, yes, better to know no one is coming to save me.

Regina Garcia

High John (Ipomoea Jalapa, Bindweed, Jalop Root)

Like King Arthur of England, he has served his people. And, like King Arthur, he is not dead. He waits to return when his people shall call him again.... High John de Conquer went back to Africa, but he left his power here, and placed his American dwelling in the root of a certain plant. Only possess that root, and he can be summoned at any time. -Zora Neale Hurston in "High John De Conquer"

High John manifests
running wild in fields
crouching low in gardens
even burrowing underground
heeding whispers and chants
for more, for better, ignoring
those who doubt his power
to restore health, to improve
conditions, to bear the fortune, to find *courage*
He has followed those stolen, those sorrowed,
those steadily holding hope that he will find
them, and his power will transcend their trouble

Over here, High John

High John, so high
the Saints still call him
The Orishas cry out, rumble 'round
to find him, to guide him, to reveal
him, he, unassuming, lowly, powerful and
holy, he moves through, from tall grass to clearing
and arrives holding fortune in one hand and
healing in the other, pours assurance from his
mouth and illuminates love to the seeking
and the scorned from lips dripping in honey and humility

Oh, High John

High John comes
He could've stayed away
but he could not leave his
people, as they entreated, danced
in clearings stump drums thumping the night

Yea, High John

High John arrives
Golden straw crown gleaming
Making ways for his people who
have wailed, wandered, waited, watched
fatigued and faltering...He still sees the holes to fill
that they might somehow become whole, as whole as he who has scoured
the lands and the seas

Draw near, High John

High John finds and fixes
and pulls from robes a

Conqueror's Cure

Mary Alice Dixon
I seek the dirty god

for Termaine Hicks, shot in the back three times by Philadelphia police, wrongfully imprisoned 19 years before exonerated, and for Vanessa Potkin, his Innocence Project advocate

I seek the dirty god
who hides
in sentenced men
with broken teeth

smear'd with lies
nailed and framed
on the gutter road
to crucifixion

when I find you
torn and thorn'd
I pray you
anoint me
with your sweat
stain me
with your blood

let me draw
your wounds
to well
your words
to geyser
springing grace

let me bare
the peace of you
that miracles
your face

I pray you
unveil in me
the Veronica
who speaks
for the god
with broken teeth

Sarah Gallucci

Just Five Minutes

I wear my favorite tube top and a face full of Covergirl makeup to catwalk to the neighborhood gas station. My best friend Jasmine is with me. We are 12 and determined to buy root beer cream soda and cigarettes. This is the first week of summer fun for pre-teen girls in Syracuse, New York. We strut slowly in our cut off shorts garnering the attention of men who drive by. Together we rack up a handful of whistles before sauntering onto the main road. These potential admirers and boyfriends, as we think them to be, slow down, get real close and follow us for a few minutes. Some ask us for our numbers. We giggle and smile as they lick their lips. They scan our thighs, hips, breasts, and faces making sure we feel the laser penetration of their eyes on our skin. Jasmine and I are still girls, but already there's an understanding that our sexual power is a social currency and we should practice building it now.

Behind the Sunoco gas station we smoke our Newport cigarettes where no adults can see us. A boy from my neighborhood pulls up in a red car with tinted windows. Aaron has brown hair and dark freckles. Normally he ignores me or makes fun of me on the school bus by pointing out my flaws: a pimple, my nose being too big, or my breasts too small. Sometimes I'm excited to be around him. Mostly, I'm bracing myself.

From the time I was a young girl, I developed the instincts to know when a boy liked me but was intimidated by me. Their behavior, often skating between flirting and humiliation. As if from the same script, eventually the ridicule would morph into full on bullying, though we didn't have a name for it then. This meant that I had to shield myself from a boy's verbal abuse while simultaneously preparing for him to kiss me.

"Wassup girl, I haven't seen you in a minute," Aaron says, and points to his friend driving the car. "This is my boy Trevor."

"Whatchu girls up to?" Trevor says.

"Chillin," I say coolly and introduce them both to Jasmine.

"You want a pack of stogies?" Aaron asks. "Trevor can get them for you." I nod and dig out the \$4 in my tight denim pocket and hand it to Trevor. I earn \$10 per week for house chores, which is about half of what the rest of my friends make. The friends who live in houses and have dads.

"You look so mature," Trevor says softly, scanning my body, taking in the fleshy mounds peeking out from above my red, white, and blue Tommy Hilfiger bandeau.

This isn't the first time I've heard this. Many men have told me this since I sprouted boobs and got my period. *You look so mature. You're so mature for your age.*

"Not enough to buy cigarettes," I say looking directly at Trevor's face, cocking my neck to the side to blow out smoke. I don't know anything about Trevor, but I know I want him to want me.

Trevor has a landing-strip goatee and sad down-turned eyes. He wears a red Chicago Bulls jersey over a white T-shirt and a Figaro gold chain around his neck. He resembles the R&B singer Jon B, though thinner. Taller and more gangly. Trevor leans back on his car for a minute, taking me in, watching me French inhale frothy, molasses clouds of cigarette smoke slowly from my mouth. He doesn't avert his eyes. I feel both sexy and stripped away.

As Aaron and Trevor walk away to buy the cigarettes I think this is admiration. This is what it feels like to be admired by a man. It's electric and uneasy at the same time.

When they return, I pack the turquoise box hard against my wrist, showing the boys I'm an expert. I've seen my mother do it a thousand times. *Thwack, thwack, thwack* as she rotates the box. Proudly I rip off the cellophane in a perfect gold ring around the top. Admiring the straight sticks of tobacco I hand one to Jasmine. She takes it in between her plump lips, puckers as she lights it, and pulls the smoke in effortlessly. She looks too beautiful to smoke. The contours of her face are rounded and cherubic, all genetic gifts given to her by her Moroccan father who ran off when she was a baby.

Jasmine and I are connected through our absent fathers. In our suburban town our family structure is pretty uncommon. Jasmine's father lives far away in California, though she has a stepfather who lives in the same house. My father lives down the street from the apartment I share with my mother and little sister. Despite being so close to our father, just one mile away, we don't see him. We don't get invited to his house and there are no mandatory weekend visits. The only time we see him is when my mother goes to pick up a child support check from him after work. Or, when he comes to the apartment and tries to talk my mother into getting back together. He gropes her body, laughs drunkenly. He thinks he can fill the holes he poked in her in the first place.

"Whatchu gonna do now?" Aaron asks.

"We're gonna go back to the crib, watch MTV for a while and come back out to the basketball courts later," I say. The basketball courts are where everyone goes to meet up, drink, and get high in the summer. I'm allowed to hang out there until the street lights come on.

"Wanna ride home?" Trevor asks. I look at Jasmine for confirmation and it's a yes. We do.

The tinted windows in Trevor's car are rolled down a crack and Snoop Dog bumps from the subwoofer for the two minute car ride. Aaron is sitting shotgun.

Both nod their heads to the beat like they're in a rap video.

We pull up to my apartment building, an ugly brick building with huge hunter green awnings that sits adjacent to the neighborhood's dumpsters. My mother secured the ground floor unit one month before she left my father for the second time, furnishing it and stocking it with food, waiting for her moment. Finally it came when my father passed out on our leather couches in the house we once shared as a family after a night at the strip club. My mother called her high school girlfriends, our aunts, who helped us sneak out of the house. I remember asking my mother the next day in this new apartment, "How come we couldn't say goodbye to dad?" She replied, "Because if we tried to say goodbye to your father, he wouldn't let us leave."

It was a small, compact apartment with flat brown carpet and a steady stream of cigarette smoke waving through the air from my mother's Marlboros. Our couch was a sunken foam pad covered in maroon velour. When people put their feet on the coffee table it creaked at its joints. Our little community of apartment buildings was offset from the main subdivision filled with spacious townhouses, ranches, and two-story homes with driveways and pools. My mother had a good job working for the state government—she always believed in working her way up through traditional means with health insurance and other nice benefit packages—but it still wasn't enough money to afford middle class normalcy or acceptance.

"Can we come in?" Trevor asks from his rear view mirror.

"My mom is going to be home from work soon," I say. This is a lie. I don't want them to see where I live and risk Aaron making fun of me more than he already does, but I do desperately want to know what it feels like to have boys over. I want to be wanted, but right now I'm not sure what this means.

"C'mon it will be quick," Trevor presses. And so I handle his pressure the only way I've learned since I was four years old, having a father who both adored women and abused them. I relent.

*

Once inside the apartment, Aaron and Trevor tell us how beautiful we are. They tell jokes and put their hands on our legs. Aaron drags Jasmine by the arm into my bedroom and shuts the door. Trevor locks eyes with me and whispers under my hair, "Let's go to your mom's room." He kisses my mouth hard with his hands cupping my neck and jaw. Slowly his hands rub and encircle my whole ass, firmly squeezing, pressing my hips up, and straight into his.

I'd be fine just like this. I'm happy to make out with Trevor like this. All tingly and warm. To be wanted and desired feels good. I feel pretty. And powerful.

"Help me out," he says tugging at the button on my shorts.

I kiss him deeper, acting like I didn't hear him, hoping he won't ask again. After a few seconds of this he begs, "C'mooooonnn."

“My mother will be home soon,” I say.

“Just five minutes,” he pleads.

I don't know it then, but I will hear some version of *just five minutes* over and over again from boys and men. The sexual coercion. The manipulation. The pressure. The drunk redneck college boy who says, *Just a few more minutes, you'll like it*, as he holds my hips down and licks my pink insides. The popular basketball player who keeps pushing my shoulders down every time I try to get up from his bed, *just a few more minutes, you don't have to go yet*. My own husband who begs his way into my body like he's entitled to it, *If you just lie there I'll come in a few minutes*.

A few minutes, five minutes, they're all forever.

My mother's bed is more grown-up than mine. She has a dark navy blue comforter with magenta paisley patterns and a mountain of large decorative pillows. Part of me is relieved that I don't have to deal with the humiliation of Trevor seeing my large wall hammock of stuffed animals or collection of porcelain dolls my father bought me at the New York State Fair, but being in my mother's bed fills me with panic. This is a woman who checks my toothbrush to make sure it's wet in the morning. She counts her cigarettes every day to make sure I'm not stealing them. She will notice a crease in her pillow case.

Trevor's large tongue swirls in my mouth as he squeezes my breasts under my tube top. This doesn't feel like the jerky touch of an exploring boy, it is one of an experienced man. He rubs the outside of my padded bra and for a moment I feel ridiculous. I'm a solid A-cup, maybe halfway to a B, which is smaller than most of the girls in school. He doesn't seem to mind. It feels good. I like the kissing and the rubbing. I lay my hands in my lap because I don't know what to do with them as he fiddles with the metal eyelets of my bra. He's unable to get it unhitched so he yanks down a cup of my bra, rubbing my nipple hard between his thumb and forefinger. A million nerve endings scream in acute pain. I say nothing. I don't want him to feel bad, like he's doing something wrong. I'm supposed to like whatever he's doing to me. This is all I know about sex, that I'm supposed to like it.

Trevor unbuttons my shorts, sliding his hand over my underwear. To create distance, I shift my hips away from him. He pulls them back to him and I freeze. In this moment it's clear I can't get out of this. I am stuck in panic. After rubbing the outside of my cotton underwear he shoves his hand down under the elastic band. My whole body tenses up. He begins ramming his two fingers hard and fast in and out of me. Even though it hurts, I can't stop obsessing about my pubic hair, the embarrassing texture, and my smell. I'm repulsed by my own coarse hairs and sourness. Somehow I've internalized that it's gross to men. I'm hardly in the moment, when he guides my hand to his pants zipper. I've never jerked a guy off, but I know that he wants me to.

“I have to go check on Jasmine,” I say, pushing Trevor back.

“She's fiiiiiiiiine,” he says, and pushes me back down on the bed, kissing my neck.

“No, really,” I say, rising abruptly and buttoning my shorts.

Right outside of my bedroom door frame I call out to her, “Jasmine, you OK?” She moans loudly. Maybe she didn’t hear me. I ask again, “Jasmine, you OK?”

“She’s good yo,” Aaron says, annoyed.

I could cry. Somehow my body isn’t letting me.

Trevor walks up behind me and pulls my arm, leading me back to my mother’s bed, smashing his mouth with mine, and pushing me onto the covers like they do in movies. He forces my hands onto his zipper again and makes me rub the bulge underneath. I’m afraid to pull away. *Should I pull away? Can I pull away? Am I allowed to pull away?*

I’m desperate to stall so I ask him in my very best sexy voice, “For real, how old ARE you?”

“How old are YOU?” he asks without answering the question.

“I’m 12.”

“Daaaaaaamn girl, you don’t look 12. You some jailbait.”

“Sooooo how old are you?” I ask, hoping he’s so distracted he won’t make me touch his dick or put it in my mouth.

“I can’t tell you, your moms would kill me.”

“My mom is 28, she got pregnant with me when she was 16,” I say, hoping it freaks him out.

“I’m closer in age to your moms.”

He goes to suck my neck and unbutton my shorts again. I gently shove him back, propping myself up on my elbows and say with a smile, “Seriously, my mom will be home.”

This feels like it will never end. He’s not seeing me. He’s not hearing me. I’m panicking because I don’t know how to stop this. I don’t know how to make him leave. I’ve tried everything I could think of without making him mad or making me look like a baby.

Finally surrendering, perhaps exhausted from not getting anywhere with me, “20, I just turned 20,” he says and gets up to leave. I am relieved and breathe for what feels like the first time all afternoon.

Right before dusk, I see Trevor and Aaron at the neighborhood basketball courts. All of my neighborhood girlfriends are there, dressed with their tight shorts, baby tees, and cinnamon glossed lips. As if from the same girl’s-guide-to-getting-noticed playbook, we whip out our long Newport cigarettes and angle our bodies to look as flattering as possible. As the sun sets and the blacktop court turns purple, one of the girls lights a joint and passes it around. The high hits me even though I didn’t want it to and I feel myself getting quiet, not saying a word. The thumping of the basketball on the concrete matches my heartbeat. In the distance I can hear the boys and their spray-bottle laughs: *Kkkk, Kkkk, Kkkk, Kkkk*. I wonder if they’re laughing at me. I don’t care. I don’t care about any of it.

Slowly the high makes me forget the pressure. The heaviness I had been carrying around all afternoon leaves my chest and I feel myself fading, forgetting. Utterly tranquilized. It works so well. It works too well.

*

I am less interested in forgetting these days, and more interested in remembering. It's not that I have all of the memories, it's that they're finally coming back somehow. And I let them. They're inconvenient feelings to have right now. I am a very busy and tired parent of two children. Pain. Anger. Chaos. There's barely time to cry anymore.

It's September 2018. I'm over seven thousand miles away from my hometown, in New Delhi, India. I am a journalist now, a convenient job for someone who likes to run away from things. I have to watch Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's testimony against Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh for an article I'm writing in *The Washington Post*. I gasp, pace, and rock my body back and forth. Several times I place my hand across my mouth and hold my breath. Dr. Blasey Ford's voice is shaky, her head bows in what I can only assume is pain or shame, or both. She is having to relive trauma from a sexual assault in front of the whole world. As she speaks, my visceral reaction comes into view. The remembering starts in my body. I've been there before, years ago. Even if intellectually I had forgotten, my subconscious had not.

"Indelible in the hippocampus is the laughter," Dr. Blasey Ford says when asked what she remembers most of the assault. "The uproarious laughter between the two and their having fun at my expense." At this, my tears are immediate. I haven't thought about Trevor in nearly twenty-two years, not directly anyway, but this testimony brings me back to the scene. To him. To the other men after him. It's a movie reel now in my mind and I realize what he did to me was assault.

I had never called it that before. A "hook up," that's what I called it. When I was a teenager and talking to my friends about it, I called it a hook up with a 20-year old man. I had been a curious, desperate-for-affection teenage girl. I had worn the sexy tube top and the face full of makeup. I had let him come into my house and into my mother's bed. I remember saying, "No" or maybe I said "No" in other ways. I said, "I need to check on my friend," and I said, "My mom is going to be home soon." There was no screaming, no fight.

That night I sit at my desk and search for Trevor's face online. I have to see his face. Checking Facebook and Instagram, he's on nothing. The obsession takes over. For some reason, I'm unable to start my article until I find him. I Google his name using different combinations: first name and last name, first name + last name + the town I met him.

Nothing.

Trevor + "rape."

An entry pops up.

I stare hard into the photos. Trevor looks exactly the same in his mugshot as he

did all of those years ago. He wears the same lost little boy expression. My blood is pulsing in my throat. My body is reacting as if I'm right back in my mother's room with him again. The memory of him, the photo, are triggering my muscles to tighten like he's holding me down on the bed. *Helpless. Frozen. Twelve. Twelve years old.* The more I stare and scroll, the more I shake. The magnitude of what has happened to me, my body, hits...twenty-two years later. Dormant. I read the charges. There are thirteen statutory rape and rape charges. So many victims. All twelve, thirteen, and fourteen years old. His first conviction was in 1998, the same year he assaulted me. This means the whole thing was real. Me. All those girls.

I close my eyes with my fingers on the keyboard and hear, *You look so mature for your age.* I remember Trevor saying this. It becomes the second line in my article.

When I'm done with the draft I walk to the living room where my husband is still working on his laptop. "I have to tell you something," I say and at this, he closes his laptop. "I never told you, but when I was twelve a twenty-year-old guy felt me up in my mother's bed, all up over me, up my shirt, down my pants, and he wouldn't leave. I tried to get him to stop, but I was scared," my voice trails off into tears as I explain the afternoons after that with the same guy. He wouldn't stop coming over to my house. He'd wait for me outside of the apartments, in the parking lot in his car. When I'm done explaining the weeks of torment with this man and my recurring nightmares of running through the woods, my husband asks, "Can I hug you? Do you want a hug?" I shake my head no. Even though this is the first time he's asked first before hugging me, or grabbing onto my body, I won't do it. Not while the ways in which he's held me down come into view.

My husband hasn't held me down in dark alleys, and not with knives and guns, but with words as his weapons, gender as his power, and the force of hundreds of years of societal and marital norms. No one calls it sexual assault or rape when it is your husband. No one calls it those things when there are no physical signs of struggle, bruises, cuts, or scars. No one calls it those things when it's your "wifely duty," and you do it because your husband and the whole world has made you feel like if you don't you're boring, you're cold, you're not trying hard enough in your marriage. We have definitions and parameters for criminalizing brutal and literal sexual violence, but no such terms capture the nuance. The grey areas of #metoo, assault, and the mental health toll it takes.

"Do you think this guy has anything to do with why you can't heal from what I did to you?" Like me, he can't bring himself to call it what it is either. He never really has. He always calls it "what I did to you." My husband not taking "no" for an answer never sat well with me, especially in the months after having our babies. In trying to convince me to have sex with him repeatedly, acting like sex was the only thing that was going to save our marriage and make him happy, acting like it was my job, my duty to satisfy him at the expense of my fragile, postpartum body. My own peace. My precious, precious sleep.

I understand in this moment my husband wants to be assured there were others, worse men before him. He wants to share the blame and not be the only one. And he is right, there were worse men. But he would be wrong in thinking those acts were worse.

“I have been broken by you and all of the men and boys that come before you. I think yours hurt worse because the one person who wasn’t supposed to do this was my husband.”

My husband wipes his eyes with the back of his hand and says, “I’ll make up for it forever, whatever it takes to make you want to stay.”

“I need space to explore what I want and need, how to deeply love myself, and I can’t take on any pressure to make this process nice or easy for you.”

He nods.

“I need to rest.”

I get up and walk down the hall to my bedroom.

Lying alone is the only thing I need.

In bed, I rub my legs up against the Indian cotton sheets. I dab lavender on my wrists and take in a big inhale, hold, and release. And one more time. I rub lotion on my scarred belly, sagging breasts, and wrinkled neck. I apologize for poisoning it and thank it for surviving every time I got hurt. I take a few more deep breaths in and out. And I fall asleep.

Maria Picone

To the guy who made me a pretzel
at the mall and wouldn't give up
until I told him where I'm really,
really from

Thank you for your extreme interest in my personal life.

Thank you for asking these questions with conviviality and not confederacy.

Thank you for dogging me after my "from Massachusetts" wasn't good enough.

Thank you for reminding me where I fit in
your vision of what America should/not be.

Thank you for clarifying what you meant via inappropriate language after
I deliberately misunderstood you, a second time.

Thank you for including a free dipping sauce in my order.

Thank you for the solar panel smile you installed
after I told you *my ancestors* come from Korea.

(Thank you for not asking, "South or North Korea?")

Thank you for encouraging me to greatly enjoy the rest of my day.

Thank you for helping me become a kinder version of myself,
who can fold this poem like a grade school love note to my brothers, my sisters.

Dannye Romine Powell
Their Wedding Day, May 12, 1940

On the drive south, were you feverish—
the heat of his hand on your leg.

Did you long for the silk dresses still hanging in your closet?
The old black walnut shading the house?

Did he drink from the bottle in the brown paper bag?
Did you believe what he said?

Was he wearing his white shirt and grey suit?
The hat with the sharp crease?

The key to the cabinet— was it safe?
The love letters you hid from your mother?

Was the honeymoon suite fancy enough?
Electric fans? A rotary phone?

Did you think to call home?

Did you watch as he loosened his tie?
Did your heart misbehave?

Was it your shoes you shed first?
Did you fall into his arms?

Did you make me from ache or desire?

Was the bar open all night?
Had you ever felt so alone?

Tess Congo
The Giver

In the home where most things are lodged
in boxes, the people are temporary.

One hallway may offer a sneak peek
of a kiss: the mother the recipient.

The giver might be a good father if he'd stop
taping homes into boxes.

Not even the children are safe
from physics or arithmetic.

There are four kids—then, six.
At times, there are no fathers.

Other times, there's a foot splintering
the front door back to branches.

What is the lesson? The mother's voice
is the mantle where the children

hang their ears. She says *custody* and *battle*.
The giver of the kiss—that father

says little. He teaches through absence
which is the action itself: *parental*

abduction. There are six kids, then four.
Who remains? The pixelated

black-and-white stillness of the poster;
the faces of my sisters, their father,

that *please* at the bottom, that number
for the missing.

Nadine Ellsworth
Three Portraits of Women on Fire

I. Annie Cumming Hall, died 2 November 1855

*Her marriage to Rev. Charles Hall in 1848
was filled with scandal and her death by fire
at the age of 28 was nothing less than tragic.
-Augusta Historical Society Records*

I walk past her Summerville grave, sublime
beneath deeproot magnolias, notice only stone,
but here, in the home where she once briefly lived,
she gazes back at me from her melancholy—

Her portrait is suitably dark, her gentle face
the moment of light, around her draped a red
shawl. This was her death, symbol of fire
too quick for tiny buttons to be undone, too

sly for layers of skirts to be removed, too merciful
to leave her ruined, but her red shawl remains,
a witness to her fire, the one that set her sacrificial
life ablaze, this fire that set her free.

II. Marianne & Héloïse

*When you asked if I had known love,
I could tell the answer was yes.
And that it was now.
-Marianne, Portrait of a Lady on Fire*

Fire adores the female form, follows the line,
sweep of limb, reaches to touch garment
hems when unobserved. Such fires are watched
at all times, buttoned in place, double-stitched

at the seams where fire might enter, murmur,
come to me. Marianne, arrayed in crinolines,
too near the flame, a bonfire too vain to tolerate
such beauty displayed in its presence, clings
to her gown, Italian silks firescorched, her skin
untouched, yet burning. *Do all lovers feel
as if they're inventing something?* Weaving
themselves into memory, gazes, portraits—

*quand tu m'observe, qui penses-tu j'observe?**

III. Self-Portrait, Unfinished

*Someday, after we have mastered
the winds, the waves and gravity,
we shall harness for God energies of love.
Then for the second time in the history of the world
we will have discovered fire.
~ Teilhard de Chardin*

My fire will consume me. I can't shed
myself fast enough to avoid your flame
when it finds me, defenseless
in my immolation because I call

your fire to me, an invocation, willingly
waltz in the furnace. I wrap myself
too tightly in you, corseted in knots I can't undo,
have never wanted to, so I will follow

the flame until I taste ash and smoke,
I will turn my head to look for you, knowing
there is nothing left to do but burn.

**When you're observing me, who do you think I'm observing?*

Yance Wyatt

Broken Water

To the spring breakers parasailing off the coast of Key West or the cigar barons sipping rum on the rooftop of Havana's Hotel Nacional, the red and white boat idling in the Straits of Florida would have seemed as teensy and toylike as a fisherman's bobber. Hidden behind their blue blockers and sweat-stained caps, the two-man crew dozed in the pink shade strained through the cockpit's red canopy. The boatswain's stubbled chin lulled until it pricked his chest and snapped to attention, waking him so that he woke the petty officer in turn.

"Looka there."

"Huh?" said the petty officer with a start. "I don't see anything."

"Listen up."

"Don't hear anything either."

"That's my point. No gulls." The boatswain reactivated the sonar, which displayed a slightly different trench topography each time the green wand revolved. "We're in the middle of nowhere. You let us drift off course again."

"Me?" the petty officer whined.

"You were on lookout, weren't you? Besides, I'm too damn old to stay awake all day."

In an attempt to save face, the petty officer lifted the binoculars that he wore like a necklace and fingered the knob until the line between sky and sea, turquoise and teal, became apparent as opposed to implied. He spotted a black dot disappearing and reappearing amidst those rolling blue hills, not sharp enough to be a shark fin and too late in the season for a humpback sighting. He pitched the binoculars to the boatswain and pointed thereabouts.

"I'll be damned," said the boatswain. "I think you may have just popped your cherry."

"I did?"

"Sit tight, sweet cheeks."

The speedometer jumped to twenty RPMs and the speedboat skipped across the water like a side-armed stone. They cut the engine and coasted alongside a woman lying facedown on a flaccid innertube as though a mighty wave had dealt her a blow. So as not to take on too much sun or lose too much fluid, she was unseasonably dressed in baggy sweats, her bloated limbs draped over the tube's circumference, her belly plugged in the hole.

"Ma'am? Ma'am! Señora?"

The petty officer grabbed the lifesaver from its mount and lassoed it around her neck. Meanwhile the boatswain fetched a megaphone from the cockpit and spoke with what must've seemed in her far-gone state like the very voice of God.

"This is the US Coast Guard. Are—you—alive? If so, don't move. We're gonna tow you in."

On the boatswain's nod, the petty officer reeled in the braided nylon one arm's length at a time until the momentum took hold and she drifted the rest of the way, finally thumping up against the scummy hull. Seeing that he couldn't deadlift her from above, the petty officer tied a boy-scout knot to the rail, donned a neon life vest, and, to keep it from capsizing, lowered his feet onto either side of the innertube as if balancing a scale. But without much tack to his footing, he struggled to hoist her up even with the boatswain trying to pull her aboard with a bearhug—a chore on account of her weight, to say nothing of her odor. The longer they labored, the less careful they were. A bump here, a bruise there, and they quit apologizing and treated her as cargo. Nothing less, nothing more.

Eventually she slid on deck like a bested tuna. The petty officer scaled the gunwale ladder and took a load off beside the boatswain, both of them briny and soaked, the elder in sweat, the youth in saltwater. Yet the daytime dried them out at once, their arm hairs rising as though the sun were a magnet, furry and flaxen against perennial tans.

"Talk about rode hard and put up wet," said the boatswain. "If she needs CPR, it's all you, rookie."

"Aloe is what she needs. Or else her skin'll start bubbling."

"Reckon they sell that in la república."

"We can't take her back in this condition," said the petty officer. "They'll just throw her in the tank. We've got to get her to a hospital, stat."

"Wet feet, dry feet. That's the policy. Not our fault she didn't make it to shore. Current is what it is."

"Rock paper scissors, then?"

They each made a fist, gaveled it twice against a palm, and threw down.

Again the nose rose and the aft dipped and the speedboat, swinging sharply stateside, sluiced a whirlpool into international waters.

*

They were forced to decelerate twice en route: first so they wouldn't get tangled up in the mangroves, then again so they wouldn't leave a wake through Key West Bight, where the ferries launched and the rich kids swam with dolphins and the snorkelers floated facedown like their bodies had been dumped off by the Miami mob. Prior to arriving they alerted the land unit, which was waiting at Whiting Street Pier by the time they tied off.

It took four coasties to haul the woman ashore, one per limb. They roused her

with smelling salts and after gaining consent rubbed her down with Alocane. The bottle wasn't economy size, so they portioned it according to the severity of her burns, double coating not her nose and collarbone as is often the case, but the nape of her neck and soles of her feet.

"Didn't have the good sense to flip over once in a while," said the boatswain after being asked to step aside. "Wouldn't want this chica cooking your arepas." He stood at bay, watching without the help of binoculars, one foot on deck, the other on the dock, as the land unit peeled off her wet hoodie in exchange for a dry, double XL, USCG T-shirt.

"Her stomach's all swollen," said the petty officer. "You'd think she'd be starving, but it looks like she ate a blowfish."

"Probably *is* starving. Parched too. Belly that ballooned. That's the body hoarding the last of its water to keep from dehydrating. You ever seen them Feed the Children ads where the old white man puts potbelly African kids on his knee like Santa Claus?"

"I fast-forward through commercials," said the petty officer.

"Your generation's soft," said the boatswain.

The sun had half-sunk into the sea, letting down a drawbridge of light from here to Cuba. The woman, more lucid now, pointed back to the boat.

"Looka there. Already wanting to go home. Oh you will, my dear. Soon enough."

"I think she's pointing at us," said the petty officer. Heeding the volume of her moans, he played a game of hot and cold until she thrilled at his nearness to her deflated innertube. Turning it upside down and inside out, he found what she was signaling for. Duct-taped to the inner seam of the tube's donut hole was a gallon Ziploc containing an astonishingly dry English-to-Spanish, Spanish-to-English dictionary and a translucent cast of Saran Wrap. Within the cast was a bundle of Cohibas corded up like a dozen sticks of dynamite.

"You gotta give it to her," said the boatswain. "That's damn resourceful. Making her own little humidior."

"Why go to the trouble when she could've packed more food and water?"

"To buy us off is why. As currencies go, a cigar beats the exchange rate of a peso."

The petty officer endeavored to rebundle the cigars without letting any of the leafing flake, but the boatswain was less delicate in snatching them up for inspection.

"Give 'em here." This order was issued by the ensign of the land unit. He'd moseyed over to complete his report and now beckoned with the hand not holding the clipboard.

"What're you gonna do with them?" the boatswain asked, one eyebrow hiked like a tiki hut. "Tag 'em or burn 'em?"

"Oh, I'll burn 'em alright," the ensign replied with an incriminating dimple.

"That there's contraband," said the boatswain.

The ensign cinched the pen to the clipboard and rapped it against the heel of his

palm. "Come on. It's 'bacco, not smack."

"And all this time," the boatswain started, "I thought you a stickler for the rules. Turns out you're not such a square."

"I'll cut a corner here and there—round it off a bit—if I get a whiff of a good Cuban." The ensign ran one under his nose. "Reminds me of home."

"Round it down, you mean?"

"What have we got here, a baker's dozen? We'll call it an even ten." The ensign turned leeward to light an illicit robusto before sliding one into either pocket of the boatswain's cargo shorts.

"Let me ask you something," said the boatswain, who was senior in age but not in rank. "What've you got against good ol' Swisher Sweets, made right here in the US of A? Right here in Florida, matter fact."

"Sweet my foot." The ensign scoffed up a ragged plume of chimney smoke. "In America, the soil's full of chemicals. In my country, it's full of sugar."

"Your country?" said the boatswain.

"I've got dual citizenship. My parents came over the right way."

"A real patriot, huh?"

The ensign made fishlips and blew a bitter wreath upon the boatswain, who fanned it away right along with the irksome gulls that had risen like topsoil in a tempest the moment the ensign had put something sausage-shaped in his mouth.

"Keep that up and I'll make the call."

"Go right ahead," said the ensign. "But you call customs on top of immigration and we'll be here all night. What is it you always say? 'Re-port, de-port, and still make happy hour.'" The ensign glanced at the face of his phone. "Already half past five."

"You two can go," said the petty officer—still climbing the ladder and paying his dues. "I'll stick around to fill out the paperwork."

"You sure?" the boatswain asked with another tiki eye. "Alright then. Come find me when you finish. I'll be somewhere on Duval." He patted his pockets in search of his keys but the first thing he felt were the smokes.

*

The petty officer couldn't bring himself to throw her in the cage. Once the land unit left, he let her sit beside him on the pier looking westward toward the Gulf and the Americas and the life she'd never have. The mercury had dropped right along with the sun. He took a wool fire blanket from the boat's emergency kit and lay it like a serape over her shoulders. They ran out of shared vocabulary within minutes then sat there sharing a more telling silence. Just then two siblings—a boy and a girl that might have been twins—strolled out onto a strand between jetties, buckets in hand, to dig for burrowing crabs. They caught one, dropped it with a shriek, then changed their minds and used the buckets for construction. The little girl sat high and dry

atop a pillowy pink drift while the boy plunked down in the surf that fizzed in his lap like spilt Coca-Cola. They chirped back and forth in Spanish. The Cuban woman watched them wordlessly until she could stand to watch no more.

She rose of a sudden and strode barefoot as a saint on hot coals over sand still radiating the day's trapped heat. She spoke to the children in a language they understood, and when she returned to the pier on her own recognizance, retaking her seat beside the petty officer, she smiled at the sight of the children doing nothing whatsoever. For now they seemed satisfied, if not entranced, by the sea.

They were still on their best behavior when the transport arrived. The petty officer made calming gestures to show the woman she had nothing to fear, and when the immigration officers didn't handle her with kid gloves, he was quick to apologize on their behalf. They asked him the requisite questions for a transfer of custody then slapped him with a sheaf of paperwork to be faxed back in. Then they snapped an unglamorous photo of her and opened the rear door of a paddy wagon packed like sardines with other Balseros who'd washed up on other keys. She climbed in and, gazing back at the petty officer, removed a pearl of a pill from a modest locket around her neck—the only item they hadn't confiscated, for whatever reason. Maybe because it seemed purely sentimental, even corporeal, snug as it was between her varicose breasts.

The van was out of earshot before the petty officer could intervene, just another pair of bloodshot eyes peering back at him from US 1. He was as independent a young man as any. If he weren't, he wouldn't have left home for the Coast Guard, wouldn't have left a landlocked state for the margins of the map where misfits clash and latitudes yield to leviathans. But in the absence of both his partner and his charge, he found himself seeking the company of the spellbound siblings still peering out at the fathomless deep. He took a chance on their English.

"What did she say to you? The woman from earlier."

"Shut up," said the sister. "She said shut up and meet in the middle. Me and mi hermano were arguing about where to build our castles. Mine kept crumbling and his kept washing away. I thought he was too close to shore, and he thought I was too far."

"She said shut up and meet in the middle, but not yet." The brother highlighted his sister's omission. "She said it won't matter if you build in the right place if you don't build at the right time. So that's what we're waiting for. For a few minutes of slackwater while the moon turns the tide."

The siblings resumed their vigil, and the petty officer was left to dot his i's and cross his t's under the lamplight of that selfsame moon.

*

If the captains of industry could build a seven-mile bridge from Little Duck to Knight's Key, was it so preposterous to think there might be enough cable and

decking, pillars and stanchions, to pave a ninety-mile straightaway due south? Despite the moonrise casting Marathon and Islamorada in a light more like midday come storm season, there were no windows through which to appreciate the jasmine, hibiscus, and hot pink bursts of bougainvillea, nor the chili lights and Chinese lanterns of Coconut Grove once on the mainland. There was only the darkness of the bulkhead and the rumbling of the floorboard, the growling of stomachs and the sibilance of prayers, the sound of the wheels hiccupping at the seams of each bridge until the stop-and-go traffic stopped once and for all. Then the doors opened and the poor, tired, huddled masses crawled out to behold an eerily familiar cityscape that would have them believe, in their collective delirium from hunger, from heat, that they'd ridden clear across the Straits of Florida, all the way home to Havana.

*

They stayed on Duval until last call then traded glass for plastic and joined the stumbling exodus in search of a swiggy bonfire. First they tried Whitehead Spit, but the horizon flashed with the heat lightning of too many iPhone cameras. Even at this late hour tourists were snapping Instagram pics of the grounded buoy that marked the southernmost point of the continental US. Plan B was Straw Hat Beach, but unabashed skinnydippers had already turned the boardwalk into a catwalk. So they broke away from the pack and left the gingerbread cottages for a wasteland of clapboard shacks demolished by the gales of yesteryear. They followed the tumbledown pickets that pointed the way through a wreckage tourists might have mistaken for flotsam washed ashore, spooking wild roosters into low flight as they went.

Reaching Fort Zachary Taylor, they downed what was left of their roadies and hopped the fence but steered clear of the barracks in case the nightguard were ex-Navy, not that jurisdiction meant much on a retired base consigned to sunbathing and Civil War reenactments. They brushed aside the palm fringe that served as a windbreak to a beach that closed at five then kicked off their flipflops and went to where the water washed up around their ankles, letting the silt slip through their toes as the ocean breathed in and out like one great pneumatic lung. Before them the world was black on black but strewn with twinkling silver as if the sky harbored as much treasure as the sea. What had been a clear day was now a clear night. So clear, they joked that they could see the lights of Havana, but they both knew it was just a dinner cruise coming in. Otherwise the evening was so empty, the vacuum so vast, they had to fill it with small talk just to maintain a sense of scale.

“Are you from here?” asked the petty officer. “I mean actually from here?”

“You’re asking am I a goddamn Conch? Sheeeeeeit.” The boatswain was drunk on rum runners and inarticulate, now deploying expletives where adjectives should go. “I’m a fuckin’ Kentuckian is what I am. American by birth, Southern by the grace of God.”

“Wasn’t Kentucky neutral?”

“Birthplace of bourbon and bluegrass. That’s more than I can say for this place, no matter how far south we are.”

“If you’re that against it, why’d you put in to be stationed here?”

“Sleight of hand.” The boatswain produced the two hidden robustos. He bit and spat, cupped a palm and chuffed both alight with the same slender flame, his face dawning and setting in the span of a struck match. “With the White House so focused on walling out the Mexicans, they’re letting Cubans spill in olly olly oxen free. Tell me, what good is it locking the front door if you leave the back wide open?”

The petty officer plugged the robusto in his mouth as an excuse not to speak. All he contributed to the conversation was a prohibitive cough.

“Don’t inhale her. Just taste.” The boatswain drew a curling mouthful by way of example. “Alright, your turn. How’s it *you* got all the way down here to the Florida Keys, the dribble of America’s dick?”

“I’ll tell you when I figure it out myself,” said the petty officer.

“You could use most people’s excuse and say you was chasing a girl.”

“More like the opposite.”

“The girl chased you?”

“That’s not what I meant by opposite. Back home I was a fish out of water. So one day, I jumped in my truck and drove down the coast till I ran out of real estate.”

“And you never looked back,” the boatswain presumed with a sage and squinty toke.

“I thought that’s what we were doing now.”

“Not from where I’m standing, partner. Seems to me you’re looking straight ahead. New horizons and whatnot.”

Whereas the boatswain’s smoke rings had become a steady industry, the petty officer’s unsmoked robusto paid out a thin ribbon as it transformed itself into ash like a wand of incense. “Then what I did, you wouldn’t call it running away from home?”

“That’d be a hell of a note. Given your job is keeping folks from doing just that.”

“I don’t see it that way,” said the petty officer. “The way I see it, we might be helping them just as soon as turning them back. I mean, what’s Key West if not a welcoming party? Come one, come all.”

“Spoken like a true lefty,” said the boatswain.

On that note he called it a night. His Cuban was down to the knuckle anyhow. As he retreated up the coast into the curved and licking darkness, that flaring cherry became the port light of a vessel or the wingtip of a plane. The petty officer found himself alone again. No partner. No charge. No children building sandcastles. He checked that he had reception, then made the call he’d been putting off.

*

“Dade County Refugee Center.”

“I’m a Petty Officer Third Class stationed down here in Key West, and I’m calling in regards to a woman we picked up in the Straits today. She didn’t have ID on her, but she was wearing this locket. And the weird thing is, I saw her take something out of it and put it in her mouth right before she was hauled off to Miami for processing. I’m not asking for any specifics. I just want to make sure she’s okay. That it wasn’t, like, a kill-pill or something.”

“She’s alive alright. Rough shape, though. Third-degree burns on the neck and feet, and the mother of all yeast infections.”

“You can share that information over the phone?”

“She’s not entitled to privacy. Isn’t a US citizen. Her son, on the other hand, is, so says the Fourteenth Amendment. Wet foot, dry foot.”

“She has a son in the States?”

“In the infirmary. As of twenty minutes ago. They found the locket in her cleavage during a cavity search. Still had a few pills inside it. They thought she might be smuggling a soluble narcotic, so they sent it to the lab. Turns out it was Pitocin.”

“Pitocin?”

“You know, the stuff that induces labor. Hello? Officer? Hello?”

*

The petty officer stood with the phone to his ear until realizing he’d been hung up on in response to his own gaping silence. The soundscape of the conversation gave way to the seascape before him and, with a tilt of the head, the celestial carousel up above. Were there really a man in the moon, he would have been grinning as coolly as the crayon sun in the corner of every family portrait ever drawn by a boy. Like the warm equatorial current of the same name, *el niño* had been born of two worlds and would forever have passage between them. The petty officer had been an unwitting but not unwilling doula to this deliverance.

“Huh.”

He dropped the filthy cigar with a hiss and followed his footprints home.

Paul Jones
Only an Outsider

One more bog body lifted
out of dense layers of peat
up into the Irish fog
outside of Letterkenny.

“The politics has shifted.”
That was the tale repeated
by a bus driver from Prague.
He had downed maybe twenty

beers inside the Wolfe Tone Bar.
The loud drunk sat uneasy
with the weight of what he knew.
The decor, late I.R.A.,

clientele with ink and scars,
the accents at once breezy,
sweet, and terse sounded askew
to ears from Carolina.

I felt I heard this before.
Not from a West Slavic slant
so out of place here under
posters of starving martyrs

—Bobby Sands and the others—
but from some other transplant,
another slur and mutter,
about some other murder.

Then, as here, a heavy door
opened. The afternoon sun
lit the dark room like neon,
a bright sign, as it signaled:

“No one should say any more
about what might have been done,
who drove the car, who was gone,
and who was finally jailed.”

That echo is everywhere
from Belgrade to Bangalore.
Everyone knows those whispers.
They know not to gasp or stare.

Only an outsider dare,
and then when too drunk, say more.
And another outsider,
listen, nod, or seem to care.

Vicki Derderian

Binder of Guys

At forty-two, Elizabeth wanted a baby. I was always on the lookout for ways to earn money. We agreed it was a transaction with benefits.

It all started when Elizabeth, my soy latte, started coming to Coffee Town at the beginning of the semester. She'd squint up at the menu board, holding up the line, even though she always ordered the same thing. Large latte, soy milk, it wasn't that complicated, except she always asked for more steamed milk. Or less steamed milk. Every morning the same thing.

One day she slid a ten in my tip jar. "Could I have a few minutes of your time?"

I joined her at the high top across from Pick Up after morning rush.

"I guess we already know each other's names, right?" she smiled.

Hers was written on cups, mine on a badge.

"I teach at UNCC. History Department?"

To me, History was one big boring reenactment—only the people were not in costumes, just their regular clothes. She asked if I was a student. I was old for an undergrad, working my way through, but she was older than me. "Your major?"

"Food and Beverage."

"Ah, Pubology. Ha ha. Married? Boyfriend? Girlfriend?"

"None of the above." Maybe it was the teacher in her. All the multiple choice.

"Oh." She bit her bottom lip thoughtfully. She had wavy hair worn long and loose around a thin, sort of pretty face. "Have you ever heard of a Cryobank?"

She rummaged through a cloth purse embroidered with dots and curls, a bag owned by the kind of woman who tramped through remote countries shopping in bazaars and drinking Darjeeling.

She dropped a thick gray notebook in my lap. Tabbed and three-ringed. We called them trapper keepers in middle school. Each page had screen shots of males in every shape and size—sporty, smart, bland. Flipped through, not mug shots exactly, more like baseball cards, a whole team, brown, black, and white guys with stats like blood type, race, ethnicity, height, weight, occupation. "I need male sperm, but I'd like to bypass this Binder of Guys thing."

"You're asking me? A father?"

"Biological father. Noun. To father. A verb."

As far as Elizabeth was concerned, donor anonymity was risky, exorbitantly expensive, and unnecessary. Distasteful, really. She shook her head. "Turkey basters. Yuck. Well, what I'm proposing to you is a short-term arrangement for as long as

necessary, no strings attached once conception is complete. I can offer a monetary stipend of course so a transaction with benefits if it helps to think of it that way?"

I'll admit my first thought: What the fuck? Why me? My brown skin? My foreign sounding name? A young guy, a student, down on his luck, but with a quiet melancholy that inexplicably worked like a secret sauce on some women? I'd seen ads for donor eggs and surrogates, escort services on Craigslist. She mentioned enough to pay next year's tuition.

I thought about my father. There had been no marriage certificate, but my mother had grabbed hold of Darko Kuderko, her chance at love, and she got me, Marko. Although once she had, Darko disappeared. I knew little about him except that he was from Bosnia and had worked briefly as a house painter in Charlotte. After he left, my mother erased him, with the vague explanation that he went back to his country. Maybe he had overstayed his visa? Maybe he couldn't adjust to life in the states? Maybe he did bad stuff? Maybe he was a fugitive? Maybe he was in one of those Balkan wars, hit by sniper fire, or shelling? He left when I was three so no matter how hard I tried, I could not remember a single thing about him.

I thought about karma. "When do we start?"

*

She lived in one of those cheap one-bedrooms up near the university. Besides piles of books, the place was tidy and spare, the walls bare except for a framed poster of the Eiffel Tower and a couple of photos: a beach trip with her sisters and brothers and mom and dad, a smiling pyramid of chambray shirts. A ski week with their poles planted firmly in the snow.

The skunky, fetid scent of weed wafted in through the air vents: upstairs kids were Thursday night pregaming. Muffled laughter. A booming bass line shook the coffee table, but Elizabeth didn't seem to notice. Thump, thump, thump. She waved a thin sheaf of papers in front of my face. It spelled out the terms of our agreement. "Do you want to go through this first?"

Thump, thump, thump. High pitched shrieks rang out upstairs. I checked the time. It was late. I worked an early shift and the frozen scone shipment at Coffee Town was due in a few hours. "I trust you."

Thump, thump, thump.

"Wait." She put her hand on my chest. She led me to the bedroom. She had lit some candles. I kissed her. Her lips parted, but her eyes were open. Was I supposed to be solemn? It felt awkward for both of us, but not so awkward that we didn't both recognize it as such.

*

So it began. Sex. Coupling. Screwing. Fucking. Making love. Baby making. We joked about what to call the whole enterprise. There was a level of absurdity to it. We

weren't always in the mood at the same time, though I was relieved that she wasn't prim or awkward like college girls I knew who'd say "let's cuddle," an expression that made me feel like a swaddled infant.

If she was ovulating, I'd skip a class, a shift at work. One month. Two. No baby. She said it might be because of a lot of things—her age, timing, most likely stress?

Even in the middle of sex, she fretted about her blown deadlines, benchmarks, and extensions on her research. "Europe's first entrepreneur. Jacques Coeur specialized in textile production..."

I ran my hand over her cool papery skin, down her bony hips.

"...so you could say Coeur was atypical for a Frenchman in the 1400s."

Her breath quickened.

"Well Jacques Cur sounds like a cool..."

"Not Cur," Elizabeth interrupted. "Coeur." Her mouth puckered into a pretty O, but I could see the teacher in her, the scold. "It means heart actually."

"Awesome!"

Another month. Elizabeth asked if we could keep trying. The semester was half over and she proposed going away for Spring Break. I pictured turquoise water, pineapple drinks in coconut shells, a reggae band, but she had arranged a research residency through a university in Strasbourg, France. I was excited since I had never been outside the US.

"Study a broad. Study abroad. Ooh la la!" My friends patted my shoulder as if I'd harvest college credits for the trip.

In the weeks leading up to our flight, she was happier than I'd ever seen her. Her hoarse laugh rang out over bed creaks that sounded like farts and she was feisty, scissor kicking her legs and pointing toes painted Chanel Marinière 46. She bought a silky red scarf and YouTubed how to tie it with Gallic insouciance. We laid in bed and studied language tapes, giddy, even making up pet names.

"Hey, Pamplemousse!"

"Hey, Galette!"

*

On Saturday morning we landed at DeGaulle and took a TGV to Strasbourg and then a local train to St. Jean. I had never even flown before. It was a lot of sitting!

Stepping out of the station, she was teary-eyed. "The birthplace! Jacques Coeur!" Ferocious wind gusts whipped her red scarf in ecstatic circles. "It's the mistral," she shouted gleefully. A phenomenon as fierce and powerful as a dry hurricane. "Very rare this time of year!"

Lucky us.

St. Jean stunk like stale cigarettes and eau de dog crap, putrid fumes that made me want to puke. But Elizabeth loved it. She loved the winding alleys, the cobblestones, the miniature tourist train. She loved the shops that sold lavender

sachets, lavender olive oil, lavender flavored foie gras. She loved the pigeon shit that covered the sidewalks, the windowsills, but most of all she loved Jacques Coeur, whose ornate fifteenth century chateau towered over the village.

“This is extraordinary,” she said about everything. For hours, jet-lagged and starving, I trudged after her while she oohed and ahed about Coeur’s impeccable taste. She stood in front of an ornate tapestry for almost an hour, examining the thread count in excruciating detail.

We climbed to the top of a limestone turret that reminded me of a fortress in *Game of Thrones*.

“Is there a dungeon?”

“Oh, Pamplemousse,” Elizabeth frowned. “Wrong wrong wrong.”

Outside the chateau, Elizabeth pranced back and forth across a footbridge. Brown water gurgled along a steep concrete embankment. The current, if you could call it that, was a trickle. Orange peels and an old tire were lodged in the mud. Elizabeth believed it had once been a moat. We hung over the bridge and watched one blue sneaker drift downstream. Child size. We waited for the other shoe, but after a few minutes it was still an orphan.

“Let’s make a wish.” She nonchalantly tossed in a handful of Euros.

I knew what she wanted, but asked anyway. “What did you wish for?”

She opened her eyes. “If I tell you, it won’t come true.”

What would I wish for? Money? Freedom? Love? It wasn’t a kid. I wasn’t ready. But if there was a kid, when there was a kid out in the world how would I feel? In the future, I could imagine rapping to my kid. The house that Jack built, the maid forlorn, the man tattered and torn. The consequences of each action, one after another tumbling backward until you got to the beginning. Or maybe I wouldn’t remember exactly how it started, maybe I would just be enveloped in the here and now of my flesh and blood, of the child curled next to me, footed pajamas, freshly bathed, attentive or not, wiggling if it ended up that it was my genes had come into play.

Family. Was it so inconceivable? It was a logjam, the not saying it. I waited for her to ask me what I wished for but she had already walked away.

*

Seven a.m. Monday morning, Elizabeth came out of the bathroom, showered and dressed, and announced, “Playtime’s over.”

There was so much to do. Ten days were not enough. She would need to buckle down. No time for side trips, no more time for sightseeing. I was on my own. “I can’t babysit,” were her exact words. “So. What’s on your schedule today?”

I winced. How many times had I been asked that question followed by being called a do-nothing and/or a royal fuck up? What could I say? “I’ve got stuff to read.” It was, I knew, the answer she wanted.

After she left, I wandered around. In a park a kid was bouncing a ball. He looked to be about what? Seven? Eight? Wearing ragged little old man sandals with holey socks. A poor kid. He was brown-skinned, dark-eyed. He could be my little brother. Or maybe he was a son of Darko too. Maybe my father moved here in exile, maybe he started a new family with no thought about me left behind. Maybe a DNA swab or ancestry record could round up all my other family members. Or maybe if I had a kid, he might look like this.

“Hey, Buddy.” I stood across from the boy and gestured with open arms. “Over here.”

The boy clutched the ball protectively to his chest. I mimed dribbling and shooting but he stared, frozen. “Hey Buddy.” I grinned. “Throw. Over here.”

The boy swung his arm, aimed for my groin.

“Don’t shoot,” I yelled.

*

That night Elizabeth returned late, and I was half asleep when she entered the room, slipped out of her clothes, and crawled into bed next to me. Even with my eyes closed, I could sense she was watching me, listening to my raggedy breath.

She stroked my hair. “Are you okay, Pamplemousse? I’ve got something for you.”

I sat up and faux yawned.

She flicked on the light and held up a brown paper sack. Her face was flushed. “Ta da. Voila, le *choufleur*.” She pulled out a creamy yellow cauliflower and set it on the pillow.

I laughed about the name, *choufleur*, cabbage flower. Choufleur: A Love Story? Choufleur Mon Amour. How did I feel about her really? Sometimes I thought she didn’t give a shit about me. But she came back every night. When it was the two of us, she could be tender.

The cauliflower was the size of a baby’s head, it was sweet and pretty and we broke off clusters with our hands and wasn’t I happier than I had ever been in my life, woozy with a sense of anticipation, like the best thing that would ever happen, a miracle really, was about to occur?

*

But in daylight I was on my own. How did I spend all that time? Grabbing a bruised apple from the chipped bowl on the dusty counter of the unattended lobby. Ducking into bars waiting for the rain to stop. Sipping Orangina and watery beer and munching on stale nuts and olives. Searching for someone who spoke English.

I’d roam around St. Jean ravenous and craving something hot and greasy. The piercing sound of sirens unnerved me. Be you, be you, be you. There was no Chinese, no pizza, no McDonalds in St. Jean. Elizabeth called this Civilized. “Eat more veggies,” Elizabeth nagged. “You really should.”

*

By Friday, I lay in bed staring up at the dun-colored water stain shaped like a Bloomin' Onion, the appetizer special at Outback.

Blobby raindrops pelted the window.

I peeked out at gray clouds. I felt clammy and actually a little sorry for myself. "I think I might be coming down with something."

"There's a duvet in the armoire." Elizabeth slammed the cabinet stacked with heavy bed covering. Armoire. Duvets. Bidets. Lots of words for stuff I didn't need. I still mixed up froid and chaud. My chargers and adaptors didn't work and the blow dryer didn't dry my rain-soaked sneakers. I kinda hated it here.

She perched on the edge of the bed and ran a brush through her hair, the blonde and silver strands, the color of chai. I rubbed my newly shorn head. It felt like velvety fur. She said it made me look like Gerard Depardieu. I had googled the French actor, an old guy with a big nose and now I was self-conscious about it.

"Oh, shit. I'm late." She fished in her bag for her keys.

I sat up. "Late?"

"For work." Frustrated, she dumped the contents on the bed.

I wound her red scarf around my neck, popped my eyes, and stuck out my tongue. "You're killing me, Galette."

"Ha ha ha." She held up the keys. "Voilà! I'll be late again so don't wait up." She grabbed the only umbrella and slammed the door.

I was left behind under lipsticks, pens, moleskins, extra chargers, Post-its, Tic Tacs. And something else. I was and wasn't surprised to see the Binder of Guys. Page after page had been marked up in red gel pen, a heart next to a beefy looking guy, a star next to an Asian pianist, an exclamation point next to a mustached entrepreneur. A smiley face next to a guy that could be my twin. Check marks. Stars. X'd out choices. I envisioned myself in one of the plastic sleeves, brown hair, brown eyes, five-eleven and a half. How different was I really? Was I plan A or B? C or D? Was I part of any plan at all?

I jumped out of bed.

"Elizabeth!" I panted. She wasn't far up the street when I caught up with her. "Elizabeth," I said more sharply.

She turned around.

I held up the Binder of Guys. "You've been shopping, I see." I pointed to marked up pages.

"It's just marginalia, Marco," she said. Marginalia, a word that sounded obscene. She was tentative, careful, walking on eggshells. "Look, maybe I'm feeling ambivalent."

"You? You're ambivalent? Shit. Well, maybe I am too. Kids need a dad."

"Do they?" Elizabeth said tersely. "Do they really?"

It started to rain. Back in North Carolina dogwood and azalea were already in

full bloom, but the trees here were just beginning to bud, the first sign of spring. The grass and trees were verdant. I wanted to go home. I was sick of croissants and pastries, wheels of cheese, smelly and moldy as socks. Or at least a mom, I wanted to say. “Yes. Yes, they do.”

She stared at me, shook her head, and walked away. I stood there waiting for her to turn around, but she kept on walking. The rain soaked through my hoodie. I huffed on my hand and stuffed it in my pocket.

I hopped on the tiny tourist train and the conductor offered me a free poncho. I was pitiful dressed in a blue plastic bag, my knees pressed to my chest chugging up and down streets in an empty little choo choo train, a triumphant whistle sounding at each landmark. *Jardin des Arbres. St. Sulpice. Jardin des Arbres.* I was not getting anywhere, going in circles. I flipped through the Binder of Guys, a catalog of mysterious men. Men who did not reveal too much, or express much. Men who held back, emotionless men, who displayed the right equipment necessary for procreation, and wasn't that exactly what was required in being a father?

Le Chateau du Jacques Coeur.

I stood on the footbridge where Elizabeth and I had stood and made wishes a week earlier. The trickle had risen several feet and was now a legitimate stream. I peered into the churning water, heaved the Binder over my head, flung it, and watched it twirl downstream, take on water, and sink without a ripple.

Rebecca Valley

A Long Time Ago This Was a Rich Man's Backyard

Now the trees own their dirt
This morning, a woman and her dog wear silent circles in the pavement
We struggle to make a meager living
In the meadow
I watch a spider thread gossamer between two trees
A collection of crushed paper cups in the brambles
and the spit of the ghosts who gummed them
Anyway, it's an ant's world now and always will be
Everyone is pregnant and sharing articles about how to parent through an apocalypse
Of course I want meaning, too
And by that I mean a child of my very own
To walk with through these trees
My child who gathers leaves
and never speaks
Maybe at the end there will be no sound
Just gestures of love and violence
The grass shifting slightly to accommodate the breeze

Terri Leonard

Gurus: Water Oaks on Mothering

Three water oaks (*Quercus nigra*) guard my house. Gurus, I call them. One has grown near a fence, so close it's swallowed the chainlinks, crisscross and all. I noticed when the trunk began pushing outward, like the tree was holding its breath, forcing the fence to flex against its massive girth. Which would win—the tree or the fence?

I bought heavy wire cutters and they sat in the shed. Walking by, arms full of groceries, I'd grimace, vow to rescue this entrapped tree, and then just as quickly forget, swallowed up by my own life. Soon, half the links were buried in diagonal folds of bark, submerged metal sutures. Over time, the tree engulfed a huge swath, disappeared it.

Today, I snipped the edges, freed the tree from the rest of the fence. The thriving oak now wears a wound, XXX in low relief. New bark emerges, a roundabout of gray crenulations, scabrous folds that climb upward toward limbs chunky thick like an old grandma. Palming her costate coat, the nubby bark is firm. Nature's sculpture, weathered and scarred. What wisdom is here?

*

The skin of this granny oak, the beauty of its bark rumpled and damaged, makes me curious. My own skin, this face in the mirror, evokes disbelief and loathing, threaded with tenderness. I caress the soft lines and folds, the quilted texture of the cheeks. They morph into the mug of my mother, age ninety, and her Italian mother, my real granny, withered tomatoes. I'm aghast. Waves of acceptance and rejection end in judgment, ruining everything. Like the damaged oak, I should have been attending to this skin. And then judgment of the judgment.

I try again. Relax my gaze. The scary details blur, lines that erode social value, self-worth. Better. The sunken eyes, mine, nestle in a hollow of bruised rainbows. Baby jowls drape both sides of the smile. Gingerly, I pinch the small sacks of flesh. They feel plump, friendly, not sad like they look. The right cheekbone is puffed from a hiking faceplant. Natural botox.

Today's surprise is two grooves that encircle my neck, folds of thin skin a few inches apart. Growth rings. Once, I recall, they could be scrubbed away. When did this permanence occur? Where was I when Nora Ephron (2006) winked at neck self-care? With two-handed urgency, I slant the wattled skin up toward my ears. It slides stubborn south.

*

“Edaphoecotropism,” a mouthful coined by civil engineers in the 70s, names the ability of trees that bind to metal, rock, and other low-porous objects. The label is new, but not the phenomenon. A fir in Washington and a Scottish sycamore both grew around abandoned bikes. An ice skate tree in southeast New York sports a blade, boot, and laces embedded in a trunk six feet up. Eyebolts, nails, lights, and ring cameras puncture trees in human spaces around the world, ubiquitous. Some will bioadapt, even become strengthened by the fusion. Others will succumb to the stress. Could parasites invade the fence-branded oak in my yard? Stop the flow of nutrients to the cambium, its underbark? Eustress or distress? What strengthens one tree might kill another. The crisscross tattoo on the oak is proof of its vulnerability and also its resilience.

*

My life has been more outdoors than in, and the chainlink on my face, sun and wind, is proof. But kid stress has given my wrinkles superpower. For sixteen years, my partner and I traveled and worked before settling to raise a family. The first two years of children were relatively easy, but by the time our girls hit pre-K, first one, then the other was diagnosed autistic. It was the mid-90s, and there were few interventions, no cure, and little public awareness of autism, mostly seen in boys. Social pressure and the drive to fix them sparked an urgency in me, the mother-bear kind. I researched mercilessly—special diets, allergy tests, energy healers, and more. Even stopped vaccinating. Sleep was elusive, eroded by grief, anxiety, and vigilance. Unravelling their diagnoses and my own internal panic further cankered our family until, when the kids were three and six, their dad quit the marriage. He quit me. It was socially sloppy and his timing sucked, but he didn’t abandon the kids.

Inside, I was shocked, scared, and deeply wounded. Outside, I was pissed. He moved out, became the weekend fun-guy, and I warriored on, sometimes martyred, doubly committed to supporting the girls. To cope, I tried the traditional methods—drinking and smoking. These did help in the short term but they were not sustainable. The stress had won out, groomed my facial muscles, cemented furrows of frowning, squinting, and efforting. A steady supply of cortisol conformed my skin inside-out to the tension beneath. More wrinkles than I should have at my age, a friend called it, trying to be polite.

Some years later, genetic testing revealed a familial pattern of translocated chromosomes, balanced and asymptomatic in me, but unbalanced in my daughters. Now in their 20s, they live semi-independently. Their dad and I co-parent, 20 years and counting, our commitment to the girls. It’s still not easy, but I’ve earned my growth rings.

*

While our second daughter was still an infant, our toddler was gripped by stormy mood swings, beyond the typical twos. None of the “What to Expect” books came close. I was always unscrambling a bizarre behavior, texture, or sound that set her off, explosive. Then, I’d add my dynamite, trying to control her. In public, we were a mess. Neurological and cognitive testing branded her: Pervasive Developmental Disorder–Not Otherwise Specified (PDD–NOS). Translation: Something’s definitely wrong here, but we don’t know what. It was an early warning that I was relying on a medical community who themselves were punting. Still in use, PDD–NOS is the diagnostic precursor of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Medical acronyms, plentiful like acorns.

*

Quercus nigra grow fast and their wood is weak. The bane of urban arborists, they are drought-sensitive, shallow-rooted, short-lived. They blow down easily. Intolerant of air pollution, they’re a favored host of the Christmas parasite, mistletoe. Yet, when well-tended, they thrive even in compacted clay like ours. The older water oaks in my neighborhood are volunteers, sprouted along fencelines and driveways. My neighbors fear their fallen limbs and the blot of acorn stain on pristine concrete. Developers seeking square footage are quick to fell them, dismiss that they clean our air, cool our hot urban yards, dismiss the decades it takes them to regrow.

*

Prior to having kids with autism, I’d have told you Occupational Therapy (OT) was to train people who have had a stroke or have a new prosthetic how to shower, write a check, or drive. But a sub-specialty of OTs, the saviors of autistic families, teach kids and parents “occupational” skills. How to be a child, then a teen, in a body with atypical neurology. As a young mother, I became grateful for OT, and for good insurance.

In low-lit rooms roped with swings and slides, crunchy beanbag chairs, mountains of lumpy cushions, and plastic pools filled with clacky Wiffle balls in primary colors, we learned to play. Therapeutic play, but it was fun. We slid, hung, and twirled, slimed with goop and shave cream, all to challenge my girls’ wonky sensory systems. There’s a name for this now, Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD), the hallmark of autism’s quirky behaviors and emotional lability. Lots of cool websites for parents and teachers, but back then, nada. The OTs taught us how to administer, through play, measured amounts of stimulation or calming. A sensory diet.

Getting their engines to run “just right” was babyish but brilliant. When the nervous system is dysregulated, it can be a stalling rattletrap of an engine or a turbocharger with no brakes. One area can rev too high while the other revs too low. “Just right” should feel like an unnoticeable background purr. This is self-regulation. Some days, we didn’t find “just right” until bedtime. While my friends were at soccer or gymnastics, I was home tuning engines.

*

Oak roots bunch low against our concrete driveway, a bulbous mountain range, mini mossy balds, a home for fairies. My girls and I grazed plastic sheep among their crumpled valleys, galloped clothespin people on plastic Breyer horses, bounded by tiny rail fencing. Overhead, the highest arm of this giant oak spans the driveway. We've swirled and soared on the thirty-foot swing tied there. Highs and lows.

*

Feeding my toddler was like an episode of *Cutthroat Kitchen*. She spit, sometimes slung, everything out. Our home became a food desert. Nothing but mushy carbs, soft on the pallet. I stopped most real cooking, moved to predictable meals. Through OT, we discovered the lining of her mouth and esophagus were over-sensitive to textures and flavors, another sensory issue. She's mostly grown past this though she's still fussy about food. Spaghetti's her favorite.

The OT game we both loved was Tootsie Roll. I'd wrap this stormy kid in a yoga mat and apply pressure to her whole body, roll her across the room or sometimes ride the Tootsie, squishing and compressing her. She'd laugh and giggle, beg for more. We both got sensory input, and this rough-housing felt less prescribed, more natural for me. Were there moments I fantasized an all-out stomp session? I won't say, except that she loved the pressure. Being in water was another sensory favorite. We called swimming cheap OT. Spent hours at the Y. These days, she freestyles in Special Olympics, gives full-body hugs, loves to hold my hand.

Noisy concerts and restaurants with buffets were a disaster. We ditched playdates, stopped hanging out with my adult friends and their neurotypical kids. It was just too hard. Even now, I don't think they or their adult children really get my girls' quirks.

Clothing tags and tight waistbands were a sensory nightmare. Like so many families with autism, I began to notice that I, too, hated scratchy labels in my clothing. And, now that we were avoiding loud noisy venues, don't ask me to engage one-on-one in a crowded coffee shop with layers of conversation, the growl of an espresso machine, and a curated 60s soundtrack. Sometimes, while writing in the quiet of my home with open windows, the noisy crosstalk of birds makes me nuts.

Thanks to OT, we became a calm, tagless, baggy clan, often caught wearing our clothes inside out or backward. We stayed home Friday nights. Woke up and went to bed at the same time every day, ate bland, textureless food. It took years to shed the shame of parental disability. In pregnancy, I was relaxed with ferocious access to maternal instinct. But as a parent, I became anxious and controlling. OT tempered that, helped me learn and practice this neuro-regulation for my kids and for myself. Most of the time, our engines run pretty well.

*

The dense critter population in my yard reminds me of someplace like Brooklyn. A high-rise postage stamp of greenspace. Live-work-play for squirrels, owls, hawks, robins, mockers, jays, and cardinals. I'm talking 24-7. This "Occupy" movement sometimes includes my attic. Besides the permanent residents, we have tourists like the white-throated sparrow, yellow-bellied sapsucker, and cedar waxwing. Barred owls toss ghoulish howls, monkey-like, their nighttime spars anchored by these giant oaks and understory. Neighborhood Rescue Mission: acorns, nests, burrows for rent. No ID checks.

*

Edaphocotropism. How does a stress become a strength? Eventually, I found anchor in the roots of yoga and meditation. Deep into a hip opener called pigeon (*kapotasana*), I experienced my brokenness directly. Sobbing into the mat, I spewed grief and anxiety, all I'd been trying to manage. I was a mother who didn't know, couldn't know, how to parent these two little girls. Practicing yoga helped build physical strength and flexibility, but the biggest gain was emotional balance.

Self-care branched into yoga teaching, and I began experimenting, playing really, with my kids and their classmates. We adapted postures, music, breathing, and chant, invented new ways to use yoga tools for regulation. More cheap OT. Yoga was cool and exotic, not a team sport. It taught focus and a reverence they intuited. They could freely sway their bodies or jump to music, shout silly Sanskrit words, or shut down in a child's pose. And, best of all, there was no doing it "right."

This blossomed into a career of adaptive yoga for folks with paraplegia and traumatic brain injury, veterans, and others. But staying sane was the real reason for my new career. In order to continue parenting coherently, my job-job had to help me grow.

*

My girls didn't pick up on social cues. They weren't invited to parties or sleepovers. By the time they could master the basic skills of soccer or softball, music or drama, they were past the age limit. Believe me, I begged. They had no slew of friends, no besties, no dates. My own youth was self-propelled, a life of many pals, an easy, unquestioned sense of belonging. Sure, my folks drove us around, paid for prom and swim team. But, unlike my kids, I wasn't dependent on parents for my social life. I wouldn't say they suffered. But for me, the isolation of being othered was crippling. We were a child-rearing island at the same time Hillary Clinton was peddling "it takes a village."

I tried a few support groups but gravitated to the inner quiet of yoga and meditation. There were no role models for this kind of parenting. I was always overwhelmed or exhausted. We did lots of therapies—occupational, speech, and equine for them; art therapy, yoga, and nature for me. I worked out a lot. We

camped, biked, hiked, and swam. Housed a menagerie from chickens to guinea pigs and rabbits, cats and dogs—built-in friends.

*

Possums, raccoons, rats, and squirrels by the gillions live in my yard. Chipmunks too. Rodents chew my hoses, lawn chairs, and downspouts. Overnight, they graze trail mix in my Prius. Their bitemarks brand all things plastic. Lately, we have rabbits, the most photogenic of these terrorists. They chew to the ground, favor tender new kale and collards. Day and night, they hop around like they own the place. Last year, possessed by the spirit of Mr. McGregor, I rose at night to study their rampage in my garden. They'd dug under the hardware cloth, sneezed past the red pepper repellent. Next day, I broke down and bought myself a BB-gun for Christmas at the fancy Ace Hardware, boxed like a harmless toy. Boxless now, it sits in my closet. Can't bring myself to do it, dammit. They even eat the zinnias.

*

When my oldest daughter slid into puberty, her interest in math and reading spiked. So did my hopes. She acquired a boyfriend. It was a growth spurt and a good one. But as her brain cells kindled, so did the mental illness we didn't know she had.

Shadowy toddler and middle school moods transformed into auditory and visual hallucinations, with paranoia and a regular cast of meanies. Early-onset psychotic derailment, they called it, like the train wreck my life would become. The most pervasive visitor was Jacob, the vampire from *Twilight*, who perched in the scarred oak closest to our house. Other mind-bullies called her the B-word, said she was fat. At eighteen she gained a diagnosis of schizo-affective, a mood disorder with hallucinations and delusions, plus thirty pharmaceutical pounds. This new diagnosis was her expression of the chromosomal anomaly. Autism with a side of mental illness. For this condition, there is no acronym.

Their dad settled nearby with a new wife, calm and quiet, called Stepmom, an asset to him and the girls. They visited on weekends but I was shouldering the 5-day school and therapy week. I remember one morning sitting with the two at breakfast, bleary-eyed and grumpy, trying to convince the newly diagnosed delusional one that her oatmeal wasn't poisoned. I was making progress, when I noticed the youngest inch her bowl away. That subtle gesture was my awakening. With all the warrior energy I could muster, I insisted, then demanded, and finally threatened their dad in a sloppy unskillful manner I am not proud to recount, to house the oldest for a time. He resisted, then relented. New wife, new home. I get it. We strung that visit into a few crucial years. Both girls got the attention they needed.

*

Without judgment, these granny oaks have witnessed tirades and overwhelm, futile attempts to corral my girls and my own mental health. Their stalwart silence blankets my despair, holds my hopes, harbors hallucinations. I respect these ancient mothers, how they've survived in urban density. I feed them in the fall, water when they're dry, and holler when a trimmer wears spikes. These octogenarians wear their bark rough and sometimes tatted, their lop-limned burl, warty fungi.

*

When our youngest made it to her 20s, we thought she'd skated the mental illness part. But birth control ignited a spike in hormones and a cycle of mania. Like some autistics, this daughter has "affinities," the polite term for fixations. She's not into quirky things like hand-flapping or vocal sounds. Her fascination is not for trains or dinosaurs or US presidents. She can't debug my PC when it's been compromised. But she knows a lot about sex and hooking up. She's savvy about men and her own satisfaction. In someone with better boundaries, this would be something to celebrate. If we all survive her risky behaviors, celebrate we will.

She enjoyed several elopements with men she didn't know, not her "right age." Most were old enough, in fact, to *be* a US president. Surely, these scumbags could read her disability, obvious in a quick exchange. Each secreted her to hotels, parked cars, and once a back alley. The last guy's in jail on a felony charge awaiting trial because, for once, my daughter had the sense to say no. *Me Too* thrives in autism. Anti-psychotics mitigate the mania, and she's learning to temper her affinity with the help of a behavior coach, a counselor, and a team of peer guides.

*

These urban oaks, elders at eighty-plus years, are my kin. Their teachings transmit through the soles of my feet, the pores of my skin, and through my breath while digging in the garden, hanging clothes, or raking. Mycorrhizal networks, mycelial messaging, maybe even pheromones. An umbilical exchange of compassion and tenderness.

*

I read a statistic recently, one that shocked me. Nearly fifty percent of the parents of autistic kids are clinically depressed. Why the shock? Because fifty percent seems way too low.

Lately, I've been doing *tonglen*, the Buddhist practice. I inhale my feelings of overwhelm and exhale compassion for myself. Then inhale the suffering of the one in forty-four parents of kids with autism, up 178 percent since 2000. *Tonglen* can be done with anger or sadness, even positive emotions like joy, though I tend to reach for it when I'm teetering.

My kids were born before the wave. Overwhelm comes and goes for me, depending on what's happening with them. But happy to say, mirror-gazing has lately become less shocking. I'm a mug I no longer reject.

*

Like the oaks, my daughters, now young adults, are my gurus. Though there's greater acceptance of neurodiversity, parenting them is still a challenge. Yet, watching their growth makes me happy and proud. Falling from the bell curve taught me balance, how to manage emotions and expectations—my own. The suffering is written in wrinkles.

My devotion to these gals is unflagging. Sweet and kind, they live independently, supported by a team of coaches and students, mostly government-funded, who help them keep house, work, and hang out with friends. The goal of this parent-run “non-profit,” fueled by sweat equity and tax dollars, is adulting with disabilities. Having a chromosomal anomaly didn't help our parenting, but it red-flagged services. We lived efficiently, divided our labor. One parent managed them while the other managed paperwork. Like acronyms, paperwork in disability is plentiful. We have privilege—not wealth, but education, home-ownership, good insurance, the internet, and friends. My kids are growing and thriving. I'm working on my third neck-ring.

*

Last summer during the long periods without rain, one of the matriarchs started losing leaves, thick olive-colored ones, dried hard from drought. They fluttered down in the hot wind, crackled as they hit the ground announcing their distress. The arborist told me, but I'd forgotten to water, and my tree was weeping leaves. I raked them feeling empty. Last winter in the hard freeze, I noticed bunches falling again, green lobes thick and stiff, airbrushed on the brown mulch. I worry for this old granny. How long does she have through all that is to come?

*

It took time to learn the right supports for my daughters and for myself. The isolation and otherness of our family pushed me to create social supports, educate grandparents, teachers, neighbors, and employers. Our world has softened, an unexpected kind of acceptance, even celebration, of our collective quirkiness.

Weariness is baked into my bones, felted on my face like the slow press of chainlink on oak. The hardscrabble work of raising my girls, our vulnerability, theirs and mine, has created resilience. Mirror-gazing, I'm beginning to feel the same awe as when I palm the crumbly bark of my beloved oaks. Going forward, my job is to honor these wrinkles, every one earned in deep commitment and service to this messy human life. To celebrate my own majesty. This skin protects and also gives us away. There's no hiding.

Jenny Hubbard

The evening darkens and comes on

for James Wright

1

I have a good friend who doesn't like birds.
She says it's the flapping. I say how can *you*,
a first grade public school teacher, not like birds?
I say it every time we meet at the bar
for a French 75 served in a crystal flute—How
Can You. Not Like. Birds. They're too loud,
she says. God. I need her to be reasonable.

2

Three cardinals in the hedge have fledged.
They peep in surround sound, one in a flower pot,
one on the low branch of the magnolia, one smack
in the middle of the street, the mother hopping
like mad to nudge it to the safety of boxwoods,
her waxy orange beak a crayon of devotion,
her road baby terrified out of its bird brain.

3

I'm sorry, Mr. Wright, I ever called your poem
worthless, the famous one with the hammock
and the horse shit flaring like gold in the waning
of day. I hear your voice read through the night.
We have not paid attention. Birds slam into glass,
into windows we are not looking out of. Every
new poem, every new life, such a warning.

Maureen Sherbondy
Her Life as Ferris Wheel

She slowly spins from morning 'til night.
Just when the sky is within reach, down
she twirls again, revolving in circles,
spinning away revulsion and resolve.
This constant movement both placates
and frustrates. *There are hills and valleys,*
a boss once lectured, *so get used to it.*
She carries the weight of family in those
swaying metal cages—her aging mother,
who like a parrot, repeats disparaging phrases.
The heaviest one to pull up and down—her father's
coffin that shudders back and forth, all the while
releasing the same circular argument that ends
up nowhere, just spits sand into the sea air.
Get off my ride, she wants to say. Oh, moon
so still above her head. Might you change places
with her for a time? Would it be sinful to exchange rides
with the Mad Teacup rider beside her? *You would not
like this any better,* replies the passenger, *all my life
spinning side to side, never even rising above
flat ground.* Prometheus, then, help a girl out.
Set fire to the base of this wheel, even though
eagles are hovering, waiting to punish her.

Lit/South Awards 2024
Fiction Competition – Honorable Mention

Anna Schachner

The Lovely Woods Are Yours

For the three weeks I'd been living in my sister's house, I had left messages for the bear—Ava, I called her. *Stay wild for life. Goldilocks Was Ridiculously Rude! Hibernation Nation. I Admire Your Fearlessness.* Usually, I'd mortar these pieces of scrap paper to the stone wall I was building to border the patio, though I'd hung the last from a string I tied to one of the trees at the beginning of the woods just beyond it. Bears don't read, of course, or keep a strict visitation schedule. It wasn't like Ava was going to emerge from the trees to knock on the door at 5 p.m. every other weeknight to say that she appreciated my admiration and encouragement. When I heard the knock, though, I did wonder if it was Ava. It was a half-second of profound wonder during which I felt almost joyful: because if a bear knocked on the door, then all was not foregone.

I opened the door to see a man dressed in jeans and one of those puffy vests hanging open, a few coils of silver chest hair poking out near the collar of a flannel shirt. "Good afternoon," he said. Dangling between his fingers was the string with my most recent message for Ava attached. He held it up and read, "The lovely woods are yours." His intonation rose, like the mountain we stood on. Or maybe it was a question, though it wasn't when I wrote it.

"I don't think so," I said, slowly, studying him. His presence didn't alarm me; his voice was too deep and earnest to be a troll's or a gnome's or even a forest ranger's, the typical frequenters of the woods, if you knew your folklore and folk alike. He was haggardly handsome. "Not mine," I added. "The bear's."

He smiled, bemused. "I didn't see a bear, but it"—he nodded toward the note—"was lying near the woods, from which I've just come. I hiked up the back

side of the mountain. I'm a little lost, if you must know." He might have blushed, from embarrassment most likely. I certainly wasn't a woman known for making men blush: plainness is its own kind of mirror. "Yours is the first house I've seen for a while."

"Yes," I said, not correcting him, given that the house wasn't technically mine until probate court. "I expect that's true, though I have lots of neighbors."

He looked back over his shoulder at the woods. "Animals, you mean, bears among them?"

"That's right."

"But you're only familiar with the one? The one bear." I heard concern in his voice, and I wondered if I wore my grief. Before, there had been no one to see it. When my sister chose the edge of this mountain, she had found her—and now my—solitude.

"That's right," I repeated. I'd seen Ava five or six times, when she wandered babushka-style into the yard looking for food. She had a distinctive gait with a slight limp, so I knew it was her each time.

He turned and looked over his shoulder. "Well, I've probably only got about an hour of light left, so I was just wondering where that road goes."

"Mile and a half down the mountain to the highway. Flat Rock's not far from there."

"Dirt all the way?"

I nodded and replied, "Yes." How odd it was to be looked at and spoken to.

"Good. The way I like it. And it's right warm for late October, isn't it?" He handed me the string and note and gave a nod. "Thank you. If I meet the bear, should I deliver your message to him?"

"Her," I answered. "And please do."

But I regretted it within the hour, when night—"solitude's unpaid helper," my sister had called it—settled in. Should there be an encounter, who knew what the man's mere presence would tell Ava? And even if he did think (it was quite unlikely) to relay my kind words, she could still kill the messenger. I did not want that man to die. I did not want anyone else, Ava included, to die.

*

Most of my local news came from the staticky AM radio station, or occasionally, from Irma, the chatty young mail carrier with an abundance of purple hair. The next day, neither reported a mauled hiker, which brought me some peace, if not more curiosity, about my visitor. Another illegal bear trap had been set for Ava, though, found near Holland Creek and then removed by rangers, a putrid little dance between cruelty and laws, both human creations. Ava's wildness needed neither cruelty nor laws. My sister, in her own way, hadn't either.

One day my sister was a long-widowed ICU nurse in flowered clogs, and the next, she sold her condo in Atlanta and moved an old stone house from the bottom of this mountain to the top. First, it was raised from its foundation, then a wide-bed truck hauled it, two county sheriffs trailing—the sheriffs more for show than safety. She told me all this when she called one night back in September. She also asked me to visit, so I immediately boarded my pack of dogs and drove the four hours from Durham because I could not remember my sister ever having outright asked me for anything, or I her, for that matter. I had to investigate.

After dinner the first night of my visit, I stood in her kitchen washing dishes and watched her outside the window. One by one, she filled five bird feeders circling the patio. As she reached for the last, a brown bear ambled out of the woods and stood only a few yards away. I froze, terrified behind the protection of a reassembled house, but my sister put down the birdseed and stepped slowly toward the bear. Then she smiled and reached one hand forward. Ava shifted to her back legs and stood, powerful but calm. In fairytales, which, as an archivist, I had studied for decades, this would have been the point where the human and the animal exchange identities, some plan enacted. Or, in nature, it was often the point of death. But neither was true. My sister kept her hand extended; her smile deepened. Ava swiveled her head. Every tree in the woods joined me in amazed, watchful silence. My sister—a small woman with hair as gray as my own was black, who thought that a stroll through an antique mall was exercise—needed something from Ava.

A minute or so later, Ava finally disappeared back into the woods, and my sister met me on the patio, the birdseed spilling in a trail behind her. I raised my eyebrows into a question. It could have been any one of many, but my sister conflated them all with her answer. “It turns out an entire house can be moved, but one small tumor on the brain, my brain to be exact, cannot,” she said matter-of-factly. She brushed a leaf from her shoulder. “I needed to practice.”

“Practice for what?” I asked. It had been a senseless question with no good answer then, and it still was.

The hiker had come from the woods, as had Ava, as had the birds that visited the feeders every day—today there must have been a dozen as I lugged mortar buckets and stones to resume my work on the patio wall. As my sister would, if she, her determined animal spirit, ever returned to see if both the house and I had stayed intact. Had I? I should have asked the hiker to walk with me into the woods; though that story almost never ends well, it certainly could. It was possible.

*

The boarding facility in Durham called the next day to say that it could indeed honor my request and transport my dogs, which made finishing the wall more urgent. I worked all day, stopping only to eat a sandwich, yet the impending

presence of four wagging tails and sloppy tongues was becoming more and more incomprehensible. The solitude would be ruined. The grief, this heaviness, like I was piling those stones on my own shoulders—what would happen to it? I needed it. The solitude was my sister's creation, but the grief was mine.

I suddenly couldn't breathe. I washed my hands with very cold water from the outside spigot and zipped up my fleece jacket. I crossed the patio, climbed the slight incline to the woods, and stood looking into the trees. There was no path, so I pushed aside limbs and scraggly bushes, exactly as my sister must have done. I walked, my eyes focused ahead, mindful of Ava. The further I walked, the more trees had leaves tinged with the last of the October color, though the less lucky ones crunched beneath my boots.

I stopped when I found the clearing. Somewhat recent campers must have made it before my sister discovered it; the trenches dug around the flat surface for the tent were still there. I stood in the center and leaned back, my hair swaying against the back of my knees—an old witch in the woods, Ava would think if she had seen me. The sky was cloudy now, the light speckled through the trees. My breath was the only sound.

I had not known my sister well. We had lived far apart since the day she left for college, seldom talking by phone or seeing each other. Somehow, we had both become fiercely independent women, though of the two of us, I was the fiercest. As such, I agreed to her request to die when she, not her cancer, chose. I did not interfere, which is why I hadn't known about the clearing until, after she was gone for a day and a night, I called 911. I don't know why I did—her body, marred or not, now belonged to no one. Of course, the rangers found her, though I wished it had been the gnomes, who were known for their guarding skills, even when they were not requested.

*

When I found my way back to the house, Irma's red Ford sedan was pulling up to the mailbox a few dozen yards down the dirt road. She stuck her hand out the window and waved. I waved back. Then she yelled, "Some hiker down in town was asking about you? Did you know that?" I shook my head no. "He was telling Riley at the post office that he's worried about you up here all alone."

"I'm not alone," I called back.

Irma shook her purple head. "It doesn't matter. I think he might be a gentleman caller, if you know what I mean."

I did know what she meant.

I took the mail inside, all of it addressed to my sister, and tore an advertisement envelope in half. On the back, I wrote *Thank you, and please come visit*. I went out on the patio, used my finger to rub a blotch of mortar along the edges of the paper, and placed it on the top of the wall. Back inside, I began a long string of phone calls

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needed to attend to the details of staying for a while, and two hours passed before I realized it was almost dark. I turned on the television to see if any stations would come in, the volume turned up to help fill the house. But I heard it: a definite knock on my door.

Fiction judge Clyde Edgerton writes: "The brevity of this story, given its depth, and the promise of a resolution that is not directly rendered are notable strengths."

Em Palughi
Radnor Lake, July 4th

A juvenile bald eagle, brown and molting
like a carp halfway scaled, a wretched thing,
has attracted a crowd around the scopes.

He flops lazily in a nest across the lake,
wingtips hanging over the edges, too big
and still waiting to be fed. I know what he
has done: a sibling starved then eaten, survival
of the slightly-larger-than, of the hungriest.

My eye goes flush with the scope. I want
to make the obvious connection: how American
to reward the one that wants the most.
I watch the eagle-mother eye a smaller bird.
Here comes another victory of big over small
it seems. I think of how we hunted pigeons

back when they moved in mile-wide clouds
that could block the sun for days: a squab,
blinded with sewing scissors, set crying
in a field, drawn-in adults shot by the sackful.

The mother eagle brings the sparrow to her beak,
snaps the thimble head clean from the body.
lets it fall to the fish below. As I pull away, I can read
every t-shirt in the crowd: *red, white, and
awesome, boom boom baby, I can't hear you*

*over all this freedom, stand for the flag: kneel
for the cross.* I think of the bluegill picking
meat from between tiny head-feathers,
how they might parse hunger from cruelty.

Arielle Hebert

Erosion

Geologists say that in ten years, Florida's coastlines will be underwater.
Oceanfront properties will drown in the wake of global warming,
and still, mansions sprout up, fungus clustered on the dunes.

Large bay windows at constant war with salt grime.
Bowl of fake lemons on the marble countertop,
pop of sunshine yellow greeting the snowbirds

when they arrive for winter. The rest
of the year, their nests are empty,
haunted only by the house-

keepers and gardeners.
We'd cruise slowly
up Siesta Drive,

smoking joints,
turning into driveways
with no gates, rolling the windows

down to get a better view of fountain statues,
birds of paradise, vaulted entryways. My girlfriend
never worried about getting into trouble, plucked oranges

from their trees and called it a favor, less rotting on the ground,
better us than the ants and rats. That summer was
a pinwheel spinning too fast, and by the end, we were

dizzy with teenage desires. Twin galaxies drifting
lightly toward our centers of collapse. We'd go
back to our neighborhood, inland, late and

smelling like smoke, my parents asking
the unanswerable question of where
I'd been, who I'd been with.

When they forbid me
from speaking
to her,

it only
made us more
reckless, desperate

for places to be alone, to be ourselves.
So, when we finally tried the front door
of a waterfront mansion and found it open,

we didn't think twice about going inside, drinking
their wine, sliding down the staircase railing,
bathing in the Jacuzzi tub, jets turned up.

This is where I wish the story ended,
with us laughing, running toward
the next sunkissed afternoon or

humid night together.
This memory of us,
happy, whole,

preserved.
A ship
in a bottle,

bobbing in the rising
waters, no one knowing quite
how we got in there in the first place,

if we have any intention of coming back out.

Lit/South Awards 2024

Fiction Judge

Clyde Edgerton

The Boys' Choir

I'm on the way to the funeral. Andy was, you know, gay. Everybody knew it, of course. Had known it. Found out, or whatever.

Actually, it's not a funeral, it's a memorial service, and I'm guessing not that many people will show, since Andy hasn't lived in Tulsa for what, thirty years? He is, was, my cousin. First cousin. He died about a month ago in Atlanta where he'd been a flight attendant for twenty, thirty years.

Family reunions these days are the last stage of holding a ranch family together. The whole thing finally dissolves. But in that first generation off the ranch, and maybe the second, you watch kids grow up—little cousins—and you see them when they are four, fourteen, and then forty-four—and then you are seventy. Friends and cousins start dropping, and my wife is not doing well. And you look back at your life and right away you start thinking you won't be looking back much longer. There's that thing about wives too—you tend to marry them for the same reason that splits you up. Speaking for myself. Just the facts.

So now, there are only three cousins left: me, Andy's brother—Gil—and Annalee. When I say everybody knew about Andy, I mean, you know, you could tell—when he was around fourteen, and that's probably about the time it's going to surface, if it's going to surface, and it's not any of my business when it surfaces, but I'm talking about normally. And so, this was way back before all shit broke loose in terms of the culture. Andy was fourteen in what, 1964? And there was this kid, Ron, last name escapes me, who came with Andy to the family reunion every year—I guess from the time Andy was fourteen until he was maybe eighteen or twenty.

Aunt Teresa, Andy and Gil's mother, who could talk the pedals off a bicycle, would go on about Andy and Ron as if it was some kind of normal friendship. She

went on about anything and everything. Uncle Don said maybe fifty words after he married her. And Andy just got more and more obviously gay. I didn't much care. He was younger than me.

I've had my encounters. Propositions. Maybe three. Bad, bad manners. Whoa.

I'm thinking about all this on the hour and a half drive to the memorial service—I just passed Owasso—but mainly, I've been thinking about Phil Robbins, one of my best friends, who died day before yesterday. I saw the email on my cell phone, from him, and then I opened it and read: "Jeff, this is Renee. I'm so sorry to have to write this email...."

I was working in my boat, and I dropped to one knee, let out this moan, and started crying. There is this odd thing: we called each other "Punky." I walked into the house bawling like a baby. And it's not like we'd seen each other than much in the last twenty years. Phone calls once a month or so. So many memories.

I keep thinking over and over: you're going to the funeral of a family member and you're thinking all the time about a friend who of course wasn't in the family.

Phil and I were fighter pilots, over 40 years ago—and best friends since, and there's so much I could tell you. So many riot good times.

*

I'm here, turning into a big parking lot. It's a big church in Tulsa—Presbyterian. I put on my mask. Inside, in the basement, I say hello to the younger cousins who have shown up. Four. Two married. One with kids. I haven't seen some of them in a few years. I recognize everybody, except for a couple of women. And I see the guy, whatever they are called now, who must have been Andy's partner. I don't think they got married. No sign of Ron—the boyhood buddy. Hell, that was...how many decades ago?

What can I say? Maybe he was happy.

So we are gathered. And it's almost time to go up into the sanctuary. I want to get out of here. I see the preacher—Reverend—coming down the stairs, I guess to lead us back up to where the crowd waits. Small crowd for sure. He moved away, see.

The preacher is a small woman, dark hair—a kind of bun, hair pulled back. She's wearing a black mask but her eyes are very sparkly. And she is wearing, you know, a robe. I didn't think the Presbyterians did that.

We are all wearing masks. Gil, Andy's brother, introduces me to the Reverend.

I want to get out of here and back to the cabin. We have a cabin up near Grove—on the lake.

Phil and I were twenty-four when we met. Yokota Air Base, Japan. He was in a different squadron, but we ended up roommates. We lived in the BOQ, next to the Officers' Club. BOQ means Bachelor Officers' Quarters. There was a liquor store attached to the Officer's Club and you could buy a fifth of scotch for less than five dollars. And off-base, nearby, was a large hotel, Hotel International, and that's where

the stewardesses, or flight attendants, as they are now known, would have layovers, as they were called. Jean, my wife, not doing well as I said, has mentioned all this under the snow-flake heading: “toxic masculinity.” As Phil used to say, she hit the head on the nail.

Phil was a little different. No, not that...I mean, first, he was funny as hell. We share that sense of humor that is—was—or is, very slightly off. One thing, we’d put each other down in funny ways, but it was never heavy. By that I mean we never got pissed off at each other. Well, there was one time, just one time, but I pretty much blacked that out from my memory. We never mentioned it. We were in a car, and he was in the backseat. I was in the passenger seat. It must’ve been three or four of us driving somewhere in our little Japanese car, and he said something, and I got really pissed off. I don’t remember what he said. But so much of what we had together put us on the floor laughing.

We were the same size, about 6’2”, and he was always wearing a pair of my khaki slacks. He made fun of the way I danced. He’d put on this little routine of me dancing (as long as he lived). And he loved the Doors version of “Light my Fire.” He would lie in the floor next to one of those big-ass speakers, listening to that song over and over. He loved blackberry wine, which I detested. And we had all those double dates, out to eat, back to our apartment in the BOQ, drunk as hell. The girls drunk as hell. And he was one hell of a tennis player. Always beat me.

So, we are now upstairs in the sanctuary, and all this is going on in my head, and the Reverend is doing her thing, and I’m sitting with what’s left of the family, maybe twelve, fifteen of us, with maybe thirty other people in attendance. God, I want out.

The reverend’s mask is off now, and she’s smiling as she talks. It’s a message of hope, about loving life—how Andy loved life. About his singing in a boys’ choir somewhere, which I didn’t know about, and other things I didn’t know about.

I am expecting the 23rd Psalm, but it doesn’t show up. She seems to have moved off the scripture back into hope and happiness.

The culture is watering down everything.

She keeps smiling. No singing, though. Nobody knows the old hymns anymore.

And downstairs, afterwards, are light refreshments and a slideshow on Andy’s life—set up on a fairly large monitor. In the slideshow there are enough absences of things like wife and family to show that he wasn’t, you know, in the normal way of things.

The Reverend comes up to me. “I’m Reverend Watson—Marsha. I understand you are one of the last remaining older cousins.”

“That’s right,” I say. “Just three of us now. Tribal elders.”

I want to tell her about Phil, tell her that if Andy had kept up with me, I would’ve kept up with him. I want to talk to her about the culture. She seems like she’s found something that is kind of above it all—but, like anything else: it’s all ritual. The breaking of bread and all that. I want to tell her that I got a letter from

Phil—after Japan—when we were in the war, and he was stationed in Thailand, flying combat missions over Laos, and I was stationed in Vietnam. He was flying reconnaissance and strike control missions out of Thailand—from a safe place. I was in Danang, a dangerous place. We'd get our asses rocketed. You climb under the bed and all that. Phil's mission was to stop munitions from getting through Laos into Vietnam. That's where he started his leaning left. Anyway, he wrote me a letter that said something like:

Punky, we are told that if we go down over the trail, they will cut our heads off. And I can see why. There's no way we should be here. But there's no way I can just stop flying. So when I head out on a mission, I say to myself that it's to stop the rocket or bullet with your name on it, and then I can feel like I'm doing the right thing.

I want to tell her that—about how all of that has been going on inside me during Andy's memorial service, about how Phil and me were alike, but that Andy was a little bit like a foreigner. But I don't think she would understand.

As soon as it doesn't seem impolite to do so, I say my goodbyes and head to the lake.

This is an original story, first published in Litmosphere.

Max Seifert
The Incredulity

*for Matthew Shepard,
after Caravaggio, oil on canvas, 1602*

Thomas, what is the quiet
beneath the skin. Night belongs
to the aliens. If gasoline
from the pump dribbles
onto their boots, you smell it.
Thirty odd dimes splayed
on the bar top, good enough
for a pitcher of beer on special.
In the heated pickup cab
their scrotums dampen
against their thighs. Thomas,
the stigmatic gash of Laramie
opens beneath the rib cage
of Medicine Bow. Baser
desires blanket the foothills
thick as Mormon crickets.
Night hardly exists amid
the floodlights of excavation
crews and vast cities devoted
to the dismantling of Holsteins
by the hundred thousand while
helicopters patrol the cliff edge
to gun down golden eagles.
This world must despise them,
placed as they are like real roses
in rot-warped wallpaper.
Thomas, death is a simple
sentence, its parts wanting
to hew together like flaps
of broken flesh (*I wound
up leaving the bar with him*),

subject and object (*I ended
up in his car*), the doing vs.
the done to (*I drove him
to anger*). Because my shoes
seemed unmanly, he decided
to beat me until my brain
dislodged from its stem (*It was
a Tuesday*). Thomas, what
is the skin but a quiet Love
might break to enter.
He took my life
(*He made it wider*).

Kristen Dorsey
Vine of My Soul

6:00 p.m.

The crowded temple falls silent when the Maestro Curandero enters and takes his place at the head of the circle of participants sitting or reclining on the worn wooden floor. He is a slender man with close-cropped black hair and dark eyes as piercing as a raptor's, wearing a mantle of quiet power and a white robe embroidered with colorful symbols.

This Peruvian shaman, whom I later learn is also a practicing medical doctor, opens the ceremony. He takes tiny sips of Agua de Florida, spraying it sharply from his lips in each of the Four Directions.

Then he sits on the low chair in front of the arched Ayahuasca vine and murmurs a quiet prayer over several quart-sized plastic bottles sitting beside his drum, rattle, and a few sacred items on the multicolored mat—his mesa. In Spanish, he tells us what to expect from the evening. An interpreter repeats his words in English.

“The medicine will last for many hours,” he says, “and some things you experience may be challenging. Sit up and breathe through these. Remain silent and focus on your own experience—there are sitters for those who need help. If you need to yell or move around, a sitter will take you to another room, so you do not disrupt your neighbor's work.” He pauses.

“*La purga* is an important part of the ceremony. There is a bucket for each of you, and a sitter will empty it when necessary. This release is not just physical, but also relieves spiritual and emotional illness. Do not resist it.” Finally, he reminds us that this profound work is sacred, private, and illegal in the United States.

“You may speak of your own experiences but must never disclose the ceremony location or names of any other participant.” He looks at each of us around the circle. “Do you agree?”

We take turns saying our first name and, “I agree” to the promise of anonymity. When the voices fall silent, the shaman looks to the person closest to him within the circle and nods.

One by one, each attendee rises to pad through the warm rhomboids of sunlight spilling across the floor to sit or kneel in front of the shaman.

They lean their heads close, whisper, consult a sheet of paper. The shaman pours a muddy-looking fluid from a plastic bottle into a silver, scrolled chalice about the size of a sherry glass. The participant tilts the cup over their upturned mouth and returns

to their space within the circle. The shaman wipes the rim of the chalice and motions for the next person.

It is me.

Early that Morning

I waited at the end of the driveway with my inner neurotic still debating the sanity of the trip. The June morning sun gilded the edges of the trees, and I squinted against a thudding headache and rummaged in my bag for sunglasses.

A beige Toyota pulled in with a crunch of gravel, and I tossed my duffel and purse in the back seat. My back relaxed into the warmth of the sun puddle in the passenger seat.

“Hey, Kristen,” my friend M smiled, and his brown eyes crinkled. He, beautiful as always, was dressed in bone-colored cotton pants and a spotless shirt.

We laughed when my stomach replied with a groan. We’d been on a mandatory *dieta* for two weeks—no salt, sugar, caffeine, alcohol, or spicy foods—in preparation for the three-day event. Today, M and I would fast, drinking only plain liquids, until this evening’s ceremony.

Sex is also forbidden before an Ayahuasca ceremony, but I hadn’t struggled with that part. I’d remained a single forty-something and mostly alone since my divorce eight years prior. I was still gathering the fragments of my heart after that spectacular fail.

What the hell am I doing? I shook my head as we accelerated around a slow-lane lollygagger. I leaned my forehead against the cool glass of the window. I was rocketing down the interstate to take DMT, a substance that shares space with heroin at the top of the DEA’s Schedule I Drug List.

And heroin stole my husband.

Thirteen Years Prior

We’d both been married before, and Tim called me his Second Chance Love. I was sure I’d found my soulmate—my reward for surviving my tour in the USMC, the DoD, my first marriage, and the sudden death of my father.

Tim was handsome and gregarious, with the straight, black hair of his Nez Perce ancestry, cinnamon eyes, and Popeye forearms from years of contracting work. I was in my mid-thirties and aware of middle age looming; he was seven years older and wore life lightly and with an inner electricity that belied his age.

On early monochrome mornings, before the start of his day, he’d leave his heavy boots at the base of the creaky farmhouse stairs, carry up my coffee, and place it on the nightstand. “I love you, Blondie,” he’d whisper, and lean close to kiss my eyelids.

I’d stretch my arms around his neck and bask in the rush of emotions: tenderness, peace, and gratitude for this unexpected encore.

4 p.m.

The sun leaned low over the temple's peak when M and I arrived and parked in a crowded, crabgrass-speckled gravel lot. We rolled our suitcases toward the rusty-roofed, rambling farmhouse that served as sleeping quarters. Two women chatted in the kitchen, peeling vegetables for communal soup, and pointed the way to our rooms with their paring knives and smiles.

We walked through a living room crowded with mismatched furniture to a dim hallway lined with a dozen closed doors. Penciled names on slips of paper were taped to each door—I located my name and whispered goodbye to M. My room was full: three other women, four twin beds, flea market furniture, and a small bathroom.

I showered, pulled on black leggings and a baggy T-shirt, and sat across the sagging bed with my back against the wall, jiggling my crossed ankles and trying to relax. One woman napped, another stared at her phone. The third woman, reclining across her twin bed and clad in a voluminous white cotton nightgown (*oh my god was I supposed to wear white?*), met my eyes and smiled. "You should rest," she whispered. "You'll do fine." She told me that Ayahuasca was called, among other things, "Grandmother," in honor of her ancient wisdom. "I need some wisdom," I whispered back.

Nine Years Prior

Tim managed chronic back issues, but pain immobilized him when he fell off a ladder four years into our marriage. He returned from the walk-in clinic with a chunky amber bottle filled with white torpedoes of OxyContin. "The doctor said it's a new nonaddictive painkiller," Tim said. "I feel better already."

Problem solved.

But Tim slowly shape-shifted into a different man after that back injury. Within a year, it was clear that he was fragmenting.

Two years after that back injury, on our June anniversary, the stranger my husband had become handed me his wedding band, saying, "I can't do this anymore." "Do what?" I screamed at his retreating back. "Be married? Own a business?" I grabbed a handful of his shirt. He shrugged me off and climbed into his truck. I threw the slim gold band far across the gravel lot and cried as he skidded away.

5 p.m.

I join a crowd of people wandering quietly from the farmhouse sleeping quarters across the grassy yard to the temple where we'll have the ceremony. Inside the airy, floor-to-ceiling windowed room, about forty yoga mats, each with a small plastic

bucket and liner, form a large circle. At the head of the circle sits a low camp chair with a multicolored throw rug in front and a long, gnarled, twisting vine mounted to the wall behind.

I step onto a mat, unroll my pillow and blanket, and plop down. M arrives and chooses the mat beside me. We bump shoulders and share deep breaths. Hugging my knees to my chest, I peek at the other attendees.

There is about an equal number of men and women, from young adults to gray-haired elders. Some wear yoga pants and fringed shawl wraps and have dirty bare feet. Others wear jeans and tees and white socks. I hear low murmurs in English, Spanish, and Russian. A woman in a long cotton skirt burns a stick of aromatic Palo Santo wood, weaving wispy smoke snakes through the air as she smudges the circle. Waist-high, vanilla-scented flower bouquets grace all four corners of the room. The space feels sacred.

Seven Years Prior

Tim didn't bother to show up for the divorce proceedings. My attorney and I sat quietly while his attorney poked at her phone, waited with pursed lips and wrinkled brow, then snapped shut her fat folder and stomped out. I discovered later that he'd paid her, too, in his new favorite currency—lies and false promises.

I needed legal and physical sanctuary from his thievery and violence—I needed to feel safe. I reluctantly accepted full responsibility for the quarter-million-dollar personally guaranteed business debt in exchange for sole ownership of our mountain farmhouse and three acres. At least when Tim pounded the locked doors screaming for money or snuck up the driveway to siphon gas from my car, I could call it trespassing.

6:20 p.m.

I pad across the floor and kneel in front of the shaman.

“First time?” he asks.

I nod and my chin trembles.

He murmurs something to his helper. Her shoulder-length blonde hair falls around the sheet of paper as she scans it and makes a note. The shaman turns to me, leans forward in his chair, and extends the plastic bottle and shot-glass-sized chalice.

“How much?” he asks quietly.

“Uh, I don't know. *No sé.*”

I wait on my knees at the edge of the shaman's *mesa*. He continues to stare into my eyes. My hands clutch in front of my chest. *Can he hear my heartbeat?*

He glugs some brown goo into the silver cup, smiles, and holds it out with a single nod. I hold the cup over my mouth like those before me: head back, mouth

Litmosphere

open, not touching my lips. A viscous blob of bitter, molasses-and-burnt-teriyaki-flavored sludge plops onto the back of my tongue. I gag, my stomach spasms, I force a swallow, and I shudder.

Back at my mat, I wait, cross-legged. It is done and I feel calmer. Resigned. I watch sparkling dust motes twirl in the orange blades of the setting sun as the rest of the circle swallows their *medicina*.

Five Years Prior

My life was a threadbare sheet ripped for rags: Before Tim and After Tim. I immersed myself in the things I'd loved B.T., including my interest in Western herbalism. I interplanted medicinal herbs in the vegetable beds and in between the flowers planted around the wavy stone foundation of the old farmhouse; I foraged others on hikes through craggy limestone mountain paths.

My home apothecary grew to over 100 local herbs. Working with these plants was a relaxing distraction. Inevitably, my spiritual path of shamanism crashed into my interest in herbalism. I knew about the plants that healed the body; I began learning about plants that might heal my soul. I devoured books on entheogens—sacred, goddess-given plants that offer a bridge to the Divine.

7 p.m.

The shaman starts shaking a bundle of large, dried Pariana leaves—his *chakapa*—and sing his *icaros*—repetitive songs sung in a mixture of language that he learns directly from the plant. Around me, people begin to moan. Two mats away, a man retches explosively into his bucket, and I cover my ears. *Gross*.

I sit upright, breathing deeply, calling in my guides and helpers to ask for gentleness on the journey. As I pray, a low electronic hum begins inside me, then grows louder like the approach of a subway train. My ears grow, enlarging to curve outward like the bell of a trumpet. *Oh no, it's coming*.

The humming intensifies like a mammoth bee is buzzing just beyond my field of vision. A cramp twists through my belly and my mouth fills with saliva. I spit into my bucket, holding it close to my face in anticipation of vomiting. When the nausea eases, I look around the room, which is stretched out like a long, low tunnel. The shaman is tiny, shaking his rattle across the far end of the tunnel, but his song is screaming in my ear, its rhythm matching the blood pulsing in my brain. Neon-colored blue, teal, and aqua geometric creatures, like inspired Spirograph doodles, gyrate and undulate through the room. They are beautiful and terrible; their leaps and twirls choreograph the waves of nausea in a mad dance, and I lie back on my mat, helpless to look away.

Several Years Prior

I'd spent the first three years after Tim abandoned me on that mountain farm trying not to die as the detritus of my life mounded around my ankles. I'd spent the last five years wrestling with what happened, trying to untangle from the grief of losing him and the shame of having our small community watch the fall. I struggled to define where I was innocent and where I must take responsibility for my choices. I grappled with who I might become in the aftermath of the destruction.

The ugly truth of Purdue Pharma's marketing scheme was now public knowledge, and knowing we'd been early victims of their greed offered some relief from my confusion—I understood that Tim and I had been targeted, duped, and robbed.

I did the talk therapy and used language to forge rote stories that corralled and tamed the trauma. Then, I crammed the pain, shame, and fear deep inside. I buried it, and good riddance.

9 p.m.

I spend the first two hours listening to the shaman's songs while the room warps and sways in nauseating, spectacular color. People moan and vomit all around me, like bellowing dinosaurs. *Your singing makes me puke.* I bark out loud in hysterical laughter. The nausea is as severe as any stomach bug I've ever endured, and I writhe on my mat, sitting up to hover over my bucket when the *icaros'* insistent demands bring me to the brink. *I actually signed up for this. And paid for it.*

Then, I am separate. I am no longer the me that is lying on the floor, bitching and complaining. I am stretched, like taffy, with long strands connecting my two selves, but watching from a distance. I see the me that is entangled in her story, but I am not her. Instead, I observe her, like the lead character in a wretched Lifetime TV drama.

I cannot escape this intimate self-witnessing.
So I watch.

10 p.m.

A python constricts my guts, squeezing my intestines. I raise my hand and a helper guides me down a dim stairwell and closes me into a square, candle-lit room containing a luminous white chair with a hole in the middle. I laugh and stare at this thing, then shrug. *When in Rome.* My bowels are liquid and hot, and the cramps relentless. I stand at the water-place afterward (*They pipe it in! Genius!*) and gawk, ensorcelled, as images in the wall-portal morph between the reflections of a chubby middle-aged white woman, a crone, and a spotted-faced jaguar.

The helper is magically waiting to lead me back to my mat. I love this gentle soul

with my whole being, and I tell her so. She smiles and shushes me.

The cycle of observing myself from a distance and being pulled back to the room by cramps and more slow trips to the bathroom continues for a few hours, even when I think nothing could be left inside me.

How can this be? I wonder, after the fourth or fifth trip to the bathroom.

I am full of shit.

This epiphany has me rolling on my mat and laughing so hard that another sitter floats over to hush me. “You look like an angel,” I whisper, then put my head under the covers and giggle and cry into my pillow.

Sometime During that Night

There is nothing but warm, liquid darkness of which I am part. I know nothing and there is nothing to know and I am not afraid. I am nothing and I am everything and it is good. I am part of the fabric of creation that is vibrating with consciousness. The vibration suggests without words that I can let go of my trapped anguish. I can surrender; I am held close. I can trust.

I drop away from the velvety place and am aware again of my separateness: separated from the void and separated even from myself, whom I am again observing. I weep for the woman moaning on the mat who is me. I sob for the trauma she’s endured. My empathy for her and for the pain that every human must endure is enormous, limitless, and flows from me in multicolored waves, like an emotional aurora borealis.

My stomach seizes and a muscular contraction grips my pelvis and steamrolls upward, gathering in a hard blockage at my narrow throat. Tears stream from the strain and my back arches with its force. “Unhinge your jaw, daughter,” the voice without words suggests, and I open my mouth in a cavernous yawn. Emotional vomit—nothing material—spews from my core in a hurled outbreath with the hiss of a snake. The spasm passes. I collapse, limp on my mat, and reinflate my lungs. Within moments, another contraction begins. *Reverse childbirth*, I think, and my body goes rigid with the passing of whatever is exiting. The purging continues for hours, releasing poison, confusion, and shame.

I don’t relive the events that stored this trauma or have to find words for it or confess the huge ugliness of it to another person. I purge, and I weep. I cry for the rest of that night, without effort, the tears bubbling up as if from an underground spring and running across my cheeks to puddle in my neck, soaking my hair and pillow.

Finally, the shaman slows his insistent, demanding singing and rattling and the spasms ease. Silver moonlight streams through the windows, and I roll into its glow; it cools my swollen eyes. I curl quietly on my mat. I am drained and purified.

I am clean.

Others in the room take turns singing and playing instruments; their voices and the music sound like bliss. “Gracias, gracias por la vida,” a young man sings in a high, crystalline voice. I repeat his words in a whisper.

The voice of our shaman, the man who led us through the abyss, breaks the quiet. “I am closing the ceremony,” he says in a low voice, the guttural edges of human words softened by his accent. He says a short prayer. He thanks us, and the beauty of that breaks me. “I will now light a candle,” he says. “You may stay and continue to work or come to the kitchen.” The flick of the lighter is visceral, the glow of the fire otherworldly. I turn my face to the halo of light. Others stand, shuffle, whisper, but I stay. More time passes and I finally believe I can live in this body again.

I rise, shaky, and wobble outside to sit on the temple stairs and stare, astonished, at the gauzy corona around the moon and the billowing, diamond-encrusted fabric of the sky.

The New Day

As the night purpled into dawn, I wandered across the lawn to the farmhouse kitchen to share bland soup with my fellow journeyers. They were clustered around the dining room tables, sharing the soft empathy of mutual experience. M and I hugged heart-to-heart, resting our heads on each other’s shoulders. We talked, faces close, until I needed the solace of alone time. I napped and journaled in turns until the sunshine glittered through the branches outside the window. I spent two more days there. I drank the medicine two more times.

Two Days Later

The ride home was subdued with a relaxed reverie. M and I shared snippets of thoughts between companionable silences filled with soft music from my iPod. I pondered the fears I’d had on the drive to the ceremony: I’d be committing a felony, I was following the path my husband took toward his (and my) destruction, I’d lose control and become addicted to drugs.

I pictured addicted Tim, his rumpled, stinking clothes, the scattered bent spoons, Bic lighters, and broken pen barrels. The unthinkable acts he committed behind those glassy, dead eyes.

The three days at the temple in ceremony with Ayahuasca were nothing like Tim’s arm-scratching twitchiness. Ayahuasca was no party, and I felt no physical hunger to drink more of that nasty brew. However, I’d already decided to return after I’d had time to process the weekend’s lessons—now wanted to heal my brokenness, not hide from it.

M and I hugged goodbye many hours later and agreed to attend the next ceremony the following Autumn.

Many Months Later

I sat at my computer and opened my email to learn belatedly of my husband's death. Five months after my first Ayahuasca ceremony, Tim had died of health complications from prolonged opioid addiction. As I read the email, a kaleidoscope of emotions cascaded through me: gratitude that I might no longer awaken in the dark at the slightest noise, relief for the end of his suffering, regret about our broken lives, and sorrow for him, me, and everyone else who doesn't know how to grieve the death of their addict.

Could the day of Tim's death have come and gone like any other? There were no bells, no alarms. No dark clouds covered the midday sun.

Many Years Later

I returned to Ayahuasca for several years, once or twice a year, for one to three evenings of work each visit. Like all enduring friendships, ours deepened with each visit, and Grandmother's teachings became more profound. I learned to listen for her voice, and we've shared intimate talks. Sometimes I've been frightened and almost lost myself in that fear, but her gentle voice led me through those challenges. Other times, we joked and laughed, and she poked fun at my beliefs and self-imposed limitations. Several times, I understood secrets of the Universe with a clarity that made sense of all things, only to forget them as the medicine left my body. Occasionally, she has worked on my physical body—seemingly adjusting my DNA and expanding my mind space.

Ayahuasca is also known as the "Vine of the Soul" and "La Medicina," two names that describe the power of her wisdom and healing capacities.

Today

One of the most promising ongoing clinical uses in some Central and South American countries where Ayahuasca is legal and considered a national treasure is the successful treatment of alcohol and drug addiction. In the US, clinical trials have begun to prove what some of us already know: plant entheogens are powerful, promote mental and physical healing, and are non-addictive.

Grandmother ultimately taught me that we each have a divine right to the life decisions that become our stories, and over time, helped me accept Tim's ill-fated choices and see both the fault and innocence in my own. Still, though, on some sleepless nights when I can't rest under the tug of a full moon, I wonder what might have been if I'd driven to that first Ayahuasca ceremony seated beside my husband.

I remember him then—the crow's feet he might have, the silvering of his temples—things I see in my own morning mirror gaze. Despite these musings, I've come to accept, in my bones, the quiet truth. There was only one thing I could have done. Only one life is mine to save.

AJ Baumel

Cycle

Code 5150 sounds like Mad Dog 20/20 and that is how
they treated her mean like a mad dog when they arrived

first Aunt Patty rounding into the driveway agitated
after a long workday always agitated even on her beloved

namesake holiday just her hot-tempered way now asking me
where is my mother she is inside my aunt now asking why

is the door locked have you been outside all day yes I have
have you eaten today only the cat food on the neighbor's porch

and now it begins Aunt Patty banging and bellowing Barbara
come out here right now calling the police arriving agitated

joining the fray forming a flurry of voices and fists banging
out a chorus echoing through the neighborhood the crescendo

rattling the dented hollow core metal door yelling Barbara
come out here right now the anger rising in the hot humid

evening air the stubborn rusted hinges now crowbarred apart
the window screeching open the police climbing in coming out

now through the front door with my mom leashed and shackled
and shoved into the back the mad dog caught the slamming

cruiser door jarring my eight-year-old eyes watching the red
lights spin and dim in the distance until she is gone on a 5150

the 72-hour involuntary stay the mad dog caged and crouching
in a dingy padded room watched through wire-meshed safety

glass behind double-locked double-doors now kept on a 5250
the 14-day involuntary stay just long enough to medicate

and modulate to prepare for the insurance-mandated release
the orange bottles filled with pink pills strewn on the counter

until the paranoia eventually throws them away until the only
orange bottles on the counter are empty 20-ounce 20-percent

Mad Dog 20/20 sounds like code 5150 and that is how
they treated her mean like a mad dog every time

I watched them take her away and now I wonder
what my teenage daughter thinks driving here to visit

me behind double-locked double-doors in this dingy
white dayroom posing as a visitor room in this facility

where we don't talk about how I got here we talk about
what we will do when I get out—

Katie Dozier
Time Traveling Haibun

braiding hair—
this time, I cross
my own lines

The earth shoved up sediment
until it was the back of a stegosaurus.
Every chance the concrete got, it added
another crack. The cars and semi-trucks
were glued-on blocks. I pulled off the
highway; driving on a fault line.

a graveyard
of Joshua trees
wave goodbye

Underneath the echo of children
asking *how much longer*, I unbuckled.
Slipped on the stones. An avalanche
of honks. The city smog crashed
into the thin mountain air—
a full-steam shift was there.

the invisible ink
appears in a flash—
love story

The sky knit a shawl around
the shoulders of the mountain.
There are times when the only thing
to do is to kiss. A twist. Our eyes
rejoined the golden hour, as two
lights flicked from red to green.

floating in amber...
that thing with
feathers

A lone headlight whispered out
to the descending night. The gravel
began to murmur. Soon, another
rattle, that shook up dust; the sunset
swallowed itself to join
our hush.

all those years the same moon

Twilight and two steel
dinosaurs mirroring our
tracks. The trains swirled
around us, and there,
we unpacked.

climbing
the same staircase
double helix

Martin Settle
Recovering Color

a canvas of a single color
can hold my attention
more than the Mona Lisa
something flickers
on cranium walls
something ancient
before Adam named the animals

color holds great space
in the brain
larger than language
I cannot verbalize why
I am regressed by yellow
married in orange
dispossessed by brown

the sky scattered blue seeds
into my infant eyes
a mother's face
with passing clouds
childhood crayons
still speak in
timeless pigments

I can be arrested
by an opalescent dawn
losing my desire
to put names to things
the subjectivity of tints
are infinite
each born a Venus
in its own shell
something wild
lost in my writing

a melanism has creeped
into my life
I've become the moth
that blends with the soot
my imagination dulled
by a black cultural hull
that does not think of
prismatic skyscrapers
painted yellow roads
Rothko vehicles
with color wheels

I am tempted
to find a place
where I can recover color—
a vermilion canyon
cut in two by a jade stream—
I could contemplate there
in silence
until I attain synesthesia
the letter A would always be red

G.H. Plaag
Elegy for R.H.W. Dillard

the light is beautiful this morning—
Virginia light. it falls in across
dark beams like white paint,
like honey. it falls on me,
too, and on that little overfilled
volume of short stories by D.H. Lawrence
that you had been so delighted to discover,
in the twilight of your life—gems
you hadn't known about appearing to you
like new time, like the extra hour in November.

this was what you had a penchant for,
this borderless curiosity, this thirst.
it would have fallen across you, too,
this morning. a whole aurora of Virginia
light in all the world's corners.
the light of your beginning.

if there's anything i have to believe, it's that
you left your extra hour in a room
with open blinds. i have to believe
in that endurance. or maybe
not—if you're watching
this be written, you'd find nothing funnier
than knowing you'd left poor D.H. somewhere
dark and jailed, like a glovebox. maybe that's
the extra hour, this final joke for you.
*the existential thinker cannot have pupils
in the ordinary sense.* and you are probably
laughing somewhere with your friend, George
Garrett, whom you loved much more than the stupid sun,
and to whom you once compared me with a wink.
this is a kind thing i have not forgotten.

so maybe it's vanity, to think that extra hour lies
with the living. there is more laughter for the dead.

Lit/South Awards 2024
Nonfiction Judge

Maggie Smith
Ghost Story

One fall I was a ghost in my own house. That time, when divorce was imminent but my husband and I were still living together, only the children could see or hear me. The laundry floated downstairs to the basement, then floated back up to the second floor, washed and folded. The dishes floated from the dishwasher and into the cabinets, chiming as they nested inside each other. I floated through the house, practically transparent. Maybe my perfume stayed behind when I left a room. I tried to rattle my chains, but what chains?

I half wanted to be a ghost. I remember thinking, then telling a friend: *I want to cut a hole in the air and climb inside.*

*

A few months later, I was trying to calm my son, then six years old, at bedtime. He said, “I know, I know. I have a mom who loves me, and I have a dad who loves me. But I don’t have a family.”

I felt the wind go out of me—felt myself emptying, falling, a balloon drifting down from the ceiling—because he was right. He still had all of his family members, but our family unit, our foursome, was gone.

When people ask how the children are doing, I tell them fine. It’s mostly true. I tell them I’m grateful at least that the children didn’t lose anyone. They still have their parents, and they have each other.

What I don’t say is when I lost my family, I lost someone, too. The person I’d called my person. In this way, my house is haunted.

*

We've lived apart for seven months when I discover *Glitch*. It's an Australian show. Episode one begins with people clawing their way from their graves—naked, muddy, disoriented. They have no idea what has happened, no idea that they died five or twenty or even a hundred years earlier. The six of them are inexplicably alive again, the age they were when they died. For them, no time has passed.

Their bodies have been restored. A woman who'd died of breast cancer unbuttons her shirt before a mirror and sees her breasts—the ones a surgeon had removed. They're perfect.

Spoiler alert: Her husband is the police officer called to the cemetery.

Spoiler alert: After the woman died, he married her best friend.

Spoiler alert: The new wife—the old best friend—is nine months pregnant.

The woman, her breasts buttoned up inside her shirt, is a witness to the afterlife. She returns to the life that continued without her.

In one scene she is in the baby's nursery in the house that was her house. Who wouldn't touch the mobile above the crib? It spins. She haunts. I cry when I watch the show as if for her.

*

Sometimes my ex picks up the children from my house after work. He parks his car and walks up in his suit. He has a beard now, so he looks like a doppelganger of himself. Or like a dream, when someone looks almost like the person you know but something is off: they are suddenly left-handed. Or their laugh sounds recorded and played backwards. I keep waiting to wake up, but I am awake.

I know the time will come when I'll witness the afterlife. The new house, certainly, with some of our old things inside. The new wife, likely—someone else who will tuck my children in.

This is a story of becoming embodied, impossible to walk straight through. When their father comes to collect them, I kiss my son and daughter and send them toward the waiting car. I close the door and lock it. If I had chains to rattle, I would rattle my chains.

This essay first appeared in Brevity.

Justin Hunt
Ghost Poker

The round begins
with this box of photos,
the snapshots
you deal to the table—
face up, a few cards
from time's dog-eared deck.

Your son's black eyes
are the king of clubs,
his smile the jack
of spades. But you draw
no straights or flushes,
no aces or pairs,
only the memory
of your once-full house—
nothing to bet on now,
like the hand
he was dealt at birth.

The night he chose to fold
rises on these vapors
of old film and yellowed
papers, the scuttle
of silverfish
desperate for cover.

You need to close
the box, but you can't.
You reach in, stir
and shuffle, let guilt
and grief hone the blade
of your one question,
that knife you carry.

Along its razor edge
you shuffle again,
wait for his answer.

Tyler Dunston

After the power outage

We sit on the couch. The AC sounds like it's about to break down. The movie pauses, buffering. You sip a beer. We look at the still. The stubborn grief of neon light. We both say nothing together. Whatever you may be thinking, I am thinking why did your dog have to die. A thought you would never permit yourself. That's life, you would say. Of course it is. There is an ocean buzzing like light under a gray sky. It will consume everything. Our spotty Wi-Fi decides to start working again for a bit. Cans of sliced pineapple. Windows. When you see your own face in a window, you can see yourself and through yourself at the same time. More buffering. His smile and his smile again, doubled by the glass. Fishes swim through him. It is an exquisite loneliness. I haven't yet come to wonder what you are thinking, but I will when I can't ask you anymore. As we wait for the movie to load, I think, I don't mind waiting, and I think of friends who have died, and I wonder whether death is like waiting for nothing to happen. Or nothing itself. And I wonder what nothing truly is. At this point I hit a familiar wall. I wish it were a window, so I could see through to the other side. So I could see you.

Mia Willis
(BOI)STEROUS
an eintou bracelet

*“The world is not a phantom; it is an assemblage of families.”
~Archbishop François Fénelon*

body,
ossuary,
vessel for the next faith,
a totally new unity,
keeper of the bloodline,
holy sundial,
bear fruit.

bear fruit.
hybrid sweetness
for the watching saplings.
birth a name ripe with ritual.
sticky with rebellion.
rambunctious pulp
alive.

alive,
weathered amber
suspends laughter in leaves.
branches whine and whisper pidgin,
grace a staple in dance.
morsel to the
hungry.

hungry
should not exist
if kinfolk have kitchens.
when food is scarce, we eat the mud.
bury the love inside

Litmosphere

then wait for it
to bloom.

to bloom,
release the salt.
sift out sting from soil
then water it with tempest wind.
forgiveness lets acid
bathe the new fronds
again.

again
thunder crashes
into the canopy.
lightning makes a meal of the bark;
shed it all. grow it back.
we are more than
body.

David Dixon
If I Fell

Crow knows me.
Can see the difference
between me and another.

Gave me a feather
I keep
in case I need to fly.

I know Crow
from Blackbird
and Raven
yet wonder
what Crow
would want
to keep
from me.

Perhaps a token
of my essence

in case Crow needs
to dream of flying.

Les Bares

Crimes Committed in My Sleep

I dream we are in a tavern and every kind
of gun imaginable hangs from the ceiling—
rifles, pistols, machine guns, more
menacing than the blizzard outside
breaking the back of Lake Superior.

In the haze of the beard stubbled bar,
you turn to me and tell me you are
pregnant, and that in the future,
which somehow really is the past,
you will lose the baby and spend time
recovering in the hospital where
I am destined to work as a janitor.

For some reason the hanging guns
all turn and point accusingly at me.
I am dressed in hospital scrubs,
surrounded by hunters in camouflage.
They seem certain I am the father.
I order a brandy and coke,
a crime in itself, and I am beginning
to feel guilty, even though
this is all happening while I sleep.

I am sorry you lost your son—
I am sorry we are in this bar
surrounded by guns. I am sorry
I ordered a brandy and coke.

I toss and turn like an indicted politician.
A cathartic snore rouses me from sleep.
It was only a dream, yet I can't help
but feel a little sad, and why do I wonder
if the boy would have looked like me?

Chanlee Luu

Freezing Point Depression

Time freezes under the watchful eye of the broken clock. Each sewing station a molecule vibrating with the rattle of metal melding sheets of fabric. Each shoe glued to the pedal. Each employee licks her thread, hoping to melt the crystalized seconds, hoping that the prick of the needle will break the glass, but the heat rises to the ceiling, trapped.

My mother is lonely in this desolate factory. No one to share her grief—a Vietnamese singer dead from COVID—their ears are taped, yellow caution to accents. So she lets Phi Nhung loiter on lunch breaks in her car.

The *cải lương* reminds her of Cai Lậy. Of leading kind oxen to the rice fields, catching big-eyed fish from the streams and frying them fresh. The bubbling oil bursting; the scales standing up—

like the hairs on her arm. Instead of watching the village boys, rambunctious voices echoing in her ear, she is stuck shoveling snow. Her frosted breath invisible under the cover of cloth. The salted roads and grey slush camouflaged—monochrome

makes her yearn for mặt trời,
for cà rem under the shade
of a cây dừa, for snow

to exist solely in stories
by foreigners.

Michael Brown

Belize

El Toro Morado. The Purple Bull. We shouldn't have come here; it's dangerous, the guy at the hotel told us. As long as we're inside with others, we should be okay, I tell Manny. But it's starting to get dark outside. Getting back to the hotel is the risky part, I say, leaning close to him.

No shit, he says over the pulsating music and takes a swig of beer.

A Punta Rock bar, the sign outside reads. A couple of guys at another table look like Americans too. Black guys dressed like people on vacation. Not like the locals. One wears a Polo button-down. The other wears an Atlanta Braves jersey, the kind the players wear. He's heavysset with thick arms, and when he turns, I see the number thirteen on the back of the jersey with Acuña Jr. arched above. I walk over and ask if they're from Atlanta.

Yeah, Atlanta, the one in the jersey says. He emphasizes the last syllable, "ta," like no one from Atlanta would. He looks at the other one with a smirk.

Me too, I say. Good to see you. He stares at me like we're at a weigh-in before a twelve-rounder. I saunter back to our table.

They're probably both packing, Manny says. That's what they do at clubs like this, he adds. It makes me feel even more uneasy, and I keep my eyes and ears trained on those around us. Why in the hell did we walk into town? I ask. To taste the country, Manny says. You can't see anything from the hotel or the gift shops around the dock. That's not going anywhere. You gotta be *here*. And he's right. Manny is always right.

I tilt the cold bottle of beer to my lips, the third one since we sat down. Thank you, I say to the waitress. She is big-hipped, adobe-colored, and ageless, with a trace of Mayan in her high cheekbones.

You're welcome, she says, in rum-flavored English.

The dance floor teems with bodies swiveling and arms fluttering to the beat of drums, maracas, guitars. They've been at it ever since we got here. Some couples drop out, sweat dripping from every pore. The air is heavy and stirs with the scent of pheromones. Others join in, mostly women, some couples.

It's a Brukdawn, the waitress tells us. That's some prime ass, Manny says as she strolls away with her butt gyrating. She hands her tray to one of the women dancers, and they swap places on the dance floor like it's a family gathering.

Manny finishes his beer with a loud grunt. He stands up and heads to the dance floor. Manny's a pretty good dancer and has no inhibitions. That's one of the million things that are different about us. He's also over six feet tall and broad-shouldered, an

ex-basketball player at a small college in Tennessee. He wades into a sea of wild-eyed gyrating strangers. Making his way to the woman who served us, he says something to her in an animated voice through the loud music. She laughs, and they dance more or less together.

Manny dances for a long time. He and the woman talk in quick spurts. The music keeps going. Occasionally, Manny takes a break to catch his breath but stays on the dance floor. I say he's a good dancer, but that's relative. He looks funny among the other dancers.

I'm sitting at this little table alone, the only lily-white person in the whole place. Everyone else is a shade of brown, some light tan like Manny, a few ebony-skinned. They speak English, Spanish, and another language I think is Creole. The talk is loud, expressive. The people at a table nearby motion for me to sit with them. Three women, two men. They all look Hispanic. One man wears a Panama hat and a blue tee. He looks like someone's grandfather and seems to be the center of attention. The other man wears a tank top and is much younger. Two of the women are also young, the third woman heavier and older. The air is filled with music blasting, singers screaming, people shouting at each other. The young man and two women greet me before heading to the dance floor. The man in the Panama talks over the din.

You American?

Yes, Atlanta.

Ah, Atlanta. Martin Luther King, Jr.—a great man, yes?

I smile. A very great man.

And Hank Aaron. Hammerin' Hank. He was my guy. The best ever.

Maybe so, I agree. I saw him hit number 715.

Fantastic! Panama says. I've seen the replay many times...many times. May he rest in peace. Panama takes a swig of his drink that wafts with the fruity smell of rum.

Do you like Belize?

Yes, the beach is beautiful.

And around here is ugly, right?

I raise my brows.

Panama slaps me on the back and snorts like the bull painted on the wall behind the stage. The older woman laughs with him.

The beer is excellent, I say, tilting the bottle of Belikin toward him. I tell him I've not seen any of this beer in the States.

The US is the richest country in the world, he says. You can buy anything you want. In Belize, only the tourists have money. But we have Belikin. It's the best beer anywhere. His eyes get big.

Suddenly, I feel like the Ugly American. I don't think he means it like that, but the thought still sinks in.

I'm Hector, he says. This is Rosalita.

Hi, I'm Brad.

Ah—Brad—a solid name, Hector replies. Very American.
Hello, Rosalita says. She looks about Hector's age, a hint of beauty in her fleshy face.

We've been together many years, Hector says. It's been good; it's been bad.

I know how that goes, I say.

He raises a brow. Men and women, two different fish.

Women make men, Rosalita says.

Hector lets out a mocking hiss. Bring this man a Rum Barrel on the rocks, he says to a passing waiter. He turns to me. When you drink this, you will taste Belize.

All right, I say.

He takes another swallow of his drink. I'd like to go to Atlanta and visit the Ebenezer Baptist Church. Have you been?

No, I haven't. I live in the suburbs and don't go downtown very often. Lots of traffic.

He nods, but the look in his eyes suggests suspicion.

Do you live near here? I ask.

Sometimes. Here and Guatemala. Here is better. He strokes his white goatee. Two families, twice as much bullshit. He grins.

The waiter sets the drink in front of me. I try to give him money, but Hector insists on paying. The pure rum is sweet and smooth on the palate.

How do you like it? he asks.

Mmm... tastes like Belize.

Ha! I like you, Atlanta.

Manny comes to the table, and introductions are shared.

Rosalita invites him to taste her drink. It makes dancing better, she says.

Manny takes a big sip. That's some good stuff. What is it?

She grins. A Panty Ripper.

A Panty Ripper? Manny looks at Hector and me and laughs like hell. He turns back to the woman. Is that what happens when you drink it?

Sometimes, Rosalita replies. She looks older with her mouth scrunched and cheeks puffed into a smile.

Only when we were younger, Hector says, dead-faced.

Manny heads to the dance floor. On the way, I see him buy a beer from the bar and take it with him. He dances with a bottle in one hand.

Numbed by the mixture of beer and rum, the driving beat of the music, and surrounded by newly formed friends, it's all good. That is until the screaming starts.

The dancers part in an ever-widening circle, and the stage light reflects off the knife in the guy's hand. The music stops. I look for Manny. He's hidden in the crowd. The guy with the knife lunges at a man holding the neck of a broken bottle. A gunshot cracks from behind the bar. The bullet puts a neat hole in a wooden beam overhead. The man with the knife runs through the parting crowd, swinging as he

goes, and out the front door. The bartender lowers his rifle. A woman runs to the victim's aid. He's still holding the bottleneck, and she wraps his bleeding arm with her shirt.

Several men rush out the door, cursing and chasing the knife wielder. Others help the woman tend to the injured man with water-soaked towels. Then a couple leads him away and out of the building. The bartender and another man, presumably the owner or manager, calm the crowd and announce there is no more threat. Within minutes, the music starts again, and the dance floor fills up. More Punta Rock.

Manny appears back at the table with a clown-faced grin. That was some kinda shit, he says to me.

Yeah, it was. Something that could get our asses killed. Let's get the hell outta here.

It's nothing, Hector says. You should stay.

Yes, Mister Brad, stay, Rosalita implores.

Sorry, we have to go, I insist. Nice meeting you.

Hector spreads his arms apart in apparent frustration. Rosalita raises a hand in a farewell gesture.

That big ass girl likes me, Manny says as we walk away. Her name is Juanita. She's only fifty American dollars.

I look at him and shake my head. Don't do that.

He laughs. Manny stops at the bar and buys another beer. I'm stupid in the head and get one too. We take them with us.

Outside, moonlight shines down from a cloudless sky in the humid night. Only a few people are on the street. The music and sound of the crowd follow us for several minutes. Although we're getting closer to the hotel, the farther I walk, the less safe I feel. After a couple of gulps of beer, I'm unsteady on my feet and toss the mostly-full bottle into a clump of bushes. Son of a bitch, I say. We spent a lot of money to wind up in a place like this. We're such idiots.

Nah, this is how the world is, Manny says. He takes a big swig from his bottle. You can't stay cooped up in a townhouse in the boondocks, thinking that's all that life is.

So you'd like to live down here? I ask.

I want to live everywhere, he replies.

That's the way Manny is. We've hung together for twelve years, and it's a wonder because we're completely different. How that works, I don't know. Well, yeah, I do. We're both losers in the game of House; him three times and me twice. Currently, we're on a boy's night out for fifty-something-year-olds like we're on our way to becoming freaking Oscar Madison and Felix Unger.

We don't speak again for a few minutes. I can see the top floors of the hotel alit in the distance. Then I hear the shuffle of footsteps behind. I turn around and see two men walking briskly toward us. One is the guy with the Braves jersey. The other is

Mister Polo button-down.

Don't look at them, Manny says. Just keep going.

Hey, you assholes, stop!

I stop. They'll shoot us if we run, I say. Manny stops too.

You guys need some weed, the man in the Braves jersey says. It doesn't sound like a question.

You got some? Manny asks.

I'm thinking that it's not smart to buy weed on the street from a guy we don't know.

Braves man sticks out a small plastic bag. A dime, he says.

Manny sets down his beer bottle and takes the bag without looking closely or smelling the contents. How much? he asks.

Braves man opens his half-buttoned jersey and pulls a pistol from a holster on his belt. All you got, he grunts.

I get it. Now we are buyers. Another petty drug deal that the local cops will ignore.

We spent most of our money back there, Manny tells Braves man.

Don't fuck with me, Braves man replies. Get it, he says to the other guy. Polo grabs Manny's wallet from his back pocket and then mine. He pulls the bills out and counts past a hundred from Manny and seventy-six from me. He drops the wallets on the ground. Watches, too, he says.

We stick out our wrists, and Polo pulls off our watches.

Go, Braves man says.

Manny keeps his eyes on the gun as he grabs his wallet. I follow Manny's lead.

Braves man sneers and says, go before I blow your balls off!

We hustle away toward the hotel. Manny stops to throw up, and I piss a personal record stream. My head clangs like a bell in a church tower. Two gunshots ring out in the distance.

*

The next day, I sleep till noon. Manny wakes up later.

How do you feel? I ask.

Like a dead cat.

Me too. Let's get some coffee and something in our gut.

The bastards who robbed us didn't take our credit cards. We use them to buy coffee and fry jacks. Later we both buy over-priced, probably knock-off watches at a local market. Then we go to a bank to get some cash.

Later that day, we're lying on the beach.

This is a beautiful damn place, Manny says.

Yeah, I say. Manny always sees the good side of things. I wish I could be that way, but it doesn't work for me. It's not just every day you get robbed by Ronald Acuña, Jr.

That could happen anywhere, he says. Sure as hell could happen in Atlanta.

They told us not to stay in town after dark, I say.

So, okay, dammit, it was my fault.

I didn't say that.

No, I did. It *was* my fault. I'm a lousy influence on you.

Here we go again.

I knew you didn't want to come here, he says.

Manny, it's fine. I loved the zip line in the jungle...and the scuba diving...and the cave tubing.

Brad, he says, that's tourist crap.

It's crap I can't do in Atlanta, I say. A way to get away.

No, I don't want to get away, he says. I want to go places. Live everywhere. Dance to the music. That was the best part—dancing. He pauses. You didn't dance.

I don't say anything; just roll over on my back. The afternoon sun bears down from a cloudless sky. A Jimmy Buffet imitator sings from the terrace. I'm in Key West again. Last year I danced in Key West.

After a while, Manny starts all over again. We're pitiful, you know. Two old men on a vacation together.

I talk with my head sideways on the beach towel. We came because we wanted to, not because we had to, I say. Not because we needed to satisfy a wife and kids.

Yeah, he agrees. You'll like it better when we get to California. People there are more laid back. We can get weed without being robbed. He gets up, walks to the water, and wades in.

California. It's been a long time since I've been there. It's probably changed a lot, just like everywhere else. Like here in Belize, where drug dealers now wear Braves' jerseys and polo shirts. But I realize I'm kidding myself about why I came here and why the next stop is California. And I remember what Hector said about living with Rosalita. It's been good, it's been bad, he said. That's the way it's been with Manny. Just like it was with Diane and then Janet. For me, relationships always run their course for reasons I don't understand. It doesn't matter; I am who I am. And I can't run away from myself.

That's when I decide to change my airline ticket.

*

Two days later, we fly into Houston. On the flight, I tell Manny that I've changed my mind about the trip. I'm not going to L.A., I say. I'm going back to Atlanta.

He squints, then glances out the window. We pass through the clouds as the plane ascends. Thanks for telling me at the last minute, asshole, he says.

I feel like the world's biggest jerk. I didn't want you to try to change my mind, I say.

He rocks in his seat for a moment. So, what are you going to do?

Go back to that townhouse in the boondocks, I reply.
He leans back and shakes his head.
Manny, I say, you're a great guy, and we've had a lot of good times together. But my head is not in it right now. I can't explain it any better than that.
He lets out a deep breath. It's okay, he says. We're still good, right?
Right.
We don't talk about it again until we land in Houston.
Have a good time in California, I say.
Yeah, you too. Have a ball playing golf with the geezers.
I smile, and we bump fists.
Manny goes on to L.A. like we'd planned. I transfer to Atlanta.

*

It's been a month now, and Manny answers one of my texts. He includes a photo of him and four other guys standing on a beach holding surfboards. I'm a surfer dude, the text reads. Manny is a good guy, but he lives everywhere, and I tried that. Belize and a lot of other places. It turns out that everywhere is nowhere, and I can't go there anymore.

Sitting in a poolside recliner at my condo complex, I lay the phone on my lap and take a swig of gin. A woman emerges from the clubhouse on the other side of the pool. I recognize her as a new resident but haven't met her yet. She's not bad looking in a beyond-middle-age sort of way. I'll strike up a conversation with her, and maybe she'll ask me about my tee shirt with *Belize* emblazoned on it.

I'll tell her I met Ronald Acuña, Jr. in a bar there. It's a start.

Janet Ford

Pizza Hut on Central Avenue, 1:00 am

It was the longest song on the jukebox
so we rode "Wild Horses" up to closing time
their broad backs damp as the wiped wooden tables

where the chairs lay surrendered, stiff legged, supine.
The Bears had wiped the floor with the Cavaliers
then shouldered in here hungry for more

shouting out orders like stadium cheers
till our pockets bulged with their dimes and quarters.
My night for the corners, sweeping to center

Eileen's to push the three-foot broom
and it would take "Layla" to fill the shakers,
wailing around us in the hollow room.

Goodnight girls, see you in the morning.
Wally slumped above his mop bucket smoking
and when we opened the door, Central was at low tide

its crash and roar now somewhere far at sea.
We stepped into the washed temple
of the sleeping city; our makeshift home,

its mottled notebooks and chewed pencils,
only a mile and a half away.
We walked our bikes through the empty streets

the sprockets clicking along like crickets
softly singing into the darkness
wild wild horses, we'll ride them someday.

Yance Wyatt

Barbicide

The older he got, the more Mo prided himself on practicing what he preached. Good hygiene, for starters. Because it all started with hygiene. Self-respect. Respect for others. The day itself. Mo took comfort in that. In the familiar routine good hygiene required.

After his sunrise triathlon of brushing / flossing / gargling, Mo snapped on a two guard to tighten his fade at the temples. Then he daubed a finger and worked some Murray's through waves gone white. Before abandoning the mirror he tweezed the feral eyebrows that made him look irritable even when he wasn't, though he often was these days. Grasping the guardrail his anxious daughter had installed, he rappelled downstairs one step at a time, reaching the kitchen without a spill and pouring his sweet acidophilous without one too. Mo took his coffee black but his cereal with milk and sugar. The Grape Nuts looked like dogfood in his bowl. He pushed them around with a weighted spoon about as top-heavy as a reflex hammer, waited for them to soften into pap so they wouldn't get stuck in his crowns. Meanwhile he leafed through *The Tennessean*. He tried his hand at the crossword puzzle but found himself at a loss for words. The paper was datemarked. That kept his brain trained on the business of the day: closing up shop, once and for all.

Not until he'd lined his stomach did Mo take his morning meds, trusting a younger version of himself (yesterday's) to have put the right pills in the right squares. He stood at the threshold of the kitchen looking down the long hall. The long haul. There. He'd made a joke. Not a funny one, but a joke anyways. Meaning his synapses were working.

Taking the hallway slow and steady, Mo paused to catch his breath at the entry table where his keys were fanned out and labeled beside a fake orchid he could forget to water. What he couldn't forget to do was lock up. Not in this neighborhood. Even with the Yuccies moving in and the thrift stores cropping up, this was still East Nashville.

*

Like every other weekday for the last half century, the red and blue helix stopped spinning at five. Mo was sweeping the black and white trimmings into a crepuscular skunk when he caught the scent of peanuts aboil. He gazed past the eponymous stenciling on the window—Z'OM—at the renovated ballpark on the opposite bank of the Cumberland. That is, until he noticed in his periphery what his glaucoma had

obscured: the latecomer who was letting in the scent. A white man in a white mask and a white shirt with cufflinks. When Mo was coming up, he only saw white men on Dickerson Pike if they were rolling down a window to curl a finger.

“Come in, come in.” Mo spoke as if there were two customers darkening his doorstep.

The walk-in let the door shut behind him and in so doing severed the breeze. To get his bearings, he did a flatfooted three-sixty then reached out for a handshake, but Mo bumped his fist, not so much for hygiene as to conceal where his palsy fell on the Richter scale.

“You sure you’re in the right place, young man? We get mostly old-timers in here.”

“Yeah?” asked the walk-in. “Where are they?”

“We’re closed for the day. Closed for good, matter fact.”

“Oh,” said the walk-in. “Should I go?”

“No, no. I forgot to lock up. That’s on me. Sit, sit.”

The walk-in made his way into the parlor and of the six empty swivel chairs chose the one pumped highest, an ergonomic throne of chrome and red vinyl.

“Truth is, it’d be slow even if we were open. Most of the regulars took to cutting their own hair—what was left of it—just to be safe.” Mo prolapsed the wingtip collar and draped a smock over the young man’s shoulders. “The rest passed away or got pushed out by their landlords, with yours truly next in line.”

“That sucks,” said the walk-in, looking backward at Mo through the mirror. In that sense, it always felt as though the customer were in the driver’s seat.

“What can I say? They opened a Sports Clips across from Sounds’ stadium and a Floyd’s between the vegan diner and vapor bar.”

“Vape bar,” said the walk-in, to which Mo replied: “Yeah, yeah.”

Mo realized he was coming off grumpy and lightened up a little behind his mask, that pleated blue cloth granting him an impenetrable deadpan. “So what’re we thinking? A fro or a fade?” Mo let the silence balloon until he about burst with laughter. “I’m just ribbing you.”

“That would have been a good one,” the walk-in admitted, “if I was here for a haircut. I figured a proper barbershop might still do straight-razor shaves. My little electric one leaves a shadow. Not a full five o’clock shadow. But still.”

“That’d mean taking off your mask.”

“If you aren’t comfortable with that...” The walk-in held his hands up, pleading innocent. “Of course, I’d tip you extra for the risk.”

“You’re already here,” said Mo, whose finances were a mess. A bird’s nest in his closet, that shoe box of receipts. The walk-in unveiled himself while Mo laid out like a veteran torturer his gleaming array of blades. “Long as you don’t mind a black man holding a knife to your throat in this climate.” By climate, Mo wasn’t referring to the Dogwood Winter that would make sacrifice bunts sting tonight.

“When you put it that way,” said the walk-in.

“I’m just ribbing you,” said Mo. Ribbing people made Mo feel better about having the shakes. Having the rent doubled. Having to throw in the towel after all these years. Mo stropped the razor against a strip of raw leather and bearded the walk-in with foam. “How close you want it? Sandpaper or baby’s bottom?”

“As close as you can get without drawing blood.” The young man leaned back until his Adam’s apple bulged, then shut his eyes, which could only heighten his sense of touch.

Mo could feel it too. Going with and against the grain, as with wood. As with water. As with anything in life. The downstrokes smooth, the upstrokes snagging, the pause in between for swashing the razor in the basin. He heard the whistle of the short line leaving the riverfront on its way back to the depot in Wilson County. He let it pass like a spell of tinnitus and said, “Well then, what’s the occasion?” Mo was going to miss seeing someone, anyone, other than himself in the mirror.

Elbows jerked under the smock until the walk-in produced a gauzy invitation with the street address spelled out, in cursive no less.

“Figured as much.” Mo lifted his chin to peer down the inner windows of his bifocals. “What’s the dress code? Hazmat suits and hospital gowns?”

“Black tie,” said the walk-in. “Masks optional.”

“Ah,” said Mo. “A wedding *and* a funeral.”

“My family says the virus is a hoax. My sister’s not going to let it spoil her big day.”

“Over her dead body, huh?” Mo went back to work with quick little scrapes at the mustache.

That particular ribbing must have been too dark for the walk-in, for he didn’t so much as feign a smile. “Her fiancé had to make me a groomsman, which puts me front and center.”

“Right in the line of fire,” Mo doubled down.

“That’s why I’m here. If my aunts and uncles say I clean up well, maybe my parents will get off my back.” The walk-in checked his Apple Watch despite a perfectly reliable wall clock. “The ceremony starts in an hour and a half.”

Turning the young man’s head this way and that, Mo kicked it into high gear. Normally, with no waitlist, he would have taken his sweet time. Michelangeloed that shit. Stepped back now and then to admire his own handiwork.

The walk-in laid the invitation in his lap. Now that his eyes were open he had a choice: either stare vainly at his own reflection or turn his attention to the barber’s workspace, comprised of a soon-to-expire cosmetology certificate, a jar of Barbicide that looked like a French press of Blue Curaçao, and a photograph of a young woman in cap and tassel.

“That your granddaughter?” The walk-in pointed his chin.

Mo tsked him for moving abruptly. “Daughter. Graduated from high school some

thirty years ago.” Mo paused long enough to reacquaint himself with the photo and spell his quaking hands. “Would you believe I snapped that with a cardboard Kodak, back when film took an hour to develop?”

“She’s pretty,” said the walk-in.

Mo didn’t know what to make of the comment. Didn’t know if the young man was complimenting his genetics or anticipating bridesmaids in heat. In case of the latter, Mo threw him off the scent. “She favors her mother, God rest her soul. Though she’s put on a few since then.”

“What, the freshman fifteen?”

“More like the COVID nineteen.” Mo apostrophized his eyebrows as if to say *oh well*. “That’s what happens when you force a diabetic into hibernation.”

“I’m graduating myself next spring. From Vandy. If I don’t flunk out of Zoom U first.”

Mo took care not to lop off an earlobe as he truncated the sideburns one millimeter at a time. “No offense,” he said without looking up, “but you kids spend all day staring at screens then claim you can’t focus when they put school on one. What is it with your generation?”

“I guess we just want to do what we want to do.” The walk-in shrugged his shoulders, caped as they were. Taking after the cinematic superheroes of his youth, he ignored facts like gravity and thought himself invincible. “Is that so much to ask?”

While applying the finishing touches, Mo turned that question over in his mind; every angle turned up a different answer. He could say *Fair enough* just as easily as *Life’s not fair*. He could say *It’s your life* or *It’s your funeral*. He could scrawl his signature under his opinion, but it would still bounce off the kid like a bad check, null and void. So Mo said nothing and wiped the walk-in’s face with a warm towel.

The young man patted his cheeks and marveled. “Wow, I feel like a wax sculpture.”

Mo hated to admit it, but the compliment struck coal in some deep chamber of his heart. He was old and gray but not beyond the devil’s reach when it came to matters of pride. For proof, look no further than those eyebrows, which he groomed fortnightly lest they raise their hackles when at closing he’d pull off his apron, as he did here and now.

“How much do I owe you?” The young man’s elbows jerked under the smock again, this time in search of his wallet.

Mo disrobed him and stepped on the pedal. The chair sunk with a heavy sigh. They walked to the storefront where the broom was propped beside that bale of today’s trimmings. Mo charged the walk-in the going rate and put on gloves to receive the cash tip, having heard somewhere that bills were the ultimate vector, ever in circulation. When the walk-in walked out, Mo dropped the razor in the Barbicide along with the used scissors and combs. He’d decided that that was the word for it. The word for what was happening to him. Barbicide.

Before locking up, Mo plucked his daughter's photo from the mirror and finished sweeping. He could have simply swept the hair out the door, but this was his neighborhood, Yuccies and all. Instead he bagged it, slung over his shoulder like a knapsack as he crossed the empty parking lot to fling it up and into the dumpster. Light as air, that bundle of hair. A wig unworn. A mask discarded.

Christopher Massenburg
Black Cloud

*But go and learn what this means: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."
For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.
~Mathew 9:13*

When we hear thunder
Don't it sound like
Gabriel still trying to teach
God how to use that MPC
Like angels laughing when
he say that next album gone be fire
Cuz we been waiting on that reveal
with biblical anticipation
longer than we waited for Detox

When we hear gunshots
Don't it sound like
Job adlibbing over a Marvin Gaye
sample looped with the 808
of Lauren London's broken heart
Like Lucifer laughing at
a life of opulence turned tragedy
Cuz we been waiting on the proof
that a contract hit can be more billboard
than casket with as much delusion
as believing prosperity can be gospel

When the shells hit the ground
When that rumble crosses the sky
Don't it sound like a morse coded wonder
of am I still relevant?
Like sacrifice is too often
on earth as it is in heaven?
I mean, is anybody still listening?
I mean when them skies open

do we dance like ain't no other freedom?
I mean, when that beat drops
do we become overwrought with anxiety?
Is it all marveled at but never understood?
Confused by but never interrogated?
Mad at but never reconciled?
Does it sound like you ain't never
gone not remember me?
Does it hurt like why does it
got to be this way?
Then breaks you down like
I bet you didn't even see it coming

McKenzie Teter
Stambaugh Auditorium

The operas were a door into our heritage,
a way to learn the language, *cantarlo*.
Our papas and nonnas so proud to see us on stage.

We were cast as peasants, *figli del Pagliaccio*,
and permitted to wear the clothes we came in.
Long nights became long weeks as we children lounged

in the blue velvet seats, eager for our five minutes of fame.
History echoed off the balcony, its words foreign to me.
A blonde boy, fellow peasant, whispered with his pouted mouth

that he knew all the secrets of the opera house,
how to sneak away, *avventura*. We remained well behaved
during rehearsal, but on opening night, with no eyes on us,

we were left to the mercy of our own boredom and the mystery
of it all. Knowing curtain call would beckon us back to stage,
he and I quickly slipped into echoing stairwells—swallowed by shadows

as the baritone of Vesti La Giubba trailed behind us.
Scuffed shoes on polished marble—the smell to prove it—
rows and rows of satin and suits,

small hallway, locked door, security guard, backtrack,
act two, steep staircase, storage room, oculus with a view.
The city sparkled through the clouded window, beautiful

for the first time. His lips brushed mine and I pulled
him in, fistfuls of tattered vest. All the while, the lovers,
plunged with a stage knife, die to the roar of the crowd.

Stevenson Richardson

The Get-Gone Man

Late the spring of '43, I was vagabonding from town to town, taking odd jobs to keep meat on my ribs while I pondered my life's true calling. Some might think that a dangerous course for a young woman alone, but my height and scarecrow frame, along with a face that made even loved ones temperate in their flattery, kept me pretty much impervious to unwanted attention. But, of course, there are perils I never thought to think of.

Coming down over some hills into a long stretch of open land, I'd pretty much put the last houses behind when I saw some asphalt cut off from the main road and head into the woods. I thought that was peculiar, being so far from anything of note, and that it might be worth my while to explore a bit, especially since it was in my general path of progress anyway. I followed it for about a quarter mile, deeper and deeper into the piney woods. It was thin blacktop with lots of potholes, and the weeds were prying apart some cracks on the edges, but it was also better than any out-country shanty had a right to, so the mystery still called.

As I went along, I could see into the clearings between the main stands of trees. There were lots of spots where the earth had been turned; not farming, too scattered and hit or miss for that. It looked more like a bunch of treasure hunters had been working off a bad map and just left their tailings behind. I was still thinking on this when I came to a gravel parking lot and behind it a long cement building with a tall smokestack at the back. It had a small porch and a frame office in the front but, other than that it was a solid piece of work, squatty with thick concrete walls, all of it painted white and not a window to be seen beyond the front room. There were no cars out front, and as I got closer I made an effort to crunch pretty loud, as my natural stride could be taken as sneaky by those that didn't know me.

A big old hound was lying in front of the door, dozing with his back to me and I got within ten yards before his nose went up and he swiveled all around until he saw me. Then he jumped up in embarrassment and made up for the delay by howling to beat the band. Which brought out a man from the inside, who stood there facing me as calm as can be, waiting for me to reach them both.

As I covered the last ground, I took him in. He was a man of middling height, not quite up to mine, but with a barrel chest and his arms crossed in front. He had the biggest forearms and hands I'd ever seen. He looked like that cartoon sailor, Popeye. He'd seen some hard wear so it was tough to guess his age, but if you sawed him in two it would take a while to count the rings. The most striking feature was his

hair, all pale coppery and plenty of it. He had a bushy beard lopped in the front to keep it from flapping too bad, but it ran down his neck to meet the hair on his chest. The thatch under his slouch hat was rough and graying, hacked and matted so it shot every which-away, like a squirrel had been dropped on his head from a great height. He wore striped dungarees and a worn shirt with about six different colors running in so many directions it made my eyes twitch. On his feet he had a cracked pair of businessman shoes without any laces. Overall, he was a curious sight, even to me as one who has aroused curiosity herself.

Still, he didn't speak until I got within about ten feet, but I could feel he was studying on me. At last, he said, "How do." To which I responded, and he said, "You must have come quite a piece to find this place." He had me there, as I didn't know what it was I'd found and sure hadn't set out to do so. As this back and forth was taking place, I noticed he was looking over my right shoulder and started to turn around to see who might have joined us when it dawned on me. He was talking at me but missing the mark because he was blind.

He held out his hand in my direction and we shook. "Lay your burden down and take a load off. I imagine a little water might hit the spot, or something with a little more kick, if you like." I told him water was what my spot needed and dropped my pack to the ground. He handed me a jelly jar full of sweet spring water and sat down on the stoop, patting the cement beside him as an invitation to set myself as well.

"Got something for me?" he asked. I was taken aback, and he read my pause. "You don't have something you'd like to part with?" Again, my shifting seemed to tell him something. "Do you know what this place is?"

I offered that no, I didn't but meant no offense if it was a historical site or some such. That set him to laughing so hard he finally wheezed and hocked up something that he sent into the nearby leaves. "You really aren't from here, are you?" I got that a lot and owned as much. He furrowed his brow and thought about me a bit more.

"Well, you're not from the po-lice and you're on your own, but it's clear you can handle yourself." I agreed with him and asked how he came to that conclusion.

"Maybe I noticed your voice came from above my ears, so you're a tall one. When you dropped your pack, I could tell from the sound it was heavy, so you've got some muscle on you. Your hands are hard, so you're used to doing your own work, and there's no quiver in your voice, so you don't scare at a new situation. Also, I didn't hear any steps but yours, and I was listening. I didn't hear any firearms clatter and didn't smell gun oil, so you're not armed. Beau would have said something too, along those lines. He's deaf as a post but his nose is tuned just so. Course even I can smell that you've been in the middle of wood smoke so long it's gotten in your hide. Now don't take offense, 'cause I can also tell you keep yourself and your kit as clean as can be living rough, so you got pride and you know what you're doing, being in it for the long haul.

"Or then again, I might just have some kind of blind magic you get when your

eyes burn out.” He smiled under his flat gaze at his own joke.

“Well, you hit that nail on the head,” I said. “And that was a good piece of work. Now let’s see if I can give you some back. Hmmm, you were a sailor sometime back, with your faded Chinese-looking tattoos and the way you still steady yourself on the deck when you’re standing. You used to smoke regular but you either quit a good while ago or find it hard to get the makings, ’cause your teeth and your right fingers are stained but you don’t smell of tobacco. You’ve lived here for some time ’cause you marched right out and down the steps without reaching to tap with your toes to get your bearings. Am I right?”

He smiled and nodded like a batter after a perfect curve has passed him by. “Fair enough. But there’s parts of this you’ll never guess and that make good tellin’. If you don’t have dinner plans, I’m heating up a can of beef stew and some company would season it right.” I allowed as that would suit me fine, glad he couldn’t see me lick my lips at the smell. When we’d ladled it out into tin bowls, sat back on the stoop, and spooned up most of it, he looked up toward the treetops and commenced.

“You know what this here was built for?” I told him it looked like some kind of small factory or maybe a kiln with the tall chimney and all, but he shook his head. “You finished your stew? You want some more.” I said I was full and thanks. “Just checking before I get on with it. See this was a crematory.” He paused for effect, so I gave him some “Oohh!” with a little shiver in my voice.

“Yep. Couple of brothers thought they could make a go of it if they got business from the four-county area. They got business, but their expenses must have piled up, or else they just got greedy, and they strayed from the path of common decency. In fact, I was the one that turned them in.”

“Some people see ‘turning in’ as about as bad as the crime that sparked it,” I offered, with a tone that hinted maybe I agreed.

So, he added like he was justifying, “They’d hired me on for way less than the going pay, figuring I was a desperate man, which was close enough, but also that because I was blind, I was some kind of moh-ron. People a lot of times get those mixed up and this time they paid for it. Cause I notice things, like I did with you. Only with them, I noticed how many times the fuel truck came to fill the tanks, one for the office and one for the crematory furnace. Except they only filled the office one. I knocked on the crematory tank and it never got lower.

“So, I started listening at night and I’d hear them grunting and lifting and I heard tools clattering off into the woods. Well, you can start to get the picture, even if you don’t particularly want to.”

He was right, I didn’t, but I was more curious than queasy, so I leaned in and said “Yeah?” to encourage the telling.

“One Saturday, I got them to take me with them into town—to buy some smokes, I said. And I went to the sheriff and told him what I knew. Seems his wife’s aunt had died not too long before and she’d been taken out for handling by these

old boys. Her ashes were under a rosebush by the river, they'd supposed. So, he had a motivation to find out the real state of things.

"Anyhow, on Sunday, a police car and two truckloads of silent local men pulled up and fanned out into the woods. There was crashing and digging for an hour or so and then hollering from over to the east. In a bit, the sheriff came back, and I could tell he was talking through his teeth to the two on the other side of that door behind us. He said, 'You boys better be glad that the Law is here and that the Law is me, 'cause otherwise you might be trading places with them out in the woods.'

"He advised them to get in the police car and lock the doors, which they were smart enough to do, just before the posse came storming back into the clearing. They were all for stringing them up, or bashing them to death with their shovels, or, well, they got pretty creative in their torments. But the sheriff was a true lawman and he said they had a right to trial, and they were guaranteed a judgment one way or another in the end. Which got them out alive."

I could guess where this was headed and shook my head and grunted. "I admire his principles, but I'm not sure I would have been that upstanding in the circumstances."

He nodded and went on. "All in all, the men and their dog found 30 bodies all scattered in the woods and a pile of chicken bones and cement powder in a pile behind the furnace. The citizens were sorry to hear that the crime only carried six months in jail, until the district attorney pointed out that when word got around among the prison population, those boys would be serving out the time in dog years, so folks were comforted by that."

"Well, the bank didn't want to reclaim the place, and nobody would be bringing their passed-on relatives here; it was too haunted for the dead. So, they just left me to it; said if I could keep myself supplied, I could stay as long as I wanted. The sheriff even gave me the search hound, which is old Beau here. He was a special trained body-sniffing dog they used to find people who die in gullies, but he'd gone deaf so he couldn't follow commands anymore. I promised to look after him so that's how we ended up here."

"So how do you make ends meet, if you don't mind me asking?" I said.

"I perform a service. I guess that's the secret for any business: give people something they need, even if they didn't know they did.

"I asked myself, what does a big old furnace do? It could make things, like bricks or steel, maybe, but I didn't have the know-how and who needs pig-iron in the middle of tobacco country? So, what else it does is it burns things to dust. It takes anything it gets and turns it into nothing much. Gone. Poof! Like that."

His flicked his fingers out all of a sudden like an explosion and I flinched to keep from having my nose picked.

He went on, "I could think of a lot of things in my life I'd like gone. I remembered little things I carried around that hurt me just to think about. I

remembered things I'd left laying around that somebody found and there'd been no end of trouble as a result. Didn't we all have things that were too painful or too dangerous to keep? But how to make them go away?

"If you bury them, some dog'll dig it up. Or you could throw them in the river, but they might rise to the surface and some bass fisher knows your secret. Throw them away, and you got people scavenging the dump. You get the point. How can you get rid of something so you know it's truly gone for good?"

He swept his arm at the building behind him. "Well, this here is the answer. That and the services of yours truly. I let the word get around through some people I know, including a bunch of them on the posse, that things could get gone for good in the fires out back."

"Seems that would put you on the spot to keep the secret, so how does this all work exactly?" I asked him.

He kept looking straight ahead, not saying a word, and I figured he might be having some kind of blind-person spell, till finally he said, "You may get a chance to find out for yourself."

Then I listened too and heard it, the pop of gravel from under tires and the grumble of a small truck headed up the drive.

"Not much for you to do but duck under cover. And keep yourself hid, or it's my neck," he added. "You know how to hide, do you?"

"I can hide so good sometimes *I* forget I'm there," I shot back by way of reassurance, and then quick, scooted over to a corner of the nearby shed, behind a woodpile where shadows crossed from three directions and chinks in the wood would give me a secret loophole on what transpired.

I hadn't but just settled when an old tan pickup rounded the bend and crunched to a stop not ten yards from me. It was a working truck all right, dinged and dusty, with a toothy round grill. The character that stepped out to meet my friend fit the dereliction of his ride, sporting rumpled khaki work pants and a shirt to match, one with some stitching over the pocket. The man himself was a stringy specimen and what I noticed most was his head, hunched down between his shoulders like a buzzard. His face was chinless and pointy, with tiny sharp teeth like a possum. Plus, he had flicky eyes, like something was going to dart out and snatch what's his.

My friend just waited by the steps, patient as can be.

"You the 'Get-gone Man'," asked Possum.

"That's me. Can I be of service?"

Bit by bit, the stranger had tiptoed up to within a couple of feet of my friend. Now he proceeded to wave his hand in front of the blind man's face.

"Yep, blind as a bat in a coal mine," said the sailor man without missing a beat.

The other started a bit and then had a dim idea. "Hey, then how come you knew what I was doing?"

"Well, for one, I could feel the breeze from your hand. Also, it's what a lot of

folks do before they come to believe their secrets are safe with me. So, here's what I propose. You got your items, whatever they are?"

The client nodded, then remembered himself and said, "Yeah."

"Well then, don't tell me what it is or who you are or basically anything at all. Just take it over there," pointing to a jumble of boxes and bags under the overhang at the corner of the porch, "wrap it up so there's no telling what it is by the feel of it, and then we'll head to the furnace. Can you do that?"

"Course," was the reply, a bit surly. Whereupon he withdrew what looked like a bunch of big, police-size photos, and a torn silk dress from the truck and headed over to build a good-bye bundle like he'd been told.

When he was finished, he announced as much and the two went into a door at the back of the long building behind. There followed some whooshing and a bit of smoke, but mostly silence and crickets for the next twenty minutes or so. Finally, the two reappeared on the porch, Possum brushing his hands together as he spoke. "What do I owe you, then?"

"Whatever it's worth," came the answer. "Just put what you figure is right into that slipper nailed up beside the door."

The eyes got shifty again, in a different way, as the client dug in his pockets, drew out a cupped hand, and hefted the contents.

"Course that nail is pretty small and can't really hold up silver. Only strong enough for paper," offered the sailor, which pulled a frown out of Possum and set him to grudging through his billfold for something that rustled. He stuffed it into the slipper with a force that should have dislodged that fragile nail and stomped back to his truck.

"Much obliged," called the sailor. But for answer, all he got was a few unnecessary revs of the truck engine and a spray of gravel as the customer put distance behind him.

When the noise had faded, we waited a bit more until my host called the coast clear.

"So there you have it," he said. "And a pretty typical type, too. A few are more gracious, but most are too wrought up to be on their best manners."

I allowed as how I didn't like the looks of the recent departed and worried about desperate people misusing the go-away properties of his oven. "I know some folks who'd like to get rid of people that way. Or maybe some bloody evidence, if you know what I mean."

"I do. I do indeed. And I didn't want to be a party to that. Partly out of my conscience, and part because people like that would just as soon toss me in the hopper to seal the deal. But, like you saw, no names. A blind man, so no faces. Boxed up so I can't tell a teacup from a two-by-four. And best of all, I've got old Beau sniffing every do-dad that comes in. If there's a drop of blood or gun oil or fireworks in there, I get the hound alarm. Then I'd tell them we can't do business and we'd part strangers. So far, it's worked OK."

I was part-way impressed. “Well, it’s clear you’ve done a lot of good thinking about it but human nature being what it is, I still think you’re treading some thin ice.”

“I do like my living spicy, so I suppose it must suit me,” he said.

I offered, “I can see you’re taking care of yourself, so I guess it’s a moneymaking proposition.”

“Oh, yeah. Keeping myself up with the latest fashion puts a strain on the wallet.” He stood and tiptoed in a dainty circle with his arms out so I could admire his outfit.

“I’m not saving up for a Cadillac. But I do get my fuel for free, and I never have paid a vet bill for Beau here. Not mentioning names, now. A little in cash, a little in kind. That’s the way the doc in town does it and so do I. So, I’m doing as well as anybody in these days and times.”

Then he frowned with a mischievous smile, “And if a few start thinking about how to stiff a poor blind man, I got a bunch of corn husk dolls with pins through ‘em hanging by the office door. Truth is, I got ‘em at a church bake sale and the pins out of a new shirt, but any rascals don’t have to know that. Blind-man juju. Boogah! Boogah! Hee hee hee!”

That got me to think about my personal situation, what I might have weighing me down. Haven’t we all picked up something that burdens and worries us, like a fish that snaps the line and swims free, but gets stuck with a hook in its lip and a yard of 20-pound-test to drag forever?

I helped scrub the dishes and set them where he pointed. I was afraid to tidy up any in case he had some kind of system to find his things. Instead, I sat with him while he scratched Beau’s head and we let the air cool around us. After a bit, I dug into my pack, wrapped up something in a small box from the porch, and handed it over to my new friend. True to his word, he didn’t say a thing; just took it inside, with me in tow, fired up the oven and, when the heat was like the sun come down to earth, he looked my way. I said, “OK,” and I watched my box slide down and puff into light.

I shook out all my ready cash onto the table between us and took his hand over it. Then, still holding his paw, I cut it into halves. “You pick your half,” I told him and apologized for such a paltry sum. He just chuckled and said “It’s the widow’s mite. I trust you, Sister.” So, I tucked his share into the slipper inside the door post.

“Mighty small box for such a big fire,” he offered after a bit, with half a smile, like one scallywag to another.

But there was no harm in him, so I just left him with, “Never mind what was in the box. Gone is gone and that’s what I paid for. Besides, it’ll be easier for you to forget if you never know in the first place.”

Steve Cushman

Ars Poetics or Why I Never Made It to the Writer's Colony

I didn't see him coming, this three-legged dog
with a white head, black body, and a tongue so long
and open to the world as if to say I'd lick the grass
off the edge of your lawnmower blade if it would
slake this all-consuming thirst. I looked left and right,
saw no owner, so I named him Rex
as I sat on the curb and he rammed
his bowling ball sized head into my crotch.

Did I mention it was August and the sixth day
in a row of 100+ degrees with no rain for two
weeks and the only reason I mowed this sad,
brown excuse of a yard was my plan to leave
the next morning for a month at a writer's colony,
one of those places out in the middle of a meadow
with cabins and wood-paneled walls and daily discussions
about the quality of your work and what makes good writing
and parties at night and the sort of writer's colony-length romances
those of us married twenty-plus years fantasize about,
though of course we'd never actually participate in.
That's for those poets from Pittsburgh or Greenville.

My neighbor, Dale, walked by in his orange running outfit
and said with a well-practiced smirk, *What you got there, Steve,
a new dog?* Times like these it's hard to believe Dale
is a lawyer but I guess if you study any subject long
and hard enough you should be able pass the test.

Julie pulled into the driveway in her white Subaru, honked twice,
climbed out and smiled at me, said, *Did you get a new dog?*
and suddenly Dale didn't seem so dumb as Rex somehow
untangled himself from my lap and hopped over to her,

so I headed for the hose by the front door, brought it back,
handed it to Julie and said, *Spray us, please.*

She smiled, said, *My pleasure*, and my God that cold water
felt like Heavenly liquid, the kind you'd sell your soul for,
and Rex he must have felt the same because he kept hopping
on those three legs, spinning and chomping at the water
as if he'd never get his fill and I was beginning
to see I too might never get mine.

Steph Gilman

Revisions

I am editing an essay about “a challenge you have experienced and how it changed you” that my sister Rhonda’s oldest son has written for his college application. Caleb is seventeen now, grappling with the difference between his world and *the* world. In my mind he is still a three-month-old infant with colic and squirrel cheeks, and I am a teenager watching my sister rub his back while he is crying: she presses her face against his to soothe him with her uncommonly husky voice, and he turns his mouth to her cheek because of the rooting reflex. She smiles with her eyes closed because even if he is screaming and searching for milk, he is with her and she is with him and it is the only place in the world they both want to be.

In real life, his mom died eight years ago. I am in my 30s, sitting in front of Caleb’s 850 words and trying to whittle them down to 650 because, apparently, there’s a word limit on recounting challenges that have changed you. His version of the story of his mom’s death is hard to read, probably as hard as my version would be, but his is hard for other reasons. He’s asked me to make edits since I was there and remember this story well and his memory is fuzzy.

But I don’t know how to edit his essay objectively, as an impartial reader. Instead, I have an emotional attachment to every word. It’s like something I have been waiting to read for years that I didn’t realize I had been waiting for. Caleb does not often talk about his mom, and neither do his other three siblings. Darcy was eleven when she died, Caleb nine, Colin seven, Davis six. We have avoided the topic for the last eight years because I can see it makes them uncomfortable, and I’ve been told their dad and stepmom don’t often bring it up.

To have Caleb’s version of the story on the page in front of me is surreal, like an emotional autopsy which I wonder if I have the capacity or qualifications to conduct.

*

The essay begins: *Everyone knows life can be hard sometimes, and it will throw you a curveball every now and then. You just have to deal with it and move on; take the experience and grow from it; be prepared for the next challenge.*

I want to ask who told him losing his mother to cancer was the equivalent of a curveball. Deal with it. Move on. Grow from it. Be prepared. How many people handed out these adages after his mom died, like uncashable checks? They are ambitious, yet fraudulent, and I wonder how well they have worked for anyone who has offered them.

I'm editing the essay with tracked changes and am tempted to insert a comment that says *What does 'deal with it' mean to you?* but continue reading instead. He has written about the year his "birth mom" was diagnosed with cancer, when he was nine, which I change to eight. Then I note that since this is not a story of adoption, perhaps "birth mom" is unnecessary and misleading.

But is my note for the sake of the eventual reader, or for me? When am I treading into the Land of Overstepping? Every time I hear the term "birth mom" from him or his siblings, I picture them in the years before their mom—their biological mom and my real sister—got sick, their tiny arms clinging to her waist while she made dinner. I remember the specific years when she became their birth mother, in 2003, 2004, 2006 and 2008, after hours of labor. And I wonder if a consequence of death is that the ones left behind must carefully sift through the memories, sorting and even eliminating some, as a technique for warding off pain. I suppose it is because of these eliminations that I am here reviewing Caleb's essay.

*

As a growing child, Caleb continues, I had no idea what my birth mother's death meant for me or what the future was going to have in store for me.

The future is often conceived in the mind and based on experiences of the past. In the South, we love to add the phrase "Lord willing" to the end of "see you soon," and sometimes even "Lord willing and the creek don't rise." Our lives feel certain until they don't, and until then, we imagine the future in absolutes. As far as my sister's kids were concerned, they didn't have a past without her, and their brains were too undeveloped to consider a world where she would not forever exist as their mom. My brain is highly developed, and I still can't conceive of it. "Mom" is everything. We are tethered by an invisible cord long after that essential lifeline is cut. As a child, I consistently called my elementary schoolteachers "Mom" and felt the blush of my cheeks as I quickly corrected myself. We ask children their mother's names, and they often respond with simply "Mom."

I know that infants learn object permanence around eight months old, understanding that just because things disappear, they are not really gone. But when do we learn object transience or, even more startling, person transience? Do we ever learn it? The process of my sister's kids learning it was brutal to witness. It showed up in their little bodies with malfunctioning systems and erratic emotions.

Caleb began involuntarily throwing up after most meals, much like his mother had been doing before she died. Colin stopped using the toilet, Davis began wetting the bed. No one could explain it; they were six and seven years old and had been potty trained for years.

I watched rage build in each of the kids, especially in the boys, with no valve to release that pressurized need for their mom. More physical fights with one another, more bruises and blood. After one argument, Caleb ran away from home, and the

neighbors went searching for him. He was ten.

Shortly after that, when I was visiting, he erupted in anger at Davis, who was six. I pulled them apart and led Caleb into the bathroom to talk while he brushed his teeth. Sitting across from him on the toilet lid, I watched him squeeze the toothpaste with both hands, his mouth in a straight line, brow furrowed. I tried to keep my tone gentle. “What makes you feel so mad at Davis?”

He brushed his teeth slowly, wordlessly, then spit the toothpaste in the sink and wiped his mouth. Finally, he responded, “It’s all his fault.”

“What is?”

“Cuz mom died. He needed her too much.”

I stared at him, processing the words, feeling them carve into me. They touched on a belief I understood to be true when I was his age: a child can be too needy. It was possible to wring someone out until they are emptied of their capacity to love anymore, and thus to live anymore. I wondered where Caleb had received this similar message, that a child could have so many needs that they could eventually kill his mother.

*

I continue reading Caleb’s essay. I grew up with my father trying to take care of myself and my three other siblings. Our family struggled financially, and my dad was constantly stressed having to take care of my mother, take care of his kids, and working as an architect full time.

This narrative is familiar to me. It is the one that I have heard his father, Nate, recount, where something always feels missing, and it’s not until I consider my uneasiness that I realize it is Rhonda who is missing—her life, her illness, her efforts to continue being a mom while dying. Her disappearance from the world was slow; she began to sleep more often, too sick to leave her bedroom while life went on outside of it. When I’ve asked Caleb about his memories of his mom, he says he doesn’t have many but that he remembers sitting in her bed while she helped him with his homework. And while I understand this, that he can’t help what he doesn’t remember and that her erasure began long before she died, it’s like watching her disappear all over again to read these words.

At the same time, what corrective liberties am I taking based on the version I remember? How much of it then becomes my own voice, my own pain?

In Nate’s version of the story, the one I’m reading in front of me, he is the central character. His version allows life to continue functioning, albeit with a new normal, but my sister’s death does not control the narrative. And, in fact, his experience of loss and rising from the ashes creates an affecting narrative arc, as illustrated in nearly every dead mother plotline from *Snow White* to *Bambi* to *Finding Nemo*. But as a sister, I have never thought of Nate as the hero of this story.

It’s impossible not to recall the times Rhonda confided in me: how she felt like a

single parent in her marriage. How Nate was at the office from early in the morning till late at night. How she struggled with postpartum depression and suicidal thoughts after Davis was born, and she and Nate considered separating, Nate's refusal to do his own therapy. How she packed up the kids and left for three months to live at our parents' house.

And then there are other disconnected memories that collide with this timeline and take up residence in my resentments. Like when Rhonda asked Nate for a smartphone in 2012, just before she got sick, and his response was, "Why would you need a smartphone?" The unspoken addendum to this being "...when you don't have a job?"

I have always found this ironic, given that when she first met Nate, she was the founder and director of a Big Brothers Big Sisters chapter in middle Tennessee. Later, she moved to D.C. to be close to him and took a job working for the secretary of state at the time, Colin Powell. When they were first married, she was the primary breadwinner for the family while he finished architecture licensure. A few years later, she had four children under age five and could not come up with a good enough reason to own a smartphone.

Slowly, I delete Caleb's sentence, *I grew up with my father trying to take care of myself and my three other siblings* and add in the following language: *My mom stayed home to raise my three siblings and me, and when she got sick, it was hard on our whole family.*

I justify this decision because of the next section, which is about all the nannies Nate hired to help take care of the children after Rhonda died, who each promptly quit after a few weeks. Narratively, in my mind, there had to be an unavailable caregiver for there to be a sudden need for a nanny.

I fill a glass of wine before continuing to read: *Many nannies could not take care of four kids without going crazy*, Caleb writes. *Many quit within a few months of helping out, but we were just kids. We did not know any better.*

I am proud of him for recognizing the truth, that it wasn't his fault. I also want to interject and remind him that it wasn't just because there were four kids—they were four confused, terrified, grieving kids.

*

The essay is halfway through, and I find myself reading faster as he describes his mom being moved into a hospice facility. I don't know if it's that I want the essay to be over or to be finished editing, or if my brain is recalling those days in hospice, when the lingering feeling was for everything to end.

It reminded me of a senior living home, Caleb writes, *which it was in a way*. I type in a clarifying line: *Because most of the sick people there were so much older than my mom.*

At some point a nurse had accidentally left behind a chart in Rhonda's hospice

room, which listed all the patients currently in the facility. Line by line were their names, medications, allergies, diagnoses. Each of their diseases were typical of old age, including my sister's. 82, 85, 75, 90, then Rhonda—43. It looked like a typo.

I did not think about why she had to live there and not with us, Caleb goes on. I think to myself, “Because the house was too far from any hospital, her pain was impossible to manage, her children were young and needy, her spouse was not equipped to care for everyone, and being home meant she did not get the support she needed.” I do not add this.

It began to get scary around this time. We would visit her every weekend when we had finished our homework and do an activity with her every week. What I did not realize was that these activities were supposed to be bonding moments with my mother before she passed away.

What I'm sure he doesn't realize is most of us didn't realize it either. We had not allowed ourselves to realize it. The morning I finally got on a plane to Tennessee I had just run a 10-mile race. It was only at the prompting of Ruthanne, the middle sister between Rhonda and me, who sent me a text that said, “I think we're at the end,” after days of assuring me that hospice was meant to be temporary until her pain and weight had stabilized enough to continue chemotherapy.

There is so much I know Caleb does not remember about this time, and the fact that he remembers these final moments as scary feels significant to me. I wonder if he recalls sitting with me in the hospice kitchen and filling plates of macaroni and cheese someone had brought for dinner. Anything to get the kids out of that room for a few moments, which was like a funeral visitation with its tearful guests, doleful Christian worship songs, and a harp player who meant well but whose serenading I found maudlin. The macaroni and cheese helped to satiate an unfillable hollowness. It was the kids' favorite food, and I felt I could sit there eating and eating and eating and never get full.

The night the nurses told us they didn't know how much longer Rhonda would be lucid, Nate brought the kids in one by one to say goodbye to her. The rest of us, family and friends, sat in the hallway waiting, pulling a child into our lap during each unemotional exit.

It had all felt like a performance to me, like a scene from a script that reads, “Family says goodbye, after a final ‘I love you.’ They each exit stage left to join loved ones.”

Afterwards, Nate stated that it had been awkward; the kids didn't understand or know what to say, and Rhonda was in and out of consciousness, saying only “I love you” many times over. I wonder if this was one of the scary moments for Caleb, sitting with her, trying to find forever farewell language as a nine year old.

The day before my 12th birthday, my mom passed away, the essay continues. I change it to “tenth.” His older sister hadn't even turned twelve yet. *My dad gathered my siblings in his room and told us how our mom had died in her sleep. Everyone cried*

except for me. I cared about her and loved her so much but just could not bring myself to cry. I was in shock.

I am struck by his need to remind the reader that, despite not being able to cry, he loved her. Tears are not obedient, I want to tell him. They are, in fact, frustratingly obstinate. For months, tears would not come, and it began to feel like they were collecting in some deep recess of my body, certain to explode if I didn't give them an escape. It was only after two or three drinks they appeared unbidden in a violent eruption of emotion that racked my body until I felt exorcised. I remember one night on vacation after several margaritas when my husband held me in a hotel room while I wept. I told him it felt like my sister's spirit hovering in the room. I sensed her wrapping herself around me, which was somehow both comforting and excruciating. When I opened my eyes, it was my husband, silent and steadfast, as the episode flowed through me.

In these moments, the same sentiment would play in my mind: *I can't feel any of this enough. It does not bring her back. It fixes nothing.* The tears would eventually subside in sputtering breaths, leaving behind an ashfall of exhaustion.

No wonder Caleb couldn't bring himself to cry.

*

The essay wraps up with an anecdote about the soccer game that Caleb and his siblings were scheduled to play the day after his mom had died. *I scored six goals against the opposing team and everyone was so excited that they cried and my entire team hugged me at the end. It was my birthday too, so after the game, my team and my family all celebrated and we had cupcakes and it was an amazing moment.*

I attended this game in a daze, feeling relief that my niece and nephews were able to channel their energy elsewhere. I remember struggling to make sense of sitting at a YMCA soccer field with all these very alive people, watching the flushed faces of children flash past me, when I'd sat next to my sister's body the day prior. I do not remember my nephew scoring any goals or celebrating over cupcakes. I again marvel at the brain's ability to compartmentalize events. My nephew could relive the joyful moments amidst the pain that hovered over his childhood, and I could not seem to stop reliving the pain because it haunts me.

The closing paragraph of Caleb's essay turns a corner, and I read it multiple times. *Looking back at it, he writes, I miss my mom so much, and I never got to see how she truly was as a person. I was not a very emotional person back then, and I am not necessarily now, but this memory engraved in my head still comes up from time to time in my brain.*

It's not just me—this essay exists because Caleb is haunted too.

In that moment after my mom died, he continues, I had turned my sadness and anger to perform a miracle of scoring six soccer goals.... I sometimes look back at it and compare it to current challenges that I go through. I have overcome many challenges such

as school and work by simply retelling myself this memory I had as a child. I have faced much harder challenges than this, and I have overcome them.

As I read this final paragraph, I am sitting with my husband in kitchen. I tell him Caleb is doing the same thing I've done since Rhonda died—trying to carve out the happy ending. The number of times I've tried to turn her death into six soccer goals.

*

After sending me this college essay, Caleb texted to tell me he had found the first iteration he drafted in the 5th grade less than a year after his mom died. In the text were images of two handwritten sheets of paper. I open them now to compare the two essays and see how different they read. In the older piece, I notice Rhonda is still called 'my mom,' not 'birth mom.' The section that stands out to me most is in the middle of the first page when the story of his mom's death becomes intertwined with the narrative of his own will to recover from it.

His words are elegiac, earnestly digging into the depth of a ten-year-old boy's struggle to cope. There is nothing artificial, just the honest inner workings of his young mind: *When my mom died, I felt like I could cry a hurricane. I spread out my anger around my family and it didn't help anything. I didn't know whether to be sad, or just to ignore it. This is when I discovered determination. I learned that loss was a very great thing. I also learned to never always mourn about sad things or you become very boring. Although we should never always mourn over things, we should never forget or ignore them.*

Caleb's words in the college version of his essay play in my head: *I was not a very emotional person back then, and I am not necessarily now.* I think back to those moments with him as an infant and toddler, when giant tears would roll down his cheeks at hurt feelings, frustration at a sibling, or separation anxiety from his mom. I can still hear his high-pitched whimper. I remember how Rhonda held him to her cheek. I suppose there is a belief out there that a marker of age is that we grow out of certain emotions.

I want both Caleb's fifth grade and seventeen-year-old self to know that I don't think mourning is ever boring. I wish he had felt like he could cry a hurricane and not drown.

I go back to my computer and insert a comment beside the last paragraph. I tell Caleb that between me and Ruthanne and his grandparents, we'd love to share his mom with him when he's ready. And then I ask him if this is the true ending of the essay.

I don't know if any kid can turn their sadness and anger into anything but sadness and anger; I write.

In some ways I realize I do have an agenda with my edits. Helping Caleb make sense of this complex story is the privilege Rhonda granted me as her sister and his aunt.

One of her final appeals to me and Ruthanne in the days before she died was that we don't leave her kids. Her tone had been weak but urgent. I have struggled with what this means. How do I hold these kids tightly but loosely with the recognition that I am not their parent and certainly not Rhonda?

Something prompted Caleb to write about her death. First as an adolescent and now as an almost-adult. A year ago, he texted to ask me and Ruthanne if we knew what sort of music his birth mom liked. Did we *know!* Music was her great love. Ruthanne and I compiled a playlist for him with some of her favorite artists, from James Taylor to George Michael. Maybe part of not leaving them is being a person he trusts to make a playlist and edit the story *because* I am partial.

I continue writing, my heart pounding with an awareness of the power of language and storytelling and the responsibility I possess in helping to frame it. *I don't know if this essay is about you scoring soccer goals. I think it might be about you continuing to live after the hardest experience a kid could possibly experience.* I go on to tell him that the act of writing about his essay and going back in time to confront painful memories is evidence of how he is constantly being changed by the loss of his mom.

As I type, I do not sense my sister's presence hovering as viscerally as when I am numbed by alcohol and sorrow. Instead, I feel her protective urgency and love for these four kids. I feel all the pain and the privilege of being here to share that part of her with him. I hope he does too.

Christine Marshall
The Evolution of Flight

You begin as a speck
of dust on my hand

*

then grow in wingspans,
moth swayed by breath.

*

Come spring, your pappus
drifts just out of reach.

I tighten the stem
around my thumb

until it snaps.

*

A flash, fast edge,
feathers streak past and a beak—

O love! You could hurt
someone with that.

*

A plane hurtles toward you
or maybe it's you hurtling toward

a plane, your tailpipe leaving
white smoke in your wake

*

but now, when I try to find you in the clouds,
I can't quite make you out.

Is that your body

or a river of light,
sliver of daylight moon,
pale eyelid of god?

*

Each year you lessen,
lesson, while my own

roots widen in the glass,

legs sprouting kudzu
for the neighbor's goats.

*

Above the exosphere, your body
sends down dust from stars.

So it goes.

*

I spread my hands
in the sunlight, the moonlight,

the lamplight.
Nothing to hold —

just a trick of wind
across my palms.

About Charlotte Lit

Charlotte Center for Literary Arts, Inc., is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization founded in 2015 by writers Kathie Collins and Paul Reali, located in the heart of North Carolina's largest city. Charlotte Lit's mission is to celebrate the literary arts by educating and engaging writers and readers through classes, conversations, and community. Our programming includes:

- 100+ classes annually, half of them free, led by talented writing teachers from the Charlotte area and across the state and nation.
- Three class formats: in-person, online, and asynchronous.
- Year-long immersions: Authors Lab for novelists and memoirists, Chapbook Lab for poets, and Publishing Lab for moving from manuscript to marketplace.
- Events that put published authors in conversation with community members: 4X4CLT Poetry+Art Poster Series (2016-2022), Poetry Nightclub (quarterly beginning 2022), and the long-running Community Conversations series.
- Multi-event initiatives: Carson McCullers at 100 (2017), Beautiful Truth (2019), and Artists Reckoning with Home (2022).
- The Lit/South Awards (2022-2024).
- Charlotte Lit Press, our publishing imprint, which publishes poetry collections and produces *Litmosphere: Journal of Charlotte Lit*.

In our first eight years, Charlotte Lit has hosted readings and master classes with many literary stars, including Joseph Bathanti, Sandra Beasley, Erin Belieu, Reginald Dwayne Betts, Laure-Anne Bosselaar, Jericho Brown, Nickole Brown, Gabrielle Calvocoressi, Wiley Cash, Jennifer Chang, Chen Chen, Morri Creech, Tyree Daye, Stuart Dischell, Melissa Febos, Beth Ann Fennelly, Richard Garcia, Judy Goldman, Jaki Shelton Green, Christine Hale, Lola Haskins, Terrance Hayes, AE Hines, Dustin M. Hoffman, Jessica Jacobs, A. Van Jordan, Ada Limón, Maurice Manning, Aimee Nezhukumatathil, Matthew Olzmann, Cecily Parks, Linda Pastan, Ron Rash, Mary Szybist, and Paul Tran.

You can learn more about Charlotte Lit and find your way to becoming part of our community at charlottelit.org.

Contributors

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Les Bares is a retired high school teacher who now lives in Richmond, Virginia. He was the winner of the 2023 Meridian Journal Short Prose Prize and the 2018 Princemere Poetry Prize. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *New York Quarterly*, *The Madison Review*, *Common Ground*, *The Midwest Review*, *The Evansville Review*, and other journals.

AJ Baumel is a poet, teaching artist at the Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing, and contributor to the *Southern Review of Books*. He is a graduate of the Queens University of Charlotte's MFA program and is past assistant poetry editor for *Qu Literary Journal*. AJ's poems have been shortlisted for the Aesthetica Creative Writing Award and the Muriel Craft Bailey Contest, and longlisted for the Bridport Prize, The Florida Review Editor's Prize, and Alan Squire Publishing Bulletin's Poetry Contest.

Jericho Brown is author of the *The Tradition* (Copper Canyon 2019), for which he won the Pulitzer Prize. He is the recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard, and the National Endowment for the Arts, and he is the winner of the Whiting Award. Brown's first book, *Please* (New Issues 2008), won the American Book Award. His second book, *The New Testament* (Copper Canyon 2014), won the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. His third collection, *The Tradition* won the Paterson Poetry Prize and was a finalist for the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. His poems have appeared in *The Bennington Review*, *Buzzfeed*, *Fence*, *jubilat*, *The New Republic*, *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *TIME magazine*, and several volumes of *The Best American Poetry*. He is the director of the Creative Writing Program and a professor at Emory University.

Michael K. Brown is the author of five novels, including *Somewhere a River*, for which he was named Georgia Author of the Year in Literary Fiction by the Georgia Writers Association. A graduate of the University of Alabama, officer emeritus of the Atlanta Writers Club, and a library advocate, he lives in Loganville, Georgia, with his wife, Judy.

Rosa Castellano was a finalist for Cave Canem's Starshine and Clay Fellowship, and her work can be found or is forthcoming from *RHINO Poetry*, *Nimrod*, *The Ninth Letter*, *Passages North*, and *Poetry Northwest* among others. She has an MFA from Virginia Commonwealth University and makes her home in Richmond, Virginia.

Tess Congo, also known as @TheHealthyWriter on YouTube, is a poet, fiction, and creative nonfiction writer. Her writing has appeared in *Publisher's Weekly*, *PANK magazine*, *Ripe: Tales of Hunger and Desire* (Afterword Books), and elsewhere. She's been the recipient of the Frederick Hyde Hibberd Scholarship, the Colie Hoffman Prize, a scholarship at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, and most recently, she was awarded the 2024 Goodyear Arts Fellowship and Residency for her poetry. She leads poetry workshops with the nonprofit Beyond Sober. She earned her MFA in poetry from Hunter College. Online: TessCongo.com.

Barbara Conrad is author of three poetry collections: *The Gravity of Color*, *Wild Plums* and *There Is a Field*; and editor of *Waiting for Soup*, an anthology from her writing group with folks without homes. Her poems have appeared in *Tar River Poetry*, *Atlanta Review*, *Nine Mile*, *NC Literary Review* (finalist for James Applewhite Prize), *Broad River*, *Pembroke* and numerous anthologies. Her subjects range from ironic takes on life to hard truths about social injustice—hopefully with a bit of attitude.

Erin Cowles (they/she) is a queer writer from Charlotte, North Carolina, who loves cats and wearing sweaters all year round. Guilty pleasures include mystery novels, curries of all kinds, and singing along to the Indigo Girls in the car with the windows down.

Steve Cushman is the author of three novels, including *Portisville*, winner of the 2004 Novello Literary Award. He has published two poetry chapbooks, and his first full-length collection, *How Birds Fly*, won the 2018 Lena Shull Book award. His latest collection, *The Last Time*, was published by Unicorn Press in 2023. Steve lives in Greensboro, North Carolina, and works in the IT department at Cone Health.

Vicki Derderian lives and writes in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Her fiction has appeared in *The Michigan Quarterly Review*, *The Louisville Review*, *Isele Magazine*, *The Fourth River*, *Leon Literary Review*, *Litbreak*, and elsewhere. She was a third place winner of the 2023 Coppice Prize and a finalist in the 2023 WTAW Alcove Chapbook Contest. A graduate of Oberlin College, she has attended Aspen Summer Words, the Kenyon Writers Workshop, Writing by Writers Tomales Bay, and Charlotte Lit. She is currently working on a collection of short stories.

David Dixon is a physician, poet, and musician who lives and practices in the foothills of North Carolina. His work has appeared in *Rock & Sling*, *The Northern Virginia Review*, *Connecticut River Review*, *FlyingSouth*, *The Greensboro Review*, *Atlanta Review* and elsewhere. He is the author of *The Scattering of Saints* (Hermit Feathers Press, 2022).

Mary Alice Dixon, Pushcart nominee and award-winning poet, grew up in Carolina red dirt, Appalachian coal dust and her grandmother's mountain lore. She lives in Charlotte, North Carolina, where she teaches a Hospice Grief Writing Workshop, which focuses on the healing power of poetry, and includes nature bathing rituals, peppermint candy and Mary Alice's homemade nut-filled bread. Her writing is in *Broad River Review*, *Kakalak*, *Main Street Rag*, *moonShine Review*, *Pinesong*, *Stonecoast Review* and elsewhere. She has been a North Carolina Poetry Society Poet Laureate Award finalist, and her work has been displayed statewide on NCPS's *Poetry in Plain Sight 2024* posters.

Kristen Dorsey is a United States Marine Corps veteran and award-winning visual artist. Her writing has been published twice in the *Chautauqua Journal*, and a third nonfiction

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Morrow Dowdle (they/them) has poetry in or forthcoming from *New York Quarterly*, *Pedestal Magazine*, *The Baltimore Review*, and *Poetry South*, among others. They have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. They edit poetry for *Sunspot Literary Journal* and host “Weave & Spin,” a performance and open mic series featuring marginalized voices. A former psychiatric physician assistant, they teach workshops on healing trauma through poetry for organizations such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness. They also volunteer in advocacy for US prison reform. They live with their family in Hillsborough, North Carolina.

Katie Dozier (KHD)’s love of poetry first bloomed as a child. She memorized Robert Frost sitting on a tree stump and bathed in Edgar Allan Poe as an adolescent. While studying words at Florida State University, KHD also played with chips and became a professional poker player. She’s passionate about encouraging others to discover contemporary poetry, through her active X account (@Katie_Dozier), as curator of *The NFT Poetry Gallery*, on the weekly podcast *The Poetry Space*, as Haiku Editor at ONE Art, and as the Prompt Series Editor at *Rattle*.

Tyler Dunston is a writer, artist, and PhD candidate in English literature at the University of Michigan, where he also teaches at the University of Michigan Museum of Art. He received his MFA in poetry from Boston University, and his poems have appeared in *Narrative Magazine*, *Nimrod International Journal*, *Raleigh Review*, and other journals. His critical work can be found in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Michigan Quarterly Review* (online), *Treblezine*, and elsewhere.

Jo Angela Edwins has published poems in over 100 journals and anthologies, recently including *The Hollins Critic*, *Pirené’s Fountain*, and *The Avenue*. She has received awards from Winning Writers, Poetry Super Highway, and the South Carolina Academy of Authors, and is a Pushcart Prize, Forward Prize, Best of the Net, and Bettering American Poetry nominee. She lives in Florence, South Carolina, and is the first poet laureate of the Pee Dee region of the state.

Nadine Ellsworth-Moran lives in Georgia where she works in full-time ministry while pursuing her love of writing. She hopes to continue listening closely and writing about the shared experience of life in these times, with particular interest in the joys and struggles of coming to understand the history, identity, faith, and culture of the modern South. Her poems have appeared in *Valiant Scribe*, *Theophron*, *Rust + Moth*, *Thimble*, *Sonic Boom*, *Emrys*, *Kakalak*, and *The Wild Word*, among others. She shares her home with her husband and four unrepentant cats.

Caeli Faisst is a writer and artist originally hailing from New York. Her work has been featured in *Carolina Muse*, *Broccoli Magazine*, and *The Library of Poetry*. Most recently, she’s been exploring new ways to meld poetry into art, notably through the use of old Bibles and erasure art.

Janet Ford lives in the Brushy Mountains of western North Carolina. A 2024 mentee with the Gilbert-Chappell Distinguished Poet Series, her work is featured in the current issues of *North Carolina Literary Review Online*, *Longleaf Press Anthology 2024*, and *Clockhouse. Poetry East*, *Caesura*, and *The New Southerner* have published her work, which has also appeared in *Poetry in Plain Sight*, *Crosswinds Poetry Journal* and *Poetry South*. She was the recipient of the 2017 Guy Owen Prize from *Southern Poetry Review* as well as the 2022 Susan Laughter Myers Residency Fellowship Award.

Sarah Gallucci (formerly Hosseini) has written reported features and essays for *The Atlantic*, CNN, *Harper's Bazaar*, *The Washington Post*, and other publications. A bold speaker, she delivered the powerful TEDx talk "Not Sorry" on the stage in New Delhi, India, encouraging women to use their unapologetic voices. She is an English professor at Central Piedmont Community College, and teaches free college courses in Title I schools on Charlotte's west side, where she lives with her two daughters.

Regina YC Garcia, a language artist and English professor from Greenville, North Carolina, is a DAR American Heritage Poetry Award winner, a two-time James Applewhite Award semifinalist, a finalist in Charlotte Lit's Lit/South Awards, and a Pushcart Prize nominee. She has been published in *Up the Staircase Quarterly*, *South Florida Poetry Journal*, *Amistad*, *The Elevation Review*, *Black Joy Unbond*, and numerous other reviews and anthologies. Additionally, she has contributed poetic and vocal content to the Sacred 9 Project (Tulane University) as well as an Emmy-Award winning episode of the PBS art show *Muse* featuring "The Black Light Project." Her debut chapbook is *The Firetalker's Daughter* (Finishing Line Press, 2023).

Steph Gilman is an essayist, memoirist, and freelance copywriter who lives with her husband and two dogs in Atlanta, Georgia. She holds an MFA in creative nonfiction from New York University, where she started her memoir-in-progress. Steph has attended a number of writing workshops and residencies, including Lighthouse Writers Workshop, Kenyon, and Aspen Summer Words. She is actively querying and eager to connect with agents interested in memoirs spanning themes of sisterhood, grief, and growing up in conservative Christianity in the rural South.

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Eddy Hicks is a poet based in North Carolina. He received his bachelor's degree in creative writing from Queen's University of Charlotte, and a Master's in English with a concentration in creative writing from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, where he was awarded the Kurzeja creative writing award for poetry. He is also currently employed there as the coordinator of the Communication Across the Curriculum program. He lives with his boyfriend and enjoys building Legos and playing video games in his free time.

Jenny Hubbard lives in Salisbury, North Carolina, with her husband and dog and manages a used bookshop that raises money for her local public library. A former high school English teacher, she writes young-adult novels and practices poetry with national treasure Danyne Romine Powell.

Justin Hunt grew up in rural Kansas and lives in Charlotte. Fluent in German and Spanish, he has won several awards, including 1st place in the Live Canon International Poetry (U.K.) and Porter Fleming Literary competitions, 2nd place in the River Styx and Strokestown (Ireland) contests, and commendations from numerous journals and organizations such as *New Ohio Review*, *New Letters*, and Robinson Jeffers Tor House. Justin's work appears or is forthcoming in *Barrow Street*, *Five Points*, *Four Way Review*, *Harpur Palate*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *American Literary Review*, *Terrain.org*, *The Journal* and *Cloudbank*, among others. Online: justinhunt.online.

Paul Jones is a person of minor interest. A manuscript of his poems crashed into the moon's surface in 2019. Another moon shot in February 2024 landed successfully. In 2021, Jones was inducted into the NC State Computer Science Hall of Fame. His book, *Something Wonderful*, was published by Redhawk Press in 2021. In 2024, Jones' poem "Geode" was plagiarized multiple

times by the notorious serial offender John Kucera. Recently, Jones has published poems in *Hudson Review*, *Salvation South*, *Tar River Poetry*, *NC Literary Review*, as well as in anthologies including *Best American Erotic Poems (1800-Present)*.

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Chanlee Luu is a Vietnamese-Chinese American writer. She received her MFA in creative writing from Hollins University, and BS in chemical engineering from the University of Virginia, where she competed in poetry slams. She writes about identity, pop culture, science, politics, and everything in between. Her work has been in *Snowflake Magazine*, *the gamut mag*, *Cutbow Quarterly*, *Tint Journal*, *Honey Lit*, *The Offing*, and *diaCRITICS*, among others. She won the 2024 Jean Feldman Poetry Award from the Washington Writer's Publishing House; her debut collection is forthcoming in October. Online: chanleeluu.weebly.com and @ChanleeLuu on Twitter.

Christine Marshall's first book, *Match*, was published by Unicorn Press in 2018, and her poems and essays have been published in *Best American Poetry*, *Agni*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *The Missouri Review*, *The Sun*, and *Thrush*. She lives in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Eric Nelson's most recent book, *Horse Not Zebra* (Terrapin Books, 2022), won Honorable Mention for both the Brockman-Campbell Book Award and the Eric Hoffer Poetry Award. His six previous collections include *Terrestrials*, chosen by Maxine Kumin for the X.J. Kennedy Award; *The Interpretation of Waking Life*, winner of the University of Arkansas Poetry Award; and *Some Wonder*, which won the Gival Press Poetry Award. His poems have appeared in many journals, including *Poetry*, *The Sun*, and *The Oxford American*. He lives in Asheville, North Carolina. Online: ericnelsonpoet.com.

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Maria S. Picone is a queer Korean American adoptee who won Cream City Review's 2020 Summer Poetry Prize and Salamander's Louisa Solano Memorial Emerging Poet Prize. She has three forthcoming chapbooks: *Anti Asian Bias*, *Adoptee Song* (Game Over Books), and *This Tenuous Atmosphere* (Conium). Maria was published in *Best Small Fictions*, *Vestal Review*, *Orca*, *Reckoning*, *Cherry Tree*, and others. She has received support from Juniper, Hambidge, South Carolina Arts, Lighthouse, GrubStreet, Kenyon Review, and Tin House. She is *Chestnut Review's* managing editor, and edits at *Uncharted*, *The Seventh Wave*, and *Foglifter*. She holds an MFA from Goddard College. Online: mariaspicone.com and @mspicone.

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with *The Jabberwock Review*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, and Poets.org, among others. Currently, they reside in New Orleans, where they are developing a novel and doing their best to eternalize the beauty of the Gulf South, before it slips away.

Dannye Romine Powell's fifth collection, *In the Sunroom with Raymond Carver*, won the 2020 Roanoke Chowan Award. Two other collections won the Brockman-Campbell Award. Her poems have been published in *The Georgia Review*, *32 Poems*, *Ploughshares*, *Harvard Review Online*, *Poetry*, *The New Republic* and others. She's won fellowships from the NEA, the North Carolina Arts Council, and Yaddo.

Melanie Raskin is a wife, cat person, witness to a ghost, big sister, exhausted chicken in a radio commercial, baker, disco dancer, and church lady. Her fiction credits include a 2009 Doris Betts Fiction Prize honorable mention and publication of "Waiting for Azrael" in the *North Carolina Literary Review*, and the 2012 North Carolina State University James Hurst Prize for Fiction for "Now You See Her, Now You—" Her 2019 Doris Betts Fiction Prize finalist "Stripped" was published in 2020 in *Minerva Rising*, and "Frayed" won the 2020 Carolina Prize. She's the co-founder of the Triangle Writers Group and leader since 1986.

Steve Richardson's poems have been published in literary journals such as *Negative Capability*, *Light*, *Yellow Silk*, and *The Formalist*, as well as the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. He taught poetry writing through South Carolina's Artists in Schools program, received a fellowship from the South Carolina Academy of Authors, and was chosen for the South Carolina Arts Commission Readers Circuit. He is currently a museum docent at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia.

Michael Sadoff is a Pushcart-nominated fiction writer based in Charlotte, North Carolina, who writes about people in dire need of human connections. He recently completed a story collection, entitled *The Hotel Motel: 13 Stories*, which has a recurring theme of hotels, rentals and other temporary living spaces, reflecting the disconnectedness and lack of belonging that its characters feel. Michael's stories have appeared in *South Carolina Review*, *Sixfold Fiction*, *Main Street Rag*, and elsewhere. He has an MFA from Queens University of Charlotte.

Anna Schachner is the author of the novel *You and I and Someone Else*. She has published many short stories in journals and magazines such as *The Sun*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Puerto del Sol*, and *Arts & Letters*. After editing *The Chattahoochee Review* for a decade and teaching in the Georgia women's prison system, she is now a freelance writer, editor, and book coach in Atlanta, Georgia. Soon, though, she will make her way back to the mountains of North Carolina.

Max Seifert is a poet and power forward from the Midwest. He received an MFA from the University of Texas at Austin and lives in North Carolina. He is an editor for the low theory cinema newsletter *Schlub Cinema*. His writing can be found in publications including *Colorado Review*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Gulf Coast*, *Narrative Magazine*, and *Tupelo Quarterly*.

Martin Settle is a writer in Charlotte, North Carolina. Martin taught English for 32 years, the last 17 of which were at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He has published six books: a memoir, an art design book, and four books of poetry. In addition, he has been awarded the Thomas McDill Award and the Poetry of Courage Award from the North Carolina Poetry Society; the Nazim Hikmet Poetry Award; and the Griffin-Farlow Haiku Award. His work has been published in *The New York Times* and other places. Online: martinsettle.com.

Maureen Sherbondy's work has appeared in *Southern Humanities Review*, *New York Quarterly*, *Prelude*, and other journals. Her forthcoming book is *The Body Remembers* (2025). Maureen lives in Durham, North Carolina. Online: maureensherbondy.com.

McKenzie Teter is a poet and educator based in Asheville, North Carolina. She holds an MFA in poetry from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, where she served as a poetry reader for *Ecotone* and coordinator for the Young Writers Workshop summer program. She holds a BA in English Literature and Creative Writing from Queens University of Charlotte. Originally from Youngstown, Ohio, McKenzie is a lover of all things Midwestern and rusty. More of her work can be found in *Rejection Letters*, *The Shore*, *HAD*, or via her website. Online: mckenzieteter.com.

Mary Tribble, after graduating from Wake Forest University, owned an event management company in Charlotte for 25 years. She returned to her alma mater as a senior advisor in 2015, where she earned her Master's in liberal studies. Her first book, *Pious Ambitions: Sally Merriam Wait's Mission South 1813–1831*, tells the story of her fourth great-grandmother's role in the founding of Wake Forest. She is working on a memoir about her journey of self-discovery through the stories of seven generations of women who came before her. When she's not writing, she's speaking, podcasting, or consulting with organizations on community engagement strategies.

Rebecca Valley is a poet living in Durham, North Carolina. She has an MFA in Poetry from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and her work has been published in *Permafrost*, *Bennington Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, and other journals. Her poetry chapbook, *The Salvageman*, was published by o-blek editions in 2022. She is also the author of a collection of true crime stories for children, which you might enjoy if you like books about dognapping, museum heists, or cryptozoology. Online: rebeccavalley.com.

AJ Vilen grew up in the mountains outside of Asheville, North Carolina, where she spent a lot of time looking for little creatures under river rocks. She has worked as a gardener, a waitress, a researcher, and a therapist. Her poetry focuses on family, psychology, a sense of place in the natural world.

CB Wilson is a writer and psychotherapist living in Western North Carolina. She is currently working on a manuscript exploring themes of imminence and bisexuality, embarrassment and obsolescence. "Oak Gall Prayer" is specifically written with gratitude for Leroy and beloved Tishrei, more broadly for queer networks of care, and ever more broadly as a prayer for continued growth toward collective liberation.

Alida Woods has had a life spent largely among school children as a teacher, school principal, and a mentor. She continues to work on behalf of children in her work in social justice and nonprofits in Asheville, North Carolina. She can be found in her garden playing with her grandchildren, or walking the beach in Edisto, South Carolina!

Yance Wyatt is a hearing-impaired author from Nashville, Tennessee. He studied fiction at the University of Cambridge and the University of Southern California before becoming a professor in the USC Writing Program and the director of the USC Writing Center. A two-time Pushcart Prize nominee, his work has appeared in *Zyzzyva*, *Northwest Review*, *Los Angeles Review*, *The Pinch*, *Welter*, *THEMA*, *Pangyrus*, *Everyday Fiction*, and elsewhere. He now lives in Los Angeles with his wife and son.

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