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NORTH DAKOTA QUARTERLY

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#### COVER

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## He Will Cover You with His Feathers

*Rhiannon Conley*

---

I am thinking about two hornbills  
I saw in the Milwaukee zoo  
the day my sister runs away with her new boyfriend.  
She, just nineteen, the whitest  
in our family's flock of black,  
submits her confession:  
"I am pregnant."  
She will not speak to us again.

The hornbills were two black birds  
the size of swans crowded in a cage  
just a feather's length longer than their wings.  
Even in this small space they stretch  
and flap, the crack of their large wings  
echoing through the aviary.  
Together, the male and female—his eyes  
a bloody red and hers cool white marble—clack.  
Clack. Their large orange bills,  
both topped with the casque of a rhinoceros,  
are so grotesque they are lovely.  
With these they chatter,  
swishing white and black striped tails  
back and forth like the rustling of vestments.

I wonder why a teenage girl  
would crowd herself into a cage,  
but of course I know the answer.  
I know the revelation of new sex,  
the necessary piety of young love.  
I know what it's like to feel holy in a boy's hands,  
to feel as though the two of you were chosen,  
your body a gift for his.  
Together, they must speak in tongues,  
clacking.

For the hornbill female, courtship is crucial;  
she is a bird whose life will depend  
wholly on her mate when she breeds.  
When her body is heavy with soft stones  
and something inside her, a ticking, like a clock,  
compels her, she and he will mud up the opening  
of a hollow tree. She becomes an anchoress  
with only a hole large enough for him to feed her through,  
for her to carefully defecate outside the nest.  
How the bones of her wings  
must ache.





# The Gospel According to Gabriel

*D. Seth Horton*

---

“**W**atch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come.”—Matthew 24:42

The hidden security cameras throughout our house record my emotions getting the better of me. At least I'm not alone. God is here. He folds my hands into his and says, “You can look at Tijuana through the tinted windows of a car. Or you could look out through the stained glass of a church. It's your choice, Gabriel. Just as it's always been.”

Outside, the doors to the SUVs are closing. I'm glad you're not here to witness any of this shit, Myra.

I have a lot of regrets. One of them is that I only met God yesterday, a few hours after you said a final prayer for me and left with the kids. I was eating an early dinner on the patio of your favorite seafood taquería out there by the ocean, and he walked by the place sporting a vested suit, a pocket watch, and a silver, knee-length beard that a few of my associates would have killed for. I'd seen some crazy people in Tijuana over the years, but they didn't have the same kind of intensity or power. His head was surrounded by a sparkling golden halo like in the paintings at church. Something about that gave me a bit of hope. I decided to follow him. Maybe he could forgive me for what I'd done, and then maybe you could too,

Myra. I paid for dinner and handed what was left of the food to some kid panhandling on the corner.

God walked straight through the western edges of the city towards the ocean. I followed him. I tried to build up the courage to introduce myself, but I was embarrassed by the person I'd become. Why hadn't love been enough for me, Myra? Why had my heart been reduced merely to a meaty, swelling, pumping organ? You said it yourself the other day: the whole situation was fucking scary and sad. The look of horror then on your face left me burning with guilt. I'm pretty sure that somewhere in the Bible, God became disgusted with men like me. I understood why he might leave me to my fate.

Toward the end of his walk, the city streets yielded to the sand of the beach. Only when his feet got wet and there was nowhere left to go did he finally twist around to face me. A silhouette against the reddening sun, his angular jaw was patriarchal, his eyes bulbous as though he had a thyroid condition. “I'm in the middle of something here, Gabriel,” he said in a rich, baritone voice.

“Please,” I said, trying to catch my breath. The air stank from a nearby whale carcass. The whale must have swallowed the bags of coke that our partners had recently dumped over the side of a ship before they were caught by the U.S. Coast Guard. I'd

heard somewhere that for whales, breathing is not an automatic affair, it has to be willed. "I need your help."

He looked at me as if I were a door-to-door salesman who wouldn't get off his front step. "What exactly do you want from me?"

I told him that I was a sinner, the worst of the worst. Now I was repentant. I repeated the confession I'd made to you yesterday, Myra, before you left on a potholed highway heading out of Tijuana, rubbing your newly chipped tooth with your tongue. I said that I never meant to become a sicario and only got into the business to support our family. At the age of twenty-two, I decided to do a little smuggling. No, that wasn't admirable, but at least there would be food on the table. Soon I learned how stupid I'd been. My boss thought he saw something special in me. I was sent to a training camp out in the desert where I learned about shooting, explosives, and hand-to-hand combat.

I also learned how to kill.

I told God that one night they made a low-level ventana they'd kidnapped from another cartel kneel down in front of me. They put a .45 in my hand and ordered me to do him at point blank range. I didn't even feel myself pull the trigger. It was like I was outside of my body, watching the events unfold. I saw the man's fear and the short-lived shock when the bullet entered his brain. Then there was only blood and blankness. Afterwards, I told myself that I shot him because I sensed

what would happen to me if I didn't, but I admitted to God that such ultimate power also felt pretty good. Maybe even euphoric.

His eyes flickered and turned into distant moons. Their milkiness was uncanny. "How many commandments have you broken? All of them, right? So whatever it is you're asking for, the answer is no."

I kicked at the sand and said, "OK, even if you can't forgive me or nothing, what about Myra and the kids? They weren't involved. I need them to be safe after I'm gone, you know?"

I thought he would offer a little solace, but no, his face turned stony. When looked at from my angle, his rigid pose suggested a descent from heaven into this, our mistaken, man-filled world. He merely shook his head in disappointment, as though he couldn't believe what I'd asked of him. "Genesis is pretty clear on this. No one is innocent, not even the children."

I shouldn't have lost my temper, Myra, but I'm sure you remember how protective I can get of the children. As my boss was fond of saying inside the death houses, once a pendejo, always a pendejo. I did what I was trained to do and punched God in the face, squarely below his left eye. Then I hit him again. And again. Eventually he began to shake and I finally stopped. He hid his face in the infinite solitude of his hands. At that moment, I realized how lonely he must have been. Damn it, what had I done?

He wiped away a bit of moisture from his crow's feet and said, "I've about had enough of everyone blaming me for what goes wrong in their lives. I'm tired of it. I'm tired of everything." He stood up and took one last glance at the lights of Tijuana off in the distance. I wished you were there, Myra. Somehow, you could have made this right. You would have known what to do to lessen our pain.

What happened next wasn't the kind of shit you'd see in the news. At first, the water beneath his feet seemed to be moving backwards, the friction from the tide and riptide creating a kind of liquid web that somehow held his weight. As he walked further away from shore, he slowly began to sink. Suddenly the sky broke out into arteries of light. A meteor shower burned through the sky. Gulls shrieked out their warnings, their white wings curling against the black backdrop of the sky like shredded paper. The ocean swelled, it started to rain, and at that point, Myra, I felt that the threat of death was real.

I waved at him wildly in a hopeless attempt to apologize. I don't think he saw me. Clapping his hands together, he looked toward heaven and boomed, "Fuck it. I give up." He allowed himself to be submerged in water that now bubbled from the horizon to the shore. He didn't resurface. Any chance of redemption was over for me. At least his suicide was a clean one. A cooling body, soon to be mere flesh, food for the calico bass and halibut that would swim away

with tiny bits of celestial skin in their bellies. I'd love to tell you, Myra, that I dove into the water and tried to save him, but that type of instinct failed me long ago. Is there anything more than the brutality that ends life? My own experiences have taught me that the answer to that question is a resounding "hell no."

I thought I'd felt terror the first time I was ordered to use a blowtorch on the face of another human being. Now I recognized true terror: the promise of eternal solitude. I left the stinking seascape behind and went back to the taquería. The SUV wasn't there. Maybe it was stolen, or maybe I couldn't remember where I parked it. Not that it fucking mattered either way. I needed to clear my head so I started walking. Above me, the light of the moon was opaque, blurred from the falling rain. I wondered if this was some type of omen.

The roads back into the city were peppered with makeshift shrines to honor the dead. Soon I would join them, but I wasn't going to run away. My boss would ultimately find me no matter where I went. I didn't want him to take his revenge out on you and the kids, Myra. Two nights ago, I'd refused to kill the son of a local crime reporter because he was only seven years old. Saying no to my boss made me expendable. There was to be no escape.

I passed a couple of transgendered prostitutes waiting underneath a bullet-punctured awning. They were all bone and dressed in pleather. Later, a truckload of police drove by.



Their faces were hidden behind black masks, though the women still decorated their eyes with mascara. Theirs was a brutal business. But you knew all about danger, didn't you, Myra? Traveling alone with the children through Sinaloa, pregnant again with our third and trying to make it back to your parents' home without being seen by men like myself. I'd give anything to hear that you were OK, that you had made it out of the city and would soon see the lights of Guadalajara. It was best that you left, Myra. To the left, to the right, straight ahead: nothing here in Tijuana was G-rated. This was no place to raise children.

My mind was still racing through itself when I stumbled home close to morning. A new Cadillac SUV was perched a block away from our house. A light rain trickled down its windows. I could feel the eyes of the lookout boring into me as I opened my front door. I changed out of my wet clothes. Realizing that they might barge in at any moment, I went to the medicine cabinet and swallowed gringo pills with names I couldn't pronounce. Next to the sink was a matching pair of old toothbrushes. You had forgotten to pack yours when you left. I kicked the trashcan and emptied its contents onto the floor: used Band-Aids, bloodied gauze, a home pregnancy test kit.

I lay across our bed and almost cried. If only I could forget about yesterday. The kids were playing at a neighbor's house and you were

kissing me, pressed up against the kitchen counter. I didn't respond. You laughed, just a little, making an innocent joke about it not being a big deal. There was nothing cruel about your teasing. There never was. In the awkward silence that followed, you finally heard my heart going off bump bump bump like a rapid-fire machine gun.

Chunks of tension suddenly seemed to coil down your spine. I felt a dizzy redness and in that split second between flare and no flare, I made my confession. I'd become an entirely different person than the one you had married. I yielded to the facts and answered all of your questions. Yes, I was a hitman. No, I couldn't remember how many people I'd killed, maybe a hundred. Some were women. I promised you that there were no children, but who knows if you believed me. When it was over, I said you needed to pack up your things and get out of Tijuana with the kids, immediately. My boss wasn't a patient man. My punishment would be swift. Of course, you could never come back to the city.

"Just get the kids and get out of here. Before it's too late." I pushed you towards the bedroom without realizing my own strength. You slipped and slammed into the door. Blood dribbled down your split lip and you gasped. You touched your face and pulled your fingers away, staring at the blood, and that's when I saw the new chip in your front tooth. I looked away out of embarrassment, feigning interest in the wall.

You took off your wedding ring and threw it at my slouched head. Maybe you guessed that it had come off the finger of one of the bitches I'd killed.

The shape of shame: me hanging my head. *I'm sorry* became my mantra until you eventually locked yourself in our bedroom to pack. I went to get the children. I scrounged together some food and held them one last time. "Remember, Papá loves you. Always remember that, OK? I love you." Thank God, they didn't really understand what was happening.

You packed what few belongings you could carry: a bar of soap, some extra snacks for the kids, a gun. It was a short goodbye. I gave you the numbers to a bank account with over two million pesos in it. I thought you'd rip it up, but you hid the piece of paper in your brazier. You recognized that you'd need that money after I was gone. "Good, you're thinking clearly."

The trip would be dangerous. Stay strong, I wanted to tell you, don't trust anyone, except you didn't need my advice. I kissed our crying children and told them to be brave.

"Don't call me. The phones could be tapped."

"May God help you, Gabriel."

It was the last thing you said before backing the car out of the driveway. At that moment, I knew with absolute certainty that the best part of my life was over. I would never find out if you made it to Guadalajara. I wouldn't even learn the name of our youngest child. What was wrong

with me? It didn't matter any longer. Nothing mattered. I was alone there in our bedroom. Other than the occasional gunshot in the city, it was so very quiet. Fuck my stupid life, Myra.

I must have slipped into a light sleep there on our bed. I woke up at dawn with a sense of someone lurking outside and thought to myself: shit, this is it. I bolted to the security monitor and saw a figure loitering behind the corpse of a rusting car. There was something about his regal disposition that I recognized. The chiseled chin and holy expression were clearly identifiable, despite the air of death that clung to him. It was God. He'd risen up from his watery grave, completely nude except for clinging starfish and a browned beard laced with sand and shells. His hair was longer, and he appeared to be more youthful than when I'd seen him last.

"Can I come inside?" he mouthed to the camera, shivering.

He was smaller than me. I gave him a pair of sweatpants and one of your old sweaters, Myra. I noticed that his body emitted a human odor. Perhaps humidity affected him like the rest of us. I reused some old grounds to make a pot of coffee and said, "Sorry, it's all I've got."

He winked and there on the table stood canisters of cream and sugar, huevos rancheros, and a steaming bowl of beans. I didn't know why he'd come back, but it felt good to sit down and eat one more meal with someone.

"Look," I said, spooning some food onto his plate, "about what happened back there on the beach—"

He waved me away. "No, no, I had it coming. I should've changed a long time ago. My power trips hurt a lot of people. Let's face it, Gabriel. I was a lot like you."

God closed his eyes. I didn't want to disturb his sudden reverie. Outside, the birds were silent, either from extinction or because the city had become deaf. The bars in the windows dripped from last night's rain. Soon the moisture would dissipate. The hardness of Tijuana would congeal once again. He eventually opened his eyes and said, "Let me tell you a little story. It's about a man named Carlos Estrada. Do you remember him?"

"I don't think so." I sipped my coffee. No matter how much we drank, the cups remained full.

"He was one of the men you killed in that big shootout last April. After the funeral, his dad built an altar for him out of recycled plywood. Despite the limited material, it didn't look too shabby. This guy is a master carpenter. His mother decorated it with photographs of Carlos, and she placed the letters that she still wrote to him there on the mantle. Whenever they can afford it, they light a candle in his memory. His mother thinks it's beautiful the way the wax melts onto the surface of the wood. The flames remind his dad that what's real can't always be touched. The altar makes them feel connected to their son."

"Why are you telling me this?"

God wiped his mouth with a napkin and moved his chair over next to mine. "Carlos's parents have understood for a long time that their son's future was going to be limited, but they still can't let go of him, not yet. They're stuck in the dreams of the past. That's why they need the altar. Someday, when they're finally ready to move on, I'm going to be there to help them. Just as I'm also here for you this morning."

For a minute or two we watched the orange sky brighten and the clouds slink through the sky as soft as butter. And then a second SUV appeared outside my house. There wasn't much time left. The men would be coming for me soon.

"I never wanted to become a monster," I said.

"I'm not here to judge you, Gabriel. I'm here to help you let go."

God holds my hands. Suddenly, I'm shaking. I try to ignore the clank of car doors outside. Would he promise that you'll be ok after I'm gone? He shakes his head. "You already know the answer to that, don't you?"

"Yeah, I guess I do." Like me, he has lost most of his power. I realize that I'll worry about you until the very end, Myra, my sweetheart, my heart-shatterer.

"What about the kids?" I ask.

"All we can do is pray. Do you want to learn how to do that?"



I get down on the floor and say, "Yes, please."

"All you have to do is talk. I'll be right here with you. Even after they come inside, I'll be listening. Don't worry about them. Focus solely on me."

Mercy has a price, and he is willing to pay for it. Somewhere in the vast waters of the ocean, the Old Testament God of rules and judgment has been discarded. Part of me was buried alongside him. We are both weaker now. We are also kinder, more loving incarnations of our old selves. I wish you could have seen this transformation, Myra, even though I understand why you needed to get as far away from me as possible.

"Dear God," I whisper.

Behind me, I hear the men kicking down my door. I am terrified, but I don't let the fear stop me. I press God's hands and pray for a soft heart so that I can forgive them for what they are about to do. And I pray for God to lead me beyond this world of darkness and light where men kill one another. I pray for some kind of a resurrection after the hanging or shooting or beheading is all over. Mostly I pray for you and our children, Myra, navigating the streets and highways amongst the fallen. Like a shooting star wished upon after it is gone, baby, I pray.

*A cat is penned up in a steel chamber, along with the following device (which must be secured against direct interference by the cat): in a Geiger Counter, there is a tiny bit of radioactive substance, so small, that perhaps in the course of the hour one of the atoms decays, but also, with equal probability, perhaps none.<sup>1</sup>*

I have never spoken truly of myself.  
The following pages are lies.  
I have only spoken the truth.  
The following pages are a  
testament to that truth.

Sword fighting schools date back to the twelfth century, but modern fencing begins in the fifteenth century with the Spanish school and a book by Diego de Valera. The French and Italian schools soon followed, the French taking a strategic approach while the Italians favored a more athletic approach. (The rivalry between these two schools still exists today.) It was considered a sign of cultivation to know how to fence. And of course, it was a badge of honor to take part in a duel. Between 1600 and 1780 in France alone, forty thousand French noblemen were killed in duels.<sup>2</sup> By the early nineteenth century more young European noblemen died from duels during the previous two hundred years than from any other cause. Dueling was tied to honor, bloodshed and violence to upholding

the honor of one's family and one's name. In many ways, the duel should be considered a great advancement in civilization, as it codified the rules of violence, curtailing the more random acts: the crimes of passion and the barroom brawls. Ironically, the modern age of random violence where children can be shot in the street and even in their own schools returns us to a more barbaric time, a time without a code.

I am both alive and dead.  
I am both an artist and a father.  
I am a fencer and a husband.  
I am a man who desires and one  
who has given up on desire.

In 1558, the playwright Ben Jonson killed the actor Gabriel Spenser in a duel over an unknown cause.

In 1569, Miguel de Cervantes wounded Antonio de Sigura in a duel.

In 1704, the German composer Handel was nearly killed in a duel with Johann Matheson.

In 1772, playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan fought two duels with the same man, Captain Matthews, over a woman to whom Sheridan was secretly married. Sheridan won the first, letting the man go as he pleaded for his life. He lost the second when his own sword broke and Captain Matthews stabbed him several times.

In 1792, Lady Almeria Braddock fought what has come to be called the “petticoat duel” in London’s Hyde Park when Mrs. Elphinstone made a comment about Lady Braddock’s age. They fought with pistols, then swords before Mrs. Elphinstone agreed to write Lady Braddock an apology.

In 1823, the Russian writer Pushkin fought a duel with the poet Konraty Ryleyev. Pushkin went on to fight many such duels, most famously the duel in which he was killed by French officer George d’Anthès, who was rumored to have had an affair with Pushkin’s wife, Natalia.

In the American west of the nineteenth century, the duel with swords metamorphosed into the gunfight. Two men standing on opposite ends of the town, facing each other, their hands poised over their guns, trigger fingers twitching.

In 1842, President Abraham Lincoln accepted a challenge to a duel when state auditor James Shields accused Lincoln of publishing an inflammatory letter in the Springfield, Illinois, newspaper. The two met for battle, which was only stopped once the seconds convinced Shields that Lincoln had never written the letter.

American President Andrew Jackson purportedly fought more than one hundred duels in his lifetime.

In 1897, Marcel Proust fought a pistol duel with journalist Jean Lorrain after Lorrain published a stinging review of Proust’s first book. Both shots went wide of the mark and their seconds convinced

them to call it a day. Proust later remarked that his biggest worry was having to rise so early. He was not a morning person.

In 1921, Benito Mussolini fought a duel with Francisco Ciccotti. The duel with swords famously lasted over an hour and a half before Mussolini wounded Ciccotti.

As barbaric as they seem to us now, duels were rooted in honor, and honor is rooted in the integrity of one’s beliefs and actions.

To live with honor is to be authentic.  
To live with honor means to betray yourself.

Codifying violence is idiotic.  
Violence without rules is insane.

We pretend the violence in fencing is not real. The blades are not sharp. No one is killed or even injured (usually). Yet, walking into a national or international fencing tournament you cannot help but think you’ve wandered onto a battleground. Piercing screams puncture the air. Fencers charge down the strip at each other, waving swords, smashing one another on the head. At a large tournament, there is almost never a moment of silence. After scoring a hit, women arch back at the waist and let out screams that would make a pterodactyl stand up and take notice. Men rip off their masks and yell in the faces of their opponents. If you only listened to a fencing tournament you would be sure the convention hall, or gym, or ballroom ran with blood. And yet blood is rare. The violence is a pre-

tense. It is regulated. Codified.

In the 1970s, a German barber by the name of Emil Beck<sup>3</sup> watched video after video of fencing bouts, studying the most efficient ways of hitting your opponent. The result was that he singlehandedly reinvented modern fencing, and in doing so, made it much more aggressive, athletic, and dangerous. In 1982, the Russian Olympic champion, Vladimir Smirnov, was killed at the world championships in Rome when the German Fencer, Matthias Behr's blade broke and pierced Smirnov's mask, running him through the eye. Several more deaths followed, almost all resulting from broken blades. I, myself, was stabbed in my right thigh by a broken blade in the late eighties and have seen two other fencers on two separate occasions run through the area between the collarbone and the neck.

The result of the sharp rise in accidents in the 1980s in international fencing was that the FIE, the governing body of fencing, regulated much stricter materials to be used in both the making of blades and in the protective uniforms. Very few serious accidents have happened since. Yet we cannot forget the origins of the sport, a sport steeped in blood.

Fencing is both violent and one of the safest of modern sports.

Soccer is non-violent and one of the most dangerous sports with fifty times the injury rate of fencing.

President Barack Obama won the Nobel Peace Prize at the same time

that he increased an already bloated military budget for more war spending in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup>

You cannot simultaneously prepare for war and plan for peace.

—Einstein

I don't yell as much as most fencers, and I certainly don't yell in my opponent's face, though I've experienced it too many times to count. But I do yell on occasion. I do feel the thrill of combat, of setting my body, my mind against another and trying to hit them. Yes, hit them with a sword. No matter that the tip of the sword is blunt. I'm not always comfortable with this duality. I am a pacifist by nature. When the topic of war and aggression comes up at dinner parties or among friends, I am outspoken in my disgust at even our slightest violent tendencies. If I were president, I would outlaw guns and never ever go to war. War is a last resort for a people who have lost all reason. These discussions always end the same. One of my friends will point out that my favorite pastime is violent in its roots. The point is made as if this hypocrisy should end the argument, as if by participating in a sport that re-enacts our violent past I am not allowed to criticize our violent present. This is a red herring, a sort of ad hominem attack. Vegetarians face this sort of thing all the time with comments like *What about those leather shoes?* It smacks of a sort of righteousness and political correctness that ignores the complexity of human experience,

of human psychology. I am guilty of this myself as I've often labeled all people in the military as warmonsters, though I have met many who are pacifists.

Like the duel, modern fencing (and much of modern sport for that matter) is simply another set of codes designed to regulate our violent tendencies, to acknowledge that we have them, but also to acknowledge that we are more than that, the sum of our parts far greater than any individual characteristic. It is an attempt to hold the duality in our hands, to accept the violence in our natures and our need to move beyond it. We celebrate the honor in sport because it allows us to live in the paradox of who we are, to make sure that violence is not the only thing in us, or that it's put to honorable means, at least most of the time. One could argue that the Geneva Conventions represent another attempt to honor or acknowledge our capacity for both violence and peace. And in a sense that would be correct. But only in a sense. The problem in modern warfare comes when you take away the life of another who never asked to be in that war, the civilian standing by the road when the bomb goes off, or the draftee who had to sign up or face jail time, and yes, even the enlisted man who joined to serve his country but is asked instead to take part in a lie. You can write up as many rules as you'd like, but you'd be hard pressed to find honor there. War always spills beyond the edges of easily codified rules, erasing the lives of those who

never gave their consent, who often never understood what their country was actually fighting for in the first place. War erases any possibility for honor because it accepts only one definition of who we are, allows for only one side of our duality to emerge.

In the first North American Cup this past year, I felt horrible for knocking my longtime friend and coach out of the tournament.

I didn't feel that horrible.

In college, my girlfriend cheated on me several times over. I hated her for that.

My next girlfriend was dating someone else during the first month we were together.

To paraphrase Hemingway, die early or life will break you. One of the ways it does so is by pointing out how difficult it is to remain honorable. When we are young, we are told: *If it feels wrong, don't do it. If it feels easy, don't do it.* Good advice. Maybe the best advice. And yet, as we age, how quickly we learn that sometimes easy means that it is good and right, that sometimes wrong is, if not necessary, certainly unavoidable. As we age, we come to understand that we are all inauthentic most of the time—it's a precondition of our dual natures. We want to be good, but we are not always, so we at least pretend to be those times when we aren't.

I pretended for a long time that I loved my first wife because I'd married her, and I had to be good.



I have pretended my whole life that I don't desire other women because I've been in relationships, married or otherwise, and am not supposed to desire. And yet I do.

I pretended I was not in competition with my brother in our writing careers. And I am not. And I am.

I pretend to be happy when friends and colleagues publish new work. And I am. And I am not.

I pretend I don't care about winning in fencing, when of course I do. And I don't.

I have pretended to love my second wife when I haven't always been sure that I did.

I pretend to want, when what I really want is to curl up in a room and go to sleep.

I pretend to have an answer, when all I'm doing is searching.

I pretend that I am a good father even on the days when I explode at my children or stay a little longer in my office than I should.

I pretend. I pretend. I pretend.

Honor is woven from this duality. In fact, the ability to hold the duality in our hands may be the very definition of honor. It's not about integrity or authenticity as we've been led to believe, but about paradox and pretense and accepting the fact that we will, none of us, ever be wholly good or bad. This is what literature teaches us, what science teaches us. Yet, the codes of so many pop culture narratives bombard us with the notion that we are one thing or the other: good or evil, young or old, smart or dumb, beautiful or ugly. No wonder

the fragile bird that flits about inside us tears its wings with the need to know who we are, which side we are on, which decision is the "right" one, which action honorable. We learn as we get older that we are all inauthentic most of the time, and yet we do our best to be authentic. We hide our violent thoughts; we repress those thoughts where we desire another; we bury the thoughts where we take what we want, thoughts where we do what we want.

The result is psychosis. The result is a culture in need of serious therapy. There is nothing honorable in being authentic if that attempt means we hide who we are. Honor is a way of being, a path toward acceptance of the beast within, toward living with that beast. Honor is the acknowledgement that we never really resolve to one state or the other. The beast is always there. Most of the big decisions are not "right" or "wrong," but both. Someone will get hurt either way. Someone will be upset. Most actions are not "easy" or "hard." They exist in an unresolved state, a state to be determined by later observation. It's the same paradox as when a champion athlete makes the impossible look easy simply because we have forgotten the ten thousand hour rule. Light is both a wave and a particle. The cat is both alive and dead.

I am a good husband, and I am the worst who has ever lived.

I am a father who loves his kids more than anything. I could walk away tomorrow and never look back.

I am an artist who dares look within. I am afraid, so very afraid.  
I am a man of honor. I have no right to that claim.

Notes

- <sup>1</sup> “The Present Situation in Quantum Mechanics,”  
by Erwin Schödinger. Tr. John D. Trimmer:  
[https://courses.cit.cornell.edu/north/Phil\\_QM/  
Schrodinger\\_Cat.pdf](https://courses.cit.cornell.edu/north/Phil_QM/Schrodinger_Cat.pdf)
- <sup>2</sup> Washington State University Fencing Club Site: [http://53398.orgsync.com/org/  
wsufencingclub/History](http://53398.orgsync.com/org/wsufencingclub/History)
- <sup>3</sup> Emil Beck: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emil\\_Beck](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emil_Beck)
- <sup>4</sup> “President Obama and War Spending”: [http://www.  
washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/01/07/  
everything-chuck-hagel-needs-to-know-about-the-  
defense-budget-in-charts/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/01/07/everything-chuck-hagel-needs-to-know-about-the-defense-budget-in-charts/)



## This Dream I Had Last Night

*Thom Tammaro*

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I left the party early because I had to be in class at 6:30 P.M. I knew my students would be waiting for me. It was a clear and calm evening, so I thought I'd walk. At first I recognized the neighborhood, but soon nothing looked familiar. But I kept walking. Eventually, I didn't recognize anything or anyone. No one paid any attention to me. I was just another passerby. The streets were filled with parked cars and row houses, and people went about their business. Someone was watering his lawn. Someone else was washing his car. A few children were rolling a hoop down the street, which I thought strange since no one rolls hoops down streets anymore. A woman pushing a stroller with twins down the sidewalk seemed not to notice me when we passed. I realized then and there that I might be lost. I tried calling some people I knew to ask them where I might be, but no one answered the phone. Now I was worried that I'd be late and that my students would leave before I arrived. I thought it was time to ask someone. I approached a well-dressed elderly man and asked him if I was anywhere near the university. He lifted his arm and pointed his finger to a copse of trees. Through it I could see the side of the brown brick building. I felt a great wave of relief wash over me. I thanked him and hurried along through the trees and to the building, where I found my way up three flights of stairs and arrived at the classroom where everyone was waiting for me.

No one knew how frightened I was. No one knew I was lost.

## Rosie the Ruminant

*Janet Sarbanes*

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I like to stand at the top of the hill in the early morning, gazing down on the bright green valley wreathed in mist, the sheep clustered close to the barn like a ragged cloud. They lie down after we're let out and continue sleeping, but I breathe in the fresh, grassy air and kick up my heels—literally, I too am a sheep—enjoying my freedom and the feel of the wind in my fleece.

This is just one instance of my iconoclastic temperament, which I've always suspected was the reason they chose my DNA for Dolly's genetic blueprint. Wilmut, the head scientist here at the Roslin Institute, is himself an iconoclast, a free thinker, and I feel a kinship there. For one thing, he knows that not all sheep are idiots—most, but not all. Another thing he knows, which you may not, is that sheep are matriarchal. Oh, perhaps not originally, but certainly nowadays. The ram only comes around so often, you know, and for a very specific purpose. And being matriarchal, of course we'd have an interest in that final frontier. Parthenogenesis.

Once the others had been chosen—Alice for her egg, Belinda for her womb—we talked it out amongst ourselves.

"I'll be the real mother," Belinda observed soberly.

"Depends on how you look at it," I said. "Her genes will be mine—all of them. She'll look exactly like me, though environment will play a role in the development of her personality."

"Let's hope so," Belinda muttered. She and I have our differences when it comes to mothering. She bonds easily with her lambs, worrying about their milk intake and sleep habits and marveling over their satiny pink ears, whereas I don't find my lambs all that interesting until they've learned to talk, by which time they're usually removed from my care and swallowed up by the flock.

"What about me?" Alice piped up, wagging her fluffy tail. "I'm just, like, the egg stuff?"

"Your egg will have its nucleus deleted," I explained, "and replaced with mine. But your mitochondria will continue to provide her cells with energy."

"Oh. Look who's here!" Alice spotted Sire and raced off to join him. They've put on his leather apron so he can't mate with any of us right now, but that's no deterrent for Alice.

"I don't know about all this," said Belinda, watching the two of them nuzzle. "Sire's not got much going on upstairs, but I think I'd miss his company."

"No one's talking about getting rid of Sire. But aren't you the least bit tired of birthing his stupid babies?"

"He's got a good heart."

"Look at all of these dumb, good-hearted sheep," I said, swinging my head around to indicate the flock. "With no say over what we do or what's done to us."

"And she's going to change all that, your little clone?"

I did think my clone had the potential to lead our flock out of bondage. With my brains and her youth—the possibilities would be limitless. “We’ll name her Hippolyta,” I said dreamily. “After the queen of the Amazons.”

“Sure,” Belinda smirked. “Hippo for short.”

But of course, we didn’t get to name her. It was old MacDonald, our “caretaker,” who did, just as he does all of us, silly names like Belinda and Alice and Rosie. Rosie! That’s me.

But this miracle, this beacon of hope for our species, he named Dolly. Suggested it to Wilmut for the coarsest of reasons, that they name her for a human singer with large teats since they sucked my DNA out of a mammary gland cell. And Wilmut, nodding and laughing and snorting away, communing with MacDonald on the crudest level—oh, that was a low point! Does he know what MacDonald does after hours, how he takes his pleasure with the ewes, all but me and a few others who stamp down hard on his execrable toes?

Dolly’s birth was amazing. All births are: that one life comes from another, that everything starts all over again, that we are given yet another chance. But Dolly’s birth was doubly amazing, because she was my exact clone, so it was I who was being given another chance. After the news came that she was born, and all the rumors that she would have two heads or six legs had been put to rest, I went off to the top of the hill to ruminate. Be-

ing a ruminant and having to chew your cud several times a day provides ample time for reflection, if you’re not always worrying over your lambs or flitting off after some ram in an apron. I looked down on the lab and the barn and wondered who among us had brought this creature into being, us with our bodies or them with their pipettes and petri dishes, their electric spark?

Belinda is quite convinced it’s us—or her, rather—they’ll never replace the womb, she says. But maybe they’ll decide they have to someday, if we cease to offer it up so willingly and actually demand something in return. The human females have already struck their deal, they have their marriages—though if Mrs. MacDonald’s condition is any indication, it looks a fool’s bargain to me. It’s she who does most of the work around the barn, dragging the pails of feed from place to place on old MacDonald’s orders. “There, no, not there, there, you idiot!” he calls from the doorway as she scuttles back and forth, their fifth bairn trailing miserably behind her. If that’s what a wedding gets you, I’ll take my chances.

The day Belinda and Dolly were released from the lamb jug and I laid eyes on my clone for the first time had to be the best day of my life. I say had to be, because while I possess a superior intelligence to most sheep, my long-term memory is more typical of the species. To tell the truth, I’ve stretched it a bit even to get this far with my story.

Belinda came out first, heavy and tired but smiling beatifically; then



Dolly gamboling along behind her, wagging her little tail. I inspected her from a short distance; she seemed perfect in every way. Of course, upon rumination, I understood that she appeared perfect because she was a miniature version of me. She was a perfect *copy*. Same white face, horizontal ears and white fetlocks—but not merely similar in color, the *exact* same. So much so that the other ewes kept swinging their heads from Dolly to me and back to Dolly, as if their world had rotated on its axis.

“Handsome is as handsome does,” I chastised them. I was dying to know if she was curious, if she was bright—had she inherited my powers of observation, my restless intellect?

I made my way through the other ewes until I came face to face with her. I had wondered if she would run to me and nuzzle at my teats, but she merely stared at me with the same curious, open expression with which she took in the rest of the flock. Environment: 1, Heredity: 0.

“Hello, Dolly,” I said. She seemed startled that I knew her name. “Has your mother told you about me?”

Dolly shook her head. Belinda was probably giving her time to bond, but I felt it important to lay out all the facts of her existence right away. I wanted her to know she wasn’t like other lambs, and okay, I wanted her to know she had my DNA. With Belinda’s back turned and the rest of the flock trying to horn in on the feed grain she’d received to aid with lactation, I took the opportunity to fill Dolly in on all the details. I knew she wouldn’t get it—she

was barely a month old—but at the very least I wanted to lodge a seed of doubt in her mind concerning Belinda. Not for spiteful reasons, mind you, but to assist my clone in accepting her prodigious gifts as they became apparent.

So I launched into what I considered to be an exceptionally clear explication of the cloning process—clear, but not dumbed down—and Dolly listened with apparent interest. But halfway through, she abruptly walked off in search of Belinda and a snack. Was she flighty, this clone of mine?

“Is that her?” Alice asked, coming to stand beside me.

“Yes,” I said proudly. “That’s her.”

“Funny, she doesn’t look like you at all. Oooh, is that feed grain?”

And Alice was off again. Was it possible—? No, I didn’t even like to think it.

I wrote off my first interaction with Dolly due to her extreme youth, but as she matured, she still showed no signs of turning into—well, me. I tried to connect with her several times, tried interesting her in animal husbandry, cloud formations, the constellations, you name it, but she soon began avoiding me, running off with her little friends whenever she saw me coming.

“Relax,” Belinda told me. “You should be glad she’s fitting in.”

It was true, Dolly was sweet and spirited and everybody liked her, which I guess counts as success from a cloning standpoint—after all, she could’ve been rejected by the flock.

Instead she'd been quickly embraced, and her unusual origins just as quickly forgotten (again, our memories are not long).

"But she's not a seeker," I protested.

"A seeker!" Belinda scoffed. "Is that what you are?"

The day Dolly turned eight months old, the lab team decided it was time to announce her existence to the world. The world of humans, that is. What a circus! For a week straight, Wilmut gave interview after interview to the hundreds of reporters trampling the pasture—and always with Dolly standing in the background. Sometimes Belinda and I crowded into the picture (Alice couldn't care less), but he never mentioned us once, and my startling likeness to Dolly went peculiarly unnoticed.

To be honest, I felt a little sorry for her, having to stand there on display day after day. She seemed confused and depressed, and I only wished she'd stayed still for my explanations, so she could at least follow what Wilmut was saying about her now. And then there were the protesters who came each morning to picket the lab—I gathered from them and the TV reporters that the humans had been surprised, caught off balance. None of them had thought cloning was right around the corner. They were afraid, too, because now one of them might get cloned and sidestep the reproductive process. If that happened, they seemed to believe, then all the humans would want to clone themselves, resulting in God's wrath and/or designer families incapable of unconditional love.

If only I could've been interviewed, I might've put some of their fears to rest. I can attest to the satisfaction of physical self-duplication, but it's a fleeting triumph, since it's really your soul you yearn to see recreated, to live on *as you* after you die, and that, in my experience, is just not the way it goes—with a bairn or a clone. Plus I could've told them there is no God, and saved them a lot of worry.

One night, not long after Dolly's unveiling, one of the ewes overheard old MacDonald chatting to the missus about a dastardly plan. Mrs. MacDonald tried her feeble best to dissuade him, but he brushed her objections aside. His plan was to kidnap Dolly and sell her to the very wealthy American who'd just bought up Inveraray Castle. Wealthy Americans were always looking for conversation pieces, he informed Mrs. MacDonald, and Dolly certainly was that. Plus he could easily blame the kidnapping on the Christians, or the animal rights activists, or any number of the daft bampots who'd been swarming his barn of late.

Once word spread of MacDonald's plot there was general consternation amongst the ewes that their dear Dolly might be taken from them. I must confess I felt somewhat ambivalent at the prospect. What new and life-changing experiences might she have, I wondered, what intellectual horizons might open up for her, there on the estate of the wealthy American? At the very least, to what historically and architecturally significant buildings might she be exposed?



"For chrissake, it's not like she's going away to boarding school!" Belinda snapped. "You'd really let old MacDonald make off with her?"

"Well, what do you expect me to do?" I mumbled.

"She's your *clone*. If you'd wash that manky face of yours, you could pass for her in her stall, if the night was dark enough and he didn't see the heft of you."

"And what? Get myself kidnapped instead?"

"Oh, come on. You can handle MacDonald."

And handle him I did, with a swift kick to the groin, and one more to the head for good measure. Oh, there was a moment where I considered turning my back on the flock forever and venturing forth into the world as Dolly's replacement, but I knew my subterfuge wouldn't survive the dawn. And to be honest, I was interested in seeing our little experiment through.

MacDonald lied to Wilmut about what happened—no surprise there. He said it was the animal rights activists who'd clobbered him as he wrested Dolly from their self-righteous hands—knowing he'd be inclined to believe him. Wilmut hates the animal rights people; they get to him in a way the Christians don't. And Mrs. MacDonald backed up her husband with an "eyewitness account," so that was that.

From then on, Dolly was locked away in the lab each night for her own protection, and Old Mac-

Donald kept his distance. At first, the other ewes bleated her name through the night, but after a while, you know—the long-term memory thing. And I don't think it's actually an unhealthy arrangement. Having some alone time every evening, that headspace to herself, has made Dolly more thoughtful and introspective. In the mornings she comes looking for me now, and tells me that she wants to learn.

She remains a difficult pupil—in science and math she's nearly hopeless, but she's shown a real aptitude for poetry. Predictably, her verse is chock full of pastoral imagery—green hills and grey rocks, misty mornings and all that—but I have to say, it sings. She rushes to share it as soon as she's released from her quarantine—first with me, and then, when I encourage her, with the rest of the flock, her devoted fans. When Dolly's up on a rock performing her newest stanzas, nothing can tear the other ewes away, not even the rattle of feed grain in the trough.

My Dolly's become a leader, I guess, though not in the way I'd foreseen. She didn't lead us out of servitude, but she's nurtured our love of freedom and creativity, and that, I think, has strengthened the flock and made us aware of our own capabilities. Oh, we haven't figured it all out yet: how to live with no gods, no shepherds, in control of our bodies and our reproductive destinies. But we know what the important questions are, and we're ruminating on them.

## A House Like Anyone's

Catharine Lucas

“What I can’t understand is, why would you want to be married?”

A tone of baffled protest. The little lift on *married*. After all, as two women over fifty sharing enviable lives—contented as any married couple with over a decade together, welcomed and respected members of our Quaker community—what did we need to prove?

The three elders sitting in our living room were gentle men whose lives testified to their Quaker principles: seek that of God in everyone; speak truth to power; remove the causes of war. Social justice, equality—their life’s work. They were also personal friends who had sat here often enough to put their feet up; we’d shared spiritual insights and friendly interest in one another’s lives for eight years. Yet tonight, they sat awkwardly.

True that as lesbians our request for marriage under the care of Berkeley Friends Meeting was unprecedented in 1985, but it did not arise from the void. The question of same-sex marriage was already being discussed within our Pacific Yearly Meeting. An activist Friend, eager to move beyond the theoretical, had encouraged us to apply. So, we wrote, Mem and I. Actively asking.

“Marriage is not just a private contract and personal mystical experience,” we wrote, “but an act of worship in community. . . .”

The Sub-committee on Marriage and Personal Ties usually responds within a few weeks by sending a “clearness committee,” three Friendly visitors who meet with the couple to assess their readiness for marriage. Our letter, dated August 15, was instead met with four months of silence. In November, we heard that the Sub-committee was unsure what we were asking for. We wrote again, forswearing any claim to legal rights. A clearness committee was finally dispatched, less to assess our readiness, it seemed, than to help the Sub-committee understand our request.

Tonight, Dick, our convener, announced on arrival that he hadn’t wanted this assignment. “It’s damned if you do, damned if you don’t. I called ten people before I could find two who would serve.” This revelation was our first hint of just how unready Friends were to entertain our request.

We settled into preparatory Quaker silence. Dick murmured a prayer for our gathering, then rephrased his opening challenge.

“Why *marriage*?” he asked. “Why not a ‘religious ceremony of commitment’? We’ve heard that used in cases like yours.”

*Cases like ours.* An echo from the potluck supper we hosted soon after we joined the Meeting. We’d been warmly embraced as a couple, and our guard was down when one guest concluded his self-guided tour of our

home by remarking, loudly, "This is a *nice* house. Just like anyone's!" The next day, I made a joke of the man's bald surprise. "Flush toilets, by gosh! Just like anyone's!" But Mem, for whom such encounters, intentional or ignorant, were all too familiar, found it hard to laugh.

It was not my place, tonight, to challenge Dick's expression. I was the imposter, "straight" from birth, veteran of two heterosexual marriages. Mem was the real deal. Growing up in a small Midwestern town in the 1950s, she had self-identified as lesbian in early puberty. She tried to bow to convention, but at twenty-one, engaged to be married, she fled the altar, unable to go through with the lie. With her first paycheck from her new teaching job, she bought her own wedding china, renouncing all claim to marriage and children and the status they bestowed. She'd just be an old-maid school teacher, for all anyone knew.

Given her past, Mem's request that Friends approve her marriage against all social norms and possibly their own beliefs required no little courage. It had been healing to feel embraced as a couple. Would our petition alienate our community? How could Mem make them understand that marriage by any other name would still bear the mark of "otherness"?

She offered them her story.

At age seven, Mem told her mother, "I'm going to marry Pamela when I grow up!" Her mother let her in on the facts. "Girls don't marry girls."

Later, reading the signs, she warned, "You know what they do with girls who like girls? Lock them up and throw away the key!" Mem became a model daughter, leaking no clues to her thoughts and feelings.

At twenty-five, she escaped to California, where, teaching, she found fulfillment in her students' achievements and friendships among fellow teachers but never brought a special "other" to school functions. Twenty years along, a colleague asked for her signature to put Proposition 6 on the ballot, the Briggs Initiative to "get the gays out of our schools."

Our Quaker committee understood the threat to her job, of course. But their faces also reflected the deeper pain: to be utterly unknown, and hated if she were to be revealed.

Mem described her tight-knit circle of lesbian friends, women who successfully passed at work but remained socially isolated from the larger community. Comforted by their friendship, she nonetheless longed to live openly, in a community with grandparents, husbands and wives, children of all ages. Her friends warned she'd be hurt, taking a "straight" lover, joining a church.

Mem paused, to smile. "They couldn't believe I'd asked to be married."

"Nor could we," Dick murmured, ruefully. The air around us had softened.

"Of course, joining Berkeley Meeting as a couple was liberating," Mem said. "I loved sharing the work. Speaking my truth. Quaker deliberations, so thoughtful—so long!" A

chuckle went around. "Best was feeling I was just like anyone else."

Mem paused. Could they hear this?

"Not long after we became members," she remembered, "I attended a threshing session on homosexuality. I'd just learned 'threshing' meant people could air difficult feelings without fear of attack. I had trepidations about going, but the testimony was enormously positive. At the end, someone across the room called out, 'Why don't you ask us to marry you?'"

Mem smiled, recalling the moment. "I told them I hadn't earned that, yet, but I would like to someday." She turned to Dick, her old friend from gardening days on Property Committee.

"You know, I don't think, after all, that our work together these years has been about earning anything. Why would I need to *earn* the same name for my marriage that you use for yours?" She held Dick's widened stare in an almost tender gaze. I breathed with her, sensed her come to rest in the Quaker silence.

In five meetings over the next two months, our little committee reached unity. Dick wrote a strong letter "heartily recommending" approval of our request for marriage. "The Light is the Light," he said to us. "We first discern, then grow to meet it." These Friends had grown. Perhaps others would follow.

But Dick's letter did not persuade. Instead, the Pastoral Committee recommended further discernment by the meeting as a whole, a process

that would consume us for two more years.

Quaker "unity" need not mean "unanimity." The ideal is to bring everyone to a level of acceptance that prevents ongoing discord. A Friend who disapproves of a decision may "stand aside" to let an otherwise united meeting go forward. Reaching unity can be hard, sometimes taking long enough that those bringing a request withdraw in defeat even though their petition is widely supported. Our commitment would be tested.

Threshing sessions on same-sex marriage commenced. Attending the first few, we were buoyed by overwhelmingly supportive testimony. Finally, Mem and I were asked to absent ourselves from the next session to allow naysayers unembarrassed expression. Sitting home, we smarted under imagined blows. The following Sunday, after worship, Friends we knew to be supporters went their way without greeting us. Mem was devastated. I imagined these Friends, ashamed of what they'd heard, shying from pain they couldn't redress. One supporter suggested to me that Mem shouldn't take it all so personally. I wondered what it would look like to take it impersonally. Was that what I was doing, in my comparative equanimity? It helped when Friends brought their doubts directly to us and, in mutual prayer, felt their concerns melt away. Those encounters were blessings.

In August 1986, one year after our letter of request, our neighboring



Grass Valley Meeting received a similar request from two younger women. In May 1987, less than a year later, their marriage was approved with a few Friends standing aside. The wedding followed in good order. We sent loving congratulations, painfully aware that our own request, now nearly two years old, had still not been brought before our Business Meeting for a decision.

Berkeley Friends rallied, asking us to keep on, thanking us for what we were doing. One card said, "Good things are happening in the Meeting." We drove to Monterey to watch sea otters at play and remember we were more than a "cause." I asked Mem if she was ready to withdraw. No, not yet. It felt important not to let the Meeting fail, for its own sake, not just ours. She wanted Quakers to live up to their ideals. And we knew many of them wanted that as badly as we did.

We were still waiting, October 1987, when the Meeting Clerk reported that, although the Sub-committee had not unified to approve our request, the matter would come to the October Business Meeting for a decision by the community as a whole. I felt Mem's confidence soar.

Twenty-five present, a low turnout. Three wavered, two would not be moved. An estate lawyer on the Sub-committee, our steadfast opposition, shook his head in disbelief that we were still asking. "Marriage has been between a man and a woman since Pauline times! Who do we think we are?" Concern was

expressed for known naysayers who had stayed at home.

No unity.

We came close to giving up. It had been too long. We moved glumly through November, sharing a pale Thanksgiving, looking a question at each other.

"*Not* into the New Year," we agreed.

AND THEN!

Mem pasted these words in our scrapbook in headline caps. At December's Business Meeting, Friends "joyfully approved" our marriage under the Meeting's care. The lawyer stood against, and a sweet, former Catholic stood aside, pleading "irreducible ignorance." The discussion confirmed the need to reach unity based on the wisdom of those Friends present at the meeting; the few remaining naysayers had not attended. (The Minute approved by Friends that evening named just the two of us. Six years later, an inclusive Minute replaced the limited one after only five minutes of discussion.)

On January 9, 1988, in the old Quaker Meeting House at Walnut and Vine, Mem and I exchanged our homemade vows: "I will try to support you in your growth wherever it takes you." We signed our Quaker wedding certificate, a huge parchment with calligraphy spelling out the date and occasion. Below our signatures, two hundred and thirteen signees bore witness: young children, great-great-grandparents, colleagues, lesbian friends, gay men, one who would die within the year, another



who would later marry in his own Quaker meeting.

Between us we had six close family: my three blood relatives (mother, sister, son) and Mem's three family stand-ins (surrogate daughter and two of her oldest friends from her lesbian family). The larger Quaker family turned out in force; this was their triumph as well. A non-Quaker friend, attending out of loyalty and curiosity, later described how her doubts had evaporated during the service. "I never witnessed anyone get more married than you two did."

Nor, it seemed, had I. Our marriage, the ceremony itself, at the last minute took on the emotional depth I had been missing. No longer a cause, this was our love, witnessed by all.

A subliminal anxiety subdued my joy that day. While our scrapbook photos show Mem's beaming face, wet eyes, a hundred hugs, I knew the woman I accompanied to the Meeting House was ill, past exhaustion, would be barely able to speak for days. Several months before our quest for marriage began, a debilitating chronic illness had forced Mem to resign from her thirty-year teaching career. Giving up a profession that demanded her all, she was able to summon just enough strength to sustain our twenty-eight-month journey. But now the illness claimed its price.

I continued as I had been. The marriage in my heart, long ago accomplished, obscured for me Mem's growing discomfort with her un-

certain status. We both understood she'd likely never work again, which wasn't a financial concern at present. But what if something happened to me?

Around that time, the AIDS epidemic was hitting gay men disproportionately in the Bay Area, exposing their exclusion from protections afforded legally married couples, primarily spousal health insurance, death benefits, and hospital visiting rights. Like these ill men, Mem knew the affirmation provided by a religious blessing was not enough to forge a legal unit out of two people unrelated by blood. In important ways, she was not my family, nor I hers.

In December 1984, in response to a gay city employee's proposal, the city of Berkeley became the first to extend health coverage to same-sex partners of city and school employees. The proposal introduced the term "domestic partnership" for the marriage-like arrangements of unmarried couples, allowing them to campaign for legal recognition as family units without challenging religious sanctions by calling it marriage.

Interestingly, the anti-gay Briggs Initiative, Proposition 6, which Mem had politely declined to sign in 1978, had helped induce a shift in public consciousness. When early polls showed voters sixty-five percent in favor, a group of Bay Area activists issued the call, "Come out, come out, wherever you are!" Hundreds

of gay men and lesbians all over the state came out to family, friends, colleagues, neighbors. People discovered how many gays they already knew and loved. With support from leaders like President Jimmy Carter and Governor Ronald Reagan, Proposition 6 was overwhelmingly rejected by voters.

Gays were increasingly perceived as people with houses just like anyone's. From 1985, when we first applied to be married, through the end of the nineties, California cities, and ultimately the state, approved domestic partner policies modeled on Berkeley's.

The process was initially piecemeal, with intermittent bulletins. Caught up in work, I paid little attention, but Mem followed avidly. One morning in 1991, she said, "Get your bag. We're going to City Hall." In the car, she told me, "We're signing the Domestic Partner Register."

Instant vision of our house in flames. Houses all over Berkeley. A homophobic pyromaniac with access to the list of names. I breathed, accepted the possibility, and decided our signing might help shift the probabilities.

At the registrar's counter, we produced IDs, mortgage papers showing joint tenancy since 1979, an announcement of our Quaker marriage (irrelevant). We signed forms, pressed inky thumbs into a book. I paid. No kiss. Going home, I glanced at Mem. Saw a woman who knew what needed to be done; was looking ahead to

the next step. I thought, *This is how things change*. It was good to put my signature on the line.

But later, I asked Mem what this did.

"Maybe nothing, yet. You don't seem to realize how vulnerable I am. If you died, I could have to fight your family to keep my share of our joint property. They would want to take everything they could for your son." I denied the danger, but she knew such assurances are chaff in the wind. We made wills, each bequeathing the house to the other. Of course, if wills are challenged, the legal family generally wins. But at least I'd made my wishes known.

Another decade of legislative yo-yo: domestic partner bills passing, vetoed by successive governors, tweaked and resubmitted. Along the way, Mem lost her mother. Turning sixty, she took a new name that shared my surname. Was I family now? She had no other.

These urgent steps—wedding, legal registry, name change, wills—seemed in the end to operate like patches sewn on a jacket, little advertisements of how we wished to be seen. The changes we would face next, operating from within, made more difference.

The illness, and with it, Mem's loss of meaningful work, presented our biggest challenge. We slid into traditional gender roles we'd always meant to avoid: the breadwinner and the wife. I commuted across the Bay, traveled to conferences, took vacations at Mem's insistence. My

trips made her glum. Once I offered to stay home. "Ha," she said. "You think it's you I miss. But it's my life I'm missing—I want to be the one on vacation, or going to a job I love!" Instead, moving between debilitating fatigue and spells of acute nerve inflammation, she prepared our meals, cared for the dogs, kept up with house and garden. Watched TV when her mind couldn't follow words on a page.

I got it that I couldn't fill the emptiness in her life. I sensed her faith in our marriage slipping away. A year came when she asked me to put our framed wedding parchment in the basement. "Historical interest only," she called it. Shortly after, she resigned her membership in Berkeley Meeting. Her sense of safety and wholeness among Friends never recovered from that gauntlet. I felt disloyal every time I attended Meeting for Worship.

Some years earlier, I had been drawn, like other Friends before me, to study Zen Buddhism as another approach to meditation. My Zen practice, a life buoy during these years, now became, for a time, Mem's greatest grievance. How could I voluntarily go away to stare at a wall, something she spent whole days doing under sentence of illness? My occasional weekend retreats convinced her I was planning to become a monk.

Yet it was Zen that saved her. She found a different Buddhist temple from mine and began to absorb the teachings. She learned how to shift

focus from hateful conditions she couldn't change to the gifts of her own awareness in the present moment. New friends were drawn to her kindness and intuitive wisdom. Although our wedding certificate was laid aside, that ceremony had perhaps removed one pebble from her shoe. Now she could walk on, loving life as it was rather than grieving what it wasn't. Maybe she and I could even find new footing.

Throughout the final decade of the century, Mem followed the expansion of legal rights for unmarried partners, which culminated in the sweeping Domestic Partner Act of 1999. That year, I finally put Mem on my employee health plan. We couldn't know I would be taking her off after just two years.

The ultimate irony: It was she who would leave, not I.

One day, at a Zen retreat, I was told to call home. Mem picked up on the first ring and asked me, point-blank: "If I wanted to move to Mt. Shasta, would you want to come with me?"

I was nonplussed. It turned out she had discovered after my mother's death several months earlier that the inheritance coming to me would be enough for me to buy her half of our house. She could start a new life in Mt. Shasta, California, under the sheltering wing of Shasta Abbey, the founding site of her Zen tradition.

Immersed in my job, my city, my own Zen center, I had to admit I wasn't ready to uproot. We revisited our wedding vows: "I will try to

support you in your growth, wherever it takes you.” Our parting felt like delivering on that promise—a deliverance into new life for her, new perspectives for me; deliverance from unhappy patterns we could no longer find our way out of. The move had a rightness that made it seem inevitable.

And what ended? When Mem and I ceased to share a roof after twenty-three years together, were we a gay marriage that failed? Or a marriage that, just like anyone’s, had changed?

I had no sense of failure during the months I helped Mem prepare for her move, or after, delivering her to Mt. Shasta in multiple trips, coming home to our empty house. But I was bereft. And I did not feel unmarried. I couldn’t stop sending care packages; we talked incessantly on the phone. (A friend called this “de-courting.”) She kept my name.

The compulsion to be in touch dwindled after a few years to periodic emails. I kept needing to know how she was. She reported on body and spirit, adventures with dogs, new friendships. I reported major events—my son’s mental breakdown, complicated by his father’s suicide; his subsequent recovery from addiction leading to a job in counseling; his wonderful wedding in the Meeting house; the tragedy when his wife, whom I adored, was killed in a car crash.

Her news, my news; we never referred to what was in *The News* those years. California voters, who had widely supported the Domestic Part-

ner Act of 1999, solidly maintained their opposition to same-sex marriage. The public could grant same-sex couples each of the two wings that flew a marriage—legal rights and religious blessing—just not the name of the bird. In 2000, a dozen years after our Quaker wedding, voters passed Proposition 22, banning the use of the word “marriage” for same-sex unions, even as the legislature added eighteen new rights to the Domestic Partner Act. To no one’s surprise, same-sex couples continued to appeal for the distinction to be abandoned.

Well-meaning liberals sometimes asked, “What’s in a word?” It was easy to forget that “separate but equal” really means “equal but separate.”

I watched developments as if from another planet, mystified by my detachment, on Valentine’s weekend 2004, unmoved by pictures of wildly happy same-sex couples getting married by the dozens at San Francisco City Hall, courtesy of Mayor Gavin Newsom, in defiance of Proposition 22. A court order immediately stayed the marriages but did not void them. Back and forth the battle went, with more marriages in 2008, when Proposition 22 was deemed unconstitutional. It was immediately replaced by Proposition 8, submitted as an amendment to the state constitution. This, too, won its necessary half of the vote, tying things up in new stays and appeals for another five years.

Finally, on June 28, 2013, after a complicated series of Proposition 8



rulings, the right to marry was granted to all Californians, and the courts managed to make it stick.

Exactly two years later, on June 26, 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court did the same for the nation. That weekend, Pride Day in San Francisco was over the top.

And where were we, Mem and I, that glorious day?

Eight years earlier, my correspondence with Mem had fallen into hiatus, possibly because of a misunderstanding. Then, after three years' silence, one day, clearing a rarely opened cupboard, I unearthed a little book of hers I knew she'd want. I mailed it with a friendly card. Her email of thanks held the news that she was dying of cancer.

It was a slow death, for which I will always be grateful. Rich correspon-

dence resumed, and when she could no longer manage email, phone calls brought me her beloved voice for the first time in years. When she died on March 2, 2015, I sat at her bedside waiting for the monks from the abbey, who included me in the ritual chants and preparation of the body. At the end, dressed in a monk's white robe, with shaved head and a radiant smile, my Mem had the look of a Buddha.

At the memorial, I carried her picture. I was Family, after all.

Today, I stand at our front window, gazing into the garden she planted and that I've kept tended. I imagine her hand slipping into mine. Our fingers tighten and release. For a moment, she is here at my side. For a moment more, that is all that matters.



## Helen Dithers en route to Troy

*W. P. Osborn*

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The tall buildings of downtown Chicago, black, white, and stark under darkened skies; Michigan Avenue, its stoplights cycling in the absence of traffic, the lions of the Art Institute shagged with ice; the Miracle Mile shuttered.

Jet aircraft at O'Hare International were parked askew and the headlights of plows crossed the tall gray parabolas blasted up by snow blowers. Passengers were stranded. Hotels were jammed. Wide swaths of the Illinois power grid were down. A Mr. and Mrs. Stefan Pestka of the bedroom community of Buffalo Grove, living on Social Security and Medicare, had perished in burning their furniture. It was February 16th and the weather news was being shown on the television behind the bar of the El Cerrito Cantina in Puerto Escondido, Oaxaca, Mexico, where Dr. Perry Lightfoot, clad in a brand new etched floral Rayon-crêpe Hawaiian-style sport shirt, washable double-pleated eggshell linen trousers with J-pockets, and woven leather flats in bone, was ordering his new love a fourth tequila sunrise. They had expected to be here half a day—in on an afternoon flight, out through Huatulco the next morning, the interim dedicated to accomplishing legal technicalities. But by this time they had been in country for nearly four days as to the north a leaning pedestrian was knocked

off his feet and blown thirty yards or more on his backside down an icy sidewalk, passenger cars spun across residential side streets, and columns of semi tractor-trailers sat stranded along the frozen interstates. An Alberta Clipper had converged with a south-sea air mass to create the messiest storm since 1993.

In the benign weather a thousand miles to the southwest, a small hotel called the Del Rey was pleased to continue letting its Mazatlán Suite to the handsome mixed couple who had flown in unexpectedly on Friday, and Professor Lightfoot was senior enough that he could arrange to have his teaching managed until the weather broke. He would have ridden things out here contentedly then, except that his amour's daughter had been left in the single care of her teenage au pair. Spirit the girl away ahead of the father's return from his Texas conference—this was the part of the plan whose execution the blizzard was overwhelming.

Ellen Lamb had no information—she'd not been able to get through to Wisconsin by telephone. She could see as Lightfoot set down her fresh drink on the table that he was making an effort to be agreeable even though it wasn't yet eleven and she was already stiff. Other elements of their arrangement were crumbling too. They'd gotten in to see the abogado for instance, but after Lightfoot

had shrugged his shoulders and gone ahead with his action against Wenene she had balked, unable to take the same step against Melvin—in truth seriously doubting why in the name of the great blue Pacific she had convinced herself to come down. At her hesitation she had not failed to observe the explosion Lightfoot shielded behind the façade of his scholarly rationality. The presumption in his not caring to render sympathy brought her into a state of internal burning. He'd reminded her that boarding their flight out of Cream City was evidence due consideration had taken place.

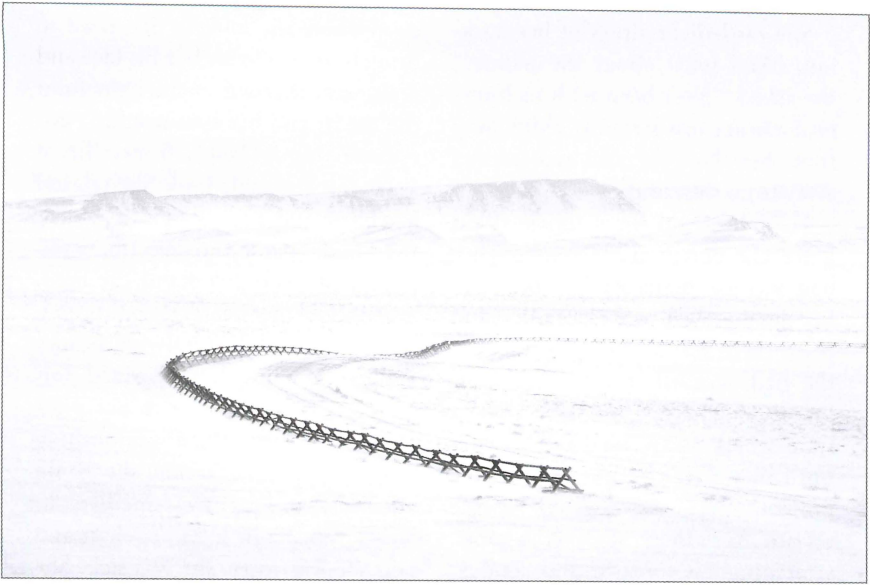
Remarriage! How could she have allowed herself to think this way! She might as well go ahead, he'd argued, because her nuptial status was going to come under challenge now anyway.

She was abidingly angry with her husband. She felt misled by him and trapped. The love they'd used to share he delivered into foreign laps these days, and she'd felt that that meant she should leave him. But now she thought this conclusion did not logically follow. She knew that in his way he still cared. A part of her still loved him, too. And he was her daughter's father—a fact not to be treated lightly if one kept one's daughter's best interest foremost in mind.

Following the cancellation of their reservation home, she had tried to bring herself to believe that the weather would ravel out as Lightfoot asserted it would. They bespoke a seafood dinner which could have been,

had regret and foreboding not spoiled it, quite sumptuous. Their sex afterward, which might have been honeymoon love, was worse than none as she concealed healthy pleasures that made her sick to her conscience and stomach. Why ever had she allowed a sales pitch from Ven Venable, really more a friend to her mother than to herself, to persuade her? Why ever back in Cream City had she gone into Lightfoot's guestroom after expertly spurning him? Why had she been the one to arrange their travel? Couldn't she have thought things through? She had been caught in a voluptuous thrall, she thought—a condition in which consequence was unapparent. She had not acted as a responsible adult. Oh hormones! Ludicrous! Lunacy!

At nightfall the music would start, the waitresses with their frilled muslin bodices and bright skirts lighting torches at the perimeter and down near the water where some of the patrons would disappear with their drinks to swim and make love. However, the light of the forenoon exposed a bartender overweight and past his youth and a pitted concrete floor with termite-weakened posts supporting a worn-out palm-thatch covering. There was no music yet to drown out the on-and-on of a television reporting on the huge storm to the north—only the piping of the seabirds and the sporadic crashing of surf on sand. Lightfoot expressed nothing aloud and she had only his ambiguous gestures to read. When he managed to look at her he focused



at the level of her chin. His lips were pressed. He sat with one arm across the table, his thumb and index finger caressing the rim of his coffee cup. Because of her ease in getting around, he must realize she'd been here before. It was only a matter of time until he knew they shared the suite she and Mel had occupied on their wedding. He had to be contemplating undoing. If he wanted to he could go back with all this undetected, while she . . . Well he was right about one thing, wasn't he—no matter what she did, she was not going to come away unscathed.

It was Tuesday. It appeared the atmospheric high pressure over New Mexico was going to force the storm out of the Midwest and up into Eastern Canada. Lightfoot speculated for the fifty-seventh time that they might be able to fly out as early as

tomorrow morning. She didn't care, she said.

"Even if he arrives ahead of us, we'll still get her," he answered.

"Oh? How do you see it playing out?"

"Well, you're right; it would've been cleaner the other way. But we can't keep blaming ourselves for the weather."

She returned her glass to the table. "I don't," she said. "I blame you."

"But he's a realist, isn't he?" Lightfoot returned after a silence. "I suspect it'll all be civilized and philosophical. Anyway, his travel will be just as hamstrung. If we're lucky, we may not even run into him."

She pinched the bridge of her nose. "It's obvious, Perry. If he's home when we get there, there will be a fight. And I don't mean a tiff. I mean a set-to. He is not going to take this lying down."

She rattled the dregs of her cocktail. "And what about the nanny?" she asked. "She's been with us forever. I cannot just strip my child away from her. Nor for that matter, her away from the child."

He'd been up for a quick affair. Since the potential for consequence had seemed manageable, and since her loving Mel was sporadic, and since there was a sensual attraction, she had acceded. But they had allowed themselves to slide into a state whose sway she'd been under until they were climbing aboard the propjet. That was when the panic set in. And there across the table, scratching his forearm and seriously doubting the arguments he'd put forth to convince her to stray sat the essential man himself. Oh, this was horrible. Melvin damaged. Hermione damaged. The nanny confused. His wife, probably a perfectly decent woman, destroyed. Herself a sodden mess now. His words, her words—declarations, demurs, assurances, actions, and reactions—and failure

everywhere she looked. She tried to bring him into focus but his face and arms were sheened in the light from the ocean and her eyes wouldn't cooperate. He looked soft-metallic, a fuzzy impenetrable lead. She relaxed her brow and let her mouth widen. Even in her panic and dejection, even though she couldn't stand the man, even though her heart was pounding, she recognized his stalwart beauty and could glimpse why she'd forgotten herself. She was in her present state because there was nothing she could do, no action she could take to even slightly remediate it. She slumped a little in her chair and said she was sorry, she was sick. She was, really, or she wouldn't be behaving this way. It was just that she felt so worried and so very, very guilty. The coffee smelled nice. She asked him if they couldn't get some fresh to take up to the suite. His hand drifted to his chest and fluttered back to the table. He turned his head as if to catch some sound.



Grandpa and I were both scheduled for surgery on the same day. It was 1993, and I was a 5-year-old half-white, half-Navajo boy who lived in Farmington, New Mexico. I was in the University of New Mexico Hospital in Albuquerque getting prepped for surgery. I had been born with a birth defect involving my bladder that, if left unchecked, would have led to serious kidney trouble.

I was lying on a table in a bright examination room with three strangers and my dad hovering over me. I faced the ceiling but paid little attention to it. I was about to endure the insertion of a catheter. It was not my first, but with catheters it does not matter how many a person has endured, each one is the first.

On the other side of town in Presbyterian Medical Center, my grandfather was also getting prepped for a procedure. Grandpa was going to get a pacemaker. He had been having severe issues with his heart and these issues were beginning to affect him. He was short of breath and tired easily.

While lying on the table, I thought about how much I admired him. I was certain that he was being strong. I would see him after I recovered, but until then, I had a catheter to attend to. A nurse held down my exposed body and told me that it was going to be OK. She was lying. I had catheters in the past and knew they hurt

and were uncomfortable. I ignored her comment and tried to be strong. I wanted to be strong like Grandpa.

A separate nurse held the torturous instrument. She wore rubber gloves and said nothing to me. I looked away from her and toward the ceiling. I closed my eyes and tried to shut out the scene. I soon felt the uncomfortable snaking friction that accompanied a catheter. I saw them put lubricant on the catheter, but it was not enough. It was never enough.

Against my best effort to stay my emotions, my dam began to leak. I cried and after several agonizing minutes, the procedure was over. I was allowed to leave in a wheelchair.

In the bed-ridden weeks following the surgery, I had plenty of time to think about Grandpa. Did he feel the same pain I was feeling? Did he cry like I did? Grandpa was Navajo and a gentle man with an understanding of what needed to be done. I thought about the patience and lack of anxiety Grandpa showed in preparation for his surgery. His bravery inspired me to be the same. I thought, *if Grandpa was calm about his surgery then things must turn out all right.*

The day of discharge arrived. I could finally visit Grandpa. We drove to Presbyterian Medical Center and made it to Grandpa's room. His room was painted a calm yellow and arranged with a chair for visitors to



use, a small bedside table big enough for a food tray, and a window overlooking a busy street. He sat in his reclined bed and watched television. He wore a medical gown instead of his usual blue plaid over-shirt, jeans, boots, and mesh cap.

My parents asked how he was doing. He replied that he was getting better. Then, changing the subject, he asked, "How is Joshua doing?"

I said the staples hurt and asked him if he had staples. He said he did, and they hurt too.

"Can I see them, Grandpa?"

"Of course, Shiyaazh." Grandpa always called me Shiyaazh. It is an affectionate Navajo term for a child who is a family member.

I made my way over to his bed and stood next to him. He pulled down the neck of his gown to expose his chest. A blood-soaked bandage covered his wound. He removed it revealing a long red gash. His scar looked much worse than mine. His staples put dimples in large purple bruises that lined his wound. The light from the room added a shimmer to the surgical site. It didn't look real. It couldn't be real.

Grandpa saw the look on my face and replaced the bandage. He adjusted the gown and said, "Pretty ugly, huh, Shiyaazh?"

"Yeah . . ." I replied in a distant voice. I went silent and thought about my scar. It never looked like Grandpa's. I thought about its appearance during the most painful parts of recovery and it didn't even come close. What was more remark-

able was the fact that Grandpa was not complaining, whining, or crying. He was Grandpa, happy to see his family. I said, "Wow, my scar looks nothing like yours, Grandpa."

"What? Why do you say that, Shiyaazh?" he asked.

I showed him my scar. It was four inches long and held together by staples. It sat two inches below my belly button. My scar did not look as fresh as Grandpa's. It was bruised and scabbed, but those signs were fading.

Grandpa looked down at my scar and said, "Wow, Shiyaazh, that must have hurt! Your scar looks worse than mine."

I was stunned. *Did Grandpa just say that my scar was worse than his?*

"But yours looks so much worse, Grandpa."

"Well, Shiyaazh, I am an old man and you are a little boy. If I were you I wouldn't have made it. You have been very brave."

Very brave? I felt a warm glow lift me off the floor. Grandpa thought that I had been "very brave." I had cried, whined, complained, and repeated the process many times, but somehow I had been "very brave." The bravest man in the world told me that I had been braver than he.

Thinking back to that moment today, I am hit with a different sense of why Grandpa called me "very brave." In traditional Navajo culture, stories, songs, prayers, and teachings were held sacred and were shared only when they could be understood. Grandpa was a traditional man who had many beliefs rooted in Navajo

culture and philosophy. One of these traditional beliefs was that there is strength in endurance.

In 1992, one year before the surgery, my family moved to Farmington, New Mexico, from Hartford, Connecticut. I was four-years-old, the child of a Navajo mother and a white father and moving to a “foreign” land. I was Navajo and had no idea that I was moving to a place called home by my people.

That year, I met my first real Navajo man, my grandfather. I can remember his tall, brown stature. Grandpa had grey streaks in his hair that was always combed back. He smelled like sweat and soil. The first time he reached down to pick me up for a hug I remember feeling the power in his arms as he lifted me.

Grandpa was a farmer, ex-railroad worker, and knew everything about being a handy man. Whether it was repairing his ’73 Dodge Ram pickup or irrigating a field, he had a quiet way of showing the world the respect he had for it.

In Farmington, Mom and Dad both got full-time jobs, and since my brother, sister, and I were too young to go to school, we stayed home with my grandparents. Grandma and Grandpa lived 10-15 minutes outside of Farmington, on the Navajo reservation in a house nicknamed the Black House, due to its lack of stucco, brick, or shingles on its exterior which exposed the black weatherproof shielding.

I grew close to my grandfather during the time he and my grandmother took care of my siblings and me. Time passed, and when I turned eight my parents divorced and moved into separate houses. My dad lived in town and my mom moved to the Black House.

There was no electricity or running water on Grandma and Grandpa’s property. I used to help Grandpa haul the water my family used at the Black House. He and I would load empty plastic 60-gallon drums into the back of his Dodge and drive to a fill station. Grandpa loved to work and was continually on the move. He was a groundskeeper for several clients in nearby Kirtland, New Mexico. Grandpa would tend crops, take care of lawns, and landscape for these clients. He worked year round and seldom took leave.

Although I didn’t understand at the time, he tried to teach me that hard work was the way to success. He would say that no matter how tough the fight may seem and no matter how daunting the task, there was always worth in the struggle. Even if loss was inevitable, there was still reason to try and press on. As a child I thought there was nothing that could beat Grandpa. I never questioned his health or his ability to push himself as hard as he did. He seemed invincible.

Our lives moved forward and I began high school. I lived with my Dad most of the time—because he lived closer to the high school in Farm-

ington—and did not visit Grandpa often. My life was changing. I played soccer, ran cross-country, joined the debate team, hung out with friends, and drifted into a world of adolescence.

During my school years, Grandpa continued to work. He was getting older but continued to push himself. Despite his vigor, Grandpa was falling apart. He grew tired and could not work as often. He was still as willing as he had been, but his body was becoming better at putting up a defense.

In November of 2005, Grandpa began to be very tired. It did not take much physical activity to wear him out. Movement left him dizzy and he complained of a constant headache. He could only sleep for a couple of hours at a time and couldn't seem to replenish his body's energy that seemed to be constantly drained. He went to see a doctor who ran some tests.

The doctor explained that my grandfather was experiencing advanced stages of myelodysplastic syndrome, an illness characterized by an ineffective production of blood cells. After hearing the news, I thought, *What? Myelodysplastic syndrome? Advanced stages? I had no idea that my Grandfather had experienced initial stages.*

In December, Grandpa was admitted to the hospital in Farmington for refractory anemia with excess blast (RAEB). Refractory anemia is a shortage of red blood cells that is unresponsive to treatment. Excess blast

means that the percentage of blast cells was over 5 percent of all cells in the bone marrow. Blast cells are immature blood cells that do not grow and age normally. Blasts circulate through the body, fail to mature, and consequently don't perform physiological functions like protecting our body from infection.

In addition to RAEB, Grandpa's spleen was enlarged. His doctor believed that Grandpa's spleen was enlarged because it was digesting red blood cells. Grandpa's doctor suggested surgical removal of the spleen. After the surgery, Grandpa made little progress. He complained of more discomfort and was on pain medication round the clock. He drifted in and out of consciousness. Grandpa's condition worsened in the coming days. He needed daily blood transfusions to keep his red and white blood cell counts up.

I tried to visit him often. I wanted to do something for him, to help him. He looked so weak and drained, a complete contrast to his usual vibrant self. I was uncomfortable seeing him in the hospital, but I was even more uncomfortable thinking about a possible future without him. To cope, I reflected on times he and I spent together in the past. During one visit I thought of a particular Saturday during the summer of 2005 that I helped him care for a larger piece of property in Kirtland. I drove Grandpa's truck because his knees and ankles were hurting. Preceding this particular Saturday, Grandpa had been in and out of the hospi-

tal several times for blood transfusions. During the summer, I had not known what the transfusions were for and hadn't bothered to ask.

When he and I arrived in Kirtland, he got out of the truck, using a cane for support. Grandpa had started using a cane that summer to help him walk. He stepped onto the ground and shuffled toward a shed in the rear of the property and I followed. Grandpa opened the side door of the shed revealing a riding John Deere lawn mower and a huge assortment of lawn tools. He pointed to the garage door which was closed and said, "Shiyaazh, please open the door for your grandfather."

I walked to the door and opened it. Sunlight poured into the dusty shed. Grandpa made his way over to the mower and beckoned me to him.

"Do you know how to use one of these, Shiyaazh?"

"No, I don't, Grandpa. I can figure it out though."

He was silent and appeared deep in thought. *Did I say something I was not supposed to?* He rested his cane by the side of the John Deere and lifted one foot onto the mower. He settled one hand on the steering wheel and he held out the other.

Grandpa used to play this game with my brother, sister and I when we were younger. He would reach his hand out when he wanted to get off the couch and ask us to help him up. As he rose to his feet he would always utter a loud, "Ehhh . . ."

When he held his hand for help in getting onto the mower I knew that it

was not a game. Grandpa was being serious. He actually wanted my help getting on the tractor. He needed help just like he needed me to drive his truck to Kirtland.

I grabbed his hand and pulled him up and onto the mower. There was no loud, "Ehhh . . ." but instead a semi muffled grunt as he exerted himself. Once in the chair, he took a short break. He turned and said he was going to show me how the lawn mower worked. He started the lawn mower and put it in gear. I grabbed his cane and carried it with me. I followed him, trying to pay attention to what he was teaching me. He showed me how to raise and lower the blades and how to turn them on and off. Grandpa then cut the power and began to get off the lawn mower. He turned his body to face me and held out his hand again. I walked forward and tried to take it but he motioned to my other hand which was holding the cane.

"My cane, Shiyaazh. I need my cane."

I gave it to him and he placed it on the ground. He stood up and motioned for me to come closer. I moved and he rested his other hand on my shoulder. He placed his weight on his cane and on my shoulder and took a step off the lawn mower. He took another step and stood on the ground.

During Grandpa's hospitalization, bone marrow biopsies were conducted to monitor blast percentage. The tests came back saying his bone marrow blast percentage had increased to



18 percent, leukemia. His prognosis did not look good. Grandpa and our family were given the option to pursue chemotherapy but it would do little because Grandpa had several months at best. There was little more the medical team could do for Grandpa.

Grandpa seemed unaffected by the news. He knew he was going to die, and it didn't seem to bother him. I had a harder time accepting the news. I wasn't ready for it. I felt useless standing by his bedside as his end crept closer and closer. I wanted to help him, like the day with the lawn mower. I wanted to be active, to do something to help heal him. All it felt like I could do, however, was look at the clock in his room, thinking it was the agent of his demise. The impersonal clock ticked away seconds of Grandpa's life. I felt I was losing the battle to help him. The clock ticked on.

Grandpa wanted to leave the hospital and go home to the Black House. While at home, Grandpa began to utilize more traditional methods of pain management and healing. Grandpa had eight ceremonies conducted by Navajo medicine men to help him feel better. Four of these ceremonies were peyote ceremonies. The peyote ceremonies were intended to relieve pain and encourage spiritual harmony. The remaining four were "ghost way" ceremonies. The ghost way ceremony is a ceremony that rids a person of evil spirits. Navajo medicine men believed a foreign force, an evil spirit, was causing my

Grandpa to be ill and he needed to be cleansed. The ghost way ceremony is four days long and involves the patient getting covered in dark coal for the "ghost." The ritual allows the evil spirit to leave the patient, which facilitates recovery. In Grandpa's case the spirit was not removed to cure, but instead to rid Grandpa of evil spirits and allow him to leave his life in peace.

Reflecting now, I am thankful for the medicine men who tried to help Grandpa achieve a better sense of wholeness and pain relief. I know that the ceremonies meant a great deal to Grandpa. They were sacred and allowed Grandpa to cope with his illness in a manner that was in tune with his beliefs.

It was the 21st of January 2006, three days after my 18th birthday. It has always been a tradition in my family that we dine out for a birthday. The restaurant is chosen by the birthday girl/boy. That year, I chose to eat at a restaurant an hour away in Durango, Colorado.

Mom did not come with us because she was staying with Grandpa. He was not feeling well and Mom thought it best to stay with him. I left because Mom and Dad convinced me that Grandpa would want me to enjoy my birthday.

I ordered a steak dinner that night. I do not remember how it tasted. During dinner, I got a phone call from my mother. I excused myself from the table. I thought that she wanted to check in to ask how dinner was going.



"Hey, Mom."

"Josh, he's dead. Grandpa's dead," she sobbed.

Five words! There was no other time in my life that I can remember five words holding so much influence. I stammered, "How? . . . Did he look like he was in pain?"

"No, he left in peace, Joshua. He left like he wanted to go, with everyone around him."

"Are you OK, Mom?"

"Yeah, I'm OK, Josh. The funeral home is coming to take him. I think that you, your brother, and sister should come to say goodbye before they take him."

My body shook. "OK, Mom, we are almost done and then we will be coming home."

"OK, Josh. I love you."

"I love you too, Mom."

I hung up the phone and made my way back to the table. I made eye contact with my father and he asked if Grandpa passed. I choked back tears and nodded. The news ended the festivities of the evening.

The emotion of the situation became too much during the drive home. I felt isolated and alone. I cried. I thought about how much I was going to miss my grandfather. I did not want him to go. I understood what Dylan Thomas must have felt while he wrote "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night." I wanted Grandpa to, ". . . rage against the dying of the light." There was no part of my soul that wanted him to go gently into that good night. The good night had come and there was nothing that I could do about it.

The night was very cold, unnaturally cold. In Grandpa's absence, the Black House felt cold and empty despite being packed with relatives. I knew everyone and they knew me but I sensed that they felt me a stranger. In a way, I felt that I was a stranger as well. Grandpa had died and I was not with him. I was celebrating my birthday, the beginning of my life.

My mom emerged from the crowd and guided us into Grandpa's room. We stood next to his bed. My eyes moistened as I placed my hand on his shoulder. I asked him to forgive me for not being there. I took his hand. It was cold and heavy. His hand was purple with bruises and no longer had the same recognizable coarseness. His hands were soft and unworked, but still familiar. His bruised, battle scarred hands showed me that he never gave up. Grandpa kept his spirit until the very end. Even though he did not physically survive his fight with cancer, he won on a much deeper level. He didn't let the cancer beat him.

In that moment, holding his hand, I saw that he was a champion in his own right. I saw his rage against the good night. His struggle was not an easy one and he met it in the same way he met everything else in life, with strength and respect. He understood the power of his disease and knew that the fight was one sided but he still fought. He still had his strength and pushed on as long as he could. He did not leave this life frustrated because he did not win the battle. He accepted how his battle would end. He left this life

in the same manner that he lived it—very brave.

I looked at his hand one last time, kissed it, and let it rest.

It is Navajo custom to grieve for three days after the death of a loved one. For the three-day period a person does not bathe. On the morning of the fourth day the entire family gathers together and washes their hair. It is important to gather and complete the ceremony before the sun rises. Navajo gods, the Holy People, are believed to walk the earth before dawn. If the ceremony is performed before the sun rises then the deceased can leave with the Holy People and therefore in good company. The water that is used to wash hair is col-

lected and saved. When every person has washed his/her hair, the water is taken outside and poured to the east. It is believed that pouring the water to the east is symbolic of the family beginning anew and letting their loved one leave.

My family and I went through this ceremony. After we washed our hair, I stared at the spot where the collected water had been emptied. The ground steamed. The vapor hurried into the atmosphere. I looked up and saw the sun. It was just beginning to enter the sky filling it with bright pink and orange. The clouds were coals in a stoked fire. They burned with the intent of warming the frigid earth below.



Each summer I pay a visit to Calkins Union Cemetery, a small patch of land nestled in the hills of rural northeastern Pennsylvania. With the entrance at a point where two country roads intersect, a gravel drive lined by tall pin oaks guides guests to the stones that mark the graves of their loved ones. During my most recent visit, a few months ago, I was with my mother and my twelve-year-old daughter, Hannah, and we were alone there, pointing out the names of five generations of our ancestors etched in slabs of granite and marble.

Hannah and I lingered at one particular stone in the old section, the grave of my great-great-great-grandparents. It stands as a monument, a four-sided statue well past my height.

"This is the grave that I wanted to show you," I told her, and as I gazed upward, holding my hand in a salute above my brow to block the afternoon sun, I read aloud the words that are etched on the side facing the front of the cemetery:

Thomas Y. Boyd  
Born  
Jan. 9, 1823  
Died  
Mar. 7, 1889

Elizabeth J.  
His Wife  
Born Oct. 16, 1830  
Died Jan. 22, 1910

“These were your great-great-great-grandparents,” I said as we stepped around to the side of the stone. “And these were their children.” I read the words that were facing to the right:

Lee

Born July 16, 1853

Died July 29, 1853

Linn

Born July 16, 1853

Died Nov. 2, 1860

Emily N.

Born Aug. 5, 1851

Died Nov. 9, 1860

Mary U.

Born June 9, 1850

Died Nov. 12, 1860

Asil D.

Born Apr. 21, 1858

Died Nov. 15, 1860

James

Born May 3, 1856

Died Nov. 18, 1860

Hannah looked at me quizzically.

“This list of names and dates is telling a story,” I said. “T. Y. and Betsy Boyd lost six children. One child, Lee, was a twin who died when he was only two weeks old. The other children—Linn, who was Lee’s twin, Emily, Mary, Asil, and James—all died within sixteen days of each other in the fall of 1860. They died of a disease called diphtheria.”

For years I have tried to imagine. Each summer I have left my visit to the cemetery feeling as though I have swallowed a weight, as if it is possible to offer my condolences to the dead, to share in the grief of people who lived over a century ago. What could be more overwhelming, more terrifying, than an epidemic, one that sweeps through the homes of a quiet farming community and plucks the children from their lives of school and play, one by one? How can a mother inhale the air, a father stand erect, while neighbors quickly shovel the earth and place the pine coffins side by side, only days apart, their

souls able to keep one another company while their bodies, defeated by death, return to dust?

My mother has been cleaning out the attic of the house where T. Y. and Betsy lived in their final years. It is a house that is still part of the family, a place where we gather and visit, with an attic that had been uncharted for decades. But the recent renovation of the house was the impetus for tackling the top floor.

"Have you found anything that sheds any light on what happened in 1860?" I asked her.

She hadn't. Not yet. She had been unloading numerous leather trunks and wooden boxes, wiping away thick layers of brown dust and scattering shards of glass from broken frames. One held a disintegrating wedding dress, yards of once cream-colored silk now stained the color of weak black tea. Another was filled with small, leather-bound books and ledgers: records from the country store that T. Y. owned and operated, receipts, I.O.U.s, the meticulously written details of thousands of transactions, the sales of lumber and coffee beans and lye.

And there were letters too. Boxes and boxes of them. Letters addressed to T. Y. and letters addressed to Betsy, letters written between them, and letters written to them from siblings and cousins and friends alerting them to a death or an ailment, or nothing at all, really. A letter just to write a letter.

But everything uncovered in the attic up until this point had been dated after 1870 or so. It was as if their lives hadn't really begun until that time, as if they had saved nothing until a certain point and then saved everything in their world. Sepia photographs showed adults dressed in black, seated in groups, wire-rimmed spectacles bridging their noses and smile-less faces making contact with the lens. There were no pictures of children. No pictures of a young family.

The information for the 1860 U.S. Census was collected in the summer of that year. I imagine the census-taker traveling the distance from one rural Pennsylvania property to the next on the back of his tired mule, approaching the front porch of the white farmhouse where Betsy sits in her rocking chair shelling peas, the front door propped open to catch the slight June breeze. T. Y. is in the barn changing the horses' water while the boys are chasing butterflies, and the girls, having helped their mother shell peas that morning, are reading a book together in the back room. A baby sleeps in a basket on the other side of an open window so that Betsy can hear him stir.

"Good afternoon, ma'am," the taker says as he dismounts his mule, holding a notebook under his arm, and approaches the porch. "My name is Mr. William Ham. I'm here to record some information from Wayne County for the 1860 United States Census."



Betsy places her bowl of peas on the ground and looks over her shoulder toward her boys, who have stopped their play to check on the new visitor. "Linn! James! Go fetch your father from the barn," she says. "T. Y.! We have a visitor here!" she calls out in case he is within earshot, and the boys run to get their father. The girls come out to check the commotion.

Soon T. Y. and the boys walk quickly toward the house, and T. Y. wipes his right hand on the thigh of his denim overalls before offering it to Mr. Ham. "Good afternoon, sir. T. Y. Boyd. How can we be of help?" he asks as the taker opens his notebook filled with lines and lists, removes his pen from his pocket, and begins to write.

The information is gathered. A moment in time is recorded:

Thomas Y	Boyd	37	M	Farmer
Elizabeth	"	29	F	
Mary	"	10	"	
Emily	"	8	"	
Linn	"	7	M	
James	"	4	"	
Asil	"	2	"	
Joseph	"	2/12	"	

My mother and I drove from the house with the attic on the same country roads that the census taker traveled, winding bends, up and down hills, making our way to the Historical Society in Honesdale, the closest city with the county records. We asked for the newspapers from November and December of 1860, and I was seated before a microfiche reader while the archivist inserted the film.

Suddenly I was viewing the same newspaper that T. Y. perhaps read to catch up on local and national news. *The Wayne County Herald* and *The Honesdale Democrat* were the biweekly newspapers that served as the primary communication for the community, outside of gossip and hearsay. I began to slowly scan the tiny print, advertisements, and announcements interspersed between graphic articles describing various incidents as experienced by the common townsfolk.

Exceedingly long addresses to the American people by President Lincoln, who had been elected on November 6 of that year and would take office the following April, graced the covers of each issue, mostly suggesting the unrest that was to come between the North and the South. Articles on the developing plans for secession from the State of South Carolina hinted at the future creation by the seven "cotton states" of the Confederate States of America. As fingertips separated the fine pages of these local newspapers every other week, I imagined the angst in the air, the suspicion that not long from then, in April of 1861, trained soldiers and untrained neighbors would be fighting in the American Civil War.

I learned that, aside from the gratuitous detail offered for the few unfortunate souls whose deaths also told a sensational story, obituaries were not commonplace in the local newspaper. A small *Death* headline might have followed with the name and date of a person who had passed, but otherwise more space was devoted to the elixir that might aid in the relief of a woman's monthly problems. But finally, after scanning column after column and page after page, I found something, a small message in the Thursday, Nov. 29, 1860 issue of *The Wayne County Herald*:

In Damascus, Pa., of Diphtheria, children of Thomas Y. and Betsy J. Boyd, as follows:

Nov. 2, Linn, aged 7 years, 3 months, 10 days,  
Nov. 9, Emily N., aged 9 years, 3 months, 4 days,  
Nov. 12, Mary U., aged 10 years, 5 months, 3 days,  
Nov. 15, Asil D., aged 2 years, 6 months, 21 days,  
Nov. 18, James, aged 4 years, 6 months, 15 days.

Thus, within the brief period of sixteen days, these stricken parents, hitherto so happy in the society of their loved and loving home circle, have, in the Providence of God, been suddenly called to bid adieu to all their children except one—the youngest of the family. The Dresser of the Vineyard “hath done all things well.” In His infinite wisdom, He has seen fit to sever these tender shoots from the parent stock, and transfer them to a heavenly soil and more genial clime.

Diphtheria. It is a word that doesn't exactly roll off the tongue. I remember learning very little about diphtheria as a medical student in 1989, which makes good sense, given that it wouldn't be a disease I would ever likely treat. It falls into the category of forgotten human epidemics. Due to the genius of scientists Louis Pasteur, Jonah Salk, and many others and to the invention of the vaccine, we now live our lives without fear of these illnesses, without losing our children to infectious diseases that once swept through our towns and cities.

I studied medical history books and searched the Internet, all to no avail. Any discussion of diphtheria was focused on its eradication, the discovery of the microorganism that caused it, and the success of vaccination. I remembered from medical school that diphtheria was a disease of the respiratory system and the throat, and I recalled something about a “pseudomembrane,” whatever that was. But I didn't have enough to help me understand what happened to T. Y. and Betsy's children.

Until I came across a single reference to a publication written in 1748 by Dr. John Fothergill in London entitled *An Account of the Sore Throat Attended with Ulcers*. A quick search on the Internet led to a scanned copy of this book

in the U.S. Archives, and I was able to read it page by page. The nightmare of diphtheria was revealed:

Those who were seized with it first complained of a pain in the throat, with a stiffness of the neck, and uneasiness upon motion, and a difficulty in swallowing their usual nourishment. On inspection, the uvula, the tonsils, pharynx, and the whole fauces appeared of a remarkably florid red colour. An acute fever came on at the same time, which in some was accompanied with small pimples and eruptions like fleabites.

On the same day, or the day following, such parts of the fauces as at first seemed to be of a deeper colour than the rest, turned white; this did not proceed from any crust of matter, but from a gangrenous colliquation, the substance itself being mortified.

The neck and throat soon after began to swell externally, the tumour was of a soft, edematous kind, and increased in magnitude as the disease advanced. All the symptoms were commonly aggravated during the night. If the patients had any interval of quiet, it was commonly in the daytime. About the fourth day the tumour was generally grown very large, and the white places in the fauces began to turn black; the breath grew extremely offensive; respiration, hitherto not much affected, now became difficult, and the patient expired in a very short time.

The pseudomembrane. Now I remembered. That was the black coloring on the fauces that Dr. Fothergill described. The pseudomembrane was a dark covering over the entire back of the throat that would ultimately lead to breathlessness and suffocate the patients, the same children who were, only months ago, chasing butterflies. By this time, in November 1860, school had begun, the leaves had changed and fallen from the trees, and the older children were busy with their studies, practicing their handwriting as they sat on wooden benches in the schoolhouse, listening to the teacher as she taught many ages all at once. I imagine that Mary and Emily were happy to have each other as they walked together to and from school each day, little Linn not far behind. They might have had a bit of homework, but mostly time at home was for helping their mother keep house, especially while she was still nursing seven-month-old Joseph and had the two younger boys still at home. It was easier for the girls to keep their school materials at school, anyway, rather than drag them with them as they walked.

Linn was the first to get sick. It makes sense, as he was of school age, and he must have contracted the disease from a child there, as a simple snuffle or cough into shared air would be enough to spread the bacteria from one to another. The newspapers didn't show the names of other families with great loss at the time, but only the names of one or two children here and there, suggesting the Boyd family must have been the hardest hit.

November 2, 1860, the day that Linn died, was a Friday. So I suppose, based on Dr. Fothergill's report, that he might have come home from school on the Monday or Tuesday before and uttered the words: *My throat hurts*. I imagine that Betsy, Baby Joseph on her hip and an iron skillet heating on the wood stove, might have rushed to Linn, felt his forehead, warm with fever, and sent Mary to the fields to find her father. *Tell him, Mary! He must call for the doctor, NOW!*

I imagine that Emily wasn't showing signs of illness until Linn was gone, and perhaps the whole family was there to bury him next to his twin brother, Lee. In fact, Linn is buried to the left of Lee, unlike the other siblings. I imagine that there was enough room there, given that Lee was only a tiny infant when he died, and perhaps Linn was the twin born first, and Betsy and T. Y. decided to bury them in order of age. Of course this, too, we'll never know.

By the next Tuesday Emily was encircling her neck with her hand, tears rolling down her cheeks as she tried to swallow her porridge. It was November 6, Election Day. Abraham Lincoln would be elected, the first of the Republican Party, and T. Y., a Republican himself, made sure to cast his vote during what the papers showed to be times of deep turmoil in the United States. The moment that Linn declared himself sick with diphtheria the week before, the home must have been quarantined, and the girls likely didn't return to school.



Photo by author



I imagine that after he died, T. Y. and the neighbors dug a pit in the back where Linn's clothing and toys and linens were burned to ashes, erasing any trace of contagion, desperate to rid the house of death.

The nights were especially bad. Neither T. Y. nor Betsy were getting any sleep, mourning the loss of Linn, attending to the baby, and taking care of Emily, who was in rapid decline. By the time she was struggling to breathe, gasping for air and skin cyanotic, Mary was perspiring with fever and had already been put to bed. Emily died the next Friday, one week after Linn.

This is the place in the story that I most struggle to picture, the point at which T. Y. and Betsy realize that they will lose their firstborn too, having already lost their second and third. Mary had been her mother's helper, eager to learn in school, approaching adolescence with enthusiasm. What would Betsy do without her? Who would hold Joseph when she had to tend to the fire? What about Mary's schoolwork, all the learning she had done, the friends she had made? This was a God-loving family, made of kind, hardworking people. What had they done to deserve what was happening to them? Mary died on Monday, leaving only the short weekend to bury Emily and burn her belongings.

On the day that Mary died, two-year-old Asil was inconsolable. His neck had already swelled, and his fever was higher than the others, being a younger child. That Thursday he was gone too. And by Sunday they were burying James.

Seven-month-old Joseph, still nursing, was the only child to survive. His mother saved his life, unknowingly passing her antibodies and, thus, her immunity on to him through her breast milk. The three of them, T. Y., Betsy, and Joseph, were all that was left of the Boyd family, most of what made their home now burned in the back pit or buried at Calkins Union Cemetery, in the spot that I stand each summer.

Upon further searching, my mother found a trunk in the back of the attic which held a few precious items, three pieces that had been saved. First she discovered a small, two-sided children's school slate, measuring ten by seven inches, framed in worn, soft wood, still held tight with tongue-and-groove corners. Each side appeared well used, with chalk marks erased probably hundreds of times in a year. And along the frame, written lightly in pencil lead, reads the following: *Mary Boyd's slate, kept since 1860. Mother always kept it sacred.*

Along with the slate, my mother uncovered two school notebooks, lined paper bound in cardboard covers with string. Each page has a line of words written at the top by a teacher, I suspect, and then a child has followed with repetitions of the words to the bottom of the page, lovely cursive handwriting using a fountain pen and ink.



One book is signed throughout: *Mary U. Boyd*.  
The other: *Emily N. Boyd*.

On July 19, 1870, a weary man approached the home of T. Y. and Betsy Boyd, large ledger held tight in his armpit. A barking dog alerted Betsy to his arrival, and she met him at the front door.

"Hello, ma'am. My name is Mr. George Wood, and I'm here to record the members of your household for the purposes of the 1870 United States Census."

"Joseph, please go fetch your father," Betsy called, and she began to list the names of her children.

"Let's see," she said. "We have Joseph, who just turned ten years old. Then there's Elisabeth. We call her 'Libby.' She's eight. And then Rena, who's five, and Charles, who's four. And then there's Thomas, of course. He's our youngest. Two years old."

By now T. Y. has arrived at the door, as have a few of the children, curious to see their visitor. The parents give each other a tender glance, and he brushes his hand over hers, both remembering the summer of the last census and the names they can no longer list.

(Libby was born on March 14, 1862. She was the first child born to Betsy and T. Y. after the loss of their five children and the second oldest in the house, two years younger than Joseph. Libby was my great-great-grandmother.)

As we left the cemetery, Hannah asked me if there were parts of her ancestors buried there that were now a part of her.

"Yes," I answered. "If we looked carefully at your genes, we would find many that were shared by your great-great-great-great-grandparents. That is one way that we are connected through all of those generations."

"I like that," she responded. "I like knowing that I came from Betsy and then Libby and then Caroline and then Garry, Jr., and then Grandma Pat and then you. I like knowing what happened that led to my being here."

"Me too," I said. "And I like knowing the stories that they left behind."

The sky speaks but without saying one word.  
In a word the sky speaks, but who listens?

Voiceless, the sky speaks. In every language:  
sky-speak. Without language, sky speaks  
volumes. Ceaselessly, the sky speaks. In dark,  
in light. The sky, neither a he nor a she,  
speaks with an universal tongue. Sky,  
known in all ages, but speaks most fluently  
to the old & the very young. Nothing graceful,  
mind you, nothing graceless, but ever gracious.  
The sky speaks all the tongues of all the ages  
past as well as those called current, those lost,  
& those never again to be spoken. The sky!

Who, standing beneath, is listening?  
The sky knows ten thousand words  
in every language ever spoken. All  
that the sky speaks is of the same language.

When ours passes away, the sky remembers  
& speaks our language, cherishing it forever.  
When any creature dies, the sky speaks softly  
& goes to her. Sky-speak, ancestral, enlivens  
those long gone who stretched & yawned  
as they strolled to the open mouth of a cave.

Hundreds of stories high, in the tallest sky-  
scraper, we do homage to the voice of the sky  
as we also stretch & yawn. Building the Tower  
of Babel, we understood the sky. Intuitively.

The higher we climbed, the greater the sky-babel  
resounded. Standing here beneath the sky today,  
we stand naked, astounded that we are here,  
& the sky, speaking, still blankets us. Faithfully.

## At the Power Plant

*Clinton Crockett Peters*

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Apparently the smokestack-laden, war munitions factory-looking thing that glows like a Christmas tree by the river is actually a power plant. It lights up the University of Iowa, and the whistle that blows at the plant excruciatingly loud at eight, noon, one, and five is manually powered. This means somebody pushes a big red button when a watch reads the time. And the whistle isn't for people at the plant to know when to have their sandwiches but is instead for the community's posterity and, indeed, for the whole countryside as the plant's foghorn whistle is so loud it drowns out the noise of passing jets.

We're visiting, so our hardhats read "Visitor" in bold, all-caps on the front of our noggins. On the cool side they remind us in blood-red ink to, "Please Return Hat to Power Plant." Who would steal these plastic water-bailers, and is the alarming color a kind of warning?

Our first stop is the control room, and I should clarify who I mean be "we." We are a group of greenies, seven of us, part of the university Sierra Club. And by "we," I mean I'm not one. I was once a member of the Club, eight years ago. I'm still a nature (and humanity) lover, someone obsessively worried about global warming, who drives infrequently and eats few things that squeal. I was once active with something called the Grassroots Org that I helped create because my undergraduate Texas

Five-A campus with 40K students and a multi-hundred-million dollar football stadium had no recycling. It was a typical string of deadlocked meetings with administrators, interviewing student groups to see how they could help us sort out the invariably beer-and-banana-strewn recyclables, and watching these students matriculate. Helpful faculty and staff became suspicious faculty and staff.

Now I'm just here, eight years and that many states away—not an activist, but not somebody who doesn't care—somebody who spent some time abroad and crash-landed back in the Midwest and just saw an e-mail inviting me to tour the coal power plant. That sounded neat. Maybe I could learn something. Maybe (a little motive bubbling underneath) I could see better where I fit in among this country's greenies and (perhaps not so green) coal burners who help run the world.

We meet at the university gym, and I am thinking maybe we'll take a bus to the plant wherever it's fuming away, but here it is, right on the river, a soft, football punt away from the English building where I teach how to thrash sentences together. The whistle decibel here is enormous. You can't hold a conversation outside at the hours of eight, noon, one, and five. (Though on New Year's they sometimes blow the whistle at midnight, and after an important Hawkeye football game and if a university president is hired and if someone is

lucky enough and knows people and sets it up beforehand they will blow the whistle at an hour other than eight, noon, one and five, and during any of these times it is impossible to hold a basic conversation outside of my English building).

We're situated in the plant's control room, which resembles the deck of the Starship Enterprise except older and bleaker. We're hemmed in by the cracked monitor boards and peeling computer desks. There's exposed tubing and cables on the walls and low ceilings that seem to crawl around like lizards. My skin squirms as I duck and eye loose wires. The computers are at least fifteen years old, their keyboard letters worn off and smudged, so it appears the typist routinely comes in after changing his motor oil. A computer mouse seems out of place here, as does a \$5,000 copy machine resting in one corner.

I hear a terrific hum, and a red light flashes, though our guide, Ben Fish, glances at it once like he would a passing cardinal. The light glows again, accompanied by a blaring siren, but Fish pays it no mind. Only then I realize that we're the only people in the room, plus a muscular, purple T-shirted guy with tattoo sleeves who slunks against a corner not saying a word. His arms are crossed and he seems to be watching the backs of everyone's heads.

One greenie is late, and I will call him Ponytail. He has an immaculate goatee, shiny greased hair down to his nipples, designer jeans, and a piss-colored T-shirt that advertises

him as a "Sierra Club Senator." There is an audible sigh from a teenage female as he ambles into the room. Even though he shows up as the lecture is already underway, he tries to take charge. Ponytail's been on this tour before, and one gets the sense he'd like to work here if he didn't hate the place. He asks a half-dozen leading questions; most are esoteric.

"There's some controversy," he drones, "about the percentage of the mass in the boilers. Right now it's only 10,000, but I can't see why at least 20,000 can't be added in the future."

Of course! Along with being flagrant posturing, the question is an attempt to knock the stiff knees out from our leader, Ben Fish who wears a tweed sweater and has the old-man boniness of a retired college professor with the truncated vagueness of someone in the military. He reminds me of Mr. Rogers (who legend says was a Vietnam sniper), only he has a deep voice, talks rapidly, and chops the air with his hands. I can't help but imagine him wanting to get his fingers on Ponytail's neck or shooting him from some far distance away.

They seem to square off: Ponytail and Fish. The rest of us move away, expecting a duel. Ponytail actually rubs his right hand against his hip as if he is trying to find a holster to draw a pistol that isn't there. He repeats this motion three times and then sticks to alternately stuffing his hands into his tight jeans or scratching the skin above his right knee. He repeats the scratching mo-

tion so often he makes my own leg itch. But I refuse to scratch myself. I've decided I'm going to be neutral.

"That's a technical issue rather than a supply issue," Ben Fish answers, "Europe buys most of the wood pellets the U.S. manufactures. Wood pellets get a good price in Europe because they've adopted the Kyoto Protocol. There's plenty of oat husks, but there's an issue with the boilers. They don't burn husks as well as wood, and they can only burn so many."

What Fish is talking about is, despite this being a "coal" power plant, the thing, in fact, burns a prodigious amount of Quaker Oats. The oat husk casings, that is, that come right down from a milling town thirty miles north that smells routinely of ballsacks. Quaker Oats does their production there, making their balanced breakfast staples, stinking up the place, and selling their leftovers to the Iowa City power plant.

Why this is a big deal is because of biomass fuel, the idea of burning stuff like husks, corn, wood, dead flowers, whatever, to offset emissions instead of coal. This wouldn't seem like a tradeoff in the way of ending pollution, but the idea is that oats or trees or weeds will grow during their lives, sucking up CO<sub>2</sub> until harvested and burned. The net CO<sub>2</sub> gain and loss with biomass then is, conceivably, zero. Whereas coal is made from prehistoric ferns, which were sucking up CO<sub>2</sub> millions and millions of years ago, and that doesn't help us much now with rising oceans,

hurricanes turning our houses into matchsticks, and floods and fires and droughts and etc, etc. Biomass is also a renewable energy source.

It's terribly hot in here in the control room, and I'm down to a T-shirt despite it being near-snowing outside. Ponytail seems comfortable. He's tapping a foot now as Ben Fish answers a question, Ponytail waiting, it seems, for his turn to ask another.

They're talking about particulate matter. According to Ben Fish, each monitoring test costs \$15,000 a pop to pay someone to come out here with a long metal tube to catch a whoof of whatever comes out of the smoke stack and weigh it afterwards to see how much shit is inside.

"If laws change we might have to do that up to four times a year," Fish says, "Or it could be only once. It just depends."

"So how much would your costs go up then?" Ponytail asks, burning holes into Fish's face. "What are your costs now for testing?"

"Well, you don't understand. We only have to do this once if we get a new boiler. That's all we have to do."

There's silence. Ponytail has a self-satisfied grin on his face I've seen on lawyers in courtroom dramas. "So you don't do an annual smog check?" he asks, rubbing his chin.

"No, we don't," Fish responds. "We don't have to according to the laws right now. But if we did, we would."

There are open mouths all around. One of the undergrad greenies actually takes a step away from Fish as if



he's emitted something foul smelling. I can see in Fish's face the resigned frown I'd expect. Or maybe that was lunch coming back up. I don't know. Fish doesn't defend himself further.

It seems clear the situation is the classic war, the eco do-gooders, their shocked faces and gasps about particulate matter (I'll pause here and say I've read Sandra Steingraber's *Living Downstream* and I know well how fucking dangerous this stuff is) versus the guy who just maybe wants to have a job that's kind of interesting, who maybe doesn't care as much as these other six in their urine shirts and synthetic shoes, but who is altogether more *real*, really.

Their trendy fleeces, were they shorn from Idahoan sheep? Were the soles of their boots not made with the same black stuff that chokes baby geese in Alabama? Are these not low, obvious critiques, and aren't I being harsh, and isn't the world not this black and white, and am I not, too, wearing a fake fleece around my waist, and aren't Ben Fish and the Greenies much more complicated than these stereotypes I've drawn? Yes. I wouldn't have made these thoughts vocal eight years ago, but I'm older and more skeptical of outpourings of self-righteousness, green, black, white, or otherwise because I'm not quite sure what purpose they serve except to drive a wedge and create a space between people.

The red ambulance light beeps again. I feel strange that no one is around to monitor. Are the rest of the

crew busy testing a trapdoor around the corner?

"Unless a judge rules biomass is less carbon emitting than coal," Ben Fish says, picking up his narrative, "there'll be no market for the carbon-capping trade. It just can't exist on the system we have set up. Europe buys most of America's wood chips because the market is better over there. We can burn biomass, there's enough of it here, but if a judge rules that it is *not* carbon reducing, then we'll never have an in-place biomass system."

Before Ponytail can respond, Fish moves us suddenly into the other room, which is half-flooded with light and drenched in the sound of motors. This is why we've been given earplugs, which are aquamarine and shaped like a health-class model of a woman's reproductive organs.

We surface into a gray room, bright like a greenhouse with rolling, thick metal boilers like some prehistoric skeletons not yet chipped away from their rocks. They flank our path as we walk. We cross over old particle board set on steel, matrix flooring. The boards seem to be within inches of slipping into the bowls of the humming plant below. The noise is furious, talking ludicrous.

I want to touch a boiler. Would its black, metal skin scorch my hand into one big zit so I couldn't open a ziplock bag? Maybe I could try touching it with my pencil first to see if it melts the graphite. And I would if I didn't feel under the ever-present

stare of the man in the purple T-shirt and tattoo sleeves who hangs back to herd us along. I'll call him Guard Dog because he looks menacing yet well-trained.

And here the pack is already moving on! We spent twenty minutes huddled in the bridge sweating it out and now in the meat of things we're swiftly escaping! I follow reluctantly. Take a few pictures. Note that we're looking at the tops of the boilers, shaped like giant snails where the steam and the smoke is collected and then funneled to be emitted into the smoke stacks and also into the pipes that elicit the hair-graying whistle that will blow in 2.4 hours, or when I am biking home, and I will skid into the soft patch of grass between the road and the concrete sidewalk to avoid an old man in a beret carrying groceries up a hill who will stare at me with a mixture of confusion and scorn as I nearly topple off my bicycle.

This is the problem with being a cyclist: nobody wants you. Those "Share the Road" signs are for looks and council board agendas. Motorists would as well grind you under their wheels like fallen leaves as lend you the curb space. "Use the sidewalk!" they yell, scream, out their passing windows. But the citizens walking merrily on the concrete seem to miss the "Bike Lane" signs in favor of hogging lanes, three-abreast. They also ignore bike bell chirps and variations of "excuse me" and stick out elbows as you pass in the grass, delicately between one world moving one way on

its feet and an even faster and heavier and smokier world moving right up against it.

This is how I am now: interested in the workings of this death machine but wary of it at the same time. Agreeing with the motives of the college kids already trampling outside, uninterested in the actual place they'd come to condemn. I'm in a gray spot as though each side (not that the world really ever lines up into halves) were tugging, or in this case pushing me toward the other.

I note that one of the room's boilers is freshly painted jet black and has two Iowa Hawkeye football decals pasted on. Another boiler is just dull gray and rusty, neglected. Are boilers like people's pets? Does the crew have their favorites? I want to ask, but Guard Dog is in my nose. This close and I realize he has a boyish face, and I turn to go almost because I feel I don't want to disappoint him.

I clamber down the steel stairs, holes in between big enough to slip a torso through. I get to the bottom and glance over to see a dark, steaming labyrinth of pipes and valves and cobwebs. I want to stroll around, but Ponytail is magnanimously holding the door open for me, and without looking I can tell he has an irritated air, as if me taking so long to see the one thing we'd come for was too much for him and I was holding up the show of him asking more questions.

There's a tense moment as Guard Dog follows. He seems to want to wait for Ponytail so he can latch

the door shut in case anybody (me, I think he thinks) wants to sneak back in. Whereas Ponytail wants to hold the door open for everybody and thereby assert his heroic grace. They pause by the door for several seconds, while the hairs on their arms stand up, Guard Dog inside, Ponytail out. Ponytail finally bows to Guard Dog, who takes the door from him and slams it shut.

We are in the teeth-rattling Iowa fall. I wrap my fleece around my shoulders. Ponytail seems to shiver and not shiver in his T-shirt at the same time. Is he flexing? His body is toned, skin bronze. He must spend time in the gym when he's not here touring the power plant.

Ben Fish gathers us into a circle. We stand by a white, 18-wheeler that has ass-ended to an enormous and curious, mouse-colored silo that I would have thought contained something of mass destruction.

"This is our husk delivery," Fish says.

The big truck is in the middle of dumping three tons of Quaker Oats leftovers into a grill that opens into the parking lot. The husks spill out onto the asphalt and pile up. We can and do scoop them into our hands. We pat them, make little balls, and let them drop. They snow to the ground.

They are soft and silky and smell of breakfast. When I look there is a chalky dust on my fingers that I am sorely tempted to lick off.

"Yeah, Quaker Oats gives us a pretty good price for 'em," Fish says. "Though they're starting to jack it

up. It's easy to run old boilers off a bit of oats. Plus, they sell the husks to low-fat granola bar makers. Oat husks have zero nutrition but also zero calories, and they take up space in the bars."

I stare at Ben Fish when he says this. I eat lots of granola bars, usually two or three a day. I've probably eaten several million oat husks before, their neutrality churning in my body, swaying like water in a wave pool, back and forth. Perhaps they'd left behind their impartial residue.

Oat day means lots of smoke. We look up and stare at the rolling white apocalyptic, yet oddly soothing, mushrooms issuing from the plant. I walk back to get a picture of the contrasts. White smoke and steel-gray sky. Six greenies, a local power plant manager. The overflowing husks of grain pouring with the sound of leaves blowing in the wind just beneath the roar of the boilers and the truck's diesel engine humming for no reason.

Not far away, within championship spitting distance from the big rig, is an adorable, clown car-golf cart hybrid that passes for an electric car these days with a little green "e" on the side (like Enterprise Rent-a-car's "e," and I wonder if this is copy-right infringement). The electric car runs on the electricity burned at this plant, with the oats spilling into the parking lot and which I have wiped on my jeans, runs on the emissions released from the smoke stack. The power plant seems tender to the electric car in some incomprehensible

sense I can't begin to explain. It's almost as if this plant, towering jaggedly over the river, were somehow the mother to this little car and its little "e" sign, though the orifice this car must have been born through is the very stack that fills the skies with its hypnotic belches.

The ash from all this burning, by the way, is the same color as the overcast day and is collected into another silo and then transferred into a different 18-wheeler. We walk over in that direction, and there is a long talk between Fish and Ponytail about where this ash goes, which is to an abandoned limestone quarry in central Iowa. Ponytail already knows (he could lead this tour), but also he knows something else, something Fish hasn't learned, that the other state schools in Iowa take their power plant ash to the same place, which means at some point soon, it will overflow like an Everest base camp toilet.

"What's your backup plan then?" Ponytail asks Fish.

Fish shakes his head, chastened. "Well, right now, we don't have one."

"You can make bricks with the ash. I've heard of people doing that," Ponytail says.

Every one looks at Ponytail admiringly while he smiles and seems to stare off at the horizon with the steel gaze of an old cowboy who knows he's done his boys some good.

We take one more run through the plant, this time at ground level, no innards to fall through, particle boards, trap doors. The ground is

concrete. This is the first time we see someone else. Real workers! In yellow hats just like us and with coveralls and smudged fingers. The men wear five-o'clock shadows like it's the uniform. As we round corners, they gaze at us with unmixed antipathy. I try to give one a prodigious smile, but he just bores holes into my eyes.

Each boiler (there are at least ten-thousand-million boilers in this power plant) is the size of a fire truck. I hear the low sound of a roaring flame, and the whole room smells frighteningly of gas. We have our earplugs back in. It might be loud, but I couldn't tell you. Mostly it's all a dull hum. We walk swiftly through what also seems like a machine shop—tools everywhere, vises wood-screwed to doorways and tabletops. Randomly there's a bulldozer in the middle of a room surrounded by boxes. Some rooms are dark and hemmed in by pipes and vents and seem to descend into cavern-like tunnels. Fish tells us later we could follow one until we reached an escape hatch in front of the English building, pop out—*Hey!*—and scare the undergraduates on their way to classes. He says this with the first bit of humor I've seen from him. The smile stays on his face for a moment longer than it takes for me to feel uncomfortable, as if the surprising of young, oblivious students would perversely satisfy him.

We round another corner and see a computer that predates the Macarena, wedged into a wall cubby, its mouse charcoaled with fingerprints.



Ponytail takes one step off the path Fish has blazed and looks into a steel-roller car. Inside, shinier than I'd expect and not-bad smelling (a kind of musk bitterroot), is the cracked and glistening subject of our scrutiny. A car of coal, and the only bit of it we will see.

We circle up in the break room besides a few Coke machines, a coffee maker, two long tables, and metal-and-styrofoam-looking chairs. We take out our earplugs, and a big, mustached man in overalls comes to open his locker, removes a shirt, glares at us. His face is worn, like old khakis, like my grandfather who used to lay brick and now soaks up Fox News from his couch. He looks at me as if I'm an insect he's deciding how to squish. I want to find out what the man's beef is, but already I know, at least I think I do, his idea: if we youngsters throw up enough pickets we'll finally get the university to do that crazy thing, construct wind turbines and solar panels. Or maybe he just doesn't like our hair, our innocence, or whatever. Maybe he's had a bad day or a bad year or a bad couple of years.

Or really, I have no idea what this guy is thinking. On his face is a kind of resigned betrayal, mixed with the holding back of a kidney-pounding rage. Is it America or the youth this guy feels is betraying him? Or is there any itching nag that maybe his life choices and influences have set him on a less-informed path? It occurs to me that no matter how much I learn, struggle, go with the flow, I

will end up like him (he whom I'm guiltily and entirely projecting onto), bewildered by the forces set up by himself and by others to be on the "other side."

Guard Dog has been following us. His steel-toed boots on the metal stairs and steps like a baton on a prison cell's bars. He still hasn't said anything. What does he think? Does he like working here?

He finally pipes up when I ask Fish why the plant was built along the river. Fish looks over at Guard Dog whose eyes light up.

"Well, it was first over there at the library," Guard Dog says. "That was where they built it. That was the first one, before they realized they needed more water for cooling. This plant's really old too though. I've read about it. And there's a whoooooole history to it."

"And you found that, where?" Fish asks.

"They got all that information on microfilm. You can go read about it in the library. Everything. It's in the library special collections. The whoooooole history of the place. Everything from the beginning to where you are right now. It's a fascinating place."

I'm ashamed to admit it, but I am surprised by the image of Guard Dog sifting through reams of microfilm at a library reader machine. I feel so bad at my holier-than-thou regard that I don't want to call him Guard Dog anymore. I'll call him Steve, though that's not his real name.



"Any other questions?" Fish asks

I inquire how he got into the coal business.

He narrows his eyes into bullet tips. "I majored in engineering in college, and I minored in Spanish because I thought I'd end up in Texas. That's where all the oil and gas are, and that's where I thought I was headed."

He pauses, and I think about telling him that I'm from Texas. That a lot of my family comes from oil money. But I don't. Maybe I think he won't believe me or think that it doesn't matter. And maybe it doesn't matter. What does it mean to come from one place, go to another, and end up somewhere in between?

Fish continues, "I first worked manufacturing after college. I didn't think, 'Hey, I want to work in a power plant.' But when the manager position came up, I wanted the opportunity and I took it. It's just one of those things you fall into."

I look around the room and wonder how many of these greenies will "fall into" something, the cracks between edges. Until recently, I hadn't thought I'd slipped into anything. My processes from high school to college and then to grad school seemed like a series of calculated steps. But what choices did I have, really? I must have fallen into some rabbit holes. Or was it all one big crack? It is a question I ask but can't answer.

"Any other questions?"

No.

"Thanks a lot guys," Fish says, "I'm glad, really glad to see Iowans

concerned about where their power comes from."

"Thanks a lot," Ponytail says, (I still feel like calling him that) as he shakes Fish's hand, flexing his muscles. "I'll see you next time."

I'd struck up a conversation earlier with one of the nicer undergrads, but now ostensibly to put on my fleece to ward off the Iowa chill, I hang back by the railing along the sidewalk that leads to the river. I watch as the greenies march off down the road, Ponytail a head taller than anyone else. I am struck now by how amazingly Ponytail looks like the Son of God, his hands in his pockets in lieu of a weapon.

I wait until they are a safe distance away. Beside me, the aluminum door I just exited shuts with a loud clang (Steve's work), and the sign "Restricted Access" is posted around it in four places. The door does not have a handle or a knob. There are no other entrances in sight.

I pick up my bag and cross the road, though I feel as if I want to go inside and assure all the workers we aren't going to take their jobs, that their end of the world isn't over. Or go down and resume my chat with the genial greenie, find out what they are doing next. Maybe head to the local vegan cafe? Or something. I'm not sure I have a plan.

It seems right though, in a way, my being between the young, messiah-led activists strolling away and a door shut on a life I was born from, perhaps, but that I don't think I could ever lead.

## Returning Train(s)

Ben Morris

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LAC-MÉGANTIC, Quebec—A year after an oil-train explosion killed 47 people in this small town, residents are waking up to a new reality: The oil trains are probably coming back. —*The Wall Street Journal*

Today, the first train comes back  
    through our front page town.  
We've spent the last four months watching:  
    debris sweeps, body cleanups,  
smoke, trucked loads of toxic soil,  
    track repairs.  
We think we can hear the approaching horn.  
We're huddled against the cold,  
our little camcorder running.  
It is snowing,  
so everything around us  
almost looks how it should.  
The Musi-Café,  
the haunting centerpiece of Lac-Mégantic, is covered in  
a soft medical white.

Then we see it.  
And the Boul de Vétérans  
holds its breath while the little train creeps down our hill,  
six timid cars of dry goods  
from Montreal, the few cars intact.  
The railway a cauterized wound.  
The Bakken tankers, angry black bodies  
    with their bellies full of fire, will return  
soon.

Now it pulls into the station, a low rumbling,  
    air breaks hiss, snow clouds  
explode. There's an extra man, extra eyes, on this train to help  
calm us down. As if the idea of safety will make up for  
the forty-seven we've already lost.  
One of us, a young woman, holds the camcorder  
with both hands  
so the town will stop shaking.



## Café Palma Courtyard

*Susan Rich*

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*Sarajevo, Bosnia Herzegovina*

*To cope* is a verb from which there is much to uncover  
like the reason for this polished baby grand

in a Bosnian courtyard where the tuxedoed waiters  
come and go crossing lit miniature globes, beneath three

out-of-season, somewhat damaged palms.

Watch them watch the profiteroles and crempites—  
like innocents on filigreed trays. They circle the fountains

in surreal orienteering, delicate cups and plates  
balanced on mortared selves, like the table-glass of piano

notes lighting up the air—mostly ignored—like the aftermath

of war, like the sugar in the pastry,  
like the bullet casings still strewn beneath their feet.

Back in the car, Mike notices several spots of Noreen's blood on the beige plastic dashboard in front of the passenger's seat, but she seems oblivious to them. Despite all that passed over the previous few hours (stitches and shots, bandages and blood), her lips are turned upward in a Buddha-like expression of serenity, or perhaps mild senility. Probably the injection the emergency room nurse gave her before a doctor stitched up her mangled hand is the cause. Mike glances at the blue kitchen towel squished at Noreen's feet, one of two he'd wrapped around her hand after she came into the house to tell him about the accident. The nurse had thrown out the second one when he unwrapped it from around Noreen's hand. Mike leans across his wife to grab the towel and toss it onto the back seat, not wanting to remind her of how much blood there'd been. Noreen had been cutting back some overgrown barberry bushes near the front of the house and had somehow managed to catch her right hand in the oscillating blade of the trimmer. Her palm had looked like a medium-sized dog chewed on it while trying to get to the bones underneath.

He takes Noreen's left hand as they sit with the windows down in the Lourdes Hospital parking lot. The warm breeze picks up a white-plastic grocery store bag and summersaults it across the blacktop like tumbleweed before it disappears under a

car. It's a Saturday, and the sky above is a cloudless blue, a day Mike and Noreen would have once used up on a road trip. An elderly woman using a walker is escorted by a younger man, probably her relative, across the lot to the ER entrance. She walks tentatively, as though her path is through a minefield.

"Does it hurt?" Mike asks Noreen, gesturing with his chin toward her bandaged right hand, which she's placed on her lap like it's something he's given her to hold while he drives.

"Little. But not for long," she says, letting go of his hand to extract a bottle of pills from her purse. They had filled the prescription at the hospital pharmacy just before exiting the building. She rattles the plastic container like it's a castanet before putting it back, but doesn't reach out to take his hand again where it waits on the seat between them. Noreen finds subtle ways to end all physical contact between them before it moves beyond polite camaraderie, a new habit she's added to her repertoire of keeping herself separate. Often, she's already eaten before he gets home from work or stays up later than him so that he's asleep by the time she comes to bed.

Mike studies her and wonders if she'll even take the pills. He backs the car out of the parking space before heading home. On Route 12 not far from their house, they drive past a dead opossum with a bloated belly



on the side of the road. Two crows pick at something at back of the body that looks like a long pink rope. Like café diners on a busy New York City street, they're unperturbed by the cars that drive past them.

Noreen nods at the sight. "We're nothing but meat in the end," she says.

Mike frowns in her direction before turning to look straight ahead at the blinking taillights of the car in front of them. "I don't think that's entirely true," he says. "Especially to the people we leave behind. There's their side of it all, don't you think?"

Noreen only lifts her eyebrows and looks out the window.

When they arrive back home and walk up the concrete pavers to their front door, Mike thinks of how the large white bandage encasing his wife's right hand makes her arm look like a pale twig with a cocoon at the end of it, as if some sort of caterpillar is pupating within it. Noreen's hair has finally grown out to shoulder length and is as white as the bandage, now that she's no longer dying it the blonde she'd favored for more than a decade. But unlike other women whose white hair prematurely ages them, Mike thinks that Noreen's still youthful-looking face and pink skin is enhanced by the whiteness surrounding it. He studies his wife's back as she climbs the five steps to their front porch and considers how unfair life is. He knows several people he teaches with who would deserve the suffering she experienced. Noreen has never uttered a word of complaint, though sometimes he

wishes she would. Then he could offer her comforting words or a consoling touch and not feel so useless or weak. Except it might feel like giving pennies to a beggar.

The hedge trimmers lie in the grass beside the pavers where Noreen dropped them. The weeds in the front flowerbed are a spreading rash across the dirt. Mike had been so hopeful when she told him she was going out to work on the yard, which had been an old hobby of hers. Noreen's daily uniform consisting of one of his "chore" sweatshirts, usually a grey, brown or black version, and roomy black sweat pants, had finally seemed appropriate.

"Jeez, hon," he says picking up the trimmers, annoyed concern and disbelief mixed in his voice. His voice stops her in the process of unlocking the front door. The tool shows no signs of the damage it caused though there are some pieces of thorny barberry stems stuck in it. The bush itself looks like it's been given a haircut by a child. "How'd you manage that?"

Noreen shrugs. "Hell if I know. Clumsy, I guess."

She disappears into the house, leaving it to Mike to finish the job. Clumps of leaves and twigs fall as he sculpts the bush with the vibrating teeth of the trimmer, which he holds away from his body as if it might attack him.

When he comes inside a little while later, he hears the shower running in the upstairs bathroom. He considers walking in to talk to Noreen but knows that the door is locked.

It wouldn't have been before and he hasn't seen his wife completely naked in at least two years. He knocks on the closed door and tells her, "Well, at least it wasn't your left hand." But there's no response. Either he didn't say it loud enough to be heard over the running water or she's ignoring him.

Mike lies on their bed and waits for her to finish so that he can talk to her. She'll need to come in there to get a change of clothes because there must be blood on the ones she's wearing though the black fabric hides it. He imagines the step-by-step process of her shower—wet, lather, rinse repeat, soap up, rinse off—and the parts of herself she must avoid looking at. What she said in the car and the image of the dead opossum replays in his memory. *Meat. Just meat.* He pictures a butcher's shop with human parts hanging from hooks, skinned like the illustrations in *Gray's Anatomy*, and shudders. A few minutes later, a wet-headed Noreen walks past the bedroom door fully clothed, with her bandaged right hand wrapped in a plastic bag. Mike sits up and watches her disappear downstairs. The opportunity to talk dissipates like the sound of a gunshot. He sinks back down and thinks how it would be an intrusion forced on her. He would sooner break down the bathroom door in order to peer past the shower curtain and watch her bathe.

That night, Mike lies on his side of their bed next to Noreen and thinks about their sex life. It used to be good. Nothing kinky, but general-

ly satisfying with occasional lulls brought about by mutual disinterest or busy schedules. But when it was good, how lovely it had been to be wanted and the means to her pleasure. Now he can't blame her for feeling self-conscious after the double mastectomy but just thinking about how they used to make love makes him turn on his side toward her and stroke her shoulder.

"I love you," he says.

"I know." Her eyes remain closed perhaps to keep the light from Mike's bedside lamp from entering.

"I don't need these, you know." His fingers graze the side of the padded bra she wears to bed every night under her large T-shirt. Tonight it's a Cutler Botanic Garden green one. "And you don't need them either. I mean, not really."

As soon as these sentences escape his mouth, Mike realizes they are distant runners-up to more winning words. But Noreen knows him well enough after twenty-plus years of marriage to accept that language is an unreliable friend of his. He would tell her if he thought she could take it that he can't remember exactly what her breasts looked like. They had been nice, average-sized with small, pink nipples, but a vivid image of their specific appearance is lost to him. He can, however, remember the scars, having seen them several times just after the surgery when she'd needed help getting dressed. That horror of scabbed over wounds and then weals, like ineptly drawn angry eyebrows on a stick figure face, could never leave his memory. How unfor-

tunate the brain works this way, he thinks. What biological advantage did this mechanism of memory provide humanity? God, he shouldn't have said that to her, but now it's too late. A virus of poorly chosen words has already infected any possible conversation.

"I don't need any of me," she says.

He's immobilized by her comment. Disjointed words like scattered dice—*what, why, please, stop*—appear in his mind, but nothing forms itself into a coherent sentence. Then she turns away from him and his light and says goodnight.

On Monday, Mike is in his classroom at Greene High School teaching his least favorite course, Bio Core/Life Sciences, which was designed for students who need remedial help in order to pass Bio I. He's covering acquired characteristics in plants when he looks up and spots two of his students, Pete and Trent, sleeping in the back row as usual. Their heads rest on their folded arms as though they are penitent monks. Normally, he would ignore them, but today he puts a finger up to his lips to encourage his other students to stay quiet, and walks up the center aisle to their seats. Except their friend Jeb coughs loudly to startle them, and they lift their heads to stare vacantly at Mike, who shoots Jeb a look.

"This isn't kindergarten nap time you know," Mike tells his entire class as he walks back to the front of the room. A few sniggers greet his comment. He faces his students, frowning and angrier than he should be.

Their blank stares make him want to punch at least a few in the face. Then he notices the bright light of a late afternoon spring sun outside his windows, a marker after all these years of teaching that it's almost the end of the school year, and soon he'll be rid of them. "It's not okay to sleep your lives away."

There is an uncomfortable silence after that, except Mike is so used to these that it doesn't bother him. A few students look down or away, while some exchange dubious glances as though they think he's lost his mind. What's the point, he wonders. Nothing he says will make a difference. If only words were like water, forceful enough in a large quantity to cut through obstacles and topple barriers.

Later, when he's done for the day and walking out of the school through throngs of self-involved teenagers, the bright red hair of a former student, Deborah Fenster, catches his eye. She stands near her locker, tearfully talking to several sympathetic-looking girlfriends. "So there we were, working on a new cheer and these two deer are trying to jump over the fence around the football field. Their faces were all bloody. It was horrible."

Mike walks out to his car, squints in the late May light. He imagines bloody-faced deer, dead opossums, Noreen's ripped palm and mastectomy scars, an aggregate of images he wishes he could erase like a chalkboard. In his car, he puts on the radio and receives the distracting voices of

the sports commentators on ESPN as though they are a blessing.

When he arrives home, he sees Noreen's car hasn't been moved. He sits in his own for several moments, then takes a deep breath and gets out. Inside the house, he finds Noreen lying on the hardwood floor in their living room with her eyes closed. Her bent right arm with its bandaged hand stretches out from her body like a praying mantis foreleg.

"Noreen!" he shouts, dropping his briefcase by the door and running to her side.

She opens her eyes and stares at him. "What? Why are you yelling?"

He sits back on his heels, stares down at her. "I come home and find you on the floor. How do you expect me to react?"

"I'm fine. Just threw out my back."

"Are you sure that's all it is?" Mike asks. He recalls something he'd read about how metastasized cancer could cause lower back pain. God, don't let it be that again.

"I was changing a light bulb and wrenched my back. That's all."

Mike stands up and holds his hands out to Noreen but she ignores them. "I'd prefer it if Dr. Sterm ran a few tests. This isn't the first time you've had back pain. Remember?"

"Not really," she says. She pulls down her "Virginia is for Lovers!" t-shirt and Mike remembers that vacation. He thinks of Noreen wading into the blue-gray Atlantic at Sandbridge beach, laughing and bracing herself for the cold water.

"Well, we need to figure out what's going on."

"There's nothing going on. I'm fine."

He sighs, but doesn't contradict her. "I'm calling Dr. Sterm's right now."

"Fine. If that's what you want," she says. He considers asking her, what do you want? but is afraid of how she might answer: *Not much, nothing, not you.*

When Mike holds out his hands to her a second time, she takes them. Her groans as she rises from the floor sound like a sunken ship raised from the seabed, except they seem exaggerated and he looks at her skeptically. She walks to the couch and sinks down into the cushions, keeping her back rigid. Noreen points at the remote and he hands it to her before walking into the kitchen to call Dr. Sterm in private.

He spends several minutes on the phone, first talking to one of Sterm's nurses, then with Sterm herself, explaining the situation and listening to Noreen click through channels on the TV. By the end of the phone call, Mike has made an appointment for Noreen for that Thursday but also has a prescription to pick up at the CVS pharmacy on Front Street. It's for Celebrex, a mild painkiller with a festive name, though Mike can't think of anything he wants to celebrate. He'd told Sterm they already had painkillers in the house from their trip to the ER that Saturday. "This one's better," Sterm said. "Easier on the stomach." On his return drive home from the drug store, he notices the dead opossum is gone, disposed of somewhere by the town's highway department.



Back at the house, Noreen is now reclining on their gray couch.

"You want one of these?" he asks, holding the small pharmacy bag out to her.

"No thanks," she says, staring at the TV as Paula Deen cackles her way through a deep-fried shrimp and cheddar-cheese grits recipe. "I feel a lot better now. Just put it in the medicine cabinet upstairs in case I want one later."

"Are you sure?"

"You know I don't like to take that stuff," she says, giving him a glance that slides off of him.

"I know. Because you're so strong, Nor."

"Yes. I am. Very," she replies, staring at the TV.

Mike remembers just how strong she'd been during her whole ordeal. She'd made jokes before and after the surgery to help deal with the situation, though he wasn't sure whether it was for her sake or his. Maybe both. "Just think how much I'll save on bras," was one. Even in the recovery room afterward, she said she'd come up with a theme song for herself. It was sung to "Born Free," with the lyrics altered to "Boob free." Mike and the nurse had laughed though the woman had also seemed somewhat taken aback. In the months that followed there had been quiet, sad moments, too; that was to be expected. But they were like rain puddles: quickly absorbed into non-existence by Noreen's determination to be cheerful.

What had changed things, he wonders. Was it the wedding they'd

been invited to, when she hadn't been able to find a dress she felt comfortable in? They had gone to so many stores, the Macy's in the mall, the TJ Maxx and Kohl's on the parkway, but nothing had fit. Or was it the visit to the plastic surgeon, who told Noreen he'd make her "better than new." "I don't want new," she'd said afterward. "I want me."

The next day at lunch Mike leaves the high school to eat at a local sub shop with the school's chemistry instructor, Erin Smythe, with whom he'd almost had an affair several years back. He and Noreen had reached a phase in their marriage where they were friendly roommates who happened to sleep in the same king-sized bed. She was heavily involved in selling real estate, her social life, and volunteer work at the Cutler Botanic Garden, while he, well, he puttered in his garage, went fishing whenever possible, and started writing a remedial high school biology textbook that he never finished. Erin had been interested in hearing his plans for the book. His old stories were fresh to her, and he became new again, capable of making someone laugh, smile, or desire his company. It wasn't so much that he'd wanted Erin, but rather that he had appreciated her wanting him.

Noreen's breast cancer diagnosis changed everything. In the months that followed, Mike's admiration for his wife's fortitude and the grace she exhibited despite her pain and loss reanimated his feelings for her. Erin eventually forgave him for falling back in love with Noreen. She tran-



sitioned from being a potential lover to a confessor, something Mike was grateful for because he couldn't imagine telling one of his male friends the things about Noreen that he told Erin. He feels an inward twinge at this, realizing that Erin knows his wife more than Noreen would want.

They sit at a table, unwrap their sandwiches, and he tells Erin about the hedge trimmers.

"She's so clumsy lately," he says, putting his sandwich down.

"Lately? Don't you remember two months ago, when she nearly cut off her pinky toe stepping on a broken glass or something in the kitchen?"

"I forgot about that." He takes a bite of his sandwich and thinks about this before discarding it like a used napkin. "I remember reading something about chemo making you clumsy, but she's been done with it for over two years."

"I don't think that has anything to do with it." Erin rattles the ice in her empty cup and longingly eyes the soda dispenser near the counter. Mike remembers the diet she's had herself on for the past six months, which has resulted in a total loss of three pounds.

"Well then, what is it? Because I don't know what to do or what to say to her. She wants no part of me."

"What do her friends say? Have you talked to them?"

"She doesn't see them as much as she used to. Sue's in Florida now, of course. And when I talked to Amy she said Noreen seemed fine to her. But it's all a big act."

"You're sure she never learned anything about us? Because that could explain it." Though they are friends now, there are brief moments when Mike wonders if the sharpness behind some of Erin's comments is because she's reminded of his disloyalty to both her and his wife. His gratitude makes him a willful amnesiac, forgetful of these moments not long after they occur. There is also the allure of not being needed that keeps Mike attached to Erin.

"There wasn't anything to learn. You know that. And why wait three years to get mad about something that never happened?"

Erin shrugs one shoulder, as if only half agreeing with him. Her hair, which is bleached a dark, orangy blonde, is tightly pulled back off her forehead and held in place by a barrette at the crown of her head, a hairstyle that doesn't flatter her wide and pale forehead. "What does her doctor think?"

"She says Noreen's doing great. Physically, at least. Everything checks out. God, she was so happy when Stern first told her she was cancer free. So relieved."

"What does Noreen say after these accidents? How does she act?"

"Well, there's always some good reason. Like she needed to trim the hedges. Or forgot she broke the glass. I wondered if maybe she was doing it so she could get pills and zone out. You know, in case she was depressed. But she never takes the damned things."

"Maybe she's stockpiling them," Erin says, then takes a large bite of her sandwich.

Mike watches her chew, as he mentally masticates her comment. Of course. How stupid, he thinks, rising and shoving his chair back. The sound of the metal leg scrapping along the tile floor makes the young couple sitting at a table several over from theirs stare in his direction. "I have to go home."

Erin nods and gives him a look like she's handling a top-secret mission. "I'll take care of your classes," she says. And he thinks, isn't that just like her, to step in when she's needed? Thank God for the kindness of women.

Ten minutes later, he pulls into his driveway but Noreen's car isn't there. Could she have gone to the real estate office? Or maybe the botanic garden? Did she mention any errands she had? Mike can't recall. He runs into the house. In the downstairs bathroom, he finds a full bottle of some pills for a prescription in Noreen's name. In the upstairs bathroom, he finds the two most recent prescriptions, lurking in plain sight. He dumps all the pills down the toilet and flushes. Then he throws the empty bottles across the room and sits on the toilet seat with his head in his hands.

After several moments pass, Mike rises and puts the empty bottles back into their places. In the kitchen, he stares at the butcher block full of knives on the counter. He picks it up and shoves it all the way to the back of the center island where Noreen keeps gadgets she rarely uses. The sink is filled with dishes and the swampy smell of a dirty drain hovers above it. Mike takes a good look around the

kitchen, at the food-stained white countertops; the dried debris beneath the gas stove's cast-iron grates. Beyond the kitchen, the glass-covered dining room table is covered with old mail, newspapers, plates, and the crumbs of past meals. In the living room the TV is off, but he often comes home to it on, knowing that Noreen has spent the day absorbed in shows on useless celebrities, programs she would have never enjoyed watching before.

In the garage, he looks around and moves anything that could be dangerous into his workshop before locking the door on it all. Then he spots a length of extra clothesline hanging from a hook, and imagines Noreen with it around her neck dangling from a garage rafter. The truth is he can't protect her if that's what she really wants to do. For all he knows, at this very moment, she's driving 95mph on 81 North, planning to ram herself into a highway divider. Mike walks slowly to the house, past weed-filled flowerbeds that were once immaculately mulched and tended, with each flower and plant having enough room around it to allow it to flourish. Back in the house and upstairs in his office, he shuts the door behind him. At his computer he conducts a number of searches on breast cancer and post-mastectomy depression. A few minutes into his investigation, he takes out a pad of paper from his desk and scribbles some notes on it.

Several hours later, the sound of Noreen's car pulling into their driveway wakes him from a nap on his re-

cliner. Mike leaves his office to meet her downstairs.

"Where were you?" he asks her rubbing his eyes to clear his mind of sleep.

"Nowhere exciting," she says.

"What time is it?"

"Almost 4:00 p.m. Why?"

"Perfect. We have to go to Owego." He takes her unhurt hand in a firm grip and pulls her toward the door.

"I'm not going anywhere," she says, holding her ground and trying to shake her hand loose from his grasp. "Mike. Cut it out."

"No. You have to come with me."

"Why?"

He thinks. "It's my job."

"Is something wrong?"

"Sort of. It's just a meeting."

"In Owego?"

"Something to do with bio teachers from other schools," he says.

"So go by yourself."

"Can't you just humor me and come? I want your company."

Noreen looks skeptical but finally allows Mike to lead her out to his car. He drives them to the Coburn Library on Main Street in Owego, a ride that takes over forty minutes. Mike tunes the radio to the country station Noreen likes, to fill the silence between them. He watches her in between staring ahead at the traffic, hoping to catch the slightest toe tap or head nod to the beat, or a mouthing of sappy lyrics. God he hates country music.

A sign taped to the front door of the library tells him the way and he leads his wife to a room down a hall.

The door is open and nine women sit on gray folding chairs in a circle. Hanging on the walls are irregularly placed posters touting the benefits of reading or of library membership, one of which features a large cartoon owl that winks wisely at Mike. At the far end of the room, a table is situated against the wall. On it is a box of coffee and next to that a flat box of donuts. Two of the women are bald but wear bright-colored scarves around their heads. Three have on wigs, and the rest look normal like Noreen. But who is to say what's underneath it all?

Mike walks into the room but Noreen stops just inside the doorway. She starts backing out, but Mike grips her uninjured hand. Then he lets go and holds his own hands out, palms up, as if supplicating an armed thief. "You stay," he tells her. "I'll go. Please." He says this word again, studies her face that's as blank as one in a portrait painting. Finally, she nods, a movement so small it's barely visible. She takes a step into the room and Mike stands aside.

Three of the women rise and walk toward them. They smile in welcome like surviving saints, before laying hands on Noreen and guiding her into their circle.

## Skyscraper in the Wind

Cathy Krizik

Chatter turned to silence as twenty women encircled me. Most bowed their heads, while a handful snuck me a smile. Trapped dead center, I shifted from foot to foot, flushed and antsy. I was supposed to be touched by their kindness, but the truth was, I hated prayer chambers. They reeked of creepy tent revivals on TV, where preachers in white suits spit scripture and women swoon as they're overtaken by the Holy Spirit. I wanted to scream, "This isn't me. I'm a lesbian from New England." I wanted them to know that all this God business was a bunch of bullshit, and that prayer was nothing but a Band-Aid to make us all feel better.

But to say that would have been rude, and the hard, humiliating truth was, after twelve weeks in this metaphysics class, I wasn't so sure what I believed anymore. The idea of being bathed in good intentions wasn't altogether unpleasant—especially before my breast surgery in the morning.

Shoving my hands deep in my pockets, I closed my eyes. In a strong, sure voice, our teacher began with *Dear Sweet Spirit*. . . and my classmates joined her in an orchestra of voices. While some people muttered quietly under their breath, others spoke at full volume, and I was soon submerged in a humming beehive of prayer.

My first prayer was uttered as a freshman in college, sitting on the edge of my twin bed, counting days on a calendar. Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty, thirty-one. . . . When I hit forty-four, the calendar slid from my hands. With blood pounding in my ears, I began pleading. Out loud. "Please, God, oh please, if you're up there, I'll do anything; just please, God, don't let me be pregnant." The word "God" floated awkwardly in the air, and I remember feeling ashamed at my duplicity. I was supposed to be an avowed atheist, yet there I was—at the first sign of trouble—dragging God out of obscurity.

Through my twenties and thirties, prayer was reserved for moments of high drama, when—like the night I drank too much and found myself driving on black ice—life seemed to hang in the balance. Those desperate petitions always felt foreign on my tongue, and unbidden, as if they'd been locked in the basement and let out by some stranger. Generally, they began with a disclaimer—*God, I don't believe in you, but just in case you're up there*—and ended with some grand bargain—*You do this for me [say, keep me alive], and I'll do this for you [stop drinking, start volunteering, call my mother more often]*. Despite my momentary sincerity, it's fair to say, my promises were quickly forgotten once the trouble was averted.



Praying as a condoned form of begging changed when I stumbled into Inner Light Ministries—a woo-woo, new-thought, omnifaith spiritual community in the California redwoods. Despite a lifetime of misgivings about church, I went to a Sunday service at the invitation of a friend, and faster than you can say “but I don’t believe in God,” I became a regular. After a few months in the back pew, in the shadow of the balcony’s overhang, I spotted a class in the Sunday bulletin called “Fundamentals of Metaphysics.” The sixteen-week course promised personal healing, transformation, and in-depth exploration of universal spiritual principles. It made no mention of prayer or, for that matter, God, so I whipped out my Visa card and signed up.

In Week 5, prayer was introduced as one of the universal spiritual principles, and I took to intensive doodling. But as the weeks pressed on, I lifted my head from my notebook as prayer was ripped from the grip of religion and reconstituted into something I could actually stomach. Praying was no longer about reciting words by rote or surrendering power to some overbearing, paternalistic superjudge. It became a simple tool to redirect thought, a cognitive tune-up for the mind. So I tried it—in the privacy of my home and heart, anyway. Only after locking the front door and drawing the blinds would I sit cross-legged on the floor of my office, close my eyes, and silently move my lips.

My classmates, however, weren’t so reticent. Nothing inspired a roomful of prayer practitioners faster than a medical crisis. So when I opened my big mouth and announced that I wouldn’t be in class the following week because I was having surgery, I might as well have climbed a watchtower and bugled for the cavalry. Knapsack zippers went quiet. Twenty people stopped what they were doing and turned toward me.

When the teacher said, “Let’s do a prayer chamber,” I imagined the wheels of my Jetta spitting gravel as I peeled out of the parking lot. A prayer chamber? Weren’t they for people whose lives were in tatters? Was mine? I wasn’t worried about cancer. Somehow I knew—accurately as it turned out—that cancer was not my fate. But the scalpel scared me. The surgeon had been honest. “We’ll be going through the nipple. The aftermath is going to make your toes curl. It’s going to hurt.”

My car keys were heavy in my hand as I looked up and saw a tableau of compassionate, kind faces—waiting, willing, wanting to help. The keys jangled, then landed with a thud in the bottom of my purse.

En masse, we moved to an open area in the social hall. A circle formed around me and the praying began. Twenty people’s voices rose in unison as the sour smell of stress escaped my collar. At first, I felt pummeled by their words, dissonant and biting. I sloughed off their kindness as wishful thinking. Words—even if delivered with goose bump inducing



conviction—didn't have the power to change the composition of cells or redirect the surgeon's knife. I clenched my fists in my pockets and felt guilty that my classmates' good intentions were wasted on me.

But time passed and I acclimated. Taking a deep breath, I willed myself to relax. When I remembered that these weren't fundamentalist zealots, but kind people with generous hearts, something shifted. Their disparate voices merged into a whole, and I was submerged in a chorus of resonant tone. Words became a wave of something I couldn't name. Sensations in my body suddenly screamed louder than the cynical chatter of my mind. My insides were vibrating; my legs were shaking; every hair follicle was standing at full attention. And like a skyscraper in the wind, I was swaying in soft, gentle circles, blown by some invisible force. I pulled my hands from my pockets and widened my stance to keep from tumbling over. With my palms open to the swelling prayer, it occurred to me that this chamber was exactly where I needed—where I wanted—to be.

Their words were medicine. I was being tended to. Lifted up and loved.

As the voices went quiet, I blinked my eyes wide and shook my head to clear it. My face was hot; my mouth was dry. I flapped my hands and rolled my shoulders to discharge the electricity shooting down my arms and legs. My entire body was quivering. One by one, my classmates hugged me and wished me well, their warm arms tethering me back down to earth.

Afterward, sitting in my car in the now empty parking lot, I stared out the window in wonder. What just happened? At the start of the prayer, I'd been like bone-dry soil—unyielding, crusted, and crack-hard. Drops of nourishing water had skated on my surface, repelled and unwelcome. But when I softened, allowing in the kindness, the hope, the love, I drank with a thirst I didn't know I had. As I drove home, winding along the deep ocean's edge, I wondered what was at work in that prayer chamber. Quantum physics? God? Love? And, was there a difference?

# Choose Your Adventure

Ned Balbo

*What kind of traveler are you?*

—Tourist guide quiz

## 1. Start Here

*Are you a very adventurous person?*

Not very. Risk is something I avoid.  
I watch the traffic on its slow advance  
toward crosswalks empty of pedestrians. . . .  
The flashing countdown makes me paranoid.

*Are you afraid of heights?*

The airships of the past  
float, gleaming, through the sky  
inflammable at last,  
inviolable and gray.

*Would you rather shop or read?*

My currency is words: they buy me time,  
each page a fraction of my fortune's worth.  
Interest accrues with every borrowed rhyme—  
They multiply, encircling the Earth.

*Do you like to be a part of the action?*

The action follows me. Another witness  
casts the dice and bets against the reckless,  
wrong, and dissolute, but finds more solace  
in a stranger or an empty glass.

*What's your favorite accessory?*

My constant companion, my familiar,  
tiger-striped shadow, sentry lost in sleep,  
snow-throated occupier of low terrain  
who stakes his claim by kneading common ground,  
thumbed stalker of crumpled post-it notes and bedclothes,  
vigilant thief on watch for signs of life.

*Are you an athletic person?*

The skeleton beneath my skin  
emerges from its cage of flesh,  
triumphant, till the wind returns  
to sift the bones from dust and ash.

## 2. Your Results

### The Adventure Junkie

*You're not afraid of anything! For you,  
"good times" depend on how fast you can go!  
The Garden of the Gods waits at the summit—  
You see yourself on top from far below.*

### The Retail Enthusiast

*That Duchess on the wall is not your last—  
You're a genuine Retail Enthusiast.  
Your legacy's sure to enrich your sons.  
Check out that god and seahorse cast in bronze!*

### The Fun Fanatic

*You'll ride a railway straight up to the sky  
because it's fun. You'll sky-dive just for laughs  
then look for standing stones or cenotaphs—  
There's pleasure in surviving history.*

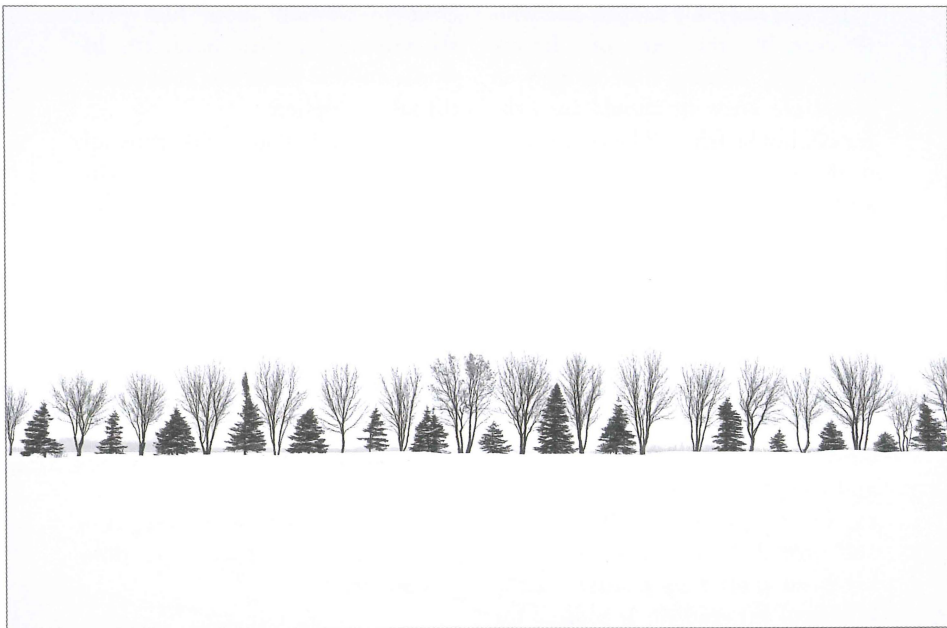
### The Intellectual

*Igneous rock, from magma formed,  
speak now: was anybody harmed?  
The cavern streams are crystalline,  
but you're afraid of jumping in—  
Confirm their source, and then: begin.*

## The Photographer

*What do you see? The burnt magnesium  
burns dark away till everything goes dark—  
From tintype soldiers' torn-up uniforms,  
iconic faces, kin, and Kodak kids,  
(the world a splendid backdrop for their deeds)  
to lost trails, mountain views, ghost town museums  
waiting years for you to capture them  
and turn your back. Before you've made your mark,  
time speeding faster than you ever thought,  
unsure what you'll remember or forget,*

*you photograph what hasn't happened yet.*



## Auto, Not Shipwreck

*Anthony R. Lusvardi, S.J.*

He reached for the ignition, but his fingers grasped only air. Nothing was where it should be. Piles of brochures, the contents of his now disemboweled briefcase—keys, coins, and a bag of plastic rosaries—were splayed over the ceiling, and the pedals, steering wheel, and emergency brake hovered overhead. The windshield hadn't shattered, but it bulged like a crinkly sheet of saran wrap, and grainy crushed glass scattered amidst everything gave a blue tint to the car interior. With the windshield and driver's side windows submerged in the frozen yellow-brown grass of the South Dakota prairie, he felt like he was floating—upside-down—inside a dimly lit aquarium.

He was okay, his seatbelt and winter coat, like the sheets of a freshly made bed, holding him snugly in place. He knew he should turn the car off, but he felt as if he were trying to do so with the electronic arm of an arcade game. It made him—tired. Tired of one more thing he didn't know how to do, tired because as his car rolled slowly down the embankment, his mind registering the dull crunch of metal and glass, he was already thinking about how to fit a trip to the repair shop into the week's packed schedule. He sighed and closed his eyes, and, as he did so, his fingers found the ignition and turned the key. Eyes still shut, his hand moved by instinct to the buckle of his seatbelt. It resisted for

a moment because the weight of his body prevented the mechanism from releasing; with a slight adjustment he relieved the pressure and was down on all fours on the ceiling of his car.

Outside the land hissed, the wind pressing the lifeless grass flat, the air full of sharp, half-frozen droplets. Someone was shimmying down the embankment, and a procession of vehicles crawled by above, drivers gawking through the sleet. The man sliding down the hill was shouting something, and it took Tim a moment to realize he was calling out to him.

"I'm OK," Tim shouted back, his mind jogging awake as he understood that the man was—unnecessarily—worried about him. Tim shouted again, then hesitated, his words muffled inside the vehicle's artificial atmosphere.

Heavy work boots and jeans appeared outside the passenger window—still intact—and then a face peered in, clean-shaven and pleasant; short wavy hair seemed more Middle Eastern than Lakota. He wore an oversized black hooded sweatshirt but no jacket. Tim was toggling the door handle, but he couldn't figure out whether to push or pull.

"I'm OK," he said again. "I just can't get out."

"Sit tight," the man said. "I've got an ax in my truck. I've done this before."



Tim felt relieved and then wondered, "Who keeps an ax in his truck?" He started gathering brochures and shoveling them into his briefcase—he'd have no time to place another order before Christmas, and the parish couldn't afford to waste them. He stuffed a few rosaries into his pockets, but those he had by the boxful in his office—every church group and pious grandmother in America, it seemed, sent plastic rosaries to the reservations.

"Do you have gloves?" The man in the black sweatshirt was back, peering through the window, eyes darting over the interior of the vehicle. "Put them on. It will protect your hands. Now turn that way and cover your face." The ax against the window was louder than the noise the car had made tumbling down the hill, its impact radiating through the enclosure. It took several blows before the glass finally broke. Tim felt like he was in a dentist's chair, unable to see what was happening but aware of drilling and scraping from the vibrations in his head.

"OK, now slide toward the window, and I'll pull you out," the man said and tugged at Tim's shoulders as he crab-walked through the window. Tim felt as if he had suddenly been ejected from a space pod onto a harsh and foreign planet.

The man in the sweatshirt was looking him over, brushing grains of aqua glass off his shoulders. "I already called an ambulance just to be sure," he said, and Tim nodded, in no position to argue with any-

one about anything now. The man's sweatshirt had an ARPD—Antelope River Police Department—insignia on it. Tim noticed a brown speckle in the white of his right eye, like a tear shed by the iris. Another cop was now quickstepping down the embankment, this one in uniform.

"We gotta keep this traffic moving," the first cop said. "People slow down to stare, and we'll have another accident." Steam rising from the sleet hitting the Subaru's warm undercarriage made the accident look worse than it was. "People forget how to drive in the snow," the cop muttered, and then, glancing at Tim, added, "Sorry, Father, I didn't mean you."

It hadn't occurred to Tim to take offense. The officer jotted down Tim's phone number and address in a notebook. The thick mat of dead grass was slick and squishy underfoot as they shifted their weight to keep warm. "How long you been here, Father?" he asked.

Tim had been in his job since August. "You don't have to call me 'Father,'" he said and explained he wasn't a priest yet, just a Jesuit scholastic, still in training. Being on the reservation was supposed to be part of that training, but the week before he arrived, the priest who'd been pastor had checked into a recovery program, and Tim had become administrator. They'd filled in with visiting priests, a retired theology professor from Omaha and now Father Deepak, an Indian—subcontinent, not reservation—who was generous, good-natured, and utterly incompre-

hensible. "I couldn't understand the penance Father gave me," Gloria Yellow Eyes confided to Tim after confessions the previous Saturday, "so I just said the whole rosary."

"What church are you at, Father?" the officer asked.

"Sacred Heart," he said. Then he added, "St. Jude's, too, in Cut Meat Creek. But not much happens there."

"That's where I was baptized." The officer perked up. "My family's from Cut Meat. Yeah, my grandma, Lucille—Lucille Long Pumpkin—she goes to church sometimes."

Tim wasn't sure if he knew her. Some weeks they had only two or three for Mass at St. Jude's, mostly elderly. Cut Meat Creek, however, was the reservation's most destitute community—they'd had a rash of teen suicides there the year before Tim arrived—so nobody wanted to close the church. "What's your name?" Tim asked.

"Officer Redfish," he began, then seemed to correct himself. "Everybody calls me Hawkeye." It turned out that Hawkeye hadn't been on duty that afternoon, just happened to be in the car behind Tim.

Hawkeye gestured down the road. "Ambulance is here. Take whatever you need from your vehicle, and we can get you home." The door, it turned out, opened normally; it had just been locked.

"Thanks for helping me out, Officer Redfish," Tim said, stepping away from the ruined car.

Hawkeye had pulled up his hood against the cold. "No problem, Father."

He shook his head. "In this job you see a lot worse."

On the way home he received a call from Bud Running Bull but let it go to voicemail. Bud—whose real name was Cyril, which is how he introduced himself to Tim, though everybody else called him "Bud"—was the church's putative choir director. Bud claimed to have assembled a half dozen singers for the Midnight Mass at Sacred Heart—Tim still had no clue what to do for music at St. Jude's—but the correspondence between what Bud promised and what Bud actually did was not always one to one. In August, on Tim's first Sunday on the reservation, Bud—a bit puffy in the face, hair the color of a penny, which Tim suspected was dyed—had approached him after Mass and said that since he'd retired he'd felt a calling to help with church music. He'd felt the call—he used the word "vocation"—under the previous pastor and had even attended a workshop on liturgy in Sioux Falls, but Father Rice's sudden departure put everything on hold. The parishes desperately needed better music—Sunday Masses were palpably depressing—so Tim was elated someone was stepping forward to volunteer. People like Cyril Running Bull were exactly the sort of lay partners he'd need to turn the parish around.

They scheduled a meeting that week, and Bud showed up with an armful of sheet music, hymnals, and documents he'd printed off the Vatican website. Tim was impressed and

assured Bud of his full support; he knew he was just getting started and didn't expect the music to be perfect; he was not musical himself and with so many other things to learn so quickly, he thought Bud's calling was providential; he'd love it if he could work in a few hymns in Lakota. The next Sunday, Bud showed up but had a cold. The following Sunday, he said he hadn't prepared anything because he wasn't sure if Tim wanted him to lead the singing or not. On the third Sunday, Bud was ready, but when it came time to announce the first hymn, he launched into a spontaneous fifteen-minute disquisition on the new translations of the Mass coming out that Advent. Only when Tim began walking down the aisle toward the lectern did Bud abruptly start warbling into the microphone, having neglected to inform the congregation what hymn he would be singing.

And then the letters began: three, four, five-page manifestos containing lengthy autobiographical digressions detailing his personal and professional accomplishments and implying—but never quite saying so outright—that Tim was standing in the way of what needed to be accomplished in the parish, musically and otherwise, that certain things had been better under Father Rice, that perhaps behind it all Tim was unappreciative of Lakota culture, maybe a little racist, and not quite a faithful Catholic either, wondering—just wondering—what the bishop would think if he knew about the goings-on of the An-

telope River Indian Reservation. He signed all his letters "Chief Cyril W. Running Bull," the only Lakota Tim had met who referred to himself as "chief." He managed to lead the singing twice in a four-month period.

Tim could vividly imagine what would transpire at the Midnight Mass—he had dreams about it—but it seemed too late to do anything, as if he were on the deck of the *Titanic* and could already feel cool air wafting off the iceberg. Bud would arrive at 11:57 and announce that he had a sore throat; the two members of the choir who did show up—who would not have rehearsed—would start off shaky, hitting not quite the right keys; a brave soul or two might hum along, but as the choir's confidence faded, eighth notes would morph into half notes, quarter notes into whole, and whole notes would come to feel like the purgatory of a lifelong sinner. Before they'd finished the first verse of "O Come, All Ye Faithful," Sacred Heart's congregation of three hundred would fall as silent as if the cantor had just announced that singing causes lung cancer—though you'd still be able to hear the shuffling of feet, coughs and whispered conversations, sunflower husks spit onto the floor, and the tearing of paper, toddlers the only people still interested in the hymnals. In August, he'd had great hopes for Christmas—the best opportunity of the year to bring the lost back to the fold—but now he just prayed to get through it. Bud's voicemail could wait until tomorrow.

Father Deepak met him at the door of the Jesuit community's doublewide. Tim had called ahead to inform him of the accident. "It happens so often with the missionaries in my place," he said, shaking his head. "My province lost two men because of wrecks. Very bad, especially in the mountains. Come." He reached out his hands to help Tim with the armful of items he had salvaged from the car. "Of course, it happened even to St. Paul. Shipwreck, not auto." And then, "Come, we are having Mass."

Tim had forgotten about Mass. The tribe had issued a no travel advisory as the storm rolled in that afternoon, and Tim had called the daily Mass regulars and baptism class participants to tell them all events were off. But he'd stayed at the office, using the extra hours of quiet to catch up; they'd had two funerals the day before and another was scheduled for the end of the week, so he was behind. At Mass, Tim picked grains of blue glass out of the folds in his sweater and felt as if he were watching himself from some distant vantage point. Then during the intercessions, Father Deepak prayed in thanksgiving for Tim's escape from harm, and he felt a chill, like cold water down his back, and he realized that even though he hadn't been going very fast, if a car had been coming from the opposite direction when he began to swerve, if he'd skidded into a road sign or a tree, if he'd flipped onto a fence post or a stump—

And then another thought hit him: throughout the entire crash

he hadn't said a single prayer. Not a Hail Mary as he started to slide, not an Act of Contrition as he slowly tumbled down the embankment, not a word to his guardian angel as he crawled backwards from the car unscathed: nothing. And when was the last time he'd been to confession? The chill became a deadness in his gut, as if a corner of his stomach had been tied off and necrosis had set in. He felt far from the passion of the novitiate, when he'd first taken his vows. He hadn't lost his faith, didn't feel tempted to some other life, but bad old habits had begun to nibble at the edges of his consciousness; poverty, chastity, and obedience had started to seem, not chains exactly, but one more thing to worry about, like Sacred Heart's electric bill or the security light at St. Jude's that kept getting broken. He felt relieved to have escaped harm but not particularly grateful, and he tried to pray—but was too begrudging, too vague, too tired—for himself.

The next morning he woke up with a scratchy throat and crust around his nostrils, feeling achy, like he'd just gotten off an exceptionally creaky wooden roller coaster. He'd felt the hints of a cold for a week but had held it off, as if by running fast enough he'd be able to evade it, but now, snowed in and with nowhere to go, his body's defenses had powered down. He thought of all the things he needed to do before Christmas but couldn't—a feeling not unlike being suspended upside-down in his car,



wheels in the air and engine running. He spent the morning on the phone with the insurance company and had just drifted off to sleep on the couch under a pile of afghans when Thelma Stands called to ask him about buying poinsettias for the church. Fine, he told her, but she wanted to tell him about the deal she'd negotiated at Henderson's with Alan, the manager—remember?—who, geeze, always gave her a good deal if she told him it was for the church, the same with the lilies at Easter, and if they needed to, probably they could get a deal on candy and fruit for the kids' goody bags, but Alverna Bordeaux was in charge of that, so she just didn't know, she didn't want to step on anyone's toes, geeze, people could be so sensitive sometimes, and she'd done the same thing with Ted, the manager of the Wal-Mart up in Pierre—remember?—when she'd gotten the new coffee maker for the kitchen—remember?—and it used to be that families would buy poinsettias as a memorial for their relatives, but this younger generation just doesn't keep up the traditions the way the elders did, and geeze, are you OK, I heard you were in an accident, Mike showed me a picture of your car on the Internet, and geeze it looked bad, and did he know who was going to lead the music at the Midnight Mass, because in the old days—remember?—they used to have, geeze, a real big choir, and I heard they were thinking of getting rid of the Midnight Mass, but around here nobody goes to church

on Christmas morning because everybody goes to the Midnight Mass, that's the tradition. He got up from the couch and poured himself a can of soup in the kitchen, setting the phone down on the counter and picking it up again occasionally to interject an "uh-huh" or "I know" or "that so?" Father Deepak walked past and grinned.

"I think it is Thelma, yes?" he said when Tim finally hung up.

At Mass that afternoon Deepak preached on the difference between hope and optimism. "Sometimes optimism may even be a form of blindness," he said, "so that we do not look for what we cannot see." Deepak's enunciation had improved, Tim thought, or maybe he'd just gotten used to the accent.

After Mass, Irv, the groundskeeper at Sacred Heart, who was overseeing St. Jude's since Tim had fired the previous caretaker, called to ask about mousetraps. St. Jude's was infested, a problem the previous caretaker had—typically—ignored. Two of the freshly graduated volunteers who were working on the reservation that year had implored him to get the humane traps that allowed you to release the rodents after capture. Irv wasn't sure where in the state of South Dakota one could obtain such traps. "If you want, I could get a crew together and put up a teepee out front. Mice'll probably be cold if you make 'em go outside in winter." It was only then that Tim realized Irv was really calling to tease him.



"If the mice could sing, I might let them stick around," Tim said.

He got through the funeral the next day, did a make-up class for the baptism families, and finished the bulletins for Christmas. On Saturday Father Deepak drove him to Rapid City to pick up the rental car—or, rather, he drove Father Deepak, since he had doubts about how sympathetically the South Dakota highway patrol would view the subcontinent's driving customs. He managed a stop at the cathedral for confession after he picked up the rental. On the drive back, he tried calling a Jesuit classmate who was teaching at a high school in Milwaukee, but he was boarding a plane to go home for the holidays and couldn't talk. He got through the baptisms and parish dinner on Sunday and spoke to his parents by phone that evening, but he was tired and felt like he should have had more to say. He knew they wished he'd be home for Christmas, especially since he'd lost his last grandparent that fall—another factor making December so chaotic—but they'd never say so. He didn't tell them about the accident.

He got Thelma Stands her check for the poinsettias. On Christmas Eve the ex-caretaker at St. Jude's called to ask if they'd have cookies and cocoa after the Midnight Mass. "I don't know," Tim responded. "If you'd like to, that would be fine with me."

"Father Walt used to bring us cookies and cocoa," he said.

Tim made it to the grocery store before it closed, muttering to himself about co-dependency the whole time, and then picked up Deepak for the drive to St. Jude's, where the Midnight Mass was scheduled for 9 pm so they could make it to Sacred Heart by midnight. The night was crisp and peaceful, the roads quiet; the few gently falling snowflakes looked in the headlights like galaxies hurtling past the *Enterprise* when the starship went into warp speed. Dry, wispy snow swirled up off the shoulders as they passed.

"What do you think about music?" Tim asked Deepak as they turned off the state highway onto the BIA road to Cut Meat Creek.

He smiled and bobbed his head back and forth in the way Indians do.

"We can try," he said.

Tim bobbed his head in response, and Deepak laughed. The rest of the ride passed in comfortable silence, Tim's throat still scratchy from the cold. The parking lot was empty when they arrived and the town surprisingly still. Tim hypothesized that at any given time a third of Cut Meat Creek's residents were under the influence and wondered if the number was higher or lower on Christmas Eve. He walked around the building, checking for damage since he'd last been there. A chunk had been torn from the plywood covering the entrance to the basement of a now abandoned rectory, but the two-by-fours that held it in place were still intact; the junkies who used the basement to smoke dope and drink—and

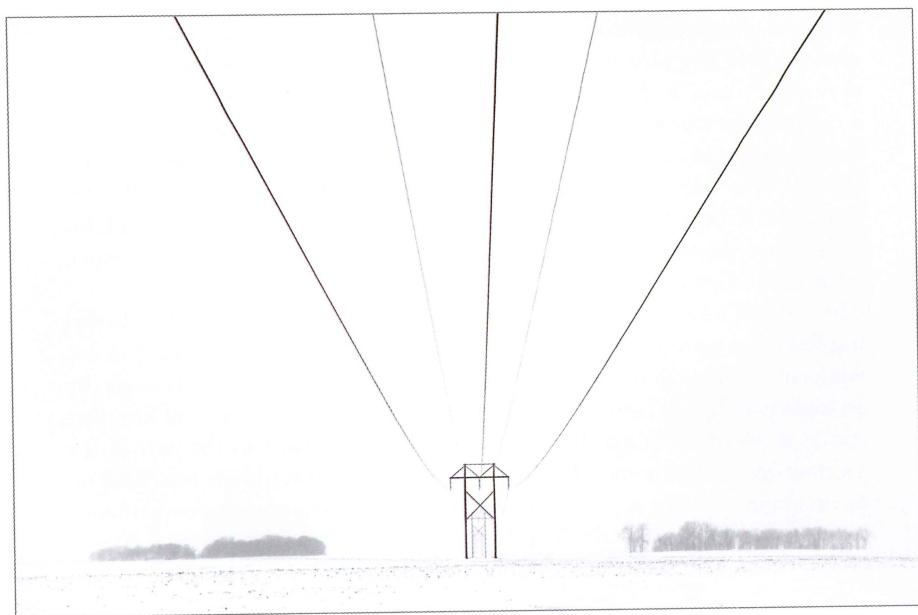
occasionally attempt suicide—hadn't gotten in. A tribal court was preventing the building from being torn down in order to make some point about the extent of its jurisdiction.

The church itself—long and narrow, neither beautiful nor ugly but functional—consisted of a sanctuary on one side separated by a retractable wall from a kitchen and hall on the other. They'd arrived with plenty of time to change the altar cloths from purple to white, set out the cookies and cocoa, and sweep up two dead mice affixed to one of Irv's sticky traps. They were paging through hymnals looking for Christmas songs when the first congregants arrived, a youngish couple in sweatpants that Tim had never seen be-

fore. They went straight to the front of the church. "Must be Protestants," Tim thought.

Tim left the hymnals to chat with the couple; he'd picked familiar songs, so if he didn't practice it would still be OK. The man proved particularly jolly, chuckling at Tim's lame attempts at humor. In addition to sweatpants, he wore a winter coat, not quite big enough to close in front and a T-shirt with a tear near the bottom that exposed a patch of the nearly perfect globe of his belly.

"Her grandma's Catholic," the man explained good-naturedly, "but I'm—what's it called?" He looked at the woman; she mumbled something very shyly, giggling a bit. "Piscopal," he said.



"Well, we're glad you're here," Tim said.

"We weren't sure what time church was, so we thought we'd come early."

"I wish more people thought like you," Tim said, and the man chuckled in response.

A pair of teenage girls arrived, pausing at the holy water font, dipping their hands and giggling, unsure what to do next; a grandmother Tim recognized took her accustomed place in the back row, surrounded by a brood of children teeming over and under the pew and each other. By the time Mass began, the two back rows were as packed as a subway car at rush hour and the rest of the pews—excepting the Jolly Protestant and companion—were as sparsely populated as the Dakota plains.

Tim announced with as much pep in his voice as he could muster that the opening hymn was "Number 81, O Come, All Ye Faithful" and asked everybody to sing nice and loud since they didn't have a choir and he had a cold and he was sure they were all better singers than him anyway. He should have added that they were supposed to stand when the priest walked in because nobody knew what to do. In fact, as Mass went on Tim felt as if he and Deepak were being forced to act out the unabridged works of William Shakespeare before an audience that, it turns out, didn't speak a word of English. Father Deepak gave instructions for when to sit, stand, and kneel, but Tim had to repeat them because the Indian's accent remained incomprehensible;

even so, half the congregation didn't follow the instructions because they'd simply given up paying attention. At communion time he felt a pang of resentment toward the whole bloated holiday, all the extra work that went into the sentimental pageant, reinforcing another year of religious indifference with a sacramental candy cane.

"I've become Ebenezer Scrooge," he thought.

As Father Deepak was cleaning the vessels after communion, he stood up and asked in a gentle voice for everyone to join in "Number 86, Away in a Manger." A few hymnals opened, though the back pews remained stolid. As his throat grew dryer, he tried to compensate by raising his voice, hoping increased volume would encourage others to join in, but he was not a good singer and as the little Lord Jesus was laying down his sweet head, he lost the melody and had no idea how to find his way back, the tune oscillating up and down indiscriminately as he grasped for notes. No one was helping, and everyone was staring, impassively, at him. He felt a warm flush rise up through his neck and sweat begin to dampen his cassock.

He'd announced that they would sing two verses, so he charged on, like the light brigade, though by that time he was so far off key that not even a return to the part of the song he knew could get him back on course. He was now too embarrassed to lift his eyes from the hymnbook, thinking they might as well go ahead

and close the parish so that nobody else would ever have to repeat this terrible experience, when he heard, rather like the cattle lowing, more speaking than singing, another voice, tuneless as his own, rising from the front of the church, and he glanced up at the happy, helpful, guileless round face of the Jolly Protestant. He was standing—alone among the congregation—holding his hymnal in front of his face with both hands like a steering wheel and making forthright O's with his lips as he pronounced the words of the carol. Tim felt another flush, now not of shame or frustration, but of gratitude, and a sudden, brief constriction in his throat made him miss a word. Somebody else was trying. Maybe that was all he would accomplish that Christmas; no converts would be made; no life-altering insights taken from the incomprehensible sermon; nobody new would show up at Mass the following Sunday; he'd count forty-six dollars, fifty-two-cents, and a Chuck-E-Cheese token in the collection basket; but somebody else was there with him and was trying.

After Mass he noticed a voicemail from Chief Cyril W. Running Bull on his phone, but decided he would wait to check it; whatever the problem was, it was probably too late to solve. "Hey, Father," a voice called out to him as he was extinguishing the candles around the altar. "Did you get some cocoa?"

It took Tim a moment to register the speaker's identity. It was Hawk-

eye, the cop from the accident, and he was carrying an extra Styrofoam cup. Tim hadn't seen him come in.

"Yeah, I snuck in late," he explained. "I was gonna bring my grandma, but she's been sick, so I decided why not just go and see Father Tim."

Tim promised to bring communion to Hawkeye's grandma the next day. He scribbled down Hawkeye's number. "You already have mine," he said, and they both laughed.

He collected what unused bulletins he could find for redistribution at Sacred Heart and emptied a Coke can someone had left under a pew. The last of the congregants were trickling out into the night. One of the grandmothers from the back pew touched Tim's arm. He'd forgotten her name, but she'd told him once she had a son in prison.

"So beautiful," she said and tottered heavily after her grandchildren.

- 1) I named it my never-summer,  
my 13th year, it was the 90s,

red eyes glowed across the field  
and Nat and I made our Marlboro mansion,

drew a circle with found sticks, blessed ourselves  
the Saints of Ohio.

- 4) At the Cleveland Museum of Art, I couldn't stop  
looking at Pollack's *Autumn Rhythm*—  
that everything-is-once rupture

makes trees sizzle, the garlic  
pop louder in the pan, makes the hour  
neon all pink and flowering from my fingers.

- 2) That summer I crawled through a hole in the fence, found a river  
and dove in—became a Siren  
of red cinnamon, arms like wands, legs, a frog's.

\_\_\_) Infection glows the wound how  
teeming a tooth's lit nerve.

- 5) "mountainous regions . . . masturbation, unusual food  
could trigger the symptoms," says an expensive academic book  
I got from the library—

"[a]utumn seemed to be an especially dangerous time."

\_\_\_) My palms kissed the lit stove.

- 8) The cult of the past—no,  
not exactly: the body as "living museum  
of pathology." Let me try again—that needling  
nothing too alive.

Please watch: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=tjLoOmDddgk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tjLoOmDddgk)

The video streams sentimental  
cattails and fog-wrapped trees, I know, though  
2:37 recalls my favorite scene in *Days of Heaven*



when the 3 fugitives boat downstream and Laura  
says in her boyish gravel-  
ly voice— “The sun looks ghostly when there’s mist  
on the river and everything’s quiet.”

- 3) I remember Nat’s basement  
bedroom, that glazed sea

of pot smoke and nose rings,  
I cradled a bottle of Boone’s

between my knees, the room  
swayed in blurred waves

and I woke to stars  
shocking skin—

naked for fishnets  
and a Bikini Kill T-shirt

are nothing in a northeast Ohio  
blizzard. I heard wind

weird the trees, the air  
cracked cold. I don’t know

how my body slipped  
from the party, landed

in a jangle  
of snowlight.

When I knocked  
on the side door, Nat whispered,

*What the hell  
are you doing out there?*

- 6) other risk factors include  
“a love letter, a picture . . . a song, hearing  
the accent of one’s native country.”

- 9) "[The sufferer] seeks solitude, during which he can caress his favorite chimera," describes the library book.
- 10) Winter-love and hearth-love—I recall our hands in the snowlands of Ohio.

\_\_\_) "the cure would leave us mutilated"

- 11) Over veggie rice and chicken curried on long sticks,  
I ask my friend Nkemdilim,  
*Which decade would you time travel to?*, imagining  
my own response—the 60s with its daisy psychadelics  
and peace marches.  
Nkemdilim says with a laugh, *The future*,  
and I feel my pale skin burn.
- 7) Those who suffer  
from the disorder experience the world  
as simulacra and uninhabitable, though—

**Note:** Jean-Martin Charcot called his museum at Salpêtrière a "living museum of pathology." Roth describes the impulse behind creating the museum: "With photographs and sculpture, the terror of illness and the capacities of medicine to overcome that terror could be rendered permanent" (72). Roth notes, "The painful disruptions of hysteria and the cool display of disease are inverted metaphors for one another. . . . Both exemplify that desire which can become pathological: the desire to overcome memory and forgetting. . . ." (73).

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## All the Home I Have

*Alison Clement*

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Aunt Feeney died and left me her land and her little house, and I came out to Oregon with my husband, Merle. Merle had lost his job at the plant and, like that wasn't bad enough, I got word that my first husband was getting released for good behavior, they said, although I found that hard to believe. Then, out of the blue, my Great Aunt Feeney died and left me her place, a little cabin, they said, near the Oregon coast. All these things happened at once like it was designed by somebody with an idea, *Move to Oregon*, and we didn't have any choice but to go along with it.

We left Paxton, Illinois, in our green Mercury. We had a pint of whisky in the glove box and a cooler of sandwiches and beer in the backseat. We had the radio on, loud, and the windows rolled down. I had the feeling of excitement I always got before a big change, but Merle wasn't like me. He lived in one place all his life. And he never traveled anywhere either, except for Vietnam. He never even went to Chicago before. He never went to Missouri, and that's just on the other side of the Mississippi River. He didn't know about going someplace new, that you get to start over: white and perfect, like Sister Agatha used to describe a pure soul, like a bottle of pure white milk with nothing bad in it, just white.

Leaving made him nervous. "If we don't like it, Rae, we'll go back home."

We drove across the country, hardly stopping. We pulled into motel parking lots and slept in our car. We drove across the plains and through the desert. We drove over the continental divide and Merle said that on the east side of it, all the water fed into the Atlantic Ocean but now, on the west side, the water went to the Pacific. He drove, while I looked out the window or at him. He was a dark, handsome, quiet man, and I loved him in a wild way that couldn't be helped. I felt like I could ride in that car forever. It was spring in Oregon. Back home my first husband was getting released from prison, but out here the flowers were blooming.

After three days, we got to the Pacific Ocean and turned south. We drove along the coastline. We passed people in rubber boots digging in the sand for clams. We passed little shacks with all the paint worn off and broken-down old cars and rusted-out trucks parked outside. We passed big fancy houses, too. Usually they put the big fancy houses one place and the little shacks someplace else, but here they put them together. We drove along a steep mountain cliff, high above the ocean. I wanted to pull over and look at that ocean but Merle was in a hurry now.

We drove seven miles south of a town called Yachats, to a valley named Klickitat, and turned onto a gravel road. The road was narrow and curvy, and on both sides of it

were huge trees. I asked Merle are these redwood trees, but he said no. He said redwood is from California and it's even bigger. At first, as we drove up the valley, there were a few little houses. There was a rusted-out trailer. There was a basketball hoop nailed to a tree. Then we started to climb, and there were no houses and nothing but the little road we drove on. Pretty soon we were looking down over steep cliffs.

"Are you sure this is the right way?"

"Will you just look at it," he said. "It's like something from a book. It's like a picture postcard."

The road was so narrow that if you thought about something else for a second, or say you reached down to turn the radio station, you'd run off the cliff and be instantly killed.

"I don't think anybody lives back here, Merle. This is the middle of nowhere."

"I think it's just up ahead."

"Do you see any houses?" I asked. "I don't see any houses."

We had been driving along the edge of a cliff, and then suddenly the valley got wider, the cliff turned into a hill, and we were looking at a meadow. That's where we found Aunt Feeney's cabin, on the side of the hill overlooking the valley. There wasn't even a driveway. You just pulled to the side of the road and parked there.

We sat in the car, looking at what we could see from the road. It was nothing but a little shack, that's all.

"The will called it a *cabin*. It said we inherited a cabin, didn't it, Merle?"

Merle didn't answer at first. Then,

finally, he said, "The roof looks good." He added, "I guess you can put a wood shake roof on a house out here without worrying about it burning down." And then he was quiet, thinking of this.

I got the whisky out of the glove box and took a drink.

It wasn't raining that day but the sun wasn't out either. The sky was heavy and pale. After a while, we got out of the car and followed a little path through the weeds, walked down slippery wooden steps to a short trail that led, finally, to a rusted metal gate. We opened the gate and walked inside a fence. Aunt Feeney had a yard in there, but now it was all overgrown with weeds up to your waist. There were three old apple trees. There was an orchard nearby too, but the trees were still young. It was April, and they were full of flowers.

We walked up the crooked steps to her porch. We stood there, and while Merle looked out over the meadow to the creek below, I rubbed the windowpane with my sleeve and peered inside at the smallest, shabbiest, most pitiful-looking house I had ever seen. I turned to Merle, and I was alarmed by the happy look on his face.

"Are you sure we got the right place?" I swept my arm over the view, showing him. But I knew as well as him that this was it, our inheritance.

It didn't seem right to just open up somebody's door and go inside, whether they're dead or not, but the door wasn't locked, and Merle pushed it open and went in, and I followed

him. It was cold in there. It was dark and small. It had a cold, empty, wet smell that made you think of dead things buried in the dirt, dampness in the lungs, and things left outside and forgot about.

Merle went to every window, pulling the curtains open, and we stood, looking around. It was only just the one room. I knew it was a small house, but still you expect more than one room all by itself. You expect a kitchen and a living room and a bedroom, at least, and you plan on a hall too, to get from one room to another. You expect a bathroom, instead of an outhouse outside, with two holes cut in a board.

"Jesus," I said. "How could anybody live here?"

There was a kitchen sink and a propane stove and refrigerator on one side of the room, and on the other side, the living room side, an old plaid couch that needed to be thrown out, along with a wooden rocking chair and a coffee table, handmade by someone who didn't know what he was doing. In the corner of one room was a bathtub. "A bathtub!" said Merle, like wasn't it something how the house came with its own bathtub. I felt on the wall for the light switch but there was no light switch. There were no light switches anywhere and no electric outlets. There was no electricity. Which is something you just take for granted when you're talking about a house where people live, that it will have electricity and a switch on the wall that you flip so the lights come on.

There was a ladder going up to a loft, and Merle climbed it. I watched him disappear and I thought how men can be sometimes, not a care in the world, because they don't understand things the way we do. I put my hands on my hips and stood looking up to where Merle had disappeared. I thought men are part animal anyway. They could sleep in their car and hardly notice.

Merle poked his head out of the opening. "It's the bedroom!" But he saw my face and added, "Oh, it needs some fixing up and all. It's rough."

Rough was not the word for it. It was a hole in time that took you back to the days of cowboys and mountain men and women who buried their babies in unmarked graves: desperate people who lived short, cold, dirty, miserable lives. People who lived like they did because they didn't have a choice. Because they had to. But all Merle saw was a big fun house, a fort with woods around it and a creek out front where he could fish.

"We're almost to California," I said. "Why don't we just keep going?" Merle didn't understand that you can change your mind about things. "Let's get back in the car, Merle, and keep driving." And, because Merle is a practical man, I added, "There's sure to be more work in California than here."

Merle climbed back down the ladder. He said, "We could barely afford the gas it took to get here, Rae. Think about it."

An old dusty woodstove sat in the middle of the room, with a stack of



newspapers next to it, and firewood and kindling piled nearby. Merle squatted in front of the woodstove and began to make a fire. He said wasn't it strange to think of Mrs. Feeney getting these things ready, and now here they were, but she was gone. Even though I never met her, still I should have given a moment of respect to her memory, but I didn't. I crossed my arms over my chest. I thought of the word *cabin*: that's what the will called it. A cabin, I thought, is cute and clean. A cabin is made the way it is on purpose. When you go to a cabin, you relax. You don't look around and see hundreds of things that need doing. You sit by the fire and drink beer. I said, "An inheritance, Merle, is supposed to bring you *up*, so you live better than you did before."

He set wadded-up newspaper in the stove and kindling on top of it. He said we might as well give it a chance, now that we came all this way. "And if it doesn't work out," he said, "we can sell it." He struck a match and lit the fire, then turned to point out the window in back of me. "You see those trees out there? They got to be worth something. If we give it a chance and it doesn't work out, then we can sell that timber out there, Rae, and I bet then we'll end up with enough to go back home and start over."

I didn't tell him how you don't start over by going back to what you just escaped.

That first night, it began to rain. The rain fell on the room above us and on the porch outside and on the fields and trees and on the creek. You might think rain falls the same everywhere, but it doesn't. It falls different on each of those things, and it has a different sound. It rained all night and all day and all the next night and all the next day. It rained like that's all it knew. Sometimes the rain came down hard and straight, and sometimes it came down soft. Sometimes the wind blew so much the rain seemed to be coming from every direction. Sometimes it blew so hard the trees bent sideways like they would break.

Every day Merle went down to the creek. He didn't care if it rained or not, he'd go out and catch a fish and bring it home and cook it on the propane stove. "Can you beat this," he'd say.

I told myself it would wear off. A place you go on vacation is different than a place you'd want to live at, and this was not a place to live. You might take your summer vacation here, if you were the type that liked to rough it, but nobody in their right mind would live here if they had a choice. Meanwhile, I tried to be a good sport. What you don't want is to make it an issue. If something is an issue then the other guy will fight you even if he knows he's wrong. You have to let him see things for himself so it's not your idea but his. I swept and mopped and scrubbed.

I washed the windows and cleaned out the stove. I went to the bathroom in the outhouse, and I took baths in the living room. I ran out in the rain to pick flowers from the yard and wildflowers from the meadow. I cut apple blossoms from the trees in the orchard and daffodils from the field and put them in a jar on the table. I made the best of things.

We didn't have electricity. We couldn't make toast or dry our hair, iron our clothes, watch TV, nothing. Our stove and refrigerator were propane, and for light we used the kinds of lamps you fill up with kerosene, the kind people keep in case there's a tornado and the electricity goes off. Without real lights, we went to bed early.

I could hardly sleep. Merle said he loved the quiet, but it wasn't quiet. I laid in bed at night listening to the sound of the creek and the things in the woods croaking, hooting, running, squealing, thumping, while Merle slept beside me like a baby. The moonlight came in the window and fell on his face, and I'd lean up on one elbow to watch him. Aunt Fee-ney had lace curtains and they made a pattern on his cheek. I'd try to look at him impartially, like if I was a stranger and here he was. Well, Merle is a good-looking fellow, and that is something you're bound to note, but he has a roughness and hardness about him, from growing up in Paxton maybe, or from Vietnam. I still don't know which. All I know is the

last thing you'd expect from his looks is the sweetness that's there. He is as sweet as a baby.

My first husband, Purdy Lamb, don't let his gentle name fool you, he is another story. If you didn't fill up the ice cube trays, if you pulled the blankets off him at night, if the neighbor's cat woke him up, if you said the wrong things, talked too much or too loud or to the wrong person, looked at him sideways, smiled when you shouldn't, or if you cried, then you were in for it. You can't imagine how men can be, in the privacy of their own homes, when you've only ever seen them in public.

I appreciated Merle, and I knew all the good things about him, starting with worshiping the ground I walk on, but I secretly worried about our marriage. We had been married for three years by then and the truth of the matter is I was someone who never wanted the same thing for very long. No matter how much I cared for something, I always wound up changing my mind, whether I meant to or not, and I didn't want to change my mind about Merle. "I will always love you," I whispered, hoping it was the truth.

Dale Porter put his hands in his pockets and stood back from the other passengers, who ringed the oval-shaped luggage carousel three people deep, pressing toward it. As if with their communal impatience they might will it into motion. From where he stood he could feel a slight flow of air from a vent in the low ceiling, and he turned his face to catch it in full. As he did this, an older man in a suit pushed past him and shouldered his way up to the conveyor.

Something about the man put Dale in mind of his father, who had carried himself in just this aggressive style, who'd had the same fist-shaped bald spot on the back of his head. Who'd insisted that a grown man should dress for a business meeting whenever he boarded an airplane. Who'd been dead now eleven years and seven months.

Dale straightened, held his head higher, as if this man, even with his back turned, was watching him, evaluating. It was not unpleasant to think so. His father, who always made fatherhood look so difficult. In Dale's place right now, his father would be attempting through his body language and facial expressions to communicate to the world just how goddamn hard it was to be the patriarch. Let him see Dale now, then, relaxed and upbeat at the end of a hectic vacation with his wife and two young boys—to Manhattan, of all places. Let him see Dale still in good

spirits, despite their four-hour delay at JFK and their late-night return to Washington, D.C., with work and school in the morning. Let him watch, Dale thought. Let him evaluate.

He felt a pull at his sleeve and looked down at Mattie. "I want to help get the bags off the thing," the boy said.

Here among strangers and under the harsh light of the luggage claim, Dale thought his son looked pale and fragile, and he resisted a momentary urge to scoop the boy up into his arms. "Where'd Mom and Con go?" he asked.

Mattie pointed across the terminal to a row of chairs along the wall. Connor sat wearing headphones and looking at one of his handheld electronic gizmos. Elaine was looking back at Dale and Mattie, and she waved. She was just far enough away that if Dale squinted he could confuse her for herself at half her age. She looked good to him, good the way she'd looked when they were just out of school. He could still see the girl in her. He was exhausted, true, but he had some ideas yet about what the two of them might do when they got home, how to extend the vacation one more night, stretch it all the way until the next morning, when they would finally have to get up and go back to their lives.

"I had this dream on the plane," Mattie said.

"Did you dream you were flying?" Dale asked, still looking over at Elaine.

"We were all on the subway again," Mattie said. "Except it was like, when the lights went out this time I couldn't find any of us." The boy looked at his feet. "It spooked me out. I kept feeling all these bodies around me but none of them were us."

Dale nodded and put his hand on his son's shoulder. There'd come a moment on the trip when their crowded train stopped in the middle of a darkened tunnel and lost power. The lights went out for twenty or thirty seconds, during which Dale gathered his family to him and told them not to move. He put one hand on his wallet and pulled Mattie and Connor closer, and waited for something to come at them. When the lights flickered on and the train lurched forward, he looked around and saw the other passengers unmoved by the experience. Dale had grinned sheepishly, but by the time they reached their stop it had become a thrill for this suburban family, the boys charged up, fueled by a sense of adventure. It was Mattie's way, however, to process it differently now, after the fact. "That sounds normal enough to me," Dale said, "to be spooked by a dream like that."

"Were you scared?" Mattie asked.

"Nah," Dale said. "Not a bit." This wasn't true. There'd been a minute of anxiety that went straight to his core, when he questioned the whole vacation, taking his children to this metropolis when Disneyland would

have made more sense—but he was still putting it on for his father standing up at the conveyor, challenging him to turn around, to see Dale now, at the end of a week that began with a crazy cab ride into Manhattan and was concluding, Dale assumed, with this small conversation with his son. In between, Dale had shepherd-ed his family from Coney Island to the Chelsea Piers, had walked them over the Brooklyn Bridge and ferried them to Ellis Island. They'd all four shared an impossibly tiny room with a trundle bed in their boutiquey hotel in Greenwich Village, and their closeness necessitated, on the last night, a wild and hushed rendezvous for him and Elaine in the tight bathroom, the boys sleeping on the trundle bed not ten feet away. The biggest noise was their laughter at the ridiculousness of it, he and Elaine both in their mid-forties and behaving like kids on spring break. When they crept back to bed, crawling over their sleeping sons, he'd vowed to take this feeling back home to Northern Virginia with them. A family adventure is what it was, a thrill. And Dale had done it all with a can-do attitude calculated to communicate to the world that all this and more was just a part of the job. Let his father evaluate that. Let him see Dale's back unbent under this and any other load.

But just then the man at the luggage carousel turned and revealed his profile, and the nose and brow were all wrong. The illusion vanished. Dale felt a brief, illogical wave of abandonment. In response, he



lightly squeezed Mattie's head and said, "It'll be alright, kiddo. You'll see." And then, as if to reinforce this notion, a buzzer sounded twice and the luggage conveyor rattled into motion.

The twenty-mile drive from Dulles Airport to Quincy Flats was quiet and, near one o'clock in the morning, without traffic. Elaine rested her hand on Dale's leg and closed her eyes. In back, Connor nodded off and Mattie, though awake and alert, said nothing. The image of his father at the luggage conveyor kept filling Dale with a nagging foreboding, but he had a talent for banishing from his mind unhelpful thoughts and emotions, and by the time he drove through the gates of the Wakefield Green subdivision he felt fully renewed. He parked the car in the garage and got out with a determined smile on his face. He opened the door to the house and ushered his family inside, and was about to start dictating going-straight-to-bed orders when from the darkened hallway there came the sound of broken glass beneath the boys' feet.

Everyone stopped. Dale felt it immediately, something wrong in the air, a smell and a sense. His first instinct was to retreat, to flee, and he had to will himself to move forward and find the light switch.

Their home had flipped over on itself. The walls were empty and the floor covered in debris—books, dishes, pictures, knickknacks. The living room rug sparkled, somehow, and it took Dale a moment to understand

that he was seeing the remains of the antique hallway mirror, whose shards, nestled among the carpet, reflected the lamplight in bends and angles. Elaine's baby sun rose plant had been uprooted from its pot and stuffed leaves-first into the fireplace, scattering soil and roots and ash. The wooden handle of Dale's recliner had been torn off and stabbed into the seat cushion; the gray couch sat on its back. A burning chemical smell filled the air.

"Dale?" Elaine said, quietly, and then again, louder: "*Dale?*"

Dale tried to get his mind working. He could not yet move. Connor asked if there had been an earthquake, or a tornado. Mattie asked where the TV had gone. Dale looked to the entertainment center on the far wall and saw it bare—no flat-screen, no DVD player, no stereo. No computer on the table in the corner.

"Dad?" Mattie said, his voice pinched.

Connor was the only one not fixed in place. He ran toward the kitchen and flipped on the light. The countertop TV was gone, and the refrigerator half capsized, leaning onto the counter, everything formerly atop it spilled across the tile floor. Dale looked at the mantle over the fireplace, which had been swept clean of three framed family pictures, a trio of decorative candles, and the marble statuette Elaine's cousin had brought them from India, an ornately decorated elephant on its hind legs. Connor, somehow energized by all this, *thrilled* by it, ran excitedly into the living room.



"Look at this!" the boy said. "I mean, what happened? Mattie!" he said. "Just look!"

Connor darted back and forth, grinding plant soil into the carpet with his sneakers. Dale was about to tell him to move off the carpet when he was sideswiped by the epiphany that whoever did this might still be in the house. Might be hiding in the basement or upstairs or in the hallway bathroom just around the corner. The involuntary sound Dale heard himself make when struck by that realization, a stifled grunt that came from somewhere deep in his throat, was apparently so frightening and strange a sound to Mattie that the boy wet himself on the spot. Dale watched the stain blossom across the crotch of his son's pants, and then turned to Elaine. She mouthed one word to Dale, soundless but clear: *why?* And her face, for a long second, went slack and transformed into something unfamiliar. He said her name aloud, sharply, and just as quickly her face rearranged itself back into his wife. "Get the boys out of here," Dale said.

Elaine drew herself in and nodded several times. But she couldn't move. Dale crossed the space between them in three quick steps and put his hand on her shoulder. "We don't know if anyone, if someone . . ." He squeezed her arm harder than he intended. "Get the boys out of here. Get them out right now." He turned her and gave her a light push in the direction of the front door. "Go. Now."

Connor didn't want to leave, wanted to continue exploring their trans-

formed home, but Mattie went over and took his little brother's hand, tugging him toward the door, and the three of them went out.

Dale closed his eyes and asked himself where he would hide. His whole body had come alive and electric, sharp and alert. I'm a criminal, he said to himself. A thief. A violent, trespassing vandal—where do I hide when I hear the garage door roll back, the car pull in? The blueprint of their home spread out in his mind, and he considered the darkest, quietest places first. Then he picked up the severed handle of his recliner, which he found at his feet, and held the jagged end out before him as he walked about the house as quietly as he could.

He started in the laundry. From there to the main floor bathroom, then up the stairs and through his own bedroom, the master bath, the guest room, stepping over and around and through debris, their things. There was an aluminum taste in his mouth, and his heart beat so loudly he worried he wouldn't hear footsteps approach him from behind. He looked behind doors and under beds, behind shower curtains and in closets.

In the bedroom, their dressers and bedside tables had been rifled. Elaine's jewelry, which she kept in something like a fancy tackle box on her bureau, was gone, leaving its squared outline in a film of dust. No room had been spared. In the guest bath, when he yanked back the shower curtain, he jumped to see something in the tub. It was the fire extin-

guisher from the downstairs pantry. Dale understood now the chemical smell, the foamy, filmy liquid everywhere in the living room and going up the stairs. He closed his eyes and tried to listen for sounds of movement, the breath of a person hiding.

Downstairs in the boys' room, everything from the closets was out and on the floor, the boys' beds covered with pieces of a broken lamp and the white plastic beans spilled from inside their bean bags, whose denim covers had been slit. The biting chemical smell from the fire extinguisher in his nose, he went back to the kitchen, where every last plate, dish, mug, and glass from the kitchen cupboards had exploded—all of it blanketing the tile in a great, glittering sheen.

Then he saw that the door leading from their kitchen to the basement was ajar, a splinter of wood torn away from the frame by the handle. Of course. That was where he'd go if he'd done this, if he'd been interrupted in his wild rage. Underground. They kept that door locked to keep the boys out of the unfinished basement, with its cement floor and exposed walls, pink insulation and crisscrossing pipes and wiring. There was no exit down there, not even a window. Anyone hiding there would be trapped.

Dale held the recliner handle back by his shoulder like a billy club and pushed the door open as quietly as he could. The kitchen light illuminated only the first few steps. After that, absolute darkness.

The light switch for the one fluorescent bulb in the basement was here in the kitchen, just to the right of the door. Dale flipped on the light and took off down the long wooden staircase in a rush. He may have yelled something, given a shout as he reached the bottom, his whole body poised and tense.

But to attack he found only the water heater and the central air unit, the boxes and the old toys and playthings of the boys, his long-neglected skis and their trunks of old clothes and things unused and unwanted, and he understood that not only was no one here waiting for him, but that the thief likely never made his way down here in the first place. No trace of anyone. Dust coating it all.

He straddled the divot in the cement at the basement's center, his heart pounding, and thought of his wife's question—*why*? Why would someone do this? Not just rob them, but attempt to tear their house apart? As he stood in the damp and silent basement, another question snaked its way from his stomach to his mind: not why, but who. *Who* would add this wild destruction to his thievery? What kind of feral, deranged vandal would be capable of such a thing? He stood still, his body humming with unreleased violence, and tried to conjure such a man from the earth beneath his feet, tried to make him rise up through the concrete floor and account for what he'd done.

Palms to knees, I steady myself—drunk, and swaying between the two, who pass a bottle through me, each to each. The math means I have two drinks for every one of theirs, and they coax-cajole, taunt me into continuing, and when I slow, tip the liquid for me, until the room begins to dip and tilt on an unseen axis, with me at its center. *You are the sun*, they whisper, but it seems impossible that the sun feels dizzy like this. I am trying to form words I don't remember how to say, something like *No* something like *I need to go* but my mouth is thick and slow. I try to rise but they catch my sleeve, assure me, lie, tell me friends are on their way back to us. My legs aren't listening anyway, and I have lost track of where I am. I groan, push the bottle away, which seems to be a cue—they lay me back on the bed. The mattress is soft against my shoulders, soft, all I want to do is sink into it, all I want to be is released, to not be here, in the center of this. I will give anything if they will let me sleep. I feel fingers move on me as from far away, on my hips, on my thighs, faint as echo. One is on top of me as my eyes are closing, folding me into sleep. Sleep, with dreams of oceans tossing my body.

## Despite Many Gone

Greg Przekwas

But she did look younger with very dear float. And drive air and smell and breeze and wind. And very long dusk. And new valley college and course and lake. And four-lane ridge. And even yet ranch and orchard and farm. And yon rolling tree. And medium spire and tower and burb. And low mellow jazz. And good-enough wheels and cool-enough Tab.

And chat about ward. And day room harbor and own room cove. And Wolf lobby plain. And swim-and-band Zack and dive-and-choir Mo. And many-role Ann. And Hollywood Moll and Jesuing Frank. And big-column Dad. And graved Alms and Joe and Helen and Wolf. And yon glowing film. And four-lane down and highway around.

To Village Care sprawl. With even large pond and fountain and brook. And like hall and gym. And clubhouse and pool and court and green. And many abode. And no and little and more and full care. And med center hub. And much tree and hedge and flower and lawn. And minimal dusk. And mild air and smell and breeze and film.

And little-fogged Mom. In prim beige dress and low open heel. With even res bag. And light day makeup and birthday cologne. And fluffy gray hair. And thin watch and ring and glasses and beads. And medium pudge. And like sag and crease and wrinkle and spot. And far-away guard. And very dear last of drive-thru float.

Through chat about plane. And shuttle and car and drive and room. And gather and swim. And drive-in and Den and park and field. And *Our Town* and "Smile." And doctor and nurse and unit and ward. And rallying Dad. With even mild yellow and growth and muss. And like IV. And minimal wheeze and dry and dab.

And no live wake. Or Side Bar or Lead or Diner or loft. Or column or *News*. Or depot or U or draft or plane. Or '43 dance. Or '45 wedding or year-later birth. Or much dive or climb. Or lone through and out and over and back. Or group in and on. Or even affair or OD or fog.

Or so I reviewed. With even more Tab and very long smoke. And gray-ing-vet yarn. And prim waiting dab and bag and roll. And mild swim and dive. And like bay and wagon and meal and café. And Union and vote. And famine and bomb and hostage and raid. And day room and drive. And manage back out and in and up.

To near-enough room. With even pale desk and meadow and john. And high muted game. And mild hub and light and air and smell. And lone other chair. And long high view of burbing and yet. And no live crew. Or bugle or flag or throng or award. Or depot or train. Or own yard or barn or field or pond.

For more-rally Dad. With even nav robe and raised lighted bed. And Gobel salute. And arm juice and

agua and *Ragtime* and *News*. And off IV. And already shave and full thinning comb. And medium gray. And like gut and jowl and crow's foot and bag. And mild bob and weave. And like crease and wrinkle and spot and pock.

And yellow and wan. And clearing and phlegm and bag and spit. And agua and juice. And line score pan and highlight review. And even low "Win." And both-hand remote and farsighted off. And Mom-watching look. Through her manage in and around and up. Then long tearing breath. Then lean on down and very brief kiss.

Then manage back up. Then down into turn and bedside chair. With even groined bag. And prim leg and hand and mouth and look. And minimal tear. Through very faint "Home" and "Be well again." Then firm waiting nod. Then very near laugh or grin or smile. Through Dad's wary look. Then minimal weave and smile and nod.

As I did mull away. For manage back down and out and in. Then more night and drive. With still even jazz and gather and yarn. And large Bell plant. And more bank and store and church and school. And far more abode. And much food and drink and field and game. And medium smoke. And like horn and wave and bird and yell.

And depot and green. And Trail Room and Deal and Rack and Vogue. And crossing and bridge. And Emma's and mill and hall and graves. And no live raid. Or Jesse or Frank or Cole or Jim. Or Pilgrim or slave.

Or Thomas or Ben or George or Abe. Or Harry or Ike. Or *Best Years* or *Hud* or *JFK*.

Or rally or oath. Or very big change in few-block hood. With even grown tree. And wide ranch and yard and drive and street. And few boat and goal. And there corner light and drive and house. And low mellow in. And off manage on and up and around. And very fresh mow. And large grill and deck and table and chair.

And old friend Rob. With even more lounge and cutoffs and flops. And wee-glimmer Earth. And there tray and beer and lighter and pack. And minimal tan. And mild sag and gut and jowl and gray. And low wary "Friend." And like manage up and shake and hug. And patio door. And medium cooler and very own beer.

For further review. With even more air and smell and breeze. And like film and star. And firefly and cricket and yard and house. And highway and train. And hood turn and in and off and on. And long smoke and beer. And minimal in and john and out. And no live tribe. Or Pioneer Loft or rally or march.

Through chat about Dad. And farm Coach and Jennie and openward Mom. And then and now U. And like Joan and Dylan and Zack and Mo. And Laura and Ann. And Emma's and Den and Plaza and Grill. And Oahu and Nam. And Clinton and Gore and Bush and Dole. And Huck Three Band. And Gehrige and Nun and Jeff and Marie.



Or so I reviewed. Through minimal drowse and nod and doze. Then medium sleep. And final mull in and john and out. Then like smoke and beer. With even high glow and near-full moon. And no live bite. Or clearing or trap or ville or raid. Or triage or bag. Or grad night or gym or cabin or lake.

Through waking and dream. With now parch and weary and muddle and yard. And May-orchard hood. And fogged Jackie Mom and boozed Jack Dad. And full longing gym. And own doubt and word and layup and then. And Marm Fair Ann. And Jem Brave Zack and Scout Goody Mo. And very filmed dawn.

And even more lounge and yarn and review.

And June tree and yard. And mild air and smell and breeze and chill. And grown squirrel and bird. And few shed and garden and woodpile and deck. And no live mow. Or burrow or suck or sting or bite. Or triage or Wall. Or river or gulf or bay or lake. Or island or torch. Or Dublin or Warsaw or Milwaukee or res.

Or Laura or Rob. Or bagel or orange or decaf or smoke. Or critter or tribe. Or soon ward or room or call or graves. Or long run or swim. Or Inn or Grill dinner or U-Plaza drive. Or Bayview meal. Or many-note Fourth or Baja inn. Or fall Rep or school. Or yon winter glow and fade and away.



## Interlude (again)

*Lindsay Lusby*

---

If a girl lay shoulder-to-shoulder  
with the road,  
                    she will play dead:  
    head slung backwise,  
            tongue hung out like entrails.

If she waits up for the moon,  
she will waxen:  
                    dew settled in her lungs  
    and milkfat in her cheek.

Pinch her:  
            she will mold herself  
    around that touch.

## Do you spook easily, Starling?

*Lindsay Lusby*

---

A stone slungshot in the brush  
is a body facedown in the river—

we drop our scavenging  
and scatter.

Every shattered thing underfoot  
we will call evidence.

The map we make of it:  
a murder.



## St. Helens [1980]

*John Sibley Williams*

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Sometimes deer stop returning to the river to drink. Just like that. Ash lacquers the surface for a few months and over the bodies it compresses into a kind of stone. Funereal, the sky returns to those Biblical days our grandparents recounted over our tightened eyes, feigning sleep. When we dreamed it was always of this. Of them, angry gods. Of constant featureless night. And still. Perhaps it's true: I haven't lost much recently, at least compared to the deer that won't be here when the water cleanses itself blue again. I'd like to say we are a patient people, a stone people, that something good will come from waiting for the sun to reemerge to lengthen our shadows.

yesterday my son iggy's teacher commented that iggy can't see and needs a haircut (horse shit!) and I had a nightmare that someone cut iggy's hair and his curls went away and his hair turned brown and it made me think of when we were little my mom let me and my sisters go to church with our neighbors and I was excited to accept jesus into my heart and then after church the mother cut my little sister's beautiful, waist-length hair into a tiny bob and then she tried to cut my beautiful long hair so I ran home and told and my mom didn't believe me so she went over to their house and was like WTF and the lady claimed she had to cut our hair because we had lice and our hair was too long (horse shit!) and saw that my sister's hair was chopped off and she went into a rage and threw a brick at the lady's car.

used to think that was a lil bit crazy but now I dare a mothafucka to touch iggy's hair I will commit murder.



## Portrait of My Father as John Clare: “Skunk’s Nest”

*Justin Bigos*

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Well in my many walks I rarely found  
a place less likely for a skunk to make  
its nest—or bed—or home—than a dumpster  
in the parking lot of the Westport cab stand,  
where on so many nights I’d tossed the news.  
Now little Smiley—it’s what I’ve named him—  
keeps warm among those tattered inky pages,  
Styrofoam cups, shredded lottery tickets,  
diapers, disposable cell phones. Slept there  
myself one night, or should say, tried to sleep.  
In the woods I’d found my car burned: some kids  
probably, bored or stoned, and so I salvaged  
what I could, couple handfuls of nickels and dimes,  
the tire iron, a few pine cones I could now use  
like charcoal, to sketch fairer scenes than this.  
And as the snow came down slow and pond’rous  
I traversed paths named and unnamed and,  
when nearly blind, stumbled upon the dumpster.  
Quiet. So quiet and dark. Like being in a skull  
inside a skull. Like that. Now, listen: Smiley  
has a nose like a grape. The purple kind. And I know  
that means he will not last the night. I feed him  
McDonald’s burgers but he only eats the bread.  
I once ate grass along an old ditch road,  
and it tasted like dough. Now when I eat bread  
I taste fields, sunlight. The dog I used to chase  
and let chase me was named Smiley. When bit  
by a ‘possum Ma put him down. He made  
one noise. She said go out and find the wretched  
animal and kill it with the same clam rake  
she used on Smiley. I searched for it two days  
and two nights, or pretended to. Finally found  
a raccoon dead from cold at the edge of the road,  
tied it inside a plastic bag. Ma said damn  
me for bringing it inside the house, wasn’t her

who taught me to be so stupid, go bury  
the thing outside. I carried the raccoon down  
the old dump road and kept walking. Hours  
later, found myself at the edge of the marsh,  
at the factory where they make helicopter wings—  
or talons—or blades. In the sky, nothing  
but a few gulls, a robin. I threw the animal  
in a dumpster. The noise it makes? A church bell,  
if you are hidden inside the bell, praying.



## Portrait of My Father as John Clare: “Epithalamion”

*Justin Bigos*

---

And how, when she must've thought I was asleep,  
she loved herself with a candlestick, then slipped  
it back inside her bedside drawer. Next morning,  
she cooking biscuits in lard, I snuck myself  
a whiff: cattail soaked in rainwater  
off a tin roof, the slightest tang of sorghum.  
I've pictured it many times, that dark system  
that gives life, recoils, beckons, the whole thing  
cupped in the palm of a hand, if one  
so dared. But when I bring my hands together  
over my wife, my sleeping wife, they slide  
away, one north, one southwest, and I'm left  
looking like a man in the middle of traffic,  
stripped clean of his vesture, directing no one.

## Up Over Every Dark Thing

Richard Wirick

The stories of Lucia Berlin (how's *that* for a Cold War mother's name?) are utterly raw in their emotion, smarting like scuffed knuckles or strings of firecrackers, each new one snapping with pain in the echo of the one preceding it. The tales are narrated by a seemingly straight, middle-aged mother of four (which L.B. was) who sinks into addiction, petty crime, and unexplainable flight from unseen tormentors in the American Sunbelt of the fifties, sixties, and seventies. Their miseries lie open like the viscera first apparent to the surgeon as he opens the wound along his marker. That bright, that perfectly horrific. These are worlds of pain from a narrator slipping into poverty alone in spite of what Phillip Dick called the "Perky-Pat Layouts" of the post-war economic boom, those natural communities of mid-twentieth-century abundance.

But even as they display true misery, their stylistic delivery is laconic, spare, diffuse. The lines along the page look not so much like locutions as much as mere revenants of sentences. Punctuation is unorthodox and sometimes inconsistent. If Celine were wandering across Tucson's trailer parks instead of war-torn Germany, the layout of the pages would be very similar. As her executor Steve Emerson has written, Berlin avoids the comma that results from a pause that would not be heard in actual speech or that results in an

Lucia Berlin, *A Manual for Cleaning Women*. Ed. Stephen Emerson; Foreword by Lydia Davis. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015. Pp. 432, \$26 hd.

undesired slowing of any kind. At the same time, the cadences can feel rushed and hectic. She has drawn comparisons with the first-person stories of Denis Johnson's *Jesus's Son*, but the narrator bears the responsibility of her four children seriously, so the vision is not drug-addled or hallucinogenic.

But what amazing stories these are, and how deprived the modern short tale has been by her itinerant, hard-to-find appearances in journals edited by Saul Bellow or the Black Sparrow Press anthologies where they were eventually gathered in the nineties. She has an almost supernatural ability to tell a story from the perspective of the non-literary storytellers she grew up with, filtered through a smugless knowingness and affection for those she describes. Her stories have the illusion of a loose naturalness, but at the same time a solid beginning, middle, and end. They open and shut like a music box. Their music is dusty, deludedly hopeful, salving and bandaging the wound like a palimpsest letting the blue smudge of blood show through.

The sixties come more alive here than in anyone's fiction or non-fic-

tion, and that includes Carver, Didion, those who have etched out a branded grit and desperation for what their narrators deliver. There are lots of laundromats and lost TV game shows. In "Carpe Diem," the mother telling the story puts us exactly where we need to be, looking through exactly the lens that does it justice:

So many laundromat attendants I have known, the hovering Charons, making change or who never have change. Now it is fat Ophelia who pronounces No Sweat as No Thwet. Her top plate broke on beef jerky. . . . When she comes down the aisle with a mop everybody moves and moves the baskets too. She is a channel hopper. Just when we've settled in to watch *The Newlywed Game* she'll flick it to *Ryan's Hope*.

The rightness, the click of completeness and the ending *lift* of the trash TV reference are seamless, the sacred stuffed screamingly down into the profane by someone who has come to know too much to be happy. An Elmore Leonard narrator would have no familiarity with Charon, and a Bellow or Martin Amis character wouldn't even know what a laundromat was. This is the kind of incipient enlightenment someone like my own mother underwent when returning to college in the mid-sixties, raising three of us, my sisters and me wondering what she was do-

ing with those SBX-bought Norton Critical Editions.

The sheer messiness of life brims over for narrators who had the glamorous, Jackiesque sheen of the author herself (look at the jacket photo!). She meets other mothers who have descended into parental abnegation and misanthropy, waiting for their issue to become tweens and run away:

The mother. She hated children. I met her once at an airport when all four of my kids were little. She yelled 'Call them off,' as if they were a pack of Dobermans.

It gets even better when the narrators are kids themselves:

All the clean restrooms were on the other side of the road, on the left side. But Mrs. Snowdon couldn't make left turns. . . . It took us about ten blocks of right turns and one-way streets before we got to a restroom. . . . I'd already wet my pants by then but didn't tell them, drank from the cool, cool Texaco faucet.

The stories I feel closest to are set in the Oakland-Berkeley flatlands of the seventies. I was an undergraduate and Berlin, somehow, kept gravitating back to that sun-blasted hodgepodge of students, welfare moms, immigrants, and would-be artists of every stripe. (Of course, she was a cocktail waitress somewhere along San Pablo Avenue.) She took up nurs-



ing ("It's good, you can meet doctors that way. Dying rich men who are patients.") "Emergency Room Notebook, 1977" packs a wallop and draws the Denis Johnson comparisons. This narrator knows every conceivable variety of overdose: phony, incompetent, sure-to-succeed:

Exam week at Cal. Many suicides, some succeeding, mostly Oriental. Dumbest suicide of the week was Otis. Otis's wife, Lou-Bertha, left him for another man. Otis took two bottles of Sominex, but was wide awake. Peppy, even.

Who would call peripheral Asian characters "Orientals" but someone of that time and place? And not lost on us who watched TV the decade before—Otis was the town drunk in *Mayberry RFD*, who locked *himself* into a jail cell every night for safekeeping.

I have locked myself into this collection, turned the key, and fallen asleep with it every night since the book came out in early August. Scenes will drift into your dreams whether you recognize a reference or not:

It's Marlene the Migraine, an ER habitue. She is so beautiful, young. She stops talking with two Laney College basketball players and stumbles to my desk to go into her act. Her howls are like Ornette Coleman in early "Lonely Woman" days. . . . all

I can see is her elegantly manicured hand, extending her Medi-Cal card above the desk.

Yet for all her mid- and late-life poverty, it is the glamorous diplomatic childhood and travels—principally in Latin America—that give such engaging breadth to the collection. Radical identity shifts can overtake her transplanted narrators. In "So Long," the narrator is living in Mexico and speaking mostly Spanish and comments on the linguistic strictures of even the most mundane of observations: "Of course I have a self here, and a new family, new cats, new jokes. But I keep trying to remember who I was in English." Her father was a mining engineer, working for big companies with State Department contacts, a dashing charmer among American expats. She lived for a while with her mother's family in El Paso when he moved to Chile for work. "Electric Car, El Paso" takes the reader through a sort of animated hodgepodge of life in a turbulent, dirty border town. There is too much dreary reality in such places, and it has to be counterbalanced by freakish objects: "Mrs. Snowdon waited for my grandmother and me to get into her electric car; it looked like any other car except that it was very tall and short, like a car in a cartoon that had run into a wall—a car with its hair standing on end."

The foreign life comes to full flower, though, once she moves to Santiago to join Berlin *pere*. Chile is a wonderland, full of breaking waves, para-

sols, and starfish. Like Thales, she seems to see everything rise from the water of its sinuous coast. She visits the houses of the rich, her father's clients. She sprawls on sumptuous furniture, plays with manicured dogs on the verandas that look out on palm orchards and jagged-glass peaks of the summer Andes. Detail is the trigger in these stories. The critic Alistair Johnston has it that she would "start with something as simple as the line of a jaw, or a yellow mimosa."<sup>1</sup> The wild asparagus of North America gives way to Borges's Garden of Forking Paths: lily pads streaming along like verdant saucers, cactus and soccer flags woven with onion garlands on a farmhouse balcony, rocks steaming after a morning rain.

But she never used description to draw attention to itself. She later scolded her writing students to not write anything "clever" or "just pretty." The minutae always has something deeply human, waiting to be revealed. "Solitude," she says in "Fool to Cry," "is an Anglo-Saxon concept. In Mexico City, if you're the only person on a bus and someone gets on they'll not only come next to you, they will lean against you." But she had no illusions about all people being angels south of the border. She knew that the Latin consciousness that D. H. Lawrence naively worshipped as "Blood Knowledge" could also contain treachery, subterfuge, betrayal. In the marvelous "Good and Bad," the narrator sees selfish, thwarted agendas on the part of a possibly gay teacher in her Santiago

middle school. Then the storyteller has the self-knowledge to see the incipient evil within herself.

The instructor is from the lower middle class that is struggling against an ever more imperial government, the one that her father of course works with. The narrator straddles the Marxist bent of her tutor and at the same time the elegant, bourgeois world the grown woman rails against. When the teacher finally tries to run away with the girl, making romantic overtures, the girl is repulsed enough to tell her father, dressing for a round of golf, that the lady "is a communist." Of course, this is a death sentence for the teacher's career:

I just blurted it out. It had been a miserable day. I was fed up with Miss Dawson and. . . that's all it took. Three words to my father. No one else knew what had happened. The other girls were happy she was gone. We had a free period now even though we would have to make up American history when we got to college. There was nobody to speak to. To say I was sorry.

Intimacy can lead to celebration of a very different human make-up, that of the Whitmanian "adhesiveness" that allows uninhibited sharing, leaning together on a bus seat. But it also leads to the high, open ground of adulthood—that landscape of power, harm, rejection of the needful gesture. Berlin's narrators seldom use

the sharp edge of this folding knife (note the immediate guilt in the last sentence), but know what darkness lays down in the case they have closed it in. Berlin's narrators evolve in their wisdom, knowing that the soul is neither good nor bad but a constant flux between the two. The little girl was jarred by the teacher's lustful outreach, but later remembers the saint-like missals of the woman that would be difficult to find in the North. The teacher had taken her to an orphanage for the mentally disabled where "They washed ten faces in a row, all the eyes blind. They fed six mongoloid giants, reaching up with spoons of oatmeal."

Berlin finally found a place in Boulder, where the poet Ed Dorn ran creative writing and brought her onto the Colorado faculty and where she still wore her hair—on into the nineties—like Barbara Eden in *I Dream of Jeannie* (did I tell you to look at the jacket photo?). She was the most popular teacher in the English Department's history, though old habits die hard. She complained of the impersonal atmospherics of Colorado liquor stores, "Gigantic, Target-sized nightmares, where you could die from DTs just trying to find the Jim Beam aisle."

She wrote to Emerson from there, dying in the University Hospital, disappearing into the shady pantheon of her characters:—

Bay Area, New York and Mexico City [were the] only places I

didn't feel I was an other. I just got back from shopping and everybody kept on saying have a great day now and smiling at my oxygen tank, as if it were a pool or a child.

She wrote till the end (2004), with even her titles starting to swell and boost with beautiful, colloquial helium: "Let Me See You Smile," "How'd You Get It So Hot?" and my favorite, "So Here It Is Saturday." Her last letter was to August Kleinzahler, the San Francisco poet and discoverer of great, neglected talents like hers: "Augie, so what is marriage anyway? I never figured it out. And now it is death I don't understand."

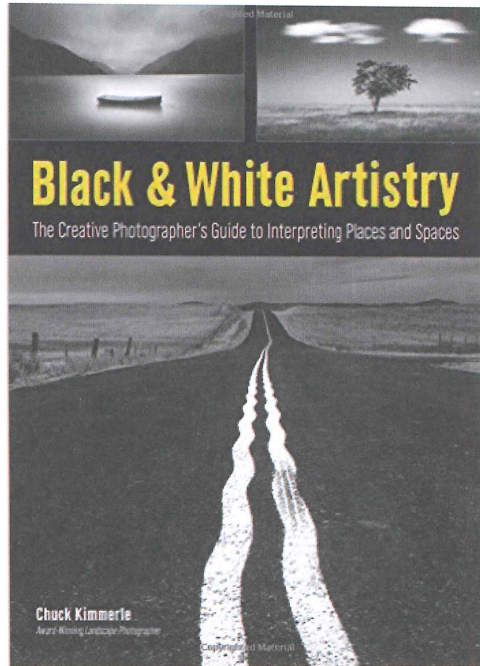
#### Note

<sup>1</sup> As quoted in the book's introduction by Lydia Davis.

Welcome to the *NDQ* Winter issue, the first *NDQ* issue of 2016. We are very pleased that this issue is rich with the beautiful, and often haunting, photographs of Chuck Kimmerle, a landscape photographer who now lives in Wyoming.

As Tim Pasch, another photographer, recently said, Kimmerle is legendary. He spent more than 16 years as a newspaper photojournalist in three different states—Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and North Dakota—and then 10 years as the staff photographer at the University of North Dakota. His work during those years received numerous national and international awards and culminated with a nomination for the 1998 Pulitzer Prize for Spot News photography.

While he was on staff at UND, Kimmerle wrote a review of a photography book by Laura Wilson, *Avedon at Work in the American West* (Vol. 72.1 and 2, Winter/Spring 2005, 276-78). Now he has published *Black & White Artistry: The Creative Photographer's Guide to Interpreting Places and Spaces* that is available as either a paperback or a Kindle book. As Amazon's description has it, Kimmerle



teaches photographers who've mastered their camera controls to see the possibilities in every landscape. You'll learn how to identify a scene that lends itself to black & white (and determine which scenes just don't work), you'll explore high- and low-key presentations, the effects of various lenses, and how and when to produce straight, graphic, or interpretive presentations of your scene.

Professionally matted prints of the images in this issue, and many more, are available on Kimmerle's website at <http://www.chuckkimmerle.com>.



## What Else Is in the Issue?

Although this issue of *NDQ* is a general issue, themes and motifs always seem to emerge and an issue coalesces into something like a unified whole. Many of the stories and poems have a “wintery” feel to them, a bleakness of this time of year, at least in North Dakota. One story is the confession of a hitman. In another, a boy ponders family connections and the loss of his grandfather. An essay details a family’s multiple losses from diphtheria in the 1860s.

But not all is bleak. No issue which contains a story from the point of view of a feminist sheep in Scotland could be bleak. Peter Grandbois’ essay, “Honor,” provides food for thought and in a different ways so does the poem “Choose Your Adventure” by Ned Balbo. The poem by Rhiannon Conley, “He Will Cover You with His Feathers,” is, as Poetry Editor Heidi Czerwiec said, “crazy good.”

## Pulitzer Prize Celebration

Along with other campus and community groups, *North Dakota Quarterly* will celebrate 100 years of the Pulitzer Prize this year. On April 19, Rob Kuznia will deliver the Hagerty Lecture in Grand Forks, ND. Kuznia won a Pulitzer Prize in 2014 for local reporting. He is a North Dakota native.

*NDQ* has published nine Pulitzer Prize winners: Maxine Kumin (poetry, 2014), Ted Kooser (poetry, 2005), Stephen Dunn (poetry, 2001), Paul Muldoon (poetry, 2003), Carol Shields (novel, *The Stone Diaries*, 1995), Richard Wilbur (poetry, 1957, 1989), N. Scott Momaday (novel, *House Made of Dawn*, 1969), W. D. Snodgrass (poetry, 1960), and Maxell Anderson (play, *Both Your Houses*, 1933).

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## Contest

*NDQ* wants to give you a one-year subscription! There are seven stories in this issue. Five were accepted by current Fiction Editor Gilad Elbom, one by the former Fiction Editor Liz Harris, and one by the Managing Editor. We’ll give a subscription to the first five people who correctly identify who accepted which story. Guesses are OK, but you have to be right on all seven stories. *NDQ* staff and employees are not eligible, nor is anyone else with secret knowledge of the acceptance process.

To enter the contest, list the stories on a sheet of paper and indicate the person you think accepted the story next to it. (Make sure to include your contact infor-

mation so we can let you know if you’ve won.) Mail to:

North Dakota Quarterly  
Merrifield Hall Room 110  
276 Centennial Hall—Stop 7209  
Grand Forks ND 58202-7209

Here’s the list of stories:

“The Gospel According to Gabriel”  
“Rosie the Ruminant”  
“Helen Dithers en route to Troy”  
“Painkillers”  
“Auto, Not Shipwreck”  
“All the Home I Have”  
“Despite Many Gone”



**Ned Balbo's** fourth book, *Upcycling Paumanok*, will appear from Measure Press in 2016. His previous book, *The Trials of Edgar Poems and Other Poems* (Story Line Press), received the Poets' Prize and the Donald Justice Prize. He has new poems out or forthcoming in *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Measure*, *New Criterion*, *River Styx*, and more. He is currently a visiting faculty member in the MFA program in Creative Writing and Environment at Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa.

**Justin Bigos** is the author of the poetry chapbook *Twenty Thousand Pigeons* (iO, 2014). His poems, stories, and essays have recently appeared in publications such as *Indiana Review*, *McSweeney's Quarterly*, *Ploughshares*, *Seattle Review*, *Collagist*, and *Best American Short Stories 2015*. He co-edits *Waxwing* and teaches writing at Northern Arizona University.

**Alison Clement** is the author of two novels, *Pretty Is As Pretty Does* (2001) and *Twenty Questions* (2006). She grew up in South Carolina and rural Illinois and now lives in Corvallis, Oregon. Her work has appeared in *The Sun*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *High Country News*, and *Salon*. "All the Home I Have" is an excerpt from a novel in progress.

**Rhiannon Conley** is a lecturer at the University of North Dakota. She received her BA in English from the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs in 2011, and her MA from UND in 2014. This is her first publication.

**Claudia Cortese** has two chapbooks: *Blood Medals* (Thrush Poetry Press, 2015) and *The Red Essay and Other Histories* (forthcoming from Horse Less Press, 2015). Her poems and lyric essays have found homes at *Black Warrior Review*, *Blackbird*, *Crazyhorse*, *Kenyon Review Online*, and *Sixth Finch*, among others. She lives in New Jersey.

**Robert Drummond's** fiction has appeared in *The Iowa Review*, *Arts and Letters*, *New Stories from the South: The Year's Best*, and elsewhere. He lives in Eugene, Oregon. "805 Maple" is the first chapter from a novel-in-progress.

**Peter Grandbois** is the author of seven previous books including, most recently, *The Girl on the Swing* (Wordcraft of Oregon, 2015). His poems, stories, and essays have previously appeared in such journals as: *The Kenyon Review*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Boulevard*, *The Denver Quarterly*, *DI-AGRAM*, *New Orleans Review*, *Mississippi Review*, *Eleven Eleven*, *Failbetter*, *Gargoyle*, and *Zone 3*, among many others, and have been shortlisted for both Best American Essays and the Pushcart Prize. His plays have been performed

in St. Louis, Columbus, Los Angeles, and New York. He is senior editor at *Boulevard* magazine and teaches at Denison University in Ohio.

In 2014, **Melissa Hassard** received an Honorable Mention in the Randall Jarrell Poetry Competition for her poem "At the End," which originally appeared in *One*, from Jacar Press. Her work has also appeared in *Vox Poetica*, *Iodine Poetry Journal*, *When Women Waken*, *Writing for Peace*, and other journals. Partner at Sable Books, a collaborative publisher, she currently resides in North Carolina.

**D. Seth Horton** has published thirty short stories, essays, interviews, and reviews in various journals, including *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Glimmer Train*, and *Southwestern American Literature*. His fifth anthology, *Road to Nowhere and Other New Stories from the Southwest*, was recently published by the University of New Mexico Press. He is a book reviewer for the *El Paso Times*, and he teaches literature and creative writing at the University of Virginia.

**Cathy Krizik's** writing has appeared in *Superstition Review*, *The Penmen Review* and *The Prague Post*. When she's not making a living as a magazine art director and career counselor, she's writing, an adventure she wishes has begun before menopause. She lives in Santa Cruz, CA, with her wife and two cats.

**Diddle Knabb** lives in Chicago. She is the mother of dragons of chihuahuas.

**Catharine Lucas**, a professor of English, emerita, at San Francisco State University, lives in Berkeley, California. Her work currently appears in *Cloudbank 9*, *Reunion Journal* (*Dallas Review*), *Women in the Arts Quarterly*, *Zone 3*, *Alembic*, *Burning Word*, *Willow Review*, and online in *Persimmon Tree* and *Digital Paper*. ([www.catharinelucas.com](http://www.catharinelucas.com))

**Lindsay Lusby's** poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Tinderbox Poetry Journal*, *Third Point Press*, *Sugar House Review*, *The Lumberyard*, *The Feminist Wire*, *The Wolf Skin*, *Fairy Tale Review*, *Midway Journal*, and elsewhere. Her chapbook *Imago* was published by dancing girl press in 2014. With Jehanne Dubrow, she co-edited *The Book of Scented Things*, a new poetry anthology from the Literary House Press. She is the assistant director of the Rose O'Neill Literary House at Washington College where she serves as assistant editor for the Literary House Press and managing editor for *Cherry Tree*.

**Anthony R. Lusvardi, S.J.**, is a Jesuit scholastic in theology studies at Boston College School of Theology and Ministry. His most recent pastoral assign-

ment was at St. Francis Mission on the Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota. His short story, "The Ends of the Earth," won the 2015 J. F. Powers Prize in Short Fiction sponsored by *Dappled Things* magazine. He hopes to be ordained a priest in just over a year.

**Ben Morris** is a PhD candidate at the University of North Dakota and has had work appear in *Lake Effect*, *drafthorse*, *Red Clay Review*, and others.

**W. P. Osborn's** collection, *Seven Tales and Seven Stories*, won the 2013 Unboxed Books Fiction Prize, selected by Francine Prose. He has short fiction in journals such as *Mississippi Review*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Cream City Review*, *Gargoyle*, and *Gettysburg Review*, and poetry in *Hotel Amerika*, *Main Street Rag*, and *Pinyon Review*. He is a professor of English at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan, where he teaches Shakespeare and other classes in literature. (wposborn.com)

**Angie Pelekidis** holds a PhD in Creative Writing from Binghamton University, where her dissertation won the Distinguished Dissertation Award. In 2010, a story of hers was selected by Ann Beattie as the first-prize winner of the *New Ohio Review's* fiction contest. Her work has appeared in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *McSweeney's*, *Masters Review*, *Eleven Eleven*, and many other journals and recently was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

A native West Texan, **Clinton Crockett Peters** has an MFA in nonfiction from the University of Iowa where he was an Iowa Arts Fellow. He is a teaching fellow pursuing a PhD in creative writing at the University of North Texas and has work published or forthcoming in *Shenandoah*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Waxwing*, *Upstreet*, *The Rumpus*, *American Literary Review*, *Los Angeles Review*, and the *Denton Record Chronicle*. He has worked as an outdoor wilderness guide, an English teacher in Japan, and a radio DJ.

**Greg Przekwas** is a USN and San Diego State graduate who has had other short fictions appear in *Samovar*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Parting Gifts*, and *Denver Quarterly*.

**Susan Rich** is the author of four collections of poetry, most recently, *Cloud Pharmacy* and *The Alchemist's Kitchen*, which was a finalist for the Foreword Prize and the Washington State Book Award. Along with Brian Turner she edited *The Strangest of Theatres*, published by McSweeney's and the Poetry Foundation. Her poems have appeared in the *New England Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, and *World Literature Today*. She has received awards from PEN USA, *The Times* (London), and the Fulbright Foundation.

**Marty Ross-Dolen** is a retired child psychiatrist currently staying home to raise her two children in Bexley, OH. She devotes her time to writing and volunteering in her community, and she has attended several writing conferences and three graduate-level creative nonfiction classes at The Ohio State University. Her work can be seen in *Foliate Oak*, *The Penmen Review*, *Forge*, and *Lilith*, and is forthcoming in *The Storyteller Anthology Magazine* and *Willow Review*.

**Janet Sarbanes** is a writer and scholar living in Los Angeles. She is the author of the short story collection *Army of One* and has published fiction and criticism in anthologies, artist monographs, and numerous journals, including *Black Clock*, *P-Queue*, *Entropy*, *Afterall*, *Popular Music and Society*, *Utopian Studies*, *Los Angeles Review of Books* and *East of Borneo*. She teaches in the MA Aesthetics and Politics and MFA Creative Writing programs at CalArts.

**Terry Savoie** is retired and living just outside Iowa City. He has had more than three hundred poems published in the past thirty years in literary journals, anthologies, and small presses including *Poetry*, *American Poetry Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *The North American Review*.

**Joshua Sheak** is a student in the University of New Mexico MD/PhD program. This is his first published essay. He lives with his wife in Albuquerque.

**Thom Tammaro** lives and works in Moorhead, Minnesota. Recent work includes a chapbook, *31 Mornings in December* (Red Dragonfly Press, 2011), and the anthology, *Visiting Dr. Williams: Poems Inspired by the Life and Work of William Carlos Williams* (University of Iowa Press, 2011).

**John Sibley Williams** is the editor of two Northwest poetry anthologies and the author of nine collections, including *Controlled Hallucinations* and *Disinheritance* (forthcoming 2016). A five-time Pushcart nominee, John serves as editor of *The Inflectionist Review* and works as a literary agent. Previous publishing credits include: *American Literary Review*, *Third Coast*, *Baltimore Review*, *Nimrod International Journal*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Rio Grande Review*, *Inkwell*, *Cider Press Review*, *Bryant Literary Review*, *RHINO*, and various anthologies. He lives in Portland, Oregon.

**Richard Wirick's** novel, *The Devils' Water*, was published by Ekstasis Editions in 2013. He is the author of two other prose collection, *Kicking In* and *One Hundred Siberian Postcards*. The latter was *London Times Notable Book* for 2007 and was a nominee for the PEN/Bingham Award for best new work by an American author. (NDQ published twelve of the Siberian postcards in Vol 73.4.) He lives with his family in Los Angeles.