STAFF

Editor-in-Chief
Danielle Lee Davis

Fiction Editors
Ben Hostetter
Molly Miller
Emma Moser
Shelley Stoehr

Poetry Editors
Lynn Marie Houston
Rebecca O’Bern
Elizabeth Wager

Art Editor
Ben Roy Hostetter

Cover Art
Kebabs
by Virginia Mallon

Phoenix Press
15 James St, New Haven, CT 06513

Noctua Review is made possible by SCSU’s Graduate Student Activities Committee.
EDITOR’S NOTE

Kind reader,

It is with great joy that I present the tenth volume of Southern Connecticut State University’s annual literary magazine, curated and edited by a spectacular staff of MFA candidates.

Nearly a year ago, I stood in a Lotte Market just outside of DC, browsing the aisles of groceries as I waited for the rain to die down and the fireworks to begin. It was July 4th, 2016, and I’d never felt more keenly what it was to be an American. My family was bickering in Korean over the price of gochujang; the smell of samosas and dim sum tangled in the air; my partner gestured to a package of longanisa, the Filipino sausages his mother had cooked for him when he was a child.

This, I thought, is what living in America looks like.

This year’s theme—Neo/Americana—celebrates that diversity of cultures and the reality of what being an American has come to be. It not only reflects the tumultuous state of the American landscape, both political and ecological, but revels in the community of outsiders and allies who have sprung up in spite of the chaos. Our contributors have drawn from their experiences to bring us stories and poems from the chill shores of Cape Cod to the packed dirt roads of Mississippi. They mumble county diner conversations into our ears and pull us headlong through an underground railroad for battered women.

It seems naïve to believe now, as I once did, that the worst outcome that could have befallen our nation on November 7th was too narrow a margin of victory, a message too weak in its refutation of the bigotry and division that had dominated the conversation. It has become increasingly clear that there is still work to be done. We hope that this volume, in its small way, can lend its voice to the chorus of dissent and shed a light upon the lives of the new Americans to which we dedicate it.

Happy reading,

Danielle Lee Davis
Editor-in-Chief
Contents

The Man Connected to the Other Side  2
   Anthony Parker

Du Xooni  19
   David Holper

Fossilized Forest  22
   Avra Elliott

Mississippi  38
   LaRue Cook

Native Body  52
   Hannah Marshall

Great Food Cash!  54
   Raymond E. Hulse

County Line Dinner Conversations  55
   Jeffery MacLachlan

Remodeling  56
   Kent Kosack

What’s Wrong with that Kid?  63
   Brian Robert Flynn

The Sound of Weeping  64
   Kurt Luchs

Living the Black  65
   Mark Gunthre
Hawking the Superslide  
   Virginia Mallon  

Loblolly  
   Bruce Colbert  

Bellyful  
   Avra Cipri  

Child’s Play  
   Susan Lago  

Dr. D.  
   Beaux Boudreau  

Rapid Eye Movement  
   Heiki Huotari  

Sunshine, 1974  
   Tom Larsen  

the aging rock-&-roll singer  
   Jonathan Greenhause  

Swimming  
   James Wilkinson  

A poem about being transparent  
   Ivan de Monbrison  

Strip Miner  
   Bradley Clompus  

Intracoastal Flashback  
   R.A. Allen
Ghostly Fruit 115
Rebecca Oet

Nick & Jimmy Go to the Mall 116
Evan Steuber

Summer Lust 129
Philip St. Clair
Little Sure Shot 131
Nick Roth

Nor’easter 141
Korbin Jones

Ivory’s House of Style 142
Kate M. Carey

Seascape with Mist, North Truro 156
Matthew Spireng

Clamdiggers 158
Virginia Mallon

Postcard 159
Mike Pontacoloni

Contributors 160

Editors 166
Contest Winners
Fiction Judge

Brock Clarke is the author of five books of fiction, most recently the novels *Exley* (which was a Kirkus Book of the Year, a finalist for the Maine Book Award, and a longlist finalist for the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award) and *An Arsonist’s Guide to Writers’ Homes in New England*. His books have been reprinted in a dozen international editions, and have been awarded the Mary McCarthy Prize for Fiction, the Prairie Schooner Book Series Prize, a National Endowment for Arts Fellowship, and an Ohio Council for the Arts Fellowship, among others.
Juliana Gray is the author of *Roleplay* (winner of the 2010 Orphic Prize) and *Anne Boleyn’s Sleeve* (Winged City Chapbook Press, 2013); her third collection, *Honeymoon Palsy*, is forthcoming from Measure Press. Recent poems have appeared in or are forthcoming from *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *32 Poems*, *Ecotone*, and elsewhere. An Alabama native, she lives in western New York and teaches at Alfred University.
“Which house is yours?” Jenny asked me.

“That one up there, on top, over on the far right,” I answered, pointing toward an Orion’s Belt of lights strung atop one of the Hollywood Hills. My driveway, tennis court and front lawn were always lit. I don’t have a pool.

“Must be nice to have a place up there,” she guessed.

“It is.”

“You don’t make it sound so. Why you staying here?”

“I really like hotels,” I told her.

“Excited about being on TV tomorrow?”

“No.”

“You’re not nervous? Really?” Jenny asked, surprised.

“No.”

Jenny wanted to hold my hand. She wasn’t sure if she could.

“I love Lindsay’s show,” she said.

“Everybody does,” I answered.

Ten stories below my suite, Los Angeles twinkled our reflections into black Christmas trees pasted flat on the window. The television show provided a fancy hotel room for guests. The hotel actually calls my room the Extreme Wow Suite. Rates aren’t listed on the hotel’s website. Call the front desk and the clerk immediately refers all inquiries to the Sales Dept.

“I used to be in Lindsay’s book club,” Jenny said, sounding very far away. “I tried contacting her when I got sick. We don’t have
the same mom, but we’re still sisters, you know. I wasn’t going to ask her for anything, I just—”

“She never knew you called,” I told Jenny. “No one ever talks about her family. Her staff knows better. The production company paid your hospital bills without telling her.”

“Yeah, well. That’s her choice, I guess. Does Lindsay know we’re friends?” Jenny turned toward me to ask.

“No.”

Their resemblance screamed at me. Same cheekbones. Same mouth. Same hair. Same earlobes. Both wore their father’s face. Jenny had the softer voice.

“Are you going to tell her?”

“Eventually, I’ll tell her.”

We shared a long moment of silence I enjoyed more than she did. Double-paned plate glass hushed everything outside my hotel room quieter than a hand covering your mouth. Los Angeles rolled out in all directions below, its lights a prairie of electric flowers plugged in humming their pulse. In the same eyeful, I saw everything. I saw after the big earthquake spills all these buildings onto their sides. I saw mastodons roam a slow pack down where the 101 freeway blushed ten thousand bumper-to-bumper brake lights that moment Jenny shared with me at the window. Jenny wouldn’t understand if I tried explaining it to her. That’s not meant to be an insult. I still don’t understand.

“The city is beautiful at night, isn’t it?” I asked.


“Thank you,” I said. She knew I’d know if she were lying.

“Did all that stuff happen? Is it all true?” she asked.

“Mostly. I’ve got a new one coming out. Lindsay is going to make her book club read it.”

“Lindsay wouldn’t like it, right? That we’re friends, I mean.”


I took a shower and brushed my teeth before laying down
to wait for sleep. I left the air conditioning on because I like the sound so much. My hotel suite had a bed large enough for me to sleep pointing my body any direction without dangling over the pillow-top edges. When I did sleep, I dreamt that one day I stopped dreaming. I was happy. But, I was bored.

Most guests of the *Lindsay Corcoran Show* first think the ficus tree in the corner of the green room is fake. They’ll pinch any leaf and rub it with finger pads like fabric to check. It’s very real. Seated on the overstuffed couch across the room, I can tell the ficus is real. Of course, I also know a production assistant named Aaron bought it at the Sheridan Gardens Nursery on Hollywood Way. I know a lot of things.

I know that ficus tree cost $97.41, tax included. I know Aaron bought a dozen ficus trees and paid using a credit card with the production company’s logo embossed under the raised number and expiration date. I know all the numbers on the card. I know Aaron drove a black pick-up. I know Aaron has blue eyes. I know two years from now the show will have a ratings drop and get snubbed at the Emmy nominations. I know the new Executive Producer makes immediate changes to shave ten percent from the budget. I know Aaron gets fired. I know Aaron’s parents let him move in to their new house down in Irvine while he job hunts. I know they’re nice people. I know they both have blue eyes, too.

The last time I occupied this room a small table with a large flower arrangement stood wilting there in the corner. Flowers keep dying. New ones have to be ordered. A semi-regularly watered ficus is practically unkillable.

My agent sat on a canvas-back chair and my publicist on the couch beside me. My assistant sat cross-legged on my other side, thumb-typing my schedule into her phone. I’m holding half a chilled bottle of water she opened for me. The couch made a sound like a dry finger slid down a balloon when one of us moved. Four human beings and one ficus tree breathed in and out. I got up and walked over to water the plant. I knew it was thirsty.
The hardback edition of my first book topped all the New York Times bestseller list non-fiction categories when I last guested on the show. Soft cover editions were being glued together in Dexter, MI the exact moment I sat on the cream color imitation leather couch across from Lindsay Corcoran. Each copy of my book proudly wore a gold sticker featuring Lindsay’s Book Club logo. Lindsay provided the blurb on the cover. The publishing company chose an italic typeface to visually imply its breathlessness and a large font because Lindsay Corcoran is the most famous person on television.

In the commercial everyone saw, the one her network ran for days leading up to the broadcast, Lindsay Corcoran asked me how she’s going to die and then closed her eyes to brace for my answer. The camera cut to me about to speak when the screen faded into Lindsay sitting alone in her studio asking America to join her for the most powerful hour of her life. Subtle harp music plucked under the entire thirty-one second clip.

“You’re never going to die,” is what I said to her.

Two different cast members have played Lindsay Corcoran on Saturday Night Live. The impression stayed the same. The Lindsay character wore a blonde feathered wig and purple turtleneck sweater. Lindsay’s audience brayed wild at everything she did or said. They’d pull out their own hair and hit each other with folding chairs when Lindsay gave everyone a car or a yacht. Then, Lindsay brought out Buddha or Jesus or Gandhi and the famous guest went out of their way to tell Lindsay Corcoran how much better a person she is than they were.

Twice male SNL hosts have played Lindsay’s fiancé Carson. In one sketch, Lindsay interviewed the Dalai Lama while Carson sat at her feet being stroked and fed treats. She hit him with a rolled up newspaper when he started humping the Lama’s leg. In the other sketch, she kept Carson on a studded leather leash while he held a parasol and fanned himself like an old Southern lady. Everything he said was a double-entendre, trying to get into Nelson Mandela’s khaki pants.

Lindsay kept rejecting offers to host the show. She won’t even do a cameo appearance.
Lindsay Corcoran hasn’t always been her name. She hates her real name, so I’ll keep it to myself. It’s easy to find anyway.

Lindsay’s parents met in a bar on her mother’s twentieth birthday. They weren’t together long. One day her father just stopped calling and coming over. He didn’t feel guilty because he’d made up his mind to break it off before he knew about their baby.

Her mother, Terry, still worked a checkout counter at the Safeway on North Blackstone up in Fresno. Terry’s been there long enough to have really good health insurance and a decent 401(k). Magazines at Terry’s register obsessed weekly about Lindsay’s fluctuating weight or why Lindsay still hasn’t married Carson after being engaged so long. Terry hated when they guessed at Lindsay’s sexual orientation. Or Carson’s. She turned those covers around.

It’s an open secret Lindsay Corcoran is Terry’s daughter. Tabloids did those “Lindsay Corcoran’s Mom is Poor” stories a few years ago. Terry stopped doing interviews. Now Terry lived in a small rented house with two runny-eyed poodles and used her employee discount to buy her microwave dinners and Jodi Picoult novels at the Safeway on 1st Street. She tried to not watch too much TV.

Lindsay’s father, Carl, drove an eighteen-wheeler with a pair of scuffed chrome testicles dangled under the bumper sticker forever rhetorically asking “How Is My Driving?” A decade in he settled on “Lizard Handler” for a CB handle. Truckers call women who hang-out around their layover stops “Lot Lizards.” An entire common language evolved among truckers. Carl’s weakness for eye shadow and spider web nylons meant Lindsay had brothers and sisters in other states and time zones.

Six years ago Carl’s truck slid off a patch of black ice merging onto Highway 94 outside Saint Cloud, MN. It rolled down an embankment before flopping jack-knifed in the snow. Truckers call losing traction on the road “Ice Capading.” Paramedics and firemen and police left thousands of pock-mark footprints at the scene fresh powder covered by morning. Carl died thinking the flurries were stars he zoomed past in outer space.

Lindsay Corcoran didn’t know those people.
Calling it either a ficus tree or a ficus plant are both acceptable. The ficus is the official tree of Bangkok. Nine million people in Southeast Asia agree it’s a tree. The most common ficus species is named *ficus benjamina*. When you think of a ficus, the image is a *ficus benjamina*.

The *ficus benjamina*’s rubbery green leaves beg you to feel if they’re real. Each pointy leaf’s stem and veins bulge like the spine and rib cage of a skinny young woman who’d turn around to take her shirt off if she let you get that far.

Benjamina is a good name for a shy girl. Benjamina would be tall, and have a nice complexion. And she’d be really funny when she opens up to you.

Almost two dozen of us surrounded the pool at my uncle’s new house. Uncle Ron slurred through “Black Magic Woman” while working the barbeque, spatula in one hand and Bud Light number four in the other. Most of the kids were splashing water, black hair glued flat to their faces. I’m sitting on the diving board shaft, close to the turquoise tiles grooved along the pool’s lip. I can see my bare feet in the deep end. The rest of me was dry.

“What d’ya mean he can’t fucken swim?” Uncle Ron roared loud enough to hush the laughter and music. “Jack, get over here. Now.”

My mom said something to him I couldn’t hear. I want to say she’s telling him to leave me alone.

“Nah, he’s gotta learn,” he said to her. “Move your ass, Jack. C’mere.”

Time slurred when I walked toward him. Uncle Ron crouched down so deep lines furrowing his cheeks and forehead got near my face. Skin below his eyes sagged from all his early mornings and two pack habit, slipping off the bone under our high winter sun.

“What are you? Thirteen? You gotta learn ah swim. Everybody needs a learn howda swim,” Uncle Ron reasoned. Then he pushed me into the pool.

My nose stung with the first water rush I inhaled. Desperately thrashing wild, I tried reaching for the pool’s edge, but he used
the cleaning net to push me down. “Paddle, goddammit. Paddle. Paddle,” Uncle Ron yelled at me. Our family watched. I’m actually fifteen when this happens.

Foam boiled my eyes. For a moment I got a hand around the net’s aluminum pole. Uncle Ron ripped the pole away and used it to push me down. The net poked under water like a bird hunting fish. I kept swallowing chlorine acid.

And that’s when two columns of pure white light broke the surface above. Water parted like drapes opening. A woman saved me. She had big delicate hands and long fingers, the kind someone named Benjamina would have. That’s the name I gave her in my mind: Benjamina. I remember her Benjamina hands so well. No veins. No hairs sticking out. They were dishwashing glove smooth.

Alongside me in the water, Benjamina’s arm length hair hung slack below her shoulders. It should have floated away from her head and swayed like loose seaweed. But it didn’t. Her black dress didn’t billow open or ride up her legs. Nothing affected her. Touching my face, Benjamina calmed me. I trusted her. So, I stopped struggling and followed her smile. I was dry again when we passed the surface and rose higher.

Benjamina took me far away.

I turned back to see my Uncle Frank dive into the pool fully dressed. Mom screeched through hands covering her face. Kids stayed in the shallow end. Cousin Mark helped roll my limp body onto the patio. Adults crowded around. Uncle Ron knew CPR. I started falling back toward the ground when he pinched my nose and shoved harsh air into my lungs. Second life tasted like beer and cigarette ash. I missed Benjamina. I couldn’t remember her face. I just remember her lips. That smile.

Pearly light sizzled away like my eyes were fogged up glass clearing. My new world sparkled pristine. Coughing up a full throat of water, Uncle Ron’s scared face filled my vision first. I looked into my uncle’s fat pupils, each a black olive floating in a bowl of bloody milk. His whole life rippled there, beginning to end.

I saw him carrying a snub-fingered baseball glove to watch the Angels play at Wrigley Field downtown before it got bulldozed.
I saw him run from Grandma’s broom. I saw him try to sleep in a Vietnam jungle under hissing rain. I saw him drink. I saw him knock a woman’s front teeth out. I saw him push me into the pool. I saw him smoke endless Marlboro reds in a plaid recliner. I saw him flat-line in a sterile hospital bed with no one watching. I wanted to hate him, but felt something better. Complete empathy. I couldn’t ever hate him for drowning me.

Everything meant to happen did happen.

Each major television journalist took a turn interviewing me. Katie Couric made sure she got footage of us walking in a park with my mom she could pair with voice-over narration. An entire week I sat across a gray table from Larry King fielding call-in questions from viewers all over the country whose names I already knew. Four days after I told Geraldo Rivera he’d die masturbating with a bath robe belt knotted around his throat, Barbara Walters came to our house.

The network parked two trucks stacked full with video and sound equipment and a mile’s worth of fat electrical cables on our street. Then they brought in a long trailer for Barbara Walters to sit in quietly going over her notes until our agreed time to begin. Watching Barbara Walters open our front gate and walk across our yellow lawn was surreal. She’d never been to Reseda before and would never return.

Back in New York City three days after we met, Barbara Walters stood on a bone-colored masking tape X and read the broadcast’s introduction off poster sized cue cards. Barbara Walters’ most recent contractual stipulations specifically negotiated cue cards on set instead of a teleprompter. The jerky motion of words rolling up a screen unnerved her.

“Tonight, we meet Jack Franklin, a Los Angeles-area teenager who’s become quite a sensation these past few months,” Barbara Walters started, addressing America directly. She kept her hands folded while speaking. People able to maintain eye-contact with the camera while reading without their eyes constantly scanning left to right impress me. That looks hard to do.

My face projected on the screen behind Barbara Walters
looked like I was trying to peak at the cue cards over her shoulder. Two rows of bare Helvetica print sliced my face into northern and southern hemispheres. It said:

Jack Franklin:
The Boy Connected to The Other Side

“Jack’s story,” she continued, “has been told in numerous magazine articles and newspaper stories, as well as a string of high-profile television appearances. Details have become well-known: a freak diving accident at a family gathering changed Jack Franklin’s life forever. Knocked unconscious, Jack sank underwater and stayed there several moments. When revived, he told an amazing story. Jack, a poor swimmer, drowned. He died; or, came very close to dying. Young Jack Franklin experienced what is commonly referred to as a near death out of body experience. What Jack saw during this time he stopped breathing has been the subject of much interpretation. How this event changed him, however, is beyond interpretation. Without any rhyme or reason, he woke simply knowing everything about, well, everything.

“Jack Franklin’s talents for telepathy, clairvoyance and precognition have been documented and verified during his many media appearances. He’s passed batteries of tests, both medical and scientific. The consensus is that this young man is the first human being proven to possess extra-sensory capabilities. These abilities, many believe, have a spiritual nature; a gift from God, so to speak. Others are still skeptical. Recently, I spent some time with Jack and, honestly, our encounter was strange, wonderful, inspiring and, ultimately, transcendent. Please, join me in getting to know Jack Franklin, the boy connected to the other side.”

Weeks before, my publisher sent Barbara Walters an advanced printing of my first book she read in one day and night. That Christmas her assistant included copies in all the gift baskets Barbara Walters had sent to family, friends and acquaintances.

“Your book, The Other Side,” she said holding up her copy I signed after we were done, “is astonishing. I find choosing the correct word or words to describe what you document very difficult.”
“Me, too,” I said to Barbara Walters. We laughed together in blurry smeared focus. Her three cameramen each used a special lens filter that made us look like we were being filmed through Vaseline thick fog.

She started with some biographical questions I couldn’t answer very well. Anything before the pool is hard to remember. I apologized for being a bad interview several times.

“What exactly was that white light you saw?” she eventually inquired.

“Information.”

“Would you mind explaining that for me?” Barbara Walters asked without consulting any of her blue index cards.

“The universe exploded in my face. It told me everything at once.”

“Did you see heaven?”

“I saw more than that.”

“I don’t understand,” she admitted.

“I don’t really, either. Guess you kind of had to be there.”

Of course, I didn’t write my first book. The publisher wouldn’t let me and I didn’t want to. So, I stayed at the Chateau Marmont for four days in a suite next door to the one John Belushi died in and told a ghostwriter my story. We got all the details down, but he said he’d still change some. Honesty taints good stories. I liked the book. He made something a lot of people liked. Millions found their own meaning in what happened to me. I didn’t tell the ghostwriter about Benjamina. I still haven’t figured out what saint or dead family member she might be. He would’ve tried to make her the Virgin Mary for my autobiography.

A lot of people bought my book. My publisher made sure copies were available online and sold in stores the day before Thanksgiving. People gave my miracle story to each other for Christmas and Hanukah gifts. Lindsay Corcoran’s production company bought the film rights. She’d started producing spiritually-themed cable TV movies, beginning with biopics of the Dalai Lama and Eckhart Tolle. Each had “Lindsay Corcoran Presents” suspended above their
scripted title.

My life story premiered Easter Sunday night with back-to-back airings on the Lifetime Channel. Filming took two weeks. The actor playing me was too tall. On the afternoon they shot the pool scene he mimed drowning for six takes with both his feet touching the pool’s floor. The movie made sure to present the white light I saw as God. A choir sang on the soundtrack when the actor playing me hovered above his body double sprawled out of focus on the patio below. I decided not to be on set that day. I didn’t get to see the crane the production used to film my death.

The ficus tree is also known as the weeping fig tree because it’s arched leaves droop and point their tips toward the ground. The leaves have a waxy sheen to them. Glossy leaves meant *ficus benjaminina* evolved to put on happy face despite a natural proclivity to sulk. The color of a ficus is almost unnaturally green. A healthy ficus gets easily mistaken for a fake ficus. The ficus tries really hard.

Swedish botanist Carl von Linné first described the *ficus benjaminina* in 1767 in the twelfth edition of his *Systema Naturae*. Linné was very fond of Benjamin Franklin’s scientific writings. Benjamin Franklin was very fond of shy girls. Benjamin Franklin prided himself on being able to make sullen women smile. Franklin would have named the plant *ficus labiae*. Few people earn naming a plant after them. He really did.

I shook out the last drop of water from my bottle into the ficus tree’s pot when Craig the stage manager arrived to usher me to the set. He stopped in the doorway behind me when I said hello first.

“Time to go, Mr. Franklin,” Craig announced.

My agent and publicist and assistant tucked my hair back and straightened my tie and told me not to be nervous. I followed Craig into the hall, waiting for him to ask about his mother.

“I love your book,” Craig told me. “Can’t wait to read the new one.”

“Thank you.”

Backstage, we stood side by side watching Lindsay on a
monitor screen begin to introduce me when he finally gathered the courage to know.

“This is probably a terrible time, Mr. Franklin, but I have to ask you. My mom’s been—” Craig started.

“Jack. Please just call me Jack,” I stopped him mid-sentence to correct. I hate being called mister. “Don’t worry. The next round of chemo puts her into remission.”

“Thank you,” Craig sighed. He wanted to hug me. I would have let him if we had the time, but Lindsay was about to bring me out to the stage.

“Jack just turned eighteen, so he’s not a boy anymore,” Lindsay said. Her audience got loud, clapping for the birthday I had eight days before. “Please, welcome back to our show Jack Franklin: the man connected to the other side.”

Five years ago the *Lindsay Corcoran Show* did an episode about the adult entertainment industry. A trio of actresses on the couch opposite Lindsay told her audience about a game called “Dad or Uncle?” members of the crew would play on film sets.

“What is that?” Lindsay asked.

“Guys on set, behind the cameras, you know, the crew, they try to guess who touched each girl funny: Dad or Uncle,” an actress with two first names answered.

The actresses giggled away suppressed traumas.

“I don’t think this game is funny at all,” Lindsay said, visibly shaken, “and neither do millions like me who’ve endured sexual abuse.”

Mascara dripped out of place, Lindsay’s body clenched into a closed fist. One of the actresses went over and put a tanned arm around her. The studio audience sat very quiet while Lindsay let out a cry from her stomach that had slept there years. Then, they stood and clapped for Lindsay.

Looking up into her audience, Lindsay felt loved. She cried harder, eyes so tight they looked like knife slashes to her face. Lindsay asked for a commercial break. She needed to compose herself. And she wanted to get all that glitter off her jacket.
Lindsay Corcoran never told anyone why she chose Lindsay Corcoran for her professional name. Back when Lindsay did local news in Bakersfield she decided to save the story of how she picked her name until her Barbara Walters interview. Sharing Barbara Walters’s fog was one of the earliest career goals Lindsay set for herself.

“There’s a sign on the freeway going south leaving Fresno that says Lindsay and Corcoran with arrows under the names showing you which lane goes to which,” she got to eventually tell Barbara Walters. “L.A. is straight ahead.”

“Lindsay and Corcoran are cities?” Barbara Walters asked, amused.

“Yeah,” Lindsay laughed, “they are. Small ones. Corcoran has a prison and Lindsay is a farm town. The world’s largest olive is there.”

“You must be very proud of yourself, Lindsay. You’ve been so wildly successful since you essentially escaped Fresno.”

“I’m here,” Lindsay declared.

“Which house is yours?” Lindsay Corcoran asked me.

Lindsay held a drink with two ice cubes she specifically asked me to make that way without saying please. After inviting herself into my hotel suite, she fluttered straight over to my window. Lights of Los Angeles attract the same attention fireworks do. Security is pretty tight at the hotel I’m staying at but they let Lindsay in, past the front desk and to the elevators. No one stopped her. When the most famous woman in the world walks into the lobby, you assume she’s got a room reserved.

After our interview earlier, Lindsay did her usual wind-down routine of snorting three caterpillar-thick rails of finely ground Bolivian cocaine off an antique hand mirror. It’s the reason magazines have been shouting about her successful diet plan the past few months. She brought a brick of it into the country on her private plane each time she visited the girl’s school she founded there. Lindsay really loved sunny places. The hand mirror once belonged to Judy Garland. Two years ago Lindsay anonymously bought it at a Sotheby’s auction. I finished pouring myself a drink with the same
nine dollar minibar Coke I opened to make hers.
“Come here,” she ordered. “Show me where you live.”
“Um, there, you see those three lights close in a row, up there? That’s my house,” I showed her. I touched the glass how I would touch a map thumbtacked on a wall.
“Can you see my house from here?”
“No.”
Lindsay’s estate in Malibu is bigger than mine. Her mansion is on the other side of the mountains, facing the ocean. She slept alone in a garage door sized bed. Her fiance Carson has his own room across the hall. Years they’ve lived that way.
“You were great on the show today,” she complimented me.
“Thanks.”
“Happy birthday, by the way,” Lindsay said. She ran her fingers across the back of my head. I could feel Lindsay’s fearlessness. She had very good cocaine. “Eighteen,” she slithered, drawing out the e’s. “Finally.” Lindsay started laughing, too loud and for too long.
“What about Carson?”
“Come on,” Lindsay said tugging my hair. “We both know where he is, what he’s doing right now and who with.”
A mile and a half away Carson sat in a theater on Santa Monica Blvd. while a happily married junior high history teacher from Glendale performed oral sex on him impressively well. The movie projected on the wall gave enough light to see traded yes or no facial expressions. Carson kept watching the man’s Dodgers hat bob up and down. The theater smelled like a clammy palm.
“Yeah, well,” I said.
We shared a long moment of silence I did not enjoy at all. She finished her drink and held the glass up to my face. While I made her another, Lindsay wandered around my suite, humming. Without her five inch heels on Lindsay Corcoran could be mistaken for delicate.
“Tell me what’s on my mind.”
“No,” I told her. “I don’t want to do that.”
Lindsay used both hands to take her drink from me. “Fine, no
magic trick,” she smirked. “Tell me what’s on your mind.”

“Plants.”

“Plants? What do you mean?” she laughed. Lindsay tilted her head in a way that made her smile open strangely wider. She wasn’t just hunting. Cocaine made her actually interested in my answer.

“Have you noticed the plants around your office?”

“Nope; haven’t,” Lindsay answered honestly.

“Aaron, one of your production assistants, got sent out and bought a couple dozen ficus trees. They’re spread out all over your offices. One is right outside your dressing room,” I informed her.

“Oh.”

“Yeah, I just can’t get this thought out of my head. I—I—”

“What is it?” Lindsay asked between sips.

“The ficus he bought looks like that one over there,” I pointed toward a tightly pruned example standing between matching Mark Rothko lithographs hung in the foyer.

“No, still haven’t noticed them.”

“I have. The ficus is the most popular indoor plant species in North America.”

“Good to know,” Lindsay half-whispered. “Another, sir,” she ordered in a heavier voice. Then she flicked her wrist to make ice clink together in her empty glass. Tambourine bracelets jangled half-way down her forearm. She kept screaming her thoughts at me.

“I can hear you. Come on, stop it,” I plead, taking her glass.

“Fine. Tell me more about this fucking plant.”

“It’s really a tree,” I countered. I stopped myself from telling her about Bangkok and the nine million people there who agree with me. I put fresh ice in her glass and splashed gin on the cubes before emptying the Coke can into her drink. “Here,” I handed her the glass.

“Come, sit down and tell me more,” Lindsay made her initial move. She landed on my suite’s nine-person wide couch and set her glass on the table. I took my drink over and settled far enough away to notice Lindsay buttoned her blouse until just about the middle of her chest. “Talk plant to me, I like how deep your voice has gotten,” Lindsay whispered, getting closer. Lindsay smelled nice despite the
alcohol murdering her breath.

“The species of ficus in your office is called the benjamina. The
ficus bejamina. Isn’t that pretty?”

“Sounds like a girl’s name.”

“That’s what’s been stuck in my head. Benjamina does sound
like a girl’s name, right? But, Benjamina doesn’t sound like the
name of a normal girl. It’s not a Jane or a Susan or—”

“Lindsay?”

“That’s not what I mean, but, yeah, I guess you’re right.
Benjamina isn’t a normal name. The kind of girl named Benjamina
wouldn’t be an average girl.” I tried picturing the face of the woman
who saved me in the pool. Still nothing.

“Benjamina . . . Sad girl name,” Lindsay piped in.

“Another name for the ficus is ‘the weeping fig.’ Botanists
agree with you, I guess.”

“The weeping fig,” Lindsay repeated, managing to make
unsexy words purr. I took a long drink to hush her thoughts. She
kept asking for the same thing. “I like it: the weeping fig. It’s kind of
pretty.”

“I do, too,” I agreed. “It’s beautiful.”

Lindsay smiled and bit my earlobe. She told me to keep
talking and kissed my neck. I hadn’t thought about sex since Uncle
Ron gave me mouth to mouth. Hearing other people’s sex thoughts
made me not need my own.

“The weeping fig,” I said trying to focus, “reminds me of you.
You’re a Benjamina.”

Lindsay pulled away from me. “The fuck does that mean?”

“I look at you and see a weeping fig. In living rooms and
doctor’s offices and waiting areas and airports you’re sulking, there
on everyone’s TV. Wardrobe and makeup cover how you’re sulking
right in front of them. But, I noticed. You’re sad, but you’re trying
not to be. It’s one of the things I like about watching your show,” I
said.

Lindsay shoved me, knocking the high ball glass out of my
hand. My drink splashed on the white rug, but the glass bounced
and landed right-side up. I stared at the glass until I decided it was
another thing that reminded me of Lindsay Corcoran.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m sorry, Lindsay. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

Lindsay grabbed my hair and kissed around my mouth and bit my lips shut. “You want to apologize?” she panted. “You want to fucking apologize? Apologize.” She crowded my head with begging. “You know what I want,” Lindsay groaned before laying her flat, dry tongue on mine.

“Don’t make me do that,” I plead. She straddled me and rubbed my face into her cleavage. I breathed through my nose. Lindsay kissed me again, clicking our teeth together.

“You know I know you want it,” she slurred.

I pulled Lindsay away and studied her face. Even under shadowy dimmed lights with smeared make-up, she still looked like the person on TV. Lindsay Corcoran had a camera-ready face she’ll maintain through diets and Botox and subtle face lifts and Vaseline caked camera lenses for decades.

“Do it for me,” she said. “Please.”


Lindsay smiled for me and got ready. I pulled an open hand down from high above my head and slapped her left cheek hard enough to leave a red palm print behind.

“Again,” she wanted. And I did it again.
They say, take us to the docks, so I pull out, fixing my course
on a star, wondering if the steel bulk of the Checker Marathon
will drive out on the rickety dock they guide me to, or if
all five of them—and my sorry-assed self will plunge into the narrows
that stretch between Ketchikan and Gravina, dark cold water waiting for us.
Somehow the dock holds: they pile out, a dark swarm in an even darker
summer night, two a.m., all drunk as wayward bears, or worse. They say,
Come have a drink with us, college boy. Damn bars all closed, you got
nothing
to do, nowhere to go. We drink coffee royale, more Canadian Royale
than coffee, but do I care? After an hour of this, I’m looped enough
I risk everything, call John, my boss, and he cashes out my cab, so I can go
fall fishing. Hours later, I am staggering on the fan tail of the boat,
the new lead man on this swaying purse seiner. God knows, I have no idea
what I’m doing. I start to whistle in wonder:
Whatever you do, the skipper hollers down from the wheelhouse, college
boy,
don’t whistle, bad luck. Don’t whistle, I think
as the power block begins to whistle its high-pitched melody—and I see
where the lip of the unknown is waiting to speak some magic
in my waiting ear.

For three days, I labor, uneven on my feet, half deaf, in my rain gear and
bubble mask. I learn
how a jellyfish burns, as if the sea had gone shopping for fire,
And even with the raingear, when the net comes pouring down over the
power block,
it rains whatever shit the sea has to offer, bouncing off my bubble mask,
mostly,
but other times, slithering down my back. I learn fast enough not to
whistle, not to tug on the web, so the web man beside me stagers or
falls. Even so,
I piss off Thomas, the skipper’s nephew, who labors beside me. And I learn
to watch out
when the fish bag is swaying over the deck. If it hits you,
it could knock you flat or send you spinning over the edge. Last of all, I
learn
the worst job is reserved for the greenest members of the crew, Thomas
and me,
So with every set we descend into the hold and pack the salmon with ice.
Down there slime
and stink abound. After one hard set, Thomas grabs a 10-pound salmon,
swings it hard, and smacks me up the side of the head, sending me flying
into the muck.
When my head stops spinning, I do the reasonable thing: I pick up my
own dog salmon,
and we battle it out below. While we pound each other with our fish, I hear
everyone yelling,
and I look up long enough to see them cheering us on. We fight
until there is no more fight left in either of us. After that, we become the
best of friends.
One last thing I learn: the word for friend in Tlinkot.

III
When we make landfall two weeks later, I stink in ways I did not know
were possible.
I cannot wait for a cold beer and a hot shower. As we hop off the boat,
Thomas says, buy me some smokes, will you? I tell him, come with me, I’m
just going
across the street to the 7/11 for a beer. He gives me a look. What?
They don’t allow my kind, he says. What kind? I say. Jesus, he laughs
uneasily, where the
hell do you come from, college boy? I buy him the smokes, and we sit
and drink my beer, smoke his cigarettes. I have not fished again in all the
summers that have followed, but how
can I not remember us there: the border between his world and mine, if
only for
that moment, rising, disappearing in smoke.
The town took its name from the national park beside it. Geologists and paleontologists had once hunched like vultures in the cafés, scavenging for unsuspecting tourists. They lectured bored children about the petrified trees, how the wood had become silica, how their colors came from iron, manganese, and carbon.

By the time Ann and Kirk took over his parents’ store, most of the scientists were extinct, the trees depleted by theft and by the tourist shop owners who sold off the town’s main attraction. That something petrified could eventually slip away had never occurred to anyone, least of all Ann’s in-laws who’d run the first ad in the 70’s bragging a free piece of petrified wood to every visitor.

Cafés closed their doors, the forgotten menus advertising Petrified Pastrami Sandwiches blew down the street with the tumbleweeds. A retired professor bought a pit-bull to guard the largest remaining stump, a tooth protruding from the desert’s diseased gums. On her bad days Ann was jealous of the man’s stump. Her own property contained one large, bile-colored log with grey mold-like circles, and three red sections, split so clean they reminded her of a store-bought loaf of sliced bread. She was fond of the red ones, a deep mahogany the color of her son’s wood stained Lincoln Logs.

Tourists seemed to expect towering Redwoods of stone, and standing amid what could easily be enormous animal droppings was not their idea of a good family vacation. They entered Ann and Kirk’s store, spun the postcard rack or stuck their hand in the bin...
of petrified fragments and asked how far they were from the Grand Canyon.

Ann stopped spending her days hopefully waiting behind the counter and began sunbathing in her old cruise line deck chair. It was the only piece of lawn furniture she had personally purchased, and she considered it far superior to Kirk’s white plastic chairs and the assorted dinosaurs he’d sculpted from metal or papier-mâché. A T-rex provided her with shade, as from her deck chair she watched the only remaining outdoor food vendor, a Navajo Taco stand across the street.

She’d napped on the chair during her pregnancy and forced a smile as the taco stand proprietor, Elaine Johnson Running-Tree, joked about over-baking the bun in her oven. She imagined her womb as a sauna, the heat hospitable and not oppressive.

When Kirk Jr. was born a month early he appeared underdone. His pasty flesh wrinkled around his eyes, and Ann wondered if like a puppy he would need several weeks before he could see. Ann took to calling Kirk Jr. “KJ” and eventually slurried it into “Cage.” Now two, the boy looked very much like his father, as though his name had been a prophecy.

Cage played a few yards away amid the sand and tufts of brown grass that made up their lawn.

“Dead thing,” the boy announced.

Ann forced herself from the chair with effort, the heat of the day pushing her down. Elaine had already floated across the street to kneel beside Cage, her long braids the color of oxidized stones dipping into the dust.

Ann moved slowly to join them. She pictured herself as a majestic desert animal—though no specific animal came to mind—crossing the sands to check on a stray cub. She rested a hand on Cage’s white-blond hair. When she met Kirk as a child he had the same lashes as Cage, the bleached white of the cow skulls so commonly used as yard décor.

Cage reached a fat finger toward a headless sparrow’s body covered in ants, victim to the damn roadrunners. The frighteningly prehistoric-looking creatures stared from the brush during Ann’s
walks, the feathers along their heads lifting like a spiked cock’s comb. They twisted their necks to let one eye watch her. Kirk adored them. He had built a six-foot roadrunner from scrap metal. It was the catalyst for his dinosaur hobby and stood on the edge of town beneath a billboard bragging the largest Spinosaurus sculpture in the southwest. If she wasn’t careful Kirk would tell her all about them.

“Poor thing,” Elaine said, scooping the body into her hands and blowing away the ants. Ann frowned. How could she teach Cage not to pick up every dead thing he saw when this woman set such a bad example?

“Is that a good idea, Elaine? You handle food…”

“Every creature deserves respect. Come, Kirk Jr., let’s find it a resting place.”

Elaine and Cage crossed the street, Elaine stopping to check both ways despite traffic being rare as rain.

A plane passed overhead, and Ann imagined the pilot looking down and seeing the little boy dressed in red and blue, a lone wandering survivor of some wreck. A bright speck on the vibrant dreariness of the desert floor. Tourists told Ann they envied the blue skies, but the skies only looked blue because of the sepia earth they contrasted. It was like the marbles Cage found in the sand, only beautiful because their colors stood out against the dust.

Ann returned indoors to open the store. They lived in the rooms above it. During the first years of marriage she would walk downstairs in her robe to bring Kirk coffee, and if a tourist happened to stop by she slipped away to dress. Now every morning she felt the dust of unsold souvenirs seeping up through the floorboards.

Ann buried her hand in a bin of fossilized fragments. When the exodus first started, she took Cage on morning walks to collect pieces of petrified wood from other properties for their store, but Kirk stopped this, saying it was dishonest since they were unable to pay the rightful owners.

Tourists stopped buying souvenirs when they realized they could pick up a piece of the town in any surrounding field. Ann
said nothing, merely watched as Kirk began staying up late with a yellow legal pad, writing out lists of potential side incomes. Her mother had worked as a housecleaner for the retirees who trickled into a town they thought of as warm and full of natural history. Ann had offered, trying to keep her voice light, to pick up her mother’s broom. Kirk had shaken his head. Her place was by his side, smiling at tourists and parroting back facts, arranging the pieces of petrified wood on the shelves into artistic displays.

The problem with Kirk was that his expertise never matched his enthusiasm. He bought old school buses and outlined a plan to turn them into food trucks. As the buses’ paint faded and the interiors cracked and peeled, Kirk began posting small signs advertising his availability as a notary. He viewed the dinosaurs as one of his art projects, and thought Ann enjoyed being a curator of sorts. But she hated them. Most were tall enough to come to her waist, and many stood several feet taller than she did. From the store window she could see his Triceratops and even make out its empty, staring eye sockets. It was tedious to keep the area around the dinosaurs clean, so each one had its own surrounding patch of brush. The grass vaguely camouflaged the peeling skins of papier-mâché and scrap metal. Ann reminded herself that this was Kirk’s way of surviving.

The bells above the door announced a customer. Ann kept her back turned, focusing her attention on a small tray of rattlesnake tails Kirk had collected. He had found a den of snakes recently in the leg of his T. rex. This was how he viewed every hazard or disappointment, as something to be prized or sold.

The sound of a digital camera’s shutter startled Ann. The customer, a girl, stood a few feet away. The tiny juts of her hip bones peeked over the top of her jeans, bird’s bones. A small white dog stood by her feet.

“Fantastic,” the girl said, studying the image she had taken on her camera. She wiped black bangs away from her forehead, and grinned, revealing perfect small teeth, the kind previously trained by braces. Ann ran her tongue along her own, feeling the familiar ridge of a canine.

“Can I get your name?” the girl asked, pulling a composition
notebook the size of an index card from her denim vest pocket. She was a head shorter and maybe ten years younger than Ann.

“I don’t allow pets in the store,” Ann said. She didn’t care for young tourists. They spent little and left beer cans behind.

“Tiny behaves himself.” The girl thrust out her hand. “I’m Stu. I’m taking a road trip down old highways for my book.”

Holding the girl’s hand, Ann noticed how freckled her own hands had become. They appeared large compared to the girl’s.

“Sue?”

“Sorry?”

“Your name.”

The girl laughed. “Stu.”

Ann imagined canned stew, the orange grease congealed on the surface. The girl’s parents must have hated her.

“Is there a good place to eat?” the girl asked.

“There’s a place to eat.”

The dog began yipping, each bark propelling it backward.

“It’s across the street,” Ann said, and opened the door for the girl to leave. She pointed across the street where Elaine was heating the grill for the burgers she served on tortillas and called Indian Tacos. Cage was setting out condiments like toy soldiers in a line.

“Lead the way,” Stu said.

Kirk would have taken the girl by the arm and walked her across the street. He would have given a monologue that didn’t sound rehearsed about the history of the town, downplaying his parents’ role in repeatedly bailing out other struggling citizens, but Ann walked silently ahead, telling herself she needed to get Cage anyway.

The Navajo Taco Stand consisted of two old grills beneath a bleached canopy. Elaine and Bob had originally opened a trading post offering moccasins, jewelry, and woven rugs. Upon learning his father was one sixteenth Navajo, Bob added Running Tree to their name and began advertising authentic fry bread. Elaine had yet to master any traditional recipes. Having worked summers at a carnival, her fry bread was basically funnel cake in appearance and taste. Whenever Kirk invited them for dinner, Ann took a certain pride in
preparing red chili, or the Spanish rice her mother had taught her to make. At first she lied about the recipes when Elaine asked for them, leaving out key ingredients and relishing her own authority. When she eventually took pity, she discovered the lies were unneeded. Elaine managed to ruin Frito pies.

Cage waved to his mother and ran over to hand her a burger wrapped in a tortilla.

“He made that for you,” Elaine said
“Did you wash your hands?” Ann asked looking for the dead bird.

Cage reached for the dog, staring at Stu as he waited for an invitation.

“You can pet him,” the girl said, again revealing her teeth, only now Ann saw the girl’s smile was a touch crooked. “His name is Tiny. What’s yours?”

“This is Kirk Jr.” Elaine said.
“Is he your son?” Stu asked Elaine.
“I’m his other mother,” Elaine said.

Stu looked from Ann to Elaine with new interest.

“Elaine watches him when my husband and I are busy at the store,” Ann said. She didn’t mind someone thinking she was a lesbian, but if she was she would do better than Elaine.

Stu ordered fry bread and when it was placed in front of her she shook her head and sincerely murmured, “Fucking fantastic,” as though mislabeled funnel cake was exactly what she had expected and hoped to find. Ann hoped Elaine had forgot to wash her hands. She glanced down at Cage.

“Where’s your bird?”
He pointed to a small mound of stones near the corner of the stand and then resumed petting the dog.

Stu held up her camera the way an explorer might show a nervous native she was unarmed. “Can I take your boy’s photo?”

“Are you a reporter?” Elaine asked.

“Of sorts. I’m a lens for other humans to view America.”

Ann nodded in what she hoped was not an encouraging way. Stu continued.
“We were going to do the whole Route 66 drive. Classic American road trip.” She pulled the dog into her lap where it began to eat what was left on her plate. “We received a grant to finish our book.”

Ann pleaded silently for Elaine not to ask what she promptly did.

“What’s the book about?” Elaine said.
“Dying tourist towns. You know you are the fourth dinosaur park I’ve seen?”

Ann licked the sand from her teeth and sighed. Why correct an intruder? If someone came in to rob you and said, “This is a great silver creamer,” you wouldn’t correct them and say “It’s a gravy bowl.” Whatever you call it, they have taken it from you. Yet Ann couldn’t be memorialized as someone who lived out her life in a dinosaur park. If some girl’s book was all that was to remain of Ann’s life, let it be accurate.

“We aren’t a dinosaur park,” Ann said.
“I wouldn’t say we’re a dying tourist town,” Elaine added, taking the plate the dog had licked clean.
“What are you?” Stu asked. There was nothing confrontational in her voice, just a patronizing sincerity.
“We’re a national park, a landmark; the trees should be one of the World’s Wonders…” Elaine said. Her braids made Ann think of a scolded dog’s drooping ears.
“But where are the trees? It’s called Fossilized Forest.” Stu pulled the notebook from her vest again.
“They’re gone. Sold or stolen.” Ann switched to the monotone she saved for answering tourist’s frequently asked questions. “The government only owns and protects about ten percent of it.” “Seems to me your town has a bit of an identity crisis.” Stu laughed and made a note of her own joke.
“They gave a grant to you and a dog?” Ann asked.
Stu looked confused. “What?”
“You said ‘we’ received a grant.”
The girl tapped the metal bit of the pencil against her teeth before lightly biting the eraser. “Where does the ostrich come in?”
“The what?”
“When I drove in there was a man painting a sign that said ‘Feed the ostrich.’”
Kirk wouldn’t do that without speaking to her first. He wouldn’t. The hideous sculptures were one thing. The abandoned school buses were acceptable, even when she found teenagers’ used condoms in and around them, but surely he wouldn’t bring another living creature here.

Ann asked Elaine to watch Cage and quickly crossed the street to her own car. Kirk felt an immense trust for the other few citizens of their town, and as she expected he’d left the keys in the ignition. She sometimes wondered if he sensed her desire to flee, and left the keys as an invitation. Or perhaps he hoped someone would steal the car, leaving her stranded.

She hid her surprise when Stu got into the passenger side. The girl had left the dog playing with Cage.
“There’s something I wanted to clarify,” the girl said in a conspirator’s tone.
“Can it wait? I need to speak to my husband.”
“Is he the guy painting the sign?”
“Probably. What did he look like?” Ann felt new hope. The man who owned the hotel often bought strange pets for his grandchildren. He kept a tank of piranhas in the lobby.
“Tall. Blondish. Good-looking in a daytime TV sort of way.”
“That’s him.” Ann registered the girl’s admiring tone and added, “My husband.”
“I’d just love to get a photo of both of you, or at least of the sign.”
“I need to speak with him. Privately.”
“I’ll give you space.”

Ann accepted the girl’s persistence but left the air conditioner off to punish her. She steered with only her fingernails touching the burning wheel.

Ann pointed to a rest stop as they passed. It had been built unfortunately close to town, allowing tourists to bypass Fossilized Forest altogether. They had been relying on children’s bladders for
business for some time.

“A young boy was killed there last summer,” Ann said. “He was switching high schools, heading to live with his other parent because he was being bullied or something. He must have smelled weak. Three older boys killed him. Left him in his own trunk.”

“Oh,” Stu said, her smile defeated for a moment before returning in the form of little parentheses on either side of her mouth.

“It’s dangerous for someone your age to be driving alone,” Ann added, pleased to have momentarily dampened the girl’s aggressive joy.

“I’ll be sure not to pick up hitchhikers,” Stu said, the first hint of irritation in her voice. They rode in silence for a few moments before the sound of Stu’s camera as they passed the roadrunner sculpture made Ann look involuntarily at her passenger. Stu reviewed her photos, clicking through rapidly. For a moment Cage appeared on the little screen, smiling at Ann. The Ann in the photo was looking away. The desert had aged her.

“You asked why I said ‘we.’” Stu said. “I left Seattle with my boyfriend. He was supposed to come with me. We applied for the grant together.”

“Where is he?” Ann asked.

“I wanted to ride a trolley in San Francisco. I know it’s cliché, but anyway, Pence made fun of it, and then proposed on it. It made sense I guess. It was one of those perfect movie moments.”

“His name was Pence?” What the hell were parents thinking? Ann glanced at the girl’s naked ring finger. “You said no then?” “It made too much sense.”

Ann saw Kirk long before they arrived. The flat land of the surrounding desert had the effect of making everything feel both closer and vast. As a child she had been sure she could walk to distant mountains, and occasionally tried.

Kirk shielded his eyes with the wide paintbrush and waved as she pulled over. He appeared to be applying a second coat to the letters of the sign which, as Stu had reported, encouraged tourists to come feed an ostrich. Beside the letters he had drawn a cartoonish looking ostrich body with its head in the sand. He smiled and set
down the brush, holding out his arm for Ann. She let his arm envelop her as she filled the space by his side.

Her first photo with Kirk was from middle school. His father had told them to smile and Kirk had held his arm out in invitation. It was the gesture he made when her mother died. It was one he made when Cage took his first steps. The one he made when she would find him, head resting on his hands over the yellow legal pad. Like a word with no translation this one arm, this unforced affection, communicated everything they were.

“Head in the sand?” she said, wondering if it was a joke.
“I couldn’t get the face right,” he said.
She would not scold Kirk in front of the girl. She wouldn’t let the girl, now snapping photos, paint him as a caricature of the beleaguered husband.
“Why not? I saw an ad on Craigslist. A man in Holbrook was trying to find a home for his. It’ll draw people in. They’re exotic. And you love birds.”
“Only the little ones.”
“Who’s at the store?”
Ann shrugged.
“Doesn’t matter,” Kirk said. “We’ll head back. Who’s this?”
Stu held out a small hand, giving Kirk a smile she had kept from Elaine or Ann, but one Ann had seen other women give him.
“Stu. I’m photographing your park for a book I’m working on.”
“Press! Excellent. I must give you the grand tour.” He walked over to his jeep and opened the door for Stu. “Hop in. I have all the insider information.”
Ann drove ahead, glancing in the rearview mirror. Stu was waving her hands as she spoke, coming alive in his presence. Kirk grinned in response. Ann imagined a third driver smashing into his car. She imagined the grief she would feel losing the person she’d known the longest and the freedom as she packed their belongings and headed—headed where? The west coast. She would go to El Centro where her mother had said she had distant cousins. Was it
near the shore? It had to be; she couldn’t imagine a city in California without automatically picturing a pristine ocean, shells larger than her hand. She could take Cage to the beach. Or perhaps Cage would be in the car with his father when the accident happened. Ann placed her hand against her sweating forehead.

When they returned Elaine was standing in their yard, holding Cage on her generous hip. She began bouncing him as they approached. Long brown streaks of dirt ran down around his eyes. He had been crying. Kirk took him from Elaine, immediately examining his palms and face for some sign of damage, some explanation for his tears.

“The little dog,” Elaine said and looked toward the feet of the T. rex. “I’m so sorry,” she said to Stu.

Kirk handed Cage to Ann, telling her to keep him away. She moved the boy’s round body to her own narrow hip where he promptly began to slide down.

Stu followed Kirk at a distance, then stopped, giving a short scream that turned to choked cries.

Elaine said the boy and dog had been playing, running around the legs of the dinosaurs. She hadn’t heard the snake’s warning in time, and only noticed something amiss when the dog yelped.

Ann glimpsed the dog’s grotesquely bloated face and looked away. In the distance the horizon was turning brown from an incoming storm, but the air still felt hot and stagnant.

“Dead thing,” Cage whispered.

She touched his hands, still sticky from honeyed fry bread, tufts of the dog’s fur stuck between his fingers.

Kirk had his arms around Stu, telling her to breathe deeply. Her gasps gradually returned to normal breaths, even as her body continued to shudder.

“Are you okay?” Ann asked Cage.

“She’s crying,” he said. Ann wished she could appreciate that he had inherited his father’s empathy.

The girl slumped toward the ground till she was sitting in the dust beside the dog. Kirk draped his handkerchief over its head.
It was a kind gesture, but there was something melodramatic about the partially covered corpse.

“Why don’t you go give her a hug?” Ann said, grateful she was able to send him as a small ambassador. He sat beside Stu who stroked Cage’s hair as though he were a surrogate puppy.

Ann pulled Kirk aside.

“Should I call Animal Control to come get it?” she asked.

“They’re closed on Sunday.”

Cage was watching them, and they instinctively moved closer.

“Can we bury him?” Cage asked.

“Junior, that’s against the law,” Kirk said.

“We buried the bird,” Cage said.

“A little bird is different,” his father replied.

Cage looked to Elaine, his eyes searching for an ally.

“We could bury him behind the house,” Ann said. “If that’s okay with you?” she asked Stu.

The girl was broken, the smile gone, the body just some boney sticks holding up a denim vest.

“It’s not like I can take him with me,” she said, her tone surprising Ann. The girl held Cage tighter. “I’m sorry. Yes, a burial would be good.”

“I’ll fetch something to wrap him in.” Kirk went to the house.

Ann took Cage from Stu’s arms and followed Kirk, holding Cage’s fat hand in hers. He slowed her down, but she was hesitant to leave Cage with the two would-be mothers. By the time she was upstairs Kirk was searching the linen closet. He held up one of Cage’s old yellow crib sheets.

“This should work,” he said. He turned to Ann and Cage.

“We’re lucky…” He frowned.

“That it was just a dog?”

“Elaine is a fool.”

Ann loved him for this comment, for stating what she felt. It allowed her to be the kind one. Despite living in the town for twenty years, Elaine still exuded the naivety and fervor of an outsider. Tourists and transplants thought they knew the desert. They were the types to leave food out for coyotes and then feel shocked when
their cat disappeared one night. But she and Kirk were different, should be different.

“Kirk, the den you found a few weeks back--”
“I killed all of them.”
“Yes, but--”
He knew she slept by those snakes, and for a moment she let herself wonder if Kirk also imagined fatal car crashes.
“I’ll take the other sculptures down.”
“You know, some people will pay to hunt rattlesnakes,” Ann said.
“Are we those kinds of people? And do you want those kinds of people around the house? We aren’t that desperate.”
Ann wanted to add, “not yet,” but instead began folding the sheets that had fallen to the floor.

Ann wandered the yard with Cage picking small branches of pink flowers from cacti while Kirk wrapped the body in the sheet and began to dig a small grave. Kirk had chosen a spot near one of his early dinosaurs, a fat, flat Anklysaurus that looked more like a horny toad. Ann sawed at a flower’s stem with her thumbnail and added it to the pile in Cage’s outstretched hands.

Cage pointed to a stem full of buds. Reaching her arm into the plant, Ann felt like a good mother. She was protecting the tender pads of Cage’s fingers from the cactus, but then she reminded herself she was not doing this to save him pain, but to save her from the pain of discomfort when he cried.

When Cage could carry no more, they brought the flowers to the others. Stu was holding the wrapped bundle with the same care Cage held the blossoms.
“Will anything dig him up and eat him?” Stu asked.
“In other cultures they break up the bones and let the animals eat the body. It releases the soul,” Elaine said.
Kirk silenced Elaine with a slight shake of his head, and looked at Ann as if to ask why the woman was still there. But Ann liked the image of cracking bones and setting out the rib cage like fried onion flowers. Would the dog be reborn as a coyote? Some-
thing fiercer that could survive in the next life?

Stu set the body into the grave and Kirk filled it again. He planted a cactus they’d dug up from the side yard on top and piled stones and bits of petrified wood around the base.

“The cactus will bloom in a few months,” he told Stu.

Stu stood and dusted the sand from her black jeans. Cage had moved to her side, leaning against her until she finally lifted him to the shelf of her hip. She nuzzled her nose against his neck and kissed his forehead. The wind whipped dust into Ann’s eyes as sand met sky and merged into a force of warmth and grit.

“Have you ever seen anything so blue?” Stu asked.

It was anything but blue. The dust storms sometimes ranged from lavender to a sickly yellow, but this one was simply parchment paper brown interrupted by a streak of rust orange as the sun fought to remain burning down on them. Ann turned to correct Stu, and then saw the girl was talking about Cage’s eyes. She was staring into them. Ann felt a pain in her side and placed a hand where Cage should be and wished to widen herself into a home for him again, to crack the bones where he once nestled inside her.

Kirk’s phone rang and he apologized, stepping away and giving directions to someone, probably the ostrich man.

“Will you send me a photo? When it blooms?” Stu asked, gesturing toward the cactus. She wrote an address down in her book and ripped out the page.

“Sure,” Ann said.

Ann closed her eyes as Stu drove away. She could visualize the road and the place where Stu would merge onto the highway. The first few miles would bleed together in a burnt umber blur, occasional roadside crosses breaking up the image but eventually appearing the same, as if you were driving on a conveyor in an old movie set. A truck would drive by with an ugly ostrich head poking from a crate. Stu might consider going back for another glimpse of it, maybe one more photo, but then say she had taken too many of this place already.

Kirk invited Elaine to stay for dinner, but her husband was
back from his fishing trip, and she weepily crossed the street, calling out to him that he wouldn’t believe how awful her day had been.

Ann and her family went inside. Kirk and Cage went upstairs ahead of her while Ann remained in the store. She ran a hand along the register she’d never plugged in that morning and wiped dust from the postcards displayed beside it. Upstairs she could hear Cage giggle, Kirk pretending to growl. She locked the door separating the store office from the stairs into her home and went up to their kitchen. She focused on the task of boiling water for rice and heating the stove for fish sticks, but instead found her mind continuing to follow Stu. Ann pulled the slip of paper with the address from her pocket. She pitied the girl and shook her head before tossing the address into the trash. She didn’t approve of outsiders watching her husband or holding her child. Soon she called out for her boys to come eat. She set down their plates, one with ketchup for Cage and another with tartar sauce for Kirk. She could not decide between the two and left a blank spot on her plate. Its emptiness pleased her.
I headed down to Roadside Café with every intention of finding a woman to bring home, to keep the walls from closing in. It was Saturday, five in the evening, and I’d been weed-eating the trim on my four-acre lot all day. I needed a beer, maybe three. I’d given up brown liquor by then. I won’t say that it ruined my marriage, but it didn’t help none.

Not long after I left the Marines with a pension, Emily quit cold turkey. She said alcohol didn’t do nothing but make her tired and remind her of the ex she’d left in Pascola, Missouri, along with the other ninety-nine folks who lived there. That was fine, but it still did something for me. I’d put in twenty years, a few tours over in bin Laden’s neck of the woods, so I figured I’d earned a few high balls a night, just to take the edge off. To pass the daytime as a civilian, I’d started driving a semi for a low-end clothing store, four on, three off. When I’d get back in Aberdeen, Emily and me would have sex most mornings until she had to be at the courthouse, collecting money from folks. Doctor told us I was shooting blanks at thirty-eight, but Emily held out hope, her being thirty-three and believing the Lord had a plan. She blamed it on me and the brown liquor mostly (free will can be a son of bitch), and she said I’d put the Roadside life behind me if I cared about our future. Maybe I did come home limp-dicked more than I should’ve, but I kept the gutters cleaned and the yard mowed. Anyhow, Emily got plum tired of repeating herself and put me and Aberdeen behind her.

Saturdays at Roadside were the busiest and attracted fresh
faces every now and again, drunks coming in off the Tombigbee from the marina, mouths watering and eyes floating. Barbara, the owner and cook, made a fine pulled-pork sandwich and sold beers cheap—High Lifes for three bucks, Buds for four. She wasn’t an ugly woman, plenty up top, but she was too far towards fifty for me. In the light of the kitchen, her crow’s feet gave her away.

I sat at the corner of the pinewood bar with my back to the door, a couple of High Lifes already empty, when this loudmouth in swim trunks and a backwards camouflage hat busted in and bellied up. I got a look at the white letters running across his black cut-off T-shirt: LOOK DOWN FOR A GOOD TIME. He smiled crooked and his big biceps stretched his frog skin. Reminded me of a redneck Ken doll, except he had an M tattooed on his left bicep. I guessed it stood for his last name. I’d known a lot of boys who looked like him in high school, me included.

“Hey, old-timer,” he said. “Shot?”

That didn’t set us off on the right foot. I wasn’t an old-timer, but I was old enough to know he didn’t have no business with the brunette who must’ve slid in behind him, like she was embarrassed of him, or maybe just to be around the rest of us. She was good looking in a way that made you wonder why she was here, or anywhere you were. Your eyes can’t help but fix on a woman like that, walking through the grocery store or at the courthouse paying a ticket. She had a shine to her skin and roundness to her eyes that you only see in the movies. I could’ve stared at the slit in the middle of her bottom lip for the rest of my life.

“Better not, bud,” I said. “Past my bedtime.”

“Bullshit,” he said. “You may be old, but I know your kind don’t go to bed this early.” He waved Barb over and slapped the pine twice. “Bartender, two whiskeys.”

“Honey, name’s not bartender.” Barb squinted at him. “Let’s see your ID. Her’s too.”

They yanked ’em out, like they were irritated anyone would question their ages, him more than her. Barb turned the IDs toward the sunlight, which had about died out. “Don’t act twenty-five.” She laid ’em on the counter and eyed me about the shot.

I shook my head no.
“Turns down a whiskey,” he said to the brunette. “Can you believe that son of a bitch?”

She scrunched up her forehead, maybe considering the question or annoyed at him. Then she gazed out over the crowd. I could tell she was trying to peg this place, full of middle-aged nobodies. She sniffed, inhaling the cigarette smoke that was surely burning her eyes. She swallowed hard, like she’d swished the smell of salty barbeque and bitter beer around in her mouth and would just as soon spit it out.

“I want a beer,” she said, her voice rising above the nonsense. “Bartender, a Bud for my girl,” he said. “It’s Barbara. Got it, hon?”

“Where you’d stumble in from?” I asked, leaning in, hoping the brunette would answer.

“What do you care, old-timer?” He leaned with me, blocking my view.

“I don’t really give a shit. Name’s John, by the way. And don’t call me Johnny.”

“’Bout damn time you woke up.” He slapped me on the back and it took all I had not to swing. “We drove up from Starkville to dock my new ski boat at Tombigbee. Been showing her off all over the state … this one too.”

He glanced at the brunette then elbowed me and laughed like he thought the world was his, like he could always outrun whatever it was that was eating at him. I used to think I could too, and that there’d always be another woman, and that I’d never end up like the old-timers, needing these buzzed hours to kill the time before bed.

Roadside only held forty going by fire code, meaning fifty elbow to elbow. So my pickings had got pretty slim since Emily took off a few months back. She’d taken an art class in community college and loved that guy who cut his ear off. She left two of his pictures hanging in frames—the hayfield and the night sky, both of ’em awful fuzzy, if you asked me. But I didn’t know how else to decorate. I left up the mirror shaped like a quarter moon too. My one-nighters would laugh and ask if I was sure I didn’t swing the other way.

I leaned forward some more to size up the girl from the neck
down, but a baggy white T-shirt covered her bathing suit. She was swaying to a tune in her head, fingerling a silver cross that dangled from her necklace. The song had to have been a lonely one, ‘cause she aged a decade right in front of me. I’d seen Emily turn sour that way on our front porch, with a death grip on her coffee mug, green eyes gazing into the steam rising from it. I asked her once where she went those times. “Just trying to put a finger on it,” she said, “when maybe it could’ve gone another way.” She blew on her coffee and slurped it up all in one breath, and then turned to me, her lips still parted over the edge of the mug, eyebrows raised, like I might have a clue.

The last bit of sun came through the windows, catching the dust in the air. Roadside had filled to the brim. Not even the brunette could keep from sweating. It beaded up on her forehead and at the sides of her mouth. She pulled her dark hair back and twisted it up in a ponytail, the pieces of what she didn’t grab resting on her neck.

“I woulda never come to this shit hole,” the asshole said, noticing my interest in his girl. “But she told me she knows some folks around here, somebody she’s wanting to see, before we get the hell out of here.”

“Where to?”

“Alabama,” he said. “Family friend in Birmingham got me on at Co-Cola. Already got the house picked out, two stories, plenty of room for a boy or two.”

“Where’s her ring?” I wanted to test him, poke him some, see how far he’d go.

He shifted his weight toward me. “The fuck you gettin’ at, old-timer?”

“Just making conversation.”

“Sounds to me like you want to go outside and figure it out.”

“Believe I’ve got it figured out, bud.” I threw back my High Life and signaled Barb for another.

He grabbed my shoulder. “Who said I was your buddy?”

I lifted the empty High Life bottle.

The brunette jumped between us, her back to me, facing him. Her hair smelled like flowery shampoo and lake water.
“David. Don’t. No more trouble.” The words slid from her mouth like melted butter on a hot skillet. Barb slammed the beers and the shot glass on the bar, and we all three tensed up.

“Pour me that shot, Barb.”

“You sure?”

“That’s what I said, ain’t it?”

Barb set up another shot glass and spilled Old Charter into it.

“I thought you’d wise up,” David said. He tapped his shot on the bar and tossed it back, a motion that looked as familiar to him as pedaling a bicycle. I did the same. I’d missed that burn in my throat, the way the edges of the world blurred and cleared. I’d let a damn kid get to me, or maybe it was the brunette. I saw Emily in her, the lips and the cheeks, only Emily had curly auburn hair and a cute nose that took a slight left.

“Why were you in such a hurry?” Emily asked me that day we met at the courthouse. I handed her the check for a speeding ticket I’d got on leave, a thirty-five-year-old in a hurry to go nowhere. She blinked her brown eyes. “Couldn’t wait to see somebody?”

“No, ma’am,” I said. “But I’d get another ticket if it meant seeing you again.”

David reached over my head, and I ducked out of reflex. He rang the rusty bell hanging from the wall and the bar roared—a round for the whole place.

“You sure?” Barb asked him, glad to crack open every single bottle with money up front.

“Goddamn right.” He plunked a hundred on the counter. The brunette didn’t blink. Her eyes were empty, just round copper cutouts, hiding every thought in her head.

“Need to hit the head,” David said, pecking her on the cheek.

As he stumbled and sidestepped tables, the real old-timers slapped his ass, thanking him for making their night. When he was out of sight, she took one long gulp from the Bud. Her neck throbbed. The bottle hit hollow on the bar and the fizz filled her eyes.

“My name’s Stephanie,” she said, as calm as the night outside. “But David calls me Steph. I hate it.”

“My name’s John—but you can call me Johnny.”
She smiled a mouthful of pearls, then nodded down at something on the bar. I didn’t move my eyes off her. “Look,” Stephanie said, nudging me.

There they were, shining in the yellow light. David’s keys. She slid her hand across ’em.

“Let’s go,” she said and walked right out the door.

Barb was busy at the cooler, so I laid a twenty on the counter and didn’t glance back to see who saw us go. Stephanie had already unhitched the boat trailer and opened the driver’s side door of the F-150, hoisting herself up to where I could see her eyes above the truck. The copper in ’em sparkled.

“You coming?”

I hopped in before I could say no. She hit the gas and we were gone, the bar a speck in the side mirror. I was in her life now, just hanging on.

The highway was lined with heavy woods. The moon was only a thumbnail full, no stars, but the LED lights on David’s truck sliced through the dark. All the bells and whistles inside were digital, even the odometer. The dash glowed green as the summer leaves onto Stephanie’s neck. I caught a glint off the cross, the bars as solid and straight as the road laid out ahead of us.

“You believe in the Lord?” I asked.

“Might’ve been a time,” she said.

The engine hummed low and the wheels glided over the asphalt. I didn’t realize how fast we were going till I noticed the green seventy lit up on the odometer. The speed limit was fifty. The highway might’ve been straight, but I was worried about how much she’d had before she’d chugged the Bud.

“None of my business,” I said. “Just noticed your necklace is all.”

“David’s parents bought it for me. They go to church. If I didn’t wear it, they’d think something was wrong.”

“Is there?”

She leaned back into the headrest, stretching her slender arms to full extension, both hands on top of the wheel, one overlapping the other. Her white T-shirt slid above her bikini bottoms, which
were jet black, tied in loose knots. There wasn’t a stretch mark on her.

The cup holder started vibrating—DAVID popped up in big letters across the screen of her phone. She mashed a button and tossed it in the side pocket of the door.

“Never did care for cell phones,” I said. “Still got one of the flip kind, just in case someone decides they need to find me.”

“No one’s looking?” she asked.

“Don’t reckon so,” I said.

“How old are ya?” she asked.

“Too close to forty.”

“Did she leave? Or did you?”

I squirmed in my seat and my T-shirt peeled off the leather. The odometer flickered seventy, then sixty-nine, then seventy, like it was stuck between two points in time.

“Who said I’s ever married?”

“You’re too pretty to be alone.”

“You’re too pretty to be with him.”

“You ain’t got to tell me.” She dropped a hand from the wheel and raised the armrest between us. “That’s why you got in.”

“Where we headed?”

“You really care?”

I scooted closer and grabbed the bend between her hip and thigh. She didn’t flinch. Her skin felt as smooth as I thought it would, like being naked in a lukewarm river.

“Why’d you want me to come then?” I asked.

Stephanie rubbed her thumb across my knuckles and that was all the answer I needed. My dick hardened up against my jeans. She hadn’t looked at me since we got in. I wanted her to look down and see it. I wanted to see the want in her eyes.

“Why stay with that asshole?”

“Got no choice,” she said.

“You know damn well that’s a lie. You could have anyone you pointed at.”

“Quit asking me questions then, if you don’t want the truth.”

I watched the pines whizz by out the driver’s side window. I hadn’t been honest with a woman in I couldn’t remember when. I
moved my hand between her legs. “All right then. How does it feel to be that good-looking?”

She cocked her head sideways and grinned. The youth that had gone out of her cheeks at the bar came back. I rubbed the crease through her bathing suit. She took in a quick breath, and her foot let up on the gas, causing the engine to die off. The truck veered across the double-line, but she steered it back with both hands.

“I wanna know if you like the stares,” I said, making circles with my fingers. “I wanna know how it feels to have the pick of every man in the room.”

“It hurts.”

I jerked my hand away.

“Not that,” she said, grinning.

The left blinker clicked, and she slowed the truck into a sharp turn.

“Men care about two things,” she said, “What they want and how to get it. You asked me that so I’d think you were different, that you care.”

We were off the highway now on a back road that curved through a thick forest of pines and oaks and magnolias. They seemed banded together, like every branch was holding on to the other. Stephanie hugged the white line, all that separated us from the trees. If we flipped, we’d be a forgotten secret.

“How do you know I’m like all them other men?”

“It’s fine,” she said. “You don’t have to be sorry about it. The looks I get ain’t all bad. And I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t been with a lot of men in a lot of rooms.” She blinked. “That’s all in the rear-view though.”

Stephanie went silent right then, zoned in on the road, on a mission to somewhere. I wanted to tell her not to be too hard on herself. Lord knows I wasn’t in no position to be a judge or a jury. I knew the feeling, enjoyed the looks and what went on in those rooms myself, even after I’d settled down with Emily. But the way Stephanie punched the gas, that blank stare, I figured there wasn’t nothing I could say to change whatever direction she thought she was headed in. I knew about that too, understood it even now in David’s truck, that feeling when you can’t see beyond the fog of the
high beams, or maybe you’d just as soon not know what’s out there in the darkness.

We hit a clearing that opened up into a neighborhood of trailers and shack houses. Some front porch lights were on, others weren’t. A wooden rocking horse, its red paint chipping away, teetered in front of a trailer. One of the shack houses had a church pew in the yard, books stacked at one end, folded clothes at the other, enough space in between for two. A silo came into view, ivy covering nearly every inch of the brick and mortar. I wondered what was left inside, or if the city was too lazy to take the bulldozer to it. Maybe I’d climbed it in high school to impress the girls, help me get laid. I was sure I’d been on about every back road in Aberdeen, climbed about every silo, but they all tended to run together anymore, same as the women.

Emily, though, Emily was different. She wanted to talk after sex, run her hand across my chest. She’d tell me how glad she was to be in Aberdeen, not still cooped up on a cul-de-sac in Pascola with a man she’d married at nineteen cause is was the fastest way out of her momma and daddy’s trailer. She’d go on about trips we could take, places we could visit and be free now that I wasn’t a Marine. She’d ask me to bring her along in the semi for a run, saying how lonely it must be in the cab of an eighteen-wheeler. I didn’t have the heart to tell her that the military can make a man appreciate being alone as much as it can make him miss the smell of flowery shampoo in a woman’s hair. I didn’t have the heart to tell Emily, her hand on my chest, that the cab of a semi had become one of the few places I felt safe, that maybe driving a tank and shooting an M16 was all some men were cut out for, even if the Lord did have it all planned out.

The night Emily left I didn’t even lower the recliner. She bent down in front of me, her brown eyes level with mine, a duffle bag flanking her on each side.

“Whatever it is you want, I’m not it,” she said. “Not anymore. Or maybe I never was.”

Nothing I could’ve said would’ve surprised her, or made her stay. She just wanted to see the look on my face when she asked the question, like folks on Wheel of Fortune who can’t solve the puzzle.
but still have to see the prize.

“Maybe we could start at the front and try again” was all I could think to say, cupping a glass of watered-down brown liquor.

“Funny,” she said, “Seeing as how you never even say hello anymore.”

Emily picked up her duffle bags and shut the door.

Stephanie whipped around a curve. I dug my nails into the seat.

“You ain’t gonna die tonight,” she said. “Promise.”

We swerved again, onto a back road of a back road.

“Sure you know where you’re headed?”

“I grew up on this road,” she said, “‘til I was ten—‘til Momma died.”

“How’d she pass?”

“Cigarettes. But I told the other kids it was a broken heart.

That sounded better, I guess.”

“Your daddy?”

Stephanie didn’t answer. The gravel crunched under the tires and drowned out the engine. She pushed the brake to the floor, shifting to park. We were in front of a trailer, covered with more rust than paint. The grass had grown so high it’d turned to hay. A big oak stood behind it all, the branches curved, like arms cradling that small plot of land.

“I didn’t know my daddy,” she said.

“Who raised ya then?”

“Mississippi.”

She cut the engine and inhaled, letting her breath out in a tight stream. Frogs croaked and crickets chirped, somewhere out there, letting us know they were living.

“I don’t wanna go with him,” she said.

“Then don’t.”

I leaned in and kissed her, chewed on her bottom lip, running my tongue over that little crease. She moaned like she hadn’t been kissed with any amount of feeling in some time. Her thighs shook when I brushed ’em with my fingers. I lowered her across the bench seat and loosened one of the knots on her bikini, sliding my hand underneath her. I tried to pull off her T-shirt but she stopped me,
ripping my collar and licking my neck. I loosened the other knot and unzipped my fly. When the tip rubbed across her skin, she pressed her palm firm against my chest. Stephanie shoved me so hard that my head banged against the roof of the truck. She opened the driver’s side door and hopped out, setting off that damn dinging sound. I tucked my dick in and took the key out of the ignition.

I had to squint cause of the dome light. She’d already retied the knots, and the baggy white T-shirt hid her figure. Her hair had come loose from the ponytail, flapping in the breeze. She rolled her shoulders forward and wrapped her arms around her stomach, like she might double over. Then she sprang up, ripping the T-shirt off, slinging it toward the trailer. The white cotton disappeared into the hay.

She walked into the yellow coming from the truck, spinning the cross around her neck between her fingers. Stephanie’s figure was an hourglass. She ran her other hand across the red splotches that I could see now, spread along the top of her flat stomach and between her breasts.

“The rash shows up after a couple months,” she said, “One of the signs you’re positive.”

“Positive?”

“HIV,” she said.

I expected her to scream, *Gotcha*, any second. I checked the insides of my cheeks with my tongue and pushed the puke coming up back down my throat.

“You ain’t gonna get it,” she said. “And it don’t mean I’m dead, not like when you were my age.” She was steady, downright confident, maybe forgot for a second the mess she was in.

“He do this?”

She nodded. I reached for her but she jerked back.

I climbed out of the truck and shut the door, leaving us in the dark. The frogs kept croaking and the crickets kept chirping. Once my eyes got used to the night again, I could see that hers had a shimmer to ’em.

“Think he knew?” I asked.

“Says he didn’t,” she said.

“You believe him?”
“Does it matter?”
She ran a hand back over the rash, a scarlet latticework.
“There’s a top-notch clinic in Birmingham,” she said, as if she’d rehearsed the line. “But I’m just a waitress, and ObamaCare don’t cover top-notch clinics in Birmingham. His parents said they’d pay if we go together. They say the Lord has a plan.”

A breeze picked up, sounded like a comforter being ripped off the bed, and the hay stalks swayed around us. Stephanie turned to the trailer, the direction of the wind, and her hair spread out like strands comes loose from the bales. I couldn’t see those copper cutouts, but I knew where they were aimed.

“What happened in there?” I asked.

“Nothing much,” she said. “Just me and momma trying to get by. Wednesday nights were Sloppy Joes and Roseanne. Fridays she’d bring home the ice cream Snickers and paint my nails whatever color I wanted.”

“Your daddy?”
“He left before I came.”
“You ain’t got to go,” I said.

She spun around, grabbing my face in her hands. “Where else am I gonna go?” What moonlight there was reflected off the water in her eye. She pulled me in.

“I know what you’re trying to do,” she said.
“You’re the only woman I ever met who did.”

Stephanie let me go. She grinned that grin of pearly whites that had won over all those men, like she wanted to remind herself that she’d always have that going for her. Emily used to say, “A woman is only as beautiful as her smile.” She’d brush so hard that her gums bled. I used to say that was nonsense, but I never told Emily what she really wanted to hear—that white teeth or not, she was beautiful.

A pain flared up in my gut, stung like an ulcer, the acid bubbling. I focused on the trailer, its windows just shards of glass and the door off its hinges. The high school kids had left their marks in black spray paint, hearts with initials inside and a smiley face with X’s for eyes.

“You could go anywhere,” she said. “Why are you still in this
I watched her unhook the necklace and ball the cross up in her fist.

“I don’t have anywhere else to be,” I said.
“You’re scared,” she said.
“Quit asking me questions then,” I said, “If you don’t want the truth.”

She smiled, but the youth had drained out of her cheeks. “All right then. How’d you end up alone?”

The wind blew strong enough that the branches of the oak tree beat against the trailer and blew Stephanie’s hair in all different directions, covering her face. But I could tell her eyes were on me, smirking, like a kid who’s outsmarted the adult.

“You ever wonder if maybe some folks aren’t better off that way,” I said more than asked, ‘cause I didn’t figure she’d lived enough life to have an answer that would satisfy me. “Like maybe we just don’t have it in us.”

“I doubt you’ve ever really tried,” she said.
“I did with Emily.”
“So she’s the one you ran off?”
“She walked out.”
“But you didn’t stop her.”

“She said she thought she’d married a man starting his next chapter, not closing the book,” I said. “She wanted to see the world. I’ve seen enough of it. You’ll understand one day.”

“You’re afraid to care too much, ‘cause the other person might not always be around,” she said. “You figure that’d hurt more than being alone. I understood that a long time ago.”

Stephanie took my wrist and put the necklace in the palm of my hand. She closed my fingers around the cross and hugged my neck.

“Go after her,” she said, “If that’s what you want.”
“I don’t believe she wants to be found.”

I unhooked Stephanie’s arms from my neck, and she strained to smile. She kissed me then, and I ran my tongue over that little crease in the middle of her bottom lip. I grabbed her around the waist and pulled her in, so I could smell that flowery shampoo and
I wondered how Emily would handle this, how’d she get herself out of the mess Stephanie was in, or the one I’d let myself get mixed up with. And it dawned on me then that I was a mess Emily hadn’t planned for, same as that man in Pascola, the one there on a cul-de-sac. I wondered if all this had Emily thinking maybe it was her, not us, if we had her questioning whether it’s worth a third try. Holding Stephanie there, I thought about the first time Emily and I danced on a Friday night at the American Legion, when she told me she didn’t want the song to end, that the way we felt was a hard thing to hold onto, when the music stops.

I let the cross fall into the hay, and I took Stephanie’s hand. We waltzed, swaying with the hay stalks, like we were keeping time to the chirps of the crickets and the croaks of the frogs and the beat of the branches of the oak tree, thudding louder and louder against the trailer.

“Stay a night,” I said, “If you need to. Might be good to clear your head, have a cup of coffee in the morning, think about what you really want.” I smiled at her, and she did at me.

She didn’t say yes, so I pulled her close, kept on waltzing, before she could say no.
Late afternoon, I steep warm water
in white leaves and peaches. I sit
in the yellow chair with the crossword puzzle
and remember everything white
the frozen lake, my teeth, folk music on NPR,
communion wafers and Clinton and
my body’s papery shell.
How a whitewashed wall seems better
than a forest oak, how the clop of my boots
through February slush is white noise
and when I walk across the field
I am snow-blind, watching debris
float upon the thin fluid of my eye
—the upshot is
I don’t think of myself as native,
it’s been a long time
since I was Pagan amid ancient stones—
and the asphalt street up the hill to my apartment,
oh God, it wasn’t for me
for me
for me
me. I am still asking for someone
to hold my hand
to say thank you
white words on white
white bread
pressed white collars
white strung like pearls while
the oyster lies open on some dry stone
far from whitecaps and the billowing sails
that brought me here.
Great Food Cash!

Raymond E. Hulse
COUNTY LINE DINNER CONVERSATIONS

We need a new engine block
for this pickup to really roar
through the night like a Garth chorus

until its lungs are blue
and all that’s left are rusted doors.
We need a new engine block.

You should really read a verse or two
to hush-a-bye opioid snores
through the night like a Garth chorus.

Come inside when helicopters cruise—
what follows is prison escape gore
and we need a new engine block.

We’re out the game, though, true,
but doesn’t it feel good to settle scores
through the night like a Garth chorus?

You’ll get locked up with that crew
but one more voice wins the war.
We need a new engine block
through the night like a Garth chorus.
Sheetrock dust falls from his hair and shoulders as he drags buckets of rubble through the evening light to the woods behind the house. This is the fourth house his father has bought in the last two years. They are furtive birds building nests in the nearest gutter. Last year, they lived in a ranch that was half-gutted by the previous owner. They moved in when the grass was wet with spring and sold it to a new family to decorate for Christmas.

At first, the boy tried to settle into their new homes. Even his father pretended to. They hung paintings and posters from the thrift store to cover the holes and mildew stains. They set up furniture. But it was never more than a game, than the furnishing of a playhouse. Before long his father’s debtors would come calling and, somehow, they sold the house for a profit. A profit they saw none of but that chipped away at the massive shroud of debt hanging over them.

The boy, who’d once fantasized about decorating his bedroom, about having friends over, about weekends of lounging in his new living room, now only enjoys the demolition. He is John Henry with his sledge, or Thor or Ajax. The destructive progress feels right to him. Walking through the settling dust to smoke on the deck and look through chalky lashes at the new homes across the street satiates the boy. He hates those homes. The orderliness, the symmetry. He hates.

Their mornings the past two years had been the same: they worked until their lunch break, usually cosmetically masking the rottenness of the walls or the shadiness of the wiring. Until their daily
sit-down lunch at Sam’s Corner. It is a neighborhood place and they have managed, coincidently his father said but the boy thinks there is something of fate in it, to always move to a house within a ten-mile radius of Sam’s.

His father loved it most because he could smoke there. The boy loves it still, the familiarity of it. The luncheonette, and his father—the only constants in his life.

The boy remembers a lunch a year ago: his father struggled to keep a cheesesteak sandwich together, the onions slipping out reminded the boy of inch worms falling from trees on the street he’d grown up on.

“I think Sam is making these sloppier than usual.”
“It’s the same.”
“I’m the one eating it, smart guy. I think I’d know.”
The boy stayed quiet. His father surveyed the room.
“That’s a cush job.” He pointed at two postal workers sitting at the counter drinking coffee and working their way through two orders of the day’s special—a mound of meatloaf and mashed potatoes covered in black gravy, not brown. Tar-black. “They take a morning stroll and then stuff themselves and call it a day. I should have been a postman. I thought about it.”

His father had been many things. A roofer, a cab driver, a cook, a wine deliveryman, a tie salesman, a liquidator, a high school history teacher, a real estate agent. He had thought about being a lot more. And now, he was a father. Though the boy suspected he had never thought much about that.

“See that waitress? That’s Sam’s niece. She’s about your age and a looker. You should talk to her.” His father chided him about his lack of social skills. The boy resented this. How could he learn social skills cooped up in a dilapidated house with no one to talk to but his defeated father? He’d dropped out of school a year ago and, in turn, dropped out of his friend group, his former hobbies. Dropped out of his life.

“She’s a looker. I can’t believe she’s related to Sam.”
“Just leave it alone Dad.”
“Leave it alone? I’m trying to help you. I think she’d be a huge
help.” He laughed and put the ravaged remains of the sandwich down and lit a cigarette.

But this is a memory. An echo of their former days which, the boy realizes, despite the similarly precarious circumstances, were happier ones. Days when his father would bust his chops and chit-chat with the servers. Days when they went places. Now, the boy gets food to-go and brings it back to his father, who eats little of it, preferring to smoke and compulsively read over his bills. They seldom talk outside of relaying necessary instructions and reports: pick that up, throw this out, avoid that, paint this, nail that in, knock this down.

Their current home seems the most hopeless yet. A dilapidated two-story craftsman bungalow on a cul-de-sac they seldom leave. At sixteen, out of school, the boy feels older. Feels like, if not a man, then something in-between. Feels that, robbed of rituals—a prom, a homecoming, a graduation—he’ll never become a Man, whatever that is.

He’s become increasingly introspective and quiet, living off his memories rather than living. He thinks of the cicada shells he found as a kid, amber husks clinging to tree roots and branches, still-lives. A million little shed selves. When would he and his father shed this house? Who would inhabit it? What form would the next one take? He wants to live in a Victorian. They feel foreign to him and he imagines that their sounds and smells are foreign too, English or European or ancient somehow. He imagines within one he can be someone else, someone bold and capable.

Money is even tighter on this most recent flip, so his father cuts every corner. He’d usually hire a few Mexican or Guatemalan laborers to help with the grunt work, his father said, but the boy suspected they were hired as much to give him someone to talk to, as surrogate friends. But the two of them are doing everything themselves this time. The boy has electrocuted himself a half-dozen times—his father keeps forgetting to turn off the electricity—and for a week the boy has no feeling in his fingertips. He runs his numb fingers across his face at night and thinks about dust and throwing out sheets of glue traps with dead mice on them. Once, when they first moved in and some mice had eaten through a box of his father’s cereal, the old
man declared war and forsook the wire snap traps for sheets of sticky

glue traps. A terrible way to go. Gnawing off your own limbs to es-
cape. But his father was drunk when he set them and forgot where
they were all hidden. For a month after the place reeked of death as
mice died slowly in hidden corners of the old house. At night the
boy’d imagine hearing them screech and gnaw, raging against the

glue and the men who brought it here, little clumps of gray fur decay-
ing, mingling with the dust in his hair and lungs.

His favorite part of this house is the giant deck off the back
overlooking a small patch of deciduous woods. Though the deck had
been rotten through, they replaced the shoddiest boards, the most
likely to kill or maim, and stained it all rust-brown. He and his fa-
ther drink beers at the end of the day and smoke cigarettes on the
derck, breathing in the smells of varnish and stain, watching the wisps
of smoke drift toward the woods. The sky feels very big, the house
small. Below and beyond, some kind of county park next to a river
that flows slow and dull green down the hill and under the road be-
yond with a nursery and three hot dog joints. While trying to stain
the back side of the railing and reaching way out past the point of
reason, his father tumbled over the side twenty feet into the rhodo-
dendrons below. For a moment, the boy imagined taking him to the
woods and burying him under the illegal debris and pouring a bottle
of whiskey over the rubble. He imagined hopping into the old pick-
up in the driveway, also rust-brown though it had come off the lot
a bright beige, and swinging by the diner to grab Sam’s pretty niece
and head west to the Pacific, an ocean he’s never seen. But his father
emerged from the shrubs. Though fifty and riddled with aches, the
old man had managed to land like a cat. He lit a cigarette and went
back up to finish his work.

More to unload. The boy goes back in for another. Dumpsters
are pricey and the woods are dark and wide so for the last three
ights he has been chucking the remnants of their remodeling into
the woods. The first night he brought all the awkward stuff. Under
a starless sky, he hauled scrap lumber full of screws, cracked lead-
lined pipes, leftover insulation, strips of plastic, poorly-cut PVC,
torn-up linoleum, and anything else his father hadn’t sold or traded.
They had stripped the place, selling what they could to antique shops and dealers, then to contractors looking to save a few bucks, then to scrap dealers. The remainder the boy was tasked with unloading in the dark. The second night he dragged out odds and ends: cups of rusty or stripped screws, glass fragments, a busted toilet bowl, moldy shelves covered with several generations of contact paper, and a shattered curio cabinet. In his mind, he was in the mafia, burying bodies. Or an army chaplain saying last rites over dying troops. He was a spy sequestering secret data, essential to the cause.

This third night is the trickiest. Clear skies perfect for prying eyes. Buckets and buckets of paint, stain, varnish, and shellac. Some they had bought; some the previous owner had left behind. All have to go. He had wanted to pick his father’s brain on how best to get rid of the stuff but they hadn’t talked in a while. The lack of money and the speed and shabbiness of the job they are doing is eating at the old man. Each successive home seems a move downward. This craftsman had been beautiful and built with care but had not aged gracefully. The bones are sound, but the flesh is in a state of advanced decay. They did the best they could given their financial and technical limitations, but the place reminds him of his great-aunt, an old lady going to the opera, reluctantly dragged out of bed and coated with too much make-up, close to giving up the ghost. His father has aged with the homes too, grown more distant and morose. They used to read the newspaper aloud over breakfast after he first dropped out. Just as good of an education, his father said. Afternoons they’d sing along with the radio while they tore out plumbing or knocked down a wall. Now they work in silence. When his father gives directions, they are halting and muttered, like he resents having to form words at all.

The boy gets drunk. Drinking simultaneously gets the creative juices flowing and calms his nerves. He keeps drinking at the prospect of lugging heavy buckets stealthily across a yard all night, jumping at every sound. Loosening up, he starts with the small cans of touch-up paint and varnish. As he comes to the edge of the woods he hears scurrying and feels eyes on him. The wind shifts and blows over the hill toward him and the house. Redolent of woods rot, of
growth and decay. Leaves rustle as the stars begin to shine through the black-green canopy above. Unthinking, he throws the first bucket, underhand, into the woods. He sees a flash of metal and hears a distant thump as it lands in a dark pile of leaves. Looking around and feeling exposed, the boy strains to hear a car or a voice. Past the trees cars roll along the road and the river flows. Emboldened, he hurries back inside for more cans. Next comes the outdoor paint. A bucket of beige for the exterior. The same innocuous beige on every home they’ve owned. People like neutrality, his father had said. The boy had daymares of drowning in seas of beige.

Then, the brown trim. It has some name a marketer had thought clever, like russet chip or mahogany dream, but the label is covered in paint drippings and he doesn’t care. He crosses the yard and throws the next batch into the woods. They land with a bang that worries him but he continues with his work. There are miscellaneous colorful paints in the mix from the previous owner who obviously liked bolder, brighter colors. A sunny yellow, a rich lime green, dark red, and royal blue. Drunker on both booze and the thrill of law-breaking, the boy twirls as he hurls the paint into the woods. He is a spinning top casting colors into the night. Done, dizzy, he lurches back to the house.

He goes to the slop sink and washes the paint off his hands and arms. Somehow he has gotten covered in the stuff. Probably wet paint on the lids and handles. He isn’t sure and doesn’t care. The pumice soap foams and the paint funnels into the gray plastic basin. Stumbling across the living room, the boy drifts to the deck and his cigarettes. He sprawls out on a damp cushioned chaise lounge and smokes, watching the end burn down and the smoke dissolve in the sky. He falls asleep without beige dreams or the smell of rotting mice in his nose.

The morning sun pulls him from sleep slowly. His mouth is dry and sour. Struggling to work up some saliva, he sits up and looks out at the green treetops, level with his eyes. He focuses on the trunks below. Color. Splotchy, dull and dazzling, everywhere. The woods are awash in color. Matte reds streak up the trunks of maples. Eggshell whites are splattered across the forest floor. Ferns sag under the
weight of glossy royal blues and bland shades of beige. Colors flit
along the branches as painted squirrels scurry through the trees. His
father stands in the yard laughing and coughing through his cigarette
in the center of a polluted yet spectacular circle, as if he were the
gray center of a star that, containing every color, has just exploded
and cast out its vibrancy, seeding space. The boy sees this colorful
disaster, leans over the rail of the brown deck, the beige house behind
him, and laughs too. He lights a cigarette and thinks that today he’ll
take a day off. Today he’ll go to Sam’s and try their breakfast. Today
is something new.
“What’s wrong with that kid?” they’ll ask
and I’ll almost tell though they’ve no right to know
that that kid, sunburned and wading in the waves,
his awkward trunks pulled up to his ribs,
to the crack of his ass, holding in his hand
a copy of William Shakespeare’s Pocket Classics,
shouting lines from Macbeth into the briny mist,
listening to each subtlety, to what his voice sounds like
repeating the verses again and again under waves crashing,
trying to make perfect with his youthful tone
this soliloquy so universally known—
that that kid’s actually an adult from the future,
that he was granted for some reason or another
one wish by God, and now Tomorrow, and tomorrow,
and tomorrow / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
the sea foam dampening pages, his thick hair everywhere,
and see that? A goddamn seagull has landed on his head.
No sir, there will be nothing wrong with that kid.
The sound of weeping woke me in the night;
It was you, half-sleeping and half-awake,
Who cut the silence with a cry so white
With grief that all not broken had to break;
My heart broke with your heart, the dark dissolved
Into broken sobs caught in one white throat,
And for a moment everything devolved
On a single mournful perishing note.
Long ago I heard a loon cry, far off,
Inconsolable on the wide waters
While thunder, murmuring, stifled a cough
And rain made music in smothered gutters.
Why it wept -- for what, or who -- I never
Knew, though I carry that bird forever.
The fear always surprised him when the blackness hit. His lamp would flicker and die and the black filled the tunnel, the deep seam defined by timbers and track and the blood and sweat of a hundred years of fathers. Tim knew his place down here in the black, with the rock and the men and the heat and the damp and the dust. Fear didn’t belong; it could save you or kill you. He squeezed his eyes shut and the lights drifting across his eyelids took him away, away from the company store and the boss and the union, under the stars with Liza. He should take her somewhere, he thought, she deserves it, even as his hands fumbled for the spare battery, changed it by rote, a practice fine-tuned by the wisdom of the mine.

It hadn’t been like this before the accident. His guys, dead: Jimmy and Duke and Pete the Greek and Big Pete and Ivan. And Catman, buddies since they were kids, the Catman rang up his tenth life that morning. The danger at that face was real, just like Big Pete said in his safety filing. But the Company said it wasn’t, and OSHA was gone, and the union was a shadow of itself. The collapse left no unanswered questions. Now there are six more graves at the churchyard and six more broken families and six more names on the memorial wall at the union hall. The Company stonewalled for a day or two, but there was no point. The settlement moved those families off the mountain, into town on the pension, to send their kids to college and away from the mine.

As his light snapped back on, the quitting bell rang. Tim
walked quickly back towards the main shaft, blackness following his headlamp down the track. He always liked walking down here, if it was a reasonable distance; after all, he was the mine, too, Earthen Man, made of the blackness and the fear and coal and rock and dust and noise and thick wet air.

The elevator clanked as it came down the core. The men grouped in the cage, face to dusty back, close—like cattle facing coyotes. Tim slammed the gate closed, pushed the annunciator and the shaft squeezed in, surrounding them as the cable began groaning, the cage banging heedlessly against the side rails. They were a mile and half down and the markers went by excruciatingly slowly, deck by closed-off deck, seams abandoned decades ago as the mine had forced itself down, down, down into the resisting rock, consuming men for the City’s pleasure. Eventually the light softened into daylight, and freed from the shaft the cage swung back and forth, joyfully; it had escaped, too, just like the men it carried. Tim exited the elevator; dirty hands and dirty boots and coveralls and dirty dust-layered lungs but alive under the infinite sky. The future pushed in—clean, warm space without tunnels, timbers and tracks, Liza happy, grateful that he made it through one more day and that they would have a brief evening and morning before he abandoned her for his real life in the mine.

“The Dukes are gone,” she said to him. “Moving truck came today.”

“They were the last ones,” he said.

“What about us? I know I’d get pregnant if we left.”

They were sitting on the porch as the day wound down, looking down the mountain, over the wide woods, watching dust from the crush yard waft down the valley, winding down river, west toward the City. She had some family there, he’d met them when they came up to the mountain in the summer. They’d help us, she said. Tim’d been thinking maybe he’d like to be a garbageman in the city, work outside mining the trash, but those jobs are probably hereditary, too. He didn’t know no one. Most likely he’d end up making minimum wage in a hardware store or washing cars in a car
dealership or being a dishwasher at Denny’s. Not much love for the miner, away from here.

“I only got six more years to a full pension,” he said.

“You’re gonna die down there, Timmy, you son of a bitch, just like Catman and your grandpa. You get us out of here!” The screen door slammed behind her. Then the bedroom door.

It seemed like a long time before her pacing stopped.

The view down the valley was gone. Night-time’s silvery black filled the sky, billions of living stars; he hated their mystery and yearned to bury his heart in the true black of the mine, in the history of his family, of grandpa and pa and now him. We’re a virus, he thought, us miners. Good for the son she craved so much, refusing to be born here, where he’d have coal dust in his veins. He closed his eyes to the brightness of the sky; he heard the mine calling, but he heard something else, too, something soft and scary, a wavering voice, whispering unheard words.

When the waning moon rose above the black of the woods, he went inside to find her.
Hawking the Superslide

Virginia Mallon
LOBLOLLY

In this steamy Loblolly forest brackish river and sea dance together
Through waist-high Palmettos below
fingered roofs of
Spanish moss
and gentle fall sunlight.
Gnarled live oaks wail macabre as this dervish whirls, around and around,
faster ever faster, its siren call,
this tarantella to uncertainty heavenly gust blowing
this singular tune, and
A palm frond waves alone,
this soldier’s last salute,
to follow the trail ever deeper onto the cockleshell mound and across fallen ironwoods
deep into this sandy bottom stained forever with the blood of forgotten men,
as a cathedral of black gums and beeches stands guard.
As I look about, another dervish further points the way
and I struggle to understand what has been said and why, 
yet I know this moment must be for me, 
for the man that I am, or can be, 
and I walk on confident 
feet breaking fallen twigs and my heart soars 
at this gift, 
the solitude of my insignificance 
to all that came before.
BELLYFUL

I shucked down
to the boneyard
    a prison
    it didn’t matter

what the fuck

it was showbiz

zip me the hell up

Lindy sat on the steps in front of the gym, the latest Nancy Drew propped open on her knees. She tried to look as if she were engrossed in Nancy’s adventure, as if she weren’t perfectly aware of the other girls jumping rope about three feet to her left. With one finger, she pushed her glasses further up the bridge of her nose as if the girls weren’t jumping right in front of her, so close that she could feel the breeze from the downward swing of the rope on her cheeks. Slowly, she turned the page, as if engrossed, as if she didn’t hear the group of boys on the blacktop teasing Julie, the prettiest, smartest, meanest girl at Mountainview School. And Julie’s answering giggle like a cupful of cold clean water.

Finally, a thousand years later, the playground aide blew the whistle signaling the end of recess. Lindy sat with Nancy until nearly everyone had passed through the cafeteria doors. Then she closed the book and went inside.

Helen filled the tub with hot water and a healthy pour of Lindy’s Mr. Bubble. No need to strip as she had been walking around the house in the nude – so liberating. All those confining clothes, no wonder her creative juices had almost completely dried up. Nothing wrong with a woman’s natural body, her natural smells. How Phillip loved to bury his nose in her armpit (no longer shaved) and inhale her scent. He’d growl then like a dog or a bear and her heart would beat so she was sure he could see it inside her chest. Phillip, she whispered to
herself. She tried the words out: “Lover. My lover.”

Oh, but the water was hot. Her skin red and smarting as she lowered herself inch by inch. Damn. She had forgotten her notebook on the edge of the vanity. She reached for it, but her fingertips didn’t quite touch. Dripping all over the tile, she stood, grabbed it, and then lowered herself again– one two three – nothing to it. The water would relax her, uncork her, so the poem that had been struggling to reach the surface could rise. Rise!

She wrote it on the paper –Rise–and waited, pen poised above the page. Waiting.

Mrs. Sternbrenner glared at Lindy. “Well, young lady? I’m waiting.”

Lindy could feel the compressed glee of the class, a held breath. “I didn’t hear the question.”

“What? Speak up. I can’t hear you when you mumble.” She looked around the room, her eyes like empty milk bottles, until they lighted on Julie’s raised hand. “Yes, Julie?”

Julie cleared her throat. “Latitude runs north to south.”

“That’s correct. Very good, Julie.” Mrs. Sternbrenner’s mouth, which had been pinned up tight when she looked at Lindy, loosened into a grin of square teeth.

Lindy tried to disappear into her shoulders. Two rows in front her her, Julie’s cap of blonde hair shone like a halo. “Stupid,” someone whispered. A boy.

Social Studies took another thousand years.

After her bath, Helen felt fresh. She glanced at the clock and frowned. Lindy would be home from school in less than an hour and she would have to put on clothes. Sometimes, she didn’t bother, but Lindy – she was so uptight. Really, for a child you’d think she’d be uninhibited like a little savage, but no; the child would fidget and look uncomfortable until her mother pulled on clothes. No bra though. Too confining. She loved the feel of the fabric against her bare breasts (and Phillip loved how they looked, her breasts, loose and free in a thin cotton shirt).

She threw herself into the chair beneath the window and looked at the pad, wrapping a strand of her long dark hair around a finger. “Rise,” she had written. A good start. She added an exclamation
point – *Rise!* – and nodded her head. Good good good and then the phone rang, always interruptions just as the juices were starting to flow.

How boring! Her husband, David, wanting to know what she was making for dinner. Why don’t you make dinner? she had countered. Always the woman’s job: cooking, cleaning, raising children. He sighed and in the sigh she could hear the answer: because I work all day. As if she didn’t. Wasn’t housework work? Taking care of the child? Not to mention her real work, her poetry and pottery (a class she took at the county college on Tuesdays). They hung up and Helen slammed her notebook down on the table, nearly spilling a glass of milk left over from Lindy’s breakfast. Now it was ruined, the muse gone. An afternoon’s work down the tubes. The dishes in the sink shone in the sun. Against her bare skin, the fabric of the chair’s cushion felt nubbly; the backs of her legs itched. She felt naked.

Lindy walked down the aisle of the bus. Rosie scuttled over, filling the aisle seat; Leanne across from her did the same. Lindy kept her eyes on her shoes, the brick-colored ones with the laces that looked like licorice whips. Kara put her books down on the empty space next to her. Michael didn’t do anything, only looked at her. Finally, she sat down on the last seat on the bus. Next to Louis, the other kid no one wanted to sit next to. He was small for a sixth grader, but already had acne, sore looking red bumps with greenish white centers. “Hi, Lindy,” he said. His breath smelled like the stuff you see under a rock.

“Hi,” she said back. Had she spoken at all that day? To her ears, her own voice sounded unused, like an unopened book. She turned and looked out the window, squinting her eyes until the trees bent sideways as the bus sped by. The only thing worse than being Lindy Blume was being Louis Donaldson and Lindy wasn’t going to make matters worse by being seen talking to Louis Donaldson.

“Hey, Jew,” Michael said. “There’s a penny on the floor. Pick it up.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see it, the penny. Hot and quick, she felt Louis’s awful breath on her cheek. She turned the page.

“Pick it up! Pick it up!” chanted the bus until Lindy’s stop.
She felt the penny hit her on the back as she made her way down the aisle. The bus driver stared straight ahead and snapped her gum as Lindy climbed down the stairs. And then she was free. All the air left her lungs as she let her bookbag hang heavy in her arms.

*Rise*

Pen poised over the paper and then Lindy came through the door and the thought was gone flown right out of her head.

“Hi, Mom,” she said, shrugging her backpack off her shoulder, putting it on the floor next to a pile of David’s shirts Helen was supposed to have taken to the cleaners. Damn! David would be mad, but Lindy was talking so Helen made a mental note to take the shirts out to the car on her way to meet Phillip. Mental note: Helen could see it tacked onto the porous gray matter that was her brain.

Phillip. His arms covered in dark hair, his beard that scratched her face from his ferocious kisses. After Group, she and Phillip would meet at the motor lodge on Route Ten and kiss and kiss on the thin floral bedspread.

“Mom,” Lindy was saying now. Mom.

Helen looked down at her pad, the lone word rising up like an accusation.

“What!” she said and it must have come out sharper than she had intended because Lindy blinked her eyes hard.

“Do we have anything to eat? I’m kind of hungry.”

“Didn’t you eat your lunch? I’m in the middle of something.”

Unaccountably, the child’s face flushed. “I’m still hungry.”

Helen put down the pad. Sighed. Always the interruptions. No wonder she could never finish anything. “I think there’s some tofu bean casserole. Want me to heat some up for you?”

The child was already backing away, shaking her head. “That’s okay. I’ll wait for dinner.”

After Lindy left the room (to do her homework?) Helen picked up the pad again, but it was no good. The poem was gone. She tore the page out of the book and threw it in the garbage can; because no one in this goddamn house except herself ever did anything, it was overflowing. The unborn poem bounced off a banana peel and landed on the floor.
In her room, Lindy was not doing homework. She was reading. This time a book she had taken out of the town library, a book about raising pure bred dogs. Lindy didn’t have a dog, but someday she might. Who knew? A nice collie with a long pretty coat or the sensible looking Scottie on page twenty-two who looked kind of like Mr. Heidelberg who lived at number twelve. She turned the pages of the book and her stomach growled. She was starving, but the thought of her mother’s tofu bean casserole quelled the hunger pangs. She thought regrettily of the peanut butter and honey sandwich she had thrown out at lunch. Bad enough she had to sit alone, but her sandwich on its brown bread with actual pieces of grain, her container of wheat snack puffs, and the whole unpeeled carrot her mother had thrown in her lunch box at the last minute, attracted undue attention. Everyone else at Montainview School had a sandwich on fluffy white bread with cookies and some sort of chips on the side. Maybe an apple, but that was as close to “healthy” food as anyone else’s lunch got. After enduring Julie’s fake curiosity (“Really, does it taste good, Lindy?”), the boys’ taunts (“Ewwww. Gross.”), and Leanne’s even faker sympathy (“What’s the matter? Your mom can’t afford real bread?”), Lindy just threw the lunch away. Mrs. Burton, the lunchroom aide who was at least a hundred years old, saw Lindy throw her lunch away every day, but said nothing. Sometimes Lindy wondered about grown-ups. Did they not care about the lives of kids or were their heads so full of grown-up things that they didn’t notice?

A tap at the door. “Lindy, honey?” Her mom opened the door. “I’m leaving for Group now. David’s bringing home something for dinner.” She saw the book open on the bed. “Homework?”

Lindy shrugged; not exactly a lie. She wondered why her mom got so dressed up for Group when at home she didn’t usually bother getting dressed at all. She was wearing her favorite dangly earrings, jeans, and her purple poncho with the black fringe. And make-up, surprising because didn’t her mom say that cosmetics masked women and reinforced their roles as society’s second-class citizens?

“Don’t forget to empty the garbage,” her mom said and then she shut the door and was gone.
In the motel room Helen and Phillip fell on each other like starving animals, mouths open, fingers fumbling with buttons and zippers, the bed hitting the back of Helen's knees and she was falling back then—

“Wait. Wait!” she panted, wiggling out from under Phillip's bulk.

He wiped his hand across his brow. “What? What's the matter?”

Helen couldn't answer. She was scrambling in the drawer of the table next to the bed. She pushed the Bible aside. There it was: a notepad with the motel's name across the top. She fumbled in her bag until she found a pen.

*Rise*, she wrote on the top of the pad (no exclamation point—she could see now that had been indulgent). The rest of the lines poured out of her filling the blank page no punctuation to hold her back and when she finished she stood in the center of the room and read the poem to Phillip in a trembling voice. When she was done Phillip was crying. So beautiful was a man who was unafraid to show his emotions. He rose from the bed and took her in his arms. She wanted to tell him that she loved him, but didn't want to hear him say that love was a bourgeois emotion, so she trapped the words behind her teeth under her tongue and swallowed them where later they could be born into another poem.

David had brought home a bucket of chicken, Lindy was grateful to see. Without her mother there to criticize the meal’s lack of nutritional value, the food seemed to taste better. She had three wonderfully salty, greasy drumsticks and some of the mashed potatoes that had come with the bucket. After the meal, she was still hungry, but then David asked her if she'd like dessert. She pictured the juice-sweetened carob chip cookies in the cabinet and shook her head. “Too bad,” David said, grinning, and pulled out a Cadbury bar, Lindy's favorite, the caramel filled one. They split it and ate in silence. David was her stepfather and most of the time she remembered to call him David, but sometimes she slipped up and called him Dad.

No one else at school had parents who were divorced. No one else had two daddies or a mom who wore a poncho. No one else at school was Jewish. They either went to the Catholic church in the center of town or the Presbyterian one near the park. Lindy some-
times wondered if that’s why no one liked her. She wasn’t fat like TJ Ledbetter or smelly like Louis Donaldson. She wasn’t even too tall like Leanne who got called “giraffe,” but who was always picked first in gym when they were required to split up into teams (Lindy and Fat TJ were, of course, picked last). Kara had a cranberry colored birthmark on her neck and Rosie constantly got into trouble in class for speaking out of turn. So what was it about her? Maybe, she thought now as the last bit of chocolate melted on her tongue, it was the combination of things – the Jewishness, the divorced parents, the poncho – that set her apart. It couldn’t be her no-color hair, somewhere between brown and blonde, or the small gap between her two front teeth, or even her glasses since several other sixth-graders at Mountainview had them too.

She thanked David for the dinner and together they cleaned off the table. Lindy washed the dishes without being asked. She wanted to wait up until her mom got home, but David said it was a school night and she needed her sleep so she went into the bathroom to brush her teeth and get ready for bed.

The house was dark when Helen let herself in. She took off her clothes, considered showering, but didn’t want to wash Phillip’s scent from her body so she crawled into bed next to her husband. She could tell by the way he held himself when the bed sank under her weight his back to her that he wasn’t asleep. Her eyes adjusted to the dark and she could her latest sculpture, Woman in Triumph, on top of the dresser, silhouetted against the slightly lighter dark that was the bedroom window. The clock ticked and then, just as she was drifting off to sleep: “You smell like a whore.”

Helen said nothing, only pushed her breath out through her nose.

David rolled over onto his back. “You didn’t even have the decency to clean yourself before coming to bed. To our bed.”

She sat up, the blanket falling away and then she launched herself out of the bed. Her foot caught in the sheet and she almost fell, catching herself against the corner of the dresser. The sculpture crashed to the ground.

In her room, Lindy pulled her pillow over her head and when
that didn’t block them out, put her fingers in her ears as well. The fight went on and on until the front door slammed. Who had left? She pulled away the pillow. Through the wall that separated the bedrooms she could hear her mother crying. David then. After a while, the house was quiet except for the hum of the refrigerator and the ticking of the clock in the hall. Lindy thought she wouldn’t sleep, but then she did.

At recess, Lindy, sitting in her usual spot on the steps, opened her new library book, *Investigating Fossils for Fun*. She had just started on the chapter about geodes when a shadow fell across the page. She looked up. Sarah and Julie stood in front of her, and since Lindy was on the top of the four-step rise and they stood at the bottom, they were eye level with her. They both stood with their hands clasped behind their backs. Julie’s hair was a cap of gold; Sarah’s tied up in two thick rust-colored braids. Julie’s skin was pink and white; Sarah’s had freckles like sprinkles of nutmeg. But on their faces the identical expression, what Lindy’s mom would have called “looking like the cat that swallowed the canary.” Lindy had never been sure what that saying meant, but suddenly she knew. Sitting in the sun, she had almost been too warm; now though the hairs stood up on her arm as if she were cold.

“Hi, Lindy,” said Julie.
“Hey,” said Sarah.
Lindy cleared her throat. “Hi.”
“Watcha reading?” asked Julie, leaning over to look at the book propped open on Lindy’s knees.
“Nothing,” she said, shutting the book and putting it on the step behind her.
“We’re gonna walk around,” said Sarah.
“Want to come with us?” said Julie.

Despite the hairs on her arm, Lindy felt a quickening in her chest. To no longer be exiled to playground purgatory. How long she had waited for such an invitation. Something, some instinct, urged her to pick up the book, to ignore this gesture just as she ignored their taunts, but then: “Sure,” she said, and then the three of them were walking across the blacktop towards the open field where during gym
they played softball or dodgeball or did calisthenics. The boys were out there now, playing a game that involved running and pushing. Sarah and Julie were talking about Leanne and turned towards Lindy, including her in the conversation.

“Sarah thinks Leanne is stuck up,” said Julie.

Lindy didn’t know what to say to that so she just nodded. She was surprised Sarah would say such a thing, being somewhat new to Mountainview School. In fact, Lindy had been astounded at how quickly Sarah had been accepted (by Julie!) what with her newness, orangey hair and freckles and all, but Sarah could run fast and hit a ball almost like a boy. Also, she had an older brother who had taught her swear words, some of which were new to the kids in Mountainview’s sixth grade.

“What do you think?” Julie asked.

“I don’t really know her all that well,” Lindy lied. Actually she had known Leanne since first grade. They had been friends, in fact. They had sat together at lunch and traded sandwiches (this was before the awful wheat bread), Leanne’s bologna for Lindy’s PBJ.

“Well, I never really said that,” Sarah said now, pushing Julie’s shoulder as they walked (but not too hard).

“But you think it,” said Julie.

The girls had now reached the center of the field, the limit of where they were allowed to go during recess. “What’s that?” Sarah said and her voice was so loud that Lindy jumped and turned to look where she was pointing.

“What? I don’t see –” said Lindy and then she heard that light giggle and she turned and saw Sarah and Julie racing together back across the field towards the blacktop. The boys stopped their game and looked at the running girls, and then at Lindy standing alone in the middle of the field. They laughed and Sarah and Julie, turning, looking back over their shoulders at the ridiculous Lindy, laughed too.

Lindy felt naked.

She trudged across the stunted grass. The playground aide blew the whistle and all the children stopped what they were doing and lined up at the cafeteria doors in two straight lines: boys in one, girls in the other. By the time Lindy climbed the steps everyone had gone inside. Only the playground aide with her round hard belly waited,
arms crossed over her breasts. “Let’s go,” she said to Lindy.

Her book. *Investigating Fossils for Fun.* It was gone. “Have you
seen a library book?” Lindy said.

“Speak up! I can’t hear you.”

Lindy didn’t speak because she knew she would cry. So she
said nothing. She felt hot all over, like she had a fever. Years later, she
would be able to identify this feeling as shame. Now she followed the
aide through the doors, letting the school swallow her whole.

Helen had not even been able to get out of bed when Lindy left for
school. She had heard the child hesitate at her door and then walk
away. All day she had been in bed, not sleeping, aching, hurting.
David gone. He hadn’t come home in the long stretch before dawn
or this morning. He hadn’t called from the office. Her body burned;
maybe she had a fever. Maybe she was really ill. Her joints ached, also
her head behind her eyes, and she itched all over. How awful David
would feel when he finally came home and saw how sick he had
made her.

And Phillip. She longed to call him, but knew she shouldn’t. Of
course, they didn’t know about her at his office and word could get
back to his wife who was vicious, according to Philip, a true dyed-
in-the-wool bitch he called her. She wasn’t cool the way Helen and
David were, and here Helen gagged back a sob as she thought about
David’s open-mindedness that allowed her to discover her real pas-
-son for art. Oh, David! She must have dozed then because sometime
later she heard the front door open and Lindy’s footsteps dragging
across the floor. They stopped at Helen’s door and this time Lindy
pushed it open a crack and called “Mom?” into the musty twilight of
Helen’s bedroom.

She threw her forearm over her eyes to block the stab of light. “I
don’t feel well, honey. I’m really, really sick.”

“Do you need anything? I can get you some Tylenol or a drink
of water or something.”

Helen put her arm down and squinted at her daughter silhou-
etted against the bright light that was absolutely leaping through the
door. “Not now. Maybe later, ’kay?”

Lindy didn’t say anything, then: “…um…Mom? Mommy?”
But Helen was already drifting. “Later, Lindy. Close the door on your way out.”

As she fell down, tumbled, rolled under black waves of sleep, she realized that Lindy had been sniffing. Maybe she was coming down with a cold. And then she slept.

When it became too dark to read, Lindy looked up from her book. Night had crept up outside her window. She switched on the light next to her bed. The house was silent. Her mother must still be sleeping. Her stomach rumbled.

Lindy sat at the table with her book and waited. David would be home soon, she told herself. She hoped he would bring pizza this time, but she'd be okay with chicken again. Her stomach gurgled. Or maybe her mom would get up. She'd be all apologetic for forgetting to make dinner. They'd go the diner and her mom would let her order breakfast for dinner, Lindy's favorite. When enough time had passed, Lindy had to admit to herself neither of these things was going to happen. She opened the refrigerator. In the back, she found a carton of eggs hidden behind the tofu bean casserole. She took two and cracked them into a bowl, fishing out most of the pieces of shell. After a search of the cabinets, she found the frying pan in the sink. Whatever had been cooked in it had hardened, so Lindy scraped it off with knife, washed it, and set it on the stove with the last of the butter. The bread was moldy, but she found a box of whole wheat crackers that would do just fine. She arranged her dinner on a plate and cleared a spot on the table. All she need now was a glass of milk or juice, but the milk had soured and someone had put the carton of juice back in the refrigerator empty. No matter, she thought. Water would be fine. In the cabinet with the glasses, she spied David's bottle of gin. It was clear like water and David always seemed so pink and smiley after he had a couple of drinks. She splashed some into her glass and set it next to her plate.

The eggs were delicious even though they were hard in some parts and runny in others. Lindy ate them all and the crackers, too. The gin was kind of gross and made her cough, but after the burning went away, she felt warm and a little happy so she drank it down and got herself another, making sure to pour some water into the bottle.
so David wouldn’t notice. Midway into her second glass, she paused
over the memory of Sarah and Julie, their backs, their running feet,
but she felt nothing now. She had cried for a while when she got
home, wanting only her mama to make it all better. She was disgusted
with herself. What a baby. No wonder they had run away from her,
wouldn’t sit with her on the bus. She finished her drink and put the
glass in the sink.

“Time for bed,” she told herself, but low so she wouldn’t wake
her mother. “Don’t forget to brush your teeth,” she whispered.

She thought she would read for a while under the covers with
her flashlight, but she was so tired that the room spun and spun.

Helen opened her eyes. What time was it? She turned her head to
look at the clock. Nearly three in the morning and still no David.
She kicked off the covers and got out of bed. Every light in the house
was on. She turned them off as she passed: two lamps in the living
room, the bathroom light, the overhead in the hall. In the kitchen, she
poured herself a glass of water and drank it right down. When she
went to turn off the light in her daughter’s room, Lindy was sleeping
on top of the covers. Odd, she was still fully dressed. Helen pulled off
her shoes and pulled the covers up over her daughter. How simple her
life was, how secure, she thought, smoothing a tangle of fair hair off
her forehead. Ah, to be a child again. Then she turned off the light
and shut the door.
DR. D

The road winds, kisses Lake Michigan
snow slants sideways—my school psychologist

waits on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons
outside parking lot slick with sleet—

punctual, she comes in dark suit or stiff long skirt
to receive me in the waiting room

never takes off her tortoise shell glasses
spreads a wake walking the hall

yet soft spoken, kind in the low light
of her office, window drawn in North Milwaukee.

What we did share across her oriental rug
tugs my despair—not coping

through graduate school, alone
on the top floor of my apartment

we even meet in that cold on a Sunday evening
my final semester in Wisconsin

she holds course like a skiff
barely tacking my way across that icy lake.
RAPID EYE MOVEMENT

My bread is buttered on whatever side is down. From each of eighteen wheels I’m shedding tread. She loves another then she loves another not and like the eye behind the patch, I’m on call always but the heart opposed to mine needs be right only once and if in altered states like Idaho, balloons with polka dots are tied to fence posts, it’s a girl or it’s a boy and not a final answer and the relatives who greet me are the relatives who didn’t have the time of day for me in life.
SUNSHINE, 1974

Procol Harem on the radio, you know the one, fucking endless. My partner Mark claims he gets it, but his take takes longer and makes even less sense. Look at him mouthing the words; eyes closed in rapture, vestal virgins my ass. There are certain bands I would banish from the airwaves and Procol Harem tops the list.

“‘Yoming, check it out, Jackson.” the driver chings a wind chime, one of dozens strung above the dash.
“‘That would be Why-yoming.” Jackson corrects him.
“Where the buffalo roam.”
“Big Sky Country.”
“I have to pee.” The girl, Laney, whimpers between them.
“I swear you are the peeingest woman.” The driver gives her a goose.

The Banks brothers, Jackson and Monsanto Joe, just winding up a six-month road trip. Picked us up in North Platte and we’ve been shit-faced ever since, high-grade Columbian, Lebanese hash, Nepalese temple balls, for Christ sake! Paraphernalia scattered over the console, if we get pulled over they can throw away the key.

But we don’t care. It gets like that sometimes. So far over the line you might as well enjoy it. Plush ride too, Chevy van, generic exterior, seriously modified inside, cherry paneling, Persian rugs, couch/bed, small fridge. The kitty litter, incense and wind chimes I could do without, but the AC cranks and the sound system kicks ass.
“I really gotta go, Joey.”
And yeah, I could do without Laney, too. Nice to look at in a blonde sort of way, but the voice tends to grate and the bladder is insufferable. Jackson’s girl, from the look of it, though those lines can be blurry. The Banks boys are Hollywood handsome, blinding teeth, cobalt eyes, plus a breezy affability that marks the charmed life. Nothing bad can happen if we stick with these guys.

Jackson traces Laney’s jaw line. “You know what I love? I love this, right here.” He strokes the crook. “Wonder what that says about me?”

“It says you’re cunning and manipulative.” She takes his hand but doesn’t move it.

“Diplomacy, love.” He fingers an earlobe. “It’s what separates us from the baboons.”

The guy is good. They’re both good, Jackson’s smooth to Joe’s spacey, both self-possessed beyond their years. I want to be like them.

“Vellesburg.” Joe veers into a rest stop. “Begins with ‘V.’”

“A perfectly harmless letter.” Jackson scans the lot.

“Don’t I know it.” Joe parks at a distance and slouches behind the wheel. “Vellesburg, with a ‘V.’ A good place to live, shop, vor-

“I’ll be right back.” Laney toes the door open. We watch her cross the lot, glassy eyes glued to her bottom.

“What I look for in a woman.” Joe sighs. “Grace under pres-

Jackson’s stare is unwavering. “You might have parked farther away.”

“Any loose, horny women where you’re going?” Mark’s first words and standard inquiry.

The brothers swap looks. Joe turns with a smile.

“We may be able to help you there.”

“Where are you going, anyway?” I think to ask.

“Little place called Monroe. Due west. It’s where we go to lick our wounds.”

“Your hometown?”

“Our folks live there, little house on the cul de sac. You’re wel-
come to tag along.”

Pretty stark out Monroe way, mountains shine in the distance but it’s mostly scrub desert and cloud shadows over the plain. We roll in near sunset. The light burns red against the mesa, backdrop to descending rooftops, bleak, empty, break your heart.

“What’s your dad do here?” I can’t imagine.

“He tinkers.” Jackson gathers up the stashes. “I’m not sure what he’s working on now, but you know the rotating TV antennae?”

“That was his?”

“Pretty much. He’s one of those guys who has to take it apart and make it more complicated.”

“He also sings show tunes.” Laney leans in.

“Right. Show tunes.” Jackson plunks an imaginary piano.

“Their parents are so cool,” Laney assures me. “Their mom was a Rockette. You know, Radio City?”

“Really!” Mark gets a rise.

All I can think is why here, when you can invent anywhere? Here is not a natural habitat. You don’t just throw up some houses and make it homey. This is living on the moon.

“I can’t imagine show tunes making sense out here.” I gape at that mesa.

“It’s an out of body experience.” Joe chuckles. “Some nights the coyotes howl along.”

Mom meets us at the door with hugs all around. Maxie’s the name, if you can believe it. The kind of mom your buddies beat off to. I’m halfway passed when she snakes my arm.

“My God, it’s you!”

I blush like a hayseed. My Christ-like resemblance is a matter of consensus.

“No really, it’s uncanny. Barry!” she calls inside. “Come see who the boys brought home.”

Barry lumbers in wiping his hands on a rag. “Well what do you know? Right here in Monroe! Didn’t I tell you? God’s country.”

“You should get an act together.” Maxie taps her fingers to her cheeks. “A one-man show.”

“Too schmaltzy.” Barry waves her off. “Can you sing?”
“Easy, parentals.” Jackson leads us inside. “We can talk showbiz later but first, we need victuals.”

Joe checks the fridge. “Begins with ‘V.’”
“I’ll make some pasta.” Maxie smacks Joe out of the way. “You two have lost weight.”
“Lean and mean, Maxi-mom. Seen Michael around?”
“He and Kate are in London.” Maxie rifles the refrigerator. “His cousins are staying at the house. Couple of cuties, we met them at the barn dance.”
“Excellent!” the boys share a nod.
“Well now.” Barry clamps an arm around Mark and me. “This calls for a celebration. How’s about I make us up a pitcher of martinis?”

Mark looks to me. “Seriously?”
“But of course!” Barry strolls us out of the kitchen. “The boys are home from the wars, God’s in my living room and all’s right with the world. Joe? Jackie? Care to join us?”
“Absolutely!” They trail in, gnoshing chips.
“We’ve been expecting you for weeks. Your mother kept a light burning in the window.”
“We got diverted.” Jackson bellies up. “Made some friends in Taos and stayed on for the festival. Johnny Winters smoked ‘em.”
“So gyro-dad what are you into these days?” Joe sprawls in the E-Z Boy.
“In a word? Self-propulsion.” Barry rattles the ice bucket. “I was watching a show about those wind towers out in California. Pretty clever idea, if a tad unsightly, profitable too, providing there’s a wind. I started thinking, why not a wind-driven car? Mount a pin-wheel in the grille, hook it to a battery and charge while you drive.”
“Will it fly?”
Barry works the shaker in a slow pirouette. “I don’t know yet. I’m still in the thinking stage. Lot of problems to be sorted out.”
Laney saunters by and drops a kitten in my lap. “That’s Frick.”
“Is there a Frack?”
“No, just Frick.” She squeezes past and settles in beside me. Barry circles the room with a tray of stemware. I touch mine to Laney’s
and the lines get blurrier.

“To our prodigal sons.” Barry offers the toast. “May they yet find peace in a restless world.”

“Here, here,” Laney seconds.

“Tell me you have a sister.”

“I do. She’s married with three kids.”

“Do you have her number?”

“She lives in Wisconsin.”

“Just tell me, I’ll remember it.”

Dinner’s in the air: garlic, oregano. Outside the wind has picked up and a gaggle of tumbleweeds tumble by. Tumbleweeds, right? Something funky is playing in the background. Maxie ducks in, grabs a drink, exits in a cha-cha.

“How’s that compare, martini-wise?” Barry nods at my glass.

“Honestly? It’s the first I’ve ever had.”

“The trick is in the gin.” He pulls a bar stool over. “I only use Brady’s.”

“Brady’s?”

“Walt Brady, my attorney.” Barry sips and smiles. “He and I built a distillery in his garage.”

“It’s…not what I expected.” To put it mildly.

Maxie teeters over and takes my hand. “You come with me.”

I follow as best as I can, weaving around and through. Laney waits in the kitchen with a Polaroid camera.

“Right here.” Maxie props me by the counter and fits herself to me. “OK, oh this will be good. No wait, wait!”

She wraps one of my arms around her waist. “Perfect! Oh the girls are going to flip when they see this.”

Laney shoots a few, then she and me, then us and the kitten. In between, we sample the sauce, adding a dash, doing the rhumba. Laughter rolls in from the living room. The phone rings but we don’t answer. Martini time, Monroe, Wyoming.

Then on to dinner.

“I don’t even remember what he was talking about.” Joe twirls up a forkful. “All I remember is I kept saying ‘That’s the mark of a true professional.’ Over and over, like I was the final word.”
“It was wolf-trapping!!” Jackson slaps the table. “How you gotta boil your clothes and seal them in wax or they’ll smell you coming. The guy looked like Gabby Hayes.”

“Yeah, wolf trapping, right?” Joe cackles.

“Monsanto Joe, the old hand.” Jackson howls.

“We were sure you’d be back to see Mia off.” Maxie piles more pasta on our plates.

“Johnny Winters, Mom.”

“Your little sister, my precious baby.”

“Nolo contendre, por favor.”

Barry clears his throat and pings a glass for silence. “May I have your attention for a moment. I, uh … we have a little announcement to make.”

“Oh Barry, don’t you dare.” Maxie bats him. Barry pushes up from the table.

“Tonight I am pleased and proud to inform you that your mother, our very own Maxie Jo Banks, has won the Starling County Talent Contest for 1973!”

The room erupts in a cheer, on our feet as Barry sweeps an arm. Maxie covers her face with her hands, but we can see her cranking up. Must admit I love this stuff.

“Let me guess.” Jackson holds up a finger. “‘I Thought About You.’”

“Even better. Wait till you hear.” Barry wrestles with a wine cork. “Your mother is brilliant, you know.”

“Well hell, let’s hear it!” Mark hollers and we all join in, clapping and chanting.

“Max-ie! Max-ie!”

She waves us off and rolls her eyes, but oh yeah, she’s gonna do it. Laney leads the march out the side door to a deck walled in with windows. There’s a circle of chairs around a potbellied stove and an upright piano wedged in the corner. Barry and Maxie enter to raucous applause. She hams it up, curtsies and kisses, he whispers in her ear then sits at the piano. Maxie waves for quiet.

“OK. First, I’d just like to say that tonight is one of those special nights.”
“Louder!”
“As some of you know, I’ve always liked to play around with tempo. Doodle with the rhythm, so to speak.”
Barry strikes a cord.
“Anyway…this sort of came to me one night when I was thinking about my boys, wondering where the hell they could be. Your father helped me with phrasing and, well…we don’t like to brag but the rest, as they say, is history.”
Barry opens with a flourish then drops to light and lilting. Maxie comes in soft as a whisper.
“You are … my sun … shine.”
A faint chord, then softer still,
“ … My only sun … shine.”
The old warhorse served up slow and sweet but weirdly haunting. We’re carried along, lost in the mood. Those same words saying what they never said, a love song, soft and simple. Barry slows to a crawl at the finish, tinkling off into soulful silence. Maxie’s big eyes shimmer like diamonds.
“You’ll never know, dear …
… how much … I love you.
Please don’t take …
my sunshine …
… away.”
We sit in stunned silence. Then someone thinks to clap and we rise as one. Bravo! Bellissimo! Encore! Encore! Maxie beckons to Barry, they take their bows and we roar like loonies.
“Thank you, thank you, great crowd.” Barry grins like a monkey.
“All of you, family, friends, that, uh, concludes our program for the evening—” We boo. “No, no, don’t get her going now”—Maxie swats at him— “but, we invite you all to join us at the bar for an evening of Maxie worship.” Which we do into the wee hours.

True to their word, the Banks boys pair us with the wayward cousins. Two days later they load us up with victuals and drop us at the on-ramp west.
“Well, that was sure interesting.” I wave after them. “It feels
like an old episode of Route 66. You know, Todd Stiles and Buzz Murdoch.”
   Mark blinks once, twice. “You remember their fucking names?”
   “Well, yeah. I loved that show.”
   “Too faggy for me.”
   The light turns green and the next surge hits the ramp, antsy from the wait, bunched too close. Plenty of traffic, but the timing’s all wrong.
   “Faggy?”
   “Yeah.” He fingers his beard. “Couple of butt-boys. You didn’t see that?”
   Jesus, now that he mentions—
   “The blonde pretty boy and the swarthy troubled guy?” Mark limps a wrist. “And talk about a homomobile!”
   “Wait a minute, how is a Corvette a homomobile?”
   The weary sigh. “You know sometimes you amaze me.”
   “No really, explain to me. How?”
   The look of concern. “Think about it, OK?”
   “It’s the world’s most macho car!”
   The exaggerated look of concern.
   “Oh, so in Mark’s world swishy is gay and macho is gay.”
   “It’s not my world.” He shakes his head. “I just live in it, like you.”
   A muscle pickup slows to a crawl then its redneck whistles and blown kisses. We give them nothing to kill us over. A Greyhound blows by bound for Reno, granny gamblers wide eyed at the windows. Mark lights a cigarette, I toe a line of pebbles to the edge of the asphalt.
   “OK, they’re gay guys, fuck it.” The lead pebble gets the boot. “I was talking about the concept, on the road, everywhere you go you get involved in something.” Then the next, then the next. “It’s what happens. It’s true! We just lived some.”
   Mark settles on his pack. “What was that about, anyway, Monsanto Joe?”
   “Don’t know.” Rocks rattle down the bank. “I didn’t think to ask him.”
“Monsanto. That’s a chemical company, isn’t it?”
“I thought they made carpeting.”
“Yeah.” Mark squints up at the sun. “What’s that about?”
An old Fairlane shoulders over. We grab our packs and book.
THE AGING ROCK-&-ROLL SINGER

is destitute & searches frantically for his groupies.
Wherever he goes,

he carries an amplifier,
a stringless electric guitar, & a 50-foot extension cord.

All his shirts are emblazoned with his former band name
but still have tags
dangling from the neckband.
His thousand-dollar wigs have been repossessed
& are on display in the den of someone’s mansion,
& his liver’s been transplanted,

though the original resides in a glass case at the Hall of Sciences.

His present diet consists of oats & dubious canned meat.
When people recognize him,

they snap his picture as if spotting a mythical creature, like Santa, or a yeti.
His STDs are a formidable collection acquired over decades of libidinous indiscretion,
are further testimony of his inexplicable aversion to prophylactics,
while his former wives speak of him in the 3rd person singer, recounting their married lives as if they’d beaten a terminal illness.
Each step he takes is a reminder he’s lost his former gait,
how his once mellifluous voice could now accompany a formal dictionary entry for “gravelly” or “hoarse” or “how early promise is eventually exposed by fate,”
how the aging rock-&-roll singer physically endures in directly-inverse proportion to the storied legacy he accrued.
Swimming

James W. 15-1-2012

James Wilkinson
A POEM ABOUT BEING TRANSPARENT

Personne ne pleure
pourtant la nuit est cousue par tous les côtés
au bord du vide
la statue penche dangereusement
et pourrait à tout moment tomber
les ailes de l’oiseau sont agrafées au ciel
à l’angle plus mort du vide
l’occurrence d’un cri
ou bien le sein blessé
par la pointe d’une aiguille
a laissé
un petit trou unique
à la place de l’œil
Nobody is crying
Yet the night is sewn on all sides
by the edge
the statue leans dangerously
and could fall down at any time
the wings of the bird are stapled to the sky
on the dead angle of the void
the occurrence of a scream
or even an injured breast
   by the tip of a needle
   has left
      a single tiny hole
instead of an eye
STRIP MINER

Whatever the landscape had of meaning appears to have been abandoned,
unless the road is holding it back, in the interior,
where we cannot see . . .
– Elizabeth Bishop, Cape Breton

None of his tricks were working. His big yellow backpack was hidden in the bushes. People could be wary of the pack—made you look like a hippie or a bum. But he dragged it back out.

A guy standing alone, a young guy with a beard and ponytail, they wouldn’t warm to that either. He tried histrionics again. Knelt down, put his hands together, simulating prayer, miming please to the traffic. Crickets and grasshoppers were loud in the brush after the cars passed, the constant rattle and buzz of his vigil. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to walk the seventeen miles to Beckley. At the end, at least he could buy a meal and find a bus station. Not that he had enough money for the ticket to Washington, where Maggie apparently was waiting for him. There wasn’t a date set, just an invitation—one he wasn’t inclined to dismiss. When they were seniors in college, a mushy Mennonite school in Indiana, Maggie and Ted spent a few indeterminate nights together, erratic start and stop, which left them unmoored.
Were they on the brink of sex—or sliding toward a breakup? By graduation, this hadn't been decided. She went home to Olympia and rented an apartment on Younglove Street, that name alone goading him to fits of blind, incapacitating envy.

Ted had returned to Philadelphia and worked in a series of what he believed to be absurd jobs: busboy, office drone, substitute teacher. He imagined that these jobs were buying him time, prepping him for the next Great Move. Then in June, he received a letter from Younglove Street. Maggie also had been working at jobs (waitress, law firm receptionist) that made her none too happy. And she'd been re-considering what had happened those last months at school. Maybe they could break the stalemate. And assuming Ted was as dense as usual, she added “I've finally got a diaphragm.”

So Ted was westering in a hurry. The first five hundred miles had gone pretty well—two long-distance trucks and a gypsy academic en route to a new post. Then in West Virginia, everything stalled. Ted sat hunched up on the gravel shoulder, arms clasped around his knees. He began a game of naming states, drawing a blank at forty-three or so, with stubborn gaps in the prairies. His conclave of U.S. presidents petered out at twenty-six. After that, he sang every rock hit he could recall, chronologically, from the last decade, but the lyrics skittered fast into dispirited humming. Three hours left of sun, a ten-hour walk to Beckley. It wasn’t feasible; he would wait.

A pea green pickup passed him and eased off the road twenty yards ahead. Ted was not enthusiastic. As a hitchhiker, he learned to classify ride potential according to vehicle. Naturally, the semi-trailer behemoths were the best, assuming you could beg your way on at a truck stop. Then came cars with suitcases lashed on top or pulling a U-Haul. Your average family sedan, nicely maintained, kids in backseat: No chance. Ditto for women alone. Never happens. Battered pickups—exhibit A sitting a quick jog from Ted—were arguably a good bet. But they tended to be short-rangers, picking up fifty pound sacks of chicken feed or driving to the next exit where cousin Bob needed to pick up a secondhand crankcase or clutch or some other beat up thing. The other problem with
these rides was talk—too much or not enough. You might have to entertain for your miles. Or cope with oppressive silence: Bill and Earl sitting there stoically, two snakes on a rock, until they were moved to speak, which they did in a few chewed-off syllables that fell to a short, garumphing laugh that Ted was expected to join—or ignore, at his peril.

The driver, wearing the obligatory John Deere embossed cap, opened the passenger door. Ted threw his pack into the back and climbed in. “Hey, thanks for stopping. I’ve been waiting here three hours; I was beginning to worry.”

The man was roughly forty, huskily built, someone who belonged in this pickup: clean-shaven, sandy red hair wispy on top, and a round strong face with small creased eyes. His arms were sunburned in patches—tough, thick skin, well-muscled, especially the forearms. “I’m Jake Wilson. Glad to give you a hand.”

“And I’m Ted Zakarian.” He fretted over how his ethnic surname would be received.

“Where you headed, Ted?”

“Beckley today and eventually the west coast. But you never know.” It seemed to Ted he was trying hard to sound rough and tumble.

“Hell, you’re only twenty miles from Beckley. I can take you there tomorrow morning if you’ll wait.”

Ted clenched a little—tomorrow morning, wait until morning? What does that mean? “No thanks, rather get there tonight. But how far you going?”

Wilson was talkative, yet not compulsively, could even give and take. They compared origins, occupations. Ted censored the story of his last several years. He had been involved with the anti-Vietnam war movement and still considered himself a reasonably committed activist. While at college, he led a small contingent of protestors in a 24-hour vigil at a Midwestern obelisk topped by a sword-wielding female Victory; this event gained no media attention but attracted a horde of bottle-tossing motorists who orbited the statue. Wilson’s life was seriously more complex and intriguing. He had done tours of duty as a B-52 bomber pilot. When Wilson
reached this part of his history, Ted became guarded. Though he was clearly one of those hippies presumably loathed by Wilson and his ilk, he was also a born diplomat. He did not want to quarrel with his benefactor, who was regaling him with stories of high altitude missions over North Vietnam. Wilson would peer down from his equipment-hemmed seat to the distant fuzz of jungle and watch a string of bombs detonating like fire pearls. Ted wanted to ask if he ever thought about what happened to people and animals below. But he knew better. Wilson replied anyway, the question hanging in the pickup.

“I couldn’t worry about what was going on at ground level; I was following my flight plans. “Keep in mind this wasn’t a dry run. We were getting shot at.”

Ted would have asked, “And why do you think they were shooting at us? What were we doing in Vietnam in the first place?”

Wilson continued, as if answering, “I’m no political scientist; I didn’t go to college and learn communism vs. democracy. I can’t explain the fine points of why we were there, to tell you the truth. People have their opinions; I don’t get into that bullshit. We had objectives and we met them. Besides, that war would’ve ended a lot sooner if we didn’t have an arm tied behind our back.”

“What a crock! So frying those villages was an objective? And you’re talking Curtis LeMay, we should have bombed them back into the Stone Age?” was what Ted would have said, rather than, “It must have been terrifying to fly with those SAMs coming at you.” He hoped that the reference to surface-to-air missiles might impress Wilson. Even a radical hippie could be in the know. Wilson held on to the wheel with one hand and drew little derisive circles with the other. “Yeah, those SAMs were something else.”

It was unclear to Ted whether the putdown was aimed at Russian technology or him. But Wilson was scrapping for a dogfight. He kept escalating, his voice growing hoarse. “I was happy to lay down those bombs, it thrilled me to hear them explode. We were dealing with the E-N-E-M-Y, Ted, do you understand? Ever hear about their punji stakes tearing up our infantry? How about their abuse of P.O.W.s? The North Vietnamese, the Vietcong,
anyone giving aid and comfort, forget them, they were the target zone.” After each assertion, Wilson would pivot his head and glance at Ted, whose eyes were locked forward. He tried to blink away the arguments he would have made if the man had been twenty-two and they were on neutral terrain.

“OK,” Wilson said suddenly. “We’re here, my property, all three hundred seventy acres.” Ted couldn’t grasp the size—though once he’d spent a day wandering a hundred-acre Vermont farm mostly reverted to forest laced by a giddy fast stream, sheltered by steep hillsides, and harboring a small graveyard in the redolent silence. The family was trying to hold on to the farm, as a kind of retreat. They paid land taxes with money from their city jobs. But this Wilson spread was a different story, vaster. And what had begun as Wilson’s hills had been sublet to the coal company, shaved of cover, reconfigured. There was a hyperbolic, sculptural quality to it, with tiers of blank terraces coiling around the mountain cores. Instead of moist phases of green, the palette was pale, exposed: dusted browns and grays, burnished reds and pinks. It resembled an excavation for a gargantuan shopping mall—or replica Badlands, installed with overly symmetrical buttes and mesas, minus the gauze of geological time. A web of sinuous roads moved down the slopes to allow hauling of the black stuff. The tops were plateaus, not soft and rounded blanket tops like his fantasy Appalachians. Ted had never seen a range in such shape—crests lopped off, degraded, a whole series of them, a blasted extended clan. Wilson swept his hand toward the scene and said, “I’m proud of the whole damned thing. After they get the coal, they’ll re-plant the slopes and restore the mountain. These guys are pros; down the road it’ll look fine.”

“But how can they do this?” Ted wanted to ask. How can you restore something so intricate and ancient and ravishing? What he said was, “Wow, this is incredible. Unreal.”

“Oh, it’s real, alright. You should see how Frank Watson’s deal turned out, just over the county line. That gang’s fixed for the next hundred years.”

Since it was getting late for Beckley, Ted accepted Wilson’s invitation to stop at his house, join a family party, and sleep over.
“See how the other side lives, Ted. Real folks from the real country.” Ted didn’t have the steam to parry, so he said, “Fantastic, thanks for the invite.”

The shindig was well underway when they arrived. There were at least forty people and seven big tables set up on the lawn next to a sprawling new ranch house; a bunch of toddlers and restless babies; strung-out parents in their teens and twenties; a gang of middle-aged types gabbing exuberantly; and a half-dozen geezers. There were huge mounds of corn, mashed potatoes, burgers, watermelon. Deliquescing slabs of pie were passed around, accompanied by booming laughter.

Kady, Wilson’s daughter, sat across the table from Ted. She was one of four children, the second youngest. After sophomore year at the University of West Virginia, she was home for the summer. Ted guessed that she was not among the swifter students in her English class. There was a blankness amidst her beauty, a vacant sheen that he interpreted as incapacity rather than inexperience. She did, however, have an insinuating smile which seemed intended for him, as he spoke nonchalantly about his hitchhiking luck, his life in the city. Kady had lank, blondish brown hair which hung straight to her shoulder in even falls. Her nose was thin and canted up. She had delicate, yet shapely lips, with small orderly teeth. The contours of her body were understated.

Though he felt a bit ludicrous scripting himself into a classic farmer’s daughter scenario, Ted was nearly obsessed. Sitting at the picnic table, he could not stop strategizing. How could they steal away, without being observed, his intentions not blatant to these strangers? While dishes were being cleared from the tables, Kady came close to where Ted was sitting, asked in a half-whisper if he’d like to take a walk and “get the five-dollar tour.”

The tour she gave—of the barn, grain elevator, piglets, and goats—was so methodical and blandly cheerful that Ted doubted any developments. The farthest section of the farm was a stand of apple and peach trees, misshapen, with more branches dead than alive. Kady said, “No one’s touched these trees for twenty years. I guess they lost interest. And the fruit looks terrible.”
She was pulling down a branch to inspect an apple when Ted, feeling charged up and terrified, put his hand on Kady’s shoulder. Steady as you go, he told himself. Kady carefully released the branch and turned to him. She looped her arms around Ted’s waist. They kissed lightly for a few minutes. Then she tugged at his hand and said, “There’s a cool place nearby.” At the edge of the Wilson property was a creek bottom shielded by a stand of old oaks and maples. One day, mining debris would clog, essentially erase it. They stepped down into a zone that was dim, richly fragrant from layer upon layer of plants emerging and declining. On a clear patch of bank, with the stream swooshing a few inches from them, they first sat, and then gradually sank lower. Ted was feeling an unfamiliar surge of bravery. He unbuttoned his shirt and laid it on the ground. Kady matched him item for item; no faltering, no deliberation. When Ted admitted that he wasn’t carrying protection, Kady said that she probably wasn’t fertile at the moment, and Ted accepted that notion.

Later, their nudity, even in this makeshift refuge, struck Ted as an awkward fact. Never a convincing Lothario, he had muffed prime opportunities due to insecurity or obtuseness. This time it had played as desired, but anxiety was creeping in. Perhaps he’d be ferreted out as a poacher on the Wilson estate, get a traditional whupping. Unable to gracefully flee, he absently stroked Kady’s hair, crown of head to neck, and posed a long train of questions. First, he wanted to know about the strip mine.

“I can’t stand it, I turn away whenever we drive by,” she said. “It feels personal, like I’ve been beaten up or something.”

Ted asked if she had protested to her father, tried to stop it.

“Yeah, I gave him a flyer from the conservation trust, but it didn’t do any good. There’s too much money involved. And as you might have noticed, Dad’s bull-headed, always has to be right.”

Kady planned, at school, to be a double major in English and history. “The ideal combination,” Ted remarked with authority.

She idolized William Carlos Williams, Sylvia Plath, and especially Elizabeth Bishop: “I love her landscapes, so incredibly
precise. Not just that. They’re kind of . . . illuminated. Know what I mean?”

He did—and her insight was unsettling. She was perceptive, articulate. He coveted a humanities girlfriend, one who understood poetry. Maggie, though enticing, was a political science major with designs on grad school—a future Ted conceived as repellent. As Kady relaxed into him, into this new situation (it was a situation now, Ted conceded), he verged on becoming interested in her. But he shoved the idea aside. What was he doing here, what was happening? This was an accident. He had plans, Maggie waiting for him, the whole continental project.

Early the next morning, Wilson offered to take Ted to the highway. He seemed groggy from too many beers at the picnic. Ted was afraid to say anything but the required minimum. He’d spent a few minutes with Kady after a perfunctory, non-farmlike breakfast; he jotted her phone number and address on a receipt drawn from his wallet. Ted vaguely talked of hitching east at some point and stopping by the farm. Kady said, “Or I could look you up, too,” her grin wiry, controlled. Ted agreed that could happen. The ride to the interstate lasted only a few minutes; there would be no free pass to Beckley after all. Ted sensed that Wilson was assessing him peripherally.

“So what are you doing this summer?” he asked.

“Nothing much. Once I get to Washington I’ll find something.”

“Aw, c’mon, we can do better for you here. I could use some help this summer. Get that orchard back in shape.”

“Thanks, it’s a great offer. But I’ve got stuff I need to do. If that changes, I can drop you a line.”

Wilson peeled off his next phrases slowly. “Sure, you can drop a line, Ted. But I wouldn’t wait too long. You seem like a person who can jump on things when they’re offered. Do you read me?”

“Yes, I read you. I’ve got to think it over.” From the highway ramp, they could see a ring of dun hills. At this distance, maybe two miles, they seemed abstract, bald deconstructions, designed to prove
an untenable hypothesis. The equipment crawling up the hillsides trudged silently, raising swirls of dust. Ted climbed out of the truck and Wilson stretched to the door, pulled it shut hard. He raised his hand rigidly in a mock salute and was off.

After an hour stuck on the ramp, Ted neither praying nor goofing, a van stopped. Its exterior was glossy black and a porthole bubble had been punched into the rear left panel. Lazy fire-streaks, orange and red, ran its full length. The side door slid open and a waft of smoke poured out. He hauled up his pack and climbed in. Once they were on the highway, the driver shouted back, “Where you headed, man?”

“Washington.”

“D.C.? You’re aimed the wrong way, man. We’ll drop you off at the next exit.”

“No man, Washington state. Hey, my name is Ted. Where you going? I hope it’s far, cause all this waiting for a ride has been a fucking drag.” He felt like he was talking the talk to these lumpenproletariat with crap haircuts.

The one sitting on the shag rug across from Ted spoke up. “Reno, man. We’ve got work there.” He gestured to the driver. “His uncle builds the houses and we’ll paint them. Seventy-five bucks a day.” A third guy sat against the van’s wall and puffed devotedly on a joint. The first one said, “That’s Doug, you can call him Toke, and the driver, he’s Funk.”

Ted re-introduced himself, to no effect. The driver yelled to the windshield, “Hey Weasel, get our buddy a beer and throw me one too.” They drove for several hours, smoking and drinking sporadically, everyone taking short turns as driver, even Ted. By the time they reached the Missouri River, Ted was feeling fairly comfortable with the group. They’d just graduated from high school in suburban Pittsburgh and had been camping in West Virginia. They expected to get rich in Nevada and get laid. All those Reno girls, even when they aren’t actual hookers, they’re still pretty loose. At least that’s what Funk’s uncle said.

Ted was slumped to the carpet, propped on his elbows, holding a lung full of smoke. On the opposite wall, there was
a poster of an iridescent couple, their backs to the passengers, standing on a mountain top and surveying a glowing, paradisal fruited valley bisected by a metallic stream. The couple were naked, with calf and thigh muscles too well developed, squiggly purple sparks jumping off their frames.

Funk, who was drinking again, shouted, “Hey, Ted man. Why don’t you come with us? Forget Washington. You can work with us, make big bucks and party every night.”

It was turning dark outside. Soon, they would have to find a place where they could sleep it off. Weasel and Toke chimed in, “Yeah man, great idea, man. You gotta join our crew.”

Ted finally let go of his breath. This could be the right thing. He was broke and couldn't picture what kind of life was possible for him in Washington. Maggie was an unknown quantity—volatile, flighty, diaphragm or not. Maggie could wait—she wasn’t going anywhere. She was hot for him. She could wait. “That sounds pretty good to me, man,” Ted said amiably, while opening a beer. But he looked at the guys in the van and thought, I’ll party with them, but I’ll never be them.

A year later, Ted was sitting on the floor of a sketchily furnished apartment on the margins of Reno, sipping a beer. Weasel was sitting across from him in a daze, bolstered by the wall, next to his nearly unconscious girlfriend of the month. The painters’ collective had disintegrated. Weasel was making the rounds of big box stores, hoping to land a sales job where you wear a brightly colored shirt and a rectangular black name tag. Funk, now calling himself Evan, lived here too, but was seldom seen. He was temping as a security guard at a lesser casino, hoping to shift into card dealing. Toke had removed to the lush California/Oregon border, where a commune supposedly was raising exotic birds and mammals.

Ted worked as a handyman’s assistant in a skeezy motel for long term boarders. He had bluffed his way into the job, knowing squat about being handy. Often enough, to the overblown chagrin of his boss, he bungled: dropping fluorescent bulbs, misaligning the pipes below a toilet, twisting up the new Venetian blinds. A rare
perk of the job was sifting through junk left by tenants who’d fled the last payment or other trouble. So far he’d snagged a Marine Corps cigarette lighter and a pocket watch engraved on its silver back with “luv4evr” that ran intermittently. In the top drawer of a teetering dresser was a star sapphire the size of a ping pong ball. Obviously fake—but he took it anyway.

Ted was going through a dry spell with women, which surprised him. He’d always been able to find someone acceptable, trusting that more choices would emerge. Two months after arriving in Nevada, he called Maggie in Washington. They spoke desultorily for a few minutes before Maggie acknowledged that she’d stopped waiting for him. She’d met another politico but wouldn’t give up his name or what sort of politicking he did. In fact, her defensive, cryptic replies suggested that the intruder might be enjoying residential privileges on Younglove Street. Ted got off the phone and drove straight to his favorite skunky bar a mile away, where he spent a few hours alone hating her betrayal, replaying his clever inaction.

Shortly after the last talk with Maggie, Ted began to date an emergency room attendant, Deana. They’d met on a Sierra Club outing in the mountains bordering Lake Tahoe. During lunch break, the group of ten hikers scattered along a creek that rushed fast, swerved jaggedly. Deana and Ted wandered off a few dozen yards to an outcropping where there was a view of a U-shaped, cliff-held valley a thousand feet below. They spotted a flat rock and swept off the twigs and pine cones. As Ted stared at the valley, he had a sudden intuition that made him dizzy, that this terrain he was absorbing might be sentient, purposeful. That the land looked back at him somehow. But he dismissed this notion quickly—too sentimental. Next to him, Deana sat unexpectedly close so he hitched an arm around her shoulders. She settled in and he felt her frame rising and falling. There were angular ruins erupting from the valley floor—mineral battlements here and there, half in, half out of the ground. Maybe it was all finished, beyond improvement. Ted found himself pleading under his voice to something quasi-responsible, “Please nobody touch this place, may no one screw it
That night, Deana accepted Ted’s formal invitation to join him in his tent for a non-existent drink. Soon enough they were undressed, sharing what was available. Cooling off, they resumed their swap of biographies, though hesitant, almost grudging on both sides. Ted was curious about Deana’s job. She saw things that most people didn’t expect to see, but didn’t let herself get snared by the outrageous phenomena: burn victims, car crashers, survivors (or not) of shootings and knifings, heroin and alcohol o.d.’s …

“I couldn’t do it,” Ted remarked, and she said, “If you stay focused and don’t freak, you can make yourself useful. Otherwise, find another job.”

Once, he’d asked what was the worst thing she’d seen in the ER, and Deana said, “If we become really good friends, I’ll tell you.” Ted believed that the excessive hardness, the pragmatism was an act. Deana was a single mom with a four-year-old girl. She barely knew the girl’s father, who didn’t sound like a person to know very well. Ted imagined he was doing a reasonable job of surrogate dad, hugging and carrying Ada a lot, bringing her little plastic replicas of ambulances, doctors, and nurses. Early one morning, in Deana’s plush bed, ten minutes after an oddly silent round of post-ER shift sex, Deana said she had to shut it down, she couldn’t say exactly why. Ted pushed for more information until she fessed up that she needed someone who was more mature, who even had a kid or two of his own and could understand what she was experiencing.

“I completely understand,” Ted insisted hurriedly. “You don’t have to be divorced with a kid to get it. I hung out with my aunt a lot when she was leaving her husband. It was pretty gross; they were throwing garbage and bottles at each other and the cops came.”

Deana said, “That’s not what I mean,” then kissed him on the forehead lightly before retreating to the bathroom. Immediately, he wanted a gloss on the “mean” part but concluded that he didn’t want more responsibility for sweet Ada, anyway.

Weasel lit a joint and carried it ponderously across the room to Ted. “Man, you’re looking severely bummed. You OK?” Ted
inhaled with eyes closed, rose slowly, and said, “Just remembered something. Back in a minute.” In his desk he fished out a scrap of paper with the West Virginia girl’s number, the one who admired Elizabeth Bishop. Leaning his head against a kitchen cabinet, he made the call—but it was Jake Wilson who picked up. All was well at the farm. Crops had been good; lots of money coming in from the coal fields. And Ted, in turn, reported that Reno was super crazy, all day and night, as expected.

“So why are you calling, son? I hope you’re not still thinking about Kady, because she’s moved on. She’s in Minneapolis; transferred to the state U. Living with her fiancé.”

“No,” Ted asserted, not un-smoothly. “Actually, this isn’t about her.” Shit, what did she say about me? “But I might be coming east. I’ve been working in a dumbass job and it’s time for a change. I was wondering if you could still use help on the farm.”

Wilson’s breath was audible on the phone, as though he were laboring. Maybe he was a smoker, a macho who never quits. “No, I don’t have much that’s suitable for you, but the company that’s doing my hills is looking for people. What can you drive?”


“Can you work twelve hour shifts without dropping dead?”

“Absolutely, the more work the better.”

“You’d be helping yourself and the land at the same time. Helping the country, the way I see it.”

“I do see that,” Ted said, as if he did.

“I’ll give you the number of the hiring agent, but only if you promise to use it. And soon. They’re gearing up. Tell them I referred you.” Ted scribbled down the number, fully intending to follow through. How cool to be paid for undoing damage, to be the good soldier who restores, who people respect, even love for this service. He recalled Wilson’s hills with their tops lopped off, vegetation sheared away, black dust peppering the ground, access roads spiraling up the flanks, drawing in massive bulldozers, grinders, and dump trucks.

I could be there in a week, he thought. But can you really push debris around like jigsaw pieces, make them cohere as they’d been,
as remembered? Or do you shed memory, revise nature, create stupendous new art like Indian serpent mounds?

Ted circled his options a while, *restore, create, remember, forget*, but was too foggy to choose. So he fantasized about downsing beers with Wilson. Maybe he could aim to be more like him, dig into that life. What’s the point of being so proud, so superior? Once it was plain that he was there for keeps, a regular dude, Kady would come home to him. Whoever that guy was in Minnesota, how interesting could he possibly be? Could he dissect poetry *and* drive a giant rig? Un-fucking-likely! But then more of that Appalachian mist came rolling in, smudging all the lines. Ted sat cross-legged on the grimy linoleum floor and gave up trying to recalibrate. Too much work. He looked at the paper scrap with the hiring agent’s phone number. Crushed it into a lump, stashed it deep in his hip pocket.
INTRACOASTAL FLASHBACK

This Bonneville’s ragtop is rusted stuck in “down,” and the reek of pluff mud from beneath the drawbridge is like an exhalation of Darwin’s Genesis. Tires whine soprano on the liftspan’s iron grating; offended, a heron flaps skyward from the mangrove knees.

I glimpse a white wedge slanting out to sea. Heartsick, I remember how you loved the water: bare feet planted wide on the deck, fingers loose around the forestay of your old man’s sloop, your long hair levitating in the breeze.
GHOSTLY FRUIT

REBECCA OET
They’re walking through a field on either side of which are fences. Nick doesn’t know why these fences are here, what they are protecting, when they were erected. Probably a while ago. It doesn’t really matter.

They’re taking a shortcut to the mall. It’s probably a terrible idea to go there. Nick is pretty sure it’s a terrible idea, and he’s pretty sure Jimmy thinks the same thing, but they both want to get some new sunglasses.

It’s nice weather. Warm with a breeze.

“You know what it’s gonna be like after we slide those shades on?” Jimmy asks.

“What?”

“It’s gonna be like one of those, what-do-you-call-its, when the camera goes slow and people walk making cool faces.”

“Is there a name for that?”

“There should be.”

“Slow-motion? Montage?”

“A montage is a series of images that signals a passage of time. That’s not what we’re looking for.”

“Who’s looking for what? I don’t care what they’re called.”

“You should because you’ll be in one soon. You should know what you’re getting into.”

“What we’re getting into,” Nick corrects.

“Right, what we’re getting into. I think I might grab some
lotion and lip balm too, you know? I don’t want to look all crusty for the camera. I feel crusty a lot of the time. That’s a terrible word.”

“Are we getting a camera, now?”
“Isn’t that?”
“We should get a camera. Document this shit.”
“Nobody wants to watch this.”
“Where’s your head? I’m talking about the two of us walking out of a sunglass shop looking cool as shit.”
“Oh, I was thinking about zombies.”
“Yeah, well stop.”
“There’s one over there.”
“One what?” Jimmy pans to the left where an old man is shaking the fence. “Oh,” he says.
“You get this one,” Nick says.
“I got the last one.”
“But you’re better at it.”
“That’s true.” Jimmy feels at his pockets. “Where’s the-uh, the…” Jimmy snaps his fingers, looking for the word.
“The knife? You can’t remember the word for knife? You know how unbelievable that is?”
Jimmy laughs. “Yeah, well, I can remember it now.” He looks at Nick. “So where is it?”
“Like you said, you got the last one.”
“I did, I did.”
They keep walking.
“Best not to kill outliers anyway, right?”
“Sure.”
“I mean, he’s just an old man minding his business.”
“Zombie business.”
“Right, minding his zombie business on the other side of the fence.”
“Sure. No way he could cause anyone harm.”
“That sounded a little accusatory. You accusing me of something?”
“You can remember the word accusatory, but not knife.”
“You’re deflecting,” Jimmy says.  
“From what?”  
“From answering the question.”  
“Did you ask me a question?”  
“No,” Jimmy says.  “And the word thing. Forgetting or re-mem-bering words has nothing to do with their length or difficulty. Sometimes you just forget a word. One time I forgot the word the. One time I forgot the word mother.”  
“You know I’m in love with you, right?”  
“Stop it. Stop that gay shit right now.”  
“That gay shit,” Nick repeats. “So you’re some kind of ho-mophobe?”  
“I am not a homophobe.”  
“That’s what all the homophobes say.”  
“They absolutely do not say that.”  
“And you’d know because you’re one of them.”  
“You calling me gay?”  
“See, I knew it.”  
“I just don’t want your romantic feelings to ruin our friend-ship. You don’t know how many gay men have fallen in love with me. It’s sad, really.”  
“It is sad, but I love the fuck out of you. Actually, I could fuck you right now.”  
“Are we still joking? Is this still part of a joke?”  
“We’re definitely not joking.”  
“So you’re saying you wanna fuck me and you’re calling me a homophobe?”  
“That’s what I’m saying.”  
“Alright. Just making sure.”  
They walk down a slightly sloping hill. Nick can make out the large sign that announces the mall. It’s to their right, behind the big hill that the highway below them curves around.  
“What if it’s gone?” Nick asks.  
“Why are you trying to depress me?”  
“I was talking about the mall.”  
“Yeah, I know what you’re talking about.”
“In another life people would probably celebrate the closure of malls. A kind of announcement of the return of the mom-and-pops. A sign that we’re moving back in time, to a gentler, more personal place.”

“Malls don’t close, they just empty out.”

“Like people. They don’t die, they just empty out.”

“Too serious,” Jimmy says, jogging a little as they continue down the hill. “You ever wonder how much better it would be if everywhere you were going was downhill?”

“I don’t think you’re thinking this all the way through,” Nick says, a little breathless as he half-jogs beside him.

“I’m talking about you always have a little gravity on your side.”

“That’s called a mountain. They’re all around us.”

“But you gotta climb the mountain first.”

“So you’re talking about a world where only one direction exists?”

“All the directions still exist. You’re just always walking downward.”

“That’s not possible.”

“I’m not talking about possible. I’m talking about perfect.”

“Sure.”

“You’ve never thought about this?”

“Never.”

“You are a strange man.”

The hill evens out and they move onto the highway. Nick watches the old man zombie tumble down the hill. He’s still on the other side of the fence, which continues until it meets the highway and follows the road for a ways. The old man zombie will be able to follow them all the way to the mall. He’s clumsy as he moves to his feet and begins shaking the fence again. When they walk by Jimmy sticks his tongue out at it.

“Cut the grass, old man. Do your fucking job.”

“You’re assuming he was in lawn care?”

“Why else would he be over there? Look, old feller, we’re tired of walking through weeds and shit everywhere.” He looks
at Nick. “Used to be you could count on grass being cut, trees trimmed.” He looks at the old man. “Do your fucking job.”

“Used to be people didn’t lock their doors at night,” Nick says.

“And they left their windows wide open.”

“And their cars were always running.”

“Exactly, because the way you knew you could trust people was that they didn’t steal your shit even though you were basically begging them to do it.”

“A constant test of your morals. People just left food on the sidewalks and you had to not eat it. Like cheeseburgers and hot dogs. American food that you had to deny yourself.”

“Yeah, used to be people would have their wives hit on their neighbors constantly. But you had to rise above, you had to know that it was just an offer, a kindness, that you must refuse. Everything was offered, but you had to deny it.”

“Right, used to be everyone fucked each other’s wives,” Nick says.

“And they raised children communally, at the merry-go-round in the town center.”

“And they had parades that marched through the black neighborhood to show off their designer clothes and luxury vehicles, while the pickaninnys stood naked on their porches, mouths agape.”

“Why’s it always got to come back to race with you?” Jimmy asks, playing a new part, acting offended in the perfect, stupid way of a different world.

“Because I’m black. We have the same American nostalgia. Except we weren’t there. We were off-screen.”

“I thought you said you were half-black.”

“Yeah.”

“Which half?”

“My mother.”

“My father was racist as hell,” Jimmy says. “I just thought that was how people talked. The first four years out of my house was just me learning all the shit I couldn’t say.”
“Like what?”
“Spic, nigger, kike, faggot. Hadn’t heard pickaninny in a while or maybe ever outside of a book. I appreciate the archaic racism. But pretty much everything else, you name it and my dad said it. He was like a fucking racial slur machine.”

Nick doesn’t really believe much that Jimmy says about his past or family, but that’s okay. He likes Jimmy.
“Well, at least institutional racism is at an end,” Nick says.
“That’s the spirit.”
“Burn it down. That’s always been my political opinion.”
“I knew the blacks were behind this.”
“We blacks knew what we were doing. We’re very organized.”
“Did you do it with the Muslims, or were they just a red herring?”
“After 9-11,” Nick says, “my grandma, the white one, she said she thought maybe the blacks were behind it because they hate America so much.”
“Well?” Jimmy asks.
“Well what?”
“Were they?”

They are past the large hill, the curve in the road complete. The highway is now a straight, flat arrow pointing directly at the mall, which stands proud and majestic. The parking lot is full.
“There must’ve been a sale.”
“End of the world. Everything must go.”
Nick stops walking and lights a cigarette. He doesn’t even really like the taste. He’s been smoking them for a few months now. Jimmy turns to look at him. “Are we doing this again? Have you still not figured out how to walk and smoke at the same time?”
“I don’t like it. It’s hard to breathe.”
“Then stop smoking, dipshit.”
“No.”

Nick and Jimmy met outside the 7-11 about a week after the returned’s first victims rose. Half of the town was on fire, the
dead were stumbling around almost everywhere, but the 7-11 was strangely safe and quiet. Nick was smoking a cigarette, which he never did before but does now, and he was staring Jimmy down as he approached, thinking about whether he should pull his gun. A white, middle-aged man with a tremendous beer gut was walking towards him hurriedly. It was cold outside and things were confusing.

Jimmy walked up to him and asked, “Do you have the time?”

“You don’t…” Nick had started, confused. “Why is it? Is there somewhere you need to be?”

“My friend, I’m asking if you have the time.”

“No, I don’t possess time.”

Jimmy laughed. “But do you have it? Could you read it to me?”

“I do not. I could not. Why do you want to know the time?”

“Why are you standing outside of a 7-11 smoking a cigarette?”

Nick put the cigarette out. “I’m not actually a smoker. My wife was a smoker.”

“A real looker, huh?”

“What?”

“A real smoker, you said.”

Nick laughed. “Where did you come from?”

“I’m Italian.”

“I don’t know what to do with that.”

“Neither did my family.” Jimmy started to say something else, then stopped, and then said, “That wasn’t a very good one. I didn’t think that one through.”

“What?”

“The joke? Did you not notice it?”

“Which part was the joke?”

Jimmy smiled wide. He asked for one of Nick’s cigarettes, coughed heavily as he inhaled it. “This shit is terrible. This is the habit you’re gonna pick up when the world ends? This shit?”
“It seemed like a good idea.”
“They sell alcohol in there, right?”
“They’re not selling anything.”
“Is there any left?”
“Yeah, I think I saw some.”
“Well, let’s get drunk.” Jimmy slapped his shoulder and moved into the store.

They did get drunk, on screwdrivers. They drank through the night as fires burned, and as zombies stumbled by the front door. They talked about a lot of nothing, and they pretended not to hear the screams that sounded periodically. It felt good.

They talked so little about their actual lives, that they didn’t even learn each other’s names until the third day. It had somehow not occurred to either of them.

Nick throws his cigarette down, stomps on it.
“That’s right,” Jimmy says. “We don’t want to start a fire.”
They walk through the parking lot. Nick turns around and watches the old man zombie for a few moments. He’s some distance away now, stuck behind the fence and shaking it.

Everything is very quiet. He can hear the fence rattle distinctly.

“Isn’t there a zombie movie where people camp out in the mall?”

“Yeah, it doesn’t end well.”
“They never do. Good thing this isn’t a movie.”
“How would we know?” Nick asks.
“That it’s not a movie?”
“Yeah.”
“I think it’s just called a slow-walk,” Jimmy says.

They are still walking through the full parking lot. To the left of the mall is a massive parking structure, also full.

“Did I miss something? Are you supposed to go to the mall during emergencies?” Jimmy asks.

“That’s what momma always used to say. If things are falling apart, you get your ass to the mall, son.”

“She’d hold me close and remind me that we live in a world
with malls,” Jimmy says. “Used to be, she’d say, you had to shop in several locations. We only took out the car on Sundays and Saturdays. Sundays we went to church. Saturdays we drove from one place to another. You had to get your underwear one place, your sunglasses at another, your gigantic cinnamon rolls at another.”

“You’re fucking up my story. Why you gotta be a downer all the time?”

“I’m a pessimist,” Nick says.

“Then there were malls. And then there was Walmart.”

“Then there were zombies.”

“Then there were zombies,” Jimmy says. “You’re fucking up my story. Why you gotta be a downer all the time?”

“I’m a pessimist,” Nick says.

“Not me.”

They approach the wondrous mall. There are no bodies around, only a few bloodstains here and there on the sidewalk and in the parking lot. Nick pushes on the revolving glass door and it won’t move. There are twelve more doors, six on either side of the revolving one.

“Guess we should turn back,” Nick says.

Jimmy pulls on a door. It opens.

It’s dark inside, but there’s enough light coming from ahead and behind to see. Through the second set of glass doors in front of them they can make out the arched glass ceiling in the center of the building.

“You hear that?” Jimmy asks.

“What?” Nick spins in place.

Jimmy starts singing “Two Tickets to Paradise.”

“That song’s terrible,” Nick says.

Jimmy keeps singing.

They push through the second set of doors and walk up to a map.

“Sunglasses straight and to the right,” Jimmy says.

They walk past a defunct fountain littered with pennies and mold. Nick picks a coin out of the tepid water and then tosses it
“What’d you wish for?” Jimmy asks.
Nick doesn’t say anything. He lights a cigarette and sits down on a bench.
“I’m smoking inside,” he says. “I’m breaking the law.”
“What’ll we do next? Egg Mr. Peters’ house?”
“Mr. Peters?”
“Yeah, first name I thought of.”
“Mr. Johnson.”
“Mr. Dong.”
Jimmy sits down next to Nick on the bench. They’re directly in front of a pre-teen clothing apparel store for girls. There’s a lot of shiny things, the spare sunlight bouncing off the glittery fare.
“What’d you do?” Nick asks.
“Killed a man,” Jimmy says.
“So has everyone else.”
“So serious. Mr. Serious.”
“I meant, what’d you do before. For a living.”
“I was an officer.”
“Is that a lie?”
“Guess you’ll never know.”
Jimmy takes a cigarette from Nick, lights up and coughs.
“When I first saw you,” Jimmy says, “I thought, that there looks like a criminal to me. A young black man loitering in front of a 7-11. Up to no good, for sure.”
“We’re a very suspicious people.”
“I always thought so. You know, I would like you more if you weren’t a black man.”
“Is that right?”
“Yeah, I wish you were a young Cindy Crawford.”
“Cindy Crawford? Really?”
“Hell yes. They don’t make ‘em like that anymore.”
“I’m in love with you,” Nick says.
“Not this again,” Jimmy says.
“I wish I was Cindy Crawford so you could love me back.”
“The gay men love me. They fall at my feet.”
“They worship your magnificently round belly.”
“Your magnificently round gut.”
“I was just going to drink myself to death,” Jimmy says.
“What? When?”
“That was my plan. I was just going to hit up every place that sold alcohol and drink as much as I could. That was it. That’s what I was thinking when I saw you. And it occurred to me for some reason that I had no idea what time it was.”
“That makes sense.”
“Are you really gay?”
“Yes, I’m very gay.”
“Thought you said you had a wife?”
“She was my beard. My smoking beard.”
“Right.”
“We had three children.”
“So we’re doing this for real,” Jimmy says. “We’re opening up, flowering.”
“Their names were Allison, Michelle, and Michael.”
“Good names.”
“They were triplets.”
“I had a daughter,” Jimmy says. “But I didn’t know her. She lived in LA.”
“Was she an actress?”
“I don’t know.” Jimmy throws his lit cigarette in the fountain. There is a slight plop and hiss. “You feel better now?” Jimmy asks. “Now that we know so much about each other?”
“No.”
“So what did you do?”
“I worked at the mall.”
“No you fucking didn’t.”
“I was a mall security guard.”
“Paul Blart.”
“Yeah, I was skinny, black Paul Blart.”
“That’s hilarious.”
“No, I was a manager.”
“Where of?”
“Sbarro.”
“That shit is awful.”
“It’s pretty bad. I had a second job too. A night job. I was a bartender.”
“I can’t think of any jokes.”
“About bartenders?”
“Just in general.”
“I thought up a zombie joke,” Nick says.
“Lay it on me.”
“What’s the difference between a living girlfriend and a zombie girlfriend?”
“I don’t know, what?”
“A zombie girlfriend eats you out.”
“It’s not the worst joke I’ve ever heard,” Jimmy says.
“It was the best one I thought of. I cycled through a lot. Whenever I had watch I was perfecting that joke. For months.”
“I don’t believe that was the best one. Tell me another.”
“What do you call an undead insect?”
“What?”
“Zombeeeeeees.”
“Is elongating the E an important part of the joke?”
“Yeah, otherwise people wouldn’t get it.”
“Yeah, that one’s a real puzzler.” Jimmy kicks at the floor.
“I would’ve never guessed you were a manager. I was thinking rapper or drug-dealer.”
“Yeah, that’s what I was supposed to be. But I defied society’s expectations. I am an example of racial progress.”
“An exemplar.”
“A pillar of the black community.”
They’re quiet for a few moments and then Nick asks, “Why weren’t you wearing your uniform?”
“I was off-duty.”
“I would’ve kept my uniform on.”
“No, you wouldn’t have.”
“Why not?”
“You see a liquor store on that map?”
“Yeah, and Robitussin.”
“Purple drank.”
“You ever done that?”
“Once.”

Something crashes. It sounds like breaking glass. The sound comes from above, a store on the second floor. They both stare up at the balcony and wait. Jimmy pulls his gun and holds it pointed at the floor. Nick should’ve known he was a cop from the way he holds a gun. It is a studied posture. Nick feels clumsy with his own gun. Except when he’s firing it.

A child stumbles out of Auntie Anne’s pretzels. But no, it’s a zombie. It shuffles up to the balcony, pushes through the railing and falls down in front of them, landing on its head. It doesn’t move. Nick starts to silently cry a little and then stops. Jimmy steps up to the body.

“Bad pretzels,” he says.

There is a liquor store. All that’s left are liqueurs. They drink the rest of the day and that night, talking about a lot of nothing.
SUMMER LUST

Late July, and in the cooled recesses of the shopping mall
two girls, barely sixteen,
walk in front of me: one wears a pair of too-tight jeans;
the other wears short-shorts
with GO TOMCATS stitched across the rump in yellow letters.
Every summer I become an old fogey,
and I know they will be driving too fast over a country road
to that notorious swimming hole
deep in the musty piney woods: I know about sluggish water
popsicle-green from algae,
a vector for those brain-eating amoebas posted on Facebook;
I know about red-clay banks
pocked black by midnight fires, rutted by pickup trucks,
dappled by crumpled aluminum.
I have been to Rosie’s Drive-In just across the county line:
burgers and milkshakes and fries
ever since the gritty Rockabilly years, when Sister Kenney
warned us all about polio-water,
when guys in stiff cuffed blue-jeans and engineer boots
stood beside the open hoods
of their Mercs and Rocket 88’s to show off postwar chrome,
when gals in starched petticoats
and saddle-shoes strolled to the Ladies’ Room and back again
in endless loops of display.
And when summer ends, when the Rose of Sharon trees planted by every rural mailbox begin to litter the ground with their fleshy pink blossoms, the little songbirds, darting in and out of their branches as the sun goes down, cry teenager teenager teenager as the young folks drive on a skin of soft, warm asphalt, shift from second into third.
LITTLE SURE SHOT

Halfway through lunch the boy said to me, “Question.”

“All right,” I said.

I sat with him, eating lunch at a Mexican restaurant called On the Border, though the only border it sat anywhere near was the one between Anaheim and Fullerton.

“Mom says actresses either make it by the time they’re still young or they never do.”

“Is that a question?”

“Well, is it true?”

“I don’t know where your mother gets this stuff. For your information, Anna’s playing Annie Oakley in a commercial for Gallopin’ Ford next week. She has to ride a palomino in full Buffalo Bill Western Circus regalia. While she’s riding she has to pretend to shoot a Winchester ’73 rifle at prices. She’s shooting down prices, see? That’s the idea of the commercial. You probably think it’s stupid. I think it’s stupid. Just about anyone not being paid to do it would probably think it’s stupid. But she’s an actress and she’s going to commit to it when she does it. That’s despite the fact she didn’t know how to shoot a rifle or ride a horse. She doesn’t even like horses because a horse bit her on the arm once in summer camp and she doesn’t like rifles because her father somehow managed to shoot off half his foot with one. But she’s taking riding lessons at a ranch up in Anaheim Hills -- she’s up there right now -- and she has a guy teaching her how to shoot a rifle. And twenty-six isn’t exactly old,
even for an actress.”

“Is she really gonna shoot the rifle at prices?”

“I don’t even know what that means, Robbie. ‘Prices’ is a metaphor. You can’t shoot a rifle at a metaphor.”

“Then why’s she learning how to shoot a rifle?”

“Because it has to look like she knows what she’s doing. They used to call Annie Oakley, ‘Little Sure Shot,’ so Anna can’t just fiddle around with the thing. She has to know how you really cock it and aim it and fire it. She’s got commitment. You know what that is? That’s giving your all to something even when you doubt you can do it very well.”

“Sounds more like being misguided.”

I said, “Well, maybe being misguided is part of what acting’s all about.”

“Why don’t they find someone who already knows how to ride a horse and shoot a rifle?”

“Because that person probably wouldn’t be an actor.”

“What acting’s involved in riding a horse and shooting a rifle?”

“Robbie, she has to run the horse around in a circle and shoot into the air and then pull the horse up to a corral gate in front of the dealership and say, ‘At Gallopin’ Ford we’re shooting down prices faster than they can escape!’ Or something like that. That’s acting.”

“Where are these prices supposed to be escaping from, anyway?”

“Don’t you do that, Rob” -- I pointed my fork at him -- “Don’t mock. Anna’s talented. She’ll do all right. She’s had a hard time of it is all. Hasn’t she always been kind to you?”

“I guess,” the boy said and shrugged.

“Well then, eat your burrito and ask me about something else.”

On a Wednesday afternoon in early June, I drove up to Fullerton. It was a cool day but a bright one. The surfaces of buildings were blinding and the leaves on the trees flashed like rhinestones. At Gallopin’ Ford I found what they advertise as “more cars and trucks per acre than any other Ford dealer in Orange County.” This implied only tighter spacing, not necessarily more cars and trucks,
but I wasn’t about to stand around trying to figure out which it was. I couldn’t find Anna, but I figured she was in a trailer I could see at the far end of the lot. There was a popcorn machine not far off and I walked over and scooped popcorn into a little bag, then took the bag back to a hay bale that sat at the edge of the big corral that had been built at the center of the parking lot and plunked myself down with the popcorn in my lap and looked out at the scene like it was a movie. At the far end of the corral, opposite, stood the trailer I figured Anna was in. Next to that stood a second trailer, this one with a horse. I couldn’t see the horse, but I could hear what sounded like disgruntled neighing coming from that direction. I took a few photographs with my phone and then, looking the shots over, I gave up and started to photograph passing clouds. Nothing to be gained taking pictures of a parking lot full of trucks. There’s no photograph that can’t be improved by removing trucks. Then I put away the phone and watched the clouds float over the mountains. A car pulled up behind me, and when I turned I saw The Man-Child Martin stepping out of his cherry-red Mustang.

“The Man-Child Martin” was the secret name I used for my brother-in-law, a name I uttered to no one, not even Anna. It was my understanding that Anna hadn’t told her brother about the commercial -- had, in fact, wanted to surprise him and their mother when the thing got on the air -- so it was a mystery how he’d heard of it. He must have had plenty of warning too, because he’d come in a cowboy hat, something he must have thought right for the occasion, but it sat on the Man-Child’s head like a small basket, the lanyard tucked under his chin, and on his feet were a pair of snakeskin boots. His dungarees were tucked into this ridiculous footwear and he wore a Western-style shirt with crazy cowboy filagree around the shoulders. I thought maybe he wouldn’t see me across the lot, and bent myself low and pulled a pair of binoculars out of my knapsack, so I might hide behind them. Only one lens worked. The other had gotten cracked somewhere along the line. I looked through the one good lens and could see the director making authoritative gestures, like framing things with his hands and turning his baseball cap around so that the flap was at the back.
Then he would look through the camera. When he was finished doing that, the director would flip the cap back around to its upright position. He looked like a weak-willed sort of man.

I heard the Man-Child’s boots stepping up behind me but didn’t turn. Instead I just held out the field glasses and said, “You wanna look?”

“You wanna look?” Martin said, “Nothing’s going on yet.” The Man-Child pushed the cowboy hat up on his head and raised the binoculars anyway.

“Left lens is broken,” I said.

“Damn thing’s out of focus, Eli.”

“That’s the broken lens,” I told him, “Like I just said.”

“I heard you.” Martin squinted through the right lens. “Is that little guy the director?”

“I guess,” I said.

“What are his credits?”

“I don’t know. Anna says he’s directed a half-dozen local spots.”

“Such as what?”

“Such as I just told you I don’t know.”

“Well, here,” Martin said, handing back the binoculars.

“Damned things make my eyes hurt.”

I took back the field glasses and held the one good lens to my eye. I could see a palomino mare being led out of the horse trailer. It didn’t look particularly happy to be working in show business and loped slowly down the plank of the trailer onto the blacktop. A girl with some sort of walkie-talkie apparatus attached to her head led it to the edge of the fence. There a man with a black bag gave it a shot in the rump with a hypodermic. The horse neighed and shook its head a few times and looked somewhat more alert, though its eyes flashed with something like resentment.

I put down the binoculars and looked at the Man-Child. “Why are you dressed like that?”

“Like what?” he said.

“Like a cowboy.”

“Why are you dressed like it’s every other day of the
“Well, I’m not in the commercial, Martin. And unless you have some news to report, neither are you.”
“I’m showing my support is what I’m doing.” He reached down and picked up the binoculars from where they sat next to me on the hay bale and scanned the parking lot in a smooth, gliding sweep.
“I don’t even know how you know about it. Anna said she was gonna surprise you and your mother when it went on the air.”
“She put it up on Facebook is how. You’d know that if she’d friended you.”
“I’m not on Facebook.”
“Bucking the system, huh?”
“What?”
“You ever heard the expression, ‘bucking the system?’” The Man-Child lowered the binoculars and looked at me.
“Course I’ve heard the expression, ‘bucking the system.’ What’s it got to do with not going on Facebook?”
“I guess you think you’re some kind of rebel.”
“Can I have the binoculars back,” I said.
When I looked through them I saw Anna come out and mount the palomino. It kicked a little but Anna pulled at the reins and it quieted. She didn’t look very steady on the animal, but she’d only taken three riding lessons since she’d claimed she could ride at the audition, so it struck me as an accomplishment she could control the horse and look like she knew what she was doing. The woman with the walkie-talkie stepped over and petted the horse’s mane. Another man handed Anna a rifle and the woman with the walkie-talkie stepped back. The director came over and pointed toward the corral, then made a circling motion with his finger. Then he walked to the middle of the corral and motioned for the horse to be brought in.
Anna rode slowly around the edge of the picket fence as the cameraman followed from his spot at the center of the big corral.
“Let’s do it at half speed a couple times,” the director said.
Anna gave the horse a light bump with her heels and it started
to canter. She bounced in the saddle as the horse made a couple of circuits around the edge of the corral as the cameraman swiveled his camera on its tripod.

“All right, now, at speed,” the director called. “Bring her to a gallop.” Anna kicked the thing a little harder this time and it went into a gallop.

“All right,” said the director, “Great, great! And when you come around this time we’ll need you to fire.”

Anna pulled out the rifle that had been tucked into a holster attached to the saddle. She passed me and Martin on her circuit and the horse’s hooves made a sound on pavement like the ticking of a giant stopwatch. I had the strange feeling a race was being run, though Anna was on the only horse in the corral. Martin slapped his cowboy hat against his thigh and whooped as Anna passed but she didn’t look over. She held the rifle at her side. Two crows flew by. It struck me all of sudden that something was going to happen. Anna’s jaw was set. Her shoulders were squared. The director called from the megaphone, “Cock and fire when you’re ready.” But when she tried to cock the rifle as she rode she couldn’t. She struggled with the fancy maneuver of throwing the stock of the Winchester as she held the metal lever. And all of a sudden, not so much raised in the air but with the barrel pointed toward the ground and not far from the palomino’s head, the rifle fired. As if the horse had been expecting it, as if the whole charade had been rehearsed a thousand times, the horse jumped the corral fence. It jumped without any hesitation, jumped as if it had planned to make a break the minute it heard it would be in a commercial in Fullerton, as if it had only been waiting for the rifle shot to mark its escape.

The animal looked like it knew where it was going. It found the one spot in the entire corral where it could jump and not come down in the bay of a Ford F-100. It seemed to me in that instant that a great number of anguished nights must have lain behind it, nights when it had imagined a life on the run, wondered where it would find oats, and pictured the consequences if it were caught. There was a second when the earth stopped, as it had for Joshua, and the air went quiet and neither thoughts nor words passed
through that part of the universe that had more Ford cars and trucks per acre than any other dealer in Orange County.

Then there was nothing.

The palomino was in the air and the air didn’t move. Then, when that era had passed, a new one started up. The palomino cleared the fence and the Winchester Anna had been holding spun in a long arc into the bed of a truck. The director was shouting, “Christ, go get her, go get her, go get her...”

The Man-Child said, “I don’t think that was supposed to happen.”

The man I’d thought was a veterinarian and had probably doped the horse ran after, shouting, “Vivian! Vivian, goddamnit!” Even with the chaos it occurred to me that “Vivian” was an odd name for a horse and that the man sounded like a husband arguing with a drunken wife. In any case, Vivian wasn’t listening. She ran down Commonwealth, past a Carl’s Junior, past an Auto Zone, past a Stater Brothers and past a CVS. I ran behind as fast as I could but lost ground with every stride. I could see Anna trying to lower herself and clinging to the horse as it ran, but its wild gallop made it look like holding on was about impossible. She bounced up and down in the saddle trying to keep her boots in the stirrups and it looked from where I was like she was almost thrown a few times. Cars honked as Annie Oakley galloped down Euclid Avenue on Vivian for what must have been close to a mile as I fell farther and farther back.

The horse slowed and finally stopped near the corner of Euclid and Chapman, a half-mile from the dealership, where it stood munching grass in a small island under a 76 sign. I could see from a block and a half away that Anna was bent forward clinging to the animal’s back but wouldn’t get down.

The woman who’d brought the horse from the trailer drove up in a little pick-up, jumped out and took the reins, but by the time I got to her Anna still hadn’t let go of the palomino’s neck and the woman from the pick-up had taken Anna’s hand and was asking, “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m alright,” Anna said.
“You don’t want to come down off her?”
“I don’t intend to just at the moment.”
“Okay,” said the woman, “But don’t cry, honey, it’s gonna be alright.”
“I’m not crying,” Anna said. “I’m sweating. I haven’t cried since I was eight.”
I walked over, trying to catch my breath, and laid a hand on Anna’s leg. I said, “Sure you’re okay?”
“You go stand over there, Eli” she said, “I’m alright.”
I nodded and did like she said.
Then the Man-Child Martin caught up, huffing, clanking up in his snakeskin boots, his face dripping with sweat, looking like a pudgy kid who’d outgrown a Halloween outfit, the straw hat dangling behind him from its little leather rope.
“Jesus Christ” -- he was wheezing -- “This is what you get, letting her do this damned thing.”
“I didn’t let her do anything,” I said. “She does what she wants.”
“They put you on a goddamned crazy horse,” he said to his sister.
Her head was against the horse’s neck and she looked the Man-Child over. “Why are you dressed like a cowboy?”
“Well, to go along with the Wild West scene,” the Man-Child said.
“You look like a goddamned idiot, Marty.”
Then she straightened herself up, gave out a piercing war holler that rang like a bullet though the sky, kicked the horse’s ribs, and, as the animal reared up, the woman from the pick-up lost the reins and the horse lunged forward, off the little island of grass under the 76 sign and onto the sidewalk. “What the hell!” the Man-Child shouted, and I heard a voice cry out “Vivian!” from somewhere down the street like a lover calling to his girl across a river, but Vivian had taken Anna off in the opposite direction -- or Anna had taken Vivian -- away from Gallopin’ Ford, away from more cars and trucks per acre than any other Ford dealer in Orange County, away from me and the Man-Child, and I didn’t know why she’d done
it, why she’d cried out like that and taken off on the horse except that maybe she saw it was the end of the line and she was beautiful but nearly 27 and hadn’t made it as an actress and wasn’t going to after this and wanted to go out in a blaze of glory and maybe in a movie you’d fade to black right about there, with her riding off into the sunset or at least down Euclid toward La Habra, I don’t know, but the real world doesn’t fade to black until we die and, though we couldn’t see her riding off anymore after a while, it turned out later that she kept riding north, then northwest, and eventually the horse got tired and Anna roped it to a tree in a parking lot in Whittier, about five miles from Gallopin’ Ford, and went into a Denny’s and ate a plate of waffles and the police came and arrested Anna for reckless endangerment and I had to make her bail, which cost $387. Vivian’s owner made some noise about prosecuting for horse theft, but he never did.

“Actress Rides Runaway Horse Five Miles through Streets of Fullerton, La Mirada, Whittier,” the headline in the Orange County Register read the next day. It wasn’t accurate, because Anna was in control of the horse when Vivian ran off from the 76 station, but that’s what it said. The day after that, Anna was on the Channel 7 news. They asked her to wear her Annie Oakley outfit, and she did. A couple of agents from smaller agencies called her after that, and she signed with one and he got her some work in ads. Of course, that wasn’t the end of it and as you’ve probably guessed by now, Anna is none other than Anna Hessington, whose last movie grossed, according to her brother, “forty-two mil.” The Man-Child Martin likes to call me up from time to time and read the figures to me from Variety and The Hollywood Reporter. He says his sister’s movies always make money. Not one has ever lost a dime. “Little Sure Shot” they call her. Gives him a kick, I guess, telling me this stuff, because she left me not long after she signed with CAA.

I’ve always wished her well though and hold no grudges and practically every time Robert drives down from LA for a visit these days he asks me to tell him the story again about Gallopin’ Ford and the time I ran through the streets of Fullerton after a runaway horse that was carrying the now famous Anna Hessington. Last time
he was down he asked if there was any way I could get her to talk
to his film class at UCLA and I said I didn’t think so, since Anna
and I haven’t talked in a while -- she called on my fiftieth birthday
last year, but didn’t on my fifty-first -- but if he wanted to call the
Man-Child, maybe Martin could get her to do it. I didn’t think
Anna spoke a whole lot to the Man-Child Martin either -- though
he’s awfully coy about it -- so I didn’t know if that would work any
better. Then Robert asked me to tell him the story about Gallopin’
Ford again. I’m happy to tell it again. I don’t mind telling it again.
How many people have a story to tell? And how many people have
a son who wants to hear it?
NOR’EASTER

Weather me to honesty
And blow me back to sea—
To birth and home // and origins of self.

Midnight calls to yesteryear.
Forecasts made in quiet.

Have you considered turning inland?

I am the land and storm,
My soil sown with salt.
Bringing myself to realization—
A synonym for inhospitable.

I’ll take myself by wind // or quake // or silent dissipation,
Or desperation
Or dying.

They all feel just the same now.
IVORY’S HOUSE OF STYLE

I looked in the front window at the old fashioned tube TV. Must be black-and-white, I thought. Vintage. Everything about Ivory’s was vintage. Thumbed-through magazines sat untouched on the small coffee table next to the freestanding ashtray. The door said “Walk-Ins Welcomed,” but Ivory’s sat quiet just like the empty warehouses, abandoned train depot, closed cafes, and tiny little Baptist churches in town.

The hooded dryers and aluminum-armed chairs reminded me of the time in junior high school – about 1972 – that my friend’s sister shampooed and set my hair so I would look good cheering at a school game. My mom was mad because I didn’t ask for her permission. It cost money to get my hair styled. My mom counted every penny. She would drive across town for a can of beans that was three cents cheaper at the IGA. The irony of all that. It was inheritance from my mom that gave me the startup funds for this little venture.

“How much?” I asked Doris, my realtor.

“You fixing to rent or own?” Doris asked. “I’m sure we could get this for a good price, the market being what it is. Utilities are on. Might take some work to get the electricity up to code, but the plumbing looks fine.” She ran the faucet for the hair-washing sink.

“Rent … for now,” I walked over the cracked, scarred linoleum, peered up at the ceiling. “What’s under these old acoustical ceiling tiles? Hey! These aren’t asbestos, are they?”
“This building isn’t that old, so no asbestos. You could paint them, or drape fabric from the ceiling. I saw that in a restaurant in Winston and it looked real nice,” Doris offered. “You want this to be a yoga place?”

“It was a place for women. I want it to stay place for women.” I answered. “I thought about a wine bar, but that new one opened on Second Avenue. I don’t think this town could support two wine bars. Maybe a yoga studio … meditation … a place for book clubs to meet—the kind where members actually read books.”

“A social club?” Doris asked.

“Social club? As in teas and gloves and quilting? Not my thing. A social club serving a Sauvignon Blanc and a nice red blend…maybe a little bubbly … That’s a thought. I suppose I need a license to serve wine,” I said.

Ivory’s House of Style intrigued me. Why did the shop close? Who was Ivory? Was she still around? Did she own this space or rent it back then? The shop was mute. Each day I walked by I made up stories about the place. Ivory was old and crippled up from years of standing on her feet providing perms and cuts. She lived in a tiny cottage with a small, yappy dog. Her kids left her here when they moved to find better jobs. Maybe she moved to Charlotte and lives with her son and grandkids in a small apartment over their garage. Next to the House of Style was a Tae Kwon Do studio that held classes at night. A small print shop was next to that studio. Nothing in that block of First Street looked very successful during the day, but maybe at night the block came alive.

“I’ve heard rumors about this place,” Doris said.

“What rumors?” I asked.

I liked Doris. She was a bit gossipy, but just the right amount of gossipy for a realtor. She knew everyone. I mean everyone in the county. Knew their families, their history, their sorrows. Being new to town, she was a real find for me. I always took what she told me with the old grain of salt. I could usually verify some part of the stories she told me, but the best parts often were the stuff of small town talk.

“Just talk. That’s all,” Doris said, but her way suggested there
was more to come. I waited. “Well, before the furniture companies left, this was a different place. People came downtown to shop,” she said. “Ivory’s opened in the late 1960s, back when women went to the Beauty Shop every week. I think my husband’s cousin’s neighbor came here.

“Anyhow, the location was good—right across from the Post Office and a block off Main Street, so women could come by for a set after shopping,” she said. “Ivory’s was hopping until the furniture companies pulled out of town. You know, all that went to China, leaving men sitting on the front porch, smoking cigarettes, waiting. Men lost work, lost ambition, some say women lost something more,” she said.

“So what were the rumors?” I prodded. With Doris you needed to know when to listen quietly and when to prod her forward. Sometimes she’d get lost in her own stories.

“My momma had a maid when I was growing up. Well, she cleaned our house; she didn’t fix meals or anything. Maybe she’d bake a caramel or coconut cake every so often. Ummm, she made great cakes,” Doris said.

“And? You were telling me about this place,” I interrupted, knowing if I didn’t stop her, she’d start reminiscing about the cakes, which would lead to her ongoing struggles with weight and exercise, and end up with some new thing she read about the powers of coconut oil.

“Ellie, she was our maid, she showed up one day with a black eye. Momma made me go outside, but I stood under the window and heard most of what they said. Ellie’s husband, Joe, worked at Dixie Furniture. Anyway. He was a bit rough.”


“He drank and sometimes he’d hit Ellie. A black eye or a bruise. I heard Momma tell her she needed protection. Ellie said Ivory would help her,” Doris explained.

“How could Ivory help? She ran a beauty shop, right?”

“She did. But a man went missing once and folks claimed Ivory was responsible,” Doris said.

Now to Doris, everything she said so far made sense, but to
me, the holes in her story were bigger than the ones in back screen
door in this place. In conversations like these, I had to choke down my impatience and wait for what connected all the sentences.

“I guess I’m not saying this right,” Doris started. “You have
to understand the way it was back then … the 70’s, you know. Peo-
ple lived more separate lives. Rich, poor, black, white. We all got
along and worked together, but they kept to theirs and we kept to
ours. It wasn’t right, but it was,” she explained.

I took a breath and waited. I had a million questions.

“Men drank. Women suffered. Sometimes they suffered just
a little, like Ellie’s black eye. Sometimes more. We all knew it, but
...”

I took another breath, holding my Northern aggression still.

“Women helped each other when the men didn’t. Mommas
raised grandchildren. Women took food to folks who were too
proud to ask. Ivory, well, Ivory made men disappear,” she said.

There it was. The part of the story I was waiting on. I had
to show enough interest to tease out the story, but not too much or
Doris would back off, pleading it was only gossip and she wasn’t
one to gossip.

“Disappear?” I asked choking my curiosity, examining the
old TV with my back half turned away from her.

“Well,” she drew that word out for all it was worth. I stepped
a bit closer to the hair-washing sink, still not looking at Doris.

“Men often left for better work someplace else, of course,”
she said briskly getting back to business. “Enough about that, when
would you want to start renting this place?” She looked around.

“You could remove that sink over there. Add some folding doors
over here. New paint does wonders. I know a painter who is look-
ing for some work right now. You want his number?”

Doris moved toward the front door and I followed, still curi-
ous about her story. I looked at the walls and posters of hairstyles
long out of fashion, the linoleum floor, aluminum chairs. “I like
this place. Ivory’s House of Style,” my lips tried on the name. “Let’s
make it live again.”
Ivory’s was set to open by mid-August. The last contractor packed up tools and paint brushes. Late afternoon before opening day, I was polishing wine glasses, counting napkins. I had just opened a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc when two African American women peered in the front window. One was old—thin white hair and a face of wrinkles—the other was about 30, dressed stylishly. The door cracked opened.

“Hi! We open tomorrow. Come on in and look around if you want,” I held the door fully open so they could see the place. Part co-op, part bar, part social club, and all designed for women. Officially called Ivory’s,” I offered memberships on a sliding scale so women across Lexington could have a glass of wine and enjoy an evening away from home Wednesday through Saturday night. I leased the space to a young woman building a yoga practice, a local writers’ group, and on Sunday afternoons, a small mediation group used the space.

I kept some of the beauty shop furniture. The ceilings were draped with soft, billowy, blue-grey fabric. A small rustic wooden bar surrounded the old sink. Counter space and shelving for bottles of wine were added at the back near a refrigerated unit keeping white wines and Prosecco cold and storing oranges, pears, and berries for Sangria night. A bright blue, orange, and green rug covered most of the linoleum. Spots of the same colors poked out from walls, artwork, and the soft pillows on the old furniture.

The older woman said, “I’m Ivory Thompson. This was my shop. This is my grand-niece Dorothy.”

Dorothy smiled, “The place looks great, doesn’t it Auntie Ivory? Same, but different.”

“Oh honey, everything in life is same, but different,” Ivory turned to me. “It’s beautiful.”

“Thanks,” I said. “We have red and white wines and some little things to snack on. I hope women feel comfortable coming here alone or with friends. Men, too, but I see this as a place for women.”

“That it was,” said Ivory. “Lots of women came here years ago. Laughing, telling stories, glad for time away from their chil-
dren and men.”

I plunged in, “I heard there might have been some trouble here with men.”

Ivory stared at me. I squirmed a bit. I glanced at Dorothy and then back at Ivory. She was sizing me up! I looked straight at her. Her face changed, softened, she asked, “You want to hear about the past, hun?”

I gestured to the couch. “Please. Sit down. Can I offer you a glass of wine?” I poured them glasses of the Sauvignon Blanc and sat across from Ivory.

“Why did you do over this old place, anyhow?” she asked.

“I ... I ... needed something of my own,” I said, stammering. She waited. “I’m recently divorced. I don’t have kids. I wasn’t sure what to do next. I walked by every day and it just called out to me, I guess.”

“And what makes you think this place has stories?” Ivory asked.

“My realtor said her mother had a maid who said ...” “Said what?” Ivory challenged.

“Said that you made men disappear,” I blurted, a stupid, privileged white woman, tantalized by urban myths of black women and the men who wronged them.

She sighed and said, “I suppose you want to hear about Wil- lie.”

**September 1972**

The ringing phone woke Ivory from the best sleep she’d had in weeks.

“Hello? Ten minutes.” She reached for her glasses and hung up the phone. Curtis stirred at her side.

“G’on back to sleep. This don’t concern you.” She sighed, bent over, slipped on her shoes.

Driving to the shop, Ivory wondered how many more times she could do this. Ellie stood at the back door, her arm around a woman, more of a girl, just half her size. She parked, looked
around the lot, and climbed out of the car.

“Ellie.”

“Ms. Ivory. This here is Sally. She needs our help,” Ellie said, pushing Sally forward.

“Thank you for helping me,” Sally said so softly that Ivory had to bend down to hear her.

“You look tired. What’s wrong with your arm?” Ivory looked at the arm Sally was holding awkwardly to her chest. “It’ll be all right,” Sally said, tucking her chin down to her chest. As she did, Ivory saw red welts and the beginnings of bruises on Sally’s neck. She reached toward them, but Sally shuffled away.

“C’mon in, child. You stayin, Ellie?” Ivory asked.

“No ma’am. If he wakes up and finds me gone.”

“Hurry on then. I don’t need another one tonight.”

“Thanks, Ms. Ivory.”

Ellie left. Ivory swept Sally through the shop, Sally’s eyes wide as she looked around. Ivory followed her eyes, seeing the tidy little shop. She’d worked hard to get this place going and make it the busiest shop in Lexington. Hair and nails by day. Other work, like this child tonight, came more and more as the men lost jobs and dignity. Good men beat down become angry men.

“How long you been married to him?” Ivory asked, gently sitting Sally on a stool.

“Oh, I ain’t married,” Sally replied. “I think we get married someday.”

“Child, if he hurts you now, it’s gonna get worse later on.”

“Oh no. He was just tired tonight and wanted fried chicken. I fixed ham,” Sally tossed away Ivory’s concern. “Just tie up my arm and I’ll head on home. I be fine.” Sally’s left arm hung slightly lower than the other.

Ivory snorted. She opened a cabinet and pulled out a mason jar. “Drink! It’ll help with the pain.” Ivory poured a taste from the jar into a juice glass.

“I don’t care for it,” Sally said.

Ivory handed Sally the jar and a rawhide. Sally drank. She sputtered and a light sweat broke out on her forehead.
“Now, take the rawhide between your teeth and clamp down hard. Look over at that hair dryer,” Ivory said. She jerked hard, forcing the arm back into its socket. Sally screamed, dropping the rawhide to the floor. “I’m sorry,” she said apologizing for screaming, dropping the rawhide, and interrupting Ivory’s sleep.

“Hush now. Let that arm rest. Take some aspirin. It’ll be fine in a couple days. You got some folks around here I can call?”

“No’m. My momma died and my daddy left a long time ago. I got no sisters or brothers,” Sally said.

“Let’s get you home.” Ivory guided Sally to the door, turning out the lights. They drove through the quiet streets. “He’ll keep at it.”

“It’s only this once,” Sally said.
“Ain’t once enough?” Ivory asked.
“He love me.”

“Child, hitting you isn’t love. You need to leave him,” Ivory said.

“But he loves me,” Sally whimpered. “He say so.”

Ivory dropped Sally near the ramshackle house she shared with Willie. She drove back to her house, heart and eyes heavy. Ivory climbed into bed and slept restlessly until she heard the alarm. At breakfast, her husband, Curtis asked, “Who was it last night with Ellie?”

“No one.”

“No one, or no one you want me to know?” he asked. Ivory kissed him lightly on the check. “Go to work old man.” She shut the door behind him and stood watching him walk to his truck.

She opened the shop right at nine and kept her hands busy from the first wash and set to the last perm. Women talking and laughing all day helped last night disappear. She was sweeping up the last bits of hair when Ellie walked in the door just after seven.

“Ellie? I didn’t have you on the book. I’m closing up,” Ivory said.

“No ma’am. I came here to warn you.”

“About?”
“My brother Marcus told me Willie was spoutin’ off today. Says he is gonna’ fix you. Said some other things—bad things—about you meddlin’… well, you know,” Ellie said.

Ivory knew. Since he was a kid, Willie Hairston was just one minute, or maybe it was one lie, ahead of trouble. He was a good-looking man. Sober, Willie was charming. Women fell for his charm and ran from his beatings. Each new girl believed him when he said he wouldn’t ever hurt her. Willie’s dad died in an accident at the plant. The brakes failed on a skid loader full of pallets. It tipped over the bank into the creek pinning him underneath. Willie’s mother never came out of her sorrow and left Willie with his grandmother, Lizzie, who was near 60 and struggling with diabetes when she took him in.

“That man runs his mouth more’s he should,” Ivory said. “He’s just talk. His grandma babied him and look how he turned out.”

“Don’t worry, Ellie,” Ivory said. “Lizzie came in this shop nearly every week of her life for a wash and set. He knows that. Men need to spout off. He won’t bother me.”

“But Ms. Ivory …”

“Ellie, I’ll be fine.”

Ellie left. Ivory swept up the remaining hair into a pile. She cleaned the sinks and gathered up the used towels to take home and wash. She was tiding up the back room when bell on the front door tinkled. Ivory picked up the basket of towels and went to the front of the shop. Willie Hairston stood there, tanked up, and swaying slightly.

“Miss Ivory,” he said, “You messin’ where you don’t belong.” He took a step toward her. She faced him holding the basket between them.

“You shame Ms. Lizzie’s memory, Willie. Go home. Sleep it off,” She set the basket of towels on the floor. “I’m closing up now.”

Willie moved fast for a 6-foot drunk. He grabbed at her blouse, but his foot hit the basket of towels and slipped sideways. She shoved him away from her. Willie slipped on the pile of hair
and lost his balance. He stumbled and fell backwards against the washing sink. His head smacked against the porcelain as he fell to the floor. Ivory moved over to Willie as the shop door opened again and Ellie rushed back in.

“I saw him heading this way. Are you okay?” she asked. “Oh Lord, he’s hit his head. Look at that blood.”

“Help me with him, Ellie,” Ivory lifted his head to see the wound.

Willie’s eyes fluttered, he groaned. His eyes closed. The smell of alcohol assaulted the two women.

“Let’s get him to his truck,” Ivory said. “He can just sleep this off, but he’ll wake up with more than a hangover headache.”

“Serves him right,” Ellie said.

The two women pulled Willie to his feet. Each grabbing an arm, they shuffled across the shop floor and out the door, Willie’s feet moving slowly, helping them along. He was too loose limbed to heft into the cab of his truck, so they flopped him onto the open truck bed. Together they pushed his legs up on the tailgate.

“Sleeping like that, he looks harmless,” Ivory said. “I’m just glad Lizzie isn’t here to see the mess he’s made of himself.” She turned to Ellie. “Thank you for coming back. I don’t think he would have hurt me, but a drunk never does what you think he’ll do. Help me clean up and I’ll give you a ride home. He’ll be fine there till he wakes up.”

Ellie swept up the mess. Ivory cleaned up the blood and gathered up the towels. Neither woman spoke as they worked. Ivory locked the shop and they left.

The next morning, turning onto First Street, Ivory saw a police car pulled up next to Willie’s truck in front of her shop. She parked her car and walked over.

“Hey,” she called. “What’s happened?”

“Not sure. I was just driving by,” Jim Hargrave said, gesturing to the truck. “It looks like Willie had one too many last night.” Hargrave was the best of the town’s cops. He grew up in Lexington, went to the city schools. He knew how things worked in town.

“Willie, hey man. It’s time to wake up,” Hhe shook Willie’s
shoulder gently. Willie didn’t move. Hargrave looked at Ivory.

“Go on into your shop, Ivory,” he said, reaching for his walkie-talkie. “Dispatch, Officer needs assistance at 195 West First Avenue. Send an ambulance,” he said.

Ivory stared at Willie, then turned, unlocked the shop door, and called Ellie.

“Girl, we got trouble. I think Willie’s dead. Yes, I just saw him. No. Jim Hargrave is here. No don’t come here. Stay home. We’ll talk later. Don’t say anything to anyone,” Ivory warned.

The day in the shop was full of perms and sets. Ivory tried to follow conversations and laughter common when women are away from chores, kids, husbands, but last nights’ worry stayed by her side. She jumped when the door opened.

“Ivory! Girl, someone walk on your grave?” Ruby asked from under the dryer where she had been watching Ivory. She knew more about folks’ business than the newspaper and she told what she knew. She wasn’t malicious, just a watcher and a talker.

Ivory smiled at her, “Curtis was watching reruns of Twilight Zone last night. I guess I’m a little jumpy,”

“Twilight Zone? That show. Why don’t he watch Julia? Twilight Zone!” Ruby scoffed, turning back to her magazine.

When Ivory’s last client left, she called Ellie. Ten minutes later, Ellie walked in the door.

“Miss Ivory, I been so scared thinking the police would turn up at my house,” Ellie whimpered. “I took some chicken over to Sally. That poor girl …”

“Shush, now. That ain’t gonna happen,” Ivory reassured her. “Jim Hargrave said they figured Willie fell against the curb, hit his head, made his way to the truck, and died. Another black drunk dies and no one questions it. You know that,” Ivory said. “This isn’t all a bad thing, Ellie.”

“Willie was a mean drunk,” Ellie agreed. “Sally was just the last woman he hurt.”

“Willie was alive when we put him in the truck. Could be his head, could be his heart that killed him. It’s no worry for us, right?” Ivory asked staring at Ellie.

152
Ellie put on her sweater and walked to the door. “It’s no worry. No worry at all.”

A few weeks later, Ivory was still up and caught the phone on the first ring. “Hello? Ten minutes.” She hung up the phone. Curtis woke up.

“Again? I don’t think—”

“G’on back to sleep. Thinking about this ain’t yours to do.,” Sshe spoke more sharply than he deserved, but Ivory was tired. Minutes later, she met Ellie at the beauty shop back door.

“Ms. Ivory, it’s Sally. They broke into her house. She’s scared bad. I can’t get her out of the car,” Ellie said. Ellie and Ivory walked over to the car. Sally was huddled in a blanket on the back seat, her eye swollen shut, blouse and skirt torn. She was barefoot.

“C’mon child, let’s get you fixed up,” Ivory coaxed her from the car. Sally swayed between Ellie and Ivory. “Can you tell us what happened?” Ivory asked softly. She settled Sally into a chair, looking over her injuries and tallying them in her head—swollen eye, bruises—maybe cracked ribs, maybe worse.

“Bernard and them broke down the door. They punched and kicked me,” she said, her voice flat. “I tried to run out the back, but he grabbed my arm and it gave way. They pushed me down and …” Sshe stopped and began to cry, softly then wailinged. “They done it, Ms. Ivory. They done it. They said it was my fault Willie died.”

Ivory looked at Ellie. Rape was unspoken, but not uncommon. Ivory bound Sally’s ribs best she could. A black eye will clear up, but the other, t? That Ivory couldn’t fix.

“I can’t stay here no mo’., “ “Sally looked up at them, eyes begging for help.

“Ellie, can you take Sally up to Galax? You can be back before dawn if you hurry,” Ivory said. “I know someone who will help, Sally, honey. We’ll get you out, okay?”

Sally nodded.

“You got some things at the house you wanna get? Ellie’ll take you out there—…”

“No! I can’t go back there. Please don’t make me,” Sally
cried, her head bowed low to her chest. “I just can’t.”

Ellie put her arm on Sally’s knee. “You stay here with Ms. Ivory and have coffee. My sister is your size. I’ll pick up a few things, and then we’ll head out,” Ellie asked said.

Ivory made coffee, heavy on sugar and milk for Sally. She handed her a mug.

“Thank you. I just can’t—…”

“Shush child. You don’t have to. It’s best for you to leave Lexington. Find a new life. You deserve more than what you’ll get here.”

They drank in silence. Sally kept her head down. Ivory planning. A few minutes later, Ellie drove up. Ivory helped Sally get up, her arms holding her tightly.

“I am in your debt, Ms. Ivory. I don’t know how to pay you back,” Sally tried to smile, tears in her eyes.

“You have a good life, Sally. That’s my pay back.” Ivory helped her down the steps, and into Ellie’s car. She gave Ellie a few dollars for gas or whatever.

Ivory began making phone calls. A cousin would drive Sally from Galax to Charleston, West Virginia. The bus would take her to Columbus, Ohio, where Ivory’s cousin, Marie, was a nurse. Marie’s church would help Sally find a job and a place to live.

I am was stunned by her story. Honored to hear it and afraid of the consequences of knowing that history. Confusion flit across my face.

“Tell her how many,” Dorothy urged.

“There were more?” I asked.

“Bout 20,” Ivory said.

“You built an underground railroad for abused women!” I looked at her. Surprise. Awe. Shame. “And I turned it into a bar.”

“I wanted you to know the honor in this little shop,” Ivory looked around. “Talking ‘bout how things are the same…the place looks real nice. Thank you for the wine,” Ivory said, using Dorothy’s arm to rise out of the chair. “Have fun now. Just remember this place done a lot of good.”

154
The bell tinkled as the door shut behind them. I looked around the room’s bright colors, muted lighting, all designed for fun. I poured more wine into my glass and sat on the couch staring at the old wash sink.

About a month later, three women walked into Ivory’s right after we opened. “Hey, Dorothy! Thanks for coming? Where’s Ms. Ivory?”

“She’s the reason we came tonight. This is Ellie’s granddaughter, Keisha, and this is Sally’s great-granddaughter, Tina,” Dorothy said. “Aunt Ivory died last week. She was pretty sick when we came here. She had ovarian cancer, but she didn’t tell many folks.”

I stared at her a few seconds. “I am so sorry for your loss, and my loss. She was …”

“Yes, she was,” Tina said. “I might not be here if it weren’t for Ms. Ivory. You know my grandma Sally’s story. “

“Aunt Ivory wanted women to have a good time in here again,” Dorothy said. “She liked that you kept some of her things and her name on the window. She was happy that her place was alive again.” She smiled at me.

I struggled for a minute. A bar. I made a bar out of an underground railroad for battered women. Laughter waved across me. Women were enjoying themselves here tonight …. women of all ages, all colors … I smiled. I created a place for women that was a bar, and a yoga studio, and available to women’s groups during the day. I could do more …. fundraisers here to support victims of domestic violence … donation night for the local women’s shelter. I could hire a woman who needed a job and a leg up. I could volunteer my time. I could … I could get out of my head and serve my guests.

I grabbed four glasses and handed a bottle of Prosecco to Dorothy. We walked to the empty table near the front window, the window still carrying the words, Ivory’s House of Style.

“Come on. Let’s celebrate Ivory.” I said. Dorothy popped the champagne.
SEASCAPE WITH MIST, NORTH TRURO

The water has glinted back at us for two days on the northernmost bayside high bluff on the cape, but today the sky has lowered as cloud or fog so where before we could see for miles southwest across the bay, and could clearly view Long Point and Provincetown to the west, there is just a greyer band where the bay should be, a hint of ridges that seem waves. Lying back on the bed leaves everything beyond the windows grey-white, but for a brightly colored windsock at the edge of the bluff, its colors muted by the mist. The neighbor who came out each day to fly radio-controlled gliders, one with a three-foot wingspan, the other twice the size, launching them from the bluff top into the updraft and guiding them silently back and forth, has not been out since morning, the weather keeping him in, or the damage to the larger plane from a crash the day before into a clothes tree dampening his enthusiasm for flight. Even the birds have gone away, no
high-flying gulls evident in the mist, though earlier
a foraging sparrow flew from a picnic table to the tattered net
hung for a volleyball game no one here now will play.
CLAMDIGGERS

Virginia Mallon
Postcard

In your Carolina living room
you shucked my doubts like oyster shells,

peeled my husk of guilt,
boiled off my envies.

So often I asked of you
what a walnut asks a hammer.

Here at the wedding of a mutual friend—Cape Cod, May—
let me show you what I’ve learned:

Twist even the legs from a lobster
and suck the meat out.

Crack its thorny wrist
and snap its lumpy thumb.

To reveal the green tomalley, pancreas and liver,
lift back the carapace completely.

O soft and toxic filter of the sea
that might stiffen our lungs to a shell:

We spread that on our toast, Jim, with a knife.
CONTRIBUTORS

R. A. Allen’s poetry has appeared in the *New York Quarterly, Night Train, RHINO Poetry, Word Riot, Amuse-Bouche, Gravel*, and elsewhere. He has one Pushcart nomination for poetry and one Best of the Web nomination for fiction. He lives in Memphis, a city of light and sound.

Beau Boudreaux teaches English in Continuing Studies at Tulane University in New Orleans. His second book collection of poetry, *RAPUNZEL’S BRAID* is forthcoming in early 2017. His first book collection of poetry, *RUNNING RED, RUNNING REDDER*, was published in the spring of 2012 by Cherry Grove Collections. He has published poetry in journals including *Antioch Review* and *Cream City Review*, also in anthologies along with *The Southern Poetry Anthology*.

Kate M. Carey writes about people and the crazy and chaotic, painful and prideful, wild and wonderful things they do for love. She is married to an Episcopal priest, has children living in Ohio and Florida.

Ava C. Cipri is a poetry editor for *The Deaf Poets Society: An Online Journal of Disability Literature & Art*. She holds an MFA from Syracuse University, where she served on the staff of *Salt Hill*. Ava’s poetry and nonfiction appears or is forthcoming in *The Fem, Literary Orphans, Menacing Hedge, Noble / Gas Qtrly, and scissors & spackle*, among others. Her first chapbook *Queen of Swords* is forthcoming this fall 2017 from dgp. She resides at: www.avaccipri.com

Poetry and essays by Brad Clompus have appeared in such journals as *Cimarron Review, Denver Quarterly, Willow Springs, West Branch, Tampa Review*, and *Sonora Review*.
Bruce Colbert, a former journalist, is an actor and playwright in New York City where his plays have been performed Off-Broadway, and in Toronto. He is author of five books.

LaRue Cook was a researcher, writer, and editor at ESPN The Magazine and ESPN.com for seven years before returning home to Tennessee, where his new title is Existential Mess. During his limited free time, he drives for Uber and is putting an MFA from Fairfield University to use on a collection of short stories. His fiction has appeared in *Minetta Review*, *Star 82 Review*, and *Inwood Indiana*, among others, and you can follow his “Uber Nights” at My2ndFirstStep.com.

Ivan de Monbrison is French poet, writer and artist who lives in Paris and Marseille. His poems or short stories have appeared in several literary magazines in France, Italy, Belgium, The UK, Canada, Australia, Switzerland and in the US. Five poetry chapbooks of his works have been published: *L’ombre déchirée, Journal, La corde à nu, Ossuaire* and *Sur-Faces*. His novels include: *Les Maldormants* (2014), *L’Heure Impure* (2016), and *Orgasmes et Fantaisies* (2016).

Avra Elliott is a writer and toymaker from New Mexico. Her work has appeared in *Tinderbox, Shadowgraph*, and *Ilanot Review*, and is forthcoming from *Tupelo Quarterly, Jam Tarts, and Barrow Street*. Elliott received her MFA in creative writing from Warren Wilson College.

Originally from Denver, Brian Robert Flynn is currently breathing the fiction and poetry of Washington, DC. His writing can be found in (or is forthcoming from) *The Moth, Clarion, Southword, Jelly Bucket, Glasgow Review of Books*, and *Noble/Gas Qtrly*.

Jonathan Greenhause was the winner of Kind of a Hurricane Press’s 2015 Editor’s Choice Poetry Award and the 2nd-prize winner in the 2016 Gemini Magazine Poetry Open. His
chapbook Secret Traits of Everyday Things was a finalist in Encircle Publications’ Annual Chapbook Contest and will be published in September 2017.

Mark Gunther has been many things in his life—student, hippie, cook, husband, carpenter, father, entrepreneur, athlete—but has always been an activist, musician, and dancer. In 2015 he received an MFA in creative writing from the University of San Francisco. His work has appeared in Thin Air magazine and Noctua. He currently is shopping his first novel.

David Holper has done a little bit of everything: taxi driver, fisherman, dishwasher, bus driver, soldier, house painter, bike mechanic, bike courier, and teacher. He has published a number of stories and poems, including one collection of poetry, 64 Questions. His poems have appeared in numerous literary journals and anthologies, and he has recently won several poetry competitions, in spite of his contention that he never wins anything. He teaches English at College of the Redwoods and lives in Eureka, California, far enough the madness of civilization that he can still see the stars at night and hear the Canada geese calling.

Heikki Huotari is a retired professor of mathematics. In a past century, he attended a one-room country school and spent summers on a forest-fire lookout tower. His poems have appeared in several journals, most recently, in Diagram and The Inflectionist Review. His chapbook, Truth Table, is available at the Finishing Line Press.

Korbin Jones is an undergraduate at Northwest Missouri State University studying creative writing, publishing, and Spanish. At the university, he works at GreenTower Press for The Laurel Review as an editorial assistant and typesetter. Prior, he has had poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction published in Medium Weight Forks and Sucarnochee Review. His debut novel, Electus, was independently published and is currently available on Amazon.
Kent Kosack is a writer based in Pittsburgh, PA. He is an MFA candidate and English Composition teacher at the University of Pittsburgh. He is working on a collection of short stories and his second novel.

Susan Lago teaches writing and literature at Queensborough Community College in New York. Her work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in such publications as *Pank Magazine*, *Word Riot*, *Per Contra*, and *Prime Number*.

Tom Larsen has been a fiction writer for twenty years and his work has appeared in *Best American Mystery Stories*, *Newsday*, *New Millennium Writings*, and the LA Review. His novels *FLAWED* and *INTO THE FIRE* are available through Amazon.

In addition to writing poetry, Kurt Luchs founded the literary humor site TheBigJewel.com in 2002. He has written humor for the *New Yorker*, the *Onion* and *McSweeney’s Internet Tendency*, among others, as well as writing comedy for television (*Politically Incorrect* and the *Late Late Show*) and radio (*American Comedy Network*).

Jeffrey H. MacLachlan also has recent work in *New Ohio Review*, *Eleven Eleven*, *The William & Mary Review*, among others. He teaches literature at Georgia College & State University. He can be followed on Twitter @jeffmack.

Hannah Marshall lives in Madison, Wisconsin, where she divides her time between writing and mothering. Her poetry has appeared in a number of publications, including *The Madison Review*, *The Anglican Theological Review*, *Dappled Things*, *Big Muddy*, and *Minerva Rising*.

Anthony Parker is a Southern California-based fiction writer. He received a creative writing master’s degree from Cal State Los Angeles.
Michael Pontacoloni’s poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Smartish Pace, Pleiades, Colorado Review, New Ohio Review, and elsewhere. He holds an MFA from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and lives in Connecticut, where he works for a small software company.

Nick Roth’s stories have appeared or are upcoming in Roanoke Review, Crab Creek Review, Failbetter, The Forge Literary Magazine, Shooter Literary Magazine, Rivet Journal, Word Riot, Prick of the Spindle and a number of other magazines.

He attended UCLA and the School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California and lives in Los Angeles.

Matthew J. Spireng’s book What Focus Is was published by WordTech Communications. His book Out of Body won the 2004 Bluestem Poetry Award and was published by Bluestem Press. His chapbooks are: Clear Cut; Young Farmer; Encounters; Inspiration Point, winner, 2000 Bright Hill Press Poetry Chapbook Competition; and Just This. He was first place winner in the 2015 Common Ground Review poetry contest and is an eight-time Pushcart Prize nominee.

Philip St. Clair is the author of six collections of poetry. His work has appeared in Black Warrior Review, Gettysburg Review, Harper’s, Ploughshares, Prairie Schooner, The Poetry Review, Rattle, Shenandoah, and elsewhere. Awards include the Bullis Prize from Poetry Northwest and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Kentucky Arts Council. He has taught at Kent State University, Bowling Green State University, and Southern Illinois University, and at present he is Professor Emeritus at Ashland Community and Technical College. He lives with his wife Christina in Ashland, Kentucky. Please visit his website for additional information.

Evan Steuber hails from Kentucky where he spent his first twenty-some years working in restaurants and retail, meeting the love of his life, and getting educated (BA English, University of
Louisville). He spent some time in Ohio (MA Fiction, Miami University), and then lived a year in France. From France, he and his partner Kayley bounced back to Chicago where he’s pursuing a PhD. He recently won the Alumni Prose Award through the Program for Writers at UIC, which gave him some cash and his first fiction publication in *Packingtown Review*. He’s pretty excited about life and philosophizes about the undead in his spare time.
Danielle Lee Davis completed her MFA at Southern Connecticut State University, though she originally hails from swampy South Florida. Her work has been published in The Southeast Review, Kaleidotrope and elsewhere. When not writing, she can be found at Hollins University, where she advises students embarking on their own adventures abroad.

Lynn Marie Houston is a writer, educator, and editor. Her first book of poetry, The Clever Dream of Man (Aldrich Press, 2015), took 1st place in the Connecticut Press Club’s literary competition and 2nd place with the National Federation of Press Women. Other poems and essays of hers have appeared in Painted Bride Quarterly, Word Riot, Full Grown People, Bluestem, Cleaver Magazine, and elsewhere. She teaches at Southern Connecticut State University and is the founding editor of Five Oaks Press.

Ben Hostetter earned his BA in English at VCU, in Richmond VA. He is currently enrolled in the MFA program at SCSU, in Hamden CT, and is presently working on his first novel. He’d rather not list where and when he’s had stories, essays, etc. published, not because he wishes to be “mysterious,” or anything like that, but because he’d rather take this opportunity to say, yes, he too enjoys cozying up with a beer or some coffee and a good book.

An Indiana native, Molly Miller has a degree in English Education from Purdue University. She recently relocated to the East Coast to pursue an MFA in fiction from Southern Connecticut State University. She has received several Purdue literary awards, and has been published in Sisyphus Quarterly.

Emma Moser is a native of New England and an MFA candidate at Southern Connecticut State University. Though her concentration
is fiction, she frequently goes undercover to explore poetry and creative non-fiction. She has over twenty published works in multiple genres, featured in both independent and national journals like *Thin Air Magazine* and *Cheat River Review*. She also runs a blog about her writing life, grandiloquently titled Antiquarian Desiderium, which can be found at antiquedwriter.blogspot.com

In addition to serving as Poetry Editor for Noctua Review, **Rebecca O’Bern** is Managing Editor of By The Book Editing and teaches writing to college students. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Connecticut Review, Blue Monday Review, South 85 Journal, Hartskill Review*, and other journals and anthologies. She is the recipient of the Leslie Leeds Poetry Prize. When not writing, editing, or teaching, she might be binge-watching Netflix or singing operetta to her cockapoo.

**Shelley Stoehr** has published four award-winning novels and short stories for young adults, including Crosses, the first YA novel about cutting, and an ALA Best Book for Young Adults. School Library Journal has said, “Stoehr’s narrative flow is a strength, as is her ability to capture the rhythms, attitudes, and feelings of teens.” Stoehr is presently an MFA candidate at SCSU, as well as a freelance ghost writer, editor, and proof reader.

**Liz Wager** is in her second year as an MFA Poetry candidate at Southern. She hails from Western New York, and attended Alfred University as an undergraduate. When she’s not writing for school, work, or fun, she’s busy sewing, playing the trumpet, and/or trying all of the pizza places in New Haven.
Neo/Americana

Allen
Boudreaux
Carey
Cipri
Clompus
Colbert
Cook
de Monbrison
Elliott
Flynn
Greenhouse
Gunther
Holper
Huotari
Jones
Kosack
Lago
Larsen
Luchs
MacLachlan
Marshall
Parker
Pontacoloni
Roth
Spireng
St. Clair
Steuber