

An abstract painting featuring a central, vertically oriented rectangular frame. Inside the frame, there is a depiction of a landscape or interior scene with various colors like blue, green, and yellow. The background of the painting is dominated by large, textured areas of red and yellow, with some green and white accents. The overall style is expressive and somewhat chaotic.

TLR

TAHOMA LITERARY REVIEW 3.1

TLR
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REVIEW

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ABOUT THE COVER



Issue 3.1 cover art

This issue's cover is courtesy of Sandy Newhouse, a Northwest artist specializing in watercolors and acrylic painting. Her work features acrylic glazing and varied textures, and often intends an emotional view of the Northwest and of her travels in the U.S. and Europe.

Newhouse first became interested in art in fourth grade, and attended the Portland Art Museum's children's classes every Saturday during the school year. She continued her art studies through high school, at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, and finished her BA degree at San Diego State.

Although she originally began painting in oils, she moved to watercolors and acrylics after having kids and discovering that young children can find a wet painting no matter where one hides it.



An example of Newhouse's textured acrylic work.

After moving to the Gig Harbor area thirty years ago, she joined a group of watercolor painters who began to paint together on Wednesday mornings. The group began to host art teachers and hold critiques, and, as Newhouse, says, "This has added greatly to my very conservative background." Four years later, several members of the art group began a studio/gallery where they painted, taught classes and displayed their work. The business is a local mainstay today, with fourteen artists displaying both painting and 3-D art.

Newhouse's art is in private collections throughout the U.S. and in Europe. She has been juried into many Northwest shows, including the Frye Museum, Pacific Gallery Artists, Northwest Watercolor Society (she is a signature member), Peninsula Art League (Gig Harbor), and the Western Washington Fair, several times winning high prizes.

Her work is now shown exclusively at Gallery Row in Gig Harbor. Additional samples of her art are posted in *TLR's* web gallery, and at <http://gigharborgalleryrow.com/sandy2.html>. Contact her directly at sincolor@comcast.net.

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You can hear many of the authors in this issue read their stories, poems, and essays on our web site: <https://soundcloud.com/tabomaliterary/tracks>.

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ABOUT THIS ISSUE

As we enter this spring, we find ourselves in a state of transition. This March marks two years since we opened submissions for our first issue of *Tahoma Literary Review*, and we couldn't be more proud of how far the journal has come in that time. Now, with our contributors finding much-deserved recognition in venues like *Best American Poetry*, *The Best Small Fictions*, *Best Gay Stories*, and others, this is a season in which we feel we're transitioning from being a journal setting its course to one that's found its way.

It's fitting, then, that our sixth issue locates itself within spaces of change—grappling with, sorrowing in, and celebrating transitional moments.

As a nation, we have a presidential election to look forward to (or shudder at the thought of, depending on one's degree of optimism), and Alex Gallo-Brown opens this issue with a poem that connects the civic body with the physical, reminding us of the connections between the political and the private.

We also see the body broken—as in Anita Olivia Koester's masterful long poem "This Week on *Game of Thrones*"—and the body born, as in Katie Bickell's heartbreaking short story "To Do:" which addresses the problem of missing First Peoples women in Canada. We inhabit the spaces that other bodies have left, as Nathan Elliott does in his essay "Shiva Buys a House" and Lynn Sloan does in her short story "Lost and Found."

We look for answers and communion with the divine, whether calling up a diety on the phone as we see in Patrick Roesle's delightfully strange "Tzadik Nistar," standing in awe of the natural world as does Heather Durham with her nuanced essay "Hand Wing," or offering "Grace" as Gabriel Welsch does in his quietly prayerful poem.

Yet we also seek answers in the void, as in Benjamin Harnett's "Yahoo! Answers," make getaways of the imagination, as in Marisela Navarro's electric "My Escape." We shake our heads at the illogic of circumstances that bind us, as in Gaylord Brewer's "Morning at the U.S. Consulate, Office of Stolen Passports."

And as always, we seek human connection, reaching through loneliness to find meaning in community. At times this effort feels like a way to hang on, as in Siobhan Phillips' "It's summer, but we can find plenty of ways not to care," as an avenue to finding peace in our losses, as in Blair Hurley's "Inland Sea," as a lesson in letting go, as in Carmella de los Angeles Guiol's "Matriarchy," or a as a way to repair those wounds we make in each other, as in Eloisa Amezcua's "Car Talk."

It's our hope as editors that the pieces in this issue of *Taboma Literary Review* speak to you not only in their exquisite craftsmanship—a point of pride for us as editors—but also in their honest and even vulnerable handling of those moments of change and flux. We hope that in these pages, our writers' words build a bridge for the reader between the here and the beyond.

TLR
TAHOMA
LITERARY
REVIEW

THE BODY WANTS TO FEEL INSPIRED

ALEX GALLO-BROWN

Blue lights flash
through bare window,
flicker like
a laptop screen
pointed towards
our face.

The body
springs up.
The body knows
what to do.
The body bangs
its head,
neck craned
to see.

Downstairs,
neighbor shakes
shoulders against his
open apartment door.
He says a dead body
has been found
behind the building.

No way he can sleep
until it's been
removed.

Nothing to say
or see here
for the body.
It does not
know this man.

Upstairs, hand
pushes laptop
up, presses
buttons until
it begins
to speak.
A convention
is on—
chirping mouths
in quivering heads
to fill our ears
with air.
An election is on
and we want
to feel inspired.

SHIVA BUYS A HOUSE

NATHAN ELLIOTT

When we bought the house, we bought someone else's life. No doubt this happens all the time. Houses take on, subtly and inexorably, the personalities of their inhabitants. Rooms are remodeled around the habits of those who inhabit them. Kitchens flourish from the seasoning of frequent use, or they fall into brittle disrepair, neglected by people who live on take-out. Bedrooms are changed into offices by childless couples; offices are converted back into nurseries by couples shocked by their fertility. Bathrooms carry the pleasurable scars of a thousand Sunday afternoons spent smoking cigarettes and reading novels in lukewarm soapy water. Toilet seats respond to the weight they are asked to bear.

But usually when new occupants move in, the house is empty, and these ghosts only lurk in the corner of the eye. Such ghosts take their time revealing themselves: new inhabitants may not even recognize the specters they grapple with every time they toast a piece of bread.

When we moved into our house, her panties were still in the bathtub, her clothes still hung in the closet, her golf clubs sat in the corner, and the shrink wrap she had put up against January drafts still clung to the windows. We bought the house because we liked the tree out front, we liked the idea of having an old Newfoundland house, we liked some of the old furniture and the books, and because the odd situation allowed us to negotiate the price. We were too naïve to demand that

much of the detritus of her life be carted away before we took possession.

The tenses get strange when her pluperfect past meets our past perfect. One day in December of 2011, two months after my son was born an hour up the road, she had decided that she had had enough, and moved into a retirement home on the other side of the island. We knew because the calendar still hung on the wall in her sewing room when we took possession in November of 2012.

Whatever the tense, one verb was perfectly clear: our house remained hers.

On the third night that we spent in her house, my fourteen-month-old son burrowed into a dining room packed tight with her brittle antiques. My wife panicked: she couldn't see her son, she could only hear his giggles as he made his way through the room like a prairie-dog with the detritus of other lives over his head. We heard him slam into something: he emerged from the mess wailing, with blood flowing from both lips. Moments later he ripped two buttons off an ancient chair in a fit of destructive revenge.

We joined battle with our invisible roommate. I ripped up carpet laid down half a century ago and dust and ash swirled around my head. We purged; we repainted; we donated old clothes reeking of mothballs and an old-fashioned perfume. We cleaned. We burned beeswax candles against her lingering odor. We cleaned again. One spring night I ripped out the ancient carpet runner on the staircase, and the smell started to fade. We fretted when our toddler found yet more expired prescription drugs still rolling around on the floor, and we cleaned yet again. We hauled broken-down furniture to the dump. We stripped ancient wallpaper off the walls, peeling back layer after sagging layer.

We had begun our exorcism with compassion for the spirit we struggled against. We read her journals. We discovered the paperwork for her time-share in Portugal. We found multiple passports, including one issued by Britain, dating back to the time before Newfoundland left the doddering Empire and joined the adolescent Canadian Confederation. She was gay: the obsessive, debt-inducing globetrotting was a way for her to be with the woman she needed away from prying local eyes. The impressive booze collection she had left behind supported the Driving While Intoxicated citation she was protesting in a drafted letter ad-

dressed to the local constabulary, but never mailed. One day our empathy threatened to destroy us; instead we burned the journals and letters and hoped flames would erase the accidental intimacy.

We were throwing someone else's life away: my son sat in judgment in the back of the car as I took a warm corpse a pinky fingernail at a time to a muddy landfill where scruffy gulls and scruffier bald eagles screamed and picked at offal.

We destroyed again and again.

We became numb.

We awoke one morning transformed: we were a trinity of Shivas. We came to destroy. We came to transform. We came to renew. We were bloodthirsty gods of an ancient order: even my son's infant face had been splattered with the gore he demanded from the house as his due. Now himself a divine spirit, he sported with her collection of small Buddha statues, transforming them at a whim into monsters, aliens, and toy soldiers.

We peeled back the onionskin of her house to discover another layer of dust and ghosts underneath, and the stories grew up around us along with the potatoes planted in the garden I sliced out of the back lawn. We unearthed the original inhabitants, the man who had built the house with his brother, beginning in 1904, and ending in 1909: they had come from the little sandbar island community in the Bay St. George to the new village beginning to grow on the shore. They built a solid merchant's house. Bootleg wine had once been stored in the kitchen cellar, so I was told by an eccentric headed down to the beach to try and salvage lumber from a decaying fishing shed. A year later, having the kitchen floors redone, the cellar was revealed. The builder of the house had never married—said the locals—but he kept a live-in 'maid,' a euphemism delivered with customary wink and chuckle. We wondered about the window we found on the exterior of the back of the house that we could not place from the interior of the house, and we wonder still. We ordered the ancient shed out in the back destroyed and barely blinked when the long, far too durable antique nails finally gave way to our youthful demands for utility.

During these years of destruction and guilty voyeurism my son grew. Her room—where once she had waged senile war against mortality by filling it with hoarded liters of diet soda and innumerable bottles

of partially used cosmetics—became his. Books with bright dragons and dark werewolves on their covers, toy boats, a brightly colored quilt on the wall, fish, moon, and stars dangling from the ceiling, a rocket-shaped lamp: they all grounded the room firmly in his relentless boyhood. Her pluperfect past yielded as much as the past ever does to the urgent demands of the indicative present, and the house began to become ours.

Now my son's toy dinosaurs ravage across the floors where those ancient feet once trod. The dinosaurs scream in rage for the past blood and flesh incarnations of themselves, wondering how they stumbled into this new geological age and are now nothing more than a memory, barely rendered in cheap plastic and rubber. They wonder how it is that they have surrendered their now to ours.

LOST AND FOUND

LYNN SLOAN

“Lauren, you must be joking,” Dallas said. “You can’t let Frannie simply exit with no fanfare. We need something, her friends, me, and you, most of all. Good God, she’s your mother. Nothing church-y, okay, but a wake is bare minimum essential.”

Dallas, my mother’s oldest, dearest, and gayest friend, was a force of nature, so three weeks later I waited at Frannie’s condo on West 81st for him to arrive with the food trays. Dallas invited their co-workers from Holiday Heaven Travel Advisors, where Frannie had worked for twenty-some years, in the cubicle she shared with him, and I’d invited those whose names I found in her lizard address book: masseuse, personal trainer, dermatologist, podiatrist, manicurist, who was not the same as her pedicurist, whom I also invited, hair stylist, esthetician, etc. My roommate Constance and her current scowling not-paying-his-share boyfriend begged off.

The guests were to arrive in a half hour.

I stood in front Frannie’s gold-framed hall mirror. Where’s the blonde hair that needs some fluffing? Those doll-blue eyes ringed with mascara? The too-bright pink lipstick that needs to be licked off those expensive veneered teeth? No more Frannie, mirror. You got me. Nice enough. Nothing special. Brown eyes. Brown hair, cut short, ends tucked behind my ears. No earrings. No makeup. “Like a goddamn Mennonite,” as Frannie would say.

I put away her vacuum and placed the bronze urn with her ashes among the profusion of orchids by the one window that offered a sliver view of Central Park. The tacky urn would appall her. I was sorry about that. I was sorry this wake would seem humiliatingly inadequate to her. The Tavern on the Green would have been her choice. And I was sorry about the indignity of her death. Frannie had tripped down the stairs to the 59th Street/Columbus Circle subway station wearing four-inch high, red patent leather, pointy-toed, sling-back Jimmy Choos. Broke her neck. She was fifty-two-years-old. "Forever Young" was her theme song. What her vanity got her was a bunch of pervs looking up her skirt before the paramedics arrived. If she'd lived, that would have killed her.

On the plus side, Frannie would never grow old. On the minus, I was alone in the world at thirty, an orphan.

Dad died of a brain aneurism/traffic accident on the Garden State Parkway when I was six. Mom sold our Colonial four square in Tenafly, bought this condo, went blonde, got her job at Holiday Heaven Travel, and insisted from then on that I call her Frannie. No more "Mom." Thanksgiving dinner at a Chinese joint and Christmas bingeing on old Meg Ryan movies with take-out, like "girlfriends." I had no living uncles, no aunts, and no cousins. "Who needs them," as Frannie would say.

Her doorbell rang and I let Dallas in. Even juggling the stack of boxed trays, he looked like an aging dress-shirt model, graying hair sleekly cut, cheeks rosy and burnished, as if he'd just enjoyed a hot shave with a straight-edged razor. Frannie gave me that detail, the straight-edged razor, implying that this should tell me a lot. I hadn't asked for clarification.

After we set out the trays, he handed me a glass of Prosecco, my choice, fewer bubbles than Champagne, more funereal, and said, "Maybe you could grab a scarf or a jacket from your mother's closet to dress up your outfit."

My "outfit" was a white shirt and black skirt. I thought I looked nice. "This is bad enough, Dallas, without you channeling Frannie."

"It doesn't matter. Everyone will think you're in mourning."

Then everyone will be wrong, I thought.

When the doorman called up, Dallas retreated to fuss over the buffet table, while I waited at the door to let in Frannie's friends, who arrived in packs of two and threes, mostly women.

“Terrible loss.”

“If I can help in any way....”

“Such a nice apartment.”

“She was one of a kind.”

A blur of air kisses and moist hands gripping mine.

“This shouldn’t have happened.”

“I can’t believe she’s gone.”

A fat man in a rumpled suit gave me his card. Fine leather goods, wholesale. A pregnant Indian woman held my hands and sing-songed something. I got away and refilled my glass.

“She was a lovely woman.”

“And what great taste.”

A grandmotherly woman patted my arm. “Death comes to us all, dear.”

What was I supposed to say? “Thank you,” I muttered, emptying my glass, and then refilling it.

I searched the crowd for Dallas. He’d promised this wouldn’t be hell. Standing by the orchids, nodding solemnly to a tiny woman in a green feathered hat, he glanced up and gave me an understanding look. But he didn’t understand. Sure I loved my mother—you can’t not love your mother—but not having to tug against her any more was a relief. Frannie wasn’t the mother I wanted, and I wasn’t the daughter she wanted.

Behind me I heard. “Frannie couldn’t have been old enough to have a daughter in her—what—her twenties?”

I spun around, hugged the plump, disheveled woman with drawn-on eyebrows, and said, “Could you whisper that to her urn, about her not being old enough to have a daughter my age? She would be *so* flattered.”

From the kitchen, Dallas smiled at me. I scowled back.

A woman with shiny red hair—a wig?—and a tipped-up pig’s nose started telling me about her and Frannie’s many shoe-shopping adventures. When she paused for air, I said, “Jimmy Choo killed my mother.”

Her eyes panicked. Pleased, I walked away and found an open Prosecco bottle.

Someone touched my arm, a dweeb with a droopy eye. I wanted to throw up. Before he could speak, I said, “I’ve got to go,” and ended up

in Frannie's closet, sitting on a pile of shoes she hadn't bothered to return to their boxes, the shoes she must have tried on and rejected on the day she died. I picked up one silver high-heeled strappy sandal, a Dior. My head wobbled as I tugged off my black loafer and slipped the sandal on my foot. It pinched.

"These would be cute on you." Frannie had said. I was fifteen and we were in a discount store. My choice, I needed new gym shoes for PE. She'd thrust a purple furry boot at me, the kind prostitutes in Alaska probably wore. Jostled by bundled up women and hordes of kids, I glared at my elegant mother, who looked like a hologram beamed down from an elite and alien culture, and launched into an attack on Asian sweatshops providing unnecessary, junky shoes for the American market, breezing right past the hypocrisy of my wanting Nikes, which had been outed for their labor practices. "You don't think about what goes on anywhere else, do you, Frannie? You don't care about the consequences of your actions. You don't care about what's important. You're just a skeeter bug who skims along the surface—"

"Believe me, Lauren, on the surface is where you want to be. The murk that's below you need to avoid." She dropped the purple boot and stalked away. A little boy skipping past stopped to put the boot back where it belonged.

But even then, in high school, I knew that our fight wasn't just that I didn't want to be like her, the standard daughter/mother duel. By the time I moved out of the condo, when I was twenty-one, I sensed that a fissure existed inside her, an absence that made it impossible for her to connect with me, or anyone else. Dallas was her only close friend. He shared her love of light opera and designer sample shopping. Since I left home, he joined Frannie and me on our occasional Sunday brunches, making it possible for us not to quarrel. For this I was grateful.

I pulled off her silver sandal. Towers of Lucite shoeboxes surrounded me. This was her domain. Style was her diversion and a distraction from anything of substance. Her heart lived here. She loved clothes. Most of all she loved shoes. Kept them in perfect condition. Her feet, too. Twice monthly pedicures. I'd refused her invitations to join her. I picked up a gray suede pump. "Don't crush my Manolos," I heard her say.

Dallas found me crying and sent me home in a cab.

The next day, I returned to find Frannie's apartment cleaned, vacuumed, everything in place, trash bagged in the kitchen. "You're welcome," Dallas had scrawled on a doily propped next to her bronze urn. Was this addressed to me? Or to Frannie, for doing the best he could with her impossible—that was Frannie's favorite word for me—her impossible daughter?

I gathered the few things I wanted to keep: the shoebox of our family snapshots from before Dad died—we hadn't bothered to commemorate anything after that—his death certificate, my diplomas, the wallet-size photo of Frannie's much-older brother, Bobby, in his Army uniform, and the telegrams about his being shot down in Vietnam on January 15, 1972. He died when Frannie was twelve. In the yellowed picture Bobby looked like a boy version of my pretty mother, open face, high forehead, short nose, same vacant blue eyes, but already lost. She told me how he taught her to twiddle a penny back and forth between her toes, smoke Camels—unfiltered back then—and steer the car while sitting in his lap. I reminded her of this when I wanted her to teach me to drive, but she'd said, "Go to driving school."

Frannie's urn I left among the orchids by the window. I'd bury it next to Dad's, later, when I readied the apartment for the realtor. Her clothes and shoes I'd give to Thelma's Place, which supports a women's shelter in my neighborhood and where I buy most of what I wear. Carrying bags of family memorabilia, I returned to work at the copy center in Red Hook where I was the day manager. When I finished college, Frannie had urged me to get a "good" job, in Manhattan. "Why waste yourself in a dump serving the world's unwashed?" But I liked solving technical and mechanical problems, liked supervising the staff, and most of all, I liked the grateful customers, the kids with their lost cat pleas, the old women with their "found" notices, the Syrians, Koreans, Dominicans who came in with their hand-drawn, broken English, patched together layouts for flyers advertising their businesses, or menus, and I helped them re-work their pieces so they "looked" American, as they said. I didn't charge for this, although the price sheet listed \$25/hr for design services. I was salaried anyway. Frannie said I created better-looking litter. She nagged me about my job. She nagged me for living in a slum. She nagged me about how I dressed. She nagged me about everything.

*

Dallas was waiting in a window booth at the Olympic, the diner near Holiday Heaven. He wanted to give me Frannie's things from her desk at work. After our coffees and my cherry pie arrived, he slid over a lumpy envelope with Holiday Heaven's spinning globe logo. "They say you should get rid of your sex toys before you die."

"Please. I drew a curtain between me and any thought of Frannie's sex life." She'd had no boyfriends, which had always struck me as pathetic, given how much effort she put into her appearance. The lump turned out to be the clay ashtray I'd made in kindergarten.

"Curtain? You two had an entire drapery department between you."

"And that's over."

"Lauren, it's never over," he said, as I shook out what was left in the envelope. Frannie's work ID, and a heap of postcards, sent before smartphone photos killed postcards. Mali, Tierra del Fuego, Ivory Coast, Bhutan, Indonesia, Bangkok, absurdly pretty paradises now transformed into war zones. I picked up a card showing a thatched hut in front of a perfect turquoise sea. Dar es Salaam, postmarked 1999. Teddy + Mindy thanked my mother for her "AMAZING insights and X-treme helpfulness."

I handed it to Dallas, and he smiled. "Your mother was good at her work. She knew how to take care of people."

"Strangers."

"Not just strangers." His fork hovered over my uneaten pie.

I nodded for him to dig in, then I rifled through the heap of cards. One from Bangkok featuring a gold temple was addressed to Fran-ster—Fran-ster?—and sent to our home in Tenafly, not to Holiday Heaven.

Dear Fran-ster,

I fell down a rathole and found myself in paradise. All giggles and boom boom. Come see.

Your loving bro,

The Bob-ster.

The Bob-ster? My Uncle Bobby? 12/10/87 said the postmark, which meant he was alive when I was three years old. But Mom, Mom and Dad, always said he was MIA. I flipped through the pile of cards again, and found one addressed to Fran-ster at our condo on 81st Street.

Postmarked 2/2/98. I was living there then. I was seventeen. “Sawaddee from Bangkok” looped across a lurid sunset.

Fran-ster, My savior and angel and one true.

Thanx squared to the nth. \$\$\$ arrived. Deal Sealed.

Come to Bangkok to visit your brother the Kapitalist.

Uncle Bobby was living in Bangkok, and my mom, who was as deep and deceptive as a Hostess Twinkie, never mentioned this to me. Could he still be there? The earlier postcard had been sent when Dad was alive. Had Frannie kept this fact from him, too? After Dad died, Ms. Twinkie sent money to her brother, but she hadn’t gone to Bangkok. That I knew.

I re-read the message, trying to find some clue that would explain why she would hide her brother’s existence.

Dallas reached for the card, but I held tight. “Did you know Frannie had a brother living in Bangkok?” A deserter? But this was hardly a reason to keep his existence a secret from me, her daughter.

“Lauren, we didn’t talk family, except about you.”

He took the card, and then squeezed my trembling hand. I pulled away. “Do you think this is an address?” I pointed to the blurred writing around the card’s edge. Frannie hadn’t cared that I might want to know my one uncle, even if he was a deserter. Wasn’t that practically a badge of honor in that war? She didn’t want a family, so she couldn’t imagine that I might feel differently. She was that selfish.

“If you want, I can ask a Thai fellow I know.”

“Do you think Frannie’s brother could be alive?”

“Contact the Army and find out.”

On the Vietnam War POW/MIA list, under Pennsylvania, I found Harmon, Robert J. under “Unaccounted for.” 1978/01/15 Status: XX, “Presumptive Finding of Death.”

Dallas’s friend said the blurred writing on the postcard was an address.

I had an uncle. That he was alive mattered. That Frannie hid this from me mattered, too. She shouldn’t have kept this secret. She’d left behind a few thousand in her checking account. I’d spend her money finding him.

*

In the time it took me to locate my passport, Dallas had arranged my cut-rate flight to Bangkok and booked me a comped hotel. I had plenty of un-used vacation time. His web sleuthing had produced the name of a shop at the address on the postcard, Uncle Bunny's—Uncle Bobby's?—T-Top Nails—the satellite picture of the neighborhood looked like a maze—and a phone number I didn't call. Time zone, language problems, and what would I say to whoever answered the phone? Uncle Bunny, are you my uncle Bob? Was there a real Uncle Bunny, or might this mean something in Thai? Maybe my uncle had no connection to the nail salon, but lived above it. Or had. He would be around sixty-four now, maybe long gone, or dead. There were too many things I didn't know how to ask on the phone. I wanted to see for myself. I wanted to go. Part of the reason, maybe the biggest reason, was that the journey, and even the distance traveled would be an affront to Frannie.

Dallas warned me that Bangkok looked like Singapore but smelled like Ho Chi Minh City, which I figured meant like Bay Ridge, east of my Brooklyn neighborhood. The smell of rot cut right through the taxi's AC on the ride from the airport, and the squalor was way beyond the picturesque dilapidation shown in the Internet videos. When we entered an area of high-rises and glittering shops, Hermes, Mikimoto, Prada, the passing scene looked like a theatrical scrim. Nothing seemed real except the heat and the damp stench that clung to my skin. The cab stopped in front of a glass and marble hotel. I checked in, grateful the diffident man behind the desk spoke some English. I slept for a day and a half.

The doorman hailed a cab. Nervous, I handed the driver the address Dallas's friend had written in Thai, and we nosed into a slow-moving stream of motorcycles and honking cars. Gold foil Buddhas swayed along the top edge of the windshield. I pressed my spine into the hard seat, trying to hold myself together. Fancy shops, palm trees, outdoor cafes, sunlight sparking off everything. I'd forgotten my sunglasses. After fifteen minutes of lurch-and-go, the cab darted onto a narrow street, and a few turns later, we entered a neighborhood of rundown two- and three-story buildings. I couldn't tell which direction we were headed. A skinny man tried to cross in front of the cab, but we raced on as the guy pounded the trunk. How was I going to find my way back to

the hotel? I had its business card, but what if no one would help me? What if I couldn't find a taxi? What if I got mugged? If Frannie hadn't been secretive about having a deserter brother, I wouldn't have had to come. All this was her fault. One narrow street twisted into another and another. Short, wiry people hurried along the sidewalks. Flimsy stalls selling iAccessories, scarves, sundresses, umbrellas. Beautifully arranged, brightly colored fruits, each as enticing as Snow White's poison apple. After nearly colliding with a metal drum cooker and a man waving tongs, the cab pulled around a corner and screeched to a stop.

Through the swinging Buddhas, I saw a sign, hand-painted, red on yellow, in English and Thai: Uncle Bunny's T-Top Nails. Maybe the address written on the postcard was someone else's address, written like you might write a phone number on a dollar bill. I loosened my grip on the doily-covered headrest in front of me. Frannie's brother wouldn't have written someone else's address on a postcard inviting her to visit. An out-of-the-way nail salon might have been the best an American deserter could do. But wouldn't he have found something better by now?

Two old Thai women walked arm-in-arm past the salon's glass front.

Getting out, I stumbled over a little boy squatting on the sidewalk and apologized, which made him wail. I pretended nothing had happened and glanced across the lane at Uncle Bunny's. A narrow, one-story building with laundry lines on the flat roof. No second story where my uncle might have lived. I turned away and faced a wall of chrome hubcaps for sale. Short people flowed around me. In the hubcaps' distorted reflections, a woman in pink shorts now leaned against the doorframe of Uncle Bunny's. She flicked her long black hair and stared in my direction. I was a head taller than everyone else. Godzilla. I pushed into the crowd to get away. When I reached the corner, I stopped. The woman in pink shorts was gone. I turned and walked back.

The air conditioner above the door to Uncle Bunny's dripped on my shoulder. Inside it was so dark I could barely see, but I could make out a jar of lucky bamboo on a waist-high counter a few feet in front of me and below, a red altar with a bowl of rice, like in every Thai restaurant in America. Twang-y music, maybe a cover of a Beatles' tune, droned. The air smelled of acetone and fake floral. To my right were

two pedicure chairs, like those I'd seen through the window of Eeny Meeny's at the corner of my block. I'd never had a manicure or pedicure. At the closest pedicure chair the woman in pink shorts bent over the feet of a squat woman with matted black hair and arthritic knees, who stared at me.

Behind the angled counter an old man watched me. I flinched. My uncle? Shaved, knobby head, face like a carved walnut, eyes cut into folds. He didn't look white, exactly, but maybe, or maybe Indonesian or Indian. Soft flesh, very tan, bulged between his wife-beater T-shirt and the waistband of his loose white shorts. His splayed legs were bony. Grimy flip-flops. Potbelly, skinny legs: a drunk's body, as Frannie would have said.

"You want mani/pedi?" His voice was honeyed and soft, not harsh Thai, not American, more Indian.

All I could get out was, "Just a pedi," pointing to my feet.

He slow-blinked toward the empty lounger.

I took off my flats, eased into the empty chair, and then set my bare feet in the attached tub that I guessed would be filled with water. He seemed smaller than I'd imagined Bob, but he slouched, so it was hard to tell. But he couldn't be my uncle. He was too foreign. In a few minutes I would ask if he knew him, when I wasn't so jangled.

From where I sat, he was partly hidden behind the angled counter, so all I could see of him was his head and narrow shoulders. He looked nothing like the boy whose picture was in my purse, not even adding forty plus hard years. And nothing like Frannie. Through half-closed eyes, he watched me. He could be anywhere between forty and eighty years old. To avoid his creepy gaze, I studied the photographs on the shop's back wall: five rows of eight by tens, close-ups of feet, some fat, some thin, some adorned with coy ankle bracelets, all with gaudy nails, but nothing fancy like the tiny cartoon characters, or the plaids and stripes, or the American flags displayed in Eeny Meeny's window.

Above the man were shelves of nail polish. I probably should have selected one.

I shoved my feet into my flats, then shuffled, with my right heel caught sideways, across to the shelves of nail polish above the man's head. Behind his ear a scar shaped like a question mark puckered his shaved scalp. I hated having to reach over him, hated my arm stretching

out of the short sleeve of my blouse, hated the curve of my armpit exposed, was shamed by the warmth of my body radiating from me to him. I grabbed a bottle, and I stepped back, almost tripping out of my folded-over shoe.

His eyes, obscured in shadow, swiveled in my direction.

I clutched the nail polish bottle so tight its cap cut into my palm and croaked, “Do you know a Bob Harmon, an American?”

His expression didn’t change. “He used to live here,” I said. No response. “That was a while ago. Fifteen or so years ago.” Nothing. Maybe the extent of his English was “mani/pedi.” I continued, “Do you own this shop? Have you been here long?” He stared at me, no change. “An American,” I repeated.

“You want pedi, you sit.”

Was he smirking? I shuffled back and dropped into the pedi-chair, my pulse jumping under my skin. Could he see that I was shaking? I tried to focus on the tinny pop song.

Pink Shorts stood, flipped her hair over her shoulder and arranged a small fan to blow on the finished toenails of the other customer. The old man mumbled something and the two women laughed. About me?

The whining pop song soared and I wanted to cry, like a stupid child. I didn’t speak the language. I didn’t understand one goddamn thing about where I was, in a dingy nail salon in a seedy section of Bangkok, half a world away from where I belonged. The creepy old man was useless. No one lived above this shop, and why would my mother’s brother own a nail salon anyway? This place had probably been a mail drop twenty years ago. There was a reason Dallas hadn’t found other postcards from my uncle. He didn’t want to be found, or he was dead.

Pink Shorts dumped water from a bucket on my feet, and sat to splash the warm water on my shins. Where she’d positioned her stool off to the side would give the old man a good view of me and my parted legs if his eyes weren’t closed. I pushed my skirt down over my knees, its back edge dipping into the water, and pulled the cloth tight. I was stuck here until this was over.

The other customer fumbled with her purse, dropped money in a tray on the counter, and was gone. The song shifted into another, the AC wheezed. Something changed, something subtle. Even with the tinny music and the swishing water, a quiet had descended. Wishing I

were any place but here, I kept my eyes locked on the jagged part in the sleek black hair of Pink Shorts as she bent over my feet, trimming my toenails and pumicing my heels. The man's breath caught, a snagged wet rasp, as she set my feet, one by one, on a small cushion on the edge of the tub. While she massaged lotion into my feet, I felt his gaze slither over me. I looked up. His eyes were closed.

Sitting behind the counter in the dim light, he looked like no one I could imagine knowing. He wasn't my uncle. He couldn't be. And I hadn't even come to find my lost uncle. I didn't care about someone who'd never been a part of my life, or my family. I'd come to rebel against Frannie one more time, and spend her money doing it. That's what brought me here. Defiance, pure, simple, and stupid.

Pink Shorts continued to rub my feet. The creep's lips began to tremble, his eyebrows lifting when her fingers twisted between my toes. His eyes seemed shut, but he sensed or could hear her movements. Her smeary hands grasped my ankle. When her long fingers slipped slowly back and forth over my heel, along my arch and over my toes, he began to sway. His jaw thrust forward, the cords on his neck pulsing, and his breath came in gasps. He was masturbating. Behind the counter, he was masturbating. Inside me everything recoiled, but I sat rigid, unable to move. The woman's hands held me in place as she stroked my foot. Her grip moved to the other one, and she began again. Around me I dropped an imaginary glass wall. I could hear nothing, see nothing, feel nothing. I was in Frannie's closet, sitting on her shoes and around me floated her smell: the lily and clove of her perfume, Ivory soap, and the tang of foot sweat on leather. I could see her black stilettos, like two gleaming weapons, metal tips on four-inch dagger-heels, the arch a perfect hand-grip. With shoes like these a woman couldn't run, but she could wound. She could gouge a creep's eyes until blood ran down the disgusting folds of his cheeks and dripped onto his hollow chest. She could do that.

Pink Shorts slapped my foot and placed it on the cushion. The perv whimpered, turning his face towards the windows. Light flashed from outside on the street, something moving. He lifted his eyebrows, his eyes opening wide, and, caught in the light, they were blue, the same color as Frannie's. Behind my collarbone something broke open. Fragments blew apart, shards in a void, clicking and spinning, twisting, flying upward, falling. I couldn't breathe. My mother's brother. Wind whipped

my face. I was in a car, windows down, in the driver's seat, roaring down a country road. Not me, a little blond girl with bangs and pigtails, sitting on her teenage brother's lap, his big hands beside hers on the steering wheel. She's laughing. Then she's not laughing. Her brother's hands are beneath her skirt, between her legs. Her eyes cloud. What can she do but hold on?

She had done her best. She had married Dad, built our safe, conventional life, and sent this asshole money to prevent him from ever coming back. She'd kept him a world away, from her and from me. She'd done this for me.

Something moved in front of me: Pink Shorts reaching for the polish bottle I held. I shoved her hand away, struggled out of the chair, forced my feet into my shoes, jamming my little toe, and walked toward the perv, stopping at the counter.

He lifted his chin to stare at me through slit eyes. "You look familiar."

"I'm no one you know."

From my purse, I dug out the Army portrait. I stared at that lying, innocent face, tore it in half, and dropped the pieces in the tray beside the other customer's cash.

I'm sorry, Mom, I am so sorry.

Outside, clouds blocked the sun, but no rain fell. Someone bumped me. I was caught in a crowd of people carrying folded umbrellas in preparation for what was to come.

WAITING FOR THE NEWS

NATALIA HOLTZMAN

Like everyone else, I'd like to wake up to good news every morning. Like everyone else I'm a fool for good news. Out goes the trash.

I wake up and so on. When I'm asleep, I hear my little dog rustling in her own sleep. Sometimes I wake up and she is awake

already and lying quietly by me, looking at me. Sometimes I am awake and she is asleep and I look at her. Bring me good news

every morning. Meanwhile, it can be hard to watch movies all the way through, they seem to go on forever. Likewise, the afternoon

can be endless. Suddenly everything stops. Why not? Sometimes I am watching a movie and then forget that I am and then I remember

but it is too late to follow the movie again. Now I realize that I've forgotten those strangers who knock at the door and ask,

when it's open, Have you heard the good news? Yet there's nobody near me. I am always already speaking. It can be hard to

lay claim to even the smallest thing. I admit I've sometimes crouched
upon my living, shivering and mean. I guess the search
for good news can be endless. As Richard might say, *no end to it*.
All the water in my heart is draining out of it. Tell me something
good this evening. Meet me by the oleander. *Meet me in the park*
if you love me. Tell me anyway. The distance shrinks,
or seems to. *Each year something dead comes back and lifts up its*
arms—or they do. Their sticky hands beckon. Like children
they scatter their toys in the sand. Their mouths open, little red
ovals. If they knock at the door, do I answer? I almost miss
how it happens. When I can, I will build a good house for myself
and my dog and we will live in the house all winter.

To Do:

KATIE BICKELL

The baby kicks one way and the steering wheel pushes the other and now Amy has to wear the too-tight sweatpants. She has to leave the car parked right where it is, too, unless she wants to drive in a warm puddle of pee.

Her belly bumps against the gearshift when she reaches to the backseat. She tosses clothes around until she finds the only other pair of pants she can still get into and double-checks the parking lot before opening the car door.

The morning air steams off her wet legs as she changes out of her track pants and into the sweats. The pants are so tight her thighs sting as she pulls them up. She wrestles the waistband up over her bum and it snaps under her belly, digging deep into her hips. She stretches her top down until The Cigarette Shop logo flattens her boobs, but it springs right back up when she lets go and a roll of fat sticks out below her shirt.

She walks around the car and sits in the passenger's seat to make a list. Amy messes up without lists. She does stupid stuff like filling her gas tank when she's outta cash and then people yell at her or she has to drive away and hide so she doesn't get caught. But if she writes lists she's all organized and in control. And it feels so good to cross stuff off. She doesn't put a checkmark beside the things once she's done them, like some people do. She puts a line right through, like a sword.

Today her list says:

To Do:

1. Lock car
2. Brush teeth, hair, wash face
3. Grab smoke
4. Grab coffee
5. Sneak a puff
6. Work
7. Call Rodney
8. Taco Tuesday!
9. Wash sweatpants

She underlines that last one 'cause it's important, except she'll have to get the pants after work so Shannon doesn't smell them in her backpack. Amy counts the money in the bag's top pocket and writes:

\$10.38

Then she makes sure everything she needs is packed and she starts to leave. Oh, wait:

10. Entrance 3B

The biggest in the world, it's easy to forget where you've parked at West Edmonton Mall.

Amy's gut feels real tight, so she better hurry up and get to the washroom. She sits on a lemony toilet seat and tries to go but she can't so she just washes up and leaves real fast. If she gets to work before Shannon, she can poke a hole in a cig pack from the back and sneak out with for a quick puff. It's so much nicer smoking in the morning, no one around to stare. Last week she got in trouble for having a smoke on her lunch break.

"Not in uniform," Larry said, pointing at her belly. "Makes The Cigarette Shop look bad."

Dammit. Shannon's already there, bent over the magazine rack with earphones in like she's a real-life poster from the men's section. Shannon is Larry's girlfriend, and since he owns The Cigarette Shop, she doesn't have to wear a uniform or work weekends or anything.

"Holy cameltoe, Chubs!" Shannon eyes are little slits, sparkling the same as the glitter on her cleavage. Amy lifts the section of counter that flips up and turns sideways to shuffle in. She tries to look at her flip-flopped feet and wonders when she cut her nails last. *Cameltoe?*

TO DO:

“Your pants, Pity Fuck. Not leaving much to the imagination.”

Amy glances down into the warped steel of the counter in front of her. It's true, the tight pants show everything, and man, is she ripe. She's been real thick and heavy between the legs for weeks. It hurts, the fullness there. She thinks of when Mom was pregnant with Miranda and wonders if she had the same problem, but Mom was always skinny and beautiful, not big like her. Flat-ass and fat-ass, one of Mom's boyfriends said before Mom threw a bottle at him. The next day Amy cut her foot on the glass and her mom felt so bad she pulled the splinter out with her teeth 'cause she couldn't find the tweezers. She wished she knew where Mom was now.

But here right in front of her Shannon won't stop giggling, her head cocked and staring at Amy's crotch. Amy's face gets red hot. Her stomach cramps up again.

“I'm just going to go to the washroom,” she tells Shannon.

“You better not sneak a smoke!”

Amy visits the bathroom three times that morning but just can't go. It feels like someone's turning a corkscrew in her gut and she pushes until her legs shake but nothing comes out.

The fourth time it happens she's counting Player's Lights in the back, and it makes her fingers clumsy. “I'll be right back,” she says, picking the carton from the floor.

Shannon snorts. There's only one guy at the counter, the first customer of the day, buying a paper.

“Okay, Soft Shit, do what you gotta do.” Shannon winks over the till. The guy's older than Amy, probably about Shannon's age, but good-looking, wearing those low, baggy pants Rodney likes. Shannon leans over the counter like she's whispering but she's not. “This is, like, the eighth time she's gone this morning.”

The guy laughs. He glances at Amy real quick and then eyes right back to Shannon's tits as she counts his change. Amy stops going to the washroom then, and tries to ignore the pains. Then she thinks to write down when they hit:

1. 9:08

2. 9:19

3. 9:31

At 9:42 she says, “I think I'm in labor.”

Shannon rolls her eyes and stares back into her phone, thumbs punching the screen. “Whatever.”

“I get a pain every eleven minutes.”

“Bullshit.” Shannon looks up: her lips look soft and pouty, but her eyes are sharp as broken glass in Amy’s heel. “I’ve been right here all morning and you haven’t said shit. This is, like, reverse discrimination. This is why I told Lar not to hire a preggo. You don’t get to just take off when you don’t feel like working.”

Amy’s mouth opens and closes but no words come out. She hates it when Shannon’s mad at her. After the baby’s born Amy’s gonna come back and say hi and Shannon’s gonna be so surprised. They’ll probably end up being pretty good friends, actually. The guys will get along too and they’ll party together at those clubs Shannon’s always talking about.

“I didn’t mean I have to go right now. I was just—”

“Whatever.”

Amy shuts up and sits down. What is she supposed to do? Breathe, she thinks. Right. She’s never been to any of those birthing classes, but she’s seen lots of movies. She writes down:

1. In, Out, In, Out
2. Huh Huh Huh
3. Hee Hee Hoo, Hee Hee Hoo
4. Hoo Hoo Hoo, Hoo Hoo Hoo, Hoo Hoo Hoo

She doesn’t make a big show of it, but practices breathing when the cramps hit. Then Larry shows up with lunch for Shannon and hears Amy breathing and he tells her to go home even though Shannon sighs real loud.

“Last thing we need are her guts on the floor.”

So this is what Amy does:

To Do:

1. Get Food
2. Call Rodney

Tuesdays mean Taco Meal Deals at the food court so Amy gets two tacos, deluxe Mexi Fries, and a diet iced tea. She still has six dollars and she only needs a Loonie to call Rodney, so she buys another Taco Meal Deal in case she gets hungry later. She gets paid in a couple of days anyway and she’ll be at the hospital tonight, so there’s no reason not to spend the money.

TO DO:

She stuffs the food into her backpack and heads back to 3B. Walking makes the pain so bad. It's like her hips are falling apart, like the baby's trying to dig out of her back. She carries her bag in front, imagining her crotch getting fatter with every step.

She stops at a payphone on the way and her stomach turns all slippery like the baby's rolling around, except it's not. It always makes her head hurt, dialing his number. What if it's out of service this time? But last week there was this click like someone picked up and then all this shuffling and another click, like maybe he wanted to talk but chickened out. Maybe today he'll answer.

Amy lifts the black receiver and pushes the buttons and holds her breath. Her stomach drops 'cause the call goes right to voicemail.

"Hi Rodney, it's me. Amy. I think the baby's coming. I keep getting pains but not too bad, though. It kicked me when I dialed your number. Feels real weird, the kicks, kinda gross. But it was cute this time, like it knew I was calling you. Anyway, I'm probably gonna go to the hospital soon. Bye."

And then: "I really wish you were here."

She blinks and blinks and tries to breathe. It's real warm out now and she forgot about this morning, so the smell of pee surprises her when she opens the driver's side door. She wants to cry when she remembers her comfy pants are still wet, but the hospital's gotta have extra clothes.

Amy leans against the side of the car and tries to figure out what to do. It's too early to go to the hospital but people will stare if she's moanin' all around the mall. She looks at the junk all over the backseat through the rear window. She's not gonna show up at Rodney's smelling like smokes and piss and fast food grease, so she grabs her pen and writes on an empty McDonald's bag:

To Do:

1. Fold clothes
2. Throw Out Garbage
3. Empty Ashtray
4. Clean Up Pee

She crosses the chores off her list in order, but the driver's seat is still wet so she sprays it with the Febreze she keeps under the back seat and puts a blanket on top. The air freshener smells like Rodney. He'd

spray it in his bedroom whenever they smoked weed or had sex so his grandma wouldn't know what they had been up to.

"Like it never happened," he'd wink, hipbones sticking out over his shorts. It was awkward, sometimes, him so scrawny and her so thick, but he was so strong when he was on top. She always felt safe with Rodney, proud to be his girl.

It took a pretty amazing guy to love a girl for her insides, to not care what she looked like or where she was from. He was the one that taught her how to drive, too, that time he got drunk playing basketball. He liked it when she drove, liked to tease her, try to make her crash, his hands between her legs. She feels as warm as chocolate left on the dashboard when she thinks of Rodney like that. That's love. That's what he's gonna feel like when he sees her with his baby.

She doesn't even blame him for being scared. She should have been more careful, should have made him wear a condom. She rang the doorbell of his grandma's house every day for weeks after he found out she was pregnant, but no one would answer. Then one day she noticed the kitchen light on through the window when she showed up, but when she left it was turned off. That's when she figured out what was going on.

She would've had an abortion if he wanted her to, too, but how was she supposed to get to the clinic without a ride? The bus didn't stop anywhere near it and the girl on the phone said she wouldn't be allowed to leave alone anyway. Her foster mom thought abortion was murder, and mom was gone and Kookum and all her old friends were up north on the rez, and Amy hadn't seen or heard from any of them since she and Miranda were put in care anyway. Then all of a sudden the baby was kicking and as if she could get rid of it then!

"Karen tells me you've got a boyfriend, Amy," Amy's caseworker said one day, eyes back-and-forth-back-and-forth from her files to Amy's stomach.

Amy shrugged. She crossed her arms over her belly and stuck her chin into the neck of her hoodie so she could see without really looking.

Lena turned to Amy's foster mom. "Treaty?"

Karen frowned. She shook her head and messed around with her necklace, rubbing the little gold cross between her fingers and thumb

TO DO:

like Jesus was a genie able to turn Amy good and skinny and white. “I told you from the start—teens only.”

Lena shrugged. She closed her eyes and shook her head like don’t worry about it and then snapped her fingers. *Be gone like that*, she mouthed. Amy’s heart thumped like Rodney’s basketball. She pushed her head deeper into her sweatshirt, trying to hide her red-hot cheeks. She knew people wanted babies, knew they got scooped up real quick, but she hadn’t realized she wouldn’t even get a say.

So when Rodney’s brother showed up four months too late and gave her three hundred dollars to get rid of it, Amy asked for his old Dodge Spirit instead and disappeared real quick and quiet and, just like mom, no one’s looked for her yet.

The pains are coming every eight minutes now, so Amy drives to the hospital. The road blurs when her gut seizes and she has to work real hard not to swerve. It’s like driving with Rodney, but the opposite. The hospital isn’t too far from the mall, but she forgot she’d need change to park there so she parks across the street and just hangs out. The earlier she checks in, the more questions she’ll have to answer. Amy’s plan is:

1. Sleep
2. Get in Just in Time
3. Have Baby
4. Pretend to Not Speak English
5. Sneak Out With Baby
6. See Rodney

Amy closes her eyes and tries to sleep but can’t. Then she remembers the Benadryl sitting in the glove box.

In her dreams, they’re all staring down at her: Shannon and Larry and Karen and Lena, all staring, all weird smiles. Amy’s stomach is torn open and they reach into her until their elbows are sticky red. They’re pulling her guts out like giant worms and she whimpers *no please stop owie owie*, like a little kid. Then her guts change into pieces of the baby and they’re ripping the baby apart and it’s sick and it’s terrible. And then Rodney’s there, and he’s holding her hand and telling her it’s okay, it’s okay, and she pushes her face to him but he’s tricked her too and *please stop please stop, mommy, mommy, mommy!*

She wakes up screaming and then the pain stops and she opens her

eyes and it's way too dark. She's all wet, too, like she peed again. And then, oh no, she shouts again and bends into the wheel and oh oh oh it's like she's turning inside out!

People are standing in front of her car and she realizes she's parked in front of a restaurant. Stupid, stupid, stupid, why didn't she look? The pain starts again and she sees two girls looking and laughing while they smoke.

I'm dying, I'm dying, she tries to shout but it just comes out like "I'm Di, I'm Di!" and the girls throw their smokes and walk away, smirks on skinny legs in high heels. She's going to die here all alone and her poor baby too. Poor baby, she thinks, poor, poor baby. Why doesn't anyone love you?

The driver's side window gets dark. Death. Death is coming; this is what it's like. And then it's a face. Not death, a man. Oh no, who's this? Black skin, all furry, big eyes staring. Why's he looking at her?

He raps the window with his knuckle.

"Open the door!"

"I'm having a baby!"

"I know, open the door!"

Amy starts to cry. Drive, she thinks. Drive to the hospital. Beep the horn. They'll save you. But that pain happens again, and oh no she's going to be sick.

She opens the door and the man steps into the space and she throws up on his shoes. He doesn't care though and gets in even closer and almost kneels right in the puke.

"Can you walk?"

She shakes her head. All Amy can do is cry and cry.

He tries to scoop her out of the car but she screams and clings to the seat.

"I can't, I can't, I can't," She drops and crawls on the asphalt and the lights from cars and the hospital windows across the road all blur and swim around her. "I'm dying!"

"No, Mama, you're having a baby." He pulls her up by her armpits and she clings onto his jacket. "I'm gonna put you on the backseat and drive you to emergency, okay?"

He opens the door and she falls into the back and feels something cut into her belly.

“Can you take off my pants?”

“What?”

She screams again. “Take off my pants!”

She moans and arches the best she can while he slides his hands under her, and then her bum and belly and legs are bare and cold and it’s so good and who cares about being embarrassed and oh no, no, no, it’s not good, OW!

The pain runs out just as the man gets into the driver’s seat and she remembers the seat is wet.

“I’m sorry.” She starts to cry again, big tears running into her ears. “I had an accident.”

He *shush shush shushes* her and she feels the car lurch forward.

“I need you to focus on me, okay? Don’t push. I’m gonna keep talking and you just keep listening—don’t push. We’ll be there in a minute.”

“You’re gonna have that sweet baby in your arms tonight, okay, Mama? You think of that. You gonna meet your sweet little baby tonight! Gotta be strong now, gotta be brave. Gotta be a mama bear, gonna fight for that lil’ baby bear, now, okay? Don’t push.”

Amy moans. She pulls her knees as close to her chest as they’ll go. She can barely breathe. Her head’s on the pile of folded clothes and everything smells like wet dog. She fights the urge to push, focusing on his words and a rusty hole in the floorboard, the street flying by underneath. How’s a baby gonna live back here?

“I don’t know what to do.”

“Only two things you ever got to do, okay? You gotta be kind, you gotta be brave. Those the only two things anyone’s gotta do.”

Amy closes her eyes and the car stops and he shouts out, his voice real high, like he’s scared. Then there are more voices and a woman at the door and then fingers between her legs and she’s on a bed and they’re running with her and everyone is yelling and playing with tubes and needles and that man’s gone and Amy keeps thinking *don’t say anything*, except she wants to because that one woman’s holding her hand and right now all Amy wants is a mom. And then it’s all blurs and shouts and lights and pain.

Next thing she knows, her clothes are clean and folded on the bench opposite her bed. Her car keys are on top of them and there’s a tray of food beside her. And that’s good, ’cause she is so hungry and tired and—

There's her baby.

Amy peels the sticky white tape off her arm and slides out her IV. She sits up and holds her breath and leans over the baby's plastic cradle. He's beautiful and small and his hair is all curly like how hers is when it rains. She wants to pick him up but he's so quiet and his little wrapped-up body is so nice and warm in his blue blankie, so she takes her hand away. She's never wanted anything as much as she's wanted this little boy, and a little voice in her head says, *except Rodney*, and she half laughs and half cries because that's all so stupid now.

She knows what she's gotta do but it's hard to think so she reaches for the napkin on her food tray and finds a pen and makes a list. She pulls on her gray sweatpants and ignores the way her nose stings and her body aches, and she grabs her keys and kisses his sweet soft head and she puts the napkin in his cradle:

To Do:

1. Be Kind
2. Be Brave

And then she wishes him every last little bit of happiness in the whole world and slips out of the room, out of the hospital, out of his life, and no one's looked for her yet.

THE MOTHERING TYPE

ERICA MOSLEY

The smallest Sanborne kid, shoes heavy with rainwater, waddled up to us clutching a kitten by the throat. “A meow!” she said.

Her mother, sitting beside me on a busted ice chest, untangled her daughter’s fingers and rearranged them in a gentler shape. “Take it back so the mama cat knows where to find it,” she said. The girl tottered out into the black yard but got distracted and ran shrieking after her brothers, the kitten flopping in her fist.

The mother and I tried to have some sort of a conversation, mostly about her kids, but were interrupted every few seconds by a scream or a discovery which needed sharing and praising, and did not get very far. “When do you think you guys’ll start trying again?” she said, and must have seen the look on my face even in the dark because she did not wait for an answer. There wasn’t time, anyway; one of the older kids, a boy, emerged from the yard with a second kitten, this one less yellow and more limp than the first, cupped in a hand, eyes barely open.

“Oh, no no,” the mother said. “Take it back—don’t let Rosie see you with it.” But he was busy; he plopped the kitten in my lap and ran.

I did not touch it, tried to not even look as it floundered over the hills and valleys of my jeans, and while it crawled I considered how much leeway I had in correcting another woman’s children when they were in my house, my yard. I grabbed the kitten one-handed and waded into the tall grass, looking back briefly at my husband, who was talking

to the other husband, who was sitting in the one proper lawn chair we had, and wished we'd remembered to mow before inviting the Sanbornes over. We'd forgotten that kids need room to romp, room to spend their energies in the hours between dinner and bedtime.

I dropped the kitten in the wet grass under the hammock, caught the little girl, and took her kitten, too, which she still clutched by the throat. She barely noticed me pull it from her fingers; she was too excited by the wind and the heavy plops of rain that had begun to fall again. I placed this kitten with its brother and announced that we would not be picking up any more kittens, that the mama cat would come back for them eventually if we left them alone and stayed away.

Sitting on the patio under the awning on my upturned bucket I half-listened to the mother while she tried to resuscitate our conversation, while thinking mostly, instead, about the shift I had just witnessed, about the lack of throbbing, deep-stomach dread.

The rain let loose. The Sanborne kids screamed, running though my dark and overgrown yard, dancing like scarecrows. While their heels smacked the wet ground inches from fragile skulls in tall grass, I thought about the kittens in the alley behind my childhood home, found by me, nursed by my teary mother, years ago, with a plastic syringe and a can of infant formula. One had already died beneath the tire of our neighbor's truck; the others died slowly, moving less over the course of days until they did not move at all, small black flies burrowing through the hair inside their ears. While my mother stroked them she scolded, as though it were listening, the stray that lived in a garage down the street and scattered her babies every spring. Not all cats, my mother said, are capable of rearing the young they produce; especially not these feral ones.

The Sanborne kids hollered and danced in the rain, bringing me, every few minutes, another waterlogged kitten: a litter of three, of four, of five, kittens half the size they should have been, found behind a tree, next to a rock, caught in the chain-link fence. I said, "Put them back. Let the mama get them. I don't want them up here." The mother looked at me from her busted ice chest like she was thinking of a question she wasn't sure how to ask.

After the Sanbornes left, I kept myself busy in the kitchen (though normally I would have left the mess for the morning or even for a few mornings down the line), listening to the drizzle of the rain and, just

audible underneath it, the crying of the kittens for their mother. They cried for hours, until the rain grew stronger and burst finally in a full spring storm, and I did not hear them after that.

When I was a child we had nine cats, three dogs, stretching a few dollars every week across prescriptions for them and food for ourselves. Sometimes, when one got too old or too sick, we took it to the vet for an injection and it died twitching in our four arms.

While I wiped down the counter tops I wondered what had changed. Sitting on the patio on our chunks of plastic I had not told the Sanbornes what I knew: that the mother cat was dead, that I'd seen her hit by a car two mornings ago, her body thrown into and hidden by the tall weeds near the sidewalk.

YAHOO! ANSWERS

BENJAMIN HARNETT

How is babby formed? Is true love real?
What makes the woman underground?
Can jet fuel burn steel? I eat massive amounts
of spaghetti. Why
do my ancestors complain?

The bone twists in the fire as it burns. A shadow
on the liver says
the King will die. Enlil
wrestles with a bull.

Why can't birds fly into space? Does the God
in the Mountain House control our fate?

I've heard of a place called Rûm
far to the west of here,
where all the people live as ghosts.

Why shouldn't animals carry guns?
Where do our lives go when our body is done?
Can a dream reveal

what is or what will be
or could it be just a disordered excitation
of the imagination brought on
by stress?

Will a human ever walk on the sun?

MY ESCAPE

MARISELA NAVARRO

I planned My Escape using Plot Scenario Generator. It told me I was a protagonist and that I said the wrong thing while going through airport security. There's a bartender, a secondary character, who wants to go on a road trip with me. According to Baby Name Genie, given that my last name is Johnson and I was born a girl, my perfect first name is Shaylee. The bartender's perfect name is just Matthew.

I was on my way to Nowhere. I used Random Point Generator and selected Whole Earth, latitude limit of 60 degrees, longitude limit of 180 degrees. I clicked See On Map and no point was generated. Japan, Australia, and Iceland were cut off, no chance there. No matter, though, I was soon about to say the wrong thing at airport security, so I was going Nowhere.

Spent thirty minutes shoe-watching in the security line. Galoshes are in, sling-backs are out. It was my turn after stilettos. TSA waved me through the metal detector.

"Where you traveling to?"

"Nowhere."

He eyed me suspiciously and said, "Please wait over there." He pointed.

A fat woman in crispy clothes came over my way in no hurry and told me to spread my arms and legs. She patted my sides and pits and asked for identification.

“Shaylee Johnson,” she said, staring at my photo, then my face, photo, face, photo, face. “Nice name.”

“Thanks.”

“Where you traveling to?”

“Nowhere.”

“That’s right. Nowhere.” She said it like a villain. “Going to have to ask you to exit the building before I call the police dog.”

She confiscated my carry-on. My notebook was in the big pocket. It had pages of notes on a certain character named Mickey Hages. There were margin doodles with the words Kill and Fuck extending from dark black scratches and boxes within boxes.

I had no keys, no money, little soul. I stood outside in Departures, listening to car honks and whistle blows. I watched buses and low-flying birds and a man gorgeous beyond belief.

The gorgeous man was whistled through the crosswalk. I was at the end of it and he stopped in front of me. He carried a knapsack, which is a synonym for a backpack, and he looked at me like I was a summer bar-becue drink.

“Going somewhere?” he said.

“No.”

“Wanna take a ride?”

“Where to?”

“Anywhere.”

He was gorgeous, so yes. He was a bartender, but I didn’t know it.

The motorcycle was the fastest in the world, per Google, the Suzuki Hayabusa. He strapped the helmet on my head and told me to hold on tight.

The wind blew the gorgeous man’s hair in my mouth. It didn’t have to be that way, but I was leaning in close and opening up wide. We rode through sun, rain, and fog. The end of a rainbow beamed into an intersection and we turned left through it. He off-roaded and parked underneath a lonesome oak tree.

The truth: I am female, age 35. I am looking for a male friend. Someone smart and funny. Passionate and shapely. A fast bounce-backer, a libertine.

I am uncreative, lonely, and an Operations Associate. I want to live

life to the fullest, but I've forgotten how. For now, my profile says I like taking walks through mazes formed from tall hedges—a thing a friend told me to say—and window-shopping out of town.

My family and friends love me, but I'm currently not in that zone. A girlfriend invited me over for dinner, but I said no. When I'm not in the zone, the less alone I want to be, the more I try to be alone.

I've been planning My Escape for several weeks with various story generators found online. I use the internet in my spare time to find get-away ideas because I can't come up with any on my own.

Instead of dinner with a girlfriend, I sat on my legs at my desk and Googled How to Live Life To The Fullest and found 100 Quotes. The website claimed it could supercharge. People left comments, and one said, "Especially Liked #69." I went back to #69, but it was nothing.

I Googled How To Find Creativity and came across How To Find Your Creative Zen. I scrolled through for bullet points but only found a photo of hot air balloons and what appeared to be a soda can floating through the sky. The caption read, "Chaos Is Beautiful." I thought about this for a long while.

I searched for a Dinner Generator and found a book, *What The Fuck Should I Make For Dinner?* The U and C in Fuck were crisscrossed utensils. I laughed inside and moved to the kitchen, dropped eggs into boiling water. I picked out chocolate chips from a trail mix bag.

Music and talking erupted from the TV. I sat on the couch and watched sword fighting and lovemaking. A girl with blue pixie hair smart-mouthed and made it seem like she came up with it on her own.

I thought of a guy, Sam Diaz. His perfect name is Coleman Diaz. On our third date, we forgot each other and remembered our steaks. When Sam kissed me goodnight, my head was empty and my stomach was full. He called my cell to schedule a fourth date, but I didn't pick up. He called the landline, but I was in the shower or not home. He seemed real at first, but then I didn't buy it. On the couch, with the TV on, I considered his likes. I thought of the kiss and pretended he was Coleman. Maybe I could call him.

My bed was full of bouncy fits. I slept in rounds and woke to the feeling that dogs were banging congas. I spread my legs and arms, hoping to see musical terriers, then opened my eyes to a white ceiling.

On Friday afternoons, I plug numbers. The numbers are meaning-

ful in general ledgers and sum nicely in grand totals. They always pan out because I'm good at my job. I avoided my colleagues and boss at work.

My desk phone rang—Caller ID said it was the boss, Priscilla. I didn't pick up. She left a message, and I dialed 2 to listen. My numbers are good, she said, but she needed to see me about something else. My procurement. There was an opening in her schedule in the afternoon. I hadn't talked to anyone all day yesterday or today because I wanted to do my job and that was it. I decided I would leave work early, and I wouldn't care if Priscilla found out.

I checked my email. One message in a message: Dan Sless wants to meet you. He is interested in outdoor sports and adventure. He is a Professional Naturalist who lives life to the fullest. Smart and funny. Passionate and shapely. A fast bounce-backer, a libertine. His picture showed yellow curls above his ears and a bald top. A tooth-gap in his smile, a tree behind his head.

I replied to the message: Dear Dan. I would like to meet. Where was that photo taken? Were you hiking in the woods? I enjoy walking and sitting outside. We could hike to a summit, then sit on it.

I punched out early and didn't care, just like I'd said.

I went to the park and sat in the gray-green section. Couples arrived in shifts. Kite-fliers came and amateur picnickers. I swatted bugs. In the distance stood a stone, circular structure, an abridged version of a tower—like the idea of a muffin top, except it was tower top. It attracted running children four out of four times. I ran to it, thinking I was five. I saw a kiss on a blanket and missed Coleman Diaz on my tower top. I went home and used Plot Twist Generator.

Without warning, a muscular bartender appeared by the oak tree. Using Baby Name Genie, his perfect name is Irving.

He looked at the gorgeous man and said, "Thought I'd find you here."

"Thought you'd be waiting for me," said the gorgeous man. The gorgeous man and I unstraddled the bike.

In the same moment, the men pulled out revolvers and pointed them at each other's hearts. One gun was black, the other silver. They were both shams.

“Who are you guys? Secret agents?” I said.

“No, we’re bartenders.”

I stood between the barrels, the black one shaking by my left eye, the silver one dipping below my right ear.

In five seconds, the guns went papow.

One new message: Dear Shaylee. You are funny! Yes, let’s hike and sit! Sure you don’t want to find a maze? Are you free this Saturday? Dan.

I scratched a mosquito bite on my knee and moved to the kitchen. I sliced soft cheese and spread it on a cracker. I stuffed it in my mouth, then felt an urge to pee. I sat on the toilet for ten minutes and thought of something. One time, when I was seventeen, I fell into a deep sleep in a canoe. A boy I had a crush on was rowing us around in a lake. When I awoke, my shirt was puckered uncomfortably. My shorts felt twisted. The sun was shining on my face and the boy was quiet. I never spoke to the boy again. I wrote him into violent outdoor scenes and scratched his name darkly into the margins of notebooks. I thought of his skinny arms and how smooth the water had looked as we floated, and I saw the surface change into hideous waves.

I wiped and thought about the 100 quotes. #69 said Be Your Best Self. I flushed and used Bar Drink Generator.

A red stream shot in my eye, a wet blast inside my ear canal. The liquid trickled down to my lips and mixed into a fruity two-for-one.

“You missed,” I said.

The gorgeous man tried again. Very Berry Flame.

The muscular man. Gin Fizz.

Ruritanian and strong, we looked like a fountain sculpture as they squirted drink specials into my mouth.

They emptied their guns and I fell to the ground. It was beautiful down there. There were mysterious muscles and eyes orbiting me. I felt myself hovering over grass like a field ghost. Felt warm leather against my thighs. A sweet, sweet roar. Frisky wind up my nostrils. I opened my eyes that I hadn’t known were closed and saw letters spelling perfect names over people’s heads as I passed them. I couldn’t see the gorgeous man’s name because his head was too close to mine. It was Matthew, but I never knew. Irving swayed by the tree, shrinking to a speck, then gone.

We passed a batch of trees. Dan Sless was there, standing in a zesty pose. We passed my work building. Priscilla Watson was looming at the window. We passed Jupiter where the gorgeous man said he worked. I saw the boy in the canoe, shirtless and ready. I saw Sam Diaz. He was behind us, gaining on us. He was riding something I couldn't make out. Only sudden amnesia can save this story, the Plot Twist Generator said. Sam Diaz was riding a Mustang. The horse or the car. The gorgeous man revved the engine. The horse sprung in a four-beat thud. We zipped away from its westward gallop in our own reckless groove.

MORNING AT THE U.S. CONSULATE, OFFICE OF STOLEN PASSPORTS

GAYLORD BREWER

By turn, we relay our sad tales to the officer,
are given numbers to place over hearts
and buzzed inside. Open at 9 a.m., by 9:20
the stark room clamors with violation:

“wedding ring on sidewalk” con, “bouquet
of roses” scam. We’re old hands at duplicity.
What a special evening on the beach/in the café/
strolling the plaza/at the dance. Until.

A small man with a bushy mustache
rises again and again on the toes of his sandals,
coiled with humiliation, his laughter
icicles. He would have killed the guy.

He would have spent the night in jail, for sure.
He *hopes* the guy contacts him for a ransom.
Come and visit Brooklyn, buddy.
His wife, eyes red-rimmed, studies the floor.

The heavy girl from Indiana, leaving tomorrow
for Portugal, then Scotland for school until
August, begins her story again, to someone new,
although we are corralled together.

The woman nods. Yes, his hands touching
what was most personal to you. Forms signed,
sworn. One by one, we buy back names
and faces, our country, are released to bright

late morning, first day after the other.
A deep breath almost celebratory. Aromas
of lunch. Who could eat since then?
Still, somehow, this sunlight warps the street.

That man there in the dark shirt, dawdling?
We hold close our dear identities,
step a little faster, locked and guarded
into a world revealed. That's just the way it is.

CAR TALK

ELOISA AMEZCUA

Peggy calls in. She's
looking for a man,

wants to put out an ad
for a car she doesn't own.

We listen
on another ride

home. She can date
the prospective buyer,

she says, needs help
deciding what car

would attract the right
person. Kind, funny,

adventurous. The way
we describe each other

CAR TALK

to strangers.

Tom and Ray think

it's a great idea, a 1959

Land Rover. We listen

closely, don't want to say
the wrong thing

after a night of arguing.

Say you brought it back

from Kenya. Say you were

on a safari. We laugh.

Say you'd hate to part

with the car

when he comes to check

it out. Say it's a lie,

that you're looking

for a man. Say you feel

bad for Peggy,

you hope she finds

what she deserves. Tom

and Ray say to put out

a wanted ad for the car

instead. Driver included.

Say something before

the next caller.

I think we mean
to say we're sorry.

When our small mouths
open, we sigh.

WADE AND THE SUMMER WOLF

SAMANTHA JO ATKINS

He's ugly but you've fucked ugly guys before. And anyway he has a newish forest-green truck out there in the parking lot, and his name is interesting. Wade. You've never met a Wade before.

Hi, you say, standing in the Dairy Queen line. I'm Chris. You don't shake his hand. You don't touch your chest, like you might've if his eyes weren't so small and so far apart.

Wade, he says, though you knew that already from his online profile. Is Chris short for Christina? he asks.

It's just Chris, you say, and then you order a Dilly Bar and pay for it with a couple of folded up dollar bills from the back pocket of your daisy dukes. You wore them because your legs have never been this skinny in your life and you were hoping he'd be hot. Besides, you're in Martinsville, Indiana, and you figured you'd blend right in with these dead tooth, backwoods racists in your denim cut-offs. You're from Cincinnati, where there's shit to do, or just outside of it anyway. And the only reason you came to the sticks is because your dad said it'd be good to get used to Indiana before your freshman year and because he had this distant cousin who needed a summer babysitter for her kids.

Wade doesn't order anything. Strike-fucking-one. How hard is it for a guy to figure out that girls don't want to eat in front of them if they aren't eating too? This dude's an idiot, and you're cold in these stupid ass-cheek shorts in the air conditioning. You take your Dilly Bar and go

sit by the window, facing the room, so you don't have to see your reflection sitting across from him in the glass like a mirror with the darkness outside.

He sits too and doesn't smile. Jesus—his face is so pale you can almost see the blue of his veins through his cheeks.

So, you say, while moving the cold, sweet milk around in your mouth, You're a photographer?

He nods, clasps his long, skinny fingers together on the tabletop.

Yeah. Mostly events, for an agency in Bloomington.

Why do you live here, then? you ask. Martinsville is an hour and a half away.

This where I'm from, he says.

Something about that doesn't add up to you. This guy had listed some decent books as his favorites on his page. Not to mention the photography thing. He shouldn't want to live *here*. He has to be stuck.

You're not from here though, he says. First smart thing he's said the whole time. So why are you here?

Babysitting, you tell him. I'm a summer nanny for one of the families over in that fancy division by the golf course.

He nods. You catch the last bit of chocolate coating in your mouth as it breaks from the Dilly Bar and falls. No other customers are here. You hear an employee laugh from the kitchen.

You're really pretty, he says. I'd like to put together a little portfolio for you. You know, do a photo shoot or something. He smiles. His front two teeth are too wide. His lips are too thick.

Yeah, you say, and shrug. Thanks. No way you're doing anything with this guy. In fact, the whole thing seems pathetic now—the way you had signed up for that site, the way you had had to Google the zip code you were in before being able to even search for anyone around. Stupid—the way you'd thought it'd be nice to have a surprise and not know what he looked like beforehand—the way you'd forced yourself not to look at his picture, afraid you might not like him anymore if you saw. You should've looked.

So you're nineteen, right? he asks, his gnarled, ropey fingers still wound into a ball on the table.

Yeah, you tell him, though you won't be nineteen for another two months. You?

He chuckles, as though he can't believe you'd ask.

I don't want to say, he says.

Well that's not sketchy at all.

He shrugs. God his shoulders are bony.

How old are you? you ask, cocking your head like, *I dare you not to tell me.*

Twenty-five, he says.

Damn. You thought he was younger with that wispy ass goatee.

He shrugs again. His eyes keep darting around the room, and it reminds you of that kid you met in boarding school that was so stretched out on anti-psychotics, or whatever they were, that his eyeballs literally shook in their sockets like speakers with the volume up.

Are you nervous or something? you ask, dragging the bare stick from the Dilly Bar along the top of the table.

You want to smoke a cigarette? he asks. Do you smoke?

Sometimes. And sure.

You leave the stick right on the table and walk behind him out the door. It's like walking into a furnace. You think he's going to stop outside the door and pull a pack from his pocket, but he keeps moving. He leads you through the wet sticky heat of Indiana summer to his truck and then does that thing so many country boys think is chivalrous and opens the door for you.

This is the moment you should refuse to smoke in his truck, tell him you want to be in the air, take the cigarette and smoke it and then say, Well Wade, it's been great but I don't think you're my type. Or, Wade, best of luck, I'll hit you up.

But you don't. You get in the truck. You smoke his nasty Pall Malls without filters and you watch the employees close the Dairy Queen and stare at the two of you as they walk back to their cars and drive away. You don't know what you're telling him—all kinds of things. You can't hear yourself. All you can hear is Matthew Minton from seventh grade telling you that he's going to break up with you if you don't give him head because Savannah said she'd go all the way whenever he wanted.

It was the fall and you'd just turned thirteen. You met Matt at a friend's birthday party and someone had dared you to kiss him and it had been the first kiss you'd ever had. He'd kissed you like they kissed on the movies, your entire mouth pressed flush against his entire mouth

and your entire tongue flipping around on his entire tongue. You'd taken him to church and your dad had said he seemed like a nice boy, even if he was from Texas, and he had asked you if Matt knew why his dad was in jail and you had said no even though you knew it was for drugs.

After church one night, your dad had offered to drive Matt home. This was after he told you about Savannah and after you'd prayed about it and after God had been disgusted that you'd even asked. This was after you'd decided not to do it and to tell him that he would just have to break up with you even though he was your first boyfriend ever and your first kiss and the first penis to press against you through blue jeans at the seventh grade dance. But then there you were, in his bedroom in that ratty trailer. There you are, and his mom and your dad are smoking cigarettes in the front room and he is standing with his back against the door and his hand on the button of his jeans.

But then you remember, you're really with Wade in that truck at Dairy Queen and you know that if you turn your head, you'll see the silhouette of his weak chin against the street light. You try to see it but instead, you're looking at Matthew Minton and his shriveled, gray penis hanging out of his fly. In the green truck, Wade's hand is working its way under and up your shirt now and somehow you're kissing him and his mouth is almost dusty with ashes. But all you feel is Matt's hand on the back of your head and then both his hands on either side of your head but you don't know what else he wants you to do. His penis is in your mouth and that's all you know about any of it, that once a penis has been placed inside you, you are no longer worthy of Heaven.

You don't fuck Wade that night at the Dairy Queen. You just let him feel you up and you writhe around in his passenger seat and manage to keep him away from your crotch. Then you drive your stupid ass back to the house you're living in, the big house with the kids near the country club, and you smoke a bowl in your private guest bathroom with the window open and the bathroom fan on. You think you'd have to be high as hell before you'd let Wade get your clothes off. But then, a few weeks later and after he has taken you to the movies twice and the fair once and let you smoke all his cigarettes, you figure it's time.

The first time you let him fuck you, you're sober as Wonder Bread.

You tell him you want to do it outside somewhere, in the grass, but on a blanket of course. You're not an animal. You tell him to bring a condom, though you doubt you'll use it, and you tell him to pick you up this time instead of meeting you, like a real date. He shows up at your dad's cousin's house at nine, after the kids have gone to sleep and you're on your "free time." Wade sits out in the driveway in that giant, ridiculous truck and you rush downstairs and out as quickly as you can so that he won't get any ideas about coming up to the front door. It makes you nauseated just thinking about telling anyone his name or that he's a local or that you're going on a date with him. If your dad found out you were hooking up with a stranger townie you'd have to hear about it from not only him but from his ignorant wife, Dollye, who spells her name with a goddamn E on the end for no reason that makes sense.

It's not just that Wade's rural, though, that's not it. And it's not just that he's freckled and boring—it's more than that, you decide as you climb up into the truck. It's all the little things put together—the whole picture. It's his flat smile and his Pall Mall breath. It's his chewed-off fingernails and the way they leave his fingertips nubby and naked like ten little pencil penises. It's his idiotic way of staring off into the sky, pretending to be thinking something existential. It's his way of bringing a camera everywhere, his way of wearing high-waist, faded Levi's, as though he's never cracked open a damn magazine in his life.

Let's go, you tell him, as soon as you're inside. Let's go fast before they decide they need me for the night.

They won't decide that but that's what you tell him anyway to get him moving. He's such a sap. He's playing an Oasis CD for God's sake.

I have this amazing cover of Wonderwall I want to play you later, he says.

Okay, you say, but you don't want to hear it. If you wanted to listen to Wonderwall, you'd listen to it alone in the thick, cradling bed the family is letting you sleep in. You'd listen to it with the lights off and think about that psycho Jaden with that half-Mexican permanent tan that you've been in love with since before you had an ass, since before you'd ever even seen Matt's dick in that trailer bedroom. The one who told you he'd take you to prom even though he was dating that virgin, Pentecostal, long-haired speaking-in-tongues wacko Evie.

You take Wade's pack of cigarettes from the center console, pack

the top against the butt of your hand because he never does, and fish a lighter out of your filthy beige cloth purse.

You're smoking more now that you're with me, he says and smiles and looks over at you like some dumb ass idiot dog.

This is where you should say, I'm not *with* you. But you don't. Of course you don't. He's supposed to take you to the quarries next weekend, and you want to jump off that fifty-foot cliff. Plus his friend who's going with you is going to have a bunch of weed. And besides, he still hasn't emailed any of the photos he's taken of you and that he's even promised he'll print and you've still got a month left in summer before college. What the hell are you going to do here for a month alone?

He's driving out into the middle of nowhere, though to be fair, everything around here feels like that to you. You thought your shithole suburb was the worst place to be growing up but you were wrong. It's official: The worst place to be is Martinsville, Indiana and the worst person to be with is Wade. He pulls over to the side of some road, trees all around.

Just through there is a clearing. Let's get out here, he says.

Your cigarette's done. You toss it out the window. Look at yourself in that rearview mirror. Your hair is stringy and the blonde dye is turning blue-green at the ends from spending so much time at the pool with the kids. Your own cheeks are freckled now and you can't get your cheekbones to look like Kate Moss's cheekbones no matter how little you eat.

Wade lays the blanket out on the short grass through the trees. It is a nice spot, shady and private, but you can see the sky, clear and blue above you. You take off your sandals and then your jeans and sit there on the ground with him, stripped down to your thong underwear. They're bright pink and you know how they make your bony hips stick out like a little girl's. That's what you want to look like, you realize, a sexy little girl. You sit cross-legged and twirl your hair around one finger, the way you think a sexy little girl might. You don't want to think about why you want to look like that. You don't want to think about anything.

You grab his thin, weak arms and pull his whole body toward you. So much for being a little girl. You kiss him hard on the lips, even though he's too much of a limp-dick to use his tongue the way a man's supposed to use his tongue in your mouth. He just flits it in, like a scared mole, poking its head out of the ground and then back in.

Take your shirt off, you tell him, in what you think is some kind of husky, sexy, Kate Moss voice, but which is probably, you know, a hoarse, twangy sound puffing out like smoke.

He leans back, jerking at his shirt like he's forgotten how shirts go on and off. He's nervous, his little stupid fucking hands are trembling. This is going to be fast.

You push his naked shoulders down to the blanket, try not to notice his rounded stomach and its wispy trail of dark hair leading from the belly button down. You make sure to adjust your face a little while you kiss him, making sure its disgust reads more like dominance. You unbutton his Levi's and slide them down to just the knee. You don't let him put a finger near your crotch. You don't know where his fingers have been.

Of course, he's ridiculously well hung. Every time. It's always the ugly ones or else the ones who already have a kid or the ones who call you Carly when your name's Chris. You rub it with your hands for a minute or two and then put it inside you. It's nice if you close your eyes and think about Jaden, but Wade is one of those guys who wants to try to put his hands on your hips and tell you how to move—as if you don't know—so you've got to finagle the whole thing so you can pin his arms down with your knees and shins and that means looking at him. It means noticing how happy he looks—how unabashedly happy—like you did in those pictures of yourself as a kid at King's Island. You have to look at him while you push him down and so you see how he's looking at you, like he's never seen anything before, like this is the first time his eyes have ever worked.

You're flattered at first, you admit it, but then terrified. Are you fucking another virgin? No—he's lasting too long for that. You don't want to but you look at his eyes again so that you can see what he's looking at. Then you figure it out. He's falling in love.

It's the tattoo on your chest, between your breasts. You forgot it was there, which surprises you because you thought you'd never forget the day you got it. Right after your eighteenth birthday, you'd gone into that tattoo place with no clue what to get and looked through all those "artist portfolios" that were really just binders full of four by six photographs in grimy plastic liner sheets. You were getting ready to leave when you saw it, drawn up and framed on the wall, and now sweet lost boys like Wade always fall for it.

It's the face of a wolf in detailed, thin lines of black and gray, howling at the moon behind her. Her snout points straight up so that when you look down at her, you imagine being able to see all her teeth and the length of her tongue and even the deep red shadow of her open throat. You keep her there close to you, singing madly in the night, and it's embarrassing suddenly, that he can see her too. She's the closest he's come to knowing anything about you.

You barely notice when he cums. Some of them like to pretend like it's no big deal, like it's some secret, subtle joy, like the way it feels when a caramel finally softens in your mouth. You prefer it when they're honest, though—when they're so overwhelmed by it their spine bucks them into a crunch and their face tightens and contorts as though in the last moment before death.

You sit there for a minute on top of him, letting him catch his breath, and then roll him over on top of you and tell him to take it out slow so that it doesn't spill on his blanket. You hop up, slip on your flip-flops and walk, naked, behind some brush.

Gotta pee, you tell him, remembering a month ago, before you'd met him, when you woke up on a Sunday morning after a party with a UTI so painful you had to go to the doctor. Some lady gyno in gray slacks had leaned over toward you then with a folder in her hands and asked, How often do you have unprotected sex? When you said, Never, she nodded, wrote something in the folder, and then demonstrated how far apart your legs should be when you pee after sex so that the urine would kill all the germs before they could crawl up your urethra.

Can I have one of your cigarettes? you ask as you put your clothes back on. He's still lying on the blanket on his back but he's pulled up his pants.

That was amazing, he says. I can't believe that just happened.

I thought that was the plan, you say. You rifle through your purse for a cigarette of your own. You don't have one.

But still, he says as he sits up and pulls his knees into his chest. Isn't this perfect?

A mosquito bites you on the arm. You've probably got bites all over your ass. His little squinty eyes look so genuine, like he's really living the true-life moment of an Oasis song. Poor guy. You almost wish you

could be what he is beginning to think you are. You put your arm around his shoulder and snuggle your cheek against him.

Yeah, you say, it's perfect.

But it makes you feel bad to say it. It feels like a tattoo gun is going wild on the inside of your stomach. You pull your arm away slowly and pinch the fat on your cheeks with your fat fucking fingers.

You cut him off before college starts. You write him a message online and then text him something to the same extent—this was fun but summer is over and you're moving away and you don't want anything serious etc. etc. You say, I'm sorry this didn't work out but what you really mean is, I'm sorry I made you think there was ever a "this" to work out in the first place. You don't answer when he tries to call you. You don't come out of the house when you see his truck parked down the street.

Wade doesn't let it go. The messages, which have been coming since September, move from angry to compelling to pitiful to angry again. His grandmother is dying. He's losing his apartment. He can't make his truck payment. Or else he has concert tickets for you. Or he finally put together a packet of your photos and he wants to give them to you in person or else he knows you were full of shit all along and he never trusted you ever. He leaves you voicemails, telling you that he's so sad he doesn't know what he will do, sometimes going further and saying he doesn't care if he lives or dies. The therapist you've started seeing at the university counseling center tells you to delete the voicemails before you even listen to them. She tells you to delete your profile off the site, to delete the messages. You delete and delete and delete like she says but you tell her, You know, he didn't rape me. She says, Who said he did?

No, you try to tell her in her office with the long windows facing the orange and yellow of fall leaves, I mean it was my idea. I'm the one who found him. It was my fault.

So it was your fault, she says. Move on.

Except she doesn't say this. You do, when you're brushing your teeth over the dorm room sink at three AM when you can't sleep. Your therapist says things like, Be gentle on yourself. And, Would you like a cup of tea? And, Do you think that might connect in some way with

Mom? She calls your mother “Mom,” as though your mother is the universal Mom, the imperial Mom, the Mom everyone knows. She calls Wade, Wade, and Jaden, Jaden, but she doesn’t call Matthew Minton, Matthew Minton, because fuck Matthew Minton. If you have to hear his name aloud at all, ever, you’ll throw that hot tea straight at the wall and the Styrofoam cup will explode with a pop.

You’re doing all right in college, getting A’s and B’s. You’re smoking weed and Camels. You’re giving hand jobs occasionally if you can’t pretend to be too drunk or if the guy you’re with isn’t taking drunk for an answer. Your hair is long and straight like a hippie. Your skin is clear from your new birth control pills.

One weekend, you get invited to a fraternity party at a roller skating rink and you’re so excited because you used to win speed skating races every Friday night as a kid. You even know how to skate backwards. The night of, you wear tight jeans and a tight shirt and thick socks but you don’t take your own roller skates. You don’t want people asking you why you own your own roller skates. You don’t want to have to tell them that you always thought you’d be able to go back to those Friday nights in some way. That you’d imagined some nice guy actually coming to your dorm room and seeing your skates in the bottom of your closet and telling you he also missed the nights of the races.

The roller skating party is exactly as you imagined it would be. One girl already had to go to the ER from drinking too much while skating. On the rink, gliding next to the quiet blonde guy who invited you and is now stomp-swaying to keep moving and keep his balance, you notice some of his frat brothers posing for pictures in front of the concession stands. The shaggy back-of-the-head hair on the photographer looks familiar and then you realize, it’s him. His T-shirt, faded black to gray, is worn thin at the sleeves and his long hands are straight out of an El Greco. It’s Wade.

You’re going to face it head on. You’re going to skate off the slick rink onto the flat carpet and stomp across the room to him and say something like, Hey. How’d you know I’d be here, Wade? But you decide you’ll skate around once more first, or maybe twice, and then by the time you’re on your third lap, you see him looking at you, standing by the water fountain. You look away—pretend you didn’t see him. But then it’s no use. He’s already walking toward you, wearing that same old

outfit you've seen him in so many times before, blue jeans and a khaki, button-up shirt. He looks like a fifty-year-old man in that, especially with his sinewy arms and rounding belly.

You try to keep laughing and smiling, skating next to this guy, Mark, who brought you in the first place. But Wade is at the railing now, with his camera up to his eye, snapping photo after photo in your direction.

Hey girl, says your friend Kim as she skates up next to you. That photographer dude is watching you hardcore, like creepy hardcore.

Yeah, you say, I mean I don't know. He's taking pictures.

Yeah but he's just standing there, following you with the camera.

I'll go talk to him, you say, and it comes out more sad than you mean it to.

Ew! Kim scrunches her face and looks at you, which knocks her off balance and nearly leads her to fall. She grabs your arm. He's like thirty.

I mean to tell him to stop, you add, and then you realize that Mark stopped skating a while back and has disappeared entirely.

You skate to the rail and stop.

Hey, Wade.

He looks up from his camera. He looks exactly the same as he did—as though he'd never been in the sun before he met you and as though he'd resolved to never even think about the outside since you left.

Why didn't you answer my calls or messages? he says. It comes out in a solid block of sentence, rough and heavy.

What are you supposed to tell him in response to that? Do you say the generic thing everyone says, the thing that will ease him off the cliff—It was just too hard. Or does that leave a crack open in the window? If it was just too hard then he'll think you have feelings for him and that there's a chance for him and that if he just slips in the right way, sideways or when you're not looking, he'll be able to revive you then and there.

But you don't want to tell him what you felt about those messages—especially the later ones. That every time you've gone somewhere new this semester you've kept an eye out for him. You don't remember him being crazy obsessive in the summer, so you don't know whether you were delusional then or if he's delusional now. The whole thing is wrapped in a joint somewhere back in July, and you're not going to give

him the satisfaction of knowing that from time to time you thought you saw his truck on campus and that in those moments your stomach twisted like a sponge, and you were scared, not quite of him but of something.

You've got to say something harsh and clear and at the same time, simple. A couple of girls standing behind him are eyeballing you and if you don't time the whole thing just right so that you can blow it off as a casual interaction later, you risk never being invited back to the frat. It's a shitty system, the sorority/frat world, and the girls are especially hard on guys without symmetrical faces. Still, this is where you find yourself, at a preppy school in the middle of Indiana, fitting in, sort of, with the future pharmacists and lawyers of America.

I thought it'd be better for both of us if I ended it clean, you finally say.

His face stays flat and expressionless as he raises his camera to his eye, aims it at you, and clicks you frozen forever like that.

You drink a lot afterward. More than what the skating rink allows, asking everybody if they're going to use their drink tickets and taking those that say No. You fall while playing limbo and take the limbo stick and the old man running the competition down with you. Mark tells you that you need to leave on the first round of party busses, rented for the night to take everyone back to campus. He walks you to the bus but doesn't ride it with you. Says he'll see you around. You curl into a ball in one of the seats, your head on your knees, thighs flat against your chest. The bus smells like gin and cologne and some frat asshole in the back screams, "Fuck you, driver! Fuck you!" the whole way back to campus.

Two months go by, Christmas jingle bells past, you're in spring semester, and you're always cold. You fall so hard on the ice on the sidewalk while going to class that your head whips back and hits the concrete. You lay stunned on the ground for a moment, looking up at a mockingly blue, clear sky. You've stopped smoking weed and cut back on the drinking for a while. Now you just smoke your cigarettes and eat plain rice cakes with stir-free almond butter slathered across the top. Your breath always smells like coffee now. Your eyes are always dark so that people are always asking you if you're sick but you're not sick, you're just tired. And you're gaining weight, slowly. You run a mile every day at the indoor track and then smoke at least half a pack of cigarettes to keep

from feeling hungry, but your ass is widening out again like an open umbrella, your arms thickening like pudding.

You're lonely as hell, so you go through rush to join a sorority. You put on plastic bullshit pearls to look like everyone else and it works because before too long you're in the chapter meetings that make you feel like a dark angel, all in black and wearing a glistening pin in a tiny room in the attic, holding hands. You're not supposed to tell anyone about the holding hands part, or the black, or the way you say the Lord's Prayer together dressed like that. You don't tell the sorority girls that you like saying the prayer because it lets you imagine that you're all chanting in unison to raise the dead from the center of the circle. You don't tell the sorority girls shit.

Wade stops sending you texts and messages. You don't see him or think about him or acknowledge that he ever even existed. In fact, you're too tired and depressed and fat to think about fucking or guys or any of that. You just get up every morning, crawl down from the top bunk of the bed you share with another sorority sister, and go to class, half the time without brushing your hair. When your sorority sisters talk about sex, you keep quiet and eat another rice cake, even when one of them asks if she's in risk of getting pregnant from giving a hand job.

Then there it is. In your mailbox. A letter from Wade. He knows where you live, his handwriting scrawled across the face of the envelope like a fifth grader addressed it. You would throw it away without opening it, but there's something hard inside. A flash drive, you feel through the paper. You're lonely and bored and no one pays attention to you anymore. You're fat and lazy and your breath stinks and maybe you deserve someone like Wade. So you put the flash drive in your computer and open the only file, named CHRIS, to find fifty-six JPGs—photos.

You expect to open them and find he's been following you. The first one will be an image of the back of your car peeling out of the Dairy Queen. The next, you think, will be you in a short denim skirt, holding a turkey leg at the fair. He will have taken photo after photo of you smiling, or pretending to smile. The clearing in the woods where you fucked. The house you lived in during the summer, all the lights off except the one from the bedroom you stayed in. And then picture after picture of you in roller skates, on campus, checking nervously over your shoulder on your walk to the sorority house.

But when you open the first photo, you find what you think at first is a husky dog behind the chain-link of a fence, its legs stilled in blurred motion, eyes focused ahead of it to something the photo doesn't capture. You open the next one, and it's the same dog, though this is unlike any husky you've seen before. It's taller, a man's legs in denim stand behind it, the head of the dog well past the knee in height. The fur is also different, you notice, blending from gray to black, to a full brown, bushy tail. You realize you're disappointed they aren't pictures of you and then you clench your fist and say, No! aloud, on accident. You cover your mouth with your hand. The next image zooms in on the dog's face and you get it—you understand what Wade wants you to see. The dog's snout is too long to be a dog's; its eyes are too thin.

The wolf lowers her head in image three and in the next her tongue is out and in the next what she is running toward is clear. Files six through fifty-two show the whole thing: the wolf devouring the head of a cow, her gray and black fur brushing the white and brown of the cow's cheek, the white bone of the wolf's teeth pulling red and purple cords from the bloody stump that once was a neck. In the last four photos, she stretches her filled body the width of the camera's angle. Her head is perked at image fifty-three, the fur around her mouth matted with blood, her spotless tongue hanging long from her mouth like a pink ribbon. At fifty-four, she yawns. Fifty-five, lays her head on her paws, the half-devoured cow's head lying on its side next to her. Then finally, at image fifty-six, she closes her eyes, and rests.

TZADIK NISTAR

PATRICK ROESLE

He found me in the ringing commotion of the parking lot at the Mount Hope Shopping Plaza. It was 8:30 on a gusty February evening. The snow had picked up again after an hour of sporadic flurries, and was starting to accumulate in patches on the sidewalk and asphalt where the salt hadn't been spread thoroughly enough. I was walking to my car to get my phone—a moment ago I'd realized I'd accidentally left it sitting on the passenger seat—and I noticed him teetering on the curb in front of Target like an unmoored scarecrow, conspicuous in spite of the throngs of people hurrying around him through the bone-biting cold. He must have seen me putting the phone into my coat pocket after I slammed and locked the door.

“Excuse me.”

It was reflexive—I stopped, turned, and made eye contact. I was snared. You know how it is: once they get you to stop and look them in the face, it's that much harder to put your head down and keep walking, and you're obligated to listen to them recite a prepared lie that always ends with a petition for a handout.

So I stood and tensed as he came trotting up to me. Even from a distance I could smell the cigarette and marijuana smoke saturating the fibers of his faded black sweatshirt. He was probably in his late thirties. Beneath his coarse features shone a kind of wrecked boyishness that might have been sweet before its corrosion.

“Hi. How are you?” He had a voice like cotton candy and gravel; like Michael Jackson if he’d been a chronic Lucky Strikes smoker. Without waiting for an answer, he asked, “Can I borrow your phone?”

His tone and manners were nothing but friendly—too friendly, I thought, and perceived in his whole simpering aspect the affected, over-acted geniality of a hustler or junkie.

“I’ll give it right back,” he said. “I just need to call my ride.”

I saw (or thought I saw) a sincerity in his smile and heard (or thought I heard) a note of vulnerability in his voice. Both might have been rehearsed, practiced, and perfected so as to more effectively extort favors from gullible passersby, but his act (if it was an act) was so well performed that for a moment the possibility hardly occurred to me.

So I handed over my phone, saying nothing, but looking him directly in the eye.

He took it without flinching. I blinked and glanced away. “Thanks. I’ll give it right back,” he repeated and cantered back to the sidewalk in front of Target to make the call from beneath the awning over the customer exit.

As soon as he left, I decided I didn’t believe his line about needing a ride. I watched him pace before the sliding doors with my phone against his ear and figured the call probably had something to do with drugs. Now I regretted allowing myself to be cajoled into facilitating it.

The wind stung my eyes. The shopping carts jangled past and the cars purred along through the falling snow, and the stranger paced before the yellow glowing glass doors. At intervals came lulls in the combined din of the wind, humming engines, and human bustle, and threads of the stranger’s conversation found my ear.

“...Such a long time, too long a time...voice seems so far away...when you’re not here, I can’t be okay. It’s not...listening, listening so hard for the...”

After a few minutes I went across the painted crosswalk, intending to nudge him into wrapping things up. I’ll confess to a sordid curiosity—he obviously wasn’t calling for a ride, and I wanted to know what it was *really* about.

“...S-so hard, so hard sometimes to keep on without...you tell me I can, it’s possible, I will. Tell me it’s possible. Tell me you’re...”

Sounded like I had him figured wrong but not too wrong. Now I

guessed he was talking to a rehab sponsor, and decided to give him another five minutes out of courtesy. I passed him and strolled down the sidewalk toward the entrance to Dick's Sporting Goods, one of eleven other stores sharing the sigmoidal brick edifice with Target. The salt crunched under my feet, the people on the sidewalk maundered in and out of my view, and I tried, without success, to remember what I had been thinking about before the stranger interrupted me.

By the time I returned to Target, he had wandered away from the entrance and was shuffling between two rows of red shopping carts with his back turned to me. As I drew closer, I realized the white spots on his shoulders weren't snowflakes, but holes where his T-shirt showed through his sweatshirt, which seemed uselessly thin.

"...Because I have to ask, I can't avoid facing...because what's the *joy* in it?...good for who...this life, such as it..."

The wind sliced through my coat. The snow was coming down harder than before, occulting the avenue beyond the parking lot.

"Suppose somebody were to ask—what are your convictions? What can I say?" he asked, speaking louder than before and pacing rapidly between the carts. "And then, suppose they were to ask—how do you *act* on those convictions?"

He swung around—I nearly sputtered "excuse me," but his gaze swept insensibly over me and he went on tramping back and forth from the carts to the windswept concourse.

"How is the work to begin when the resolve is uncertain? And who are we without the work?"

He switched hands; one took the phone, the other went over his eyes. The sliding glass doors opened and closed. The shoppers came and went. The cars whined to and fro along the drive, rolled up and down through the parking lot.

"Please, please...please...can't sustain...can't sustain myself, we can't sustain...please, just a shot, just a taste, a crumb...to see it again, see the..."

It would be useless trying to talk to him until he calmed down. I pushed through the wind and already-subsiding snow over the crosswalk toward my car, where I stood with my hands in my pockets and observed the stranger roving about, babbling and gesticulating like a schizophrenic arguing with the aliens in himself. The shopping carts

rattled, the engines groaned, and wind leapt to and fro in concussive gusts. The next thing he said, he said loudly and suddenly enough to jostle the attention of a woman in a Minnie Mouse jacket pushing a cart out through the sliding doors.

“If I can’t imagine the Kingdom of God, how can I help lay its foundations on Earth?”

A whack job, I thought.

“Who are we without the work?” he asked again, much more quietly than before.

The snow stopped. What had accumulated on the asphalt and sidewalk was already pulverized to slush. My socks were wet. The woman in the Minnie Mouse jacket trudged past me with her cart, snarling maledictions at the toddler in the child’s seat, who was in the throes of a hoarse, implacable tantrum. Three paces at her heels marched a boy, her son, maybe nine years old, who scratched and tore at the shrink wrap from an Xbox One copy of *Dragon Ball Xenoverse* with a peculiar, pursed expression of expectancy and world weariness. The plastic fell from his hands and was seized by the wind, which snapped it out of sight before it touched the pavement.

“Here.”

The stranger materialized in front of me with ghastly breath and a gentle smile, offering me my phone. I noticed the unwiped tears in his eyes, and the hair on my arms bristled.

“Thanks,” he said.

I nodded, but said nothing.

He turned and bounded back to the sidewalk, heedless of the cars braking to avoid hitting him. From there he went past the shopping carts, towards the incarnadine glow of the PHARMACY sign at edge of the sidewalk, and disappeared around the corner where a long row of halfhearted shrubs in a mulch bed followed the side of the building to the loading dock and the garbage-choked swamp behind it.

I checked the number he called and didn’t even recognize the area code. I don’t know why I did it—who was I expecting to talk to? What was I expecting to say? But I did it. I hit CALL.

After two rings, a hard female voice spoke. She said: “Your call cannot be completed as dialed. Please check the number and try again.”

A whack job. A waste of time, I thought, clenching my teeth.

I stomped through the slush back into Starbucks, a door down the sidewalk from Dick's. I'd left a vanilla latte and my laptop on a table there. I sat back down, brought the computer out of sleep mode, and looked at the last sentences of the *Dragon Ball Xenoverse* review I was typing up for GameFAQs:

I don't know why I'm so disappointed, or even SURPRISED. Even when we discount the stupefying repetitiveness of Story Mode and the camera issues there's just no excuse for in this day and age, Dragon Ball Xenoverse still only adds up to business as usual for DBZ console titles: a double dollop of brain dead button mashing and playbook fanservice for general audience twits and fanboys, when what the gaming arm of the franchise so desperately needs is just for ONCE to have a comprehensive, competently-designed fighter that can stand on its own merits and

But now I couldn't remember how I'd intended to finish the sentence.

Whack job, I thought again, and sipped my latte. It was already cold and something was missing.

PILGRIMAGE

TRACY HARRIS

Bob Dylan is Minnesota's most famous Jew. I wouldn't care, except that, like me, Dylan has had issues with both the state and the religion. For me, Judaism has been a lifelong cross to bear. I am 100 percent Jewish, but for reasons having to do with the WASP-y nature of life in suburban Boston in the 1960s and 70s, my father's education as a scientist, and my agnostic mother's contentious relationship with her kosher and cantankerous mother-in-law, my Jewishness was never a fact I advertised. It was an immutable accident of birth, like a bald spot or an eleventh toe; it was the part of my identity I did my best to conceal.

And if I was never comfortable being Jewish, being comfortable being Jewish in Minnesota has been even worse. I stand out here. People identify me as a Jew or hasten to point out that I am "not from here." They do this to a degree that I never experienced anywhere else I've lived, i.e., the East or West coasts, before we moved to St. Paul so that my husband could accept a teaching job. He, by the way, is a backslidden Baptist-Methodist-Unitarian and seems to fit right in; at least people don't always ask him to explain his origins.

Being a newcomer in Minnesota can be tough, even if you're just from neighboring Wisconsin or North Dakota. That fact is generally acknowledged and has given me some comfort. But by the time I passed my fiftieth birthday, I had lived in Minnesota almost twenty-five years, and still felt like an outsider. Feeling awkward about being Jewish, feel-

ing isolated and on display, was occupying a disproportionate amount of my time.

I had to figure out why. Minnesota has a history of anti-Semitism, but the worst incidents had taken place decades before. I was, moreover, not the only Jew around. There were synagogues and a Jewish theater company, and since 1978 an unbroken string of Jews had occupied one of the state's two U.S. Senate seats: Rudy Boschwitz, Paul Wellstone, Norm Coleman, Al Franken. I'd never had a Jewish senator until I moved to Minnesota; here I've had four. Pretty impressive for a state where Jews number less than 1 percent of the population. So I began to wonder: if Minnesota could produce a string of Jewish senators, were there other famous Jews from Minnesota?

As it turns out, Minnesota has not produced many celebrities of any religion. Judy Garland. Charles Lindbergh. Hubert Humphrey. We are quick to claim bragging rights, and our local press is quick to herald any Minnesotan who wins a small role in a movie or TV sitcom, or who happens to get caught in a natural disaster in an exotic location. I get this. The dearth of famous Minnesotans is like the dearth of famous Jewish athletes. Sandy Koufax (baseball). Max Baer (boxing). Mark Spitz (swimming). We make a lot of fuss over the few we have.

So when I learned that during its 1904 championship season the University of Minnesota football team was led by a Jewish quarterback, Sigmund "Siggy" Harris,¹ and that with Harris as quarterback the Gophers had outscored their opponents 725-12, including a 146-0 victory over Grinnell, it piqued my interest. An athlete, a Minnesotan, and a Jew. And, coincidentally, a Harris. If Siggy Harris had made a name for himself more than a hundred years ago, there might be others, not athletes necessarily, but other famous Jewish Minnesotans.

As it turned out, besides Siggy and the senators, there weren't all that many; and truth be told, the senators didn't excite me that much. Three of the four were not even Minnesotan, i.e., they had not been born here. Rudy and Norm were not all that famous either, at least not outside the state. Paul Wellstone was better known, as a renegade liberal and the only senator to oppose our entry into the Iraq war, but he, too, had grown up outside of Minnesota. The most famous was probably Al Franken, the lone Minnesota native in the group and the first Saturday Night Live alum to be elected to the U.S. Senate. So far I'd

found a turn of the century football hero and a comic-turned-politician. I was looking for more: a mega-star with real Minnesota roots and that authentic Jewish *je ne sais quoi*. I was looking for Dylan.

It scarcely needs saying that only Dylan could have put the Jewish origin story in Minnesota. The song is “Highway 61 Revisited.” Highway 61 is the road through Duluth, the port city on the edge of Lake Superior where Dylan was born. After it goes through Duluth, it hugs the Lake Superior shoreline for 150 miles to the Canadian border. If you head south from Duluth, 61 finds the Mississippi and follows it through the Delta all the way to New Orleans.

It seems strange to place one of the most intense moments of the Old Testament on that highway, but that’s what Dylan did in that song’s first verse. I knew the Bible story long before I knew Dylan’s lyrics: God commands Abraham to prove his faith by sacrificing his son; Abraham, knife poised above the infant Isaac, is about to satisfy God’s command when God swoops in and, satisfied with Abraham’s show of faith, accepts a sheep in place of Abraham’s baby boy. Horrific, really, in that Old Testament way, but the story is central to Jewish theology and practice. It’s the source of the Jewish people’s covenant with God; it’s why Jews circumcise their sons. And in Dylan’s telling of Judaism’s seminal narrative, God commands Abraham to do the killing out on Highway 61.

I didn’t know the song until I started researching Dylan. When I read those lyrics, I was impressed: Dylan was enough of a Jew to know his way around the Book of Genesis and enough of a Minnesotan to connect Genesis with Highway 61. The connection was so intriguing that I decided to take a trip. Not to Duluth, where Dylan had been born Robert Allen Zimmerman on May 24, 1941. I needed to go inland to Hibbing, a small city deep in Minnesota’s North Country. Dylan’s family moved there when he was six; it is the town where he grew up as a Minnesotan and a Jew.

I set out on a sunny day last summer. It was mid-week so the traffic was light. I had a room reserved at the Super 8 Motel, a Toyota Yaris that gets forty miles per gallon on the highway, and I was headed north on I-35. You don’t actually take Highway 61 to get to Hibbing. Instead you veer left about twenty miles short of Duluth and take Highway 33

toward the Iron Range. There's not a whole lot up there, at least not when you're outside of the small cities that are strewn among the region's lakes and pines. Its junkyards and slag heaps. I counted five dead deer during the four hundred-mile round trip. There's a Frank Lloyd Wright gas station in Cloquet, a giant fiberglass loon floating on Silver Lake in Virginia, and there's Hibbing, the boyhood home of Dylan.

Minnesota is not all prairies and cornfields. The northern half of the state is coniferous forest, the land where legendary lumberman Paul Bunyan is said to have left the footprints that became so many of our 10,000 lakes. The forest bumps up against the shoreline of Lake Superior, biggest of the great lakes, the place I go to pretend I'm looking at the ocean when I get homesick for New England. Years ago another New Englander, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, wrote about Lake Superior using the native Ojibwe word *gichigami*, to identify the shining big sea water. There is not much of an Ojibwe presence along the shore these days, but you can see the ghost of the old ways in the canoes—usually fiberglass, not birchbark or dugout—strapped to the roofs of about every fourth car that goes by during the tourist season.

Minnesota's Iron Range lies inland from Lake Superior, through the coniferous forest. This northeast region of Minnesota has been one of the United States' foremost mining regions since the late nineteenth century, at first producing high quality hematite iron ore, then switching to lower-grade taconite in the 1950s. Underground mines existed early, but most of the ore was, and still is, taken from open pit mines. The ore is then transported by open train cars to massive ore docks along Lake Superior and from there shipped east to the steel mills for processing. My destination, Hibbing, was the center of the mining region and home to the world's biggest open pit iron ore mine.

I had been to Hibbing years before with my husband, Will. We'd toured the underground mine at nearby Tower-Soudan and seen the open pit mine just outside of town. It's impressive, a little like looking at the Grand Canyon, only not as big, not as deep, not as colorful, and filled with trucks and other machinery because the mine is still in operation. But this time I was headed to downtown Hibbing for the Bob Dylan walking tour (self-guided), the library exhibit, and dinner at Zimmy's, the Dylan-themed restaurant on Hibbing's main street.

I would have been playing a Dylan CD in the car if I'd owned one. I came of age a decade or so after the folk-protest era, and truth is I would pick Joan Baez over Dylan in a heartbeat. My favorite Dylan song, if I were forced to choose, would be the one with the lyric about not needing a weatherman to know which way the wind blows. I had learned to play "Mr. Tambourine Man" in my 8th grade guitar class but didn't learn Dylan had written it until recently, when I was googling "popular Bob Dylan songs." That's when I learned that the name of the weatherman song is "Subterranean Homesick Blues." Which is kind of interesting, considering that the Hull-Rust-Mahoning Mine, that huge hole in the earth, lies just outside of Dylan's hometown.

Despite my lack of interest in his music, I was feeling close to Dylan as I headed up the highway. He was, after all, one of my people. He'd been stuck in Minnesota like I was. What had being Jewish in Minnesota been like for him? Had he felt alienated and stigmatized, like I did? Did being born here make things better or worse? What about the span of time that separated us? Dylan grew up in the 1940s and 50s. I didn't move to Minnesota until the mid-80s, and I lived in the city; he lived up on the Range.

Dylan might have had it better. Until the past few decades brought waves of Asian and African immigrants to Minneapolis and St. Paul, the Range was the most diverse area in Minnesota, with Italians, Poles, Slovenes, Finns, Slavs, and, apparently, Jews joining Minnesota's usual mix of Germans, Scandinavians and Yankees. It was also the most politically radical place in the state, home of militant labor movements and still a Democratic stronghold. Maybe the Zimmerman family had been better off in Hibbing than they would have been in the Twin Cities. Or maybe Dylan, like me, had felt like an outsider here, and maybe that feeling was what made him such an iconoclast, a voice of protest.

I realized that Hibbing's two-mile walking tour would not necessarily answer all my questions, but I barreled north impelled by a sense of mission. Dylan had lived here; he was enough of a Minnesotan and a Jew to put crazy old Abraham on the Lake Superior shore. He was, like me, an ambivalent Jew, but he was also by birth a real Minnesotan. His identity had its roots here; maybe I had a connection to this place, too.

I don't want to get all far-out and mystical, but, although I'd driven that stretch of highway dozens of times before, that day, for the first

time, I began to feel it. It started with the billboards. A lot of them would make sense only to a Minnesotan; and they were making sense to me. Like the billboard that said, “Would you use your last Summit to batter your walleye?” Anyone could discern from the picture of a beer bottle accompanying the text that Summit is one of our local brews. But would people from out-of-state know what a walleye is? I knew! It’s a fish, one that’s caught all over the state, I think. I’ve never actually gone fishing, and had never heard of walleye before I moved here. But I’ve learned. I have become enough of a Minnesotan to get that billboard.

And it kept going, as if I had entered some state of heightened perception. A sign for Will Steger mukluks. Mukluks are those soft winter boots traditionally made of reindeer skin. Will Steger is a Minnesota-born explorer who made the first confirmed dogsled journey to the North Pole in 1986. I do not own mukluks, and I do not know Will Steger, but since moving here I have gone dog-sledding twice, and I have been on at least one hike with a woman—from the Iron Range—who worked part-time for Will Steger at one of his expedition centers.

I had not even left the exurbs, and I was feeling like a Minnesota insider. Could it be I was drawn to Dylan because we were both Minnesotans, not because we were both Jewish?

Contemplating that cosmic conundrum would have to wait because I was making a side trip on the way to Hibbing. Paul Wellstone, U.S. Senator from Minnesota from 1991 through 2002, was just days short of likely election to his third term when a small plane in which he, his wife, daughter, and several campaign staffers were flying crashed in the woods near Eveleth, Minnesota. Everyone in the plane was killed. The accident occurred on October 25, 2002, just eleven days before the election. Minnesota elder statesman Walter Mondale stepped in as the Democratic candidate, but Republican Norm Coleman won the election.

There is a memorial to Wellstone and his fellow travelers in the woods outside of Eveleth, about two miles from where the plane actually crashed. The turnoff is marked from the highway, and there’s a small parking lot by the side of the road. A trail to the left leads to a memorial site.

About a quarter-mile down the path is a polished rock, maybe four feet high, where people have left campaign buttons, a few flowers, and

lots of small stones. That's the Jewish tradition—we leave stones at gravesites. The marker for Wellstone and his wife, Sheila, is the biggest, but the trail continues in a circle, with similar headstones commemorating the others who were lost on the flight.

Further along, signs—waist-high, like small tables but tilted upward—tell the story of Wellstone's life. Born in Washington, DC, and a graduate of the University of North Carolina, Wellstone came to Minnesota to teach political science at Carleton College. That's exactly why we came here, except that my husband teaches chemistry at Carleton. Will overlapped with Wellstone for about three years before Wellstone's first campaign for the U.S. Senate, and it's a small enough school that they'd met several times. It seemed incredible—insider-y, even—that, as newcomers to the state, we sort of knew one of our U.S. Senators.

Wellstone was the son of Ukrainian Jewish immigrants but, like me, was not religious, and, like me, had married a non-Jew. This became an issue in his first run for Senate, when his opponent, Minnesota's first Jewish Senator, Republican Rudy Boschwitz, made a last-ditch and grossly miscalculated effort to garner votes by accusing Wellstone of being a bad Jew and failing to raise his children within the faith.

Two senatorial candidates duking it out over who had was the better Jew was an unlikely episode for typically reserved and Nordic Minnesota. The election had initially been Boschwitz's to lose and lose he did, despite outspending Wellstone by a seven to one margin. The state had been charmed by Wellstone's integrity, populism and his quirky campaign style. Boschwitz's ugly personal attack sealed the deal, particularly when Wellstone responded by suggesting that perhaps Boschwitz had a problem with Christians. The dust-up also showed that Minnesota's small population of Jews could be as internally divisive as any group of people, over the Boschwitz letter as well as over larger issues such as support for Israel and inter-marriage.²

Wellstone's early death enshrined him as a martyr, saint and paragon of Minnesota liberalism. More than ten years later, Wellstone bumper stickers cling to our cars, his legacy clings to our hearts. His successor, Norm Coleman, was a Jew who had converted in the late 1990s from Democrat to Republican: one of us, but nothing to brag about. Coleman was defeated by Al Franken in 2008, leaving Minnesota's Jewish senatorial dynasty intact.

A scrubby patch of woods off an obscure highway in northern Minnesota is not the most obvious place for a memorial to a fallen Jewish hero. I have been to Yad Vashem, the holocaust memorial in Jerusalem; to Dachau; to the Holocaust memorial in Paris and the museum in Washington, DC. Wellstone's memorial was like him: scrappy, low-budget, tied to the land, and a natural outgrowth of his gift for connecting with regular people. I would have sat and contemplated longer, watching the yellow monarch butterflies swarming and alighting among the thin, white pines and the glistening memorial stones; but I was being eaten alive by mosquitoes. I was enough of a Minnesotan to recognize that state-wide signal for time to move on.

The area around Hibbing is rural but not especially beautiful, a hard-worked landscape that isn't out to impress anyone. The road toward town is flat with plenty of space; the trees have mostly been lumbered, and the hills that form the actual Iron Range are in the distance. Whatever Hibbing had going on was right there in front of me. I passed Range Regional Airport: the LED display on the main entry was on, and there was a car or two circling the parking lot. I saw a couple of small planes out back behind the terminal building. As I got closer to Hibbing there were warehouses, junkyards, some restaurants and shops open for business. A new community college stands just outside of town along with a couple of prosperous looking strip malls. No Starbucks, but fast-food tacos and some kind of steak-and-shakes. The Range has seen better days, but it's not done yet.

The approach to downtown looked pretty good. The main road, Howard Ave., was adorned with flags and hanging baskets filled with purple and white flowers that someone was keeping planted and watered. There were some nice looking old brick buildings, too. Many of the storefronts were empty, but more were open for business. I was not the only person downtown when I arrived a little after noon and wandered into The Brickyard for lunch. It had high ceilings and clean, laminated menus. I ordered a grilled chicken sandwich and sat back with my iced tea. I'd been to a lot of places a lot grimmer than Hibbing.

The walking tour started right downtown, so I didn't even need to move my car after lunch. The tour had been developed by staff at the Hibbing Public Library and included stops such as the bowling alley

where Bob had won a competition—bowling, not music—as part of a group called the “Gutter Boys,” the Zimmerman family’s home, the town synagogue, and the downtown hotel where the family had hosted the celebration for young Bob’s bar mitzvah. Fourteen stops in three pages, printed off the City of Hibbing website.

The Hibbing Bowling Center was closed, so I couldn’t actually see the photograph of Bob with the Gutter Boys. His father’s shop, Zimmerman Furniture and Electric, was right next door to the lanes but it is now Excel Business Systems. I saw the former café building where Bob would order cherry pie à la mode after school, the department store where his mother used to work, the music shop where Bob used to buy sheet music and records.

For many the tour highlight is Dylan’s family home, but for me it was the former Agudath Achim Synagogue, where the Zimmerman family worshipped and where young Bobby Zimmerman was bar mitzva-hed. Located on a tree-lined residential street and about the same size as the surrounding houses, the synagogue does not stand out. You have to look closely to notice that the boarded up windows are not like those of a regular house. They are lancet shaped, tall and thin, curving to a point at the top. If Agudath Achim resembled a house of worship at all, with its narrow pointed windows and white wood exterior, it looked more like a church.

It turned out that’s exactly what it was. The Jewish congregation of Hibbing had purchased the Swedish Evangelical Emanuel Lutheran church building in 1922, removed the steeple and had the building moved from North Hibbing to its location near downtown. The building functioned as a synagogue until the 1980s.³ Even in its heyday it did not support full-time clergy, but according to the town librarians, the Zimmerman family would attend services there whenever the visiting rabbi came from Duluth.⁴

I was struck by how well the tiny synagogue blended into this ordinary Hibbing street. Small town Jews learn to adapt, of course. As diverse as the Iron Range was, it was not above ordinary prejudice and anti-Semitism. Dylan’s father, for example, loved to play golf but as a Jew he was not allowed to play at the nearby Mesabi Country Club.⁵ I’m not saying that the Jews of Hibbing were trying to deceive anyone by worshipping in a converted Lutheran church, but the symbolism is telling.

I certainly know what it feels like to live in this state and want to blend. The early Jews violated the dietary rules and ate pork because it was the only meat available during the long Minnesota winters. You do what you have to do to get through the winter here; I'm sure the Zimmermans and their fellow congregants were no exception. And their willingness to be flexible was not limited to the winter. Neil Schwartz, a classmate of Dylan's at Agudath Achim, recalls at least one Friday night service that ended early so that the congregation's six high school students could leave for a Hibbing High football game.⁶

Dylan's grade school has been rebuilt, but Hibbing High School is still standing. So too is the Zimmerman family home, just a few blocks from downtown. I felt a little creepy taking a picture of the house. But it's brightly painted, as if to invite attention. Seventh Avenue, the street where it's located, has been renamed "Bob Dylan Drive," and I assured myself that I was not the first gawker the current residents had had to endure.

Back on the main street I approached the Androy Hotel, former "Queen of the Iron Range" and Hibbing's former showplace. I couldn't go inside the Androy because, after being closed for several decades starting in the late 1970s, it re-opened as senior citizen housing; although it is on the National Register of Historic Places, is not open for tourists, be they Dylan fans, curious Jews, or architecture buffs.

The Androy is where Bob's bar mitzvah celebration took place; approximately four hundred guests attended the party.⁷ That is a stunning number of people, especially considering that there were only thirty to forty Jewish families in Hibbing back then.⁸ Dylan's bar mitzvah was bigger than any of my cousins' bar mitzvahs, bigger than any wedding I've ever attended.

Although the number of guests is impressive, I was raised to think of bar mitzvahs as excuses for big fancy parties, so I'm not totally surprised at this demonstration of excess. Harder to picture is the old Jewish rabbi the community brought to town to give Hebrew lessons to young Bob and presumably the other Jewish boys who were nearing bar mitzvah age at the time. In Dylan's own words, "Suddenly a rabbi showed up under strange circumstances for only a year. He and his wife got off the bus in the middle of winter...He was an old man from Brook-

lyn who had a white beard and wore a black hat and black clothes. They put him upstairs above where I used to hang out...” Hebrew lessons, according to Dylan, were one-on-one: “I used to go up there every day to learn this stuff, either after school or after dinner. After studying with him an hour or so, I’d come down and boogie.”⁹

It’s hard to picture twelve- or thirteen-year-old Dylan, doing his post-Hebrew-lesson boogie at Hibbing’s L & B café, the “hangout” below the rabbi’s apartment. I don’t doubt Dylan’s description of his Hebrew school experience, and the arrival of the elderly, bearded Rev. Reuven Maier that year in Hibbing has been independently confirmed. But Dylan told that story in a 1985 interview. By then he was an American icon and an international celebrity in addition to being a Minnesotan and a Jew. The image of the boogieing bar mitzvah boy was likely at least part embellishment.

On the other hand, I understand that Dylan might have felt some genuine ambivalence about being Jewish and might have wanted to downplay the whole bar mitzvah experience. In that same interview, Dylan described Rev. Maier as “an embarrassment” to Hibbing’s Jews, all of whom, according to Dylan, shaved their beards and worked on Saturdays.¹⁰ Bob Dylan—embarrassed about being Jewish? I am right there with him, as I am when I read that just a few years after his bar mitzvah, when Dylan first moved to New York, he tried to hide his Jewishness. The reason, according to one commentator, was perhaps Dylan’s “desire for a story more real, exciting, romantic, and gritty” than the truth of his youth in Hibbing.¹¹ Or maybe he was just embarrassed.

The Androy Hotel is the last stop on the walking tour. I looked around the mostly empty streets of downtown Hibbing and tried to imagine Bob’s four hundred friends and relatives celebrating his special day back in 1954. Passers-by must have heard “Hava Nagila” streaming out of the windows. It occurred to me that four hundred people would never have fit in tiny Agudath Achim synagogue to attend the actual bar mitzvah ceremony. I wondered how many of the guests actually heard young Robert, the bar mitzvah boy, read from the Torah, how many heard the rabbi declare that Robert was now a “man,” responsible for participating as an adult in Jewish religious life. In my family, it was considered bad form to skip the ceremony, much as we all wanted to and even though it could drag on for hours. But you couldn’t just show up

for the party afterwards. I thought about that house-sized synagogue building several blocks away on a residential side street and wondered what the etiquette was in Hibbing's Jewish community sixty years ago.

There were no mosquitoes as I walked through town, but it was hot and my hands were sticky from clutching the walking tour print-out. I was eager for the air-conditioned comfort of the library's Dylan Collection. It did not disappoint. The library is new and bright; signs directed me downstairs to the Dylan Collection. The librarian had to open the locked door for me, but she was casual about letting me into the sanctum. "Just close it behind you on the way out," she instructed.

It's a shame that I'm not a bigger fan because the large room contains an impressive collection of concert posters, album covers, and other Dylan memorabilia, including guitars, original hand-typed lyrics, and a copy of Dylan's birth certificate. What attracted me most was the life-sized paper mache sculpture of the artist, complete with paper mache guitar and harmonica. This was the photo op I'd been looking for; unfortunately I didn't know how to do a self-timed shot with my phone. But my karma was good—a group of pierced young people stumbled in and I am not shy.

"Can I ask you guys to do something dorky for me?" I said, setting my phone to camera.

"Totally," one of them replied, from beneath a ragged mat of dark, or unwashed, blonde hair. I stood by the statue and smiled. Just another crazy middle-aged lady, but the picture came out great.

The kids stumbled out before I was done. Maybe they didn't want to intrude on my special time with Dylan, which was thoughtful of them. But I was ready to leave; it was almost time for dinner.

Zimmy's is the Disneyland of Dylan restaurants. Built into a converted trolley car station right downtown on Howard Avenue, it is of course named for Robert Zimmerman, as Dylan was known back when he lived in town. The sign outside showed a picture of young Bob playing guitar. Inside, Zimmy's is crammed with Dylan memorabilia. Concert posters, album covers, "Highway 61" road signs, guitars; I think everything was authentic, but the menu provided no information about how it was all collected.

I would have asked one of the staff, but there's wasn't a host on duty and the waitresses were running around like crazy. Jimmy's was packed. The "Sam Miltich Jazz Trio" had been playing since 5:00 p.m. and it was "Sushi Night." I found a table in the bar because every seat in the dining room was taken. It must have been the jazz trio; I couldn't believe sushi night would draw that big of a crowd.

Jimmy's menu was pretty upscale. There were some familiar Minnesota dishes: wild rice soup, deep fried cheese curds, and a Juicy Lucy which, as a Minnesotan I know is a hamburger stuffed with cheese. I had been hoping for something like a Tangled-Up-In-Blue-Cheese Burger, but Jimmy's did not offer Dylan-themed food to go along with the décor. The best I could do was potato pancakes which I ordered as an appetizer. This must be a subtle tribute to Dylan's Jewish background, I assumed, sort of like the latkes young Bob might have eaten at Chanukah.

Sort of, but not exactly. I don't know if the Zimmermans kept kosher, but I'm reasonably confident they did not garnish their latkes with sour cream and bacon, like the pancakes I was served at Jimmy's. Still, they were delicious, and the perfect complement to my Seafood Louis salad, a (non-kosher) shellfish extravaganza that I also doubt Mrs. Zimmerman would have served.

It's hard to know how religious the Zimmermans were. Bob's parents were active in Jewish life, at the synagogue and with organizations such as B'nai Brith and Hadassah. Bob spent several summers at Jewish camp, and his bar mitzvah was reportedly the largest in Hibbing's history.¹² But Dylan has said that he never felt Jewish, that he never had much of a Jewish background.¹³ I don't quite understand how he can make this claim, and it's been posited that some of his denial was not against his religion but against the insularity of having grown up in a small Minnesota town.¹⁴ I get that. These days when I'm traveling and people ask where I'm from, I have to say St. Paul, my home of almost thirty years, but I always add that I grew up on the East Coast. Maybe I have more in common with Dylan than I thought.

Dylan also went through an extended and very public Christian phase beginning in the 1970s, about the time I was going to church with my friend Maribeth and reading a chapter a day of the New Testament so that Jesus would help me make the ninth-grade cheerleading squad.

Dylan's conversion doubtless had a deeper meaning, although I don't know what his specific motivations were. I do know that despite the bar mitzvah, despite having parents who were active in the Jewish community, Dylan struggled with being Jewish. As I have.

Judaism can be a weight: a lot of history, and suffering, and if you follow all the rules, a lot of inconvenient restrictions and dietary requirements as well. I hear that people find meaning in the practice, comfort in the community, but to me Judaism has always seemed kind of dark and sad. The religion, after all, starts with an act of near-infanticide and continues through a history of expulsions, persecution and nearly-successful genocide. Who would choose to be part of that?

Neither Dylan nor I chose Judaism; we entered that covenant through the circumstances of our births. You can't escape it. I tried and it seems that on some level Dylan tried, too. In recent years I have, if not adopted the beliefs and practices, at least tried to come to terms with my Jewish identity. Dylan meanwhile has reportedly returned to some degree of Jewish observance; his sons have been bar mitzvahed, which is more than I managed to accomplish for my son. Dylan has also given the world the music and poetry of his religious journey. His work has been analyzed to death by fans and scholars seeking to establish, among other things, the extent to which it reflects any Jewish influence. There's a lot more allusion to Judaism in Dylan's work than "Highway 61," that song about Abraham. I leave all that to the scholars. As I've said, as far as Dylan's music, I've never been the hugest fan.

I will, however, note that despite the controversy surrounding Dylan and religion, Jews, like Minnesotans, seem eager to claim him. Dylan's actual religious beliefs may remain a mystery, but as it turns out, that doesn't matter. As I learned early on, being a Jew has little to do with what you do or do not believe. It's an identity, a function of your birth. And as a religion, Judaism focuses more on action than on faith, which has allowed at least one Jewish writer to claim that "[a]s a social critic, absorber and conveyor of culture and as a spiritual seeker, the former Bobby Zimmerman has embodied some of Judaism's most important traits and values."¹⁵

Dylan may be Minnesota's greatest Jewish luminary but he will not necessarily be our last. More than a century after football player Siggys Harris led

the Gophers to a national championship, another Jewish athlete from Minnesota is making his mark. Evan Kauffman, born in Plymouth, just outside of Minneapolis, is a graduate of local Robbinsdale High School, former forward on the University of Minnesota hockey team, and in 2012 was the second highest scorer for the DEG Metro Stars of the German professional hockey league. Kauffman is one of the few Jews to represent Germany in elite international sports since World War II.

Kauffman is also the grandson of a Holocaust survivor; and two of his great-grandparents died in the concentration camps. “Obviously, you never want to forget,” he told the *New York Times* in an interview last year. Kauffman’s father said he thought “long and hard” about his son’s decision to play for Germany, before coming to accept it and concluding that his father, the Auschwitz survivor, would have been proud of his grandson Evan’s success.¹⁶

You can’t escape it. Judaism is heavy, even if you’re just a kid from Minnesota who plays hockey and has the chance to play professionally in Europe. But maybe I’ve made being Jewish, and being Jewish in Minnesota, heavier than it’s had to be. Kauffman said he feels “a little more loyalty” to Germany with each year he spends on the team. It is, after all, his new home, and everybody, including the Germans, deserves a second chance.

Minnesota, after almost thirty years, is more than a new home to me. It’s where I’ve lived my adult life, raised my children, worked in most of my careers. It has not always felt like home, but whether I like it or not it has become part of who I am. I can’t hide from Minnesota, any more than I can hide from the fact that I am Jewish.

Interestingly, in contrast to his somewhat deprecatory statements about Judaism, Dylan does not dismiss the significance of the place where he spent his childhood.¹⁷ He returns to Minnesota from time to time, to give concerts in the Twin Cities and even up in Duluth. His feelings seem mixed: Hibbing has been celebrating Dylan Days since 2001 but Dylan has never attended. But in Minnesota we are proud to claim him: whatever one thinks of his music we don’t have many celebrities and we’ll take whomever we can get.

Evan Kauffman is too young to be enshrined in Minnesota’s Hockey Hall of Fame, just down the road from Hibbing, so I headed back to St. Paul going the long way, through Duluth. Highway 61 has been labeled

the “Bob Dylan Highway” as it goes through town. It’s always been my favorite road in the state, not because of Dylan, but because it travels along Lake Superior. It’s the best part of Minnesota. I know the lake is not the ocean. There is no smell of salt, no sand, no seashells. But as the sun rises and falls, and as the clouds gather and disperse, the water goes from blue to gray to silver; and once you get past the harbor, the horizon seems infinite.

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Notes

1. "Harris, Sig"
2. Dylan
3. *McGrath 253-54*
4. "Synagogue Buildings on the Minnesota Iron Range"
5. "Hibbing's Bob Dylan Walk"
6. Shelton 37
7. Muchin
8. "Hibbing's Bob Dylan Walk"
9. Shelton. 37
10. Muchin
11. Muchin
12. Yudelson
13. "Bob Dylan," Jewish Virtual Library
14. Muchin
15. Yudelson
16. Muchin
17. Longman
18. Muchin

IT'S SUMMER, BUT WE CAN FIND PLENTY OF WAYS NOT TO CARE

SIOBHAN PHILLIPS

about money. We can stay effortless. Informal attire, one evening at seven, having decided the bar is boring this time, that we should come over and share some take out. Or cook, we can cook. And meanwhile adore this balcony wirework, this brick. Others appear. We didn't know we were *here* this weekend. Our car broke down, we explain. No travel. We charged a repair. We can commiserate—serpentine belts. Volunteer for a chore in the kitchen, a corkscrew. We can inquire if the wine's any good, not bad, consulting, compare California, New Zealand, and France—France with the Tour ending soon? We can ask who's leading. He didn't retire? We assumed he retired. He endorses ridiculous gear. We can set out a stub-handled blade with some cheese and ask where did we find such a piece. We can sigh that particular store had to close. We don't see hand-made anymore, we agree. We can muse about knives—it's a craft—the bizarre phase where our father (a normally bored engineer) ordered one from the war? We can perch in uncomfortable chairs and pass the fattoush, the drumsticks, and talk about war or wars—the refugee stare; the billions per year, their estimate? Liars. We can mention our boss's au pair:

Ukrainian. Thin as this bean sprout and yet she'll implore
the children, *eat up*. We can imitate accents, admire
her for getting the hang of such slang phrases; we can demur
from ice cream and bourbon and mention how much we revere
those who take on the task, those kids. We'd be tearing our hair.
And then we can talk about people, a move, an affair,
a divorce, a job; about those who are worthy of more
we can swear, than they have, better posts, boys, addresses, a higher
salary, we can attest. Over coffee, we spar
to embellish acquaintances' loveliness. Then we are clear,
sure.

But not in the darkness. Not where the air
glows above concrete, not higher up where obscure
planets slide down a cloud. Not where a spire
presses the mouth of the fading sky like a scar,
like a warning. Hush. It is never enough. What is there
in the world is indifferent, all of it near us but far
away, like money. Ignore it. Try not to care.

LIKE GLADIATORS

DAVON LOEB

But it could have been the summer heat, we all sitting around, dehydrated, with cottonmouth and skin dried and gray and ashen, and all our bodies were hot and sticky and brined—like a summer camp, bunked and communal and almost eating off each other’s knobby knees—our backs hunched, biting into the fried chicken and sucking the oil-plaster from under our cuticles—gnawing and spitting out marrow, drinking red sugar water from plastic cups.

Even this house seemed to sweat, like meat and its fat—like a gelatin covering the skin of the walls and the tuft of the carpet and the upholstery around the armchairs. On a white couch covered in plastic, our bodies sounded like rubber, the wetness of an underarm or the slickness of the back-neck, and the silhouette stains we left, children cooling on the kitchen floor, like making snow angels. And then this rusty coloring around knee-scrapes, and elbow-burns, and split lips—and what it was like, trying to wrestle the sun down.

Someone stood on a broken-down Buick—the overcasting of a body, pointing and directing—two feet squared on the Buick’s hood, with the paint chipped and exposed primer, exclaiming today’s main event. And it was she and I—the two skeletons, skinny as noose knots, hanging off the gallows of our cheering cousins. Someone squeezed her wrists, mimicked punches, swinging the peg-like things, forward and back. I squared my shoulders, puffed my bony chest, barely taller than her.

And then her fists fired and my lips and the blood from the sagittal band of hand bones and clip-on keratin nails, and the bobbing of her hair-ties, like clacker toys clanging—the pink plastic balls swinging as she swung. Someone said—*bit her—bit her*, and all these notions like right and wrong and good and bad and everything else that seemed important became nothing as loud as the humiliation. For if I hit a girl—I hit a girl, and I was never supposed to hit a girl—not even when the sun gets too big for the sky and touches down on earth and burns the white right out of our teeth—and God will say something like—*I'll bring the fire next time*.

Little humans like hair cells of the inner ear when struck—cochlear nerves rattle and fluid drums and a head becomes heads and motions and inertias and gravities and their laughter like an echo and the cries of a boy—some twenty-five years ago, when I curled my fingers into a ball and swung them back as hard as I could—and then the painful tangibility of it all, humankind failing the way it did—the way it always does, when bodies are spectacles, and the music we made—the grit and grind of knuckles and chin and cheek—and the way they watched, with no horror—with no remorse, only applause.

HAND WING

HEATHER DURHAM

Your entire body fits in the palm of my hand. I can feel your pebble-sized heart racing through the warmth of your soft brown fur. My fingers curl around you firmly but loosely so as not to crush you, your head the only visible part of you peeking out from near my thumb. Your mouth gapes open in what I realize must be aggression but in such small scale appears more like a cartoonish grin. You are particularly feisty, I realize, because your swollen belly and chest tell me you're going to be a mama. I run my thumb along the top of your head between your ears, which calms you, a little.

I am completely smitten.

With my other hand I choose a metal band from the professor's bag and snug it tightly around the meaty part of your upper arm—your new jewelry, an arm cuff with a scientific number on it in case you are found again. Then I open my right hand, and wait. You crawl with your elbows to the edge of my palm and then hang down from your feet for a minute, shivering, warming up. Then you spread your leathery wings and fly, back into the night.

Bats are not flying mice. They are not yellow-toothed gnawing mammals of the Rodentia order, but flying mammals of Chiroptera, meaning “hand-wing.” Peel back their skins and see they more closely resemble us than mice. Tiny human-proportioned skeletons with snouts

and tails, five-fingered hands, palms open. We primates share a shrew-like ancestor.

Watch their extended families, sophisticated social relationships like wolf packs. A mother births and attentively cares for one poorly-developed pup per year, nursing from pectoral breasts. When mothers go out to hunt, babysitters or grandmothers keep watch. Elders may live into their thirties.

Bats are at home on every continent except Antarctica. Some dive for fish like osprey, stalk frogs, prey on scorpions and centipedes, and yes, some thirst for blood. Others nibble fruit, sip nectar, or nose pollen, cultivating food crops such as bananas, mangos, avocados and figs. Like tequila? Thank long-nosed bats for the success of agave plants.

Most of our North American bats dine on insects only, acting as nocturnal counterparts of birds like warblers and swallows. Mosquitoes are most active at night, and one little brown bat can eat 1200 of them in one hour. Insectivorous bats are also important predators of crop-eating moths. According to Bat Conservation International, “throughout the United States, scientists estimate, bats are worth more than \$3.7 billion a year in reduced crop damage and pesticide use.”

Sixteen of us live in one 1700s New Hampshire farmhouse. But we are all twenty-something environmental education interns who don't mind the summer camp feel of a bustling home jam-packed with milk crates of long underwear and raingear, hiking boots and Texas, and granola bars in Tupperware because of the mice.

Sometimes we mind the mice. Like the time a mouse runs across my face at 2 a.m., and I freak out and duct tape every possible hole where it might have entered. There are a lot of holes in a 1700s New Hampshire farmhouse.

In the common room, three couches and four easy chairs back up against bicycles, cross country skis, camping gear, and climbing ropes hanging from the ceiling and tucked into corners. Sometimes at night when we're watching a movie and the lights are out, a bat will come in through a crack between the ceiling and attic crawl space and fly around the room. Though startling at first, we resist the urge to shriek and wave our hands and chase it out with a broom because that would be bad form for an environmental educator. Instead we open the door and eventually

it flies outside. This happens so often that we all get used to it, and sometimes nobody bothers to get up to open the door until the movie ends.

“Hey bat. How nice of you to drop in!” It flies around, squeaking and clicking, or lands on the tire of a hanging bike, or occasionally finds its way back up through the cracks to the attic. It doesn’t eat our food or poop in the common room, so we don’t mind the bat. Bats in our belfry? Sure, why not?

Bats are not blind. Blind as a bat means not blind at all. They see as well or better than we do, but even the best eyes don’t work in complete darkness. Whereas most nocturnal mammals rely mainly on hearing, insectivorous bats boast a sixth sense. Super heroes with magic powers, they wield ultrasonic pulses that reverberate to ridged satellite dish ears and noses to create mind maps and keep track of very small very fast prey. Echolocation is rare in the animal world, shared only by toothed whales (including dolphins), two genera of shrews, two types of cave-dwelling birds, and industrious blind humans.

An insectivorous bat in your belfry or fluttering about your yard at night has no interest in you or your hair. She may, however, enjoy a meal of the mosquitoes buzzing around your head. Be still so she can keep from colliding with you. Listen to her click and buzz, the barely audible evidence of a secret language. Clicks increase in frequency when she is about to feed.

I have just scrambled up a bright snowy hillside and crawled through a hole into a dank, dripping bat cave. Or hibernaculum, to be exact. After the biting frosty air of New Hampshire winter outside, the relative warmth and humidity of the cave wash over me like a wave. I breathe in the mineral moisture of a place where no plants grow, feeling my lungs expand and nose-hairs thaw.

At first all I see are the little clouds each exhale puffs into the beam of my headlamp. I blink, widen my vision and the walls come into view. I reach out and swipe a finger along gritty brown rock. This cave is a long-ago abandoned silver mine shaft, so the narrow passageway is about as tall as an average man, the chiseled stone walls only inches from me on all sides.

I extend a leg forward, testing the depth of a puddle with the tip of my boot. A couple inches of water on solid rock. Shuffle, step, splash. I start to make out dozens of fist-sized brown bodies adorning the walls, glistening with dew. No silver remains in this mine, but our shining treasure is here.

I catch up with the other biologists and we move deeper into the darkness. On my clipboard I tick off hash marks in different species columns as they whisper: *Eptesicus fuscus*. *Myotis lucifugus*. *Perimyotis subflavus*... Shuffle, step, splash. Drip. Drip.

I take my own additional microclimate measurements of temperature, humidity, and wind speed every five-meter interval in the cave. In each section I record which species are present. For my Master's thesis I am trying to determine how particular these hibernating bats are when choosing their roosting sites and whether this differs by species.

I stop with the others to ogle a northern myotis hanging at eye level, its body so close we can see tiny toes gripping a wrinkle in the rock, toenails glistening like sugar crystals. Long time bat lovers and more recent converts, we exchange toothy grins as we linger in the tunnel. But our body heat and head lamps are warming the cave, and a few bats have woken up and started flying around. We hurry to finish collecting our data and leave them in peace.

Because of the metabolic demands of flight, bats have evolved unique thermoregulation mechanisms. Rather than maintaining a relatively constant body temperature through food and exercise like other mammals, bats choose environments to suit their needs, like reptiles. When pregnant and caring for young, mothers choose warm attics and barns so they don't deplete their energy staying warm. In North American winters when food is scarce, some bats migrate to warmer locations while others hibernate. Hibernators choose locations with microclimates that allow them to use the least amount of energy possible to stay alive until warmth and bugs return in spring. This differs by species.

High metabolic demands, low reproduction rates, and tendency to gather in large numbers make bat populations particularly vulnerable to disturbance and disease. Even though a fungal disease known as white-nose syndrome is killing bats by the thousands, humans are still the number one threat to bats. We set fires in hibernacula, seal caves

shut, and tear down old barns. We exterminate whole maternity colonies from our attics.

Bats are outcasts, misfits, outsiders. Their association with night and darkness has long relegated them in folklore to the realm of death or the underworld. Angels wear the white feathers of doves; the devil wears bat wings. Bats inhabit our world but on the periphery, the fringes, the places we fear to go. Steeples, attics, barns, caves, hollow trees and tombs. They hang upside down and use streams as flyways, further connections with the underworld.

Bats are vampires. Vampires are bats. Never mind that Old World vampire myths appeared millennia before the earliest reports of actual blood-drinking animals. Never mind that only three of the 1000 bat species feed solely on blood. Or that the blood-borne mammalian disease rabies is far more common in raccoons, foxes and dogs and that rabid bats rarely bite, but usually just die.

And never mind that vampire bats are among the most intelligent, social, and altruistic of all bat species. They adopt orphans. They share food with less fortunate, even unrelated bats. They groom each other like gorillas. But if you choose to camp in the open on a Peruvian mountainside, a little vampire might use her razor-sharp incisors to make an incision on your big toe, her saliva keeping your blood from coagulating, and lap up your blood like a kitten. It could happen.

But I am not on a Peruvian mountainside. I am watching the last rays of late summer sun fade behind the Douglas firs of Oregon's Estacada lake as a fisherman packs up his gear and a freshly caught rainbow trout. I tip my ranger hat to him and lead my group out onto the wooden dock. Families wired on s'mores and clutching flashlights follow my lead and start scanning the skies.

I think of you, my first chiropteran crush. Your swollen belly, the soft fur between your ears. I wonder about your children, and your children's children. You should be a grandmother now. Probably, you aren't.

But because of you, I am standing in this polyester ranger uniform on a state park dock at dusk. Because of you I am driven to help these campground visitors make their own connections, form positive memories to turn scary strangers into friends. I know I can't protect you from everyone, from everything. But as I gaze at pockets of light on the water

from the rising moon, I wish that just this group of families, these parents and children, will fall in love as I have.

And then I hear them. A few clicks, a faint squeak. The flickery flutter of paper-thin wings.

“I saw one!” a girl squeals, and tugs my sleeve.

“I saw it too!” her father replies, eyes as wide.

“Did you see that?!” others join in.

It’s a warm night. The mosquitoes, gnats, and moths are out in full force and with them, the night hunters. Darting over the water, diving under the dock, and zipping just above our heads they put on a good show. Little brown bats, big brown bats, and maybe even the rare, bunny-eared Townsend’s big-eared bats who raise their babies in a nearby barn.

I never get tired of this; I’m ecstatic. And I am relieved. We aren’t yelling, aren’t throwing rocks, aren’t running away. We are smiling, welcoming, accepting of the furry beasts. We are all here together, getting along. We are more than our prejudices, greater than our ignorance, wiser than our fears.

World peace, one bat at a time.

GRACE

GABRIEL WELSCH

We sat, the other hired hand and I,
on a rock wall stacked against the earth
where it sloped to a stream loud
as wind, and we ate
ham sandwiches with coffee.
He had come to work with nothing
for lunch, and so I gave him
one of my sandwiches,
ham and swiss on a heavy bread,
wrapped in waxed paper he folded
back with grace, handling it
like a wounded bird. Sweat drying
on us in the breeze, the coffee
warm against the early spring chill,
the sun aloof and brightly undecided,
we remarked how few things
taste as good as simple food
while working. He had prayed
over his food, for just a moment,
head bowed, between him
and his god, as I gnawed
into my lunch. He thanked

the air, I guess, or the stream,
or the goodness somewhere
behind the sun. He thanked me,
though I cannot think of why
I deserved it.

EVERY STARGAZER KNOWS HER VOWELS

CHARITY GINGERICH

The white duck floating downstream in the long light
faces a bridge, faces a treeline, faces a small boat.
Not quite on the other side, a flock of starlings flies across
a weathered brick façade, whose name is *evening nest*.
The girl in the boat is busy with an orange, thirsty.
She has been waiting for this light all her life, and now
it has come she thinks of her mother's best china,
how careful the children were not to chip it all those years.
Soon the river will be filled with small, glinting pieces,
and the moon, hanging like a postcard in the sky:
dear child, come home. The table is set, and we are ready to sing.

CONVERGENCE

JLSCHNEIDER

July 6, 2006, a warm night, about ten o'clock, the window open and my arm out as I drive home from teaching a night class at the satellite extension of the community college where I'm an adjunct. Route 9W is quiet now, as compared to four lanes choked north and south to Kingston and Newburgh during rush hour. It's the main artery, on this side of the river, funneling commuters across the Mid-Hudson Bridge that connects Poughkeepsie and Highland. I'm the only car in the left lane waiting to turn onto Route 299. Then, over the Shawangunk Mountains and blissfully home after a long day.

The class is unremarkable, an Intro to Literature course attended by young and old trying to get ahead, make a new start, or realizing they'd be better off elsewhere. Most of them don't want to be there—*We'll never need literature in the real world* goes job-think—and I don't want to be there, either. But my one-man carpentry business is slow, jobs aren't coming in, and I need the money. It's like being in church where neither the parishioners nor the minister believes.

The light changes and I turn onto 299. There are no streetlights and no moon. For a quarter-mile, there's a slight upgrade until the road levels off for the next five miles into New Paltz, so my headlights are digging into the pavement, giving me a short horizon. The wind feels good coming into the cab of the truck.

I assigned Hardy's "Convergence of the Twain," but few read it and

the rest complained about the language. *Did you look up the words like you're supposed to?* Blank faces and dumbfounded stares. Like any teacher, I'll never know what kind of lives my students will lead once they leave my charge. In this class I see little promise in most of them, anonymity in the rest. I feel as if I could write their obituaries now.

Halfway up the small hill, there's a swaddled lump in the road straddling the double yellow. It's formless and dark, an animal, I guess. Route 299, a two-lane that starts at 9W and is T'd against Route 44/55 at the base of the 'Gunks twelve miles away, is known locally as deer alley: deep woods on both sides like dense fur labiated against the smooth macadam. Hunters park bumper to bumper along its shoulder in season. In season or out, there are always dead deer crook-backed by the side of the road after their assignments with the modern world, "...bent / By paths coincident." As I near the lump, and the reach of my headlights starts to outline it, I have a primal knot of recognition.

There's a dead man lying in the road.

I see two arms and legs, the unmistakable torso, the head. I look out the window as I pass by him no more than five feet away, a human being. And I know, based on no rational, conscious evidence but rather, again, on some ancient intelligence that makes us recognize this graceless pose, that he is dead. It's the jagged posture of his arms and legs, the closed eyes and open mouth, the stillness, the silence. There is no one about, no other cars, no skid marks on the pavement, no broken glass, just the warm wind on a July night, the darkness, me, and a dead man in the road.

I drive on, up the low grade hill. I couldn't have seen what I just saw. I drive on, slowing. *There was a dead man in the road.* I pull onto the shoulder and stop, then throw the truck into reverse and back up. Several cars have now stopped behind me, and on the other side of the road, a motorcycle. By the time I get out of the truck there are people standing around the man, the motorcyclist kneeling in the road next to him, holding his hand. "Hang in there," he keeps repeating. "An ambulance is on the way."

It arrives within minutes, along with the cops, and the EMTs quickly set up a makeshift triage around the man with portable partitions and searing klieg lights. I can see their stark shadows inside the temporary cubicle working furiously to save his life.

I tell the police what I know, what I saw, which was nothing, and they let me go. “Deer,” the suited detective says when I ask what happened. “Is he going to make it?” The detective looks at me, and there again the primal knot. The answer is in his eyes.

The dead man’s Harley-Davidson is twenty yards further up the hill past my truck, hidden in the ditch. There are tufts of roan hair wedged against the engine and fuel tank.

The man is Randolph J. Ligotino, 53, of Highland, NY. There will be no obituaries in any of the local newspapers. Survived by no spouse or children. Someone will erect a small white cross off the shoulder of 299 where his motorcycle eventually came to rest, where it stands today.

I’ll drive by it for years, still do, each time reminded of an encounter which made me, for a few brief moments, the only person in the world who knew he was dead, knowing before any of his loved ones or friends, of which there seemed to be so few, that he would never return to them. When it was just him and me alone together on a warm July night, and the darkness said, *Have some knowledge you cannot use and will never leave you.*

NEXT WEEK ON *GAME OF THRONES*

ANITA OLIVIA KOESTER

1.

The nurse with the nine glorious grandchildren
plays *Operation* with my forearm,
eels jump, cables course inside conduit.

*Jon Snow, able-bodied and ample-jawed, looks out
past the Great Wall, the White Walkers
come as angels come, cleaving trees into two.*

A black television cord traces a line down the room.
In my mouth an ice chip melts,
the button gives, I press and press, little knocks,

my mitochondria still refusing that coming of winter.

2.

*Lord Lannister leans over the table in the war tent
exhibits only his back and the atavistic motion of his arm, as he cuts
and cuts, loosening the buck's hide, inside viscera red as roses.*

If only summer heat still gathered roses
rubbed the cool veiny paper onto and into the cheek,
not this future pen line of black pumps, thorns manicured

off, peeled like a carrot, when one most wants to bleed. Instead,
let them leave the plastic yellow blooms to yellow, like this skin
a scrub will slice open on a slab of steel, six levels down.

The sound is on mute, there is only a broad sweep of his arm.

3.

“Don’t touch the remote, the remote gives you sepsis.”

“Be a relief frankly”.

The Stark boy has entered a no-fly zone,

*his comatose body more of a bed, sucks into the bed,
his mind, hooded bostage, his mother lights a candle.*

It’s ‘nice’ of Lucy, to button eyes on her face,

to turn the ten stark corners, to stomach her breath,
fidget with her heart as she reaches out, must push door #209 in
to see this greyhound shriveled up in the bed.

On her way home, Dunkin’ Donuts, sugar glazing, confetti sprinkles.

4.

It's not untrue, that the silver thread unspooled,
the oceans dried, the reserve spoiled, that no silo
waits ready. Womb, ocean, God, well anyway

a battleground, it felt like once.

A room of seamstresses, costumes, and only a handful
of crowns. And now this scoured basin, these empty shells.

Imagine a field where two flags meet, only one is planted.
Or none. The scripts get revised, the jell-o served.

Why eat the heart of a horse, young queen,

when all your life, you will eat your own.

5.

Pinky, thumb, index, every man I've ever slept with,
who knew there were so many folds in the sheets,
sateen, Egyptian cotton, thick thick stripes.

The act of manhood, like specialty tobacco hitting the larynx,
then trachea, then running two paths into your shriveling petunias.
These sheets were sewn in a sewer in China.

*Another scene at the brothel, this time
the red-head explores another prospect's sack of jewels
only it means nothing, a job interview,*

it meant nothing, they said holding the breasts I once peddled.

6.

*Khaleesi's brother has the thrill voice of a cricket leg,
leg of crooks, crannies in the skin where the vein
was pulled out like a earthworm.*

*He outgrows his usefulness, dies a horrible death.
When is the nurse coming back?
Dry mouth, no one ever explains the term,*

*how a charcoal sauna dials hot, the inner cheek,
the tongue as naked as a pile of kindling.
The pyre is an elaborate cliché, only on T.V.*

does anyone ever rise from ashes. I miss my mother.

7.

The machines have their own language it seems:
crik, peet, mssshapen alignment, weed green light
tickle, tickle, tickle, damn thigh asleep again.

*Stark's daughter lifts her boy's body above the crowd,
she stands witness to her father's execution,
so much blood spilt into her veins.*

Maybe it's better this way, dying alone.
Always that image of centipedes crawling into ears
but what of discarded kittens, or a pair of minks

basting in the moss of my pelvis, the damp of my rib cage.

INLAND SEA

BLAIR HURLEY

She had never seen an inland sea before, but that was what Lake Michigan looked like. Just as vast as an ocean, and this rocky beach, these little waves that lapped at her boots, but without the salt smell of the Atlantic. Like an ocean that had been purified.

She had never been here before, but her mother went to college here. Her mother told her about a boy who had drowned in the lake freshman year. “His frat brothers tied him up to a pier during his initiation. They were so drunk they forgot about him. Then the water came up.”

Now a scrim of snow covered the beach and more was falling lightly onto the water. She watched the waves trying to turn over a large rock that had probably sat there, battered and battered by the same water, for a million years. She imagined the people coming and going, the trout swimming by, her mother a girl, looking at the water, in a mad blur.

She wondered, when the college boy’s parents came to collect him, did they walk out to the lake? Did they visit the pier in the middle of the water where the police had to cut him down? She blinked hard.

She suspected the boy who had drowned had been her father, but she would never know for sure, with her mother dead now, her ashes in the box in her hands. She’d scatter them here and the water would have its way.

There was an old rotting wharf down the rocky shore and she went to it, balancing way out on top of one of the beams. College kids walking by stopped to stare as she took off her shoes. She hugged the great round pile and slid down it into the icy winter water. This was what that unnamed boy had felt, wasn't it, as his friends tied him to the pier? A sleepy joy, a warmth from the drunk girl whose bed he'd left to perform this ritual. Dark night, sheltered dormitory lights lapping and blurring on the black water. The other boys hushed and conferring, deciding his fate, the right suffering that would make them friends.

She could picture it. The certainty of their hands on the rope, the tight sailor's knots pressing into his stomach. It was like he was Odysseus and wanted to hear the sirens sing. When the water began to climb, did he panic, did he struggle?

No. Not for a long time. Perhaps he felt protected and safe among those people, his friends, winding him tighter and tighter to the damp beam of wood. And when they left him, he would have waited, patiently, for their return. It must have felt like love, the tender way they tied him down.

WE ARE COLD, AND WE ARE CRYSTALS

ALICE STINETORF

I

The village

Twelve inches have fallen. The sky is still open, shaking itself clean. All the world is ice and snow, white and blue, the black silhouettes of trees. We flock to buy the world, chopped and bound in nets, four pieces to a bundle. The world burns; flesh is pink. Or, all the world is water. We stockpile the purified world in gallon jugs, trade paper stamped with the faces of the dead for hydrogen and oxygen, fused. This is one way to be. Another is to drink from forgotten streams. Another is to collapse to a whitened earth, thrash angelic silhouettes to being, and wait for a power in the sky to answer.

II

Apartment, Sycamore and Plane St.

Another way to be: think of your cells as astral glitter and your life as dissipation. Watch your chilled remnants fall in flakes, and, thinking this, craft a powdered doppelganger topped with a carrot nose and charcoal smile. Your teeth are blackened briquettes, crumbling, it is winter but hibernation is lifting. Panic is another word for peace. Tick off the days until you melt. Wood and water, salted crackers, you forgot to call your dealer. The roads are impassable by now.

Crystal falls from the sky, trapping you here. You learned about

irony once and think this might be it. Crystal, it isn't your fix of choice, but you'd settle for it. All the world is blinding.

Your cells are glitter, and three decades ago you sat cross-legged beside your brother and a spruce twinkling rainbows, you squeezed a bottle of white glue over a sheet of red construction paper and your hand was steadier than his as it drifted in the shapes of wreaths and knobby reindeer. Your brother sprinkled green glitter over white glue and these flecks were your cells, glinting. You first shared a womb and then Christmas cards and seats on yellow buses, a blue bedroom, later a used Toyota and an apartment on a rundown block.

In those years his hands grew steadier than yours, and the first night he assisted in surgery, he came home to that apartment with a face dazzled and deep. Knowing nothing and everything, he spoke of opening a man. He spoke of the body as a mystery, failed to articulate what it was to force a man's chest open, subcutaneous tissues and stained bones peeling like lids over a bloodshot eye, the impossible vulnerability of it, how he stared into that pulsing eye like he never had that of a lover, and there was a heart, a human's core, and this neither had he seen in a lover. You knew he had failed to articulate this, its power, because your eyes were fixed to the bare wall, and a bitter taste like raw cloves burnt your tongue, and the only truth you knew in that moment was how, in a month, a year, people would look at his face and your face, together, and fail to understand you were identical twins. That you came into this world as equals.

But all the world is divergence. Trees branch and rivers fork. You should call this brother with whom you have not spoken in ten years now, not since he rolled you to your side on the cool tile and hooked the vomit from your mouth with steady fingers and screamed at the rest of them to call an ambulance. They were fucked up. You know this, what he did, what they did, because one of them filmed it, the funniest thing in the world. And because your brother had cut open twenty men by then, he understood which organs would be going haywire and which would only want to rest and thus render you a vacant vessel. But he no longer understood what inhabited you, not really—he believed that beast to be a vacancy in itself.

If you call him, you will say, *I miss you*. You will ask if it hurt to lose half of himself. You will admit there are hours of every day when you

feel unscathed because you remember to call your dealer, but this is not the case now, and you will ask how badly it will hurt to halt this hibernation. You will ask if you could die, and because he is a surgeon, he may say, *Certainly*. Because he is more than that he may say, *Stay on the line, I'm here*. He will begin sentences with the soft soothing word, *remember*: remember the time we coated a box in WD-40 and nearly sledded into East Fork Lake, remember when Mom kissed our foreheads clear of fevers, how we shared fevers and toys. You will sweat, and feel that fever, and begin to shake. Because your hands are unsteady, you will set the phone beside you on the tile and murmur and think of your cells as astral glitter and your life as dissipation, and you will visualize the pieces, falling, riding the wind.

III

Four-way stop, 9th and Hickory Ave

A rusted pickup truck's antilock braking system malfunctions. A sign spiked into the ground beside an ornamental fountain, now an ice rink in miniature, reminds the tenants of Hickory Place to leave their faucets dripping. Fourteen degrees and falling. The truck skids into the intersection and collides with a midsized sedan. The baby within the sedan is not secured as recommended by the National Safety Council. It sits up front, forward-facing. Its skull is not yet fully fused, as evidenced by the anterior fontanel. Malleable plates of bone are still closing by increments, Pangaea in reverse. The osteo-progress of the past sixteen months—nine in utero, seven out—is undone, in messy entirety, with the 150 MPH deployment of the sedan's airbag, springing forth to serve its once-in-a-lifetime purpose.

In the truck a carton of eggs flies into the glove box. All but two crack.

IV

Grocery store, Orchid and MLK

Marvin is in over his head. He knows he has dropped the ball as the IGA's freshly minted assistant manager. Or, as his boss Tony will say upon returning from Maui, he has *shot it all to shit*. This is Tony's first vacation in thirteen years, and—given Marvin's floundering—it will likely be his last.

Tony never “trained” Marvin, per se, mostly spouted random managerial tidbits until they became buzzing platitudes. Had Marvin absorbed one of them, in particular—*Order according to demand and context, not some fucking spreadsheet*—he would be in better shape.

But he doesn’t want to be good at the job. He fears taking satisfaction in it, feels cheapened and a little less *there* every time he correctly totals the deli’s weekly spoilage. He also feels validated. Smothered. Proud. This job is supposed to be part of the deal: Marvin will be the breadwinner until Zak gets his degree, then Zak will take over while Marvin gets his MFA.

Lately Marvin wakes up, lusty, from dreams in which kilns hide like Easter eggs in a jungle, and shimmering glazes drip off whimsical vining plants, and—because no dream is so transparent—a grizzled goat with a tuxedo caught in its horns stalks him, bleating plaintively.

Maybe Tony’s wife’ll strap on a coconut bra and fuck some joy into him, Marvin thinks. Unlikely. A coconut could not grow big enough to contain Barb’s tits, and a woman could not go blind enough to desire Tony, graying toad of a man that he is.

Marvin tallies the ways in which he has shot it all to shit. He didn’t up the orders for bottled water or batteries. Nor candles, soup, firewood, none of it. The dopey bagboys didn’t salt the parking lot, and now cars are skidding into one another like pucks on an air-hockey table.

He runs down the list of employees slated to work tomorrow. Desiree McEachin called out hours ago. Zane Hayworth and the Culbertson brothers, self-dubbed “Cart Corral Ninjas,” won’t be in. Molly Weaver, bless her, says she’ll have her dad drop her off, and offers to work overtime. Marvin decides to lock the doors at seven, and once everyone is gone he tries to recover his losses in the only way he can think of: merchandising.

Because the IGA is out of cocoa, Marvin will force people to think they wanted cider all along. He draws a smiling girl holding a steaming mug, and props the portable chalkboard next to a pyramid of red and gold apples stacked in enticing patterns, end-capped by two shelves of cinnamon. No oatmeal, fine, he clears an island opposite the eggs and butter, and on this arranges flour and sugar, chocolate chips and maple syrup, and—with finger paints stolen from a register display—crafts a

poster of pancakes such a perfect golden brown that his own mouth waters. He taps into all the positive winter memories of his childhood and renders them commercial, catchy, in aesthetics that say, *Buy me*.

He works until midnight. The merchandising—it rejuvenates him. He unfolds the cot Tony stores in the back office and sets a cell-phone alarm for the morning. His car is buried.

Were he able to make it home, he would have to remind himself to slump his shoulders and collapse in the recliner with an air of beaten exhaustion. Zak would tug the icy boots from Marvin's feet, massage his arches, say, *My poor baby*. Marvin would run his hand through Zak's coarse hair and tell him to go write. *I'll bring you coffee*, Marvin would say. Zak's pen would fly across the page as Marvin set the mug on his desk. *Muse has me by the shaft*, Zak would laugh.

The IGA's office is windowless, but Marvin knows the snow must be otherworldly in the starlight, a mirage outside Zak's office window. Snow so honest that it would lead Marvin to ask, *Will you hold up your end of this?* To say, *We're selfish, and I trust you less than me*. To say, *Maybe this is all I'm meant to do, or all you'll let me*.

He counts grizzled goats to quiet the thoughts and welcome sleep. For now he is in the business of merchandising. Forging illusions to protect the bottom line.

V

Union Park

A squirrel dashes along the underside of a sycamore branch topped with a pristine coat of snow. The squirrel leaps, relishes the brief moment of flight as much as a squirrel can be expected to, and lands in a red-berried bush.

VI

Franklin, northbound

A 33-year-old man cross-country skis past the 99-cent store. He passes a tattoo parlor whose neon signs transform the icicles into a row of ruby and sapphire swords, growing thicker with cold blood. There is an apocalyptic edge to the quiet, to the relative abandon of the streets, yet in these depleted signs of civilization the man sees more civility than ever.

He has missed this burning in his quadriceps, his hamstrings, the surety of his body. The man's father chuckled within his cocoon of tubes and wires when he learned his son had packed and brought along the skis. *Ours ain't skiing mountains, son.* No, and for three years the skis had waited in a closet, out of place and losing patience.

The man has spent a thousand days and change waiting for his father to die. A tenth of this, it was meant to take. The man is young but his blood has begun to feel like oily sludge traversing the networks of his limbs. In the lowest moments he understands his very presence might be encouraging his father's heart to beat and this tempts the man to leave—to end it.

He propels himself, burning, down the sidewalks, the centers of streets, every moment is a frozen snapshot and he is here, now here, at home in himself, on planes glinting like the facets of a diamond. He carries trail mix and a pack of cards. Miles beyond the village proper, the hospital rises, mountainous, and as he nears, it opens its gaping mouth and exhales. The man's goggles steam. No clarity, inside.

The game's seven-card draw, his father says. He cuts the cards. Shuffles.

VII

Belleston Retirement Community

Ethel is ninety and wishes people would stop fucking treating her like she is ninety. She tells folks that age is just a number and they smile *the smile*, the one reserved for people under ten and over seventy-five. And she repeats—*No, you listen: age is just a number.* Meaning, *I am Ethel.* Meaning, *When did I stop being Ethel and start being some old fucking lady?*

Sit, beg, roll over. Play dominos, talk about the *good old days*, wear audacious hats.

This is the lifecycle of an attractive woman: cute, pretty, hot, beautiful, pretty, elegant, handsome, old, older, cute. Ethel started playing dominos back when she was cute the first time around. She wonders if her grandson, the oldest one, would take her skydiving. Maybe she'll ask.

Ethel pulls on her rubber-soled house slippers, slides open the patio door, and steps outside. The brochures make the sliding doors out to be a pleasant selling point for the units—*so much natural light!*—but Ethel

has watched the attendants drag enough shit-stained mattresses out through doors just like her own to know they are mostly there to keep death convenient.

The snow crunches. She shuffles forward, carefully. Breathes the sharp air. The big pine by the road wears a coat of ice, as do all the trees, but this tree is her favorite. It reminds her of her first married Christmas, when she and Burchell had nothing to their names and splurged on a crystal tree ornament—literally, an ornament shaped like a tree. And how silly they felt, staring at their first Christmas tree, naked but for the tinier, glassier tree dangling from one droopy limb.

There is no mailbox to check. This is a formality. Inside, she turns to Burchell, swaddled in his urn, and snorts, “Told you I could make it.” Ethel used to leave CBS on all day but, ever since her youngest daughter bought her cable TV, she has preferred the channels with nudity.

It makes Ethel laugh. Her family might fear her demented, a crayon short. But it is just pleasure, and not the guilty kind. Ethel gave up guilt a long time ago.

VIII

Ranch home, Hickory and Main

Norah folds another thick pad of paper towels and fixes it inside her underwear with duct tape. She lives with her dad, and there aren’t any tampons or pads in the bathroom they share—she ransacked the cupboards just to be sure. This marks the third day of her first period, an event that her dad and the public school system, alike, failed to prepare her for. But after that first gush of blood, the internet assured her that she wasn’t dying. It also taught her that most girls get their first periods somewhere between the ages of ten and fifteen—twelve, on average.

Norah’s ten. This might explain why her dad never thought to buy some pads. Maybe he didn’t know how old was old enough, or was in some kind of denial about the fact that she’s growing up. Maybe he didn’t buy any because he’s a man—Norah imagines that being a man would make it easy to forget about menstruation altogether. Her last theory has to do with what’s at the heart of it: blood. Blood makes her dad nauseous. He was never the one to tend Norah’s scraped knees and elbows until her mom left.

In any case, this phenomenon has her transfixed. It isn’t *just* blood,

but a whole host of fluids and tissues. She wishes she had a microscope.

She had never realized it was a *hole*, a cavity materials could enter and exit, and the discovery is disconcerting. Flashes of the B-horror creature-features she and her dad like to rent zip through her mind, moth-monsters emerging from people's guts, reptilian hybrids, freak nuclear disasters—she's picturing her vagina as an inside-out snake sloughing its skin.

After her father goes to bed, Norah heads to the backyard. She packs a small ball of snow and drops to her knees, rolling it with her mittened hands, wrists raw and red where her coat sleeves end—she's grown again. A squirrel rustles through the bushes. Maybe it's the frigid air, or allowing herself to hunch and fold like this, but the painful undulations down low in Norah's stomach have ebbed. *Cramps*. The word sounds like the name of an evil headmistress, *Madam Cramps*. She forms a second ball, a third, and as she rolls them the earth is revealed in dark, rough tracks, streaks of disappointment in the hopeful ivory. The snowballs pick up leaves, twigs, grow dirty.

It is the ugliest snowman she has ever seen, faceless in the moonlight. Norah stares at its cold, blank head and wants to weep. She has learned that, in some cultures, menstruating women are confined to huts. In some religions, they perform special prayers to cleanse themselves. There are girls just like her in Africa who have to stay home each time this happens; they miss so much school that they're left with no choice but to drop out.

The girl pulls up her coat, works her hand beneath her jeans, the two layers of stockings, her underwear. She paints a scarlet smile onto the snowman. She imagines herself naked, sitting cross-legged in this yard, dyeing all of it red. The yard. The block. The town. The world. Red is the color of romance, and Norah can no longer reconcile this.

IX

Duplex, Maple and 3rd

Denise ran out of cigarettes ten hours and fifteen minutes ago. Not that she's counting. The nearest gas station is 2.7 miles away. Not that she has mapped out every potential route.

"You keep saying you want to quit," Greg says for the fourth time

(again, not counting). “Maybe this is God helping you out.” Endorphins will have to take the place of nicotine. Denise pushes the coffee table aside and starts doing deep squats. “Maybe,” Greg adds, “it’s time to go *cold* turkey. Eh? Eh?”

Dismemberment may occur. Dismemberment, of him, with one of the two meat cleavers he has transplanted to her kitchen, not that she’s counted, and not that she then screamed, “Who the fuck needs *two* meat cleavers? Jesus H. Fuckin’ Christ, you planning a meat party?”

To which he certainly didn’t reply, “No, just a *Butchery Bash*, ha!”

He is desperate, old, twenty years her senior, and Denise is tired of him, shouldn’t have let it get to this point, but then one day Greg was on her doorstep with a stack of musty boxes and a sad suitcase.

Squatting, engaging her core, Denise pictures the cleaver severing Greg’s doughy biceps, his ghastly scrotum, like the jowls of an elderly basset hound. He had changed the rules without her permission—the man isn’t supposed to leave his wife and kids. The “other woman” is supposed to beg for that, but it goes unspoken that it isn’t something you actually fucking *do*.

At this point, the thought of a cigarette makes her wet—the metallic click of the lighter wheel, the first drag, good God, tickling her forehead and dancing along her tongue.

Greg saunters into the room in tall socks and a headband. Mentally, she cleaves him at the knee, then swiftly slices across his receding hairline, hangs his skullcap alongside her framed Pilates certification as just another fruitless conquest. Now Greg is squatting alongside her.

He makes it to ten reps before he says, “Ugh, that’s rough on the knees, isn’t it?”

Denise bundles up fast—dressing on overdrive to make a stealthy escape isn’t new to her. Men, their arrogance, to believe their wives can’t smell another woman in their own beds. Only 2.7 miles. She trudges, onward, casting Greg’s phantom limbs to either side with every step.

X

Somewhere that isn’t a farm

A beagle works the perimeter of a chain-linked yard, hitching his leg at regular intervals and loosing controlled, staccato streams because he lives here, and this is what he does.

Last winter, as in all nine prior, he rode from a farm to a forest in the bed of a rusted pickup truck. His ears billowed. He had become slower than the others in the pack, but he didn't notice this, just the air, thick with rabbit, the woods, thick with rabbit. He found his. Bawled. No one came. This didn't matter. On he went, over vines, under logs, throat vibrating open, full.

Two months ago the hunter drove the beagle to a new place where a woman with a tired smell put him in a bleach-thick pen, dark and small. When he left—two weeks later, though he wasn't privy to the notion of “time,” and a day prior to his euthanasia appointment, though he'd been oblivious to his impending execution—it was with two younger people. He stuck his head through the open rectangle of their not-a-truck, and the wind whipped his ears and the sounds and tones the two people made were gratifying. This was a good feeling for all involved.

The beagle hitches his leg, *mine*, walks, hitches his leg, *mine*, walks. In the neighbor's yard a frozen tree limb explodes with a noise like a gun firing and the beagle enters a frenzy, tosses back his head and howls, then bays, louder every time. The woman rushes onto the porch and yells (she is screaming *McDoggles* because this is the name upon which she and her fiancé decided, but the beagle has never had a name, ridiculous or otherwise, so none of this registers).

The beagle has no concept of himself as an item that can be returned and disposed of, so he leaps through the snow, plummeting and cresting like a dolphin in choppy waters, or, more accurately, like a hound in heaven, because he is a beagle, and this is what he does.

XI

Split-level garrison, Saunders Lane

“There's ice cream in the freezer,” Kieran says. “I'm not eating snow. Get a clue.”

What's the mystery? Loretta wants to ask. *The mystery to go along with this “clue” I need so much?* She instead goes with, “You used to love snow ice-cream,” which she regrets even as the words are leaving her mouth.

“Yeah, and I used to eat glue and wear diapers,” Kieran mutters. He is sprawled across the couch like a felled giraffe. His iPhone blips and tings, and his thumbs dance across the screen. His plans for the week-

end—and his newly acquired driver’s license—are ruined. Loretta senses that her son blames her for this, as if she could have knocked on the sky’s gray expanse and politely requested that the blizzard hold off long enough for Kieran to take Molly Weaver to the winter homecoming and, after, grope her to whatever extent she allowed.

To rub salt in his own wound, Kieran has the TV set to some car-racing movie packed with deafening engines and bikini-clad girls. Jodie, two years younger than Kieran, is locked in her room blaring *indie rock*, a musical genre whose defining feature is a grating vocalist, as far as Loretta can tell. Loretta has had to buy far too many bananas in recent months; her thick-handled hairbrush was missing for a week before she found it stowed in her daughter’s nightstand. Loretta wrote to “Dear Abby” to ask if buying one’s teenage daughter a dildo is acceptable parental behavior, but no response has been printed in the newspaper.

Kieran glances up from his iPhone to Loretta, standing behind the couch holding the big pot of snow ice-cream, freshly mixed. “Can you stop staring at me?” he says.

“Can you stop staring at that stupid phone?”

“I paid for it.”

“And I pay the data plan,” she says. Kieran’s face is blank but his eyes look better fit for a vitriolic troll—she must look like a talking boulder, or a walking fish, Stalin, maybe.

“I hate you.”

He wouldn’t know who Stalin was. Loretta reminds herself that neither his nor Jodie’s brains have finished developing. Incubating and solidifying, like giant fetuses, the both of them.

Jodie’s music quiets down the hallway and she emerges, flushed, swathed in pajamas printed with words like *juicy* and *kisses*. She eyes the pot in Loretta’s hand. “What’s that?”

Kieran snorts. “A pot of lameness.”

Jodie picks up a throw pillow and employs it accordingly, throwing it at her brother’s face. “I wasn’t talking to you!”

Kieran’s giraffe-like limbs spring to action, he is on his feet and swinging the pillow at Jodie’s head. She grabs the DVD player remote and uses it to bludgeon his chest, shoulders, working up to his face. Coasters fall from the coffee table. The cat, Percy Purr, exits the room.

So does Loretta. She sits down at the dining room table and thinks

about removing its leaf, still there from the holidays. She'd inserted the leaf out of habit, but it wasn't needed this year—the first for the kids to have two separate Thanksgivings, two Christmases. Loretta's parents and brother came, but the table was an ocean when all they needed, now, was a pond.

"Mom!" Jodie shrieks. Feet skittering. Body crashing into a wall. Kieran, by the sound of it. *Good for you, Jodie.*

"*Mom!*" Loretta thinks it's Kieran who hollers, this time, though their voices are indistinct in tone, in the way they both draw out the word like they're inside a volcano, looking up, screaming it with their feet planted in the muck of hell.

Loretta fetches the liquor cabinet key from the Altoids tin in the junk drawer and removes a bottle of vanilla Smirnoff. She douses the snow ice-cream in vodka and eats large spoonfuls until her brain freezes. She clutches her skull. Her children pound down the hallway, away from her. Something smashes on the hardwood, a picture frame, most likely. "Get out of my room!"

"Give me the controller, you fucking slut!"

Opening the blinds, Loretta is met by a whitewashed world, glimmering. The bottom of the kids' long-abandoned tire swing touches the snow, as if the swing is only resting and will be back on duty, soon. She imagines her husband and "just-a-gym-buddy" Denise nestling in an idyllic cabin, a Thomas Kinkade painting come to life. Greg will be imbuing the snowfall with romantic symbolism, of course—fresh starts, the purity of true love, a blank slate for the life the two of them will create together—he always spun the weather into something beyond itself.

Evaporation, things dry up. Condensation, things build up. Precipitation, it all comes crashing down. Perhaps Greg was onto something.

The front door slams, and Jodie bursts into the dining room entryway. "Kieran's leaving." She pants, voice rich with the ruthless pleasure of a practiced tattletale.

Loretta stands and heads to the bay window by the front door, the pot of what she is now thinking of as *snow-cobolic bliss* in hand. Jodie joins as Loretta pulls the mauve curtain aside and watches her son trudge across the yard, his dramatic exit losing more wind each time his footing falters and his legs go splaying like Bambi's.

"Aren't you going to stop him?" Jodie asks.

Kieran finally makes it to his car, parked street-side. Loretta had warned him to move it to the garage before the storm hit. His loss. He's been telling friends that he paid for the used Honda Civic, himself. He saved \$500 for the purchase; Loretta paid the remaining \$2,500.

"Mom," Jodie shrieks from the depths of her adolescent volcano, "do something!"

Kieran manages to pry the Honda's door open. The exhaust forms billowing clouds in the frigid air. Greg had been in charge of teaching their son to drive—Greg was a responsible driver, so Loretta knew her son had learned to warm up the engine in weather like this, but the tires immediately begin to spin, squealing and gaining no purchase. Loretta and Jodie watch as Kieran digs a rut in the ice and snow, the car sinking, the furious revving more futile by the second.

Jodie begins to giggle. Loretta knows she shouldn't, but she too starts to laugh, a hoarse, pained feeling. She spoons some *snow-cobolic bliss* into her daughter's mouth, and Jodie's face twists in disgust. Loretta hasn't seen that expression since her daughter was eighteen months old, being fed mashed yams for the first time. A trusting face, contorted with that shock of unanticipated change. Learning to adapt.

When Jodie realizes what she's tasting, her disgust falls away, and she regards her mother with huge eyes. Loretta laughs and nods at the couch. They sit side by side, taking turns with the spoon, and empty the pot before the tires outside cease their desperate howling.

XII

Pennsylvania, 300 miles east

The landline rings, and you know who it is before you pick up the receiver. As a surgeon, you cannot buy into mysticism—to be rational is to be divine—but as a twin, you buy into a shared intuition beyond logical explanation. It is rational in that it is real. A decade has passed. You have no reason to know it is him.

But it is. Outside your window, the first flakes of January are beginning to float down, constellations shaken from the black sky. You ask him, *Is it snowing, where you are?* It is. In your brother's voice, you hear those notes intrinsic to your line of work, devastating as an intern, a neutral reality, now. Notes of mortality, the awareness of it. Dire fear. Surreal disassociation. You want to tell him that withdrawal isn't the

killer—the killer is the overdose waiting on the other side of the toppled wagon. He doesn't need to hear this. He won't until he's ready to.

Instead, you say, *Stay on the line, I'm here.* You say, *Remember how we used to spray boxes down with WD-40 and sled by the lake? Remember how close we came to falling in?*

XIII

The village, once more

Another inch falls. A bird, coasting high, sees no less than a hundred angels carved in the snow, waiting to melt, to warm, and return to the clouds.

MATRIARCHY

CARMELLA DE LOS ANGELES GUIOL

I was raised by the village that is my mother's family. Ours is a tribe of women.

My Tia Ruby is sick in the hospital. Cancer, the doctors say. Pancreatic. Not much time.

News travels through our village fast. One by one, the other *tias* and *primas* find their place beside her hospital bed. I come too.

"Carmella!" she cries out when she sees me, grasping both of my hands in hers. Her papery gown and the IV pole she's hooked up to make her appear breakable, but she's sitting upright in a chair, a glossy magazine in her lap. I take my place beside her, sitting on the hospital bed with its many straps and buttons.

I remember visiting her husband, my Tio Felo, when he was outfitted with his own paper gown and IV pole. He was always in bed when I came to visit, though. Prostate cancer. They caught it too late. Nearly a decade ago now.

My grandmother, Adita, was the oldest of three. She would have been ninety-two this year. Although I never knew her, my grandmother's two siblings, Felo and Lydia, have been a permanent part of my life.

My family has lived beside Tio Felo and his family ever since we moved to Miami twenty-four years ago. I'm pretty sure he was the reason Mami decided to leave New Orleans in the first place.

I understand now that she was giving me the gift of family that was wrenched from her at nine years old, when she and her brother were shipped to the States without a clue as to where they were going or when they were going to see their parents again.

In Cuba, the Diaz clan inhabited a large compound in *la Habana*, a wild conglomeration of generations sharing their lives together. There are stories of marathon Sunday lunches when the maids labored over cauldrons of *frijoles negros* and *arroz con pollo* and the wooden tables in the dining room filled with twenty, thirty, forty people.

The women in my family never learned how to cook.

My mother's parents divorced when she was the darling of her family, a curlicued firecracker who loved horses and her great-grandmother, Tete. Her mother was the headmistress of an elementary school, el Rancho Boyero, and there was always a cousin around to play with. Her uncle, a young Tio Felo, chased after girls and teased his favorite niece.

"Lourdita," he called her, pulling on her curls as she squirmed in his lap. Later on, when I was a little curlicued girl myself, I called him "Tio Feo"—Uncle Ugly—and he'd pretend to cry loud sobs into his big hands.

Tete is a mythical character in our family, the matriarch that reigned over those family meals. She's the woman at the top of our tree.

"I loved her more than anyone in the world," my mother tells me.

I grew up hearing the name Fidel Castro nearly every single day. Sometimes they called him Castro. Other times, he was just Fidel. I didn't know who he was; all I knew was that he was a bad man.

In the hospital room at Doctor's Hospital in Miami, Tia Ruby looks wan without her makeup, but otherwise, she seems fine. She gossips to me about the nurses and tells me which ones are her favorite and which ones are *vaga*—lazy.

"You wouldn't believe the girl who came this morning to clean my room. She barely broomed! *Que vaga*," she says.

I ask her about her recent trip to Germany where she went to visit a sister who lives there with her son and his family.

“*Maravilloso!*” she exclaims. “Grab Bibi’s computer over there so I can show you pictures.”

Bibi is her only daughter, my mother’s first cousin. I snap open the laptop computer and click on the folder labeled “ALLEMANIA” that houses the pictures of Tia Ruby’s trip. Together, we scroll through them one by one. She tells me who everyone is and what they all do for a living. In all of the pictures, she looks poised, elegant, happy. Her lips are glossy with rosy lipstick and her hair is perfectly coiffed, a sleek cap of platinum blond. I can’t believe that these pictures are barely two weeks old.

All of a sudden, she clutches her abdomen.

“*Ay,*” she says, squeezing her eyes shut.

I cringe alongside her, wishing there was more I could do than pretend to feel her pain. Her stomach is distended, solid and spherical like a belly pregnant with child. I think to myself: this is where the disease lives. This is where that mass of diabolic cells is procreating, taking ownership of the body that was once hers. I look away, concentrating on the smiling faces of her grandchildren in the frames beside her bed.

Another afternoon, a few miles away, I sit beside another great aunt, my Tia Lydia.

Tia Lydia is ninety, the current matriarch of our family. She is sitting in her lounge chair when I arrive, an ice pack on her knee and a stack of Catholic booklets beside her. Sections from *El Mundo* and *El Nuevo Herald* shuffle through her bird bone hands, porcelain as the piano keys they have played for almost a century. As a young woman, she traveled from Cuba to New York to attend Julliard Conservatory of Music. It was during this time that she met her husband Byron, another Cuban living in New York. He heard her playing the piano on the radio and knew that he must meet this woman and make her his wife. Like most of the women in my family, Lydia has long outlived her other half.

Back in Cuba, Lydia’s sister, my grandmother Ada, was falling in love with man named Enrique. Soon, it came to bear that Enrique and Byron were brothers. Byron’s mother, Doña Emma, was opposed to the romance.

“What is this? Two sisters married to two brothers? We cannot have this.”

Truthfully, Doña Emma did not want their fortune to stay in one family. And so, Ada and Enrique's love affair was cut short. Adita married Antonio, my grandfather, and Enrique married a woman named Ruthie.

"But he was *el amor de su vida*," my *tias* tell me. "The love of her life."

Years later, on another Caribbean island, after the revolution had strewn families across land and sea, they would meet again.

"They had an affair, you know," Tia Hebe says to me one afternoon, while we lounge in her pool, watching the next generation of girls pretend to be mermaids in the shallow water. "In Puerto Rico, when she was visiting your Tia Lydia and Tio Byron. Yes, she never forgot the love of her life. Adita. *Pobre Adita*."

The love of my grandmother's life died just a few weeks ago at ninety-seven.

In her old age, Tia Lydia's tongue has swelled inside her mouth, impeding her ability to speak clearly. Still, somehow, we communicate with one another. I tell her how I am doing in school; she asks me if I have a boyfriend. We have been carrying on the same conversation for many years. After we have said all there is to say, we sit and smile at each other. I look into her impossibly blue eyes and wonder what my grandmother was like, and what my life would have been like if she'd lived longer. Would I have loved her more than anyone else in the world?

In the kitchen, I hear Elisa, one of the two aides on duty, making lunch. Tia Lydia has around the clock supervision. Rather than moving to an elder-care facility, she continues to live in her glass-walled apartment overlooking the ocean. The elder-care facility comes to her. Her Baby Grand piano remains tuned in the living room, and she even plays it sometimes. Every surface is covered in framed photographs of the family she and Byron made together: their five children and the many progeny that followed. I search for my face among the many, or my sister's smile, but we are not there. We do not belong to her.

Once, I went on a search for my grandmother's gravestone. She is buried in a graveyard on the outskirts of New Orleans, where she lived for twenty years after leaving Cuba against her will. The woman working the front desk at the burial home gave me a map of the graveyard. She

circled a small space labeled DIAZ and pointed towards an overgrown lot behind rusty wrought iron.

The gate creaked as I let myself in. I was alone in a field of flat white stones. The sky that day was painted gray and the air whispered rain. It took me a few minutes to find my bearings in the graveyard, to know which plot I was nearest to and which direction I was going in, but soon I was on my quest. Some of the headstones had flowers on them, but most were half-hidden by weeds. Row by row, I followed my steps with the map in hand, checking names to make sure I was on the right track. Finally, I came to her row and made a right. My pace slowed and my finger slid across the paper now limp with November dew.

It seemed from the drawing that some gravestones were half-sized, while others overtook their neighbors threefold. My grandmother's was of the small variety, sharing a regular space with another half-sized headstone. Finally, I came to the place labeled DIAZ on the page. My eyes searched the names carved into stone—MALIGNAUX, DOUCET, FONTAINEAU, remnants of the French who once ruled this delta—looking for those four letters that were all that was left of my grandmother. I held my breath.

"She's not there," I told the woman at the desk, palms clammy, a heavy heart hammering in my chest. "How can she not be there?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am. Are you sure? I can call someone to go out there and help you find it."

"Yes I'm sure! I went up and down every single row looking for her! Why isn't she there? Where did she go? She's on your map but she's not there."

After Tia Ruby has called her favorite nurse to ask for more morphine, she settles back in her chair and we continue to scroll through her photographs.

"What's your favorite place you've visited?" I ask her.

"*Hollanda*," she says without hesitating.

"*De verdad?*" I ask, clicking through a series of pictures of Ruby and her sister posing in front of a tree heavy with baby pink flowers. "Not Paris or New York?"

She thinks for a moment, then shakes her head. "I loved *Hollanda* the best," she says.

“What did you like about it?”

“The canals, the people, the cute streets. And so many flowers everywhere!”

This is a woman who never worked, never learned to drive, and never learned English. But ever since Tio Felo died ten years ago, she’s taken two trips to Europe, several jaunts around the States, and a few more down to the Caribbean. My Tio Felo never left Florida, or even Miami, after coming here from Cuba in the early 1960’s.

I’ve heard that my uncle caused quite a stir in the family when he announced his engagement to Ruby. She was a *campesina*, a peasant from the countryside, while the Diaz family owned property, rode horses, had maids, traveled abroad.

“Why do you think she’s so careful about never getting sun?” my mother tells me. I think about the wide-brimmed hats and long sleeved shirts she wears when she takes her morning walk around the neighborhood. “Dark skin means you work the land. And she never wants to remind anyone that she comes from a family of farmers.”

In the States, though, these class divisions fell away. They all became peasants. My grandmother who had her doctorate in education became a line worker in a factory. Tio Felo spent twenty-five years as a busboy cleaning up the cigar stubs and empty cups of black Cuban espresso left behind by the rich businessman dining at the Doral Hotel.

Country homes and thoroughbred horses don’t travel well when you’re fleeing the country as a political refugee.

Elisa is my favorite of Tia Lydia’s aides. She has been with the family for as long as I can remember, running their household with a firm hand. I always ask to speak to her when I call my aunt’s apartment, and she’s almost always there. The rest of the aides are a revolving door of immigrants recently arrived from El Salvador or the Dominican Republic. I learn their names and then I forget.

Elisa is from Nicaragua. Her skin is the color of salted caramel and her smile reveals gaps in her teeth. When I traveled through Central America a few years back, I came back with stories about places in her country that she had never seen: the entrancing island of Ometepe with its petroglyphs, volcanoes, and leather-skinned fishermen; the historic town of Granada where I wandered at sunset alongside the sandy shore

and gathered juicy mangoes off the sidewalk. Last year, Elisa was finally able to go back home after twenty years of being away. She returned with stories of cousins she had never met before and a hometown that she barely recognized.

I like to think that I would still visit Tia Lydia even if she had never helped me through school. Even though I got a decent scholarship, paying 25 percent of a \$40,000 yearly tuition bill was still impossible for my parents. Her checks made it possible.

I always visit Tia Lydia on days when Elisa is working. Or rather, I always visit on days when Elisa is *cooking*. I'm not the only one. Rarely do I find myself alone with my Tia at the dining table on these days. Usually, I am joined by at least one or two of Tia's daughters, and perhaps another cousin on their lunch break—always a gathering of women. Together, we break bread in the company of *familia*, just like those days long gone, on the mosaicked veranda of that old Havana house that held them all, the air thick with *humedad, cebolla, y amor*. Except that now, we're sitting in a glossy high rise looking down at a marina filled with luxury yachts. The space around us is sleek and sterile; the air cold, recycled.

The banter is loud between the women, but Tia Lydia is quiet. She concentrates on spooning rice into her mouth or bringing a cup of water to her lips. Every so often, Elisa wipes a spill from her chin, feeds her a forkful of chicken.

Elisa's food is always hearty and homemade: cheesy, meaty lasagna, *carne asado, arroz con pollo*. Inevitably, one of my *tias* will pick half-heartedly at a salad, glancing longingly at the pasta. I always take seconds.

Conversations between my *tias* usually circle around diet fads, hair-styles, and the latest movie release. One of their favorite things to do on a Saturday is to go to the movies. They pay for one and spend the rest of the day hopping from one theater to another, watching movie after movie. No one suspects them, a gaggle of middle-aged women with their hair colored matching gold, their nails and makeup impeccable.

I don't have much to add to the conversation. I don't get my nails done, and my hair has never been colored. I prefer books to movies. And they have long ago given up on trying to pawn their fancy clothes on me. They know I'll never wear them.

Once, I brought pictures with me of a recent trip to the Amazon

rainforest. As I flipped through photographs of strangler figs and howler monkeys, my *tias* looked on with disgust.

“Where did you sleep?” Tia Hebe asked.

“Was there air conditioning?” her sister Jacqueline chimed in.

I laughed. “I slept in a bed with a mosquito net around it. And no, *tia*, there wasn’t even electricity!”

“*Ay, que horror!*” my aunts said, their eyes wide. “And the bugs! *Imaginate!*”

Only Elisa appreciated my photographs and their matching stories. The explosion of greens and the rickety wooden houses reminded her of the small village where she grew up, in the heart of the jungle.

After leaving Cuba for American, my grandmother refused to celebrate a single holiday or birthday for the rest of her life. When she was diagnosed with cancer at age 58, she blamed Castro. The cancer had spread so terrifically by then that the doctors had no idea where it started in the first place. By the time they found it, it was already in her bones.

What are the things my grandmother would have taught me if she had lived? What knowledge would she have passed on if her life had not been upended by a communist regime? What wisdom did she hold, of the wisdoms that women hold for the sole purpose of passing on to our daughters and granddaughters? Did she believe in Yemaya, the goddess of the ocean? Who did she pray to in the darkness of the new moon? Did she know what herbs mend a broken heart? What songs did she sing to summon the spirits?

I want the wizened matriarch, the keeper of ancient knowledge and secrets of the soil. But the truth is, had my grandmother lived, she might not have been the earth goddess I envision. She came from privilege, and her money bought her books, property, poetry. Losing all of this made her bitter, angry, and worst of all, sad.

The women in my family have lived through hard times, and they have learned much about the workings of this world. But they are not in the business of passing this on.

There is an unspoken code in our family that everything is fine—has always been fine—will always be fine. It is in our DNA to overlook the snags in the stitching, or pretend they don’t exist. We paste plastic

smiles on our faces. We get our hair done. We make sure our nails are perfect and our outfits are tailored to show off our figures. This is important.

When I was younger, cousins getting rid of designer clothes in their closet passed them on to me, as if I wanted to wear Gucci. When I took a semester off of school to travel through Europe, my mother forbade me to tell my *tias*.

“What will they think?” she asked.

“Why should they care?” I said.

“Tell me again how you make your *arroz con pollo*,” I say. Tia Ruby and I have finished looking through all of her photographs and now we’re rifling through fashion magazines.

She closes her magazine and sits up straight in her chair. “It’s all about the broth,” she says. “*El caldo*. You put everything in there—onions, carrots, a head of garlic. And a whole chicken, of course. Your mother loves my *arroz con pollo*. And Rafa, too.”

“Everyone loves your cooking,” I say with a smile. She smiles back at me, a soft smile showing her strong white teeth. “What comes next?”

“Well, you let that cook for a long time. Then you take out the chicken bones and add the rice. It’s going to be wetter than you think, but that’s the trick. You want it to be...”

“*Jugoso*?” I offer.

“*Si*,” she says. “You want it to be juicy.”

When it is time for me to leave Tia Lydia’s, I lean over her chair and try my best to encompass her frail body in my arms. She pats my back and speaks garbled sounds that I know are “I love you.”

“I love you, too, Tia,” I say, pulling away and looking into those marble blue eyes. These days, when we part, I wonder if it will be the last time. And when she is gone, who will sit in her place at the head of the table? Without Tia Lydia, what will become of Elisa and our lunchtime rendezvous? If Tia Ruby goes soon, like the doctors say she will, there will be no one to teach me the secret to making the perfect *flan* or burning the bottom of the *arroz con pollo* just right. Who, then, will feed our family?

Elisa walks me to the door.

“*Cuidate*,” she says, squeezing me into a hug.

“Take good care of yourself, too,” I say. “And *gracias* for taking such good care of Tia.”

She smiles her gap-toothed smile. “*Claro, hija*. Of course, my daughter.”

ALTHOUGH I HAVE MADE MY FATHER INTO A BIRD

SHEVAUN BRANNIGAN

I do not want
him flying. Wind turbines, alley cats, hurricanes and the inexplicable,
plummeting with thousands of his peers.

To clip his wings
and cage him means waking up one morning to his stiff body
on the newspaper floor.

My father is not in captivity, he roosts
in another tree.

Nothing listens. I have discarded all the clocks
and yet the sun. The moment heads toward me

like an alley cat,
feathers still around his mouth and blood. I see its stripes approaching,
I see its whiskers tense. Better this

than to see my father forget
how to roost, I tell myself. To see him forget his mate, forget
which tree is his, the seed bell, tinkling bell, call of my voice,
outstretched finger.

Best my father is not a bird,
but a sea turtle, best he carry me on his back,
his years stretching ahead like the Atlantic, best he outlive me
how salt outlives its water, until they're reunited.

An alley cat gnaws
a wing from the body of a bird, isn't that living, the very last of it.

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ABOUT TLR

Tahoma Literary Review is a journal published three times a year in both print and e-reader formats. We are based in the Pacific Northwest, but we are international in scope.

We at *Tahoma Literary Review* are committed to producing a literary journal from the professional writer's perspective; we believe that writers deserve compensation for the weeks or months it takes to compose a publishable poem or story. A major goal of *Tahoma Literary Review* is to show that writers and publishers can support each other not only artistically, but also financially.

We believe in a collaborative publication model. Literary journals that pay their contributors are rare; most journals offer only exposure, a somewhat questionable concept in a landscape that is crowded with writers, but sadly limited by lack of recognition in mainstream culture. A substantial number of journals now hold contests, with entry fees typically in the \$15 to \$30 range—usually with one winner, and maybe a few finalist prizes—instead of paying all contributors.

Our model attempts to find a middle ground that is more equitable.

TLR offers both payment and exposure to our contributors by using a substantial portion of our total income to support our authors. Payment for fiction and nonfiction ranges from a minimum of \$50 to \$300. Payment for poetry and cover art is \$25 to \$50. The amount is determined by the revenues received from submission fees, print journal sales and contributions from sources such as donors and foundations. To

ensure transparency and fairness, we will publish an audited quarterly revenue statement to verify the funds received for the submission period.

Even if a submission is not accepted for publication, submitters get value for their fees. Submitters of Fiction and Nonfiction can choose the free Feedback Option, which provides comments from the editors (and the editors themselves read all submissions; we don't use screeners). Their payment also gives them access to our Endnotes area, which features artist interviews, writing advice from experts, and more. Supporters (donors and print subscribers) also have access to this area.

If you'd like to support our work, please donate via our web site. Every dollar donated to *TLR* goes to pay our authors. Even small amounts are appreciated.

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