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Sangam | LITERARY MAGAZINE

Arno Bohlmeijer * R.T. Castleberry * Gina Elia * Daniel Espinosa

Victoria Garton * Kathie Giorgio * Diane Glancy * Roger Hart * Rosalie Hendon

Gwen Monohan * Christopher Munde * Charles Rammelkamp * Stephen Roger Powers

Sharon Scholl * M.S. Spann * Angela Townsend * Daniel Webre

Sangam Literary Magazine

English and Philosophy Program Department of Languages and Literature Southern University and A&M College
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Sangam Literary Magazine

Sangam features and represents works by established as well as emerging writers, irrespective of age, sex, race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, or national origin.

In this way, *Sangam*, a Sanskrit term for **joining together**, is, in fact, a coming together for all.

Sangam typically publishes biannually through the Department of Languages and Literature at Southern University and A&M College's flagship campus in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. As Louisiana's largest Historically Black College and University (HBCU), Southern University is situated in a bend of the Mississippi River, a locale with important literary significance, most recently home to Louisiana's previous Poet Laureate, John Smith, who is among its Baton Rouge campus faculty.

Masthead

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Time and Place

Winter 2023 Introduction



J. Michael Norris, MFA
Chief Editor, *Sangam*

We never know what awaits us as when we put out a call for submissions, making trust an important part of what we do. And so as we received and read so many wonderful poems and stories, we found ourselves awed and amazed at the creativity and authenticity of the many writers who submitted to us. Of course, with our first call for creative nonfiction, we saw stories of strife and sadness that held our attention and our hearts, speaking to a different truth than the fiction and poetry we have featured in the past.

But we could not place all the writers in this edition, as it is important to us that we put together a collection that is both cohesive and coherent, an assortment of ideas, events, and imagery that all work together, even across different genres.


For this collection, we found that the themes of time and place recurred within many of our works, sometimes transporting us away from our current reality, sometimes placing us firmly within it. Our poets and writers shuffle us forward and backward through experiences, often using different times or places to help us better understand those things that are almost universal, those things about humanity that can only be spoken about in whispers and innuendo, only seen in glimpses from our peripheral.

Here we are again, the winter of 2023-2024, in a world still struggling to become something better than it has been, both here and abroad. At home, we have a coming presidential election between two candidates who have negative public perceptions, both polling unfavorably across the board. We have a new war raging in the Middle East, brought about by one of the most brutal terrorist attacks in recent history, yet somehow we struggle with what should be done to move forward, mourning a mounting loss of life that seems unfathomable.

Perhaps these are things we cannot or will not be able to understand until a different time, when we have moved into the future and look back with clearer vision, with the wisdom of a future that is yet to come. I cannot say.

The best we can do is offer this collection to you, a collection wrought by poets and writers, artists who have used their words to make some sort of sense of the beauty and tragedy they find in our world. These poems and stories act as a record of what we feel, what we dream, and what we aspire to

be. Maybe reading them can help us make some sense of a world in that is not always easy to understand. Maybe reading them will give us an escape from a world that can be maddening in its contradictions. Maybe reading them can help us, at the very least, understand one another a little better.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Michael Norris". The signature is stylized with a large, looped initial "J" and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

J. Michael Norris, MFA

Chief Editor, *Sangam Literary Magazine*

POETRY

R. T. Castleberry
A WHISKEY INTERMISSION

Balcony flowers scent the air.
Street vendors stroll to sell
incense, candles, loose cigarettes.
Road tramps rest on church steps,
pass maps, tips for soup kitchens,
best hand-out, hangout corners.
Telling a story about hot air balloons
and Diamond Bay strippers,
the whiskey poet loafs
outside the Yellow Rose,
playing Mexican Train dominoes
with an Alabama debutante.

Tiles, fingernails, emerald rings clatter
on the tin-top table.
The debutante remarks,
“Rockabilly died on my 6th birthday.”
“At least there was cake,” the poet replies.
Range Rover, gypsy cab, Uber
pause at his streetside table.
Fighter-pilots, boxers,
the richly indolent bring
messages and money.
Outraged Japanese scholars wave
their tanka manifestos.
Evening ring of food trucks arrive
as the afternoon paper headlines:
“Zapata killed; Villa cuts a deal.”

Ignoring the silks and scarves of
the racing season’s final parade,
Army officers and their mistresses
crowding hotel cafes,
chain gangs building
little altars for the dead,
the whiskey poet retrieves his journal,

his cane and coat from the bar-back.
Sunburned, scooping up
change from a twenty,
he sighs a goodbye,
joins the hardhat mestizos walk
toward pickup trucks,
mercados, sunset's end.

Daniel Espinosa
Reappraisal for the Dark

*...God is light, and in him
is no darkness at all.*

—1 John 1:5

My mother tells me we were made
creatures of light, that dark is for
crime, the scavenger skulking,
though dark swaths the known
universe like ocean on a planet
impossibly called Earth, like ocean
in a body we likewise claim as ours,
though God called the darkness night,
though half of day is night, though night
invented the stars that invented us, or is that
to prophesize a past grown
dim with millennia, like old Icarus
approaching the sun, still a star all this time?
If Darwin kicks about in steaming tar, prays
from the pit of a man-finch, how much more
for the one who sees the dark as dawn,
phenomenon as much a symptom of this
earth as the slow sweat of thunderclouds across
its surface? Before the lens and under, the world turns
away, too known in the sunbeam
glare, and when all is revealed, dredged
to shore with the angler, gills agape
and porchlight moot, his toothy frown will tell
of how life was helixed into pairs, everything
made to bless meaning upon
another, everything translucent.

Daniel Espinosa
Traversal

It's 6:42 pm and the plane is
just over Le Jeune now. Outside
the wing trembles like springboard
just beyond my window. Looking away, I notice
the interstate where I stalled and lagged become
like thick sinew, tissue of our everyday
the kwik store on 51st a firework display
spelling *open*.
Coily the wing waves but down below
the earth looks too much like a sky, screen
of stars that swallow stars. Every day
the threat of death. Every day
the threat of death in what I love—
a rush of sea makes a shush, sounds
as much of rustling leaves as cars
whooshing in the distance
the snake's blazoned skin
belies any venom, though not to the hawk
and even the clouds kindled pink mark
another day gone, all of which makes
my awe earned, and whether
I keep it is no concern of mine.
10,000 miles over Earth a cabin shakes
though I can't tell.

Victoria Garton

Halfway Through the Afternoon

You tear down the spine of a package of Lorna Doone cookies remembering how you had to wait for a tray from below, how the delivery girl would ask if you needed anything else and you would say, "Yes, would you open the cookies?".

You wonder if anyone else would see the miracle of a hand come again to the joy of pinch and grip and tear, of a brain learning for the second time a thing so elementary.

You savor the crumble of shortbread on your tongue and you recall how you gazed longingly at the impermeable yellow checks, the name in green letters that time the substitute didn't ask and you didn't remember or denied for a moment all you had to overcome.

Like the time you tried to read a poem of the dream that was no dream but real pain filling your head and leaving you maimed. The audience took a collective breath and after two years of Zoom squared faces and muted audio your own breath caught. You didn't know if the hand recovered enough to clutch the lectern would suddenly let go, you didn't know if you had the reserves to deliver the sublime or even if the sublime were deliverable.

Diane Glancy
History of Texas

It was the dry wind.
The howling dust.
They covered their noses.
Pulled their kerchiefs to their eyes.
Even horses could not graze.
The cloak that I left when you come bring with you.
The books.
Especially the parchments— II Timothy 4:13.
The letters I wrote to you in drought.
Folded in saddle-bags.
Sent on the backs of pack-mules.
Messages
of all that I have left.

Rosalie Hendon
Over the continent

I want to go home, a child cries
Two rows ahead of me,
over and over
If he says it enough times,
maybe it will happen

We've been swallowed by a whale
Darkness and hissing air
confined and achy
I sympathize—
He just wants to go home, Mommy

That stubborn insistence
Doesn't matter we are here,
in the air, suspended
over the land
She will fix it, he knows,
and she does

Not with words
but by carrying him
up and down the aisle,
letting the rocking of her body
soothe him to sleep

Rosalie Hendon

Reflections on a Railroad Track

For Brynne

Balance on the splintery railroad ties
Arms spread wide
You're a silhouette,
a negative space,
the absence of sunset.

I only hear your voice before me,
imagine the smile.
I hold out my camera,
frame your profile against the sky.
"Any words of wisdom?"

"No words of wisdom," you laugh.
"17 years on this Earth,
and no words of wisdom?"
It's my turn to tease you.

"Hmm...I say..."
You squeal as you lose your balance.
"I say, don't say anything."

"Ever?"
"Not ever."
But don't say anything
till you know who
you're saying it to."

Wisdom inherent to 17-year-old girls
at twilight
on the edge of town,
hands full of sky.

Gwen Monohan
Homeward Bound

The old man rose with his cane
and leaned against the window ledge.
Waiting for the boys to come,
sons nearing retirement themselves.
Water filled the rusty kettle.
He sloshed some free making sure.
Then set it on a stained hot plate.
Gas disconnected long ago.

His sons arrived, bringing wives,
gray hair trimmed above their ears.
They took time opening car doors.
Longer still to clear their seats,
with suit cuffs clinging near shoe level
and tight over-coats left unbuttoned.
Both glanced up the worn stone walk to home.
Then followed the women toward the porch.

He held the cold door ajar to wait,
smudged sweater baggy 'round the neck.
His yellow cat with caved-in sides
draped against one leg to purr
till the ladies' harsh heels
rapped the wide slate walk too loudly.
Then she leapt on the greasy table
to crouch in a ready-pounce position.

They smiled shadows, breezing by him.
One wife pecked his raspy cheek.
All glanced about, yet no one sat.
Kitty on the table spat.
"Had lunch?" he said, shuffling clutter.
Then he heard low whispers near one wife,
nodding like a physician. She said,
"Dad, we've found a home for you."

Christopher Munde

EXPLOITATION¹

Before your funeral...

Before you are buried...

Before you are covered with the last shovelful of dirt...

Be sure

you are really

dead!

-Tagline for *Mortuary* (1983), Directed by
Howard Avedis

This holiday season, for survivors, leaves
Of absence arrive. In a town

Just north of the grave, a coffin
The size of a concession stand,

And the price of a concession stand
Milk Duds, hungers. This Christmas, get sick

And get cremated. For the living,
Mourning is digging time.

This time, its personable. This winter
Has just cut, chopped, broken and cremated.

Get locked
In the novelty notch
In an engagement ring.

To avoid fainting, keep repeating.

Next time,
Just keep repeating

You're cold cuts. You're fertilizer. You
Balance both ends of the scale.

¹ Several lines throughout distort taglines from popular horror and exploitation films.

See why everyone's getting engaged
To our engagement. This

Winter, get snowed in
From the inside out.

This year, the ones who lived
Suck marrow and like it, and

This Christmas, death gets
Exotic. This Mari Lwyd

Doesn't just drink wine. This time,
Jólakötturinn buries you in the yard.

Gasp through white-on-white
Subtitles. No subtitles for crying.
Big girls and animals don't cry.

Pray to get in. Pay to get in. Get in.

Welcome to the box inside the box.

Don't open the closure. Let the language
Embalm you. You will never stop

Apologizing. In debt, no one can hear you

Streaming now from a hole in the snowdome
Of your skull on Roku: It's waiting for you.

They're waiting for you. We're
All snowed in this together.

Charles Rammelkamp The Judgement of Elderly Parents

I was on the crew of sanitation workers
who discovered the bag of body parts
at the Shahrak Ekbatan apartment complex
in Tehran, when we collected the trash.
Khodaye man! It smelled to high heaven!

Forensic experts got fingerprints
from a piece of a hand,
discovered the victim was Babak Korramdin,
an obscure film director.
Surveillance footage from a building elevator camera
showed an elderly couple transporting
large plastic trash bags the night before.
Babak's parents! Akbar Khorramdin, 81,
and his wife, 74-year-old Iran Mousavi.

Turned out they'd killed
their daughter Arezou three years before
and their son-in-law, Faramarz, too, same way –
drugged, suffocated, stabbed and dismembered.

The couple confessed to their crimes.
“I have no guilty conscience for any of the murders,”
Khorramdin, a retired army colonel, declared.
“I killed people who were morally corrupt.”
Newspaper photographs showed him in prison pajamas
flashing a victory sign. “They were drug addicts,
alcoholics. They had promiscuous sex.”

The last thing *my* parents said to *me*
before they passed on to the next life?
Ghorbunet beram. I'll sacrifice myself for you,
a traditional expression of affection.

Sharon Scholl
Demise

What a labor dying is -
this war against a body tuned
to the drum beat of existence,
impervious to the will,
to passionate desire,
even the loss of mind.
Its organs duplicated
against failure,
its molecules eternal
as the stars.

It shrinks to bone,
endures past loss of food
and drink, draws
on the primitive power
of Being itself to stay
anchored to this time and place.

We find the husk one morning,
life having left unseen,
departed like an army
in strategic retreat, primed
to fight upon another front.

Sharon Scholl
Reading the Future

We laugh at fortune tellers
peering in their crystal globes
or spreading Tarot cards to read
the interplay of graphic symbols.

But the lady at the lab who took
a small vial of my husband's blood
will read his future and his past,
the chemistry that holds his fate.

She will know his diet, his habits
better than I do –what he may die
of and how soon. She'll detect
the jolts his body has endured,

when his kidneys may give out
and if he really has a good excuse
not to mow the lawn. Years ago
she would have been a witch.

FICTION

Arno Bohlmeijer
Slicing Time

A fate-defying closeness between ‘crazy and normal’ – or is it guilt and innocence? –begins with a true story: the best Mom close to me left her baby outside a shop for a minute. It requires rare forms of solidarity and reconciliation, when the lines between culprit and victim are fearfully thin.

Slicing time

“The line between wrong and right
is the thread from a spider’s web.”

Katie Melua



“Never switch your microphone or camera off!” is the creed of a good producer, for any live or recorded interview.

Journalist Anne Hoover finished College with Honors and big expectations, not only because her work was far above average. In her early days as a freelancer, before stumbling into motherhood, Anne phoned a prominent newspaper’s editor and said, “What about an interview with David Grossman?”

“What’s the journalistic urgency?” the editor asked, catching her off guard.

“Well, I admire his work...” Anne began, instead of, “His books are sold by the millions worldwide; the man is a treasure that I’ll fathom. Buy me a cheap ticket, I’ll stay in a hostel and roam around for two days and nights, like his most original characters.”

The proposal was rejected, but a few weeks later the same paper featured a page-size interview with David Grossman. After more examples of such “coincidence” in Anne’s life, her innocence grew grim.

As a consolation or passionate investment, it was her own initiative to translate a part of a Spanish novel, a hidden gem.

“Not commercial enough,” said the publisher on second thoughts, but six months later the book was turned into a major feature film – and translated by someone who’d heard *that* news before Anne did.

Through fate or synchronicity or absurdity her best ideas tended to end up with somebody else. It drove her mad, but she ignored that here and buried it there. There was work enough left.

Her journalistic writings had as much feeling as pluck, depth and a special style that dazzled many good editors, who were keen on her spontaneity, but they warned her for inflammable impulsivity, "Use your head, Anne!"

"What did I say?" someone sighed when Anne's baby was not planned, certainly not by the father.

She interviews authors, athletes, politicians, and she loves writing her enchanting columns for weekly NUNA, even with baby Reg at her feet in his rocking seat or play pen.

Anne takes her anxiety medication, brings the monitor into the garden, pressing the volume buttons and moving it with her everywhere. She always washes her hands and checks the windows, her watch and the gas burners.

Very soon she loves Reggie deeply, he's a dream kid who doesn't seem troubled by the trials of life like stomach cramps or a diaper that's too tight.

"Yeah, he's on a cloud," Anne says with mocking concern, when Reg is called a bouncing boy again. "He's so easy-going, no ounce of bother to anyone."

"Wake up, he'll be teething; his fangs will catch up!"

He's a bit late in that respect, which does disconcert her. Silly jokes about "an ancient soul" upset her disproportionately.

On the whole she withdraws more and more, content in a brittle or little peace of mind, fortunate with work that can be done from home, even her interviews, so neatly and adequately that everybody is pleased.

Anne will keep sufficient contacts and incomes for someone whose lifestyle is voluntarily moderate. In case of an outdoor interview or an editorial meeting, she can afford day care for Reg, and sometimes she leaves him – only a minute – for instance to mail a letter that can't be emailed, or a signed contract.

She loves taking Reg with her, but now and then he's in such a sound sleep that a sense of confidence lets her go a tad further, like ten minutes to a store and get something important or a treat, when a humble celebration is in order.

She always checks every possible risk and has a big note in the car as well as in her pocket, with her name and address – *baby Reg is asleep upstairs!* – in case something worse than a flat tire were to happen.

On her return he can be exactly as she left him, not having blinked an eye, or he looks around curiously and smiles to her, all of which confirm her good faith. They always embrace gratefully, bonding placidly.

“Intuition is the blend of reason and feeling,” says her wise and kind doctor.

“So,” she thinks out loud, “when it feels alright in the brain and guts, can Reg be home alone for a minute?”

“I agree.”

“Five minutes?”

“Hm,” Doc says. “Yes.”

“And fifteen or twenty?”

“Ah, good question, the eternal boundaries...”

He reflects hard and the jury is still out.

Family doctor Mullan is a gray-haired, sympathetic man in a homely office. What human person can decide such matters?

Anne pledges not to skip medication, although her nervous inclination has been under control for years.

At work in the living-room, she checks the baby monitor, opens the door and listens in the hallway. Once in a while, people called her unstable, or a mean person would say, “Is it the monthly misery again? Go see a doctor and ask for pills. Your moods are a liability!”

If her mental sensitivity had been a point for “not having kids”, Anne might have agreed, but the pregnancy went very well, including the emotions and moods, as if she got into a natural balance.

The father was not around anymore for the most part of that. Dreading complications of second thoughts or grudges, they didn’t keep in touch, although for some time she expected him back on the doorstep again, bashfully sad and mad, begging to see his son and take him out for a day to the zoo or Fair or Formula II.

Look, she’d say, we can’t be lost between the past and present, I won’t have it!

Or would she be happy to give it a go? Thrilled to give them both a second chance?

Today Anne wants to go into town, but Reg sleeps long. She never wakes him up and now she's afraid to leave him. Silly misgivings can be corny or right.

Both indoors and out in the garden, the batteries of the best monitor are always charged to the utmost. It enables her to work a stretch in concentration, and the silences (what's "long" anyway?) don't trouble her exceedingly or constantly – that's what he's like – except today.

A vague uneasiness can be exaggerated or eerily right.

In the garden, musing about an audacious and true column, she tries to pull weeds with their roots and all. She relishes a coffee break but glances at her watch in doubt: let Reg sleep now, in order to skip a nap later and give him an early night?

She hates making choices that may have too many consequences. Can something go wrong because she's frightened of it, or is it the other way round? *If only* caused angst: *if only I'd been alert one minute earlier... Please, can I start from scratch?* But she doesn't want to be hysterical.

When a doctor talks about instincts, it sounds feasible and interesting. But how to turn them into wisdom and practice?

Such thoughts can drive her crazy again. She won't think at all, since little things would become heavy. She needs the bathroom, the coffee is funny on her stomach, or it's just a bit of histrionic sickness because she forgot to eat.

So, girl, she admonishes herself, you sit and breathe, and read what you've written. You can soon be active and practical again, when Reg is awake. He loves the home-making bustle.

When or if he's awake... Other languages have one word for both, so in those countries people don't need to choose. Or they do even more! We always have to choose. But why the heck stop and think about simple words?

That's my passion and profession: compelling and boundless. It's a nuisance, though, to be so maddening conscious of details, for instance when shallow celebs are crowding TV land, and their language becomes the standard rubbish.

Can she hear Reg crying now or is it *her* fear? He never seeks attention, and for all she knows, he may have been waiting for ages. But hold on, crying could also be a good thing; at least that would not be worrying.

She climbs the stairs and there's no need to go on tiptoes. With a song she'd like to let him know that she's coming, but what on earth is wrong with her lungs? Halfway up the stairs she can't breathe, needs to pause, wants to call out: your mom is here, on her way!

Whatever she learned before, it's no use anymore: take a breath and sigh, press your feet on the floor, sweep your arms or rest the hands on your head. Her throat and chest are frozen. This can't melt, only break, it's like brain freeze on a full-body scale. But the pain around her heart is worse, while the stairs are a wintery hill, a slope of ice where she slides down. It would take all spring or summer for this ice to melt.

Up in Reg's room she crouches, then shuffles and crawls to his crib. Shaking her head, she carries him, sits on the floor and rocks back and forth, going numb, just mumbling "No" countless times.

She lies down and rests him on her chest, his head on her neck, so close that his lack of breathing is felt in her fibers. Her eyes die as well, while the world has gone still.

<>

Anne is losing her mind, but she knows that cot death happens to babies in lovely and safe beds, used or new, even last week in broad daylight, in a care center among other children and sweet workers, trained and experienced.

As to Reg, she only knows the other phrase: he's gone.

He looks as peaceful as ever, his face serene, because he's there where you don't need to say goodbye. Who claims that a heaven is far away?

True, he's been *too* good for the world, there's nothing to keep him here. It's alright, he has no sense of place or time or regret. She'd better bury what's left behind, return the remains to dust as the Bible says, because it's supposed to be that way, apparently, as a matter that speaks for itself – predestined by higher or lower powers? Who keep their mouths shut tight. Cowards!?

The stony coldness in her limbs could be over. All she needs to do is dig something relatively small, but in a shielded corner of the garden she works herself into a mad sweat, encouraged

by the whole place, telling her in loud and clear polyphony: you can plant a beautiful tree here! Not for camouflage, you don't need that in the secluded country garden of this detached old little cottage. No, it's an homage and image: in winter a tree just *looks* dead, but right through the rugged wood the softest leaf will grow again, and ethereal petals will bloom. By the time the foliage gets dark and heavy, all will fall off again, for another fresh start. What more can you wish for?

Even afterwards there's no desire to eat, she drinks profusely, takes a loud shower without end, rubbing and scrubbing as if her hands and nails have toiled in the soil themselves.

Before rush hour she cycles mechanically toward Garden Center, where they have a young and white-flowering fruit tree, which can be delivered tomorrow.

The area is a mixture of lively, carefree and colorful, and here's a shopping street full of character. Without imposing, the wide sidewalks and porches look hospitable, appealing, and a kid-cargo bike fits well, waiting for someone to take care of the lost baby, outside the bike store.

She can park her own bike just yards away – around this corner – steady and ready – and with calm quickness it's no effort or time to click the safety belt open and lift him in one soundless go, all natural again. "Here's my darling good boy, it hasn't been too long now, has it."

Look: our carrying sling, straight from our bag, since life is gliding back into place, isn't it.

"Right, Reg, high time: you must be thirsty. We're on our way home, you can cradle in the big sling, and your bottle is waiting for you. We'll be there in a minute."

What are you gazing at with your big eyes? Mommy will never leave you like that again, all by yourself out there, except in your own cozy room, and in the garden. Or later you might enjoy the nice house with other children, for a morning or two. We explored last week, remember, and you found it quite interesting.

"Oh, you've got the sun in your eyes?"

Just keep low in your snug hole, as Mommy needs to steer and focus. We'll take the quiet road and the bike track. Never mind the police car, there's no siren on, because nothing

is wrong. They protect us against mean people, or they deal with traffic when there's been an accident.

Ah, it's a bit scary after all? OK, here's a short-cut, leaving town. Comes with the weather, everybody goes out, and you are lucky to have a mom working freelance, available!

I'll sing to you, but hold on, people don't see you in your deep sling, so they'd think I'm bonkers when I sing a nursery rhyme.

Oh, you want to look around and see those people? First you need your bottle and we'll cut your hair, or else they won't know you anymore. It's grown so much and all, with the peace and good food. Fancy more fruit already? We'll go easy on the strawberries, though. Your tummy doesn't like these pips in them.

"There, we're back, see?"

As practical as usual, she puts him in the play pen – he's hardly protesting – and she boils water for the bottle that's been ready on the kitchen board, thoroughly rinsed and dried earlier. No bacteria and no leak! Add the exact amount of cold water, better lukewarm than too hot.

She lifts him up. "Ho, are you greedy today!"

As soon as he sees the bottle, he almost jumps off her arms, crying blue murder, but they reach the couch safely.

"Easy... Goodness, as if you've had no food or drink for days. How long have we been in the fresh air? Wait, better sit properly, or else I'll have a sore arm, remember?"

He swallows the wrong way and quickly she pulls the bottle back, putting him upright. "Well, you're so impatient..." She tries a smaller hole of the bottle top, which has opposite effects.

My my, you're growing like anything. And you're right, we'll find new clothes; these don't fit anymore, we'll get rid of them straightaway, for something completely new!

"Hey, Reg, watch it, we don't want the hiccups now, do we."

His eyes are probing. A hand slides along the bottle and stops to hold her thumb. He's drinking more calmly, yet she makes him pause a few times, although he thinks two seconds will do.

"Yes, love runs through the tummy, I know."

Decisive, she changes his diaper and clothes.

After that she cuts his hair deftly, as if all of that was due, and they cuddle until he smiles. “No tickling, I agree, you can really trust me. Ten minutes play time? Fine, I’ll send a message to my boss and tell her to have a little patience. I can do with a nap too, frankly.”

Gently she lays him in the pen again.

Inconspicuously his old clothes are wrapped in plastic and dropped in the outside can, and how long was that, leaving him out of sight: one minute?

Kathie Giorgio
All in a Name

Up until she was twelve years old, Honey hated bugs. Even a ladybug or a butterfly could send her screaming into the house in search of her mother, who impatiently told her to go back outside and play. Her mother didn't like bugs either, truth be told, but as long as they weren't inside the house, she was fine. And that's when, at twelve, Honey made her plan.

She would bring bugs inside of the house. She would "study" them, and because it was a science, her mother would agree. But she would shudder. And Honey would feel like she won. Won what, she couldn't quite say. But her mother wouldn't say no. Like she nearly did years ago to Honey herself. Honey knew this from overhearing her siblings. And she knew it from the time her older sister, Holly, got so exasperated with whatever Honey was doing, she shouted, "I wish Mom hadn't decided to have you!"

Honey also remembered being six years old and sitting in the chair designated as the naughty chair in the living room. It was an adult-size chair because, as Honey was often told, her older siblings never needed a chair to sit in as a punishment for naughtiness. Honey sat there that day, pondering why it was naughty to use her paints to put her mother's name on the driver's side door of the minivan. Her mother was always forgetting where she parked it and the bright pink paint would help. She heard her mother whisper to her father, "Honestly, Hank. I just can't keep up with her. She was a mistake from the get-go."

Honey was a mistake. She was naughty. And even when she was afraid, she was supposed to go outside and leave her mother alone.

During science in sixth grade, Honey watched a movie with her classmates during the insect unit, a part of “Nature’s Wonders”. A man showed how you could catch the bugs and pin them to a board after humanely killing them in such a way as to not wreck their fragile, often beautiful bodies. It was a revelation to Honey that bug bodies could be beautiful.

When she got home from school that day, Honey asked her mother for a trip to the science surplus store. Her mother was excited; Honey hadn’t shown any interest in science, or in any form of academia, really, until that moment. Her mother didn’t even ask why they were going, she just picked up her car keys and they went. Honey was thrilled with her acquiescence, that she didn’t have to beg and then be put off until the weekend or the weekend after, or ask one of her older siblings to take her when they had time. It wasn’t until Honey and her mother were inside the store that Honey grabbed her mother’s hand and took her over to the corner where there were bug nets and bug houses and bug books, and then, everything a growing bug-nut could want for pinning. Honey flung out her arms. “I need it all, Mom!”

Her mother shuffled her feet. “Honey...what are we doing here?”

Honey explained the movie. She explained she wanted to do what the man was doing. But she didn’t explain that she wanted to do it because she was absolutely certain it would help her to win that indefinable contest.

They came home that day with full bags. A net. A kill jar. A rehydrating chamber. A mounting board and insect pins. And from there, Honey went to work, delightedly showing her mother every insect caught, every insect killed, and every insect mounted, until the wall on her side of the

bedroom was covered with the mounting boards. As her sisters moved out, Honey took over their walls too. She used her sister Hester's wall just for butterflies.

And her mother had to admire them all, even though they were bugs inside her house. She had to come look whenever Honey asked. Because she wasn't being naughty. She was doing something with science, and Honey's mother loved science, just like she loved math. Honey made sure her mother always counted the number of bugs on her walls, breaking them down to types, and adding them up for the sum total.

But now Honey was turning eighteen and graduating from high school and her interest in bugs, which wasn't an interest in bugs at all, but in her mother, was backfiring. Now, everyone expected her to go to college and become an entomologist, and it was the last thing that Honey wanted to do. All but one of her siblings had professional college-required jobs, like mathematician and genetic biologist, and some were not so science-y, but still college-required, like a librarian and a social worker. Only her sister Hester didn't go to college, but she took classes in business at a community college and started her own travel business, leading people on impossible hikes all around the world. Honey just wanted to move out of the house, leaving all of her bugs behind, and have her own place. And a job. And her own life. She would figure it out as she found it.

It would be the ultimate win. She didn't want to plan. She wanted to live day by day by day. Opportunities arose, and she would take them. She wanted surprise after surprise, like pink paint on a minivan door.

Honey just wasn't like the others. She was a mistake. It seemed her arrival was steeped in naughtiness, saying yes to her mother's no.

But her mother insisted that Honey apply for colleges, and she got in each and every one. "See?" her mother said. "You're so smart, Honey. You have to go to college."

“You didn’t,” Honey said. “And you’re smart.”

And it was like when she first brought a bug into the house. Her mother went silent. Then she went into the room she shared with Honey’s father and didn’t come out until the next day.

Honey made a second plan, her only other plan besides the bugs, and she kept it a secret from everyone. From her parents. From her five siblings. She knew the plan, if she said it out loud, would cause her mother to go silent again. To disappear again. But keeping it secret, Honey wouldn’t be around to see when her mother reappeared out of that bedroom. And she would no longer be Honey. She pinned her high school graduation photo to one of the walls of bugs. Honey, and the bugs, would be left behind.

Honey’s birthday fell conveniently the Monday after high school graduation, and that was fine with Honey. While she wasn’t a fan of the college degree, she did think she’d need at least her high school diploma. So she walked across the stage, smiled when her family of parents and five siblings cheered from the audience, flipped her tassel to the other side of her mortarboard, and planned her next move to move to a place where no moves were necessary.

On Monday, she slipped out of the house and walked downtown to the courthouse. There, she presented her birth certificate and driver’s license to start the process to legally change her first name. She was told it would take at least two weeks, maybe more. Honey made a silent vow to always be around when the mailman delivered, so she would be sure to intercept the official paperwork.

While she waited, she snuck a suitcase out of the cedar closet that used to be a nursery in the second floor hallway, packed, and hid it under her bed. Honey never slept in that nursery, she knew. There was a brother, who died when he was only three weeks old ten years before Honey

was born, who was the last baby in there, before her father changed it into a closet. Because Honey was a mistake, created after the room for babies was gone, she stayed in her parents' room, and then, when deemed old enough, was shuffled in to share a room with the girls. The other children all had a special place for their first few months; Honey was wedged under the window in her parents' bedroom. There was a potted plant there now.

She asked her father once why the closet wasn't changed back to a nursery when they knew she was on the way. He'd shrugged. "That cedar closet was a lot of work," he said. "It was easier to just keep you with us, and then with your sisters, where you would have gone anyway, after the nursery."

Three weeks after Honey applied for her name change, on a Wednesday, and on the day after the paperwork finally arrived, she slipped again out of the house, long before even her father got up for work. She got herself and her suitcase to the Greyhound bus depot, where she bought tickets taking her to the Oregon coast. Her brother Henry went there once when Honey was a little girl, and he'd never stopped talking about it. So she picked out a town – Waldport – and a motel and then rode the bus for a couple days to get there. She had all of the money from her savings account, started when she was five years old, in her purse, plus all of the money from graduation presents. Her bank account also included the money for the payment she was supposed to make for her first semester of college, the one she chose by tamping the acceptance letters together, then shuffling them like a deck of cards and picking one blind. She had no intention of actually going. The money was put into her account by her parents, but left to her to be responsible and pay when it was required. She had a couple credit cards that she applied for on her own. She had her cell phone, which rang incessantly until she turned it off midway through the second day. And she had her new name.

Honey's parents' names were Hank and Hildegarde. Her siblings were Harold, Heloise, Henry Junior, Holly, and Hester, and the dead brother she never met was named Holden. Their last name was Halverson. And then there was Honey.

H was the eighth letter in the alphabet. Eight letters before the end of the alphabet was the letter S. And so Honey changed her name to Sophie.

Reaching Portland, Sophie left Greyhound behind and took an airport transport bus the three hours to Waldport. When she got there, she bought a burner phone and then shut her cell off for good, including pulling the battery.

Though she couldn't quite bring herself to throw it away. That small part of Honey was stashed into the top drawer of the dresser in the studio apartment Sophie rented above an art gallery on the main drag in Waldport. Sophie wasn't sure why she didn't throw it away. She also wasn't sure why she took it out from time to time, though she never put the battery back in. Never turned it on. But she did hold it to her ear.

Three years later, Sophie had made herself indispensable to the art gallery below her apartment. She talked with the hopeful artists who wanted to sell their work. She helped to sell it. She balanced the books. The owner of the gallery loved her and suggested she take classes in art and business at the community center, thinking that it would help Sophie to understand the Oregon coast art world even more. It did, but it also inspired Sophie to paint, and soon, she had a small corner of the gallery covered with her own work. She had a boyfriend named Seth. He wanted to marry her. And while she considered the proposal, and while she thought of life with Seth, the idea came that she might want to have a baby. Someday.

If it was a boy, she would name him Holden.

Although Seth's last name was Simpson, and they joked about how their relationship was full of the letter S, Sophie hadn't told him that her name was actually Honey, though he knew about Halverson being her last name. She hadn't told him about Hank and Hildy, or Harold, Heloise, Henry Junior, Holly and Hester. She hadn't told him about Holden. She hadn't told him much of anything, really, except that she was estranged from her family who lived back in Wisconsin, and she wanted it to stay that way. Seth was okay with that. He loved her, he said, no matter where she came from. No matter who she didn't talk to.

She did, one late night, mention she was a mistake. She mentioned she was naughty. And Seth told her she was anything but and pulled her even closer to him.

The night after Sophie's first painting sold, for a price that would pay her rent for several months, she curled up to Seth in bed. They weren't married yet, but he'd moved in. Sophie felt committed, even if it wasn't legal on paper, like her name when it changed. That night, she told Seth the first of the stories about herself, stories that showed why she and her family were estranged, why she was a mistake, why she had a naughty chair when the rest of her siblings never did. For a month, she told the stories. She thought each day about what she wanted to say. She also thought about what she didn't.

"I skipped out of school a lot," she said.

"I came home drunk when I was fourteen."

"I had sex for the first time when I was fifteen, with a guy I met at the Dollar Store in town. I had sex with him for a week, and I told him I wanted to marry him, and then he left. He was only in town for that week, on a business trip. He had a wife and three kids. Two of them were older than me."

"I ran away a lot."

“I stole from the Dollar Store, and eventually, I was banned from the place.”

“I had my driver’s license for an hour before I was pulled over for speeding. 95 in a 25 zone. By the old elementary school. When school just let out and there were kids everywhere.”

“I painted my mother’s name in pink on the driver’s side door of her minivan.”

And finally:

“I decided to bring bugs into the house. I killed them, then pinned them to boards all over my room. It seemed like the only way I could get my mom’s attention.”

She didn’t say that she wondered if the bugs were still on the walls of her room. She didn’t say she wondered if her room was even still there, or if it had been changed into something else, the way the nursery in the house was changed to a cedar closet. She didn’t say she wondered how they all were, her parents, her brothers, her sisters. She didn’t say she wondered if they thought about her.

Seth held her and listened. Every day for a month. Thirty stories. Each time that she finished talking, he kissed her eyelids. Even when she cried. And he told her that naughty also meant spirited.

“Spirited Sophie,” he said.

When her stories wound down, she agreed to marry him.

It was when Sophie was looking at dresses for the wedding that she began to think of questions she wished she could ask her mother. It wasn’t to be a big wedding, it was barely a wedding at all. A trip to the county courthouse, just like the trip to the county courthouse when she changed her first name. Now, she’d be changing her last name. Sophie Simpson. Which also made her think of her mother, coming up with the name Honey for the last child she would ever have.

Honey Halverson. And before Honey, all the H-names for the children she always wanted. The children that were planned. And had, bing, bing, bing, one right after the other. 1989. 1991. 1992. 1994. 1995. 1997. And then Honey, in 2007. A ten-year gap in which no children were born. And then Honey, who didn't even have a real name. Though it still started with an H.

That ten-year gap. A baby born after the death of a baby. Sophie supposed her leaving home was like disappearing, like Holden did when he died. Though her mother knew where Holden was. She visited him every Sunday at the cemetery. Honey, now Sophie, wasn't even available by phone.

As she sorted through dresses in different shops, she thought of saying to her mother, "What do you think of this one? Is it too much? It needs to be simple. I want simple. But I want to look pretty."

Sophie, as Honey, never pictured herself wanting to look pretty. But Sophie did, for Seth.

As she tried on the first of five different dresses, she heard the curtain to the fitting room next door slide open. And then a woman called, "Oh, honey! It looks lovely on you!"

Sophie looked at the dress she was wearing, closed her eyes and heard the woman's words again, wished they were for her, and decided not to try on any of the others. This was the one.

That night, after Seth was asleep, Sophie pulled out her old cell phone and held it to her ear. There was, of course, nothing.

Sophie wished she could ask her mother if anything would change between her and Seth, after they got married. Would the studio apartment, which they both loved, suddenly not feel like enough? Would he always understand her paintings? Would he always kiss her eyelids and call her Spirited Sophie?

Would he ever think of her as a mistake?

Sophie wondered again about a baby, about what kind of mother she would be, but then she shut those thoughts off. It was enough, right now, to think of a marriage. To be Sophie Simpson. Not Honey Halverson. Not Sophie Halverson. Not Honey Simpson.

Sophie Simpson. Spirited, not naughty.

She had Seth's attention. She was not a mistake.

Two years later, Sophie stood in the second bedroom of their new apartment. She wrapped her arms around a belly that seemed impossibly big and round. It still took her breath away, despite these eight months, to see her body contort, to see the roundness suddenly become lopsided with the protrusion of a foot or a hand. Sometimes a head or a butt. All tucked away inside of her.

Sophie looked at the crib, already set with sheets and a bumper, decorated with moons and stars. She remembered the cradle that sat in a corner of the cedar closet at home. Her father had made it, and the sides were solid, with a moon and a star cut out of one side. She'd slept in it, along with all of her brothers and sisters. One brother died there, but the cradle stayed for one more. Honey. She knew it waited now for the first grandchild.

Was Sophie carrying the first grandchild?

Her mother had gone through this process seven times.

Sophie had questions again. Would this hurt? Did breathing that certain way, in a certain rhythm, really help? Should she have the epidural, which was supposed to take all of the pain away, but wasn't natural, and the trend now had turned back to sticking with nature. Nature's Wonders. An epidural wasn't nature's way of doing things, with the body and the mind working together. Sophie's mother told her once that the epidural let her read and sleep and watch television during

her labor with Honey, because she didn't feel a thing. But that made Honey feel like she'd gone through the labor all by herself. Not like the brothers and sisters, who her mother struggled alongside. Or outside, while they were inside, trying to come out.

She just wanted her mother to pay attention. Like she had with the others.

But then Sophie won. Her mother couldn't not pay attention to her when she wasn't there to not pay attention to.

Sophie shook her head. Somehow, her plan didn't seem to make sense anymore. Did she really win, when the contest was indefinable?

Late at night, two months after the baby's birth, Sophie returned Holden to his crib after he'd been soothed back to sleep at her breast. His mouth puckered and moved, as if he was attached to her still. And she knew she would want him to be. Always.

Going into her room, she glanced at her sleeping husband, then moved over to the dresser. In the top drawer, just like in the studio, was her old cell phone. She carried it out to the living room and held it to her ear. She held it for a while, looking out the window at the night. At the moon and the stars. Her son slept. Her husband slept.

And she wondered if it would always be that way. Or if she would come out of her bedroom someday, maybe after a period of silence, and find her child gone.

That thought made her double over.

In Wisconsin, though it was closer to dawn there with the time difference, she wondered if her parents slept too. Did her mother?

Lifting the battery, she tucked it back into its place in the phone. And then she pressed the power button. To her amazement, it lit up and went through its old start-up routine. On the green phone symbol, there was a number in bright red, showing the amount of voicemails she had.

The total was 732.

Sophie was amazed when she heard a dial tone. Her phone was still active. And she'd been gone five years.

The voicemails went backwards in time. The most recent one was three years ago. In it, Sophie heard her mother say her name. "Honey." Then there was a pause, followed by a "Please." She could hear tears as her mother hung up.

Sophie didn't listen to the other voicemails. When the recorded voicemail voice gave her a list of options, to save the call, to delete the call, to return the call, she hit the number 3. And then she waited.

"Honey?" her mother said. "Honey, is that you?" She sounded just the same.

Honey answered.

THE END

Roger Hart
Walls

Gray concrete block walls. Gray concrete floor. No windows. No paintings. No photos. Only a clock behind a steel mesh. Men in pale blue uniforms sit at a dozen round tables bolted to the floor, one man per table. They lean forward, hands clasped, waiting. Stern-faced guards stand with their backs against the walls.

Outside, it's mid-May. Inside, it's late July, warm and humid. The room smells of disinfectant and the lingering odor of eggs. The clock reads two o'clock.

I need air, a breeze on my face.

A young woman holding the hand of a towheaded boy enters the room. I can't imagine bringing a young kid here, not a kid that small.

A white-haired man with fading tattoos on his muscled arms—I peg him as a former syndicate thug—smiles and waves to the woman and boy who take seats across from him. Daughter and grandson? Just a guess. The boy's got the funny waddle of a toddler. Too young to know where he is or to be bothered by the walls or that he is surrounded by felons. He holds up a red toy boat for the old man to see and then pushes it back and forth on the table.

My father is waiting at the next table, and for a moment he looks happy. He nods at me and then at the chair opposite him. Men at other tables wave to relatives or friends as they file into the room. It's like the men are anchored to their chairs, not allowed to stand. I'm curious as to what they've done and if my father is friends with any of them, but I don't ask. An older woman takes a

seat at a nearby table. The man—her husband? —across from her is crying. He tries to hide it, and I look away, both of us embarrassed.

The Holographic Theory suggests we are nothing more than projections from a two-dimensional membrane surrounding the universe. We're like characters in a movie. The actors look three-dimensional, but they're just projections. Same for us according to the theory, which is based on discoveries about black holes. Gravity, it is said, gives us the illusion we are three dimensional. Most of the time I think it's a crazy theory but not here, not now. Here I feel trapped, like I'm nothing more than an image slapped on a screen.

The doors on opposite sides of the room are closed. I don't know if they are locked. The four guards wear tan uniforms, their eyes scanning the room like search lights . The guard facing our table isn't smiling. I nod. He looks at me without any expression, then walks to the table where the little boy is playing with his toy. The guard asks if he can see the boat and the little boy hands it over. Satisfied the boat does not hide a knife, hacksaw, or dynamite, he hands the toy back to the boy and moseys back to his position against the wall where he watches the occupants of another table.

My father fidgets. He chews his bottom lip like he's angry or maybe doesn't know what to say. The first few minutes of the visit are awkward. Asking him how he is seems thoughtless and yet it's my first question.

"Same old, same old," he says. His glasses slide down on his nose, and he lets them stay there as he peers at me over the black frames. "You know."

But I don't.

"Food here isn't bad," he says. "Better than Mansfield."

He looks well fed and I nod. "That's good."

Later, as our visit is about to end, he will update me on how he is. He'll flex his hand, make a fist, complain about the arthritis in his knuckles and that he can't get anything for it except an occasional aspirin. He'll tell me his prison glasses are out of whack and his prison issued shoes were made in China, his standard complaints before he was transferred to this place for those who no longer pose a threat to themselves or others, a place closer to my mother's home than the penitentiary in Mansfield. There's the illusion of less security here despite the concertina wire that tops the twelve-foot-high fence outside.

The little boy with the boat climbs into his grandfather's lap. A guard steps forward, and another guard shakes his head. They let it pass.

"You?" my father asks. My mother says he looks forward to my visits, the change in his routine, the possibility I will break the monotony. But once I arrive, I fail to live up to expectations. Nonetheless, I try.

"I graduated," I say.

"Your mother said."

I nod, waiting for *nice job* or *I'm proud of you*.

"Got a job at the university," I say.

"You teaching?" he asks with a flicker of surprise, maybe pride, something he can tell his fellow inmates.

"Maintenance," I say. "Outside maintenance."

He looks disappointed and quickly loses interest. He stares at a vending machine in the corner.

“Want something to drink?” I ask, hoping to revive his interest, his appreciation that I’m here.

“Coke,” he says, and I reach into my pocket, pull out my wallet, and slide a dollar across the table.

The guard appears at my shoulder and presses two fingers against the bill and slides it back to me. He shakes his head like a teacher warning a student to stop passing notes. “You have to get it,” he says.

Embarrassed, I pick up the bill and cross the room, slide the dollar in the vending machine slot, punch the button, and out rolls a can of Coke. I return to the table, push the can across to my father. The guard appears again and holds out his hand. My father snaps the tab on the can and hands it to the guard, who moves back to the wall.

I give my father a puzzled look.

“The tab can be sharpened,” he says, making the motion of sliding an imaginary tab back and forth. “On the walls.”

I learn something new on every visit.

“I took the maintenance job because . . .” I start to say I couldn’t stand spending my days in a small classroom, stop, catch myself. “Because I enjoy being outside, and Oscar’s a great boss. He’s a Buddhist.” Working on grounds maintenance was something I did all four years of college. It gave me a place to think, helped pay tuition, and Oscar, though older than my father, became a good friend.

My father peers into the Coke can as if he thinks there might be a prize waiting in the bottom. Then he takes a cautious sip. Satisfied, he takes another. “So,” he says. “Buddhist? Hmm. I’ve gotten active in the prison ministries, *Christian* ministries. Think it will help me get paroled.”

I look at the walls and feel trapped. I take a deep breath.

“This place is nicer than Mansfield,” I say, hoping saying it will make it so.

My father grunts.

I can’t tell if it’s a grunt of agreement or a grunt of disgust.

In the thirteen years he’s been incarcerated he has changed. I feel like I’m sitting across from a stranger, and as hard as I try to bridge that gap, to find the man who made buckets full of popcorn every Saturday night and frequently joined me behind McMullen’s garage to shoot basketball at a lopsided hoop, I can’t find him. He’s found religion or says he has. At the same time, there’s an edge to him, his mind constantly surveying his surroundings, calculating, watching, and plotting. He’s a small man, weighs about one forty and has gone bald, but put him in front of a junior high classroom and no student would get out of line. He has become prison worldly, and he’s staring at me, trying to understand how the man sitting across the table could possibly be his son.

I fight the feeling I may be trapped here, trapped by the closed doors, by the holographic projection. What if it, the projector, whatever it is, gets stuck. That sometimes happens at the movies, the characters freeze on the screen until someone in the audience goes to the lobby and complains. I don’t tell my father any of this. He thinks I’m strange, the odd one in our family.

He sips the Coke the way he used to sip beer, long gulps followed by lip smacking. He leans forward. “The old guy on your right, near the wall, the one with the ponytail?” he whispers, quickly adding, “Don’t look now. Murdered his mother-in-law and stored her body in his freezer.” My father smiles. “Shouldn’t be against the law murdering your mother-in-law,” he says.

I don’t know if he’s joking.

My father scans the room. “Joe, the anemic looking guy sitting in the corner, across from the blond, bilked old ladies out of hundreds of thousands of dollars.” He pauses, shakes his head. “Joe

claims he spent it all before he was caught, but I think he stashed it. You couldn't spend half a mil in a year and not have something to show for it, a big boat or cars. Something."

In the years my father has been incarcerated he often plays detective. He nods to my left at the man who cried earlier. "Carl's an arsonist. He was a volunteer fireman. He never killed anyone, just liked fires, and driving the firetruck."

My father takes pride in the misdeeds of his fellow inmates. I wonder if the other inmates are sitting at tables, whispering to wives and girlfriends and daughters that my father killed a woman. I wonder what kind of cred that gives him, where he sits on the prison totem pole. I try to guess what the others have done and cast a quick glance around the room. Staring, I imagine, can get you in trouble. Many look too old and too fragile to have done the crimes my father describes.

We are momentarily lost for things to say. My father taps the top of the table with his knuckles. I take another deep breath and try to relax. As usual, my father picks up a familiar thread. He wants to know if I'm taking care of his '88 Buick Regal, which is in storage, and if I've checked on it. "Bobby Allison drove one, you know," he says. "Won Daytona behind the wheel of a Buick Regal."

"I know," I say.

He sips his Coke. I wish I'd gotten a Coke for myself, but I don't want to get out of my chair and cross the room again.

"It needs to be on blocks," he says. "Can't rest on the tires forever without creating flat spots. Going to need new ones, anyway. Tires rot. They'll just fall apart if they're exposed to sunlight for a long time. Car needs to be washed too. Dust can pit the paint. Have you washed it?"

We have gone through this a dozen times during previous visits. I lie and say I've washed and waxed it. "It's on blocks and covered with a tarp," I say. We have several more years before he is eligible for parole. We'll deal with the truth then.

“Hoses go bad, too. You should know these things.” He takes another sip of the Coke, tilts the can high to get out the last drop, then eyes me over the top of the can.

Hoses go bad, too. You should know these things. He says it like I don’t know. I do. The deterioration of rubber is called thermal-oxidative degradation. I just graduated from Ohio University with a bachelor’s degree in chemistry and physics. He thinks I’ve sold out, working maintenance at the university instead of holding a teaching job.

“We’ll have to replace them when I get out,” he says.

There are three problems with that. First, my father would engage in nonstop criticism of what I was doing wrong while replacing the hoses on his old Buick. Second, his making parole any time soon seems unlikely after hearing his prison stories, which may or may not be exaggerations. And third, the Buick is dead. I killed it. I began driving it shortly after he went inside. Fell asleep one night driving home from a third shift summer job at a steel plant and slammed into a tree. I lived. The Buick did not. My mother suggested we not tell him, so for the past twelve years we’ve pretended his Buick is alive and waiting for him. It’s the one thing my father and I can talk about, his Buick, a car that no longer exists.

My father looks around the room. “I don’t see George.” He lowers his voice. “He sneaks out at night. Visits a woman at the bottom of the hill. Maybe he’s there now.” He glances at the clock. “Well, probably not now, middle of the afternoon.”

I don’t believe George, whoever he is, sneaks out. I don’t think anyone could sneak out, but I suppose stories like that provide entertainment.

My father has never mentioned any regret about the woman he killed, something he argued was an accident during his trial. “I wasn’t planning on robbing her,” he said. “I just needed a drink.

She surprised me. Hit me with that goddamned bat. Nearly split my skull. I didn't think she was home."

The drink he was looking for was booze, not water. His attorney argued that the blow to his head, resulting in a concussion, clouded his thinking, and he didn't know what he was doing when he grabbed the bat from the woman's hand and swung. The jury didn't buy his excuse. I thought prison would force him to give up drinking, but he brags about making hooch from raisins they occasionally get in the mess hall. "Peaches, apples, just about any fruit that can ferment will do," he says. "Never tried it with a banana. Too bad we never get grapes."

I glance at the clock again. The hands have barely moved. I want to find escape-artist George, ask him to show me how he gets out.

In addition to the woman—she was a librarian—my father was involved in the death of five others, all teenagers. Their car was racing toward the crossing as the train approached. He was the engineer. He blew the horn, yelled for them to stop, the yelling pure instinct as there was no way the driver could hear him over the roar of the engine and repeated blasts of the whistle. The kids would have made it had they kept going, but at the last second the driver hit the brakes. The car stopped on the tracks. The conductor, sitting in the locomotive next to my father, suggested later that the kid wanted to kill himself and his friends. Why else would he stop on the tracks with a train barreling down on them? The police reported to the parents that the kids were probably distracted, had the radio going full blast and didn't see the train coming. No one mentioned the possible suicide theory. The parents, two of them, wanted to blame the train, the engineer—my father. They wanted to sue. But a locomotive pulling one hundred and five freight cars full of coal takes over a mile to stop. Case closed.

My father rolls the Coke can between his hands. “I’ll get parole in a couple years. If not, I’ll sneak out some night.”

Sneaking out at night is total bullshit. I know it but can’t tell if my father believes it or not. Secretly, I wish it were true, that there was a way to escape.

After the accident with the five kids, my father started drinking. Initially, he liked the mixed drinks, especially Manhattans. Then he skipped the mixes and the glasses and went for straight whisky. Bottles of Canadian Club, Seagram’s 7, Wild Turkey, and Jack Daniels filled the trash. Now he drinks hooch.

The room is getting more humid. I’m sweating. “Have I told you about Cass?” I ask. I have a mental list of things I want to tell him.

“Many times,” he says.

“Okay,” I say, “here’s something you aren’t going to believe.” But before I can tell him the new stuff, however, I repeat some of my previous stories to bring him up to date and refresh his memory. Maybe the holographic membrane is stuck on this and it’s not my fault for telling the story again. “Well, I’ve told you how we met the summer after seventh grade. Since then, Cass and I keep running into each other even though her parents moved to Virginia, and she went to an art school in California. It happens, these chance meetings, when we least expect it.”

My father nods, looks around the room, maybe looking for George, maybe bored with my side of the conversation.

“Well,” I say, trying to recapture his attention. “The physics department sponsored a field trip to the Very Large Array in New Mexico. The radio telescopes. This was over spring break. While there, I took a side trip up to Taos and guess who I saw.”

“Georgia O’Keefe.”

“What? No! She’s dead. How do you know about Georgia O’Keefe?”

“I’m in prison. Doesn’t mean I’m stupid.”

“Right, I mean, yeah. I just thought . . . Anyway, I saw Cass. She’d been visiting Georgia O’Keefe’s Ghost Ranch, and I was out hiking and there she was. It was . . .” I look for the right word. *Magical*? Not here, not now. “It was special. We had dinner together and then we had to get back with our groups.

My father purses his lips together, pushes the Coke can across the table. “Better throw that out,” he says.

I want to slam the can on his head. Maybe murder runs in the family. I take it, walk between the tables and drop it in a special container labeled ‘cans.’ The young boy with the boat sits on his grandfather’s lap. I’m guessing the kid is three or four. I’m not good at guessing ages.

The thing about my father’s Buick? He knows. He knows I totaled the car and came close to totaling myself. Larry, my brother, told him the week after it happened and yet my father and I continue to pretend his car is still in the garage, waiting for him to show up. We talk back and forth, and most of what we say is nonsense. It’s like there’s a barrier between us.

A loud boom shakes the walls.

Everyone stops talking and looks around, waiting. I expect the guards to run to another part of the prison, but they don’t move. A few visitors stand, and the guards hold up their hands like cops stopping traffic. There’s a sharp crack, immediately followed by another loud boom. It comes from above us. My father and I look around despite there being no windows.

A prison official—one not dressed in a tan uniform—comes into the room, holds up an arm. “Can I have your attention?” He’s built like a fire hydrant and has a booming voice that does not need a bullhorn. “We’re under a tornado warning. There’s a severe thunderstorm hitting us now.

You are safe in here, and I ask you all to stay calm and in your seats. We will notify you when the storm passes.”

A woman raises her hand, but he’s gone before she can ask her question.

I wonder if my father and the other inmates are hoping the tornado rips the prison apart, opens gaps in the walls and the fence.

The little boy at the next table looks around. I can see the panic in his eyes. Yogi, my dog, is like that. First sound of thunder he runs and hides, presses his head, the only part of him that will fit, beneath my bed. Another loud crack of thunder, this one louder than the previous, and everyone gets quiet, waiting for the next. The lights flicker and the boy begins to cry.

His grandfather pats him on the hand, murmurs something. But the boy gives way to body shaking sobs. I expect the boy’s mother to pick him up, carry him to the exit door, but she stays seated at the table while the old man pulls the kid onto his lap and murmurs in the kid’s ear. When the next crack of thunder occurs, a boom so loud the walls shake, the boy buries his head in his hands.

“Shouldn’t bring a kid that young here,” my father whispers.

And then the boy’s grandfather—I’m still guessing here that he is the grandfather—takes the toy boat and starts running it over the table as he softly sings. “Row, row, row your boat . . .” Soon, the arsonist and the young woman at a nearby table join in and start singing. “Row, row, row your boat.”

Thunder booms and the lights flicker again.

Then, to my surprise, my father starts. “Row, row, row your boat.” He has a deep voice, and it carries around the room. He nods for me to join him. I hesitate, glance at the guards, and then begin singing.

Another table joins in and then another. Everyone trying to comfort the boy or wanting to be a part of something bigger than themselves. We sing louder and soon, as other tables join in, our singing drowns out the boom of thunder. Our voices bounce off the walls, and I expect the guards to blow a whistle and demand quiet. This singing in the round becomes both chaotic and strangely soothing. The little boy, still on his grandfather's lap and holding the boat, mesmerized by the voices around him, stops crying.

Two guards join in, and my father nods and smiles.

Eventually, the thunder fades, but the murderers, muggers, thieves, con artists, arsonists, drug dealers, wives, girlfriends, guards, sons, daughters, my father, and I, continue to sing, louder and louder. We have no trumpets. This is not Jericho, and yet we sing as if our voices can bring down the walls, the ones around us and the ones between us.

Stephen Roger Powers
Liffey

Greta told Roy what a thrill it would be to discover a stolen car in the lake. Strange things had been reported turning up on the bottom as the water receded. She wanted to see what was left of the Gainesville Speedway or Highway 53, both of which were covered when the lake was created. It was one of the driest late autumns on record. Lake Lanier's water level was twenty feet below normal.

Roy said he was happy to go on a drive with her.

An afternoon drive, Greta worried though, might change her mind about leaving. Oddly, whenever she felt it was time to tell him, she found herself suggesting something for the two of them to do.

A mile past an overgrown cemetery, Roy parked near some evergreens.

Greta slammed the car door and hurried ahead on dry pine straw to the shoreline, which was wide and dry but still muddy at water's edge.

Roy tagged along.

Greta said how surprising the water so low was, and she paused, expecting Roy to run in. He used to whenever they stopped at a lake or river. He'd leap from a dock, clothes on or no, tuck his knees to his chin, plunge in, and dynamite water all over. He'd splash her like a shaking dog when he climbed out. Then babble on and on about life worth living and good fellowship with the earth.

Greta couldn't remember when she last saw Roy wet. She loved him once, but he made her cringe too much now. She would never get used to him. She and Roy would never last. Too many men in the world to settle for one.

They continued on, and Roy bent over every few minutes to examine faded beer cans, a rusted horseshoe, and a rotting stepladder half buried.

They came to a crumbling brick foundation. It was hot and bright out, and they shielded their eyes with their hands.

"This must be one of the houses that was here before the lake," Greta said.

She circled around inside the foundation, as if imagining the house was still there and she was sizing up the walls and the ceiling. Something in the dirt caught her eye, and she crouched to scoop it. Her shirt hiked up her back, and she felt Roy staring at her there while she kept poking, her ponytail swinging back and forth and sweat breaking up and down her backbone.

She knew his face was blank, his eyes black bottle caps and his mouth a limp flag.

Greta showed him a cracked china plate, thick and heavy. "Like the bistros in France," she said, smiling. Her fingernail scratched some dirt off, and she used her shirt's hem to wipe the plate.

She sat on the brick. The words she wanted to say made her insides a reservoir and a receding shoreline, a big whirlpool in the middle sucking water down and exposing trash. It was time.

"I'm going to Europe next week," she said.

Roy stayed standing.

"Quit my job," she said. She picked up a stick and wrote their names in the cake-like ground.

She wanted him to say something.

But he didn't.

"May never have the chance, I don't go again now," she said.

A hazy stink was crawling, probably from the evaporating reservoir's fast-drying muck, but Greta couldn't help feeling like the stink was seething from him.

Finally, Roy said, "Is it Michele?"

"Michele isn't around anymore," she said, relieved he'd spoken but worried he'd call her a liar. Of course Michele is around, he might say. Isn't he?

Last winter in France had been breakneck. Greta's strongest memory was wind near the Gare du Nord and Michele pulling her close and walking her home, his long coat cloaked around her.

Michele was a man with a sense of propriety about everything. One night, after they had returned from a day trip to Giverny, Greta suggested they go out again to Shakespeare and Company. Maybe get some wine in Montmartre.

The middle button of Michele's tan sweater was undone. Michele buttoned it, said he did not want to.

Greta said she'd go by herself.

"You are in a foreign country," Michele said. "You should remain home with me. I do not feel comfortable, you wandering off by yourself."

But Greta raced past Michele's dented Peugeot parked in front of his townhouse on her way to the Métro. Michele was doing his best to catch up. Greta felt satisfied when she turned and saw him struggling to pull his coat on. Michele soon caught up at the station, but he remained grumpy the rest of the evening.

Greta and Michele were the same age, but something about him made her feel he was much older, which was fine because she was too urbane for men her age.

He made her feel inferior though. After a few months wandering around France on his money, she couldn't help feeling liberated when he suggested some things about their relationship wasn't working. He said wasn't because his English wasn't the best. He loved her, he insisted, and he wanted to be with only her, but couldn't she please consider how it made him angry when she—

Greta cut him off and announced she was returning to America.

A few seconds ticked. Michele pinched his button and grimaced. Then he said, "I am furious, of course. But I love you. I am going for a walk to think about this, and when I return we will discuss."

"It's raining," Greta said.

But Michele's fury simmered him out the door to the wet, cold weather, his coat wrapping and binding him.

Greta didn't see him again because she slipped away before he returned.

A few weeks later in Georgia, his first letter showed up. Michele was old-fashioned, and he wrote in perfect handwriting, letter after letter, one arriving every day, sometimes two. His loopy, sweeping cursive professed his love, said he would die without her. The embossed envelopes and colorful stamps added brush strokes to the weepy contents.

Greta couldn't remember giving him her address.

By this point she was seeing Roy. Sometimes Roy drove over in the afternoon before the mail came, and Greta had to slip the letters somewhere before Roy saw her bringing them in. She retrieved them later, used a brass letter opener to slice them open carefully so as not to tear the envelope or stamps, and she read them by candlelight in her room.

The letters habitually mentioned dying, that Michele would die without her, until, one day, a letter didn't show up. The second day went by, and the third. Still no letters. Greta

assumed he'd given up. Fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh day, then two weeks, a month, several months.

Google was no help. His name was too common in France. She couldn't stop thinking about him though, and every day that plodded in Roy's company amalgamated her regret. Maybe leaving Michele was a mistake.

Heading home, Greta and Roy rolled the windows down and wore sunglasses because the sunlight glared from the road. Roy stopped for gas in a small town. The car's chrome was as bright and fluid as melted lead. The car grumbled when it idled. Greta thought it sounded like a hot tub.

Before home, Roy turned off at a state park. Greta's shirt stuck to the seat. She fiddled through radio stations and stopped at the only one that came in. Gospel.

They watched the cascades rush down the rocks. Greta wondered how long they were going to sit. The water threw light like the chrome, and they listened to its natural background music while the singers on the radio sang old-time harmony in hollow static. The sun was coming down. Greta imagined the singers on stage, crowded around a microphone, the band behind them. The upright bass was her favorite instrument. Her imagination was precise to the worn-off varnish under the strings.

She thought of Michele and heard his heartbeat in the bass line.

She couldn't help going to Roy's house one last time though. She carried two grocery bags. She chopped shallots, poached sausages, and boiled red potatoes.

Roy fetched the beer from the carport refrigerator.

Greta mixed sherry and olive oil. Nothing was more beautiful to her in that moment than the way the kitchen chandelier shone through it as she drizzled it over the potatoes and shallots.

Around midnight, twelve empty beer cans rolling off the table and half his food still untouched, Roy's head dozed back. His snores were a loose and rusty bike chain.

Greta took off.

Her happiest microseconds were when airplane tires broke contact from her home country's runways. All her happiness fit in the first microscopic gap between concrete and rubber. Compulsion to repeat that happiness drove her life.

She'd longed for France, missed roaming around in Michele's battered Peugeot. Mont Saint-Michel. Dune du Pilat.

But nobody answered Michele's door. His voicemail disconnected the second ring. His parking spot was taken over by a shiny black Mercedes, new and dent free. An old man wearing a Bavarian hat eased himself into the car one morning while Greta watched from across the street. After his Mercedes pulled out, the spot soon was taken by a dirty Citroën missing its hubcaps.

Three restless days staking out Michele's place drained her cash faster than expected, so Greta chased a hunch to Dublin. Michele had once worked as a data centre security investigations manager there and occasionally returned to consult.

Greta followed a recommendation to a hostel in Temple Bar. A French teenager down the hall clued Greta in to a Beaujolais party. Wine tasting was a splurge, but Greta wanted to go because the French consul was hosting it. Fifty euros a person, but people speaking French would be worth it.

Maybe Michele would be there.

The teenager said she might meet her there too if Greta could loan her fifty euros. She said loan because she was practicing her English. Greta taught her lend.

Roy was the furthest thing from her mind when Greta hurried out and almost collided into him on the street. The strangest thing was he didn't say a word.

She couldn't think how he'd found her. She almost said something predictable like "Isn't this a surprise?" She stopped herself because they weren't in a movie and it wasn't a welcome surprise. She hated saying predictable things anyway.

He stood there studying her, same bottle caps, same limp flag. The Temple Bar Pub's red paint reflected street shine and tinted his face florid.

"Where's Michele?" he said, his words carrying steam.

Cold drizzle. Some sleet.

"I was on my way to the pharmacy," she said. She pointed up the cobblestone street.

The pharmacy was decorated for Christmas. Lights and wreaths. The cross above the front window glowed green.

Roy waited outside. She hadn't really been on her way to the pharmacy, but Greta browsed medicines anyway. She picked a box, read the label, put it back. She picked another.

Greta felt a little sorry for Roy. He was watching her. His face was shadowed, but something in his eyes glinted like gold bottle-cap letters. She should have been afraid, but she had the upper hand because she was familiar with Dublin. What was the worst that could happen? He could get a room in her hostel, she supposed, but if he harassed her she could call the Gardaí.

She bought paracetamol and confronted him. "I hope you enjoy your time in Dublin," she said.

He didn't respond.

Her hands were in her coat pockets. "Dublin Castle is worth seeing," she said. She nodded and smiled. "St. Stephen's Green. Phoenix Park. Kilmainham Gaol."

No response.

It was unnerving, the way he was eyeing her. People rushed by. Christmas lights sparkled and winked. Music played inside the pubs. Gospel singers under umbrellas were attracting a crowd on the corner.

“And Trinity College,” she said. She wound her scarf tighter around her neck, said, “Well, then,” moved away, drew nearer the crowd. “How could I forget the library?” She laughed, nervous.

The herd blocked her way. The cobbled street was narrow. She stopped to listen. What could he do?

The singers were old and stiff, and they sang off key. One gentleman, short, his gray combed-over hair greasy, leaned on a steel sign pole. The open songbook in his hand shook.

A tall, thin woman was in front of him singing. Yellow dress and a green sweater vest. Silver hair towering. Greta thought it looked like a basket. The woman rocked forward when she sang a high note and tilted her head down when she sang a low, her small neck flattened to a double chin and her mouth a perfect, tight O.

When my life is almost gone, hear my cry, hear my call, they sang. They were a dozen old women and men. The comb over was a half beat behind.

Greta and Roy lingered together and listened. Roy tried to hold Greta’s hand, but Greta pulled it away.

The singers started a new song. *Go tell it on the mountain.* Some put their songbooks down on the wet sidewalk and clapped their umbrella handles. *Tell it over the hills, tell it everywhere.*

The song finished, and the crowd dispersed some, but Greta couldn’t get away because no matter which way she turned someone blocked her. Roy’s hand was on her elbow. Umbrellas passed.

Comb Over and Basket Hair both gestured at Greta.

“Merry Christmas,” the man said.

“Merry Christmas,” the woman said.

“Merry Christmas,” Greta said.

“We love singing” the woman said.

Comb Over offered a crooked yellow smile. “Church trip from Tennessee,” he said.

Roy told them he was from Atlanta, but they didn’t acknowledge him. They conversed with Greta about the foggy weather and traffic in Dublin. Roy’s agreements tried to cut in, but they still did not acknowledge him. Roy opened his mouth to say something more, but the woman remarked to Greta how it was such a small world to run into someone from America abroad. The man said, “Well, we best be getting back with our flock,” and they said good-bye and rejoined the singers under umbrellas for *there’s power in the blood, power in the blood*.

Greta’s eyes met Roy’s. She hoped for people to pass between so she could catch their wave and float away to Beaujolais up the river.

“I expected to find you in France,” Roy said.

“Well, then,” she said again. “It was good to see you, but I must be on my way.” She nodded, hands still fisted in her pockets. Her scarf itched because it was new and stiff, and she thought maybe she’d forgotten to cut the tag.

Roy might complain about the money he wasted in France, and that wouldn’t end well. People were flowing around them. Greta really wanted some to flow between and to hitch a ride on them.

Finally the moment came. A family ambled between. Greta couldn’t count the kids, but colorful hats moved past at waist level like a paper-boat parade. Then a surely shopper, much quicker than the family, barreled through, her bulging bags jostling the kids.

“Excuse me,” the father said. The mother dropped her phone, and it bounced a few times. She scrambled to retrieve it from all the feet hustling by. Her kids spun around and bumped each other.

Sin stains are lost in its life-giving flow, the Tennesseans were singing.

Greta took advantage of the confusion and distraction. She charged away, her head bent forward in the wind and her arms folded in. The singing followed her a while—to *that home on God’s celestial shore, I’ll fly away*—and shadowed her ghostly along her way. Soon fiddles and whistles and button accordions from the pubs she was hurrying past drowned it. She rounded a corner in the river’s direction.

She glanced back every now and then, but no one was following her. A man emerged from a pub behind her and lit a cigarette, but it was not Roy. A taxi stopped and let a man out, but it was not Roy.

The city light shrank from her the farther she sped up the river. The sleet was falling harder now, and it crunched underfoot. She hadn’t brought an umbrella because she forget to check the weather before setting out, and she wasn’t going to lead Roy to her room returning for it. People went their way, heads down, coats pulled in. They were dark, featureless in the night, faceless, and the dark crept closer until the only light was a reflection from the river and a green glow from algae growing up its concrete retaining walls. Low tide. Windows dark too. Dublin’s roads empty for the first time Greta had seen.

Cold, wet nights like this, Greta missed Michele most. Greta hurried against the icy rain that was now falling steady. She followed the south bank of the River Liffey, marching west.

She checked behind her every minute or so to make sure she was not followed, but Roy was gone. By now she’d covered enough distance along the river that she’d spot him far behind. She was sure he was gone.

She felt good because she was in her nicest wrinkle-proof traveling dress, bundled in a new scarf and long coat, collar turned up. She was confident she might pass for French. She could speak French well enough, and she thought her clothes, especially her gray dress, looked French.

Close to her destination, she crossed the Bridgefoot Street junction. The address was coming up. The only person was a drunk by the Calatrava bridge, lit white and brilliant ahead.

The drunk wore just a soaked black T-shirt and torn black jeans. His long black hair was curly and matted. Blood ran syrupy from above his ear and deepened his T-shirt's color. His nose was bloody. A nasty purple bruise oozed above an eye.

"Kicked me out," he yelled. "The bastards."

Greta could hear Michele saying to ignore the fellow and keep moving. Sometimes he still spoke to her, though Greta was sure it was only her memory. She hustled past the drunk.

She arrived at the house in front of the bridge, the same house the drunk was yelling at. She thought the house might ordinarily appear dark and gaunt if each window on all four floors weren't illuminated. They were the only bright windows along the river. Shadows moved behind the curtains. She climbed the front stairs and entered, relieved that she'd made it and hadn't caught Roy trailing.

Inside, it was warm and the ceilings were high. A woman welcomed her in French, unwound Greta's scarf for her, and took her coat. The woman laughed and held up the scarf's tag. Greta shrugged, and the woman snapped it off. She laughed again. Greta laughed too and thanked her.

Greta felt run off her feet from the long walk, and her hair, twisted on top of her head, was wet, but from the entryway she found her way to the gallery despite wanting more than anything to sit. Everyone in the room raised their eyes and offered happy greetings.

Greta submitted an introduction, and a well-dressed gentleman who seemed in charge pointed to several men and women and gestured to Greta while saying their names. He put his hand on Greta's back and steered her toward them.

"Your French is exquisite," he said.

Greta thanked him and accepted some baked brie and raspberries on a cracker from a butler who presented a silver tray.

The well-dressed gentleman drifted off to welcome someone else.

A second stretched to a minute. The house imposed an odd feeling, as if she'd been there before. Parties like this, people like these, must have arisen uncountable times within its walls.

Mid-bite, there was Michele across the room, standing away from everyone. Something large mushroomed in Greta's throat. She swallowed it down and wrapped the cracker in a napkin. She left it on a side table, tugged her sleeves, and crossed the room.

"What's the matter?" Michele said. He smiled. His teeth were broken eggshells.

"I don't know whether or not you're really here."

Greta wasn't sure what to do or what else to say. She couldn't remember if that's how his teeth looked the last time she saw him.

The voices rose to a din. It seemed she and Michele were being avoided. Everyone was speaking French—Greta quickly became aware how elementary her own really was with all those people speaking so quickly—and the gallery was growing hot.

Michele said, "I continued sleeping on your side of the bed to warm it for you."

Greta was expected to compliment his thoughtfulness. Last winter in France revealed that everything between them was about Michele. He *was* gallant, she would admit, but his appearance at the Beaujolais party was so sudden a surprise that all her questions fell down at once in her head like bowling pins.

“I will bring you some wine,” Michele said.

“I was at your house in France,” she said.

“The Beaujolais nouveau this year is good.”

“Is it?”

“We will taste later.”

Her eyes traced him as he threaded through the guests. He was light on his feet and didn't bump anyone.

Lightheaded, Greta closed her eyes. She was so warm she imagined cool water and the quarry ledge off Claude Brewer Road. Roy held her hand, but she pulled it away, and he leaped off the ledge without her. A splash and his laughing rose up to her, then more splashing, a series of gurgles, and silence. A couple deep breaths and closing her eyes tight, she jumped also, felt the cool air whirlwind around her on her way to him.

When she opened her eyes, she realized he was here too. Roy. Coming in. His shoulder brushed Michele's as the two passed. Roy's eyes targeted Michele's back. Then his gaze connected with Greta's, and he cleared a path to her.

Greta was positive she'd lost Roy back in Temple Bar. She'd checked behind her so many times. Unless he was ducking into doorways, she couldn't have missed him.

His perplexed expression suggested that Roy didn't know what to say.

But he spoke. “Maybe in a million years, if we haven't killed ourselves off, natural evolution will have grown bored with how we build planes to fly...”

Greta rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. Same Roy.

“...and oxygen tanks to take us underwater,” he continued, “so natural evolution will decide to grow us wings and gills.”

“Go jump in a lake,” Greta said. She pressed through the guests to the entrance hall, where she climbed the stairs. Up there must be where the food is, she thought. And the wine. Michele.

Roy was clomping up behind her.

She wondered how to get rid of him this time.

They found the dining room empty and quiet. Party noise beneath echoed up. Buffet tables were loaded. Meats and pastries, cheeses and fruits. The hardwood floor creaked as they walked around it all.

Greta said she was hungry.

Roy told her to help herself.

She chose a plate and arranged a rolled beef slice, some crackers, and three cheese pieces on it.

Roy didn't take anything.

Greta's right hand gathered her dress near her knee, and her left balanced her plate while she maneuvered down the stairs.

Silence rolled through the gallery when Greta and Roy entered. Everyone stared. From the corner where she'd found him, Michele coughed.

Greta smiled, suddenly hyper aware of where she was, not belonging. She bit into her beef.

The conversation resumed.

Roy hovered near her. Greta put her plate down. Michele threaded over, light on his feet again, not bumping anyone, and pulled her from the gallery to the hall.

“You have embarrassed me,” Michele said.

“Why?” she said. She resisted the urge to roll her eyes and cross her arms. That would set Michele off, she knew.

“You must wait until the hostess invites you to have some food.”

Greta blushed, a fire roaring from deep within, and she shot Roy an angry look.

“We didn’t know,” Roy said.

Roy might as well have not been there. Michele didn’t acknowledge him.

Greta had so many questions. She ached to make a discrete exit, towing Michele by the hand, so that they could find a table, perhaps at Heuston, a short walk. A boy would play the piano while she and Michele talked. Greta loved Ireland for its train station pianos.

A woman Greta assumed was the hostess approached the room’s center, cleared her throat, and gestured for attention.

Greta sheltered close to Michele. Her peripheral vision gauged Roy observing her and his limp-flag mouth twisting into a furious whip. Greta felt the heat blossoming from him.

But she was startled to sense a cool wave from Michele, like from a freezer just opened. She inched closer.

The hostess, perhaps the consul’s wife, was bony and imposing in her one-piece black spaghetti-strap dress that was entirely inappropriate for this Dublin evening. The woman’s shoulders and her face were tan, her hair a perfectly cut black bob. Gems and silver chains hung around her neck and wrists. She spoke rapidly in French, but Greta fished “celebrate,” “holidays,” “this year,” and “new Beaujolais” from everything she said. She thought she snagged “shit” too, but then she guessed the woman wouldn’t have said that here. She looked around, bored at the woman’s long speech, anxious to depart. All the women were dressed almost the same. All the same bobs. The men were in dark sweaters and slacks or dark tailored suits like Michele. A room full of black.

The hostess raised her arms at her speech’s conclusion, and everyone muttered a response. They filed from the gallery to the stairs. Greta, Michele, and Roy lingered last. When it was their turn, Michele and Greta edged ahead before Roy.

Greta sensed Roy behind her watching her legs move. He watched her back, the way her silver flats sparkled in the dim light, the way Michele's hand cupped her hip.

She paused in the shadows on the landing. Glancing down on him, she felt a strange, friendly pity for him while feeling likewise a strange, friendly pity from him.

She continued with Michele. In the soiree room, wine glasses and Beaujolais bottles lined the bar.

Michele selected two glasses. Greta finished her first and requested another, but the man in white shirt and black bow tie enforced a limit. One per guest. She grabbed a glass already poured. Wine dripped down the stem, and red spots bloomed on the white cloth.

Several people were mingling around the buffet in the dining room adjacent, sampling the food. Greta hung on Michele's arm. She wanted Michele to parade her from one couple to another, speaking French while Greta smiled, nodded, and returned a few words. She wished a ring was on her finger that she could hold out for *oh là là*.

She and Michele ended up near the window. Greta parted the curtains a few centimeters. The rain had turned to sleet again. The street below was glittering. Two walkers, arm in arm, were passing by on the sidewalk, shuffling carefully.

The cold outside flowed through the glass.

The bloody drunk out there was halfway across the illuminated bridge. From the middle of the bridge's walkway, he lunged and slid full-force into the railing. He doubled over, leaned far forward.

Greta was afraid he'd pivot off balance and plunge to the water.

But the drunk stood up, skipped back to the walkway's center, and lunged at the railing again, this time pivoting farther out. He balanced on his stomach, his hands on the rail. He then let go and spread his arms. Greta wondered if the drunk thought he was flying.

Roy was walking toward him. Greta watched through the window. When had Roy left? On the stairs? After?

The drunk regained his footing and headed for the bridge's opposite side. He must not have noticed Roy approaching, Greta thought. It was easy not to notice Roy.

She continued watching through the part.

Roy studied the railing. He flexed his fingers and untucked his shirt. cursory eye contact with Greta.

Greta shrank back some but steeled herself and remained at the window.

Then Roy rushed for the railing, slipped once on the slippery bridge, caught himself from falling, and leaped over. He soared off and arced toward the river. His arms flapped and his legs ran in place. Then he was gone in the dark.

Greta waited for a splash, but if there was one the window blocked it.

The river wasn't deep enough for a low-tide leap.

Freezing rain streaked the window. Sleet rattled it. Greta breathed deep. Dublin was shutting down outside. So was all Ireland. How long until Roy's body was found, frozen and blue? It would snag somewhere, on a submerged tire, a barrel, or a shopping cart. Or continue down the river to the bay, lost forever. She hoped lost forever.

She felt a little lost herself, regretful. She always felt that way, even when happy.

Michele would be glad to know she had no return ticket to Atlanta. Michele would gladly take her back to France.

She turned from the window to face him and ask if they could make their exit.

But he was not there.

She scanned the room, checked each face, but none were Michele's. She returned to the food and wine, but he wasn't there either.

He wasn't on the landing.

Nor the stairs.

In the entryway, guests were receiving their coats, guiding their arms into sleeves, buttoning up buttons, turning up collars, calling au revoir back through the door.

No Michele.

He had to be somewhere, though it made no difference. Greta was lost for sure now because every man was a Michele or a Roy. The Micheles only wanted death. The Roys were oblivious even to the end. They offered nothing more for her, but, to get her bearings, she closed her eyes again for one last glimpse.

Roy was treading water in the quarry. Greta was too, shivering. "It's always Civil War ghosts," Roy said. "Nineteenth-century ghosts. People who died last week. Nobody claims they've seen Renaissance ghosts or cave-men ghosts." Roy splashed her, and the quarry was a frosty morgue. Roy's ghost was pulling a slab out. His body was on it. His ghost lay on his body and reclaimed it.

"Do you have anyone to see you home?" a man's voice said behind her. A surprise. Not unwelcome, but a surprise. Greta might have located Michele if she'd kept her eyes closed a little longer. She contemplated before answering. Was this a Michele? Or a Roy? She wrung her hands, cracked her knuckles, and caught her breath. She tamped down the flush that was enkindling her neck. Then she faced the well-dressed gentleman who had welcomed her and introduced everyone when she arrived. She smiled and answered.

"I do not."

M.S. Spann
The Universal Joint

Some years ago the “fact” that the flush toilet was invented by an Englishman named Thomas Crapper gained credence in popular culture. The Victorian-era plumber was fodder for late-night talk show monologues and showed up now and then in trivia competitions and compilations. It wasn’t true, but it was fun.

I’m thinking about this as I stand in a stall in the boys’ bathroom downstairs at St. Anastasia elementary school. Six weeks into the school year, and already I’m repairing a toilet. I hear footsteps, then a question.

“What are you doing, Mr. Mike?”

I’m the custodian, but Principal Stiefel promotes the idea that every adult in the building is a teacher and should be accorded the requisite respect and deference. The little ones are scrupulous about the *mister* before my name. The older kids don’t bother. I’m just “Mike” to them.

Mrs. Stiefel also promotes the idea of community service, so when students get into trouble, it isn’t unusual for their consequence to involve helping me with my chores. Especially simple cleaning tasks. That’s how I met Kayden.

“Hi Kayden. Fixing this toilet again.” Kayden is a skinny, eight-year-old perpetual motion machine with a distinctive voice—naturally strident, a bit raspy. The subtleties of “inside voice” and “outside voice” are meaningless to him. Kayden’s voice has one level, well-suited for addressing large crowds in hotel ballrooms. Unamplified. From the conversations I’ve overheard in the office and the hallways, Kayden has decided he doesn’t want to go to church with the rest of the school. His announcement hasn’t gone over well.

He finishes drying his hands, then lingers to watch me work.

“Shouldn’t you be getting back to class?” I ask. There’s no message there, and Kayden doesn’t infer one. He’s a funny kid and I enjoy listening to his thoughts on whatever it is he wants to talk about; he can be entertaining.

“I know,” he says. “But Mrs. Stenbrugen doesn’t mind if I take my time getting back.” He says this matter-of-factly. He’s one of those kids who’s discussed daily in the teacher’s lounge. I hear them when I go in to check the trash at midday. When the staff aren’t complaining about Kayden, they’re sharing stories about funny things he’s said or done.

“Do you want to know who broke the toilet?” Kayden asks.

“It doesn’t matter, Kayden. It’s an easy fix. I’m sure it was an accident.”

“OK.” He turns to leave, then stops. “Mr. Mike, how come you’re never in church in the morning?”

“Oh, I have to work,” I tell him. “Someone has to stay behind to keep things running here while you’re all at church.”

I’m fibbing. Both the principal and the pastor have encouraged me to feel free to “join the school community” at Mass twice a week. But mine has always been a tidal faith, and its latest ebb has been prolonged.

Kayden studies me. I can tell he’s processing my response, considering its merits. Sifting perhaps for something in my reply that he can use to justify his desire to skip Mass.

“You should probably get back,” I say. He smiles and walks away, slowly. I’ve seen him do this in the hallways. He steps deliberately, delicately, staring at his feet as they move, as if to catch one foot sneaking up on the other one.

Another “fact” from my youth: “You’ll always have a job at the post office.” And I concede I made a good living for a long time. It was a good position to get right out of college, when jobs were scarce and I wasn’t particularly ambitious. The U.S. Postal Service has been around for a couple hundred years, why wouldn’t I always have a job? My new bride, Hanley, wasn’t particularly bothered by my wary relationship with ambition. “I’ll be the ambitious one for a while,” she told me. That suited me fine.

A month later I’ve learned why Kayden has been complaining about going to Mass. He’s been sent to do time with me after several outbursts during religion class. He explains as we wipe down the preschool chairs after their lunch period.

“We have to get ready for *re-con-cil-i-a-tion*” he says, rocking his head from side-to-side as he sing-songs each syllable. “What’s the point?” He parrots what he’s been told and explains his problem with the concept. “Whenever I get in trouble for something (even if I didn’t *do* anything), I have to *go all the way down to the office* and *tell* the principal why I’m in

trouble. Then *she* tells my parents, *and I tell them too.*" He pokes his chest as he says this. "I do the consequence. Why do I have to go through it all again with Father?"

Hanley spent years teaching me to recognize rhetorical questions and training me to keep my mouth shut and my ears open, to let her and our daughters simply vent. "They just want you to *listen,*" she'd remind me, exasperated by my unsolicited wisdom or counsel. *I want you to just listen.*" Kayden is a challenge; I'm learning some of his questions aren't rhetorical.

"You only have to go before the big holy days, Kayden." I take a chance and tell him about my experience. "It was called confession then, and we had to go every Friday morning. We'd kneel in this little closet in the dark and tell the priest all the things we'd done for which we were heartily sorry. He'd tell us God forgave us and give us some prayers to say."

He nodded. "Did you feel better?"

"I think so, Kayden. It was just something we had to do, so we did it."

"Were you in trouble as much as me?"

The sincerity of this question catches me off-guard. I want to tousle his hair or give him a reassuring hug. I smile. "I don't know." Another fib. I'm certain I wasn't in trouble as often as Kayden. "It was different then," I tell him. "We knew the teachers and the priest expected us to have something to say. Sometimes we'd make things up so we wouldn't get in trouble for trying to pretend we were perfect."

"You lied?" Kayden asks, as though I've revealed a secret identity. I learned this about Kayden—he never lies. A noble character trait but one, I've noticed, that can create problems for a kid with lots of opinions and a compulsion to share them.

"To a priest?"

"Well..." I'd always thought of it as an amusing anecdote about children finding the path of least resistance through a tedious and anxiety-producing obligation.

The recess bell rings. Kayden stops working and gives me a thumbs up. "Don't worry, Mr. Mike," he whispers. "I won't say anything." He hands over his spray disinfectant and damp cloth, then skips across the cafeteria and out to the playground.

Hanley and I met at a party, where I asked her out mainly because her name intrigued me. It didn't take me long to realize she was as unique and surprising as that name. We were married two years later. We had two daughters, Annelise and Audrey, who so resemble their mother not only physically but also in disposition that I could have believed they were cloned

rather than conceived. Annelise spent a semester in England, met a man there, and stayed to work with him running an organic catering business. Audrey settled a little west of here, in Columbus. She works in media relations for the city's professional soccer team.

By Christmas, any charm Mrs. Stenbrugen may have seen in Kayden has worn off. As I restock paper in the copier room, I can hear the principal in her office talking with Mrs. Stenbrugen. The conversation is loud; I can tell they're talking about Kayden. He has spilled the beans about Santa Claus, and parents are upset. He'd been discoursing during recess about the inside information he'd acquired. A group of kindergarteners heard every word. I can also tell Mrs. Stiefel is working hard. She doesn't care for Mrs. Stenbrugen.

There are rumors that Kayden may leave at the end of the semester. His parents are unhappy. They don't believe Kayden is getting the support he needs. Kayden is also showing signs of strain. He complains loudly (everything he does is loudly) about his assignments. I hear him as I make my rounds in the afternoons, emptying classroom trashcans. He still goes to church, but those days are always bad for him and for the staff. He talks throughout the Mass, including during Father Quince's sermons. He quiets down when Mrs. Stenbrugen admonishes him, then starts up again. When I hear Mrs. Stenbrugen talking about it after school I nod, understanding the strategy. Kayden is angling to get kicked out of church.

The principal also understands. Mrs. Stiefel is patient and relentlessly positive. In the atrium, as the classes file past me on their way to church, I see Mrs. Stiefel pull Kayden aside. "I'd like you to sit with me today," she says. "Is it okay if we sit in the back, in case I'm called away for an emergency?"

After a few Masses sitting with Mrs. Stiefel, Kayden decides he'd rather sit with his classmates and try to be quiet.

When the post office announced my facility was closing and I was retiring early, I wasn't upset. Our daughters were grown and gone, and Hanley's IT job with Amazon could be done just as easily from home. I took the pension and, partly as a result of a weekend at a bed and breakfast in a distant Pittsburgh exurb, we made the move to downsize there. St. Anastasia was the Catholic parish, and Hanley joined. She sang in the choir; she talked me into helping at parish picnics. She loved it. "I feel like I'm home," she told me. "Like it's *my* community."

Covid was just gaining momentum. We decided we were in a good position. I was retired, Hanley worked at home. We wore masks when we went out. We organized any shopping trips for early mornings and maximum efficiency to avoid as many people as possible.

Covid found us anyway, God knows where. We had mild cases and congratulated ourselves for our caution and scrupulous attention to all the advice coming from various government agencies. As my symptoms improved, Hanley's health worsened, and with symptoms not common for Covid. We soon learned she had late-stage pancreatic cancer. I went to church with her, said the prayers. I meant them. "We'll get through this," she said. We stayed positive, worked hard on optimism. Ten months later she was in hospice care.

We return from Christmas break and Kayden hasn't left St. Anastasia. By the end of the first week back he's been sent to me. I give him a bucket and rag, and we wipe down the railings on the stairs. I notice he has a small silver cross dangling from a chain around his neck.

"That's a nice cross, Kayden," I say, inviting an explanation.

"Thanks. My grandma gave it to me. She takes me to her church sometimes."

"Oh? Not St. Anastasia?"

"No," Kayden responds. "It's River something. They do things different. The minister talks about Jesus and all that, but there's a lot more music and no kneeling."

"Do you like it?"

He shrugs. "It's *long*," He grabs the rail he's just cleaned and bends his body far back to emphasize his words. "We go out to breakfast after church. That's the best part."

I notice Mrs. Stiefel at the top of the stairs, leaning over the railing. Kayden is chattering away about his favorite breakfast. He doesn't notice the principal, who smiles as she listens to our conversation. I imagine she sees a child talking with mentor.

Kayden changes the subject again without missing a beat. "Mr. Mike, do you think God really does stuff for *everyone*? Like, he's paying attention to *everyone*?"

"I don't know," I tell Kayden. I glance up. Mrs. Stiefel is still listening. "It's nice to think so." She smiles and moves on.

The week before Easter I hear Kayden from inside my workroom just off the cafeteria, and I cringe. His class is at lunch with the younger grades, and he's talking about the Easter

Bunny. His voice betrays him again. By the next day, parents are upset again. The primary grade teachers are fielding some uncomfortable questions.

“I’m not supposed to say stuff like that,” Kayden says during our next work session in the cafeteria. “Mom and Dad tell me to keep it to myself.” He sighs—a long, weary exhalation of self-awareness. “It just comes out. Then I get in trouble again.”

Kayden loves pushing one of the long-handled dust mops. We start at opposite sides of the room and work our way toward the middle. Kayden delights in the action of its universal joint, which allows him to spin the mop head 360 degrees when he reaches one end of the cafeteria and turns to come back the other way.

“What I don’t get,” he says as we pass, “things like Santa and the Easter Bunny, all those are invisible and fake. But God and Jesus and angels and stuff, who are also invisible, are real.”

“People saw Jesus,” I remind him. “Early historians—you’ll learn about them when you’re older—they wrote about him. He’s a historical person.”

“Also, how can a dead person come back to life? I mean, if he’s like a *zombie* or something, but those aren’t real.” His earnestness makes me wistful. I imagine a zombie Jesus. I think I should say something, but I don’t have an answer for him.

Kayden moves on. I watch him as he slows, staring at the mophead. He holds the handle and steps around the mophead. It doesn’t move. He is entranced, studying the universal joint in the handle with a wonder I’m sure the teachers wish he would find in their stories of The Loaves and Fishes and The Resurrection.

“How’s this work?” he asks.

I wait to be sure this is an actual question, then get out my phone and try to briefly explain the universal joint. He is quiet, but I can tell he’s thinking. “I wish I could really find things out,” he says, moving on to another topic. “Like with a time machine. That would be so cool.” He stops pushing the dust mop. “I think it’s ok for me to go back to class now.”

“Okay, Kayden. See you soon.”

He laughs.

It’s the fourth quarter, and Kayden is working with me once a week or so, even when he’s not in trouble. It was decided after the Easter Bunny debacle, for the benefit of both Mrs. Stenbrugen and Kayden, that they should have a break from each other now and then.

He's still wearing the cross. Kayden tells me he's probably going to a different school in the fall. He doesn't know which one. "I'd like to go to Franklin," he says. Franklin is the local public school. "I know a few kids who go there."

The guy I replaced here at St. Anastasia left to work for the public system and is now at Franklin. "I've heard good things about it."

"My mom and dad are thinking about it," Kayden continues. "I heard them talking about 'indoctrination.'"

I try to briefly explain indoctrination.

"Kind of like here," Kayden reasons. There's no judgment, no resentment in his voice, and I can't help laughing. I see how things look to him.

During one of his last "timeouts" near the end of school Kayden asks me if I think the universe really goes on to infinity.

"What do you think, Kayden?"

"It's hard to think about it." He rubbed his head as though trying to push the idea out of his brain. "But I *like* thinking about it." He looks at me, searching. "You know?"

"I do. I used to dream about it. I was a little older than you," I told him, "and I loved learning about the moon, NASA, everything about space. I used to dream I flew to the end of the universe, and I was always happy because finally I knew the answer:"

"What happened?"

"In my dream the universe always ended at a brick wall too tall for me to see over. So I would climb the wall. I could reach the top and pull myself up. Every time I had the dream, just as I was about to look over the wall—" Kayden is listening, rapt. "I woke up. Every time."

He studies me again. Processing.

"I haven't had the dream for a long time."

"Do you think there is really an end to the universe?"

"I don't know, Kayden. Experts all say there isn't, but the universe is so vast. I guess no one can really know, can they?"

He considers this. "I wish we could. It's annoying."

Hanley was always more religious and I know that helped her. I tried, for her benefit. To give her comfort. It was a kind of lie, I suppose. If she realized that, and she probably did, I like to think she appreciated the effort.

Father Quince saw me in the grocery co-op several months after the funeral. The anger I hadn't been able to find a target for had evolved to a kind of listless resignation. I suppose he recognized that. He asked if I'd be interested in the custodian position at the school. He thought it might be good for me.

"I'm not much of a Catholic," I told him. "Or anything."

He nodded. "You'll do."

On the last day of the school year Kayden finds me in my maintenance room, preparing to start summer cleaning. He's come to say goodbye. "I'm going to the new Christian school in the fall," he tell me. "Grandma said she'd pay for it and my mom and dad said the teachers at this school just want to see me get in trouble."

I can't see him having less trouble at his next school, but I don't say anything. He is happy. The new school year is far in the future. He hands me a drawing and smiles with his whole face.

"Have a great summer, Kayden," I tell him.

"You too!" He calls back as he dashes away.

My daughters and I have rented a beach house at the Jersey shore, near where Hanley grew up. We vacationed here often, and this is my first time back here since Hanley died. They're bringing husbands and kids, my five grandchildren, so it's a family reunion, our first since the funeral. I came out a day ahead of them to set up, get groceries, and have a day to myself to wander the town, the beach. Reminisce.

In the evening I set up the hammock on the small deck off the back of the beach house. I took the job at St. Anastasia because I needed to do something and it was close. Father Quince and I get along, and I enjoy being around the kids. It keeps me out of the house and away from the television, which I love too much. Keeps me from wandering the supermarket and the hardware stores with all the other geezers trying to pass the time in our "golden years." Pyrite years. Fool's gold.

Nothing that happened is anyone's fault. Hanley and I married, had children, took jobs, relocated, did everything always with thought and consideration but also, as it turns out, on faith; like everyone else we had no way of knowing what would happen. We told ourselves stories that gave us comfort, a little courage.

It's hard to drink beer in a hammock. After struggling through two (about beer I have always been ambitious) I raise the second empty to Hanley, my daughters, to the night; to the stars, to little Kayden. I wonder what stories he will choose. I hope he can believe them for a while. I hope I'll see him again somehow. I rock forward out of my sling and shuffle to bed.

I have the dream again. I fly in some kind of rocket ship, pointy at the top and with huge fins, like the rockets in one of the old Tom Swift books I devoured at Kayden's age. They were generations old and out-of-date even then, but I loved them.

The border comes into view. I am out of the rocket and scraping my knees on the rough-mortared brick wall. I haul myself to the top and peek over. There's more space, more stars distant and glimmering, more darkness. The wall isn't a border; it's a pointless obstacle. Kayden stands beside me, talking as usual. He's older, bigger, but it's still Kayden, smiling with his whole face.

"Now we know," he says. He points, and there is Hanley on the other side of the wall. Kayden is still talking, and she's laughing at whatever he's saying, but I can't understand it. Then suddenly I'm awake, regretting the second beer as I hustle to the bathroom.

I don't want to go back to sleep. I slip on shorts and a shirt and pad down to the beach to sit on the sand. The thin pre-dawn horizon glows pink-orange.

It's been decades since I had that dream. What was Hanley doing there? And Kayden? Do I need to parse it? Unsettling as the dream was, it was good to see her.

My feet are wet, as are my shorts. Wavelets push around me, then recede. I wonder if the tide is coming in.

By mid-August, the building is nearly ready for the new school year. The floors have been stripped and waxed, the carpets cleaned. Some eighth graders are helping move desks and furniture back into the classrooms.

I'm sweeping the atrium when Kayden and his grandmother appear at the doors.

"Kayden thinks he left a couple of jackets here," Grandma explains.

Kayden is carrying a scruffy backpack. I direct them to the lost and found in the office. They return with three jackets and a dinged-up metal water bottle.

"How's your summer, Kayden?"

He tells me he's been swimming at the city pool. He's going to vacation Bible school, he says, but it's not so bad. He pulls a book, an old trivia compendium, from the backpack.

Grandma rolls her eyes. “ We stopped at a few tag sales this morning. He decided he had to have that old book.”

Kayden leans in and whispers, “Did you know the toilet was invented by a guy named Crapper? Crapper!” He laughs.

“That’s a good one, Kayden.”

“It’s true, really,” he calls back as he follows grandma out the door.

I hope Kayden will hold onto that one for a while. It isn’t true, but it is fun.

Daniel Webre
Early Birds

The same car was out there again. It pulled up to the curb, not bothering to cut the lights. Alden looked at the clock, then out the kitchen window. Same as last night. Blue sedan. Or was it a different one? Six-fifteen in the morning. What was with these people? Alden flicked on the light above the stove. He still hadn't hung a curtain in the window over the sink, so Alden knew the driver could see him now—hair sticking up eight different directions from a fitful night's sleep. He didn't care. He poured some juice and watched the sedan start moving again. It drove toward him, his house, then out of view, as it rounded the curve of his street.

They had been in the house a little under a month and every weekend the same neighbors down the block were having a garage sale. He and Stacy'd had one themselves just before the move. They'd consolidated all of their junk and made a surprising amount of money. But to keep that going week after week? He didn't see how it was possible. He hadn't noticed Stacy standing in her pink kimono behind him.

"I caught you," she said.

"Oh yeah? Doing what?"

"Spying on our new neighbors."

"Here. Take a look. It isn't the neighbors. It's these early birds. They can't even wait until daylight."

There were two more cars now, one on each side of the street, in front of the neighbors' house. Alden didn't see the blue sedan among them but figured it couldn't be far. The sales officially started at seven, but sometimes they opened up early, hence these scouting expeditions.

Stacy walked closer to the window and rested her arm on his shoulder. "I see what you mean. Do you think we should dress and walk over?" "For what?"

"Maybe they've got some nice curtains."

"I'm getting to that."

“Hey, relax,” Stacy said, taking her hand away. “I forgot how grouchy you could be in the morning.”

Alden finished his juice and rinsed the glass. “Sorry. But what’s the rush? I’m sure they’ll have another one next week.”

“That is a little different, isn’t it? But hey, we’re new to the neighborhood. It might be fun to walk over and introduce ourselves.”

The whole time Alden was in the shower, he kept thinking about how much he didn’t care to meet these particular neighbors. He wondered if the other homeowners were in on it, or if maybe they, too, were irritated by the steady stream of garage-sale traffic on Saturday mornings.

Stacy had freshened up and was ready to go by ten-till. She’d pulled her blond hair into a ponytail and was wearing jeans, sneakers, and one of Alden’s flannel shirts—the one he’d been planning to wear, actually. Instead, he chose an old sweatshirt from his college days. He’d quickly learned that no one in Springdale, Louisiana, had ever heard of his alma mater, but he’d gotten over that. At least it didn’t provoke anyone’s animosity like the colors of the rival football

schools. It seemed to Alden like no one knew quite what to make of it, or of him for that matter, and thus made nothing of either. Which suited him just fine.

“Hey. Let’s go,” Stacy said. “We’re missing out on all the good stuff.”

She handed him a large canvas tote bag, but he didn’t take it at first.

“Wait a second,” he said. “We don’t want to appear overly eager. They’ll take us to the cleaners.”

“Alden, honey, you’ve got it all wrong. This’ll show them that we’re no pushovers.”

Alden took the bag but wasn’t convinced. To be a good sport, though, he threaded his arm through the shoulder straps and wore it like a purse.

At the end of the driveway, Stacy stopped with a gasp. It was full light now and Alden could see it too—a fluffy explosion of white and gray feathers, in a two-foot blast radius. It looked like the aftermath of a pillow fight, swept into a pile.

“I don’t see the body,” Stacy said.

Alden scanned the edges of the driveway. “Me neither.” He stooped to pick up a single long gray flight feather. “I think it might have been a mourning dove.”

“But where’s the rest of it?” “Got away?”

“Let’s hope. But from what?”

“You got me. A cat?”

“Bad kitty.” Stacy made a pouty face, then shuddered.

Alden let go of the feather. The two of them watched it flutter back to the pavement.

“Come on. Let’s go.” She grabbed his hand—the one that hadn’t been touching the feather.

For a brief moment, while walking from their house to the neighbors’, Alden felt fortunate to have his own parking spot, seeing now the extent of the growing traffic congestion. Cars blocked driveways, honked, and competed for choice spots. Then he caught himself and remembered where they were headed. Stacy kept steady pressure on his hand. That was nice at least. Not-so-young lovers, not-so-old either. Though he was thirty-three and she twenty-nine, neither had been in a serious relationship—not so serious, anyway. They’d married shortly before buying the house, and now lived together, here in this neighborhood that was waiting to catch its second wind.

As they approached the driveway with the garage sale sign, Alden was reminded of an ancient bustling marketplace, perhaps somewhere in the Middle East. Tables lined both sides of the driveway, more tightly packed than the cars along the street. They were piled high with goods—garments, electronics, and knick-knacks—what his mother would have called *tchotchkes*. There was even part of one table stacked with cans of food—vegetables and soups— many of them still shrink-wrapped in cardboard flats. Scarcely an item had been left untouched by human hands as a skein of people lifted and assessed, haggled, bought, or rejected, until the remaining inventory was thoroughly scattered and left askew.

“Where do they get all of this stuff?” Alden asked, not fully realizing that he’d said this out loud.

“Didn’t you see the U-Haul?”

“What? No . . . A U-Haul?”

“I saw them unloading it yesterday. They must store the stuff offsite somewhere and truck it in.”

“They can’t do that. This is a residential neighborhood.”

“Oh, whatever. Apparently they believe they can. Let’s see what they’ve got.”

Alden cooperated. But he refused to touch anything. He didn’t want to support this kind of operation. Which of them were the neighbors anyway? He thought it would be obvious when they got there, but there was such a glut of humanity buying and selling that it seemed impossible to tell.

At first he thought a large woman in a recliner might be the homeowner because she was the only person he could see at that moment not in motion. But soon she stood up and left with two men in a pickup truck—recliner and all—the three of them crammed into the cab, fleshy shoulders pushed up in close quarters.

Alden felt a hand tap him on the back. He turned to face a strange, pink-haired woman, then realized it was his wife. “Oh, Stace. What are you doing?”

“Do you like it?”

“You’ll get lice,” he whispered.

She took off the wig and shook it as though that would dislodge any of the little vermin. “There now. Should we keep it?”

Alden was growing agitated. “Of course not. What’s the matter with you?”

“Oh, relax.”

She returned the wig to a white plastic bust Alden had mistaken for a shopper. Unlike the other people, throwing things haphazardly about the tables, Stacy took real care centering the wig atop the pale model. He admired the way she smoothed the pink locks until they hung uniformly across the featureless head.

“Okay,” he said, “you can keep it—but only if it comes with a bottle of medicated shampoo.”

Stacy didn’t seem to be listening. She was unfurling a flowered sarong. Evidently, she decided against this, too, because quickly she folded it again and moved to another table.

Soon, though, a hat display caught Alden’s eye. Several coatracks stood clustered together, holding men’s hats of various styles. Coats hung below them, suspended from hooks. One Stetson appeared to be moving. Alden continued to watch, determined not to be

tricked by another inanimate object. No, it was definitely moving. Floating, quite possibly, above the collective heads of the crowd. Then it separated itself, taking a long leather coat with it, and traveled toward Alden, who turned quickly to grab whatever merchandise was on the nearest table.

“You like that, do you?”

Alden looked down to see what he was touching. It was soft and black, a pile of feathers. “Good taste. That boa comes from New Orleans. I knew a little gal used to wear it in her

variety show. There’s garters to match around here someplace.”

Alden pulled his hand away. “My wife and I were just looking.”

“Plenty to see here. Look away, fella. Look away.”

Alden presumed the man was his neighbor, but hesitated, deciding against introducing himself. “Thank you,” he offered as an alternative.

The man remained near.

“Horton College, eh? Never heard of it.”

Alden had forgotten he was wearing the sweatshirt.

“What’s ya’ll’s mascot out there? Don’t tell me it’s the Hoos.”

“No, no. We’re the Antelope.”

“Good track and field, then?”

“Up until 1903, yes. Then they got rid of all varsity athletics.”

“Well, I’ll be. I never heard of a college without sports. What about school spirit?”

“Horton’s got more than most, I’d say.”

The man looked genuinely perplexed. “To each his own,” he said, shaking his head. “Let me know if you want me to make you a deal on that. We can do the whole set if you want.”

Alden smiled and hurried away. He found Stacy, who was holding up a stuffed and mounted duck—a male mallard.

“Oh, there you are,” she said.

“Absolutely not.”

“Don’t you think the house could stand some decorating?” “That?”

“Why not? Oh, Alden. I’m just kidding. You’re always so serious.” She put down the duck. “I did find some other stuff. Here, let me see the bag.”

Alden leaned over so she could reach in, as it hung from his side. He couldn't see from that angle what exactly was going into it, but he decided not to worry. She'd already passed on the duck, had she not?

"See the guy in the cowboy hat?" he said. "Where?"

"Over there." Alden tried indicating the proper direction, further contorting his body in the process. "He tried to sell me a garter belt."

"That's so kinky."

"What I mean is, this is his garage sale." "Huh. What's his name?"

"We didn't get that far."

"Looks like a real cowboy. Ranch houses, you know. Let's go settle up." Alden scanned the area, trying to find the checkout table.

Stacy tugged his arm. "Come on. It's this way."

The crowd of people had gotten thicker and seemed to be at a standstill; but he and Stacy managed to push through, reaching the line forming in front of a folding card table, set up in one corner of the carport. An older woman was working it. She wore her gray hair pulled back in a bun and was dressed in a sort of denim jumper. Alden felt unnerved by the way she almost disappeared inside of her clothing, the fabric roughly the same texture as her skin. He wondered if this was the man's wife—or maybe his mother.

"Hi," Stacy said, smiling, once they reached the front of the line.

The gray-haired denim woman responded with a curt nod. Alden expected Stacy would chat her up, introduce them to her, lay the groundwork at least for a neighborly relationship, but she did none of that.

"Unload the bag, Alden."

The sharpness of her words startled him. He quickly reached his hand into the bag, only to touch something wet and sticky. "Hey!" he said, pulling his hand clear. He noted that it now smelled like peppermint.

"You'd better do it," he said, letting the strap slip from his shoulder.

Stacy made a face, like it was his fault somehow. The old denim woman handed him a paper towel. Alden thanked her and she nodded again.

Stacy inspected the inside of the bag. "It's not too bad," she said. "Could I have a couple of those, too?"

The woman sighed then tore off several feet of paper toweling from the roll. "You

folks mind stepping aside,” she said, handing the paper to Stacy. She motioned with her chin toward the long line behind them.

“No, of course not.” Stacy picked up the bag and moved away from the table. Alden followed, attempting to look contrite, though not really sure why. “We’ll be back in a moment,” Stacy said.

She glanced around, then directed Alden to a sofa, and took a seat next to him.

Alden was happy to sit for a while. He didn’t think the morning was going so well. He wished they’d never crossed the street. Why couldn’t they have just stayed home and snuggled?

Do the things other newlyweds did on Saturday mornings? This rummaging through other

people’s junk was a poor substitute. He was tired and he wanted to go home—and he knew he could have, of course. But he also knew enough not to leave Stacy sitting on this couch all alone.

She was busy dabbing at something inside the bag.

Alden took another sniff of his peppermint-scented hand. “Not bad, actually. What is this stuff, anyway?”

“It’s syrup. Artisanal. Basically sugar-water with mint extract. But the lid must have come loose in the bag.”

“Did it get on everything?”

“Sort of. I think this t-shirt absorbed most of it.” She pulled out a beige cotton shirt and shook it until it straightened out enough for Alden to read the words, “Bend, Oregon.”

“I don’t understand. Why would anyone want a shirt commanding Oregon to bend?”

“Ha-ha. You know it’s a place, right? I thought you knew all about the Northwest. I mean, with your precious Horton and all.”

“Horton’s in the Midwest. You know that.”

“Well, the way you’re always talking about it. I just assumed they must have taught you something about the other regions of the country, too.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, relax, Alden. I’m only joking.”

“Well, I don’t find it funny.”

“Listen, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it. Why don’t you go home and put on

some coffee?"

He wondered if this was a trick question. He wouldn't mind a few moments alone to get his thoughts together. "Okay," he said, still bristling over the Horton comment. But then he remembered some relationship advice his father had given him once about not going to sleep while angry with your spouse. He assumed it applied to leaving garage sales just as well. He took a few deep breaths and stood up. "The coffee and I will be waiting."

She stood too and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you, sweetie. And I really am sorry." They kissed again, this time quickly on the lips.

As he turned in the direction of home, two men carried off the sofa they had just been sitting on.

Without Stacy, the house seemed empty and strange. Most of their stuff was still packed in boxes, but the coffeemaker was ready to go. Alden measured out the grounds and water and pressed the brew button. The hardest part would be finding the right cups. Stacy's favorite was

shaped like a hummingbird. It held only a single shot of espresso and seemed more than a little ridiculous to Alden, but Stacy liked it. She used to flit around her apartment with it—herself a little like a hummingbird—moving from sofa to kitchen and back again, refilling the tiny cup a dozen or more times during his visits. At first, he'd worried this was her way of not letting him get too close to her, but with time he understood it just reflected how much she delighted in the odd little cup—dainty, she called it.

But now he couldn't find it anywhere. He had to pull out a couple of old mugs—brown and clunky ones—he'd brought from his own apartment. He climbed up on a chair and was taking one last look into the furthest reaches of the kitchen cabinet, when he heard the door open.

"What are you up to, sweetie?"

He stepped down from the chair, as Stacy set the tote bag on the table. "Coffee's ready, but I couldn't find your hummingbird cup."

"That's broken, remember?" "Broken? No. How? When?" "Right after we moved in." "I honestly

don't remember."

Stacy shrugged and poured coffee into one of the mugs. "It's no big deal. I'm over it."

She handed him the mug of coffee and poured herself some. "You're really bothered by that, aren't you?"

"Well, it's just that I knew it was your favorite."

"That's sweet, Alden. But really, it's just porcelain." She smiled and took a sip. "Everything will be okay. Hey, why don't you take a look inside the bag?"

"I'm not falling for that one again."

Stacy started unpacking it herself. First, she removed an old milk bottle with a cross-threaded cap. He realized it was still half-filled with peppermint syrup. Next came the Bend, Oregon, shirt—now neatly folded. The third item, though, took him completely by surprise.

"What is *that*?" On the table in front of him, standing two feet tall and a foot or so across, was a ceramic tree supporting birds, a nest with eggs, and a dangerous-looking serpent that curved halfway up its trunk. The birds were in a state of high alarm and were doing their best to keep the invader at bay. Alden felt an unusually strong reaction against this particular piece and regretted that he had spoken so resolutely against the mallard.

"It's based on a John James Audubon painting," she said.

"It's hideous. That wasn't in the bag earlier, was it? I think I would have noticed."

"No. You're right. I found this after you left. The man in the hat was carrying it out of his house, just as I was checking out. I got it before anyone else could."

"But why? What's the draw?"

"It's *active*, Alden. I want this to be an active household. *Doing things*."

Alden sensed the subtext. "I'm not opposed to activity. I know there are more things I could be doing. That *we* could be doing together. But I don't know, Stacy. To be honest, that thing freaks me out."

"How can you be freaked out by a little nature scene?" "I just am. I wish you'd return it."

"I can't. All sales are final. It's what that old woman said when I paid."

"Then we'll give it back. They can sell it again. Let them keep their money. I want it gone."

"But I don't, Alden. I bought it because I like it."

Alden could tell he was losing this battle. He tried remembering if he'd ever seen

anything remotely that awful in her apartment when they'd been dating, but nothing came to mind. Hers had been feminine and comfortable—almost like a nest—nothing at all like his barren and depressing bachelor pad—or his den, as she liked to call it. A quirky hummingbird cup was one thing. But this?

“I'll tell you what,” Stacy said. “You can pick out a place to put it.”

“How about in the cabinet?”

“All right. There goes your chance.”

“Look, I'll try it for a while. But I'm telling you—I don't like it.”

“Oh, you've made that abundantly clear. Here, put this away,” she said, handing him the bottle of syrup, which was still slightly sticky. Stacy finished her coffee and took the Bend, Oregon, shirt with her to the back of the house. For now, he guessed, the statue would be staying on their kitchen table.

Later that day, Alden realized Stacy never did tell him the story of how the hummingbird cup had broken. He also wondered why she hadn't mentioned it before. Or had she? Either way disturbed him. Stacy wanted action? He was taking action now. He'd left her unpacking boxes and was on his way to the hardware store to buy a hummingbird feeder. A real one. For real birds. He remembered swarms of them buzzing around his grandparents' yard when he'd visited them over fall break. Those had been some good times—his grandmother laughing when a hungry hummer flew too close to his head. Its wings had sounded just like electric hedge clippers.

When he reached the store, he couldn't believe there were so many choices. He picked a feeder with red plastic hibiscus blossoms and little perches so the tiny birds could rest while they drank.

A man in overalls waited at the register.

“How are the Hoos looking this year?”

“What? Oh . . . No. Antelope.”

“Antelopes. That's right. Now I remember.”

Alden cleared his throat, debating whether or not to correct him.

“Um . . . It's 'The Antelope.' Singular. Capital A. And we no longer have sports teams.” “Huh. Well, that's too bad. I must have got them mixed up with somewheres else. Need

any nectar with that?" The man, whose name was Verlin, picked up the feeder and scanned it with a red laser.

"Oh yeah. I've been forgetting things lately." "That right? Like what?"

"I guess I don't know actually. But yes, let me get some nectar." Alden started to move away from the register.

"Hold on, there. No need. How many packs?" "Uh, two, I guess."

Verlin reached below the counter and pulled out two silver pouches of nectar. "There you go. Popular item this time of year. I keep a box of 'em handy."

"Thank you," Alden said. For some reason, he found himself shaking Verlin's hand after making his purchases, then immediately realized this was a weird thing for him to do. But Verlin didn't seem to think so at all. He acted like it was just part of the experience of shopping at these

mom and pop businesses. Alden left the store feeling better. He would set up the feeder as soon as he got home. This must be what being active was all about. Being a man of action. Establishing a rapport with other men of action. Like this Verlin—owner-operator of an independent hardware store. He felt an irrational sense of optimism building as he started the car.

Driving down his street, Alden noted the U-Haul backed into his neighbors' driveway. The old denim woman was nowhere to be seen, but the cowboy-hatted man stood next to the truck's lift gate. He was holding a coffee mug shaped like a pineapple and appeared to be supervising a crew of workers folding tables and carrying boxes into the back of the truck.

Alden hadn't realized how slowly he was driving until the man raised his pineapple mug as a kind of greeting. Alden tapped the horn twice and waved. He wondered if the man had recognized him from earlier or if this was just the sort of neighborhood they'd moved into. He liked the sense of belonging he was feeling. Maybe he could forgive the man for his petty zoning infractions after all.

When he got home, not even the monstrous statue could spoil his mood. He wanted to show Stacy the new feeder right away, but she was in the shower. He thought about joining her, but decided instead to have it all set up by the time she was done.

The first step was simply taking the feeder out of the box. The nectar itself turned

out to be a powdered concentrate. Alden searched the still-packed boxes of kitchen stuff until he found a measuring cup and a gallon pitcher. He didn't think the half-starved birds would be overly choosy about proportions, but he wanted to do this right. It might be their last meal before flying across the Gulf of Mexico.

Applying his best chem-lab technique, he reconstituted the nectar. Then he filled the feeder with the bright red liquid. Almost immediately, it started dripping from the flowers, so he

hurried outside and found a suitable branch in the fig tree—one in full view of their sitting-room table. He paused and listened for humming. Nothing. Only the distant caws of crows. Somehow word would get out sooner or later. He went inside to clean up and put away the pitcher.

Stacy was just finishing a glass of nectar. Her lips were wet and glowed red. "Thanks for the Kool-Aid."

"You drank that? It's hummingbird food."

"Ew—I thought it tasted a little off. Did you mix it wrong?" "No, it's perfect, in fact."

"Well, you put it in the pitcher we use for drinks." "It's all I could find. You were in the shower." "Oh well. It wasn't really that bad."

Alden fished the empty packet out of the trash and studied the ingredients. "I don't think any of this should hurt you. Looks like sugar water, mainly."

Stacy peered out the kitchen window, then walked to the sitting room. "Where'd you put the feeder?"

"In the fig tree."

"Why so far?"

"I don't know. Seemed like a good place."

Stacy stared out the sitting-room window. "Look, honey! There's one out there already." "Really?" Alden rushed to the window.

"It's on the perch. I've never seen one sitting still before. Oh, it's so cute!"

Alden swelled with satisfaction. He'd made his wife happy and was helping out nature at the same time. The little bird drank its fill and disappeared again, off to do whatever hummingbirds did between transoceanic flights.

"I'm getting hungry," Stacy said. "How about you?"

“I could eat.”

“There’s not much in the house. Wanna go somewhere?”

“We could do that.”

Stacy rubbed up against him. “Let’s go on a date.”

“You and me?”

“Who else?”

“I thought we were married already.” “That’s just the beginning.” Stacy kissed him. “I want cocktails and music. Jazz music. And I want to hear a real chanteuse.”

“What’s that?”

“Oh, you’ll know when you hear one.”

Stacy told Alden that she remembered seeing a new club was opening in the downtown district. Downtown at night was a depressing place. But there was one charming street of pubs and restaurants where the city had made a conscious effort to renew itself. The Verve nightclub was on that street, but it was on the far end, away from most of the renovation work and other activity. Alden was okay with that. He preferred peace and quiet, and as they walked, the boarded up store-fronts helped him with his transition into the Forties.

It was only a little after seven when they got to the club, still early for night life, but the sparse crowd surprised him nonetheless. Except for another couple at a table near the stage, and maybe two or three drinkers sitting at the bar, everyone else appeared to work there. Alden liked the dimmed lights and the mellow music. Billie Holliday was singing “Autumn in New York.” The night’s live performers were nowhere to be seen; but an upright bass, drum kit, and baby grand piano stood onstage, washed in delicate light and making quiet promises for later. Alden put his arm around Stacy as they waited for someone to seat them.

“Maybe we seat ourselves,” Stacy said after two or three minutes had passed. They walked further inside, hesitant at first, but then deciding on a table close to the stage and far enough away from the other couple. Older and distinguished-looking, the man and

woman must have been in their late fifties or early sixties. His head was mostly bald, and what hair he had left was white and close-cropped. Alden thought the couple had overdressed—the man wore a dinner jacket; his wife, an evening gown with pearls—and yet he couldn't help but admire their elegance and poise.

Stacy must have been thinking something similar. She was taking on a dreamy look, her eyes moist and smiling, even though she hadn't had her first cocktail.

"Alden, honey, do you think that could be us in twenty years?"

Alden pondered the question, not being one for glib or easy answers when it came to their future. More than anything, he wanted them to have a future together. It was just hard sometimes, living with somebody else after having been alone for so long. "I don't see why not," he said—then, feeling awkward added, "I'd prefer to keep my hair, though."

"They look happy together, don't they? Do you think they were they made for each other, or do you think they had to grow that way?"

Alden didn't have a chance to answer this time. The waitress had come to take their drink orders. Stacy asked for a vodka martini. Alden said he'd try a Tom Collins, though he didn't exactly know what was in one.

"I'll be right back with those," the waitress said, her voice rich like caramel. Then the music picked up. A lively sax. Charlie Parker?

He still hadn't come up with an answer to Stacy's question, but she seemed to have forgotten it now, if she'd ever expected one. There were other people to watch. Several more were trickling in. Most were gathered near the bar in small clusters, and Stacy seemed to be enjoying herself, keeping her eyes trained on them. Their drinks arrived and she sipped her martini. Alden felt good too, knowing he'd created for Stacy just the kind of evening she was hoping for. It didn't even matter what was in a Tom Collins. Now all they needed was dinner and a chanteuse.

They were lucky they'd arrived as early as they had. All the tables were full now, and a few musicians milled about, taking horns from their cases, adjusting things on stage. Every now and then, someone approached from the crowd, said hello to one of the performers, shook a hand or slapped a back. The whole place buzzed with people talking and laughing. It made Alden wonder how long their small, struggling city could sustain a scene like this one. But then he checked himself. It was a good beginning, he kept repeating to himself . . . and surely there would be many more good days to come.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Gina Elia

Remember You Will Die

This work depicts actual events in the life of the author as truthfully as recollection permits and as mediated through her own emotions. These events may have been experienced differently, or may now be recollected differently, by other people. Additionally, while all persons within the work are actual individuals, names and identifying characteristics have been omitted to respect their privacy.

The week I found out my father was dying, the two biggest issues of my life were: one, a mysterious insect bite I had received which had caused my inner forearm to redden and swell, and two, a petty jealousy I harbored concerning the close-knit friendship of two of my work colleagues. In the half-hour before the phone call that notified us of Dad's emergency admission to the hospital, I had been crying in bed thinking of how I had seen them together at lunch. They had been sitting at the table with the rest of us, but engaged in their own little world together, one I was not privy to, murmuring inside jokes and allusions to previous stories told. Neither of them had paid any attention to the ice pack on my arm or the swollen insect bite, even though I had thought those would make for good attention-getters.

But then the phone call came, and even though I wanted to continue dwelling in the comfort of a problem that wasn't really a problem, I sensed that I would have to leave it behind to grapple with a real and grave issue. I stood in the dim lamplight listening to Mom explain how Dad's lungs were so bad that he couldn't breathe without the aid of a bipap. It felt like the shadowy figure of Reality had roused itself from a long, deep slumber, brushed off the leaves and other debris that had accumulated on it, and reminded me of its presence.

After Mom finished speaking, I decided to show her my insect bite anyway to get her medical opinion on it. She gave me a look that said, *are you serious right now?* But I was still desperately clinging to the fragments of a world that was slipping away from me, one in which minor issues were worth discussing because nobody had anything more serious going on. Over in the corner, Reality shrugged. *It will come back. But not for a while.*

The surrealness of what was happening, that in moments my focus had shifted from

the subtleties of workplace relations to the imminent death of my father, continued once we were at the hospital. Over the next few days, a series of doctors cycled through who all shared the same news with us. It didn't look good. He had caught pneumonia, which is hard enough for people his age to overcome, but his lungs were hugely deteriorated from the Interstitial Lung Disease he had been diagnosed with four or five years ago. They showed us CAT scan images in which his lungs looked mostly white. They said this wasn't good, that it meant most of the healthy tissue in Dad's lungs was already gone. They said there wasn't much they could do for him. They said his time had come.

When a doctor first uttered the words, "your time has come," that first night we all rushed in, Dad absorbed the news in silence. But he had some questions for the second doctor who told him, the guy who came on for the day shift once the overnight guy had left. "What about a lung transplant?"

The doctor replied, "You are far too old for that. It's a very risky surgery even for the young. And your weight is a concern also. But primarily the age."

"What about my intestines? Can you check those? It feels like something in my intestines is eating away at my lungs." I felt sick to my stomach. Dad was highly educated, with a bachelor's and two master's degrees. It should have been obvious to him that the issue was with his lungs and only his lungs. Even this close to the end, as my sisters and I all sat around his bed trying to process that Dad would soon no longer be with us, he was still trying to problem-solve, to find something in his broken body that could be fixed. Maybe it was the engineer in him.

The doctor hesitated, then cautiously replied, "I can understand why it might feel that way. The Interstitial Lung Disease is causing your lungs to gradually deteriorate, so they probably feel like they are being eaten away by something. But, unfortunately, I'm afraid that's just the state of your lungs. There is nothing we can do."

That was the end of the conversation. Dad asked no more questions, and for the rest of his life any further comments that it was "his time" were met with stony silence.

After the first night and day Dad had been rushed to the hospital, when he was able to downgrade from the bipap to a high flow, another kind of machine for assisting with breathing that we were told was for less severe cases than the bipap, he was moved from the ICU to the general ward. The doctors were clear that this was not a sign of improvement. Dad's breathing was not sustainable off of the high flow, and even on it he would die within a week probably—we were just prolonging his suffering by keeping him

on it. They were basically moving him to the general ward to wait for him to die, or more precisely for us to give the okay to pull the plug. My sisters and I wanted to face our reality with courage, but at the beginning, what they were describing felt like murder. Dad was completely alert and sitting up in bed talking with us as though his life didn't hinge on whether or not he was attached to the plastic tube that snaked underneath his nose.

In fact, the next few days were a weird twilight zone in which the closer we were in proximity to Dad, the person who was dying, the less we talked about what was happening. My sisters and I had inherited from Mom a need to thoroughly discuss every detail of whatever issue Reality tossed at us as a means of coping with it. Once we were presented with our father's imminent death, we talked about it while walking through the hallways of the hospital, over coffee and lunch in the cafe on the first floor, and at dinner with Mom. We cried. We made judgy comments about each other's way of coping. We shouted. We hugged. We alternately laughed and argued about our lives together with him, our memories, whether he was a good or a bad father. We talked about what the doctors said, how they said it, and what we thought of them. We also talked about our perceptions of Dad's comfort in the hospital, how he must be feeling, whether or not he was scared, and whether or not the wetness around his eyes was evidence of actual crying, which would be an anomaly for him. I argued it was just irritation from the bipap he had started wearing again, now 24/7, because his breathing had deteriorated too much for the high flow to support.

But when inevitably we found ourselves once again standing in front of the door to Dad's hospital room, we knew it was time to silence ourselves. Nobody talked to him about his imminent passing if the doctors weren't in the room. It was understood that this would not be welcome. Dad's given name was Frank, but in my opinion it was a misnomer, because he was anything but. I don't recall him ever facing any issue in his life head-on.

It was the same with his death. He was stubbornly silent on the topic of his own mortality, on funeral plans, on sage words of advice for us to remember him by. He also didn't offer any final thoughts on the decision he had made many years ago to leave my mother for another woman, which had entirely changed the contours and trajectory of our family. Instead, silence reigned supreme when we sat around his hospital bed. His girlfriend played Solitaire on her palm pilot, I fiddled with a Rubix Cube I had brought along from work, and my sisters sat by Dad's side holding his hands.

When he was still alert, Dad preferred to spend his waking hours complaining. He

thought, not unjustifiably, that the hospital food sucked. One of my sisters mixed a pat of butter into the mashed sweet potatoes once to make them less bland. She asked Dad how that was. He told her it didn't make them better. To my other sister, he said that she hadn't cleaned his glasses as well as he would have himself. Apparently, he wanted to bring his habit of critiquing everybody who loved him right to the edge of his grave, ensuring it was his legacy. Mostly, though, he just tried to sleep, a sleep from which he eventually never awoke as the painkiller drugs made him drowsier and drowsier.

The last day that he was in the hospital, not quite a week after he had been rushed in, we arrived that morning to find that even on the bipap, his oxygen saturation levels were only at eighty-something percent. A healthy person's is at 100%. He was breathing at a rate of seventy breaths per minute, short and shallow. An average person takes about twelve. Dad's skin was very hot, and in his state of half-consciousness his hands batted at ours, the first time he hadn't been receptive to us holding them.

A doctor we hadn't seen before came to us that morning, a South Asian woman. When she started speaking, it was like a heavenly guardian had swept down from her perch of oversight in the heavens above to help us see the light. At once with more authority and more gentleness than any previous doctor had possessed, she told us that Dad was not going to get better and that it was time to remove him from the bipap. She explained that every ounce of energy he had was being used to breathe, and that even so, not enough oxygen was getting to his brain. As a result, he was starting to suffer brain damage.

It felt almost like a relief to have someone so authoritatively tell us what to do, a mother duck leading her ducklings, and my sisters and I nodded and cried at her words and knew that pulling the plug was what we had to do. Only Dad's girlfriend hesitated, stuck on the fact that we had said we were going to give him one full course of antibiotics for the pneumonia. She technically had no say in the decision, but my sisters and I wanted to be respectful to her, since she had stuck by our father and supported him all those years. She seemed to really love him, and he wasn't an easy man to love.

My sisters spent a long time convincing her that this was the right thing to do. I can't take credit myself—I left and went to the waiting room at the end of the hall to call my department chair at work with an update, an excuse to get out. Then I sat there sipping on some gingerale a kind nurse had offered me, which happened to have been one of Dad's favorite sodas. I found myself unable to face her denial on top of everything else, so I suppose in this regard, my sisters were stronger than me.

Through some magic I do not understand, they convinced her to let Dad go, and I was informed that he was shortly to be removed from the bipap. I returned to the room and watched as a nurse came in, removed the bipap, and put Dad on the support of nothing but the home oxygen tank, which until a week ago had been enough for him to live on. He was completely out of it from the painkiller drugs, but we weren't sure how much he could hear. We each shouted as well as whispered our "I love you" into his ears, and then quieted. Each of my sisters held one of his hands, while I sat at his feet and stroked his big toe, poking out from the hand-crocheted prayer blanket the hospital chaplain had laid over his feet. We had requested both her and the hospital priest, figuring that would give Dad's weary soul more of a chance to land somewhere good in his next life. We watched his heart monitor sullenly, then eventually asked the nurse to turn it off because it beeped loudly and incessantly as his heart rate started to drop. We didn't want to remember our final moments with him that way.

Within thirty minutes of being removed from the bipap, Dad died. My sisters and his girlfriend wanted to linger in the room for another few hours, so I did too, because it would have looked cold not to. I wanted nothing more but to make a beeline for the exit. I could not stomach that the corpse lying in front of me was my father. It wasn't him. He had left. I didn't understand the purpose of continuing to stare at the shell of what had once been him. Soon after dying, his fingertips started to turn blue, which made me queasy. Later on, Mom told me that that process shouldn't have started until many hours after he had died, which just showed how de-oxygenated he had been.

Then his girlfriend told us, glibly and without realizing the gravity of her words, that back when Dad was diagnosed with Interstitial Lung Disease some four or five years ago, the doctor had told him then that he only had about that long to live. "And that's how it really played out!"

she marveled, as though she was talking about the accuracy of a sports forecast and not our father's death.

Dad didn't tell anybody but her. And he must have instructed her not to tell us either. Then he continued to live as though nothing serious was happening. My sisters and I were concerned about his deteriorating health, but since nobody had told us otherwise, we had assumed that his condition was chronic, not terminal. When we started to worry, we told ourselves we were making too much of nothing. When his doctors made the call to put him on oxygen around the clock, we reasoned that lots of people live with oxygen for many years. Mom, who was estranged from him and had only known of his illness whatever details we described to her, misunderstood it as a form of COPD and assured us that he could live well into his eighties in such a condition. Then four months after going on oxygen 24/7, he died.

I wish he had told us.

Angela Townsend **Appropriate Attire**

As this essay recounts my inner emotional and intellectual experience as a writer, I attest that it reflects my honest and true feelings and thoughts. Where I reference external experiences, I have made every effort to recreate events, locales and conversations accurately from my memories of them.

I wish the line between sacred and profane was not blinding. It isn't, but my eyes take in only a splinter of light's spectrum.

When you party with words, you learn to observe their dress code. "Saints" and "angels" are vague enough for hosts of hosts. They may wear cargo shorts or top hats. "Hope" is invited to most parties, handsome in sweat shorts or pearls. But the "Holy Spirit" does not own heels or attend awards ceremonies. "Psalms" are business-casual, underdressed for galas, expected early to help with potlucks.

Given a slobbering love of God and a kitten-heeled craving for affirmation, you find yourself a perennial faux pas. I have blown my liturgical cover with literary journals, the equivalent of wearing holey overalls to Buckingham Palace. I have waxed too wonderstruck with the astute and academic, my tutu turning off the professional pantsuits.

My wardrobe is just as wrong for the worship service. I foam at the mouth with rage or comedy, and devotionals in denim dresses cover up their daily bread. I mess up my hair with metaphors, and the combed and confident shutter the cathedral.

I am infatuated with Jesus and grateful for the F-word. I am devoted and divorced. I sing hymns all day and believe nobody will be left outside over the long night. I am Mary and Jezebel, 99th sheep and feral cat, organ and kazoo, disciple and moon child.

I am alive and confused and incapable of writing any of this out of the plot.

Squinting from infrared to ultraviolet, I try to write the whole arc. But I am Eve's daughter, with a sweet tooth for low-hanging fruit. I cram my convictions down my blouse at the agnostic cocktail party. I turn my "Everyone Belongs" T-shirt inside-out at the Baptist barbeque. I tell myself

I'm wry and graceful, telling it slant like Emily Dickinson with a bigger ego, but I'm just a calico coward under God's fig tree.

Who will save me from this body of work? There's no stylist seraph at my door, reporting to make me over. There's no wordplay to wiggle into, no matter how often I sausage my soul into a dress three sizes small.

There's only one option appropriate for all events. The events themselves.

There are moments of such infallible joy, God-words are redundant. I'm happy as a gumdrop to gather them like pleats, but the dress will twirl with or without details.

At six, I ate vanilla pudding while watching *Schoolhouse Rock* reruns. I was the woman who found fire. Sweetness existed, and creativity, and the hoe-down of language and laughter. I remember this hour as though it were the world's first hour.

At fourteen, my father angered me for any or no reason. But it was the Summer Olympics, and he squeezed increasingly hilarious handwritten notes under my bedroom door until I resurrected. I was every small animal who ever came home. I remember this hour as though it were my father's face.

At twenty-eight, my coworker made a comment about narwhals. Our boss summoned a music video on the same topic. Our collective hundred fifty years of age rewound to Eden as we leapt and danced, slaphappy and free. I was a guest at Cana. I remember this hour as though it were permission.

At forty, I Zoom with my mother on mundane mornings wearing discount dungarees. We bicker about democracy and examine the flight paths of angels and compliment each other's tie-dyed hoodies. I am every vandal who has ever been unable to lose love. I remember these hours as though they are my name.

At the edge of darkness, I catch myself burbling hymns. I realize I am not alone in my galley kitchen. A great company is grooving in their own pajamas, ancestors and oddballs and my lost cats. I am the six-winged seraph, covered in eyes. I remember this hour as though it were vision.

At the horizon, I am naked. I have no answer. I have no question. I have no reason to be afraid. I am Mary Magdalene hearing my name in the garden. I forget this hour most of the time.

If I attend to events, I will be dressed appropriately. Editors may disagree. I may curdle, craven. I may light strange fire or snuff the light. The sacred and profane will not cancel the party on my account. They will top each other's guest list. They will doff their top hats to haggard heretics in jumpsuits and flinty saints in silk. They will keep the light on, especially when we squint.

Contributors

Arno Bohlmeijer is the winner of a PEN America Grant 2021, a novelist and poet, writing in English and Dutch, published in six countries – US: Houghton Mifflin, in two dozen fine US Journals and Reviews, and in *Universal Oneness: An Anthology of Magnum Opus Poems* from around the World.

R.T. Castleberry, a Pushcart Prize nominee, has work in *Vita Brevis*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Trajectory*, *Silk Road*, *StepAway*, and *Sylvia*. Internationally, he's had poetry published in Canada, Wales, Ireland, Scotland, France, New Zealand, Portugal, the Philippines, India and Antarctica. His poetry has appeared in the anthologies: *You Can Hear the Ocean: An Anthology of Classic and Current Poetry*, *TimeSlice*, *The Weight of Addition*, and *Level Land: Poetry For and About the I35 Corridor*.

Gina Elia is a freelance writer who also teaches Mandarin Chinese in South Florida. Her work has been published or is forthcoming on the TED-Ed platform and in *Eclectica*, *Psyche*, *Sangam Literary Magazine*, *Taiwan's Commonwealth Magazine*, *The China Project*, and *Geneologies of Modernity*. She was born and raised in Boston, Massachusetts and earned a Bachelor's degree in Comparative Literature from Cornell and a PhD in Chinese Literature from the University of Pennsylvania before moving to her current position. She has spent an extensive amount of time in China, Taiwan, Japan, and Southeast Asia. In her free time, she enjoys reading, writing, listening to music, traveling, and continuing to study Chinese and other languages.

Daniel Espinosa is a painter-turned-writer living in Austin, TX. His work is forthcoming in *Emerge Literary Journal* and appears in *O*, Miami Poetry Festival's collection "Waterproof: Evidence of a Miami Worth Remembering" eulogizing his hometown of the Magic City.

Victoria Garton In 2023 Victoria Garton had the chapbook *Venice Comes Clean* published by *Flying Ketchup Press*. *Bright Flash Literary Review* accepted her flash fiction, and poems were accepted or published by *Clarion*, *Cosmic Daffodil*, *I-70 Review*, *Proud to Be* (Honorable Mention), *Sangam*, *Sparks of Calliope*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *The Penwood Review*, *The Seraphic Review*, *Thorny Locust*, *Vital Minutiae*, *WayWords Literary Journal*, and *Wasteland Literary Magazine*.

Kathie Giorgio is the author of seven novels, two story collections, an essay collection, and four poetry collections. Her latest novel, *Hope Always Rises*, was released on February 28,

2023. Her next novel, *Don't Let Me Keep You*, is under contract and will be released in October 2024. She's been nominated for the Pushcart Prize in fiction and poetry and awarded the Outstanding Achievement Award from the Wisconsin Library Association, the Silver Pen Award for Literary Excellence, the Pencraft Award for Literary Excellence, and the Eric Hoffer Award In Fiction. Her poem "Light" won runner-up in the 2021 Rosebud Magazine Poetry Prize. In a recent column, Jim Higgins, the books editor of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, listed Giorgio as one of the top 21 Wisconsin writers of the 21st century. Kathie is also the director and founder of AllWriters' Workplace & Workshop LLC, an international creative writing studio.

Diane Glancy is professor emerita at Macalester College. Her latest poetry books are "Island of the Innocent, a Consideration of the Book of Job," "A Line of Driftwood, the Ada Blackjack Story," and "Psalm to Whom(e)" published in 2020, 2021 and 2023. In 2022, she published a nonfiction collection, "Home Is the Road, Wandering the Land, Shaping the Spirit." Glancy lives in North Central Texas on land where many tribes camped, Apache, Comanche, Wichita, Waco, Kiowa. Her other books and awards are on her website, www.dianeglancy.com.

Roger Hart's stories and essays have appeared in *Natural Bridge*, *The Tampa Review*, *Passages North*, *Runner's World*, and more than thirty other magazines and journals. His stories have won the Marguerite McGlinn Prize for Fiction, the *Third Coast* Fiction Prize, and the *Dogwood Journal* Fiction Prize. His most recent story collection, *Mysteries of the Universe*, was published by Kallisto Gaia Press. He lives in Montana where he is working on a novel under the supervision of his wife and two very big dogs.

Rosalie Hendon (she/her) is an environmental planner living in Columbus, Ohio. Her work is published in *Ravens Perch*, *Quibble Lit*, *Sad Girls Club*, *Pollux*, *Blue Bottle*, and *Willawaw*, among others. Rosalie is inspired by ecology, relationships, and stories passed down through generations.

Gwen Monohan has been published in several small literary magazines including COE REVIEW, BLUELINE, and BIG MUDDY among others. She recently won third place for "Focal Points" from CALIFORNIA QUARTERLY and earlier a first prize from DOVER BEACH POETRY PRESS/Visions for "Robin's Wake."

Christopher Munde's first poetry collection, *Slippage* (Tebot Bach, 2019), won the Patricia Bibby Award, and his poems have also appeared in *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Blackbird*, *The Literary Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Third Coast*, *West Branch*, and elsewhere. He is a graduate of the University of Houston's MFA program and the recipient

of an Academy of American Poets Prize. Presently, he lives and teaches in western NY.

Stephen Roger Powers is the author of four poetry collections published by Salmon Poetry and *Highway Speed*, a collection of short stories published by Closet Skeleton Press. Other work has appeared in *32 Poems*, *Shenandoah*, *The Woody Creeker*, *Natural Bridge*, *Rabbit Ears: TV Poems*, and *Let Me Say This: A Dolly Parton Poetry Anthology*. He was an extra in *Joyful Noise* with Queen Latifah and Dolly Parton, and he can be seen if you know just where to look.

Charles Rammelkamp is Prose Editor for BrickHouse Books in Baltimore. His poetry collection, *A Magician Among the Spirits*, poems about Harry Houdini, is a 2022 Blue Light Press Poetry winner. Another poetry collection entitled *Transcendence* has also recently been published by BlazeVOX Books and a collection of flash fiction, *Presto*, has just been published by Bamboo Dart Press. A collection of poems and flash called *See What I Mean?* was recently published by Kelsay Books. A collection of persona poems and dramatic monologues involving burlesque stars, *The Trapeze of Your Flesh*, will be published by BlazeVOX Books.

Sharon Scholl is a retired college professor (Humanities) who convenes a poetry critique group and manages a website (freeprintmusic.com) that donates music to small, liberal churches. Her poetry chapbooks (*Seasons*, *Remains*, *Evensong*) are available via Amazon Books. Her poems are current in *Gyroscope Review* and *The Bluebird Word*.

M.S. Spann is a writer and educator in Washington, MO. His work has been published in *GNU Literary Magazine*, *Everyday Fiction*, *Ink Babies*, *Watermark*, and *Cape Rock*. He has written juvenile non-fiction for Harcourt's Reading 2000 series. His bilingual (English/Spanish) children's book will be released in September 2024.

Angela Townsend is Development Director at Tabby's Place: a Cat Sanctuary. She has an M.Div. from Princeton Theological Seminary and B.A. from Vassar College. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Amethyst Review*, *Braided Way*, *Cagibi*, *Fathom Magazine*, and *The Razor*, among others. She received fifth place in the 2023 Writer's Digest Awards for Spiritual Nonfiction. Angie loves life dearly.

Daniel Webre received an M.F.A. in fiction from McNeese St. and a Ph.D. in English with creative writing concentration from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. His short fiction has appeared in *The Bitter Oleander*, *Xavier Review*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, and elsewhere. Currently, he lives in Louisiana where he teaches first-year writing and literature.

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