Agnes Scott

Writers' Festival 2010

Agnes Scott College

39th Annual Writers' Festival

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One-Act Play: Christina Anderson

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This year's Festival Magazine design is based on the words "simplicity," "sustainability," and "spirituality." After exploring connections between the organic and inorganic, as well as reflecting on the writing process, the idea of "build-up" became a driving inspiration. Build-up is visible in layered textures, saturated colors, and lines representing a tree's growth rings. To capture textures, we used a variety of techniques, including photography, painting, ink drawing and digital collage. The bright pink and purple tones speak to the wide variety of colors that come from nature. Ultimately the imagery is a tribute to nature's vibrance and resilience.

The magazine is produced with 100% Green-e certified paper and soy-based inks.

Design blog: agnesscottwritersfestival.tumblr.com

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AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE
THE WORLD FOR WOMEN

Agnes Scott College
141 E. College Avenue
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The Agnes Scott College Writers' Festival has been held annually since 1972. Its purpose is to bring nationally acclaimed writers to campus in an atmosphere of community with student writers from the colleges and universities of Georgia. While on campus, our distinguished guests give public readings, award prizes in the festival's statewide literary competition, and conduct workshops for finalists in the competition. The guests for this year's festival are Scott Russell Sanders, Paul Guest, and Sarah Scoles.

The Writers' Festival competition is open to anyone currently enrolled in a college or university in the state of Georgia. The works printed in this magazine have been selected as finalist entries in the competition. The visiting writers make final decisions during the festival, and a prize of $500 is given to the winner in each contest category.

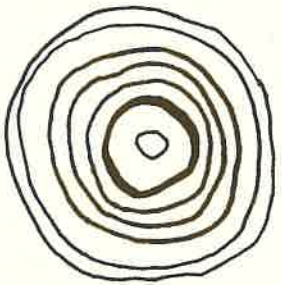
The Writers' Festival is made possible by the James T. Kirk and Ella Rather Kirk Fund. We are grateful for the support of President Elizabeth Kiss, Dean of the College Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt, English Department Chair Peggy Thompson, Dana Design Director Nell Ruby, Eleanor Hutchens '40, and the estate of Margret Trotter.

Poetry

Creative Nonfiction

One-Act Play

Fiction



poetry

Vows

My parents only touched when they fought—
at night and outside, their shadows
spilling the lawn like cloth across a loom.
The four of us, from the windows,
were embarrassed but pleased
as their dark rib cages wove into one another
until they finally merged—
their many arms like a Hindu god
dancing in our front yard.

So when my brother calls
asking if I believe in marriage,
I remind him how the fights would end—
my mother's cheeks yellow in the porch light,
the moths that gathered there whirring
too close to her lips, and my father
leading her back inside with the promise
he'd return with shrimp low mein.
Later, the scrape and clink
of spoons against ice cream dishes
as we listened from our beds,
like wedding guests tired from traveling,
ready for the couple to lean in and kiss.

Guardian

The night after my father struck my mother
with a glass, shards spraying, framing her head
like the nimbus of a tortured saint,
I snuck into their bedroom, awakened
by the quiet, and saw an angel leaning over
my sleeping father. The angel wore a gown
that swirled with liquid fire—black
and orange melding into braids, into tributaries,
into veins of a leaf—a sword burned in his belt.
I knew my father never rose for Sunday
morning mass, never dipped his fingers
into the font by the front door. But the angel
examined him as I thought a man might
before leaving a woman he loved, or maybe
as an artist would view a damaged canvas.
The angel's hair hung in thick golden twists,
and when he met my eyes, one lock of it fell
in slow motion—it took years for the lock
to drop from ear to shoulder. When it settled,
the fire in the angel's skirt turned to rock.
Only a chisel could release my father now.

Kitchen Sink

You won't be undressed like this until years from now,
when some other knows you well enough
to move slowly, drawing your arms out of sleeves.

In some cultures it's custom to curse
a lovely child out loud to keep the gods turned
into their hand mirrors. I cannot help myself.
Lately, I sigh into your neck.
Your eyelashes cluster like women, wet and dark and thick.

What will you think when you find the photograph,
and see yourself, a baby wound in a towel
with a hood, like an animal caught in a snowstorm—
and a woman clutching this scoop? You will not think
Madonna and Child, one where he doesn't pet
her cheekbone, but leaps from her lap and she lets him.

You might think of the tide, rushing terrified
to recapture what it thought it could give up.
You might think of a girl at a picnic bent over
an egg on a spoon, flat-footed and careful.
Or, a lover's body by candlelight.
That shaded but memorized nest.

Letter to Bonczek from Brockport

Michelle, Asia's underwater, and a wave
of rainy nostalgia descends
from the gray bowl of Lake Ontario,
where the feeble surf laps
at Hamlin Beach: mere cat spittle. *A butterfly flaps*
its wings in China, blah blah blah....
And on the coast of Thailand, along the scar
of the Maldives, geology and physics
have spoken: a lullaby about saltwater,
about broken huts, about toddlers
with lungs full of seaweed.
Who is he who needs further proof of God
as a fiction? Who is she who still climbs
the bell tower to sling prayers at the stars,
and who are they who cannot feel
the pinging hail of those prayers?
No stars here, Bonczek.
A black cloud 100 square miles thick
menaces this steepled village, arcs
into space: satellites get stuck
like moths in cotton. Panic
becomes terror when televisions fail to bark
the half-time babble, to rattle
the jewelry of the bachelorette, to herald
the swamping of a whole fucking continent.
Plasma screens idle, black and still
as the historic and mighty Erie Canal.
The dull canal oozes westward—
bargeless, waveless—toward the grim
stillness of Lake Erie.
I haven't seen sun, Michelle, since Luquillo—
where even the lines of latitude wail
sad *canciones*, and where the sun hangs
overhead even at midnight, the eye
of a compassionate god....
In other words: impossible.
I worry about vitamin D,
that I'll be rickets-stricken by Valentine's Day,
that my cells will swell with scurvy, burst
like little hearts. Hell, I'm not a pharmacist.
And praise Fortune I'm not a mailman!
All the local merchants have switched
places again—the book shop and diner,
the coffee shop and salon,
the head shop and saloon—
as though they revolve
round some soggy nucleus, impossible
to see—perhaps Nostalgia itself.

And I wonder if at the core of the Earth,
if at the center of the god-damned galaxy,
there spins such a bulky abstraction.
This rain is marvelously tangible,
as are the umbrellas swirling like black
pinwheels on these riverine streets.
Bonczek, many a moon has shriveled and swelled
since you split for Spokane, since I split
for Wherever with my beer belly,
my ragged knapsack, my tongue
lapping poems from the bowl of the world.
Everyone we knew has sprung
a litter, and pitchers of swill are a quarter
more, and our saloon—where we tossed
our bulls-eyes and swallowed our swill,
where we slung jeers
at lousy cover bands, where we drowned
and drowned in the basements
of innumerable pints, where we sunk
like closing-time eight-balls—
O our saloon is an attic
of televisions, and behind every black screen
a football spirals into its wide-open future,
a hockey puck sails
into a new and violent world....
But some things remain true.

Example: the crosswalk is still
a heap of mangled pedestrians struck
by local imbeciles, la la la.
Example: the continents still grind
their tectonic jaws, spilling panic and terror
into the salty throats of wretched islanders,
O treacherous geology, O cheerless physics....
And how about the elusive sun—
our stable G-class star which will never burn
this planet to supernova dust.
Dig it, Bonczek, we're alive
because of cosmic mediocrity!
Since last night, the saloon has moved again,
but let's find it—in the basement
of the post office, in the bell tower
of a church—and let's get impossibly drunk
on the slash of sun we know
must be up there. Michelle, let's toast it
as though it were indeed the watery eye of God:
Down the hatch, Sun, you fucking lemon—
how yellow and dull, how sour
in your absence.

Channeling Dockins, Iredell Replies from Breadloaf

Two-bit Dockins, you goon, what the fuck
is the capital of Uzbekistan? Not capital
like capital city—like exotic metropolis
teeming with rickshaws and zeppelins
and ziggurats—but capital like capital*ism*,
like what do the merry Uzbeks use to buy
salt and trinkets? O I've been struggling
with a poem about Marx, and it's evolving
into swill with each bourgeois penstroke,
each sip of Jameson. Ha, you expected me
to name a vodka, to maintain the integrity
of the motif, but vodka is fucking dumb.
The grizzled cabbie in grizzled Burlington
let me pitstop for whiskey and for smokes
I don't need (don't rat me out to my old lady),
and he didn't even charge me for the idling.
O Buggers Curses Crap, I felt like a god-
damned dirty hippie. You like that one,
Enjambment Boy? And could such a miracle
ever visit poor taxi-less Uzbekistan? Hell,
do its villages still suffer the interminable
bread lines? Do rusted Soviet tanks still
wait to fire cheerless Communist shells
through the icy hula-hoop of the Arctic Circle
and into the brains of fat Kansans, of Panhandle
prom queens, of 300,000,000,000,etc.-illion
brainless Americans? How close is Chernobyl,
its humming sidewalks, its conifer needles
tapping tapping tapping to the plutonial
metronome of half-lives? Are American
cigarettes, American blue jeans—O endless
contraband spilling like uranium marbles
from the endless American toybox—still all
the rage two decades after that first totalitarian
brick was untotalitarianly unloosed? Curses,
I tire of questions. The Vermont stars spell
a marvelous answer—each a luminous
fragment of a scattered Unified Field Theory.
They launch photons through the Arctic
air of these August evenings, and alongside
each photon, a teenaged Albert Einstein pops
a wheelie on a quantum 19th-century bicycle....
You like this cosmic *mise en scène*, Cosmology
Boy, Admiral Quark? You and your god-damned
science ought to be caged in a mitochondrial
prison, a heartless gulag in some solar Siberia....
Ahem. Meantime, it's *literally* 4,000 degrees
in Atlanta—isn't it, Über-Hyperbole Boy?—

and you've been dragging your Sisyphusian
knapsack down muggy Peachtree, sweltering
10th, insufferable Charles Allen.... Thanks
for feeding my two-bit cat. How is that little
gangster? Has his needy mewing distracted you
from your epic rants, your Odyssean tirades,
your idiotic—I mean Iliadic—invectives?
Last I heard from you, you were complaining—
to the full astonishment of Western civilization.
No, fuck it—Eastern civilization, too. Throngs
of water-logged Indonesians, of soaked Sri Lankans,
of Thai, of Madagascarians, of doomed Maldivians,
have gathered on tsunami-wrecked beaches
to gasp a simultaneous global gasp whenever
Dockins complains. You like that, Sarcasm
Boy? I'll fucking bury you in irony, Irony Boy.
But not before you finish cat-sitting Jules,
who must also be sweating, who must also
think that the August sun is a lousy goon.
I've seen Jules pant. A panting kitty-cat
is an odd thing: I expect it to fetch the useless,
useless newspaper, to bark at the mailman,
his infinite heap of sour news.... Good news
here—an uninterrupted party: night after night
of glorious campfire, of glorious stars streaming
down their total and glorious lack of capital—
i.e. *pesos*, or whatever the fuck the merry Uzbeks
use to capture the American illusion. Meantime,
the starlight whips the campfire into dizzying
fractals. You like that one, Geometry Boy?
I haven't forgotten my Marx poem, failing
like a doomed *ism*. Nights I slouch—your pet
word, eh, Comet Boy?—nights I slouch fireside,
telling riotous stories of my riotous West Coast
youth, my riotous, untamed *bildungsroman*.
You like that word, Dockins? I'll pass
my exams for sure, and two-bit goons across
the globe will have to call me "Doctor."
But no one here has been very productive.
Example: this one homeboy Steve is failing
to compose a villanelle about pelicans.
What jackjob writes poems about pelicans?
Essays, even. Novellas, pamphlets, graffiti,
and all manner of two-bit literary what-not.
My roommate Rupert can't even bang out
a decent double sestina over juice and waffles.
And what's with all these Formalists, anyhow?
You'd grumble so loud—your throat a calamity
of scotch, your irises sad little tectonic
mills—that the planet would tilt hopelessly
on its feeble axis, crack like a sourball....
But then there's Melanie. Mike, you'd adore

Melanie—she hasn't written a single word.
Daily she waits for the Earth to darken, to bend
toward the stars so she can exhort them.
You like that word, Word Boy? O Melanie,
Melanie, who exhorts the stars to burst.
We can almost hear the stars asking her
politely—we imagine the stars are polite—
to shut the fuck up, poor poemless Melanie.
Poor poemless All of Us, trapped between
flames. Flames up there, flames down here—
it's fucking transcendental, *très* Thoreauvian.
I shall keep a fifteenth eye open for Thoreau
to amble over yonder hill—one of Vermont's
trillion quaint little god-damned yonder hills—
his beard twinkling with starlight, with ink,
with pond ice, with crumbs of the two-bit Void,
a yawping Walt Whitman swinging à la Tarzan
through his viney beard.... Seems to me a poem
about Marx is a retarded idea, though I'm blind
to the capital of Uzbekistan—I mean the city
this time. I bet you would know, Geography Boy,
you walking atlas, atlas with kidneys, lungs,
Golgi apparati, fucking gills—the impossible
weight of infinite place-names bee-stinging
your shoulders. Oh exponential hell! A pox
on this blessed plot—this erupting volcano,
this Belizean haiku, this monsoon, this England—
of mixed metaphor. Dammit, I'm global, too:
patron saint of Monterey, Sal Paradise of Reno,
Huckleberry Finn of the northing Salinas,
notorious bunny-killer of the Basin and Range,
and unchallenged master of Mexican-gang
Spanish—the only lexicon I use with Jules,
so if he's been ignoring you, Mike—sorry.
Try *pinche puta*. I'll translate at Vickery's
over a pint, our 100,000th—limes for you,
intolerable Scurvy Boy, and I'll go limeless—
and we'll throw them down until the stars
ask us to please stop, until both of us, slouching
a terrific slouch, tilt our swooning heads away
from the splintered continents, push our palms
as if in prayer into the sad, sad humidity, aim
our burning throats starward and say—politely,
as though crooning—"Bitch, call me Doctor."

The Light Bulb People

They watch us, from the convex
belly of incandescence.

Like babies, they slide and inch
up the cords, breaching glass

and invention, that they may inspect
and know what twists the world.

In their handheld universe, they only
tilt their heads and ponder

the curiosities of unfurling teeth.
Innocent as fingers they corset us

in light as we unknowingly perform
the odd little number for their swollen blinks,

hot and pink for the clapping.
Do they listen too? Our soft and watery

speak? Grappling at the corners
of our mumbles? Do they avail

the rotting fruit, the flies that quicken
to the bin, filching every minute

we think we are alone? Thieving
little angels, swinging on a current.

They steal like gypsies the ticks of our watch.

Burning Pornography in the Woods

Have you ever seen an albino
groundhog or built an entire city
out of sunlight?
Ask what burning meant, a hand or two
cupping a toad, this new naked witch,
charred and wrinkled,
Breasts heavenward, her back an editorial.
We burned
that woman in the woods,
or rather the likeness of that
woman, naked, paper, and tempting
as a plump apple.
I laughed at the sight
of her fiery consumption, I was only ten
(my accomplice ten as well)
just playing
with a different doll,
nothing like building a house,
nothing like calling the dog
to save us from the groundhog,
alone we brave, two little girls
burning pornography in the woods.

Nimbus

The names of the dead are not nearly as heavy
as pennies or the ink it takes to declare one *deceased*,

stamped as they are with the faces of silent.
When the priest scatters dust over the Dutch-door

coffin, wading in the dirt known as Heaven,
the body's name peers down at its former self

like scanning the newspaper for yard sales.
The name might even disapprove and feel

evicted, turned out like the wash.
In ancient Bulgaria mourners carry the dead

feet first from their houses or lop their heads off
all together so as not to entice the living

with the stillness of their breath.
When I was ten I gave my mother charcoal rubbings

of Lodi's tombstones. The names of the dead are not hard
to steal, as one might imagine. More like kissing winter

goodbye or whacking a spider with a shoe. Shooing
away a mosaic of leaves I find Lodi's forgotten

in a parade of wilting carnations, plastic mementos,
beer cans in final toast. The orphaned veil of winter.

For instance, yesterday a nuisance of bees hummed
inside the wood of our deck, a performance we applauded

with more Raid. And though last night you scolded me
for killing a moth, poisoning bees left you remorseless,

an empty sugar jar. The bees wheeze and fret
in the nimbus of our comfort, exploding

out of holes drilled just so,
plunging eagerly to the concord of silence.

The names of the dead or the vowels
we open our mouths to, litter our deck.

A. Kay Emmert

Girl Playing House

I remember you guarding your house.
I remember you holding knuckles at your side,
ready for a jaw or eye
like holding a knife ready
over an apple. I remember the dirt
on your cheek, how the cut on your lip
bridged the crease
beneath your nose. And the two boys,
how they used
their immortality for jumping from high places
and wrestling with dogs. All you had
was a pile of crumbling stairs,
not even a key to the door behind you. But yours

was the power of a word.
It filled up your dark eyes and dark arms, stripped
them with your word. You were
mother then, with your bedsheet dress and scraped knees.
That was long before you knew how to hold
a body in your arms and hum hush
into the neck. Before you became
the presence in the shadows of a room
where you crossed death
with the word smelling of dried milk on your shirt.

You were just a girl then
in a world of young gods. Your feet never slipped
from the crumbling step
but someday it will be your nose in the dirt.
Who will be there to catch
what shimmering thing
you let fall to the earth?

Out of an Eighteen Wheeler

Everything came from that truck
and carried his smell.
Dried night sweat and oil,
salty hair. The smell of long sun.
Two a.m. frost in headlights like breath.
The engine's guttural cough.

Locked in back, bicycle parts,
torn wicker furniture. A mountain
of cucumbers, the green slopes we'd climb
filling Tote-A-Poke bags. Later jars, later
pantries so that years later
they still fill my mouth with the sharp crack
that this was wrong. He filled our trailer
with the trash he hauled, lifted
from the slurred heaps behind Wal-Marts. Taught us
the difference between broken doll
and strong shelves.
Taught us to survive as scraps.
Gave us the means for a home, but not
a home. That, he left in the cab. That scent

saturating our living room with Korea
and the confused men in restaurants
missing fingers or an ear lobe.
The ghosts who shouldn't have returned.
Those who could never know where we live.

Magnolia Leaves

If I were to make these
I would back them with brown velvet.
Every stem leading to a velvety branch,
every branch to a velvety core
and at the tips, cups
of green glass all gazing skyward
so that from above, it would be

emerald.
Sliding dew.
Stained glass window.

And beneath, little girls
cart-wheeling, great-grandmothers waiting
all their lives
to smell blossoms.

I would make them leather-backed
so You would have to take each one
in decisive fingers and snap
the spine before
flooding the world.

All things smell like the pines
hidden there under the veins.
I would make it so You
would have to break everything
to know it all.

Used Vehicle For Sale

I am a homeless lapser
collecting persons
in my skin.

I once hid behind the shelves of the library
accosting philosophers. Fattening them up.
Foolishly, I kept them all in one cage.
They began to fight to the
death. None survived. My gut
became bloated with carnage.
but I digested them all
then began to look for more easily repressible prey

I crept from stoop to stoop
enveloping sleepy drunkards. They were heavy—
too inebriated to move. They puddled in my ankles.
The doctors said I may never walk again. I abandoned
The slosh for a more spry crew.
I learned to single out the scent of hair gel
and sleazy musk. I stalked these scents about town,
stealing their strippers and thieves, hoarding their names
then cutting them up like bad credit cards,
hundreds of persons at a time, leaving a bloody mess
for the city to clean up.

In times of desperation, I'd stroll down 5th Avenue
dressed in all black to catch the clean people. Clean people
are valuable. If you shove them in the machine at the
grocery store you can get coins, absurd sums of hard
cash. Jackpot. But it's a rough game. 5th Avenue
people are often stolen by other little girls
before you can escort them to the grocery store.

It's an awful crime, kidnapping is,
but hey, right now, I'm slouched down shotgun
in your grandma's camper. We're on our way to Vegas.
She thinks I'm a westerner, but I'm a south-mid-east-westerner.
I've always been contested territory; surely she's noticed
the wars when we stop at rest stops. When the highway stops buzzing.
When the quiet sets in and I curl up next to her in bed,
and I'm me lapse her lapse you lapse him lapse that guy lapse Raskolnikov
lapse John Wayne lapse Dorothy Vallens lapse Tony Montana lapse God
lapse Mary-Kate lapse Ashley lapse empty shell on the beach waiting for
the next crab that will fit inside.

Me and your grandmother, we lie on the bed, lapsing in and out of
dreams.

I'm Sorry That She Only Lived One Saturday Afternoon

I'm sorry I can't care right now. I'm sorry
the only day I really cared about your grandmother was that one Saturday.
Remember?
That Saturday?
We lost our soccer ball because it rolled on forever on the crisp golden fur of that wide golden retriever in front of your apartment.

We lost the ball so we sat on that beasts' fleshy back and rode it into the city.
Our
butts beat its spine past the Labrador in the pink sweater and the
trees, birds, scorpions, and dancers that arched and cupped the sky and the people Charlie Chaplin tripping over their struggles like we did last Wednesday,
like you're probably doing right now,

and we laughed and laughed at them. We really made a sub sandwich out of ourselves that day—slit us down the horizontal middle and slid in all the meat and sauces, laughed it all up, and you were so sorry because you were me.

But the hours sliced our loaf vertically,
slid us back into the plastic bag,
and secured it with a twist tie
too loose to hold
our loaf together

so we sat together unable to scoot apart
on your sticky leather couch acting
like two people who used to have sex but don't anymore.

We're like this now.
I can't really care about your grandmother.
And you probably think the thing I said earlier about the sub and the meat and the sauces was a sexual metaphor or something but it wasn't.

Remember that Saturday?

In the city?
In the sun-flooded social spaces of the civil engineers and gentrifiers
where you told me that story your grandmother told you about her escape from Cuba, from the front line, from the hate, the storm, the sickness, the others, and I cared because her words were space time weighed and real and crashed over us, caught us in their current and dragged us out to the gray sea, the iconic ocean in front of the diagonally parked cars at the bank?

Helpless, we watched her tie her words, that heavy anchor, around our ankles.
Remember drowning in that iconic ocean until the sea parted, a wave backed out, drove off and we saw our shadows again and laughed...
do you ever go back to that ocean? I swim there sometimes and look for you...

Painting Blackbirds

She has been painting them for weeks now,
some suspended in flight, others nesting in trees
or resting on fences, a red sun setting
on their wings. Each bird ironed flat against the sky,
each painting less realistic than the one before.

She wonders if she can really paint birds in flight
unless she is there to see them lift off, unless
she can see their bodies twist, their tail feathers
like dark gloves. Can she paint such things
if she does not know the difference between
a red-breasted and a yellow-headed blackbird,
the chestnut-capped and the white-collared one?

But she persists, trying to capture what she sees
so clearly in her mind, the common blackbird
she saw in her grandfather's barn when she was a kid,
the one that remained with her and became
what she pictures whenever she hears the word
bird. She will never, never, never get this right.
Yet every morning she stands at her easel,
the paintbrush a blackbird poised between her fingers.

The Phone Call

I enjoy you more than you know, he said
after I'd described my cotton bra and panties.
He was on the road, driving down some dark
highway in Virginia, and the moon
was so bright he'd turned off his headlights.
Promise you'll never try this, he said,
and I promised because I couldn't drive yet.
Keep talking, he said, so I talked
about kissing boys at school in the closet
behind the stage, their fingers sneaking up
my shirt, their wet tongues lapping my ear.
Like puppies, I said.
What else? he said.
I said it was his turn, so he talked about his wife,
pregnant with twins, her disgusting body.
The stretch marks, he said, looked like earthworms
clinging to her sides, and her breasts,
like awful beige eggplants, just sagging there.
What he wanted, he said, was what
she looked like in high school.
She won't always be fat, I said.
She won't ever be new again, he said.
Now tell me, he said, what you whisper
to the boys when they kiss and touch you.

Waking Up at Four a.m. on the Neighbor's Porch

Someone has taken my shoes
and a basset hound is licking my feet.
My purse yawns beside my head, unzipped.
The rest of a mojito sours in a murky cup
on the wood railing, crushed mint leaves
floating like Autumn's litter in a backyard pool.

I pull a ratty blanket around my shoulders
and walk down the neighbor's driveway.
In the porch light ghosting the street,
I see that my husband's car is gone.
I feel in my pocket for house keys
but all I find is a wadded cocktail napkin
with his handwriting: *didn't want to wake you.*

It's like a scene from a 1960s movie
when the leading lady drinks too many martinis
and wakes up in a hotel room with a stranger,
only I've never been much of a leading lady,
and no one's here. I'm just another housewife
standing in the street, wrapped in a pink blanket,
wondering where her husband is.

The Rough Guide to Romantic Comedies

Boy, he's in a special love, one that whitens teeth
and completes each other's sentences, so as he walks
Central Park on the first squirrel-orange day of Fall,

there is no symbolism lost to him or the camera.
Swans partner across the lake's rippled chrome,
the zaftig wives in tight black couture hurry

home to their husbands on the Upper East Side,
even the Guggenheim is a surrealist wedding cake
and when the kid playing bucket drums says,

Mister, you sure got a fine lady, he thinks yes,
a doozy: corkscrew blond, MBA, voice like
Ma Rainey after five full tumblers of single malt.

But something's rotten in this Bronx apartment,
her Gordian heart, the cold, stoic feet of home,
late night calls to that old beau from Tupelo.

Being, Heidegger once said, *is that which is farthest.*
What he is not is him, the shiver down boy
in the elms of her childhood, the one who grows up

shirtless and on her mind, his tan biceps hunched
under the hood shadow of a tractor, pining away for
the day she returns to the farm, expectant and courtsome.

Now the camera isn't happy. Life is rain and gray winos,
the smell of muscatel on his stoop the afternoon he
comes home from work and finds she's caught a train south,

leaving a note: *Gone back to find out myself—Beth.*
Over and over, like a stammer, the cyan cricket-light
moon sees them to a cool pond edged by willows

and before he can say cut, the image of his nemesis
drawling down her calico sundress plays his head.
For a week he lies in bed, reads Coleridge.

Enter the sidekick, Buddy Strong, the man with the plan
and a brand new Lincoln that squires him through
the bituminous hills of West Virginia, Kentucky,

Tennessee, where night comes like a quarter horse,
quick, quiet and poorly sired, out from under the rafters
of a barn he passed fifty miles back, making it

vein blue and susurrus, a gunmetal pennant drowsed
over poplars, hickories, pine, the Natchez Trace
winding him and Buddy miles around bend after bend

until the camera focuses in on a city limit sign:
Welcome to Tupelo, Original Birthplace of Elvis
Population: 70,000 Christians, 6 Jehovah's Witness.

See Boy, now he's in a trouble love, one that shatters
teeth and gimps knees with a crescent wrench.
As he arrives unannounced at her parents' house,

The drama is neither lost to him or the camera:
Beth on their backyard veranda, alone, surrounded
by the smoldered white of camellias and lattice.

The other man coming across the lawn, tire iron
in hand, his lip cleft with the same delinquent twitch
the King wore in *Jailhouse Rock*, only meaner,

but before he can lay a finger on him, it's time for
The Big Speech. With the assembled family watching,
he recounts a love unequalled since Beatrice and Dante,

a Siamese intimacy of body and mind that defies
physics, noblesse oblige, and the cosmos itself.

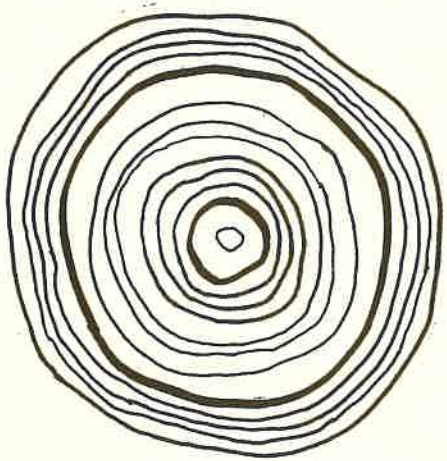
A covey of doves flits in everyone's chests.

The other man, now wistful and tender, says
You bested me fair and square, which doesn't
make sense, but who cares? After he kisses Beth

in the last scene, credits run, aisle lights shunt
the audience from the red, labial wall of the theatre
and into the parking lot, where things really heat up.

Recessional

For three years we abruptly vanished
in the doorways of friends, quick as two blue lips.
Lovely Laura, perched shirtless on my oak bureau,
knees lilting downbeat to the subterranean thump
and pyrotechnic acid-warble of Sly's Family Stone,
tongues fumbled in that divorce refinery
that doubled as our apartment complex.
Shady Dearest, whenever you touched my wrists,
magnolias blossomed over driveways,
the neighbors lost hubcaps. You made me feel
like a film—chromatic and racy, well-paced
until the bunk finale when a stranger lustfully sighs
near a jukebox. I couldn't name it. You said,
"*Mourning Is Easy and Poisonous* sounds right."



fiction

Michelle Haddad

Mercy

"I'm not going to live much longer," Joe tells Rose on the day they meet. She knows his name because it's written in his medical records, and on the bracelet that hangs around his wrist where the veins stand out too-bright blue. He never volunteers.

It shouldn't really come as a surprise to her that he's dying. It's only her first week working as a hospice nurse, and she's well aware that her co-workers think she's naïve, just another pretty girl fresh out of school with a genetic predisposition to save the world. But she knew what this job was about when she signed up for it.

Still, Joe is not like any of the other patients she's met so far. He's young, barely older than herself according to his chart, and he looks as though he might have been handsome were he not so sick. He's had leukemia practically since birth, say the records Rose is fairly certain she's not actually supposed to be reading in such detail. The fact that he's on her floor now means it's finally caught up to him and is winning the race. He's been receiving high dose chemotherapy for the better part of his life, but now he's chosen to stop entirely, and that is what makes him interesting to Rose.

Charts like this are the key to everything, she's quickly learned, the information spelled out in their neat little boxes more intimate than any relationship she's ever had. She's always been the one left behind, the one unable to connect the way she sees her classmates do. Or maybe just the one uninterested in everything that they have. In nursing school she watched her classmates pair off, learn to be happy together. That life has never come for her, and she's never felt compelled to seek it out for herself. To Rose, it has always seemed mind-numbingly *boring* to want to be so *content* all the time.

If she's honest with herself, it's how she's ended up a hospice nurse. Everyone tells her that what she's doing with her life is a good, generous thing. The world needs more people like her. Secretly, Rose knows that she's landed here because she *likes* it. *Real nursing isn't like you see on TV*, she's been told throughout school. It isn't sexy. It isn't exciting. Most of the time, it's just hard work and a whole lot of sadness. Secretly, the tragedy is exactly what she thrives on, as though she might be able to fill up the empty places in her life with the excess emotions others have scorned. She is pretty sure this makes her a monster.

"Seriously, you don't want to know me," Joe says, when he realizes that she's still standing at the edge of his bed, though it's been nearly a full minute since he's swallowed the pain medication she's here to deliver.

"That's not true," Rose insists, though she's not exactly sure which of his statements it's in response to. She's always had a tendency to speak from her heart instead of her head.

Joe laughs darkly; there's an edge to him, like illness has worn away all the softness from the lining of his soul until there's nothing left but the skeleton of it. His hair is thinning from the chemo, and his cheekbones stand out like an old man's. "Is it your job to say that, or are you a habitual liar?"

"Neither," says Rose stubbornly, and walks away, closing the chart with a soft snap.

***

He's still had no visitors when she finds her way back to the room at the end of her shift. She's already been told by her coworkers that it's a bad idea to get close to patients, especially on this ward. The best way to get hurt, they'd said on her first day. And yet she feels drawn to the possibility, and to Joe, though if she's straight with herself she's paradoxically also a little repulsed by him. He isn't attractive, and he isn't nice, but he is honest, and she senses that he is as accustomed to being alone as she is.

"Why are you here?" he asks by way of greeting. His hospital gown is too big, and it hangs off of his shoulders awkwardly. She can see all of the bones in his chest and shoulders. His clavicle reminds her of a sparrow's breast, so thin it might break with one touch.

Rose shrugs. "No one's been in to see you all day. I'm off now. I thought we could talk."

Joe makes a face. When he speaks his Adam's apple seems to strain so much that his emaciated throat almost cannot contain it. "I'm not your

charity case. I'm going to die. Soon. You don't even know me. Why would you want to care?"

"You shouldn't be alone," Rose insists, though she herself has always preferred it. This seems the right thing to say, if she wants to be allowed closer to him, and for the first time in her life, she does.

"Don't you have have a family of your own to go home to?" It sounds like an accusation. "Friends?"

Rose bites her lip and shakes her head, feeling as though somehow he's cut straight through her without knowing it. "No."

Joe exhales a bitter puff of air, a look in his eyes which says he knows things few others do. "Ah. So actually, you're my charity case too."

***

Rose has never given up easily. The day after she's met Joe, she learns from her supervisor that he's the problem patient on the ward. He's known for refusing to eat, for stealing pain medication and ridiculing the staff. He's already given up on his own future, but he still has the ability to make everyone around him miserable, and seems intent on doing it for as long as possible.

"Are you jealous?" Rose asks him, when she stops by to deliver his pills again that morning.

Joe looks taken aback, and nearly chokes on the remainder of the water he's swallowed them with. "What the hell kind of question is that? You're new here. Hasn't anyone told you to leave me alone yet? You're supposed to do the grunt work. Try sticking to that."

"Yes, they have," says Rose, crossing her arms. "You found out something about me yesterday. Now I get to know something about you."

Joe laughs. "Is that how you think the world works?"

"It's how *my* world works." She signs off in the box indicating that she's given him his morning medication.

He regards her for a long moment before speaking again. "Jealous of what?"

"Us," says Rose. "Healthy people. With futures. Is that why you treat people the way you do? Because we have something you don't?"

Joe smiles, as though she's said something incredibly foolish. "There's nothing you've got I don't have. Your future's exactly the same as mine. You're going to lose everyone you love, or they're going to lose you. Then you're going to die."

***

Rose starts counting the days since she met Joe. It begins as a sort of gamble with him: he is convinced that he's dying soon, sooner than she could possibly fathom. Every morning that she walks into work and finds him still in his bed feels like a small defiance. Their relationship begins in bitterness, in challenge, in opposing views and misplaced assumptions.

"What happened to your family?" asks Rose one day, sitting at his bedside during her lunch break and watching him push bland cafeteria food around on his tray. "They never visit." He's gotten even thinner lately, skin looking almost translucent under the hospital's unforgiving fluorescent lights.

"Filed a restraining order against my father," says Joe matter-of-factly, scooping up a spoonful of creamed spinach, then letting it slide back onto the tray with a series of light plops.

"What?" asks Rose, shocked. "Why?" It's hardly an unusual admission, given the way Joe talks all the time, and yet it still always strikes her off-guard. It's one of the reasons she's become so addicted to talking to him.

Joe shrugs, spearing an anemic-looking carrot on his fork and waving it in her face, as though teasing might lessen the impact of what he's just said. Rose wrinkles her nose and leans further back in the chair, effectively out of his reach.

"Got tired of their pity," he says at last. "Got tired of being told that I should be hopeful, that I should keep fighting for them. Their positivity is *toxic*. All I wanted was to be allowed to make my own choices about my life. My body."

"So you—legally banned them from your life?" It sounds like a drastic overreaction to Rose. When he doesn't answer immediately, she digs into her pocket and pulls out the candybar she's smuggled in from the vending

machine in the staff lounge, in the hopes of getting him to both eat and talk.

"Mom left first," he says, tearing the paper open and eying the slightly-melted chocolate as though it might be poisoned. "Took my sister and moved to Florida. Said she'd always be there for me if I needed her, but she was too tired of the fighting. And the cold."

"Eat that," says Rose, firmly, then, "What happened with your dad?"

Joe takes a large bite, as if to spite her, chewing with his mouth open. "He wouldn't leave me alone. Wouldn't stop researching things, suggesting new treatment options to me. Just wanted him to go away. So I made him."

"You can't just make your family disappear!" Rose protests.

"I can." Joe swallows. "I did."

***

Seventy-two days into her relationship with Joe, she realizes that her fixation with him has grown into something resembling love. This thing between them has been unusual from the start, part forbidden, part unwanted, no time for progression from strangeness to friendship to something more. Only curiosity, which turned to anxiety and near-obsession, and then again into the twisted affection she feels now. A frenzied rush toward its own end. She's never been interested in sharing her life with someone, yet there's a strange intimacy in being a part of Joe's long-coming death. By the time she's counted three months, she can't imagine not spending the rest of *his* life with him, at least.

He fucks her on the ninety-sixth day, or maybe it's actually the ninety-eighth, because she isn't exactly sure anymore. She's started staying as many nights as she dares, slipping out to shower in the locker room just before her shift begins. She's risking her job, but suddenly she doesn't care, because for the first time, something *matters*. It's as if she's absorbing all the life he's let the cancer win away from him, making the most of the time he doesn't have left. One day bleeds into the next and the next, and she isn't sure where the sun is anymore.

"I want you," Joe says, and it isn't romantic, just a simple statement of need, perfectly clear exactly what he means. It's the dead of the night, the only time they might even try to get away with this.

Rose stands there, by the side of his bed, reeling in shock. Her virginity isn't something she's ever considered particularly valuable; there's never been anyone in her imagination that she ought to be saving it for. And yet still this feels like a rush—she can count on one hand the number of times he's kissed her, even. "I—I don't know."

"What, do I disgust you?" It's a definite challenge, and Joe sounds almost triumphant. "See? Just because you love me, it doesn't make you better than everybody else."

"No," says Rose, unsure again of what she's responding to. She kisses him, desperate as always to prove him wrong.

His naked body looks more like a corpse, discolored by bruises and pockmarked with craterous scars. He has so many tubes and wires that they look like they could be a mass of veins themselves, grown outside his body and fertilized by the hospital air. His skin is cool to the touch, and he smells overpoweringly of disinfectant instead of sex. Joe has barely enough strength, yet manages out of what seems pure consternation to balance himself above her between the too-thin rails of the hospital bed. Rose swallows back a sob as she takes him inside herself. Never has she been more certain of his mortality.

***

"You've been stealing pills," says Rose, when she's finally plucked up the courage. "You scam them off the other nurses by claiming you haven't had your dose yet and hoping someone's forgotten to chart."

Joe shrugs noncommittally. It's the first time that he's too weak even to sit up in bed. Rose has seen his latest lab results, knows that his blood is now more cancer cells than healthy ones. He's in so much pain that she thinks maybe she ought not to be confronting him now, but it needs to be done and there might not be another time.

"My supervisor thinks I'm helping you. She's going to fire me if you don't

give me something to tell her. Why are you doing it?" Rose crosses her arms, forcing herself to be firm, though it's harder than ever to look at him. "Are you selling the pills to other patients? You always seem like you're in pain. I doubt you're taking them yourself."

"Closet," says Joe. "In my shoe."

Rose opens it warily, and pulls from a sneaker as beaten as he is a bag full of painkillers. "You're just—saving these?"

Joe nods. "Until it's time."

"For what?" asks Rose, then realizes exactly what he means. "You're planning to kill yourself."

"Told you." There's a rebellious side to him even now, when he can scarcely muster the energy to lift his head. "Wanted to do things on my terms."

"It doesn't have to be that way," says Rose. "We could help you go—peacefully. That's the point of palliative care. That's my job."

Joe smiles slowly, lips crooked, clearly having twisted her statement of foolish idealism. "Promise to get me a syringe full of morphine when I ask, and you can have that bag for your supervisor."

***

Rose isn't sure she's going to fulfill her promise until the day that she does. Joe has been dying in front of her eyes from the moment she's met him, but now she hardly recognizes him. It is the one-hundredth and fifty-eighth day since they first spoke, and she's spent the past nine hours watching him gasp for breath, too filled with pain even to take the air in.

"Are you ready?" she asks, the syringe shaking in her hands. This is the end, no matter what she does, she tells herself. He is actively dying, will be dead in a matter of hours. All she's doing in granting his wishes is sparing him the pain, letting him finally die in peace, more in control of his fate than he's ever been.

Joe nods.

"I love you," says Rose. She's never spoken the words aloud before to anyone other than family; they've always felt empty on her lips.

"Be angry at me, after," Joe says exhaustedly.

"What?" asks Rose, unable to find more than a whisper. Taking a breath, she slips the needle into his IV port, and presses the plunger all the way down. It's more than a lethal dose, and it will act quickly, sending him first into sleep, then coma, and finally the ultimate numbness of death. If she's lucky, everyone else will believe that he's acted alone. It's not that farfetched, given the pills.

"When I'm dead," says Joe. "Be angry. Hate me. Remember me as the bastard who stole your life and never really loved you."

"That's not true," says Rose, bending to kiss his forehead.

Joe snorts, closing his eyelids heavily. "But it is easy."

Taking a breath, Rose shakes her head, letting the resentment sink into the very marrow of her bones, like she's somehow managed to catch Joe's disease. With a cold precision, she reaches out and shuts off his cardiac monitor before it can alarm.

Jen Pirkle
See That You Don't

My aunt Jayla died during the hottest June on record. It hadn't rained for months and there wasn't even enough wind to move the gnats around. It was the kind of weather that was hard to breathe in. Standing outside at her funeral, I could feel sweat rolling down my legs under my blue Sunday dress. The dried yellow cemetery grass poked at my feet through my sandals, and it felt like ants crawling on me. I kept trying to pull up the hem of my skirt to get a breeze going between my knees, but Daddy pinched me on the arm to get me to quit fidgeting. His hair was damp at the neck and behind his ears.

My little cousin Emmaline was sitting in a folding chair on the front row under the tent. Uncle Jack had his hand wrapped around her wrist like he thought she might try to get away, but she just sat there staring straight ahead. With her blonde hair and white dress, she looked like one of my mama's porcelain dolls, and the way her stepdaddy was handling her I worried that she might break or get dirty. He only let go of her once, to let her walk up and put a flower on Aunt Jayla's coffin. When Emma turned around, I expected her face to be a mess, but it looked like she hadn't been crying at all. She had light purple circles under her big eyes like she normally did, but her expression was blank. Uncle Jack had his hand around her wrist again before she even sat back down.

The day after Aunt Jayla's funeral, Mama went to take Uncle Jack another casserole, and afterwards she brought Emma back to our house with her because Uncle Jack had been asleep on the kitchen floor. She said Emma would only stay with us for a little while, just until her stepdaddy got himself back together, but less than a week later, he up and went away somewhere without telling anyone. I overheard my parents talking about it, and then the next day they told Emma that he'd had to go on a little trip and she was going to stay with us for longer than we'd first thought. But I told Emma the truth that night, that he probably just didn't want her anymore, and if she wanted to cry I wouldn't tell anybody about it. I looked over the edge of my bed at her laying on her pallet on the floor and waited for her to start crying, but she just rolled over on her side with her back to me and went to sleep.

Since I was ten already and Emma was only six, Mama told me I had to be a good influence. As far as I could tell, that meant letting Emma wear my old clothes and play with my toys. She got one of my Cabbage Patch Kids, the one whose face was all scratched up because of the dog, and started carrying him around everywhere and telling him he'd be alright. She didn't want to do anything else like put on Mama's eyeshadow or go outside and run through the sprinkler because she was worried we'd get in trouble. I told her I did those things all the time and my parents didn't mind, but she was so convinced my daddy would beat us that she ended up hiding in the closet behind the vacuum cleaner for almost an hour. Emma was scared of Daddy for some reason I couldn't figure. She was always watching him out of the corner of her eye, and she flinched every time he moved. Sometimes when she did that he would shake his head and say something about wanting to punch Uncle Jack in the mouth. I couldn't really picture Daddy fighting anyone, though. He was too skinny.

After Uncle Jack left town, Mama went to his house and got all of Emma's clothes. When Daddy found out she'd gone over there by herself, he got worried, but she just told him to hush and said we ought to see about getting Emma a real bed. That's when I figured Emma'd be staying longer than a little while and I ought to lay down the rules for her.

"First," I told her, "you don't ever get to stay up later than me. If I have to go to bed then you have to go to bed too, alright?"

"Alright," Emma said. I don't think she cared particularly, but it was good to get the important things out of the way.

"And second, I reckon you better start coming to Sunday School with me," I told her. "If you can learn your Bible verse and say it back to my daddy, he'll give you a quarter. And you need every quarter you can get in this economy."

Emma didn't say anything to that. She just nodded and hugged that old scratched-up Cabbage Patch Kid to her chest.

"And you need to stop hiding in that closet. You're squishing Mama's Christmas wrap." Emma's eyes went bigger than normal when I said that, but before she could panic I added, "You're not in trouble or nothing. It's

just dumb. I always know when you're in there, and anyway there ain't no good reason to hide unless you're playing a game. You're not playing a game, are you?"

"No," said Emma. "I don't want Uncle Charlie to get me."

"Don't be stupid; Daddy ain't gonna get you," I told her. "He never got anybody in his whole life."

Emma tilted her head at me and squinted like she couldn't be sure if I was telling the truth. "He don't ever hit you or nothing?"

"No," I said. I hadn't gotten a spanking since I accidentally left the waterhose on all night when I was seven and the backyard got flooded, but I didn't mention that to Emma.

"Who stops him?" she asked. "Aunt Bev?"

"Nobody stops him. He just doesn't do it."

"Oh." Emma still looked like maybe she didn't believe me, but at least she stopped getting in the closet after that. She started getting under my bed instead.

One day while I was helping Mama make cinnamon applesauce cookies, she asked me if I'd seen Emma crying any. When I told her no, she seemed worried, like she *wanted* Emma to cry. "I just don't know if that's normal," she said, "with her mama dying and Jack disappearing and all, and her not shedding one tear. Does she seem like a normal child to you?"

"She's got big eyes," I said.

"You know that's not what I meant. How does she act?"

"Like this." I put my hands out in front of me and walked real slow, keeping my eyes open as wide as I could. "Like a zommmbie."

Mama watched me bump into the refrigerator and then the table and then the counter where she was mixing the cookie dough. "Well," she sighed, "I guess I should know better than to ask *you* if somebody's normal."

The second Sunday Emmaline was with us, I told my mama that she wanted to go to Sunday School with me. So Mama dressed her up in a pink dress and brushed her hair and gave her my old Precious Moments Bible to carry, and Emma clutched that little Bible to herself all morning the same way she'd been holding that Cabbage Patch Kid for the last two weeks. Our lesson was about angels. To tell the truth, I didn't pay much attention because Eli Humphrey kept kicking my chair, but I made sure to memorize the Bible verse at the end so I could tell it to my daddy and get a quarter. It was Matthew 18:10: "See that you don't treat a single one of these children cruelly. Don't you know that their personal angels are constantly in touch with my Father in Heaven?"

Mrs. Sarah made us draw pictures of what we thought our personal angels looked like. Mine looked a lot like Emma, short with blonde hair and green eyes, but I gave her wings and a halo, too. Eli Humphrey said mine was a Jew because it had a big nose, but at least my angel didn't have pointy elf ears like his did. I folded up my picture and stuck it in the pocket of my dress to show Mama later.

When we got home after church, Emma and I changed into shorts and t-shirts since it was hot as all get-out. I took my angel picture from my dress pocket and put it on the refrigerator with magnets so my parents could see how good it was. Then I recited my Bible verse to Daddy and got my quarter, but when it was Emma's turn, she started acting all shy and said she didn't remember it. She was hugging that doll real tight and rubbing her cheek against his yarn hair like she was three years old instead of six.

"Come on, Emma," I said. "You knew it today in Sunday School. It starts with 'See that you don't.' Say 'See that you don't.'"

"I don't remember it," she said. She was standing pretty far away from my daddy and looking at him like she thought he might bite her.

"It's alright," he said. "Don't worry about it, sweetheart."

"She knew it earlier," I said.

"Yeah?" He pulled another quarter out of his pocket and handed it to me. "Alright, give that to Emma for knowing her Bible verse this morning."

Since I had a bank and she didn't, I told Emma I'd keep her quarter safe with mine until she needed it. I put it in my bank with the rest of my money, which brought the total to about seven dollars. I was saving up to buy a swimming pool for our backyard because Mama said we couldn't afford one. "A few more Sundays," I told Emma, "and we'll be able to go swimming." She didn't say anything. I didn't know if Emma could swim or

not, but I was pretty good at it so I could teach her once we got the pool.

"Hey, you wanna see something neat?" I said. When Emma nodded, I got my special penny out of my bank and showed it to her. It was shaped like an oval and completely flat and shiny. "I found it over by the railroad tracks. Daddy said a train must've squished it."

Emma took the flat penny from me and rubbed her little thumb across one smooth side. "That's pretty," she said.

"We can make some more if you want to," I said. "I got some regular pennies in my bank and the train comes at one on Sundays. That's in like half an hour." I'd never squished any pennies before because I wasn't allowed to go down to the train tracks by myself, but I figured if Emma was with me it would be alright. "You wanna go?"

Emma was still holding the bright oval in her hand. "Okay," she said.

This was the first time she'd seemed interested in doing anything I suggested. I hurried and got two pennies out of my bank and handed one to her before she could change her mind. "Let's go," I said. Emma followed me to the back door and went out, and right before I closed the door behind us, I called to my parents, "We're playing outside!"

The train tracks were a bit of a walk from my house. First we had to cross the backyard, then the empty lot next door where the Buckleys' house had burned down, then the dirt road and a little old cemetery, and the tracks were on the other side of that. It was so hot that by the time we got to the other side of the Buckleys' lot, my hair was sticking to my neck and the backs of my knees were sweating. Emma's cheeks were starting to turn pink. She kept waving her hand through the air to get rid of the gnats, but they weren't going anyplace. At least she'd left that old scratched-up doll at home.

"What does it mean," Emma said out of nowhere, "to have a *personal* angel?"

"I reckon it means everybody's got one to themselves," I said.

"Does that mean I got an angel too?"

"Well, you're somebody, ain't you?" I took Emma's sweaty hand to cross over the dirt road. It was usually red clay, but it hadn't rained in so long that the clay had dried out and now it looked more like dusty orange sand. Emma didn't say anything, so I told her, "Yes, you got an angel all to yourself. You drew it in Sunday School, remember?"

"I didn't draw nothing," said Emma. "I don't know what angels look like. I never seen one."

"Nobody ever sees them," I said, "So they look like whatever you want."

We had to walk down a ways to get to the gate of the cemetery. It was so old that nobody ever got buried there anymore, not like the big one where Aunt Jayla was buried. "You ain't scared to walk through here now, are you?" I asked before we went in. "Because we can go around if you're scared."

"I ain't scared," said Emma. She walked on through the gate first to prove it, so I followed her. She said, "What does an angel do?"

"It protects you, I guess."

"From what?"

"I don't know. From whatever you need protecting from." The cemetery grass was brown and crunchy under our feet. We hadn't even been outside for very long, but it already felt like the top of my head was getting sunburnt. I had to blow out of the side of my mouth to keep the gnats off my face.

Emma said, "I think angels are too little to do anything. They're so tiny they get in your eye."

"That ain't true," I said. "Look there." I pointed at a statue of an angel as we passed it. "That's an angel, and it's bigger than you are."

Emma frowned at the statue. "That don't protect nobody," she said.

"Maybe it would if you quit arguing," I told her. "Anyway you got to believe in angels before they help you. I don't think you believe in them."

"I do so," she said. "I just think they don't help nobody, is all. They just get in your eyes."

"Well, your eyes are so big you must have a million angels in them, then," I said. That shut her up about angels until we got to the other side of the cemetery and came out through the gate. The train tracks were right

there on the other side of a ditch. "Do you still have your penny?" I asked.

Emma reached in her pocket and pulled out the penny. I took it from her and went over to the tracks and set it on the rail with mine. Then I went to lean against the cemetery fence where Emma was. "It should just be a few minutes," I said. "We can wait here. But don't get too close, okay?"

Emma looked up at me. "Where do angels live?" she asked.

I rolled my eyes. "Heaven, dummy."

"But how can they help people if they live in Heaven?"

"How do I know?" I said. "They just do."

Emma got quiet for a little while. I thought maybe I could hear the train coming, but I wasn't sure. I pulled up the bottom of my t-shirt and wiped my face with it.

"My mama lives in Heaven," Emma said, scratching the back of her neck.

"Yeah," I said.

"You think I'll see her when I get there?"

"You will," I said. I'd heard my mama telling Emma that at Aunt Jayla's funeral. "And you'll see angels, too. Big ones."

"How do you get to Heaven?" Emma asked.

"Well, you have to die first, like Aunt Jayla. But before that you have to say you love Jesus, or else you can't get in."

Emma nodded. "That's what I thought," she said.

I could definitely hear the train coming by then. "Here it comes," I said. "This is gonna be cool." A moment later, I saw the train headed our way down the tracks. The rails started vibrating, and I could see our pennies moving around. "I sure hope they don't fall off," I said.

Emma said something I didn't quite catch.

"What?" I asked, loud. The train was almost to us.

"I said, I love Jesus!" Emma shouted. And then she took off running toward the tracks.

I ran after her, but I knew right away that I wouldn't be able to catch her. We were only standing fifteen feet away from the rails, and that's too short a distance to catch up to anybody. My fists balled up and something cold went down my back even though it was so hot outside. I thought for sure I was about to see my cousin Emmaline flattened like a penny.

But then, she tripped.

It didn't look like a trip, but that's all I can figure it was. What it actually looked like was she ran straight into something and bounced backward off of it, but either way, she fell smack on her butt right before she reached the tracks. She started to get back up again, but I grabbed hold of the back of her shirt and dragged her backwards right as the train reached our pennies and sent them flying off the tracks.

Emma struggled for a few seconds, but I sat right down on the ground next to her and wrapped my arms around her tight to keep her from going anywhere. The train whooshed by so loud I could barely hear Emma hollering. She was screaming at me, "No! Let me go! I want to go to Heaven!" but I held on to her little body as hard as I could and finally she stopped trying to pull away. I didn't let go until long after the train had passed us, and only then because I thought we'd both die of heat stroke if I didn't. The air still smelled like hot metal.

As soon as I let go, Emma flung herself away from me on the stiff grass. When she looked over at my face, she was crying. It was the first time I'd seen her cry, ever. "I hate you," she said. "I *hate* you."

I didn't know what to say to that. I stayed sitting on the ground and just stared at her. She kept on crying.

After a while I stood up, pieces of dry grass sticking to my hands and the backs of my legs. I walked over to the tracks and started looking around for our pennies. When I found them, they were still hot. I put one in my pocket and could feel the burn against my leg through the material. Then I walked over to Emma and pressed the other one into her hand.

"You about ready to go home now?" I asked her.

She sniffed hard and wiped the back of her hand across her eyes, then looked down at the flat penny in her palm. I stood there waiting for her. "Yeah," she said finally. "I reckon so."

Heather Sanders
The Most Beautiful Sunday

The music had swelled so nicely that morning, leaving the congregation speechless and teary eyed as Pastor Reid closed out the service. "A lot of people have made some really spectacular decisions this morning to follow Jesus for the first time or to follow Him more closely. Let us say 'Amen' to those commitments."

The congregation echoed him, "Amen," one of the deacons in the back adding a "Praise the Lord," and the middle rows insisting on a smattering of claps. Light poured in through the east-facing window, illuminating the stained glass Tree of Life in vibrant greens and blues as if the real tree was rooted there and the congregation standing in the Garden of Eden itself. Only in the Garden there probably wouldn't have been a separation between pastor and congregation, between men and women, between Lucy and the rest of the group at the front. This was only her second Sunday back for almost a year, and it seemed to her a shame that no one recognized her. *Still*, she considered silently, *they wouldn't recognize me. I only showed up a few times before I simply couldn't any more. My face—it's not that distinctive. And it takes a while to get to know people after moving to a new town. A year does seem like a long time, but still... I shouldn't even worry about it.*

"And Jesus," the pastor now prayed. All he had to do was say those two words and every head lowered, a few hands extending to emphasize their prayers for the group at the front. "We want to thank you for these decisions that have been made today, Lord Jesus. We just want you to be the Lord of these brothers' and sisters' lives. Please, just lead them away from temptation and into the path of all righteousness for your glory's sake. For it is in your holy name we pray. Amen."

That last amen, the one Pastor Reid said with a slight finality, a shaking in his voice that also said "praise God" and "stay on the path of righteousness," meant the service was over. The pianist set into one last chorus of "Praise Him, Praise Him," and the congregation dissipated, mothers in dresses of pink, white, yellow, green helping their toddlers to the door or following their exuberant six-year-olds outside where the kids would pump themselves into the stratosphere on the swing set or play tag on the slide. The mothers, meanwhile, would chat about this sale at the supermarket or that latest familial upset. The minister of music met with the pianist to discuss next week's hymns, the deacons met at the back of the sanctuary near the offertory bowls, but Lucy stayed standing at the front where she had knelt earlier with several others—a teenage boy in khaki slacks, an older woman dabbing at her eyes with a hanky, a girl of maybe 8 years with her mother by her side. They stood in front of her in the line, waiting their turn patiently, conversing with each other, but not with Lucy. They didn't know her yet.

Not everyone had cried, but most of the women had. Not so for Lucy. In fact, when the woman next to her had noticed her dry eyes, she had placed her hand reservedly on Lucy's shoulder and said through pursed lips, "It's okay to let it out." Lucy had nodded and continued praying. She certainly *had* let it out before, but never at church. She wouldn't choose church for such an expression as that.

When the line finally shortened, Lucy stood in front of Pastor Reid abruptly, it seemed. The sudden closeness threw her a little off kilter, but she gathered herself quickly.

"Lucy, how are you?" Pastor Reid asked, patting her on the arm platonically.

"I'm fine," she replied, deeply feeling the distance that unfamiliarity entailed. "I was wondering, Pastor, I know I haven't been here in quite some time, but I'd like to help out somehow, if there was an opening."

"I see." Pastor Reid nodded, waiting for Lucy to continue. But Lucy had been to the point and had nothing else to say. Another few second's hesitation, and Reid caught on.

"Anything?"

"Yeah, I'm not picky, though I would like to work with other members of the church—to get to know them."

Reid smiled understandingly and said, "Well, we already have plenty of workers for the nursery, but I think Miss Peggy is looking for some people to help out with the women's fundraising committee. I think the ladies are planning a bake sale soon."

Lucy thought of it—gathering in her kitchen with Miss Peggy and Miss Cleo, both widows, and Lauren and Martha, college students and at least five years her junior. They would exchange recipes and bake cakes,

cookies, brownies, bread pudding. They would tell stories while they baked, jokes while they manned a booth on the church's front lawn, and just maybe Lucy would be able to talk with them, really talk with them about the things she hadn't been able to talk about for months—about her sister's sickness even, if they remembered the prayer request from the bulletin.

"Miss Peggy, then," Lucy said. Reid nodded, patting her arm again, his skin rough and warm against hers, his eyes seeming bluer, his complexion darker, and his blonde hair even more youthful when the light from the stained glass tree backlit his frame.

"I'm happy for your decision," he said.

Lucy attended Midway Baptist Church, a building that held true to its name, architecturally speaking. It was not in shambles. It did not have rats living in the walls or plumbing that worked only twenty nine of the fifty two Sundays of the year. (At least, not anymore). It had a sturdy roof, a definite sanctuary, pews, hymnals, four Sunday school rooms, and a nursery. But then there was the church downtown, Christ's Covenant Pentecostal, which had three floors, two youth buildings, an old sanctuary as well as a new, and almost fifteen hundred members. Lucy was almost (but not quite, she decided) jealous when she thought of the bake sales those ladies must have hosted. Fifteen, twenty, maybe even thirty ladies spread out across the city in different locations raising money for missionaries. She could imagine them making a sale and then laughing collectively as they watched their buyer enjoy his double fudge brownie. They would tell stories and bring extra blankets and mittens in case it got too chilly in the October air. It was a beautiful scene that even the birds would sing to if they knew the melody. But, Lucy went to Midway and her bake sale was to raise money for a new building.

For now, Lucy thought, *this will do*. They wouldn't be cooking their food together; Miss Peggy and Miss Cleo didn't like driving late at night and Lauren and Martha both had class in the morning. But at least she got to use her grandmother's lemon bar recipe for a good cause, a cause she wholeheartedly supported. She could leave the church any time she wanted to if she was dissatisfied with the congregation, the theology, the carpet's color even. But she would stay at Midway, she decided. She had only visited three times when Pastor Reid had called to ask about Maria. She had denied his help but welcomed his prayers, thinking that there must be something spectacular about this church if its pastor was so kind. It was the least she could do to keep trying to fit at Midway despite the loneliness she felt in the face of death and separation. She wished Maria could have been with her. Her sister had always been the best at making the lemon bars (aside, of course, from their grandmother).

When the day actually came, the ladies sold out within four hours, and Pastor Reid was so impressed, he told them that they had to celebrate and that dinner would be on him.

"I had no idea the other ladies couldn't come," Pastor Reid was saying, rummaging around his kitchen, clanging pots and pans nervously and brandishing a floral oven mitt when he removed a pan of homemade turkey meatloaf from the oven. He stirred a pot of green beans and checked on the toasting rolls. "Really, I'm very sorry about this." Lucy tried to calm him down.

"It's really not a problem." But that was all she could get out before he spoke again.

"I am really impressed at how well the bake sale went though."

"Me too, I—"

"Two hundred dollars may not seem like a lot right now, but every little bit helps and soon enough our new building will be made with money from bake sales and love offerings."

"I think that's for the best."

"Of course, I've also been thinking that the church should sponsor a missionary family, maybe a couple that ministers to Africa or China. That would really do a lot to spread the gospel."

"I've always thought—"

"Are you single?"

Coming from Pastor Reid, this was a question for which Lucy was not

prepared, and its sudden nature did nothing to help her come up with a quick answer. Nonetheless, it was strange how Reid looked at her when he asked. The question had been one of concern, for they stood there occupying the space of his kitchen alone, pastor and churchwoman, shepherd and sheep, yet man and woman. But, Reid's face had revealed another dimension to the inquiry—he wanted to know if she was single because of the greater implication: was she available?

Reid's own lack of wedding band became apparent to Lucy immediately. She was startled by it, and, therefore, thought of two things at once. The first went something like this: *Oh God, I'm single. I am very and undeniably single. Single like the last peanut in the can—the one with all the salt rubbed off. Single like the last bush that refuses to die in the winter, that last lonely bush. That kind of single.* And the second went something like this: *Is this a temptation? Should I be worried about falling into sin? Maybe I should go. Maybe I should stay. I want to stay. He's single. I'm single. Maybe I should go.*

"I'm sorry, Lucy," Reid said, sliding his oven mitt on and off and looking unsurely back at the green beans. "I shouldn't have asked that question. It's just that if you're not then you should go because… because people will talk."

"Oh, yeah," Lucy said, agreeing with him only in words. "But I'm single."

"You are?" His relief manifested itself in the release of a deep breath.

"I'm very single." She insisted, nodding, trying to keep herself from blushing.

For the first time, she actively noticed how very single Pastor Reid was. He stood there, tall and limber. His right hand was finally out of the oven mitt, and Lucy could see a tiny dimple in the ring finger where his pen would rest comfortably while he wrote out his sermon notes. He smiled at her, the slightest laugh lines forming around his mouth and his eyes bluer than ever. She noticed for the first time the dark hair on his arms.

"Pastor Reid, I don't think it's necessary that I leave."

Reid nodded, still smiling, but becoming unsure. "If you want to leave, though, I understand. I mean, it was meant to be a dinner for all of you ladies, since the bake sale was so successful. I made enough food for all of you."

"I understand, but I don't want to leave."

Now Reid smiled unimpeded. "We'll just have to eat a lot then." He brought the loaf pan forward and placed a generous slice on Lucy's plate, moving onto his own and repeating the same procedure with the beans and rolls. "I think you should know, then, Lucy, that my parents didn't name me Pastor Reid. They named me Mark."

"Are you saying…"

"Yeah, why not?"

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"Okay, Mark."

Reid sat down in the place across from Lucy, his arms spread almost as wide as his smile. "We should pray first." Lucy agreed.

They went out the next night and the night after that. Two nights later, Lucy returned Reid's favor and cooked a meal of baked chicken, rice, and collards for them.

"Is this Maria?" Reid asked after dinner, pointing to a frame on Lucy's mantle.

"It is," Lucy replied tenderly, ignoring the dishes still left on the kitchen table and wandering into the living room where Reid stood, carefully picking up the silver frame and studying her sister's face. The picture was taken merely weeks before Maria had been diagnosed—color was in her cheeks, her hair full and soft against her ears and slender neck.

"You look alike," Reid commented.

Lucy tilted her head to the side. "A little," she replied, "except I got my father's square jaw bone and she got my mother's cute round one."

"I like your face," Reid replied immediately, but Lucy said nothing and just stared at the picture. He placed the frame back in its place. "Sometimes God's plans are mysterious. I wish I could make it easier for you."

This got Lucy's attention. She looked up at him, their faces closer than they had ever been before. "I've already been to see counselors about this," she said, "I've read half a dozen books about grieving. I know I'll

never understand why God chose to take her. I..." she hesitated, but gathered herself and firmly continued, "I don't need you to be my pastor right now." Lucy already understood that it was her tendency toward unabashed honesty that usually distanced others from herself, and she wondered how Reid would respond. He was so close; she could feel his breath on her shoulder, study his own rounded jaw. She wanted to kiss him—no, for him to kiss her—to remind her, assure her, that he was with her in this moment.

"Tell me more about your family," he said, and the moment was gone.

For nearly a week after that night, she couldn't go out, her boss asking Lucy and the other secretaries to work late in order to help him prepare for a meeting with his company's upper management. But three days after that, the couple went out for lunch and neither returned to their houses before 11 p.m. that evening, the stars glittering overhead and, it seemed so strange to them, the trees beginning to lose their verdant color.

The last Saturday in October marked the last day of Midway's third annual pumpkin sale. Pumpkins had covered the front lawn of the church as well as several feet of the parking lot, but the event was going well and the pumpkins were going quickly. The men of the church loaded pumpkins into the backs of cars and trucks for satisfied customers and directed traffic to keep jams to a minimum. Meanwhile, the ladies sat behind tables, counting out change, pointing out the best looking pumpkins to newcomers, and also offering recipes for pumpkin pie, baked pumpkin seeds, and pumpkin casserole for a minimal extra charge. Sometime in midmorning, the sky had turned overcast and the air, unexpectedly cold. People coming to the sale bundled themselves tightly in scarves and hats before venturing out of their heated cars.

Lucy sat alone. Even though there were two tables for pumpkin purchasing, each equipped with a cash box, Miss Peggy, Miss Cleo, and Lauren were gathered around one leaving Lucy to take care of the ever growing line behind the other. For nearly an hour the line persisted, but once Lucy got a moment to take a break, she simply sat passively in her chair behind the cash box. Occasionally she would chance a quick look to the table beside her, but most of the time she would be met with icy glances and whispered gossip that she couldn't quite make out. She tried to ignore it.

As the morning wore on, the sky became an even deeper shade of grey, and Lucy pulled a thick wool jacket on over her red sweater. No one spoke to her. No one looked at her except for customers. Finally, noon came, and it was time for the afternoon shift workers to take over. Reid pulled his white Chevy into the gravel lot and stepped out, a smile wide across his face. The deacon, Brother James, a short and mustached man, greeted him as he came towards the artificial patch. They spoke for a while about the sale; the only word Lucy could make out was "pumpkin."

Without warning, an especially chilly breeze blew through the crowd. Pastor Reid blinked rapidly, the wind seeming to dry out his contacts. He turned his back to the wind, getting his bearings and opening his eyes again, facing the tables. He looked towards Miss Cleo, Miss Peggy, and Lauren. They were just informing the new group of workers how well their morning had gone, shaking hands, exchanging hugs, offering jackets to the workers who had forgotten their own. The new shift had brought each of the trio a cup of warm coffee.

And there was Lucy sitting alone, pink cheeked, rubbing her cracking dry hands together to stay warm, diligently keeping watch over her cash box until her relief came. Pastor Reid excused himself and wandered over in her direction.

"Hi, Lucy, how has your morning been going?"

Lucy looked up at him, determined to stay positive. "Really well, actually. We've sold a lot for our last day, especially since it's so cold."

"That's what I hear."

"And I learned that this set of pumpkins was donated by Pat Simmons from his grandfather's farm down state."

"That's so generous. Are they really *all* from him?"

"Yeah, they are. I heard it from Janie Otis."

"She told you?"

"No, I overheard her telling Miss Peggy." Lucy felt the optimism drain from her face. "Mark," she said, "I'm cold, and I could really use a scarf and pair of gloves. Or a blanket." Reid sat in the chair next to her.

"I can go get you one from the store."

"Or a cup of coffee. Do you know how nice it would be right now to have a warm cup of coffee or tea? I've been here since 8 a.m."

"Well, your shift is winding down here. You and Lauren could go for something warm. I would go with you myself if I didn't have to start soon."

"Mark." Lucy noticed condescension in her voice that she hadn't intended, but she let it hang in the air, nonetheless. She let the tone do its work before continuing. "Lauren already has coffee. And Alice brought gloves for Miss Peggy two hours ago. And Miss Cleo managed to find a blanket inside the church that she shared willingly with the other two ladies. You tell me why I don't have coffee or gloves."

Reid shifted uncomfortably. He took Lucy's hand between his own under the table and rubbed back and forth, trying to allow friction to do the work that a good set of mittens should have done hours ago. He looked up at her as the blood started to flow more freely into her chilled limbs. He smiled hesitantly, sweetly, running his own soft fingers over hers and lingering on her palm, feeling its creases as if he wanted to memorize them. Lucy smiled back, but still with an unmistakable sadness.

"Mark, I think—"

"Pastor Reid?" came a voice. Reid jumped, dropping Lucy's half frozen hands immediately and standing up. His cheeks were red from cold or embarrassment. "Hi, Pastor," the young voice said again—a teenager stood before Lucy's booth. She recognized him immediately as Tony Brader; his dad taught Sunday school.

"Hi, Tony. What can I do for you?"

"My dad's getting some pumpkins loaded, so he can't come get you himself, but he wanted to talk to you about tomorrow's class." Tony glanced down at Lucy, wavering for a moment, and then saying, "When you have a chance, of course."

"I wasn't done, Mark," Lucy said quietly beside him.

"I'll get back to you. Okay, Lucy?" Reid said.

"He said when you get a chance."

"But this is really important, Lucy," he said over his shoulder, already standing. "You'll be patient, won't you? A pastor's got to tend to *all* his sheep." He was walking away already. Lucy continued to sit, but looked Reid's way indignantly.

"Sheep!"

Now, at this time, in this crowd, she was just one of his sheep.

That night, Lucy received a call. It was Deacon Burns.

"How are you, Lucy?"

Lucy checked the clock on her living room wall. 8:13 p.m. She rubbed her eyes and responded. "I'm doing well, Deacon Burns. How are you?"

"Yes, I'm doing just fine, but I am a little concerned about your spiritual well-being. So, if I may inquire, how have you been spending your evenings?"

Lucy shifted unsteadily in her seat on the couch, wrapping her fleece blanket even more tightly around her shoulders and trying to decide if it actually was any of Burns' business how she had been spending her time. She finally decided on something vague. "Just the normal stuff," she said, "dinner, relaxing, maybe I'll pop in a movie."

"I see. Listen, Lucy. I'm afraid that there have been some concerns as to the amount of time and, more importantly, the kind of time you have been spending with Pastor Reid."

This Lucy was prepared for. "Concerns from whom?"

"They have asked me to keep their names private. But, I do feel that their concerns are legitimate."

"Deacon Burns, while I'm touched by your concern, I'm sure you will understand if I don't want to talk about this subject second hand. If there are men or ladies in the church who want to talk to me about what Pastor Reid and I have been doing, please tell them that they are free to call me or talk to me at church."

"Lucy, I'm simply concerned about you. I'm here for you." Lucy felt like

yelling. She stifled the impulse quickly, yet responded candidly, nonetheless.

"Where were you when my sister was dying of cancer a year ago, then? Are you there only to rebuke me if you feel I've done something wrong?"

"Lucy—"

"Where was anyone when I had to take care of my sister alone?"

"I think we should—"

"Goodbye, Mr. Burns."

Lucy hung up the phone, realizing only after she put it down that the receiver was wet. She wiped a shaking hand across her face, feeling her entire palm soaked with tears. She looked at the clock again—8:19 p.m. In less than fourteen hours she would be back to the church building, dressed up, cleaned up, and ready for shiny Sunday morning service. And, she would be there, Lucy decided. The last thing she would do was run away, even though the yellow leaves lashing against her window did not bode well for the morning's weather.

The next morning, Lucy prepared for the worst by looking her best. She put on her best tea length black skirt, some black tights, and a cheery yellow blouse with a grey overcoat. Upon arriving at the little church building, however, she found that no amount of preparation could have made her ready for that morning.

As soon as she pulled her little blue station wagon into the parking lot, she felt the stares of a dozen people icily scrutinizing her. She turned her head to see an entire ladies' Sunday school group as they observed, whispered, and observed more. Eventually, they got tired of the cold and flocked inside, still chattering.

Lucy rummaged through her car, grabbing her Bible, her purse, and a pack of tissues just in case. It wasn't until she made her way toward the building that she saw them—Deacon Burns, Deacon James, and Deacon Brooks waiting for her patiently at the door, marionette smiles on their faces and their Bibles clutched at their sides ready to rebuke her with the holy word of God itself if it became necessary.

"We're concerned for you," she could already hear one of them say. They began moving toward her. *"We wanted to talk to you about your spiritual well-being."*

"How are you doing, Lucy?" "Just fine, Deacon James." Lucy could hear the conversation already, and she could feel their condescension. Her heart sunk with the knowledge of their venereal concern, and for what seemed like a pivotal minute in her life, Lucy didn't move.

She saw Reid standing in the doorway, greeting each member of the congregation as they came in, shaking their hands, sometimes giving a hug, cooing at the infants and bending down to the toddlers' levels. She saw his eyes shift towards her, and his smile faltered when he saw the group moving in her direction, but he didn't move an inch. He didn't unplant his feet. He didn't do anything. He just stood there, making small talk, playing his part in this communal charade. It was a pretense, a farce, when only a week ago he had told Lucy he "admired her strength." Now, he was demonstrating his own lack. (And the Deacons were going to say, "We're concerned.")

Lucy, the cold air urging her towards the building, turned definitively, her legs powerful against the grassy earth, and she left.

Eventually, she found herself in a park. She strode past the mostly unused swing set, a red jungle gym, a set of teeter totters, far beyond the noise and bustle of the church and the children, and found herself in an utterly silent place—in a glade of trees. Moving deeper in still, Lucy saw it. There stood, grounded and bare, the most beautiful tree she had ever seen. Its arms outspread toward the sun, its bark uneven and casting shadows on the trunk's bulk. Not a single leaf was left on the branches. A wooden bench waited for her patiently underneath. She brushed a coating of crumbled leaves off of the planks and sat, placing her Bible and purse down next to her. She was far away from any road, lost in a quiet that only the most reverent sound could break.

After some time, Lucy wasn't sure how long, Pastor Reid emerged into her line of vision. He kept his head low and his lips pursed, and his blonde hair waved like a sheer curtain before his eyes. There was no doubt that he was ashamed; the question that looped through Lucy's

mind like a song on repeat was "why?" He sat down next to Lucy, her Bible between them, and tapped his heel nervously against the soft grass. Eventually, he spoke.

"I am sorry, Lucy. I never planned on this."

"Men plan and God laughs," she replied, "I'm sure that's somewhere in that book of yours." She motioned towards the Bible between them, not concerned in the slightest that the wind was rifling through the pages.

"It's not."

God, how the silence was holy. Holy like the wind rustling the lack of leaves on the tree above them. Holy like the separation between their bodies and spirits. Lucy almost couldn't stand to speak, but she knew she had to listen.

"They're just concerned, and I guess they have good reason. We should have been up front about what we were doing."

"We didn't do anything wrong, Mark."

"But we should have told someone, just so that people wouldn't talk."

"I think they would have talked whether or not we had said anything."

"How do you know that?"

There was that silence again—that separate silence. "I don't."

What was to be done now? Sit on this bench indefinitely, waiting for the whole problem to just blow over with the winter cold? She could tell Reid didn't think so.

"We can just go back," he said, "we can go back and apologize and explain ourselves."

"Apologize for what?" The question hung between them, though neither answered it. "Your deacon called me yesterday."

"I know."

"He didn't call me when Maria was sick."

"Did he not?"

"And he didn't call when I was grieving after she died."

"I suppose he didn't."

"And Miss Peggy, Miss Cleo, Lauren, and Martha—they never talked to me once, except to thank me for the lemon bars I supplied. They didn't even invite me to bake with them." The words were coming out so plainly, unemotional.

"They didn't..." Reid's voice was breathless and low. Lucy looked at him, waiting for his eyes to meet hers. He finally turned his head to her after a pause.

"They really didn't."

She leaned forward and kissed him with the kind of smoothness and gentleness that only comes from someone who really, truly hopes that that kiss will mean something, that this kiss will create some sort of bond, some kind of combination or connection. Some sort of significance.

When they separated, there was nothing but the breeze through the leafless tree.

"I'll see you when I see you," Lucy said.

Reid nodded and said, "I'll be seeing you, too." And he stood and left, walking steadily, becoming smaller and smaller in Lucy's eye until his form all but disappeared as he turned a corner behind a tree.

Now there is the holiness, Lucy thought, *there is the tree without leaves. There is the life without excess. There is the connection.*

She couldn't say a word—none would be sacred enough for this moment. She adjusted herself on the bench, pulling the coat tightly around her shoulders, and placing the little navy Bible on her lap. She would read, and she wouldn't beg anyone to read with her.

Amen.

JUSTINE SCHWARTZ

The Dog Catcher

Luca caught his first dog with relative ease, and it became routine the more he did it. He'd find the mutts in alleys, around dumpsters, in farmers' field along the highway searching for scraps people threw out of their windows going 90. This one was fairly easy to spot. He found the skinny stray behind a McDonald's, searching through the trash around a dumpster, licking the grease off old hamburger papers and fries containers. Luca pulled a pack of hotdogs out of his pocket, extracted one and whistled. The stray looked up, ears perked, and skittered back a few feet at the sight of the lanky boy standing a hundred yards away. Luca broke the hotdog in two and flung half towards the frightened animal. It landed a few feet in front of him. The dog jumped away again, but curiosity and hunger overpowered him and he inched nose-first towards the food. A shiver trickled down his sides as he ate.

Luca took his gloves off and squatted down level with the animal. His hot breath mingled with the cold making little wisps of steam float in front of his face. He threw the hotdog halves closer and closer sealing the distance between them, all the while speaking sweetly. When the dog was close enough to touch, Luca stretched out his hand palm-down. The dog sniffed cautiously, but backed up. Luca held out another hotdog and the stray crawled closer taking bites off the piece still in Luca's fingers. He reached up with his other hand and stroked its head and ears. The dog looked up and wagged its tail back and forth in slight, unsure movements. Luca whispered an encouraging "Good boy," as he pulled a length of rope from his pocket. He slipped the free end through a small loop to create slipknot, eased it over the dog's nose, and tightened it around its neck. The stray didn't seem to notice, but Luca fed him the last piece of hotdog just in case. Then he stood up, whistled softly and tugged the rope as he began walking. The dog seemed to understand and trotted behind, sometimes looking up at Luca and wagging his tail as if asking for more hotdogs.

At the hollow, Luca tied the rope to a stake in the ground and began to walk away. The stray pulled against the lead, willing his tether to let him go. "Stay," Luca commanded. The dog strained more, his paws clutching to the cold, raw dirt. Luca stopped walking and looked around the hollow. He was standing in small clearing of trees. There were logs on the edges of the wood; someone had rolled them out of the way, maybe it was J.R., but he didn't know for sure, and at this moment he didn't really care. Luca wiped his nose with the sleeve of his jacket and turned to face the dog. It was sitting, ears erect, staring straight at him. He wished he had another piece of hotdog to distract it, but he didn't and there was nothing else he could do.

He walked over to the stake and the dog shook with excitement, his loose fur rippling down his ribs. Luca bent down and patted the ground with his gloved hand.

"Down boy," he said, and the dog sat back on his haunches. "No, *down*," he said again hitting his hand harder against the cold soil—it was tamped down, almost solid, as though a thousand paws had walked the circumference of the tether before. The dog lay down. "Good boy," Luca said and he stroked his ears and patted his head. The dog rolled over, but Luca resisted rubbing his hollow belly.

"Stay," he said again. He got up to leave. The dog stood up, too, wagging his tail and pulling on the rope.

"Jesus. Lie down and stay there." Luca didn't know what the dog wanted, so he tried his best to convince it to relax in the hollow. He got up to leave. The dog tried to jump towards Luca, but his leash threw him back. "Fuck off," Luca said. "I don't have any more food. I have nothing for you."

He turned and walked out of the hollow. The dog whined, and then barked a single high pitched yelp. He's scared, Luca thought but he just kept walking.

Back at home, Luca hung his coat by the back door and slipped out of his boots.

"Luca," his mom called. So he headed to the kitchen and sat down at the counter watching as his mother washed dishes.

"Hey. What were you up to today?" She did not turn to look at her son.

"Nothing. Just hung out with J.R." He watched as his mother's hands paused in their circular motion around the pan she was scrubbing.

"J.R?" she asked. "I didn't know you two hung out these days."

"Yeah, Mom. We're doing this project for geography together."

Luca hardly remembered being friends with J.R. when they were younger. They played together all the time, in early elementary school maybe, but then Luca just stopped going over to J.R.'s house. At the time Luca didn't know why, but now he was pretty sure it had to do with J.R.'s father. Before he died a couple years ago, he had been an angry man who'd fought constantly, and loudly, with anyone when he was in a foul, dark mood. He'd had an old German shepherd who would lounge in the middle of the hallway and sleep all day. Luca remembered how J.R. would kick at the dog and quietly curse at it when they walked in the house. J.R.'s father loved that dog maybe more than his own son. J.R. would try to intimidate it until his father caught him smacking the big animal hard on the nose when it wouldn't move out of his way one afternoon. He grabbed J.R. by his collar, jerking him upwards, all the while screaming at him about treating animals with respect, how it marks what kind of man you'll be. Flecks of spittle flew into J.R.'s ashen face, but he didn't flinch. Luca had watched in stunned silence. The dog wagged its tail. When J.R.'s father put him down, he said "Let's go," to Luca and they headed out the back door to play outside.

"Oh," his mother said. "What kind of project?" She put her dish towel down and turned to face her son. She was worried that he didn't have any friends at school. She searched his face for signs of happiness, anything to indicate his renewed friendship with J.R. was encouraging.

"It's about human geography." His cell phone buzzed in his pocket. He pulled it out and looked at it. J.R. sent him a message and asking to meet him in five minutes. Where? Luca typed back. He was just getting warm, but it didn't matter really. He got up to leave.

"What time is dinner?" he asked his mother before he left the kitchen.

"I'm not sure, probably around six I guess. Or whenever your father gets home," his mother answered. "Why? Where are you going?"

"I was just gonna go outside, maybe work on the tree house." He and his father were building a tree house for his little brother, but neither of them had worked on it lately because of the weather. His phone vibrated again. It said "my house five minutes."

"It's cold," his mother said. She sounded as if she wanted to say more, but decided against it.

"I know," Luca said, giving a weak attempt at a smile, more for his mother's sake than his own. "I'll wear my coat."

Luca had never been to the hollow when J.R. was there. Something about the way J.R. didn't talk about the hollow, even avoided the subject—"Did you leave it there?" or "Is it in the place where I told you to take it?"—made Luca assume he shouldn't even be near the hollow unless he was making a delivery. There was something about the thick line of trees and worn-away ground that made Luca feel guilty about leaving the dogs.

He tried to imagine what it would be like for any living thing to stumble across the hollow. Would they back away in fear? He knew animals could sense danger, like when his brother's cat would burrow under the couch hours before a thunderstorm hit, or all the wild animals that flee days before a hurricane makes landfall or an earthquake waves across a fault line. Luca always felt nervous taking a dog into the hollow, but he wasn't entirely convinced his fear wasn't projected. After all, the dogs followed behind him, trusting their shepherd not to lead them astray. Luca didn't consider his enormous responsibility to the dogs until this last catch. There was something about the dog's eyes. The other ones had walked behind Luca solemnly, heads down, accepting their fate as a person on his way to his execution might. But this dog caught Luca's eye, and held his gaze. For the first time, Luca considered what he might be doing, the possible end he might be leading these dogs to. But what struck Luca the most was not how the stray looked at him; it was how it looked at him as if to say "I know where you are taking me, and you know, too, but I'm going to trust you anyway." And then it followed him, every once in a

while catching up to Luca's long legs to nose his hand, a constant reminder that Luca was leading him.

When Luca arrived at J.R.'s house a few minutes later, J.R. was waiting in his driveway leaning against his stepfather's car. His hands were jammed in his pockets, his big shoulders slumped forward, but he looked straight ahead, his eyes searing into Luca as he walked up the drive. Luca stopped a few feet in front of J.R., climbed off his bike and pushed the kick stand down with his foot. He stood, helmet still on his head.

"What's up?" he asked.

J.R. took his hand out of his pockets and rubbed them together for warmth. He ran his hand through his dirty brown hair. Luca swallowed and looked down at his shoes.

"Take that off. You look like a fucking pansy."

Luca unclipped the straps to his helmet and held it awkwardly in his hands.

"How'd it go?" J.R asked.

"It's done," Luca said.

"No problems?"

"He didn't want to be left there."

"It," J.R. said. "It didn't have a choice where it was left."

A few seconds passed and Luca shifted on his feet. He didn't know what else to say, but J.R. seemed to expect him to say something else. Luca opened his mouth to speak and then thought better of it.

"What?" J.R. asked.

"What are you gonna do with it?"

"Doesn't matter—whatever the fuck I want."

The back porch door swung open and J.R.'s little sister came bounding out. A golden-furred puppy tripped out behind her and tumbled down the stairs. J.R. exhaled angrily.

"Molly, go back inside."

The little girl looked up at her brother and Luca. The puppy chewed on her shoelaces pulling back with his whole body. J.R. took a few steps towards her.

"Why? Teddy needs to go and I wanna play outside," the little girl said. She looked at her older brother warily as if she wasn't sure she should keep speaking to him. "Dan said I had to take him outside every hour anyway." Dan, J.R.'s stepfather, had bought Molly the puppy for her birthday a week before. Luca knew J.R. didn't like the stepfather because he would get angry anytime the man came up in conversation, and he didn't like having the puppy in his house—J.R. didn't like dogs, and he'd prefer if they didn't like him.

The puppy noticed the boys and took off towards them. But then he saw J.R.'s big boots, made a wide berth around him and beelined straight for Luca. Luca squatted down to greet the puppy. J.R. took a quick step towards it to scare the pup, and it skittered off course for a second, but still stopped in front of Luca to be petted.

"Leave it alone," J.R. said. Luca stopped playing with the dog. "Just go home. We're done anyway."

"Ok. See you later," Luca mumbled and he walked back down the driveway towards home. He could hear J.R. yell at his sister some more, and he heard the little girl whimper. He didn't turn around.

One afternoon the two boys were sitting on J.R.'s back porch. Luca stared down at his hands while his friend smoked. Neither of them said much of anything. J.R. took a few last puffs of the cigarette, his forefingers wrapped around the filter backwards and awkward, smoking like James Dean. He balanced the stub, a half inch of ashes still glowing at the base, on his lower lip and turned to face Luca. J.R. grabbed Luca's arm and tapped the last of the ashes onto the center of his palm, laughing as though it was a joke between friends. Luca pulled his hand away with a stifled yelp and shoved J.R. hard, nearly sending him down the stairs of the porch. Luca looked down at his wound, inspecting the burn mark. With a loud grunt, J.R. was on top of him, his forearm on Luca's throat. Luca wasn't able to escape the heavy weight on top of him, the tight hold on his neck.

"Don't you ever fucking touch me," J.R. growled, flecks of spittle flying from around his clenched teeth. Luca opened his mouth to say something, apologize, anything to free himself. J.R. only pressed his arm harder into his throat. Luca couldn't breathe at all anymore, couldn't move. For a brief moment he looked into J.R.'s eyes. They were a dark hazel, glassy and excited—thrilled even—but there was nothing behind them.

J.R. took his arm away, climbed off and sat down on the porch again. He took out his pack of cigarettes and tapped them idly against his thigh. Luca rolled over to his side, coughed once to clear his throat, make sure he could still breathe, and then he took a few deep breaths and sat up. He put his head in the palm of his hand, deciding whether or not he should leave. J.R. laughed again for a few moments and shoved Luca playfully.

"I'm going inside, play some video games or something" he said, putting his cigarettes away unsmoked. He got up and went in the house. Luca sat for a little while longer, staring out at the tree line as the rusted leaves whispered together in the breeze. He got up and followed J.R. into the house.

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Luca sat in front of J.R. in their human geography class. J.R. always seemed to be surrounded by groups of people—in a strange way people seemed drawn to him. Yet he hardly formed any real relationships, and if pressed for details about him, his friends didn't know anything real or substantial about him. Luca had a good rapport with even the ugliest and angriest of dogs, but he hardly had any friends at school. He was quiet in classes, lying low and trying to stay unnoticed, except for the rare occasion he was a verbal punching bag for some other kid.

One afternoon in human geography their teacher was discussing the development of the domesticated canine and the evolution of its relationship with humans.

"Tonight, read the section in chapter 21 on domestication of animals because tomorrow we'll begin discussing how pets such as dogs play in integral role in our lives," the teacher said as she tapped her heel quietly on the ground. Luca stared at her shoe in an effort to look uninterested, although his ears perked up at the mention of the subject.

"I bet Luca wrote that chapter," someone near J.R. snickered. Luca ignored the mocker.

"Shut up!" hissed J.R. "He knows more about dogs than you'll ever know about anything."

"Ohhh, nice comeback dumbass," someone chided J.R. Everyone around Luca laughed as quietly as possible. J.R. shot them a chilling, deadly look. The group quieted down.

When the bell rang, Luca waited for the crowd behind him to jostle their way out of the class before he left his seat.

"Hey man," a voice from behind startled him. "Aren't you going to thank me or something?" Luca turned around to see J.R. leaning back in his desk, legs sprawled apart and propped up on his heels. It didn't look as though he was planning on leaving the class any time soon.

"Oh. Sure. Thanks, I guess."

J.R. smiled. "Hey, no problem," he said. Luca turned to leave, but hesitated.

"Why?" he asked half-facing the door.

"Why what?"

"Why'd you do it? They thought you were pretty weird for saying something," Luca said referring to the group that surrounded J.R.

"Whatever," said J.R. reaching down for his shapeless, empty backpack as he started to get up. "I guess it was for old times' sake." J.R. gave Luca a forced grin and checked him on the shoulder as he headed to his next class.

A few days later, Luca was riding his bike home from school by himself, lost in his own thoughts. And then suddenly he was on the ground. Something had clipped his back tire and sent him flipping over his handle bars, leaving him spread-eagled on someone's front lawn. Luca counted to ten before turning over so the rush of adrenaline would subside a bit and he could assess any injuries. A shadow interrupted his slow attempt to get up.

He looked up to see J.R. towering over him, a huge smile stretched across his face. He seemed to be holding back a laugh.

"Did you run into me?" Luca asked, confused.

"Yeah," J.R. sniggered offering Luca a hand up.

Luca reached up and took it and he was immediately on his feet. J.R.'s strength shouldn't have surprised Luca—the boy was stocky, and a low center of gravity made him a remarkable wrestler—but he couldn't help but think J.R. seemed stronger than he looked.

"Why?" Luca was too astonished and bewildered to be angry.

"Cause it was easy," J.R. said matter-of-factly. The boy laughed like there was some inside joke between them Luca had forgotten about in the years since they had last played and ridden bikes together. He grabbed the bike and stood it upright, brushing off the seat before handing it to Luca.

The boy paused, flicking grass and dirt out of the creases in his elbow.

"C'mon, take it," J.R. said leaning the bike towards Luca. "I was just playing around. Not a big deal." And he grinned, this time almost genuine. Luca thought he believed him and grabbed the bike, swinging his foot over to meet the other pedal. The boys rode home together in an easy silence.

On the way J.R. suggested they stop at a gas station for sodas, on him. Luca paused outside the door to pet a dog tied to a bench, while J.R. walked past him into the convenience store. Luca crouched down and the dog thumped its tail against the concrete, its ears back in an effortless submission to Luca's soft fingers as they ran down the coarse hair from the dog's head to its tail. J.R. came out of the store with two bottles of soda and an open bag of corn chips. The dog's tail curled under itself, while the ears flattened to its skull.

"You like dogs?" J.R. asked and threw a corn chip towards it. The dog flinched as it bounced off the top of its head, but it didn't take its eyes off J.R.

"Yeah. They're cool. You like 'em?" Luca leaned forward to pick up the chip. He offered it to the dog, who took it warily.

"I don't really care either way," J.R. said.

"Oh." Luca stood up and accepted the soda. "Thanks." They headed back to their neighborhood.

The boys kept walking in silence, bikes in hand, until J.R. spoke calmly, coolly.

"Wanna do me a favor?" J.R. asked. Luca didn't answer. "Well?" J.R. pressed further. "Yes or no?"

Luca nodded slowly. He liked the idea of having someone who would stick up for him or show some sort of kindness, a semblance of friendship. Luca considered the fact that he was generally a loner. What was one small favor?

"Great," J.R. grinned again, but when Luca looked up at the boy his eyes were seemed hollow. "You know where to find stray dogs?" he asked.

"At the pound, I guess," Luca offered. J.R. rolled his eyes. "Or you could try a shelter or something," Luca added hoping it was the right answer.

"No, like loose dogs. The ones on the street before they get caught and taken to the pound," J.R. said.

"Oh. Yeah, you see them around in alleys behind restaurants and stuff. It'd be easier if you just adopted one, though."

"No, I want the strays. Can you catch 'em?"

"I mean, I've never tried, but I guess I could." Luca swallowed hard, unsure of what J.R. wanted him to do with the dogs.

"Follow me," said J.R., and he hopped on his bike and took off down the street. Luca scrambled to catch up with him. He followed J.R. down a narrow street that ran behind a row of houses and onto a worn dirt path surrounded by a thin stand of trees that grew thicker the farther they headed down the path. It ended abruptly at a pile of crushed beer cans and cigarette butts. Broken lawn chairs lay scattered among the trash. They ditched their bikes at the edge of the long-abandoned party and headed deeper into the woods until the tree line opened and a small clearing appeared—the hollow. J.R. walked the perimeter as if he was inspecting it. Luca looked around, taking in his surroundings.

"What is this place?" he asked.

"This is where you'll bring the dogs after you catch them," J.R. said. He gestured to the stake. "And this is where you should tie them up so they don't run away."

A chill ran from the top of Luca's head to the base of his spine. He was scared.

"What are you gonna do with them?" he asked, although he thought he didn't want to know the real answer. J.R. said something about a science experiment for biology, but Luca was too caught up in his own thoughts to really listen. He followed J.R. out of the hollow, eyes cast down because he didn't want to take in any more of the barren landscape.

As the boys rode home, thoughts tumbled through Luca's mind. "Why can't you catch your own dogs?" Luca had wanted to ask. But he knew the answer. Dogs wouldn't come near J.R., and J.R. wouldn't be able to sweet-talk a stray into captivity—the best he could do would be to steal some yard mutt that no one would notice was gone, but there was always a chance of getting caught. Luca's quiet voice and sweet words would always work to lure the runaways and strays in—dogs no one remembered to miss.

A few days later Luca was riding around by himself when he saw a collarless dog sniffing around a dumpster in an alley. He whistled but the dog scampered off. Luca realized food would probably encourage it's submission, so he rode to the grocery store and chose a pack of hotdogs—they were cheap and smelled of meat strongly enough to lure a starving animal. An hour or so later, Luca had left the dog at the hollow and was riding his bike back home. He sent J.R. a text message to let him know. A few minutes later, a message appeared saying, "Awesome. Thanks," but nothing else.

After that first dog, things at school began to improve. Luca didn't fly below the radar as much anymore because J.R.'s friends started hesitantly including him—not outright pleased he was there, but not rejecting his presence, either. It hadn't been so bad, Luca thought, leaving the stray in that dismal little clearing. He was pretty sure he could do it again.

There was something about the last dog Luca couldn't shake as he rode back home from J.R.'s house. He had already let J.R. know that the dog was there, but he realized he didn't want to leave this one alone—he didn't want to leave it in the hollow at all. Maybe it was the way the mutt had followed behind him so willingly, or how it had whined when he tried to leave, but Luca knew that dog belonged to him not to J.R. He decided he would ride to the grocery store and buy more hotdogs or maybe a small bag of dry dog food and bring it back to the hollow.

When Luca got back to the woods, he saw J.R.'s bike among the empty beer cans and broken chairs. His heart dropped to the pit of his stomach. Leaving his bike, he crept back to the hollow, and stopping at the tree line, he peered into the clearing. A small fire burned across from the stake where the dog was tied. He watched as J.R. bent over the fire, stoking it with a shorter stake, its end glowing orange. The dog sat watching the boy work, its head cocked curiously. Luca was surprised the dog wasn't cowering in fear. J.R. took the poker out of the coals and started for the dog. He waved the glowing end around the mutt's feet. It shied away, still tethered to the stake. J.R. laughed softly.

"You don't like that, do you?" he crooned. The dog just looked at him. J.R. put the poker back in the fire and walked over to the stake again. He reached out one tentative hand; it hovered above the dog's head, fingers outstretched and together, steady. The dog waited, as if he wanted J.R. to pet him, and it lowered its head slightly, showing submission. The boy hesitated, as though he was surprised the dog wasn't afraid. Slowly, he dropped his hand and rested it on the top of the dog's head. Neither of them moved. Luca held his breath.

J.R. took his hand away and turned back to the fire. He bent to pick up the stake buried in the depths of flame and coal. Luca could not look, but he was too afraid to leave. What if J.R. heard him? This time his hand gripped firmly, confidently around the poker as he made his way toward the center of the hollow where the mutt was tethered. Luca looked down at the grocery bag in his hands. It was empty except for a pack of hotdogs. He heard a dull thud. The bag dropped from his hands, but he

didn't want to pick it up. After a few moments he looked up, but the dog was nowhere to be seen. J.R. was putting out the fire; the poker lay a few feet from the stake, still glowing a pinkish color. Rope that had once tethered the dog to the stake was nowhere to be seen. And then at the edge of the clearing, Luca saw the dog sitting and watching J.R. clean up. His heart jumped. Everything was fine.

So he gathered up the bag and walked to the trailhead. He didn't want J.R. to find him or his bike. There amongst the empty beer cans, Luca opened the pack of hotdogs and left it on the ground. Maybe the dog would find them. He picked up his bike and headed home.

Benjamin Solomon
Grief Station

I have never taken an interest in my family line. Nor do I think family members necessarily belong together, or that just because you come from the same gene pool as someone, you should have a relationship with them. But when I was twenty-two my mother died, leaving me alone in the world, and certain things she'd said just before she passed away made me think she wanted me to contact her parents, whom I had never met. I found them—they were still in Utah—wrote a letter, and a couple weeks later I got their reply. They wanted to come to Atlanta and pay their respects at my mother's grave. It was a reasonable request, one my mother might have expected, but I found myself hesitant. My mother had left Utah just before I was born, cutting off all contact with her parents, and it felt like a small betrayal, not of my mother exactly but of the years of silence and distance themselves, to just invite them here, to her home, after she had died. But I was lonely at the time—I guess I'm lonely still—and I was thinking about my mother's past a lot, mostly wondering what she was like at my age and why she'd left Utah, so a few months after she died I suggested that I visit my new grandparents for a weekend instead.

I had a photograph they'd sent, but when I walked off the ramp at the airport I passed right by them, somehow missing the pink and blue sign they'd made: *Welcome Home, Anne*. When I felt a tap on the shoulder and turned towards a sad-faced little old man, I realized the photograph must have been at least fifteen years old. My grandfather had the lightest blue eyes I had ever seen. Beside him was my grandmother, short and plump with artificially rosy cheeks and a helmet of dyed amber hair.

"We *thought* it was you when you come through the door," she said, reaching for my hand. She squeezed it and passed it to my grandfather, who held it and looked around like there might be someone else to pass it to.

They took me home. It was late, so we agreed it would be best to get some sleep now and talk in the morning. My grandmother showed me to the guestroom where everything was floral. The bed was piled high with overstuffed flower-print pillows on a matching comforter, and the walls were covered in purple and white lilies.

"That was your mother's," she said, pointing to a ragdoll slumped on a chair in the corner. "She made it herself."

"Oh?" I said.

"Do you like to make things?" she asked me.

"I paint." I said.

"That's neat," she said. "We always have been a crafty family. I stenciled those flowers." She pointed to the wall.

"Neat." I said, forcing a smile, which she returned immediately, and I was surprised to find it nearly as disingenuous as my own.

That night I lay in bed and felt my mother watching me through the eyes of her old ragdoll. Her yellow yarn-hair was tied into pigtails and her red gingham shirt and blue denim pants were crisp and new. I imagined my grandmother ironing them once a year on my mother's birthday, keeping her neat and prim like a good Mormon daughter. Something told me my mother had left the ragdoll on purpose as a stand-in, holding her place until she could make it back.

Or perhaps just holding her place. My mother never said she wanted to return to Utah or restore her relationship with her parents. But in the months before she died she'd started to talk about them, offering small details about family vacations or pets she'd had as a kid. I'd sat beside her bed listening to her talk, not saying a word for fear it would cause her to clam up. Towards the end, when she was on a ventilator, she would write notes for me on yellow mini post-it tabs, things like "Dad was a foreman at a flour mill," or "Mom made the best cinnamon buns." I asked her repeatedly if she wanted me to find them, call them, bring them to Atlanta to say goodbye, but she always put me off, never saying "no" exactly, just stalling. After she died I kept telling myself, "she would have wanted you to get in touch with them," but the phrase itself began to confuse me. The "would" implied an "if", as in, "if she was alive and capable of wanting something," only I was certain that if she were still alive she wouldn't want me to find them at all, on the contrary, she wanted to be dead first. She wanted me to contact them only after she had died, for what purpose I was still unsure. Maybe she thought it was my right to know my grandparents. Maybe she did it for their sake—a granddaughter in exchange

for the daughter they'd lost. But that night as I lay stiff and sleepless, my mother's deathbed prompting struck me as selfish. It was her attempt to not disappear from the world, to somehow live on in her daughter and parents' reunion while bearing none of its burden. That night I fell asleep angry.

I woke early the next morning, still on Eastern time. My grandfather was sitting in the kitchen, and he invited me to go canoeing with him on the artificial lake behind their house. It was just after sunrise and the air was dry and crisp. There were little birds flying everywhere, diving, skimming the lake surface and swooping back into the air. I sat behind my grandfather, watching his leathery arms pull his paddle through unnaturally blue lake water. Stroke by stroke he propelled us forward, guiding us towards the far end of the lake where the houses of the subdivision ended and the scrubby yellow mountains rose above the plane like two-dimensional props on a set. He kept a steady rhythm until we'd crossed most of the lake, and then he turned to look at me.

"Anne," he said, "did your mother ever tell you about her Young Woman's Fainting Syndrome?"

I shook my head.

"Well, in college she would up and faint sometimes," he said. "The doctors couldn't figure it out. But they thought it had something to do with her blood pressure or heart rate. Our family always had a very low heart rate."

I nodded and he went back to paddling, speaking in his slow, deep voice as he stroked.

"It would happen during class at the university. We'd get a call saying 'Tracy's at the medical center, you better come down here.' Of course we lived in Granger at the time so it wasn't far to the campus, but I tell you those drives always felt like they took forever."

I glanced across the lake at the new stucco houses and green lawns sloping down to the water. We were in a planned community just over the mountains from Salt Lake City. Its centerpiece was the artificial lake with hundreds of little inlets like the tines of a comb, each containing two rows of houses on cul-de-sac peninsulas.

"Then the fainting spells just stopped. Must have been a year went by and she didn't have one. So after she graduated from college we decided it would probably be okay for her to go to Europe with her friends. It was in Luxemburg when she started fainting again."

The canoe had drifted to a portion of the subdivision where new construction was underway, a thin strip of land between the lake and the highway. My grandfather looked over the bulldozed lots and shook his head.

"I don't know how anyone could stand to live with a highway in front of them," he said.

"Me neither," I said.

I waited for him to continue his story as we paddled along the shoreline, but he had grown silent, as if he was either lost in thought or waiting for me to ask him what had happened.

So I asked. And it turned out the story was less about my mother than the Mormon church, how its vast network of missionaries and disciples throughout Europe helped get my mother home safely when she was in danger. Mormons in Geneva, Mormons in London, kindly Mormon stewardesses in Houston rearranging their schedules to fly home with my mother who was liable to faint at any time, but never did.

"That is pretty nice how they helped her home," I said when he'd finished.

My grandfather nodded. "That's why I just *can't* imagine what could've made Tracy stop going to church. I just can't imagine."

He put his paddle in the water and started to stroke. He was still a limber man. When we paddled together the canoe seemed almost weightless.

"Let's steer us back to the house for breakfast," he said, and I pulled my paddle through the water to turn the canoe around.

"Maybe she stopped believing in God," I said as we crossed the lake.

He stopped paddling and looked back at me. There was hurt in his old blue eyes.

"Your mother said her prayers every night before bed. She never missed a night. You don't just stop believing."

I looked away. "Are we getting close to home?" I said.

"That's it right there." He pointed with the paddle.

I recognized it now, four houses away. My grandparents had the highest flagpole in the neighborhood, and its flag was hanging limp in the sky. Sunlight glinted off the brass ball, blinding me, and then I saw my grandmother waving on the porch. She was holding a Diet Coke and chewing on a baby carrot.

I stepped out of the canoe and watched my grandfather clip the yellow rope to the metal eyelet on the dock. There was a life-size plastic heron bolted to the far corner. At breakfast my grandmother told me that when they first got the heron their neighbor Clive Owens had spied it from his paddle boat across the lake. Herons were rare in the valley, so he had approached with caution, slowly creeping up from behind, marveling at how it stood so still and didn't see him. He had been ten feet away before he realized it wasn't real.

After breakfast I sat with my grandmother in the plush leather easy chairs to watch her game shows.

"She was in a car accident once," my grandmother said during a commercial. "Marty Thomas was the driver. A group of them were up to Deseret Peak and skid off the road. She had cuts all down her legs from the shattered windshield. I remember her saying how Marty Thomas got down on bended knee and picked glass out of her legs. She said with all the attention she got from Marty Thomas, she should get in car accidents more often."

I gave a quick laugh and stared at the television. So far, everything my grandparents had told me about my mother was tied to accidents or mishaps, and in every story she managed to escape only slightly scathed.

"Bid one dollar," said my grandmother to the television.

"Do you think Marty Thomas was my father?" I asked, and my grandmother winced at the question.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "Marty Thomas was a good boy. He wouldn't have done something like that to your mother."

"But how can you be sure?" I said.

"I suppose we can't be," she said. "But Marty Thomas is a bishop. He has two sons and a daughter. We don't know who your father is, Anne. We really don't have any idea."

"I was hoping you might," I said.

She sighed and turned back to the television. On TV a blond woman was straining to spin a giant blinking wheel. She needed to land on the number 7 to win. The wheel spun, clicking closer and closer to the magic number while the host's voice became urgent and the studio audience murmured. They all began to shout, the woman leaned sideways as if to will the wheel further with the angle of her body, and then the audience groaned as the clicker came to a stop on 6. The sad sound of a losing spin played out. The woman smiled, disappointed and shrugging, and the host, sharing in her loss, apologized and sent her on her way.

That afternoon we drove the half hour into Salt Lake City. I'd asked them to show me around, specifically Trolley Square Mall, where the week before an 18 year-old had opened fire on a crowd in the food court, killing five people before the police finally shot him down. It had made the national news. My grandparents seemed a little uncomfortable with my request, but they were uncomfortable with me in general, and at least now we were doing something besides sitting around the house making each other squirm.

The mall was nearly empty when we arrived, but as we made our way towards the food court there was a buzz in the air like crowds of people whispering. The whole place was flooded with sunlight from the glass ceiling, and in the far corner by some potted trees was a memorial to the victims. Six televisions pointed inwards at a giant mound of wreaths and candles and teddy bears. Every television was mounted on a podium and displayed a slideshow of photographs. Different songs came from each one. Flowers and cards were piled up around the televisions and I realized that each was dedicated to a single victim.

I bent down to read one of the cards. *We will never forget you Andrea.* It was signed by children, their little names scrawled in colored markers all around the message. I moved from one grief station to the next, stopping to watch the cycle of photos at each. Some of the victims, like Andrea, were represented by photographs of their whole lives. I saw kids at the beach, teenagers at prom, wedding shots, photos of families. The sixth television played the news. It took me a moment to understand that someone, whoever was in charge of the memorial, had compiled different segments of news footage from the tragedy and edited them together for display. There was only one photo of the killer, a kid with acne and a young mustache. I searched his eyes for anger or brutality but all I found was awkwardness. The news reports said he'd had a pistol, a sawed-off shotgun and a bowie knife. Both his guns had been loaded when he died.

My grandparents said they want to see something at Sears. Would I like to come with them? I thanked them and said no, I'd rather stay here and meet them later. When they left I felt bad, watching them walk stiffly away like two survivors from a head-on collision with their past. I knew I wasn't being quite fair to them, that I should have opened up more. But I needed the time to myself, and the memorial with its air of hushed and quiet memory was the first place I'd felt comfortable in since I'd arrived.

There were no cards or flowers piled around the young killer's grief station, and this bothered me. Someone so young couldn't do a thing like this and not be a victim too, however brutal. So I checked to see if anyone was watching, then grabbed a wreath of white flowers from the station next door and quickly placed it against the pedestal. Nobody had to know. But when I stepped back to examine it, just that one single wreath seemed alone and out of place. I grabbed another. Some teenagers walked by, gawking, and I waited for them to leave before I took one more bouquet and a purple stuffed animal and placed them around the television as well. I knew it was wrong, deeply inconsiderate, but it felt good to rearrange other people's grief to spread more evenly in the world.

Something was still missing and I realized it was a personal message, so I went to Woolworths and searched the Hallmark section for a card, but of course there's no section for fallen murderers. All the cards dealing with death were for the families of the deceased, not the dead themselves, so finally I settled on a consolation card for a hunter who has come home empty handed. There was a rifle and a woolen hunting hat on the front, and the message inside said "You'll get'em next time, pardner."

It was a horribly inappropriate choice and walking back to the memorial I lost my nerve and threw it in the trashcan.

When I returned there was man in a gray suit putting everything I'd moved back in its proper place. I watched him pick up each item separately, look it over, then replace it in the exact spot I had taken it from. I strolled closer, pretending to examine the photos of Earl P. Winder, father of four, grandfather of nine. When he passed me I read the badge on his lapel. *Sach's Mortuary.* He placed the purple stuffed animal back where it had been, looked around, spied a card that had fallen over and set it upright again. Then he left.

I stood next to Earl P. Winder's grief station and felt the heavy gaze of everything—the sun through the atrium's glass ceiling, the intrusive dwarf palms, and the constant hum of conflicting music (Earl P. Winder liked country). It was all too much, and I had to sit down on the marble floor and stare at my hands to calm myself. Down there it was like I had entered another layer of the atmosphere, cooler and thick with floral smells. I realized I could sit here forever and no time would pass. There was no possibility of movement or change, only the perfume of dying flowers and low moan of static noise. This was where the dead must live, I thought, obsessively reading messages left by grieving friends and relatives. *We will never forget you. We love you forever. In memoriam.* I could almost hear them chanting back and forth at one another in competition to show who had received the most sympathy, the greedy dead, thinking only of themselves. They were all around me, stepping on me, bustling around the grief stations making sure no card or bouquet had been misplaced. If so, they would summon the man from Sach's Mortuary, and like a faithful servant he'd come and set things right again.

When I stood up my vision fuzzed and my head went numb. Trans-

lucent tadpoles swam away and I felt like I was going to pass out. For a moment I thought maybe I had Young Woman's Fainting Syndrome, my mother's spiteful parting gift to a daughter she probably never wanted, but then I leaned forward and the dizzy spell cleared.

The food court was beginning to get crowded. Some of the people ambled around the grief stations, reading the messages, pointing at things. An old man walked up to me.

"Did you know Earl?" he said.

"Earl?"

"Earl Winder," he said. His tiny eyes were wet.

"No," I said, and watched him shuffle bow-legged on to the next station.

Halfway through the long drive home, just as we were skirting the edge of the mountains that divide their valley from Salt Lake City, my grandmother turned to look at me in the back seat. "It's a shame you can't stay until Wednesday."

"Why?" I was staring out the window. The air smelled fishy, and my grandfather had informed me that it came from the huge schools of brine shrimp that died on the beaches of the Great Salt Lake. We were passing the lake now, vast and glistening in the late reddish light with no buildings or houses along its shore.

"Wednesday is our day to volunteer in the Family History Center," said my grandfather.

"We help people do their genealogy," said my grandmother.

"What's that?" I asked dutifully, and my grandmother said she'd very much like to show me.

At home she took me into her sewing room where they kept the computer. She opened a program and printed a page and handed it to me. It was a half-circle divided into hundreds of small boxes that fanned out from the bottom center like spokes on a wheel. All the boxes on one side were filled in with names. The other half was blank.

"This is your family in relation to you," she said, pointing her finger at the bottom where my name sat at the fulcrum. "The other side would be your father's family." She drew her finger across the blank squares.

The filled-in side of the chart was packed with names on top of names, each in their own little box like plots in a cemetery. My mother had once told me that Mormons do their genealogy so they can go back and convert all their non-Mormon ancestors to the one true religion.

"I guess I'll never fill in the other side," I said.

"Oh we believe you will," she said. "We're praying for it." She patted my hand, stifled a groan and stared at the half-empty pie-chart of my life. I was annoyed by her prayers, annoyed by the tearful reunion she must have fantasized about—some vicarious version of what she never got with my mother. I didn't want my name or my image in my grandparents' heads when they knelt by their bed at night, imagining the happy symmetry of the father-daughter reunion, the teary embraces, the "catching up," and the neat completion of my grandmother's chart.

"Thanks," I said, "but it's not going to happen."

My grandmother's face went from round and hopeful to puffy and sad. I realized that she and my mother looked nothing alike—that all my mother's resemblance had been with my grandfather. Still there was something eerily familiar about my grandmother's small nose and mouth. They were like mine I guess, and supposing I lived that long, this little woman's face was probably what mine would look like when I got old.

The next morning my grandfather invited me out on the canoe again. The sun hovered low behind us, and the whole valley was pink and bronze. I sat in the front of the canoe and let my grandfather steer. I waited for the story I knew was coming.

"Did you know your mother collected dolls?" he said.

"I know," I said. "Like the ragdoll in the guest room."

"Porcelain Dolls, I mean. She had a big collection. She gave piano lessons to earn money for them. She had five big glass cases full of dolls."

"What happened to them?"

"We have them. They're in boxes in the basement. We wanted you to have them."

"I'm not sure what I would do with them."

"Oh these are beautiful dolls. You would love them. She had all kinds of outfits for them. Old fashion dresses she sewed herself."

My grandfather guided the canoe past the new houses along the highway to a section of the lake I hadn't seen before.

"Where are we going?" I said, wondering if he was going to show me something special, something secret.

"Emerson's put in a new lawn," he said. "I want to see if the sod is taking."

We paddled in silence. I wondered if I had upset him by not wanting the dolls. The truth was my mother had never stopped collecting dolls. Her apartment had been full of them when she died. It had been the worst thing about cleaning out her place, all those eerie, glass-eyed dolls, and I had ended up selling them to cover the cost of her casket.

"Why did she collect all those dolls?" I asked, hoping my curiosity would be enough for him.

"To have a hobby," he said. "To be dedicated to something."

"What else did she do?"

"Well, like I said she taught piano lessons. She was a good piano player. And she kept a journal. She wrote in her journal nearly every day."

"Do you have any of her old journals?"

"No. She took those when she left."

"What else did she take?"

"Let's see, she took her car, a little Dodge. She took some clothes, but as a matter of fact not too many clothes. I don't really know what else."

"What did you do when she left? Did you search for her?"

"Well, she left a letter. It said she was going on a road trip and would be back in a couple weeks. She called a couple nights later and told us she was with her friend Cheryl Hutchins and they were going to Chicago. We weren't happy about it, but she was twenty-three and she could do what she wanted. We found out later Cheryl Hutchins wasn't even with her. She was up to Bear Lake water-skiing that weekend."

"But didn't you search for her? Afterwards? Didn't you try to find her?"

"We called the mission in Chicago. They searched for her but they couldn't find her."

"You didn't go yourself?"

"We wanted to..."

"But you didn't."

My grandfather sighed. He stopped paddling and dropped his fingers into the water. We were adrift in the middle of the lake, far from the house, far from the shore, and I had the sudden urge to flip the canoe over and send us crashing into the water.

"She didn't want us to find her," he said. His voice had hardened now. He clutched his paddle and began to stroke. "She didn't write, she didn't call, she didn't want us to."

"But why?" I said.

"We thought you could tell us," he said. There was something so pitiful and meek in his words that I wanted to cry. We should have been crying together, my grandfather and I. We should have been hugging and weeping like family members are supposed to do when someone dies, but if I had moved any closer to him the boat would have capsized. Canoes on the water are just too unsteady.

That night I couldn't sleep. Sometime after midnight I walked barefoot down the soft hallway carpet towards the bathroom. Passing their bedroom, I caught a glimpse of my sleeping grandparents illuminated by the blue light of the television. The volume was turned low and the room flickered and hummed gently. My grandparents' faces were rigid and perfect as China dolls.

We had taken photographs at the mall, and in the pictures I'd towered over them like a celebrity athlete posing for a photo-op with two tiny fans. I was the lumbering stranger they'd asked into their lives to stand beside them and smile while the camera did its work and the moment was memorialized. Tomorrow I would fly back East, but the photographs would prove that I had been here, their granddaughter, in the flesh.

I pushed the door open and slipped inside their bedroom. The air was musty with sleep-breath and one of them was quietly snoring. I walked

to the edge of their bed and stood over them. My grandmother's face twitched slightly, then settled back into its mask of sleep. My grandfather lay still as stone. I wanted a true feeling to wash over me, something definite and sure, but then I heard my mother whispering from her ragdoll lips in the guest bedroom.

Time is not passing, Anne, time is standing still.

What she meant was that there are moments between feelings, and that sometimes those moments spread outwards until they consume your whole life. You start with a feeling, maybe hurt or anger or grief, and slowly that feeling is erased, not just from the present but also from the past, until one day you realize there is no past worth mentioning, and this is why you never tell your daughter anything about who you are or where you came from.

My grandfather began to snore loudly, his mouth gaping like a baby bird. My grandmother, eyes still closed, turned on her side and pressed his shoulder with her hand. He shifted and stopped snoring. She put her arm over him and nudged closer until they were tightly spooned.

I walked into the guest bedroom and picked up the ragdoll. When my mother was dying I had asked her to tell me who my grandparents were so I could contact them. "I'll tell you," she'd said, "but not yet." Cleaning out her sock drawer after she died I found the card with its image of two immaculate China dolls dressed in period costumes of the old West, and inside two names and an address. It was their current address at the house by the lake. All along she had known where they were.

I wanted to tie the ragdoll to a rock and throw it in the lake where all the blue-gills would nibble it away—a daughter's spiteful parting gift to the mother she never really knew. Instead I put it in my suitcase beneath my clothes. My mother had left Utah and never returned. Nobody would ever know exactly why. I decided to put the ragdoll on her grave back East.

I needed air. Outside there was a chunk of moon above the dark mountains and the sky was full of stars. The air was marshy and sweet, and I could hear the sputtering of a sprinkler next door. I was walking across the back lawn when I saw the heron, its neck rolling forward and retracting as it stepped cautiously towards the decoy bolted to the corner of the dock. I watched it lift one hinged leg at a time, moving closer, pushing its beak like a needle through the darkness until it was almost touching the plastic bird. It stood completely still for a moment, a mirror image of the decoy turned slightly askew against the moon-bright lake. Then its beak divided and loosed a terrible rasping cry.

I flew home the next morning. At the airport my grandmother asked if they could come visit me in Atlanta someday. "I'd like that," I said, but I think we all knew it wouldn't happen. They still send me greeting cards, every Christmas and Easter without fail. Once in a while they call, and sometimes during the awkward silences I imagine I can hear my mother on the line, her ventilator-breath laborious and distant beneath the static. She's listening in, waiting for us to say something new about her, but the truth is we never do.

CETORIA TOMBERLIN

The Chicken and The Train

I stumbled across them by mistake. It was a late August afternoon and I wasn't ready to go home yet. Mom was going through a stage that involved lots of crying and plate throwing. Dad called it "the change" but I didn't really understand that sort of thing back then. I was 14 and I hadn't even made it to first base with a girl yet.

The south side of the high school in my hometown is bordered by a fairly dense patch of woods. The forestry team uses it every Thursday for practice. Because of the overgrown wildlife, most people miss the tracks. That's what we call them: the tracks. It's a set of rarely used train tracks that bypass the entire town. Dad tells stories about how he and his buddies used to play chicken with the trains. You stand on the tracks as long as you dare with the train coming straight at you. The really brave kids would hop into the empty boxcars and ride for a mile or two.

Nowadays, they're mostly deserted. The trains still run, but not regularly and their cargo is wood chips or steel. Occasionally you might find a fellow wanderer walking along the parallel lines or just passing their time sitting on the rails. Lucky me, that day, I found two. I didn't recognize who they were at first, but what they were doing was pretty obvious. It was a couple in the midst of one intense make-out scene. It was so intense they didn't notice me standing just outside the trees. I'm not a Peeping Tom, but I was finding it really hard to look away. The girl's curly brown hair was getting frizzier by the second and her nails just kept running up and down the guys back like she was trying to rip through his cotton shirt. Something felt strange about the pair, not the make-out, but something else I couldn't figure at the moment.

Suddenly, I realized whose privacy I was trespassing upon. Miranda. The girl's name was Miranda Crossley. Those were her long dark curls getting dust and dirt mixed into them with sweat. She was two years older than me and one of the prettiest girls I, or anyone else in our small town, had ever seen. Her mother and my mother both taught at the elementary school. Our parents attended the same dinner parties. Hers always brought Miranda along dressed in the softest yellows and pinks to compliment her lightly browned skin and blue eyes. They were so proud of the lovely child they had created. So much so they didn't even consider giving her a sibling. If that was Miranda, then the guy breathing heavily all over her must be Chris, her boyfriend. His father was the only divorce lawyer in the whole county. He was a senior and not bad looking himself. Rumor had it he was going to UNC for college next year to study biology. His parents were thrilled to have a future doctor in the family.

The realization must have been more audible than the click I heard in my head because just as I was putting two and two together, Miranda looked over Chris's shoulder. Our eyes locked and I don't think I could have moved an inch. I doubt I even breathed for a full minute. Apparently, Miranda didn't mind an audience because she returned her full attention to Chris. I felt my lungs fill again and I tried to decide if I should back away slowly or turn tail and run like hell. I doubted Chris would be as understanding as Miranda.

I took one quiet, small step backwards. I could feel the twig beneath my shoe before I heard it, but it was too late; the weight of my foot was dropping and my reflexes weren't working at full speed. The snap could have been heard a mile away.

I saw Chris's body attempt to turn, but Miranda grabbed his shoulders quickly and pulled him back down for a long kiss. She lifted one hand off his shoulder blade and flicked me away as fervently as she could without attracting Chris's attention. I turned and ran the entire way home.

Only after closing the door and sinking to the floor, did I allow myself to think again. I grasped what was wrong with the scene. It was Miranda; she had looked like she was about to cry.

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Two weeks later I was standing there again, but this time it was almost 7 p.m. I had decided to take a walk after dinner and figured it was safe to try my old standby again.

She was sitting on the gravel rocks by the tracks, alone. I stopped myself from walking right into her line of vision. She was wearing a yellow

sun dress with purple flowers all over it. Her feet were bare, but I spotted her flip-flops about five feet away sitting on one of the iron railings.

After a minute or two she spoke: "Are you going to stand there all night?"

Damn, guess she heard me.

"Well?" She looked straight into the woods, but not directly at me.

I felt like I was approaching a firing squad as I stepped out from behind the pine. I thought she'd accuse me of being a complete creep, but she smiled when she saw me.

"It's you. I thought...anyway." She shook her head slightly. "Are you stalking me Jackson Powell?"

"No! I mean, no. I'm not stalking you Miranda." She was smirking at me still.

"So you know my name?"

"Everyone knows your name. It's a small town and our mothers work together... and...well, you're Miranda Crossley. "

She was looking past me know, towards the direction I had come.

"Are you expecting someone?" I asked.

"Kind of," she conceded.

"Chris?"

"It's like I can't escape him. Everywhere I go, he's there. It's exhausting hiding from your own boyfriend."

"I wouldn't know about that." I sat down beside her.

"You think you're funny don't you." She shoved my shoulder with her own as she said it. "Hey, you sure got a show the other day." I looked down at my shoes; my face was on fire with guilt. She stopped giggling when she saw my embarrassment. Her hand slid onto my knee. She must have been hot-natured; it was burning up. I couldn't stop staring at it. A girl's hand was on my knee. Miranda Crossley's hand was on my knee.

"You got a girlfriend Jack?"

"Nobody calls me Jack."

"Nobody but me." She retorted with a smile. "Answer the question, please."

"No," I admitted.

"Ever had one?"

"No." What was this, 21 questions?

"Well, I bet that means you've never kissed a girl."

"Well, I no—not any girl I wasn't related to. I mean, not kissed-kissed, just—you know, like my mom or sister—like how you kiss your mom or sister." I managed to shut up and just stare at my shoes. She didn't torment me though.

"Yeah, I get it. You don't make out with your mom or sister."

I couldn't help but laugh, which must have been what she wanted because she was laughing too. Her hand squeezed my knee and I considered putting my hand on top of hers. I wanted to know what they'd look like together.

"Kissing's fun, Jack. You should try it sometime."

"I will. I mean, one day," I said. My eyes darted up to her face then back down to our hands again. We sat there for a few minutes in silence. I didn't feel like I normally did with girls, awkward and out of place. I felt, I guess, like I was supposed to feel; natural. I guess that's what made me brave enough to ask her: "Why are you hiding from your boyfriend?"

She sighed real heavy before answering. "Don't you ever just want to be alone? Just for a little while?"

"Yeah, sure," I replied.

"Chris doesn't like to be alone. He doesn't get it. If I'm not with him, he thinks I'm with someone else. Who else would I be with?"

"Maybe another guy?" I was serious, but she didn't think so.

"What other guy? Chris is the best any girl could hope for here. Top of ladder, right?"

"I guess if you're climbing a ladder, he is."

"I'm 16. I've got the best I'm going to have at 16? What kind of sick joke is that?"

I didn't think those were really questions for me so I just sat there looking at the prettiest girl in town tell me she didn't really like her boyfriend.

We both heard the leaves moving before we heard Chris's voice.

"Miranda!"

I stood to leave. "I'd better go."

"Hey, don't let him scare you."

"It's not that...well, maybe a little, but..." I put my hands in my pockets, I didn't want to leave, but I didn't want to be there with her and Chris. Three's a crowd when two guys and a pretty girl are involved. "He seems mad Miranda, I don't..."

"He probably is." She conceded with another sigh. "Go hide behind the brush on the other side of the tracks. You don't have time to make it too far by now anyway. He's going to walk through those bushes any second."

I hesitated.

"He'll know you've been here, with me, if you go back the way you came."

She was right. Chris wasn't a bad guy, but that didn't mean he couldn't get mad. I didn't answer, I just dodged for the greenery. I made it before he came striding out of the woods on the same path I had taken earlier.

"Miranda! Didn't you hear me calling you?" He stopped a few feet in front of her. I couldn't tell from where I was watching, but my guess is she was glaring at him.

"I think the whole town heard you."

"We were supposed to go to the movies tonight. I called your cell." He said it like he was accusing her of something.

"There's no service out here, you know that."

"I went to your house and your parents said you'd left to meet me half an hour ago. I had to lie and say we got our wires crossed."

"Imagine that, you lying to my parents," she quipped.

"I don't like it." His eyes were on his shoes now.

"Well you sure do it enough." I noticed she slightly jerked her head when she spoke each word.

"Only about important stuff!" His head popped up. "What? You want me to tell them you're avoiding me because you're pregnant and scared out of your mind."

If a leaf would have chosen that particular moment to fall, I would have heard it.

"I'm not scared, Chris," Miranda answered softly.

"Well, you sure were two weeks ago. Crying on my shoulder for hours about how your life was over and everything was ruined." As soon as he was done his facial expression fell. He reminded me of the time I told my mother she was fat. It wasn't a lie, but wasn't very nice to say either.

"Everything is ruined, Chris."

"Now, just cut that out. Nothing's ruined. It's just a baby—people have them all the time." Chris's voice was elevating with every word.

Miranda only sighed. "People, not kids."

"You really think you're still a kid? After what we've done?"

There was that smirk again. "Well, when you put it that way."

"Miranda," Chris took a step towards her. "I don't want to fight."

She made like she was about to stand. "Then you better stay right where you are."

"Miranda, please. We need to tell our parents. You're gonna start showing soon. They can help us."

"Help us what? Pick names?"

"Figure things out. Make some decisions."

"Decisions? Now you want to make decisions?"

"I want you to decide. I told you what I want. M, I...I love you...this baby doesn't change that." He stepped towards her again, his hands were out, palms open.

"It doesn't change anything. I don't care." He took one more step and she was on her feet. She turned her back on him, but kept talking, yelling, to him over her shoulder.

"Doesn't change anything? How stupid are you? You think this is about how you feel? I don't give a shit how you feel? This, Sweetheart, is all your fault!"

Chris's face resembled someone who had been slapped. "That's not fair! I didn't, I didn't force you. You...we...it just happened."

"Yeah, it just happened—and I just have to pay for it. I just get to drop out of school. I just get to spend prom in labor." Miranda was almost bark-

ing every word.

"Miranda, I...I didn't..." His hands dropped and balled into fists at his side. He took deep breaths between his words. "I just... just want you to calm down."

"I just want you to go away!" She picked up one of the gravel stones and threw it at him. It missed which only made her angrier. Chris laughed softly and unclenched his fists.

"You're so pretty when you're mad, M."

"Well I'm not going to be pretty for long!"

She was trying to pace, but she was failing miserably—the gravel rocks were so large and she hadn't put her shoes back on. I could already see blood from fresh scratches near the bottoms of her feet.

"M...please, please look at me." He sounded like a lost little boy.

This must have surprised her because she lost her balance and landed in a cloud of dust and rocks.

"Jesus, M. Are you—" He rushed towards her and crouched down to help her up.

"Shut up, just shut up!" The fall had opened the flood gates. "Please Chris, just shut-the-fuck-up."

"Alright, Miranda." He grabbed her shoulders and tried to lift her.

"Let go. Let go!" She flailed her arms at him.

His hands sprang away. "Alright! Alright!" He took a step back. "I'm sorry, just...I'm sorry." He put his hands in his pockets and just looked down at her. "Please don't cry. Please."

She was trying to stop herself, but the effort was fruitless. Chris, and I, from the bushes, just stood there watching this beautiful girl crying her eyes out. I don't know how long it took the tears to subside, but they eventually did.

"Go...just go Chris. I...I don't...I don't want you here."

Chris sighed deeply, "Come with me. Please M."

She didn't answer back at first. She just pulled her knees to her chest and placed her head on top of them. "No."

Another sigh from Chris. "What do you want me do, Miranda?"

"Leave...Please."

"Fine, I'll call you later tonight or you can call me, whatever you want." He turned slowly and walked away back the way he came. Once he was out of sight and earshot, I came out of my hiding place. I would have preferred to stay there until morning, but it seemed rude to leave her there, like that. I picked up her shoes and sat down next to her with them.

"Miranda, I'm so sorry." I placed them in front of her.

"It's not your fault," she said without lifting her head.

"What...what are you going to do?" I said after a moment or two of silence.

"Weren't you listening? It's already been done." She answered.

We were quiet for awhile after that. She was the first to speak up.

"Jackson?" she said softly.

"Yeah?"

"Could you do me a favor?" she asked.

"Yeah sure, anything Miranda."

"Just forget whatever you heard a few minutes ago, okay?" she had lifted her head by now.

"I won't tell anyone, promise," I responded.

"Thanks, you understand...I...I just can't handle this just yet. My parent...they're...they're never going to forgive this." The tears started again, but they were silent this time and she wiped them away just as quietly before they reached her chin.

I wanted to tell her she was wrong, but I didn't really think she was. Whatever would have been the right thing to say at that moment was beyond me. I'd never felt so meaningless in my whole life. I remained silent, but sat there with her until the sun had completely set and the moon was rising. I realized it was going to be a long, dark walk home.

"Miranda, we should go. It's getting pretty dark."

"You go ahead Jack. I'm going to sit here a little longer."

"You want to walk through the woods alone?"

"No, the tracks circle the town. One section is only a few feet behind my backyard. I'll follow them when I'm ready. Besides, the moon's out; it's

not that dark."

"I don't want to leave you."

"You're sweet, but really, it's okay. Go."

"This feels wrong Miranda."

"You're going to be a good boyfriend one day, Jack." And with that she leaned over and planted a simple, short kiss on my cheek, just under my eye. Then, another on my lips.

"Now, you've kissed a girl."

"Miranda..."

"Go. I want you to."

I stood up and turned for the woods. It went against everything I knew to leave a girl by herself after dark to walk home alone, but it went against something else to not do what she asked of me.

"See you later Miranda."

"Bye Jack."

I headed for the trail, but took my time. I thought she might change her mind and wanted to give her plenty of time to do so. When I reached the pine trees I looked back to see if she was watching me. Her eyes were fixed on the moon.

She had already forgotten me. I stayed there at least another hour. Eventually, she stood up and started walking east on the tracks. She was about half a mile down the tracks when I noticed her shoes still lying on the gravel.

***

I woke up the next morning around 9 a.m. Dad was knocking on my door, asking if he could come in. This should have been a clue: my father doesn't ask if he can do anything in his own house. He opened the door slowly. He looked horrible, like he hadn't slept, but that wasn't possible since he and mom had both been asleep when I got in the night before. First, he walked to my window. When he started talking he didn't look at me.

"Jackson, there's something I need to tell you." His fingers traced the chips in the paint of my windowsill. I never saw Dad fidget before. Something wasn't right and I didn't really want to know what. I just wanted to go back to sleep. I wanted to forget about Mirada and Chris and their baby.

"Jackson, are you awake? Are you listening?"

"Yeah, I'm awake."

"Yeah?" He was finally looking at me.

"Yes sir."

"Jackson, last night—when did you come home?" He took a step towards the bed.

"I'm not sure. Late; you and Mom were already asleep." I pulled the covers up close to my chin. I wanted to pulled them over my head and ignore him, but the covers weren't thick enough to drown him out.

"I know that. What time, Jackson?" Another step.

"I don't know. After ten, maybe a little later. Why does it matter?"

He sighed and sank onto the edge of my bed. "Did anything happen last night?"

"Like what?"

"Did anything happen last night?"

"No. I...I don't know. What are we talking about?"

"You know Miranda Crossley, don't you?"

"Yes sir."

"Jackson, last night...Miranda...Miranda was found early this morning."

"Found?"

"She was walking on the train tracks and it was so dark, the train...it didn't stop. The story is she came out of no where—just appeared on the tracks. Her boyfriend called her parents' house around midnight. They had a fight and he wanted to apologize. Her parents thought she was still with him. They got worried and started looking for her. Her best friend Janie suggested the tracks. Said she used to go there all the time to think."

"There's hardly ever a train on the tracks."

"I know Jackson. It's the damnest thing. She was an only child. Her par-

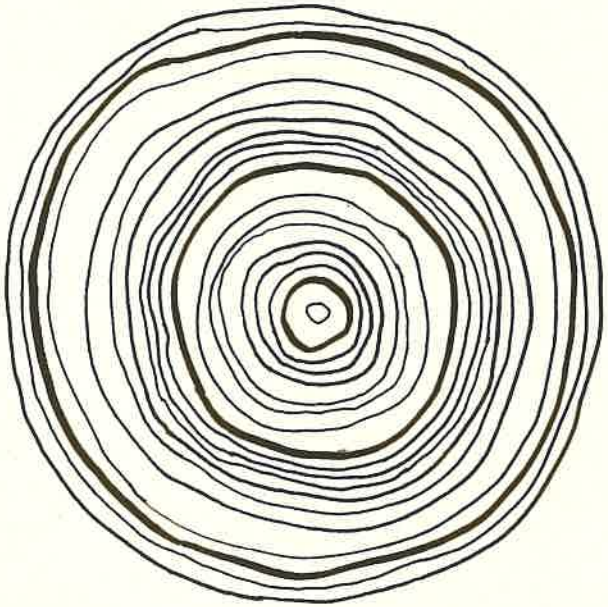
ents must be going out of their minds. School is canceled Monday. That's when they're having the funeral."

I wanted to ask about the baby, but I thought better of it.

"I don't want you to go near those tracks again. I know you like to walk on them sometimes, but...well, just don't anymore. Alright?"

"Alright."

It was one the saddest occurrences the town had ever been forced to witness. And witness it we did; almost every living, breathing soul showed up to watch two grief stricken people bury their only child. Mr. Crossley spoke to no one but his wife and Miranda through her closed white coffin with gold trim. He sat with her during the entire viewing and whispered softly whatever he thought she could still hear. Her mother sobbed crocodile tears in the front pew during the service and had to be carried out by two older male cousins. Miranda's father couldn't accompany his wife because he wouldn't let the coffin leave his sight. He even stayed after the graveside service to watch them pile six feet of dirt on his once beautiful daughter's remains. Even now, I'm unsure if they, her parents, or anyone but Chris, knew about the child. I assume not since it was never mentioned again even during one of my calls home from college. Chris still went to UNC and graduated with honors. He married a pretty blonde girl in his second year of medical school. His father was extremely disappointed when he opted to open a small private practice in the same town he did his residency in instead of back home. I wasn't surprised. I also wasn't surprised when Miranda's father put a gun to his head ten years later. Cancer had taken his wife eight years after a baby had taken Miranda's. It does surprise me, though, how Miranda has stayed with me all this time. I barely knew her except just before her death. I don't visit home much anymore because of the distance and my job, but whenever bouts of nostalgia descend upon me she appears somewhere in the woods, walking barefoot on the tracks, or tangled in Chris's arms. Maybe it's the secret that keeps her alive for me or that she was my first kiss. If I was a betting man, I'd say the former since I don't see her face when I kiss women now or fantasize about her when I'm in bed with them, but I haven't come close to forgetting that yellow dress with purple flowers.



creative
nonfiction

Rachel Burger
Chicken Shit and Candy

Gravel crunched like peanut shells under my manure-covered leather boots as I chewed on raw rhubarb, scattering the picton stones like billiard balls. The walk wasn't too long—ten minutes maybe—but I intentionally doubled the stroll. Tramping up to the rusted Long Gate and dragging it open, I diverted my eyes from the man sitting with an upturned hoe in front of the chicken coop.

I shoved my dirty nail-bitten hands into my jean pockets and approached my disciplinarian. His name was Nick. Though he was only six years older than me—17—he seemed like an adult. I was shy in approaching him. He stood up, turned the hoe face-down, and leaned, grinning.

"You must be Rachel. You're late."

I smeared my boot against the rocks. Shy to respond to his friendly stare, I sized up the chicken coop. Standing at no more than seven feet, the enclosure was made entirely of unevenly spaced termite-bitten grey wood. The building emitted no light. All I could hear were quiet coos and fluttering feathers.

Nick ensured that I had taken my allergy medicine and remembered to bring my inhaler—I had—and then handed me the hoe. He kept smiling to build my comfort level, his brown hair swooped to the side to accent his wolfish grin, but I ignored him. I was there to serve time, not make friends with my punisher.

***

It had started with another camper, Drew. Drew was several inches taller than me and had a thick, muscular build. He was intelligent, he was funny, and he had emerald green eyes—he was probably my first crush before I knew what a crush was. Drew and I shared a vision: to rule the world. In our wild vision of the coming hegemon, neither of us was willing to serve in each other's legions. The only way to solve this matter humanely was an all-out undercover brawl.

It was a lot of fun, at first. I shortsheeted his cot. He stole my t-shirts after curfew. I commandeered his towel during his once-a-week shower. And then he hid poison oak in my bed. The oozing rash crawled into my eczema. I spent a full week recovering.

Instead of ratting Drew out for his prank, I congratulated him. Quickly, I constructed my revenge. As Drew left for an overnight hike, I began gathering materials. I collected perfumes to scent his cabin. The intention was to make it so feminine that other campers would tease him. I entered his cabin, I sprayed, I left. I wasn't caught.

***

Nick opened the wooden door to the coop and took a startled step backwards. Looking over at me, he laughed, "I dunno what you did, but I wouldn't want this job." Dragging the hoe, I looked into the coop. The chickens had splattered the nests, the ground, and the lower walls with their own shit. Flecks of hay lined the floor and floated amongst uncirculated dust. Nick informed me that he would wait outside the coop. "Clean it" he said apologetically.

I took a step inside and then realized why this was the worst punishment I would ever receive. At first I coughed and sputtered, asphyxiated with the trapped heat and floating mess. The dust and shredded hay that suspended itself in the air was also covered with flecks of chicken shit. There was no circulation in the building. It stunk like sweetened vomit. I quickly exited and heaved on the gravel, the coop door slapping behind me.

Outside, a senior counselor handed Nick a hoe separate from mine and continued walking along her way; he was supposed to be helping me. Nick sighed and offered to get facemasks.

***

Drew angrily informed me of his return to an infested cabin and spider-plagued bed. The sweet perfume had attracted the bugs to nest in Drew's bunk. When he complained to the counselors, they assumed he had brought candy, a contraband that would have also drawn the bugs. He

had been relocated and punished on the other side of the camp. I felt his disappointment in me seep into my bones.

I turned myself in to save Drew from misguided discipline. Within 24-hours, I had a meeting with the director of the camp, and we agreed that cleaning the coop would be the best-suited penalty for my actions. Not knowing what this entailed, I agreed. I asked the director if Drew's name would be cleared. He responded, "everything will be taken care of."

***

Cleaning the chicken coop took at least four hours, or what felt like four hours to an eleven year old. The chickens were seated on shelves above Nick and my head, so we had to shrink ourselves to fit. My shoulders ached as I crouched and hoed, thighs trembled from exhaustion as I incorrectly held myself up. The mask helped—my lungs weren't completely covered with shit and dirt—but did nothing for the putrid smell. As I breathed in and out, the vapor began to sink through the mask; feathers and anything else that floated stuck to the barrier between my mouth and the dirty world surrounding it.

Chickens fluttered and stretched, casting new feathers and dried feces into their tiny rancid coop. They scuttled and crawled along the floor like desperate spiders, shuffling over our boots and constantly getting in the way. Nick kicked one hard enough that it shrieked and limped to the corner. The aggressor wiped his boot off in the hay and started talking about himself again.

While I separated out the hay, I uncovered, in its many layers, a dead chicken. I asked Nick what to do with it. He grabbed the dead bird by its legs and swung it outside. Its feathers ruffled in the fresh air before it collided with the uneven ground.

"We'll take care of it later," Nick said, his voice muffled by his mask.

***

I missed dinner that night because I had to finish the job. Nick left quickly. I walked the long gravel road back to my cot alone, stopping by the rhubarb patch to scrounge together a dinner.

I entered my cabin with a loud sigh. My roommate was lying in bed. "Drew was looking for you," she said. I nodded and threw myself onto the cot. Underneath me, something crunched. I peeled the covers back, prepared.

Instead of another prank, there were Twix, Nerds, Twizzlers, and M&Ms with a note.

"A good leader sticks up for his men. Good work today. Have the last of the candy they didn't find."

Famished, I began to stuff myself as I thought of only one thing: how I would strike next.

JOANNA CARVER
The Passerby

There is a photograph in a book that I bought, when I thought my love was dying down. It is of Bobby Kennedy, on the day that he was shot. He is signing an autograph for a reporter, and he is smiling into the light in such a way that his hair looks gray, his face wrinkled and aged. He was in his early forties and had suffered through the loss of his life's purpose and the mantle of his family's aspirations for greatness. That is not the age that I see. He looks at least seventy, and in my imagination he is signing an autograph for someone born around the same time as me, someone who thinks of him the way I do and hasn't yet made sense of it.

"You know who's better than Bobby?" says Burger, who has been grinning at me wildly since she walked in the door of our half-empty classroom. It is my sophomore year in college. It has been forty years since the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy.

"Who?" I say, not really interested.

She smacks her copy of Hillary Clinton's biography on my desk, a response to my sarcastic online invite the night before to join a group on Facebook called The Bobby Kennedy Fan Club. She refers to the book again during the class, implying that Hillary could have fixed the economy three months into her administration.

I've put aside my passion for politics and found the time to relax and stop debating. I've won something big for the first time in my life. Or rather, someone else has won something for me. I have been arguing against the religious right since I was thirteen, and am now twenty. The election of my life is over, and I feel as if I am entering menopause.

I know everything about the Kennedy family. I doubt if there is a single question that can be put to me on the subject of the Kennedys that I cannot answer correctly. This is something that I still don't want anyone to know, but it has gotten out. I arrived at college in 2007 with a crate of Kennedy books that I couldn't live without, though I left at home the framed pictures and posters that have counted as birthday gifts for years. People notice them on my shelves and say sarcastic things like, "Have a Kennedy fetish, do we?"

Fetish. I am not an irrational devotee, not anymore anyway. Once I couldn't care less about politics or war. My eighth grade Humanities teacher had us research the first Kennedy assassination for an upcoming class debate on whether or not there had been a conspiracy. I was known in my family for my obsessive personality, what with my love of Star Wars, Bon Jovi and The Sopranos never overlapping during their long periods of concentrated devotion.

I don't know how it began, only when and where. After 9/11 nothing and no one was sacred, except for the Kennedys. Each of them was plucked off one by one by the violence that they so gallantly wanted to extinguish in this world, and to think of what they might have done if they were not too great for this world, if they were a little less perfect.

It is now March 2009. JFK was a detached, philandering politician's politician who was great at rhetoric but meant very little and did less as President. I tell my writing professor that he is a douche bag. Bobby not only worked for Joseph McCarthy, he worshipped him, and was the epitome of blind, cruel homophobia in spite of his tireless efforts toward Civil Rights in America. Teddy is a dying old man whose sins have been overlooked in favor of honoring the longevity of his service and his status as a symbol of the golden days.

I have been fooled. I want Bobby back. I have done my reading. He was the one and he is gone. I was born in 1988 and have no sense of excitement, of revolution except for what I have seen flat and plain on the pages of books. In my own time I only know terror and the repulsion of overblown scandal.

My grandfather left my grandmother when I was a toddler, and he has been a constant source of mystery to my family ever since. No one is ever quite sure where he is or what he is doing, but he tends to appear every few years to make us all uneasy with his warped Catholicism and male lovers.

When I was fifteen he began to send me books that he had acquired since the 1960's, all of them on the subject of the Kennedy family. He

had heard from my grandmother, his ex-wife, that they had caught my interest. I also received a photograph he had taken of Bobby at a press conference in Indianapolis in 1968. He sent me an e-mail, expressing his joy that I had taken up a responsibility to my country by learning about its most recent years of glory. He told me about meeting Bobby, as a member of his Indiana campaign staff. The candidate, he said, had walked into the room in a dressing gown, yawning and scratching at his hair. He greeted them sleepily, and that was all my grandfather knew of RFK. He must have died just a few weeks later, and at the time I thought to myself that there would never be anyone better.

His name was Barack Obama, and he was the keynote speaker at the Democratic National Convention in 2004, the year that I became known in my high school as a foaming-at-the-mouth Democrat (nowadays the descriptions sway more towards the socialist or the anarchist). He was the black boy with the funny name, according to his speech, which was the first one in my entire life that made me sit up straight while it was still happening. I told my history teacher the following day that he was going to be the first black president, to which he replied, "Yeah, but he's young and naive and he won't make it." He was entirely too opinionated for a public high school teacher. When he taught us about the Vietnam War, he elaborated on instances of his own imagination in which Kennedy privately urged for the escalation of the war, seemingly striking down the haze of Kennedy's greatness.

"When people say that Vietnam would never have happened if Kennedy hadn't been shot, here's your proof that they're wrong," he said.

"National Security Memorandum 263 would disagree with you," I said, evidence Oliver Stone had given me.

It was like staring straight into a naked light bulb when walking into a room. At first, you can't see anything else. His brother, Bobby, spoke at the Democratic National Convention in 1964, where he read lines from Romeo and Juliet in tribute to the slain president. "When he shall die, take him and cut him out into little stars. And all the world will be in love with night and pay no worship to the garish sun."

Then there was the speech he gave in Indianapolis the night Martin Luther King was shot. "Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God." The entire country rioted that night, except for that city.

During the 2008 primaries, I did my homework in front of the T.V. on Tuesday nights, waiting for the returns on CNN. The re-emergence of a great speaker in American politics has caused the media to draw parallels back to the Kennedy men. They imply that none of this could have been done without these two white men, as in both their skin and the glow of their halos. I haven't said much about either of them this past year, or in quite a while, as my father noted while visiting me a few weeks before election day, when it was all but certain what was about to happen.

"Do you have something new?" he asked me. It's kind of a stupid question, which he hasn't asked since The Phantom of the Opera came out and he was forced to live with hearing the soundtrack eight hours a day. It was a brief reprieve for my parents from the constant sentences that I began with, "Did you know that Bobby...?"

"No," I said.

He assumes that Barack has taken Bobby's place, and doesn't say much more on the subject. He's wrong, as always. No one knows it but me. I have put my faith in my ideal candidate, and he has won, and I am simply waiting for him to fix everything. I have stopped panicking about the world I live in because the man I have been despising for eight years is a broken cowboy hiding in a small town.

I am bored, honestly, now that I have won.

The essentials of my Kennedy collection are *The Kennedy Women* by Laurence Leamer, *Robert Kennedy: His Life* by Evan Thomas, *Remembering Jack* by Jacques Lowe, *Make Gentle the Life of This World* by Matthew Maxwell

Taylor Kennedy, and *A Time It Was* by Bill Eppridge. The last three are photograph books. I prefer *The Kennedy Women* because it spans to the mid-nineties, unlike *The Kennedy Men*, which ends in 1963. Thomas's biography is so worn and dirty and wrinkled that I cannot call it anything less than a Bible, which is what it is for me. I bring it everywhere I go, just in case I have forgotten someone's name, or want to read something one more time.

He was a rude, angry young man, and a black and white moralist, especially on the subject of Communism, and during his prosecution of Jimmy Hoffa and other gangsters on the Senate Labor Rackets Committee. In the wake of his brother's death he could not longer be heard saying things like "absolute evilness." "How can you go and arrest somebody if they haven't violated the law?" he demanded of a racist California sheriff in 1967. When he explored a mine shaft abroad as New York Senator, he commented, "If I worked in that mine, I'd be a Communist, too."

Bobby was Senator from New York when he met Allen Ginsberg. He listened stoically as Ginsberg chanted "Hare Krishna" for him, and then asked him if he had ever tried grass. "No," Bobby said, "Whatever that means." He theorized on the Merv Griffin show in 1967 that the hippies existed in their druggy lifestyles because society had become so full of artificiality and lies that the only way to escape was to find an even more false reality that offered some relief from the first. I hate hippies, but in a way I am one of them. I refuse to accept things that are plainly true, sitting right before me.

I usually stop reading at the last chapter of Eppridge's book, which contains the photos of the assassination and the funeral. But I've seen them. Eugene McCarthy sobbing into his hands, LBJ looking over at the flag-draped coffin with an odd sense of relief and regret, Jackie in her veil again. The photos are so dark that the only thing that can be seen in each one are the half-lighted faces of the subjects and the red, white and blue of Bobby's flag.

It isn't real to me the way JFK's death was. I'm certain is hasn't happened. This future is meant to exist for only a little while before the real one takes it place, and this present becomes the past. The revolution he incited never existed, except in my imagination, in my free time. The opposite of what he wanted for his nation and mine has come to pass, and it either has been extinguished forever or it has taken forty years for it to be dug up again and electrified for my generation.

I haven't really won. I lost something before I was even born.

He thanks his dog, Freckles, first and then his wife, Ethel, noting that it's in no particular order. He smoothes his hair over, because it's longer now than it was when he was hunting Communists and gangsters. He makes a peace sign and walks off the stage, into the kitchen of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, California. I don't know what time it is. Whoever killed him is somewhere in there. At some point he ends up on the floor, bleeding, as Ethel panics and pushes the photographers away. I can see her frozen, forbidding hand in the way of the lens that took the picture sitting in between the pages of a book on my shelf. He said something. Others were shot, but survived. Outside, an attendee of the victory party is captured by a video camera signaling to a friend that Kennedy has been shot by making a gun with his hand and pointing it to his temple while nodding. He is correct. The train rolls across the country with his body aboard, a funeral train, something I've never seen or heard of happening again in my lifetime. People like me stand alongside the tracks with nothing to say.

JAMES THOMAS MILLER
Mr. State Trooper

Mid-may, late morning and the heat's already enough to pool tar on Highway 49 between Caile and Inverness. "Buck-ass naked and strung to the gills on meth," Officer Lott says, pointing to the clutch of weeds off Highway 82 where he apprehended a suspect the previous week. "The guy was soaked in swamp water, talking about how he had to get clean to meet Jesus." Lott is a Mississippi State Trooper and member of the Delta Drug Task Force. Over the last year, he's seen crystal meth-related arrests double in the area. He rolls down the cruiser's window and spits. "The guy didn't really give me any trouble. Most of them put up a pretty good fight and I have to pepper or sick Klaus on them." Klaus is Lott's German shepherd drug dog. For a rookie Trooper in the Delta, the poorest part of the second poorest state in the nation, running the K-9 unit is a sign Lott's career in law enforcement may well be on the fast track.

The Mississippi Delta is two hundred miles long and seventy miles wide at its widest point. The area traditionally considered the Delta begins just below Memphis, Tennessee and runs along the East bank of the Mississippi River to the port of Vicksburg. The first Europeans to navigate the region were the Spanish under Hernando Desoto in 1539. At this time the land was a thick quandary of impenetrable swamp and mosquito-swarmed swamps lined with small pickets of hardwoods along the ridges. Desoto and his men crossed the Mississippi River near present-day Clarksdale, claiming the land for Spain before Desoto's death and the ire of local Indian tribes forced the survivors of the expedition to scatter south down the Mississippi toward colonial Mexico. From 1543 until the end of the Revolutionary War the only real outside presence in the area were French *voyageurs*, woodsmen and traders who trapped through the area and, upon returning to New Orleans or St. Louis described the Delta as "a seething lush hell." When Mississippi became the 20th state in 1817, settlers began flooding from the east, turning into a full-on land grab after the Choctaw removal of 1820. This brought an influx of mostly Scotch-Irish settlers across the Appalachians and down the Ohio River into present-day Washington County. Clannish, wood-worn and self-sufficient, the families that eventually clawed their ways out of the hills or swamps and into the fertile bottomland did not like governmental encroachment. They wanted cheap land, cheap labor and to be left alone. By 1830 Washington County's population had risen to 1,900 people: 800 whites and 1100 slaves.

Though few white locals will admit it, the Mississippi Delta was built on the backs of slaves. The environment, stagnant heat during the summer, constant floods during the winter and spring, bred death. To be able to farm the rich, alluvial soil, slaves were forced to reclaim the burly wilderness acre by acre. A "good slave" usually lasted a couple of years at most. While fever and malaria ran rampant in both planters and slaves, the planters and their families were able to relocate upriver to the more hospitable climates of Louisville or Memphis during the siege months of summer. The slaves stayed year-round, tending the crops, building levees and clearing marshes and trees from the bottomland. The few whites that did remain were the plantation overseers and their unlucky but tough broods.

150 miles below Memphis, Highway 49 winds out of Indianola, snaking south through a hot maze of cotton fields, catfish ponds and one-stop towns with names like Isola, Inverness and Midnight. This is the lower heart of the Mississippi Delta and up until 200 years ago it was almost entirely a vast, uninhabitable canebrake roamed by trappers, rogue Choctaws and those who generally had something to hide or escape. The invention of the steamboat and cotton gin in closing decades of the 18th century transformed the Delta from a subtropical no-man's land into a proving ground for frontier capitalism in less than 30 years. Cotton became the Delta's blood, the Mississippi River its muddy jugular.

Officer Lott looks like a frat boy with a crew-cut. 27 years old, tall, muscular bordering on pudgy, he speaks with an errant twang that stalls on vowels. He's lived in the Delta his entire life. "I wouldn't say it's a nice place, maybe a good one though. I love it here." Lott brakes the cruiser to miss a stray dog that's wandered onto the highway. The cur lopes across the shoulder, down a ditch bank and into a copse of trees a few yards off the road. "Always been lots of strays around here, animal and

people. Crime's pretty bad, especially during winter when the farms shut down." The Delta's entire economy in one way or another is built around agriculture.

One cannot understand the present Mississippi Delta without first understanding the history of its plantation system tradition. Wealthy planters hired a small hierarchy of white men as overseers, who in turn watched over the crowds of working slaves. The slaves planted, cared for, and picked the valuable cotton crops. The plantation system worked wonderfully for the white elite until the onset of the Civil War. Plantations were marginally run during the war period, but not on the scale as before. The postbellum, Reconstruction economy was initially comprised of new, northern landowners, freed slaves, and a residual of former plantation owners. The southeastern United States "Black Belt", an area of high former slave concentration running from Virginia along the East and Gulf coasts in a crescent, would re-absorb the freedmen back into the post-war economic structure. The old plantation system gave way to a different, yet archaically similar device, the tenant farmer system.

The tenant farmer system revolved around the same rules as the plantation method, but with a few differences. With physical slavery gone, economic slavery came into the equation. The newly resurgent lineage of the antebellum elite had to have a labor force to make crops, and the newly-freed African-Americans had a dire need for income, so the tenant system emerged. The plantation owner gave the tenant housing, tools, seed, fuel, and limited plantation store credit, in return the tenant worked a set acreage of land from planting to picking. At the end of the year, the owner subtracted the tenant's debts and made arrangements for the next growing season. This system almost always ended in the tenant owing money to the plantation owner, thereby perpetuating the tenant's reliance. By 1950, the economic boom known as "High Cotton" was in full reign and cotton prices skyrocketed to over a dollar per pound. During this time, the segregationist, Dixiecrat government of Mississippi made sure the completely black work force stayed the way they were: rural, broke and uneducated.

Officer Lott winces at the idea of crime and racism intertwining in present-day Mississippi. "Outsiders might not get it, but there's an unwritten agreement you're born into here." Lott graduated from a 100% white private school, Indianola Academy. "I'm not saying segregation's right, but people naturally collect around others of the same." This collecting around others of the same has its consequences, the most striking being that up until 5 years ago the vast majority of criminal offenders were African-American. The advent of crystal meth changed all that quickly. "Meth is, pardon me for saying this, a white drug. I used to think all my friends, well all the people whose parents had a house like my parents, were above going to jail." This is the general consensus throughout the area. Everyone knows everyone else, with class dictating just how deeply and for what reasons. "It's [meth] not really a problem with the high school kids," Lott says. "They run a good anti-drug program over at the Academy and besides, all the students get mandatory drug tests after 9th grade. It's the ones who stay after graduation rather than go off to college, the poorer kids without much more to look forward to than working manual labor or a low-paying office job in town."

The reality is Delta culture remains an antebellum, almost feudal anachronism with only three Estates: the landed rich who basically control the economy, the wealthy merchant class who support and intermarry into the upper echelons and the black labor force. There is no real place for lower class whites except in agriculturally related service jobs. These lower class whites in the eyes of the landed "gentry" are a rung below the black labor. Farmers can always find another store to buy wrenches, fertilizer or tires. They cannot however round up an experienced tractor driver at the 7 a.m. drop of a hat. More so, the great majority of farmers and farm managers will not hire white employees for field labor. The whites won't work for the same low pay and scrap benefits the black workers readily accept.

While drugs like crack-cocaine and Oxycontin never quite grabbed a foothold in the drug culture of the Delta, crystal meth exploded, largely in part to the ballooning unemployment rate. "Cotton doesn't make half it used to," Lott says. "Soybeans, corn, rice, even catfish won't hardly make jack either." In short, this means that when the landowners no longer

make a profit the effects trickle down to the remainder of the population. Parts stores close, clothing shops go under and the houses need more paint. "Hell, one of the only ways a person can make a living around here now is crime. Either committing or stopping it. Not much else in between." In 2005 the State of Mississippi and the DEA confiscated over 50 kilos of meth and busted almost 200 meth labs. While this is a huge gain over the 469 labs busted in 2002, the amount of kilos confiscated is yet to decrease as drastically, most likely because Mississippi's neighbors to the west and north, Arkansas and Tennessee, netted over 400 and 800 each last year. This means one of two things, either fewer labs are being found or more meth is driving its way into the Hospitality State.

The underarms of Officer Lott's smoke gray uniform are pitted with sweat. Even though his cruiser is fully air conditioned and smells new, bar the lingering scent of Klaus, he likes to ride the slower roads with his window rolled down. "You can smell a meth lab way before you'd ever get close to seeing it," he says. "It's a God-awful, industrial stink that'll take the breath out of your chest." Lott agrees with the general consensus of the DEA that meth is being imported into the Delta. "Look, the shit's easy to make, no doubt. The hard part is hiding where you cook it up without a sheriff, deputy, farmer, entomologist or anybody with a sense of smell noticing. All the open land here is in crops, so folks are checking it pretty much every day." Lott pulls off Highway 49 and drives through the small town of Inverness, a town with 2 traffic lights, 1 convenience store and an inordinate amount of houses with American flags stuck in their well-landscaped lawns. He points to homes of people he knows, girls he dated, guys he played football with at Indianola Academy. At the edge of town Klaus barks from behind the black cage separating the cruiser's front and back and Lott turns onto a gravel road, coasts a few hundred feet past the last house in Inverness proper and stops on a dirt turn-row. "Klaus needs to make some water," he says. Lott opens the back driver side door and Klaus jumps out of the car, walks to a row of cotton and hikes his leg.

Lott spent his first year as a trooper in Tallahatchie County, a half hill half Delta county an hour from Indianola. Even in Mississippi, a state not exactly renown for pioneering civil rights and libertine views, Tallahatchie County is considered the rough country, insular and weary of outsiders. The county is one of the furthest from the Mississippi River and therefore received the least alluvial deposits that make the western Delta counties' land so fertile. In the hill half of the county, the ground is un-farmable and used mostly for pasture. Tallahatchie County received national attention in 1955. Emmett Till was murdered, chained to a gin fan and thrown into the Tallahatchie River. The subsequent trial by an all white jury found the white defendants not guilty.

For Lott, being stationed in Tallahatchie County was like traveling back in time 50 years, with the added bonus of a rampant meth epidemic. Compounding the move was Lott's new wife and the housing furnished by the county. "They gave us a trailer next to a swamp. Neither of us had ever lived in a trailer. Jenny didn't want to and I can't blame her," he says. While Lott's domestic life was less than perfect, the move did offer him a crash course in the basics of being trooper and more importantly, detecting the signs of crystal meth. "Those are some country people," Lott says. "I pulled over a couple hillbillies who not only didn't have a driver's license, they acted like they'd never heard of one." They had, however, heard of meth. "They were acting funny, kept scratching their arms and necks. Eyes red as a stop sign. I found 2 grams of crystal on them." When crystal meth first swept into Mississippi in the mid-90s, it spread like kudzu down from Memphis into the northern hill counties before branching into the Delta. "You couldn't ask for a better place to set up a meth lab," Lott says. "Sparsely populated, lots of gullies and hills far away from anything, then add in the high unemployment rate." Lott quickly learned he not only enjoyed busting people for meth, but he was also good at it. "I got nominated for Trooper of the Year in 2004. First rookie to do so in Mississippi." Lott's career success took its toll on his domestic life though. The more he patrolled looking for labs the less time he spent with his wife. The less time he spent with his wife, the more they argued. The arguments usually ended with him leaving the trailer to patrol at odd hours in the night. They divorced after less than a year. "I guess something good

did come out of it. If Jenny and I were fighting, I'd drive around pissed off, just looking for a reason to pull somebody over. Weird thing is meth dealers and users tend to be pretty nocturnal beings."

As Lott's late night cruising of Tallahatchie County's rural, two lane highways garnered him more and more busts, he began to build up a reputation as somewhat of a hardass. When he went to Charleston, the county seat, preachers shook his hand at the grocery store. Older ladies left cakes and brownies on the porch of his trailer. He was even invited to join the local country club. "It struck me as odd, asking a guy who lives in a trailer and makes less than most teachers to be in the country club." All this changed when Lott arrested the son of a fairly prominent local family for meth paraphernalia. The hospitality dried up almost overnight. Lott was quickly reminded that while Tallahatchie County may not have the neo-Victorian mansions of Greenwood or Indianola, the people still acted like Deltans and naturally rallied around the hometown boy. "I got calls from the same preachers who shook my hand for busting nobodies. They'd tell me the guy was troubled and needed a break, that he was going to rehab and couldn't have this on his record or he wouldn't get into Ole Miss Law School. Funny how a little influence and string pulling can make a difference." Rumors circulated around Charleston that the reason for Lott's success wasn't his doggedness; he was in on the take and receiving tips from competing meth dealers. Ostracized by the locals, wifeless and living in a trailer, Lott applied for a transfer on the merit of his arrests. Within a month, he was back in Indianola.

Klaus emerges from the cotton and jumps in the back of the cruiser and Lott shuts the door and begins to drive west down the gravel road toward Indianola. Cotton surrounds the car for as far as one can see, with the exception of a few pickets of trees and the slanted telephone poles that edge the road. "Can't really hide much here," Lott says. "The only big forests are federal wildlife refuges and you'd have to be retarded to put a meth lab in one of them. They'd put you under the jail, or just shoot you." Lott laughs and points to a white, oblong tank sitting next to a sheet metal barn and some tractors. "That's why the meth has to be brought in. Farmers don't use anhydrous ammonia anymore. That was only real reason to brave setting up a lab around here, readily available ingredients." This is a prime factor in the receding of meth production back into the hills of north Mississippi. The sprawling Delta farms use larger numbers of more technically modern equipment and can buy granular or liquid fertilizer made from urea in bulk at a discount. The smaller hill farms rely on anhydrous because it's cheaper in small quantities and older equipment doesn't need modification to put it out. All an aspiring meth cook has to do is wait until the middle of the night and siphon off a few gallons.

As much as the Delta's location as a crossroads of Mississippi is a blessing, it's also its biggest liability. Highway 61, the legendary blues trail, runs north and south from New Orleans to St. Louis, following the Mississippi River through the entirety of the Delta. Highway 82 runs east to west from the Atlantic to White Sands, New Mexico and serves as the traditional boundary splitting the northern and southern halves of the Delta. The roads intersect like the crosshairs of a rifle scope 15 miles west of Indianola. Meth is trucked in west from Texas and Arkansas via the river bridges at Greenville and Helena. Highway 61 offers dealers a direct shot to Memphis and even worse, Missouri, the corroded buckle of the Midwest's meth belt. Last year over 2,000 labs were raided in Missouri alone, more than Arkansas, Alabama, Tennessee and Mississippi combined. Truckers, along with bikers the main purveyors of speed culture over the last half century, not only make extra cash transporting the drug, they also get a free personal stash for their troubles. Random load checks by state law enforcement does slow the smuggling a bit, but every 18-wheeler can't be searched and for each cache of meth seized, scores more go unnoticed.

The gravel road curves through 5 more miles of cotton fields before coming to Highway 49 on the outskirts of Indianola. Lott fidgets with the squelch on his radio. It's just after 1 p.m., the worst part of the day in Delta when the wind stops shuffling and the whole landscape sags from humidity. Lott decides to get lunch and drives toward Indianola for barbecue. "Everything shuts down here at lunch. It's too miserable to be

outside," he says. The road is almost devoid of traffic, except for a dented Chevy Astro pulled on the shoulder. Lott slows the cruiser beside a thin, stubble-bearded guy in painter's overalls standing on the side of the highway beside the ancient van. The man shirtless, but his white overalls suggest Jackson Pollock with a grease gun. "You need some help?" Lott says. "'Preciate it, " the man answers with his hand at his temple, blocking his eyes and the sun. Since the backseat is Klaus's domain, Lott offers to drive back to Inverness and fill the jug.

"This is a pretty big part of the job." Lott taps off the jug, put it in the trunk and wipes his hands with Gojo, a Purell-on-steroids cleaner popular with farmers and mechanics. "Helping folks. Most cops play up the SWAT team shit and that's fine. Whatever gets the job done. Truthfully, it's like most jobs. Lots of waiting, then all out or get out." A few more trucks are on the highway. In the bleary, heat-waved distance around the patrol car, tractors kick up little roosters' tails of dust as they hulk forward through the flat green shag of the fields, another summer. "But," Lott says. "Buying this fella gas, means I got to help him get his truck running, which means I also get a look at what's in there." Lott smiles a bit and stops the patrol car a few yards behind the van. The driver leans off the bumper and flicks his cigarette into the dry Johnson grass weaving along the county drainage ditch downhill from the shoulder. "Can't thank you enough," he says, "it's hot as hell out here." Lott pops the trunk and opens his door, "Suppose to be even hotter tomorrow."

KAYLA MILLER
Notes Upon the Topography of Scar Tissue

Bright threads of red weave their way through the clear water filling the sickly yellow bathtub. The sound of water pouring from the spigot is deafening, echoing off the plastic tub-and-shower walls and reverberating into the rest of the small room. The walls are blue. The door is locked. I drop the razor and listen as it thuds lightly to the bottom of the tub, then I lean back and let the boiling water run over my size 11 feet. I am fifteen. I am taking a bath. And I just finished slicing a deep line into my calf.

It is something that I do now, daily. It is something that I do in the bathtub, because the water rinses the blood away so that I do not have to dirty up a handful of paper towels. I am taking several baths a day, and each bath usually results in a total of four or five cuts, progressively deeper, on my thighs, my forearms, my calves, my chest. Neat lines, never jagged, never crooked, ordered in a row. I used to slit my wrists, but was eventually found out.

My world revolves around my secret, my shameful, my joyous, my triumphant cutting. To avoid the tearful eyes examining my wounded wrists, my deep lines on top of faded pink scars and freshly-scabbed-over cuts, I have learned the tricks of the trade. I know when to cut (when my mother is cooking), I know where to cut (in the bathtub, in places on my body that will never be seen by another human being), I know how to cut (when I began cutting, I used a serrated steak knife. I now use a razor). Practice makes perfect.

It has been said that many cutters relish the rituals, the processions, which they enact when they self-mutilate. I have heard this, but cannot attempt to speak for the masses (because there are, in fact, masses of us). I do know that I adore the feeling of electricity on the tips of my fingers, knowing that I am about to cut my body, preparing for it. I take the razor from its hidden place (behind my books on my bookshelf, where I have also hidden:

Xanax pills a friend gave me.
A pack of cigarettes.
Every dollar I own saved up in a glass mason jar.
Ecstasy.
Half-empty bottles of Jack Daniels and Crown Royal.)

I take a moment and feel every unseen item resting behind A.A. Milne's "When We Were Very Young." My hands run over each one, lovingly and desperately, to be sure that they are still there, unfound. With the razor cupped in my palm, I walk down the short hallway, and enter the bathroom with a rush of adrenaline and a mounting sense of excitement. I lock the feeble door, which feels like plastic and not wood, but I'm unsure if they make doors out of plastic. Perhaps plywood? Particle board?

Turn on the faucet (check). Place the razor on the rim of the tub (check).

(At this point, every fiber of my being hums, sings; every tendon pulls taut, priming for the moment.)

Pull off several sheets of toilet paper (check). Shut the toilet's lid (check). Lay the folded sheets on top of the toilet for later use (check). The tub fills quickly, and when it reaches its halfway point, I strip and step in hurriedly. I do not like to look at myself naked—do not like to think of myself naked—so this step is best left for last.

(After the pleasure wears off and the blood flow ebbs, I pick up the razor, delicately, from the floor of the bathtub. I rinse it and set it back on the tub's edge. I linger in the water; when I decide to get out, I immediately place the toilet paper on the fresh gashes and let it stick there while I get myself a towel.)

Rituals, processions. The secret world of the cutter. I have only heard this. I am unsure.

***

I wake up and read the clock: it stares back at me, telling me that it is 10:30 a.m. in red. I am sleeping in my Nana's bed with my little sister, Tesla. She is still asleep, but I am now awake. I am awake and she is asleep

and I take a fleeting moment to enjoy this because she is so loud when she is awake. It is Wednesday. I am ten years old and it is Wednesday and it is 10:30 a.m. and I know that I am supposed to be in school, in my fourth-grade class, in Ms. Kelly's fourth-grade class.

My Nana was supposed to wake Tesla and I up. She is eight and I am ten and we do not go to the same elementary school, but we both have school, nonetheless. It is April 20, 1999. I do not know when hurricane season is, but I assume we had a hurricane during the night and school was cancelled and that is why we were not woken up. My Nana watches the news every morning while she drinks her coffee from a bowl. She would have known if school was cancelled, and she would have let us sleep.

I am exuberant. I jump across the bed, hop to the window. I expect to see large chunks of the enormous pine tree in our front yard (the yard's lone tree) strewn about the grass. I see only the same boring thing I have seen from this window a million times.

I explain the confusing situation to Tesla and we are both excited, happy to be out of school, even if the reason is unknown. We walk downstairs.

My mother sitting next to me.
My uncle's blue eyes peeping out from a scraggly beard.
Hands, constant hands, wanting, needing, all over me, consoling.
They want too much.
My father is dead.

My father is thirty-two years old and I am ten and Tesla is eight and my mother is forty-four and my Nana is sixty-two and I do not know my uncle's age, but he is in his thirties.

My father is dead.
He was killed in a car accident.
He was with my other grandmother. She is dead.

I called her Grandmillie, because as a child I could not say "Grandmother Miller," (which, for some reason, is what she wanted me to call her).

They are dead.

(The hands come back, and the salt, and screaming,
screaming,
screaming.)

***

By the time I am sixteen, I have tried to kill myself three times.

The first was the night after I heard of my father's death. I laid down, very still, very quiet, under the bathwater in my Nana's tub. I decided I would lay there and die. Perhaps a minute or two later, I raise my head and take in gasping breaths.

The second time, I resolved to hang myself from my ceiling fan. I am fifteen, and I tie an extension cord around my neck and stand on a kitchen chair underneath the ceiling fan in my bedroom. I am six feet tall, and we have short ceilings, and I am unsure.

The third time...
we shall not talk about the third time.

***

I am drinking, and driving, and leaving home for days. I am sixteen, and I hate my mother. I am having sex with strangers, I am tempted to try cocaine. I cannot feel, I cannot feel. The bright red lines dig deeper, the screaming louder.

***

It is two weeks before I am able to leave the house after my father's death. The first Sunday after the two weeks had passed, my mother takes me to church. We have never been to church before, have never talked about god. I have never even been interested. I have never even wondered.

My mother takes me to church to help me heal. She takes me to church to make me believe in god. She says that she has always believed, but I

think she lies. We walk through the doors of a tiny church sitting atop a steep hill, and I hear nothing but shouting. We are greeted by women with too much makeup, lipstick on their teeth, smiling too-big smiles. A woman hands me a service packet, and I take it so she will stop looking at me.

We walk through the doors into the sanctuary. I hit a wall of noise:
Hands waving in the air.
Adults rolling down the aisles.
A live band, "rocking out" in the name of the lord.
Mouths open, tongues wagging, prayers shouted in nonsense languages.
I think this funny, hysterical. And terrifying.

We find seats near the back. They are singing songs about god forgiving all sins. I am not singing. After five minutes of standing there, I look to my mother. Her eyes are closed, her hands raised, tears of emotion streaking her face, mumbling something under her breath. She is at home. She is at home here, and I am even more terrified because that is not my mother, she is not my mother because my mother does not act this way, has never acted this way.

(Many years later, my much older sister told me that our mother never acted that way. She had never been to church in her adult life. I can barely remember the person she was before the power of christ compelled her.)

A tall balding man makes his way to the front, and implores the congregation to please, please, in the name of jesus, come to the front if they want to rededicate their lives to god. My mother grabs my hand, pulling me through the rows and down the aisles. I scream, I pull back. I plant my 10-year-old feet in the carpet, and she pulls them out from underneath me. She pushes her way to the front. The pastor himself scurries towards us, smelling fresh meat, eyes dilated, pupils huge and black and shiny. My mother thrusts me forward and cries in his ear: her father, her father, I have been a terrible mother, oh, she just lost her father.

Oil on my forehead.

Both of his huge hands devouring my face (they are hot, sweaty).
He is yelling to me.
Your heavenly father is alive and well.
Jesus will always be your daddy.

His hungry hands push my forehead with surprising force, because I am only ten, and he is pushing my head, causing me to fall backwards. My mother catches me, and I am shocked. I am outraged. This man pushed me down.

Hands, hands all over me, touching, anointing. Strangers' hands.
Blessing, cursing, exorcising, for I am unwell.

I realize on the walk back to my seat that my mother is still standing there, being slathered with oil and prayed over. He pushes her forehead, she falls backwards, and two men come by to drape a crimson piece of cloth over her lower half. I look down the line of the altar. There are at least twelve women lying like this, eyes closed, twitching, arms bent at the elbow, hands raised beside their faces. They are all crying, and they all have crimson cloths on their lower halves. They lay there, with everyone's eyes on them, and my mother is one of them.

(I later learned that this is called being "slain in the spirit," and the cloths are to keep women's skirts from flying up and revealing their femininity while they are being slain by the spirit. My stepfather once said that it was silly, ridiculous, because if god was going to slay them, don't you think god would keep their skirts in order?)

My mother shakes, cries out, and I am transfixed. She looks like a turtle on its back, she looks like she is seizing, she looks like she's having an epileptic fit, she looks unwell. She is in ecstasy.

I walk past my seat, out of the sanctuary, out of the parking lot. I walk
walk, until
I
run.

***

When I am fifteen, when I am sixteen, when I am seventeen, even, I manage to be unnoticed and unnoticeable to the rest of the world. It is yet another skill attained along the way. Unobtrusive Kayla, smiling and polite. Underneath her T-shirt, blood-soaked bits of toilet paper are taped to her skin.

***

My mother has never forgiven me for my years of needing to feel.

All of my poetry, all of my prose, my diary entries and my secret items, uncovered and laid bare, looking sad and pathetic and small.

I have heard that after a severe burn, the kind that covers the entire body and requires a skin graft, the pain does not come from the burns. It has been said that the pain does not come from the burns but from the growth of the new skin. This is the reason they numb the patient, induce a coma, put them to sleep for hours,

days,

weeks.

(I have only heard this. I am unsure.)

Megan Scott

Elapid

Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Subphylum: Vertebrata
Class: Reptilia
Order: Squamata
Suborder: Serpentes
Family: Elapidae
Genus: Ophiophagus
Species: hannah

***

Imagine leaning forward, standing on your feet. Imagine leaning forward so far that your entire body is a rigid bar parallel to the floor. You lean forward so far that the tips of your shoes are the only contact you have with the ground. Your body—every flexing, strong muscle in your body—is so powerful that you can hold yourself outward without having to hold yourself outward. You are now a snake. Don't bother to fear yourself.

***

Snakes have appeared in mythology quite possibly since the creation of mythology. In some accounts, such as the Eden story involving Adam and Eve and the fall of all mankind, the snake is portrayed as a vile creature. One which will 'strike at the heel.' In this portrayal, serpents are evil because they have the ability to bite and kill humans in a rather unpleasant manner. (One snake wrangler on Animal Planet described being bitten by a Gaboon Viper—the largest and arguably most beautiful viper known to human records—as similar to having stuck his hand in a fire and having kept it there for three days).

Other accounts, such as the anthropomorphic snake god found in ancient Mayan religions, portray the snake as a symbol of healing. This trend probably arose from the serpent's ability to shed its skin, a process of growth and rejuvenation. (Perhaps rejuvenation is not the correct word. Snakes are not better off after shedding, except for fitting literally into their own skin. Shedding is actually an uncomfortable and vulnerable time for the snake, since their eyes are temporarily blinded and their movements offered less flexibility). The trend may also have roots in the old practice of using snake venom in various medicines.

But myths involving snakes always have one element in common: power. The power to kill or the power to save. Strange idea really, considering most snakes do not carry venom. (Nine of thirteen snake families do not have any venomous members). Yet, the fascination with serpents and their power over human kind remains, and I am a victim of its lure. You will find little information about non-venomous snakes in this essay.

***

There is a tea café close to my home in Peachtree City, Georgia, a cozy little nook in an overly fancy shopping center, meant for the pretended high-brow middle-aged business workers and the young students who don't care enough if they are seen sipping Oolong in their sweats. Square tables fill the dim-lit room, bars of polished wood under walls of reddish-purple paint. Dark shelves line two quarters of the walls, full of polished tea sets and expensive boxes of nasty unrefined chocolate made without delicious artificial sweeteners. Handsome waiters and waitresses craft your order, leaning over the counter with long flowing hair and perfectly smooth skin, looking wonderfully earthy with their soft dark clothes and tiger-eye necklaces, damaging the almost surreal environment when they open their mouths to discuss all-too-mundane Star Trek and keg parties.

My friends and I have never been high-brow, but we still qualify under the young. On a reunion during our various colleges' autumn break, we enjoyed (along with the employed elite with their laptops and elegant sweaters) choosing a type of tea from the rows of gleaming labeled tins behind the counter. The air in the café was so thick with the aroma of tea that you could lap at the atmosphere and drink. The waitress cleared the

accessories—our tan napkins and sandy-mud-colored stirring straws—from the middle of our small lacquered table while my three friends watched while I shuffled.

My clumsy fingers are not suited for sophisticated pastimes, such as conquering the ivory and onyx piano keys, but the deck of cards—any deck of cards—mold to my hands ready to be danced, slipped, split, and rejoined. We played Cheat and Golf as we blew across our cups, lids off, theirs liquid light amber and mine a dark brown. Smoky and rich.

Fruit does not belong in tea. Swallowing fruit in tea tastes like gulping down handfuls of bitter petals after being forced to chew on the root. I like the heavier flavors of black teas that smoothly grace one's palate on the slither downwards. My friends all chose fruit flavored teas—Mirage, Tangerine Passion, and Acai.

No-one at the table agreed with me that fruit does not belong in tea. But they did all agree that my tea tasted the best—flavored with sugar, not honey, like theirs. Honey is too thick, ironically bringing too bitter an earthy flavor to the liquid along with its sweetness. I am different from my friends in many ways, I know, but we are all different from each other.

***

Stephanie, Nettie, and Kit were the other bodies embodying the chairs around our gleaming table. Stephanie had been my friend since Kindergarten, Nettie since my junior year in high school (her sophomore year), and Kit as Nettie's boyfriend when she brought him through my door an hour before (he dutifully played with the kitten I thrust in his hands with the command to love on the mewing furball).

Random questions are common in our conversations, no matter where the conversations take place. (If you had the power over one element, what would it be? If you had one superpower, what would it be? If you had to be something squished against a window, what would it be?) I threw out to the table, along with two tens and a deceptive queen in Cheat, "If you were an animal, what would you be?".

Stephanie said a gazelle, which complimented her elegant grace and cautious, yet amicable, nature. Nettie said a dolphin, perfect for her playfulness and intelligence, her need to be surrounded by other people. Kit said a cat, adorably suiting his laid-back and perhaps sulky personality—no wonder he did not protest me handing him my feline charge before we left my house towards the café.

It was the Gazelle who later turned the question back on me with her large and gentle brown eyes.

***

While my fingers deal and accept in the pit-pat-slap rhythm of paper on wood, while my mouth is moving around words to partake in their conversation and my lips are smiling at what they say, my other self is beneath the table, coiled around the metal bar, flicking out my forked tongue at each shift in their feet. I am a snake. An Elapid of the family Elapidae, kin to the mamba and the cobra and the coral and the krait. I exist on two separate levels. Breathing in, I join the others at the table. Breathing out, I am a sinuous line of steel flesh encircling the entire room within my enfolding and binding hold. With each breath, I grow larger, expand farther, twist and turn around every human and object in the dark room filled with the smells of a thousand plantations in a hundred nations, cared for by a million different hands which a generous number of my brethren will bite before the café fades into the obscurity of memory. The torso and the hands of my body above the table are taunt, but my arms are useless and flop onto the table. Snakes have no need for such limbs.

***

I told Stephanie that I would be a serpent, a King Cobra to be exact. The Gazelle knowingly laughed and groaned at me, knocking against the wood of our polished square, signifying her mastery of our latest round of Golf.

***

Why did the Gazelle shudder as she groaned at me? (My snake self saw the tremble of her spine reach her feet with a shake). Does she irrationally fear snakes too? And yes, the fear of snakes for Americans is irrational. Only .2% of people who are bitten by snakes in America will die from the bite, according to a survival guidebook I read for a speech given in Communications 103 about using snake venom to cure cancer. That totals about 9 to 15 Americans per year who will die from snakebite. (Random facts about serpents have flitted through my life since the first time I laid eyes on a living snake—as opposed to the rubber one my best friend and I used to scare my cousin (who was 46 while we were 8) in a masterful symphony of screams and pallid faces—underneath my aunt's porch. It was a harmless king snake, a Colubrid—most of which are not venomous, except for those incredibly deadly few including the Boomslang, which was referenced in the first Harry Potter book as an ingredient for a body-altering potion—and I peered down at it for a long time, wondering when my aunt had bought a black hose with a yellow stripe down the side. Upon asking my aunt, she peered as well, and promptly flipped out in an overly dramatic fashion).

Approximately one thousand and five hundred Americans die from cancer every day (this fact is from the North Carolina State University medical website). That's around five hundred forty-seven thousand and five hundred Americans every year. (Last I knew, my aunt didn't run screaming off the porch because someone beneath the porch had cancer).

***

I once was bitten by a snake, a small little garden serpent with a black body encircled with yellow bands, wrapped around the fingers of a middle school science teacher for whom I was cleaning tables. It didn't hurt—he didn't yet have any teeth—it was more like how a baby will gum your knuckle hoping for breast milk. His tongue and fleshy mouth moved against my skin in that same soft way which leaves you wondering if anything touched you at all. The only difference was that the snake was using his whole physical self, all those winding, coiling, twisting, flexing powerful muscles, in attempt to harm me. He desperately tried to tear at my skin, to rip at my epidermis in order to inflict pain, his mouth stretching around my finger in bite after bite after bite. Not in a repeating striking pattern, but in a manner in which he tried to sink non-existent fangs into a steady hold. Perhaps his instincts had yet to tell him that he did not yet have the pointed weapons necessary to harm me.

I envied his power to control his body and his fear. As his exotic black scales gleaming under the florescent lights, I was overjoyed, fascinated, and speechless.

***

Back in the teashop, over our displayed cards, the boy, the only boy, at our table did not want to continue our game because he was losing, and I tightened my coiling body around his neck in a tight squeeze, a split second of anger which I could not tame immediately. If it had been one of the girls, my snake self would not have reacted so, but since he was male, all of me is prejudiced. Not naturally so, but some females learn to hate men at an early age.

***

At a graduation party for a friend in high school, I sat at a table beside her pool with three of her other friends, despite my long-time phobia of drowning, encouraged by my fascination of watching droplets of water roll down the bare black back of her brother, catching the sunlight of the afternoon like mica catches light in dark soil, wishing that my Scot-Irish skin would catch more than a sunburn and flea bites from her dog's little friends.

At the corner of the pool next to a chain-link fence, an obsidian undulation caught my eye, the sun rippling off of the waving form, practically

highlighting the pattern of the scales from fifteen feet away. The other girls at the table denied that this beautiful black cable of sinew was a snake, until a curious black head popped up above the grass, peeking at the swimmers and us. The other girls at the table quickly left, running towards the house in high-pitched screams, toppling chairs in their fear. I ran to the snake in my excitement, happy watching him race from me against the fence, racing with him until I blinked and he had expertly hidden himself away from my sight.

He did not want me there, no more than I wanted to be at a party surrounded by young women listening to degrading music blasting out slurs like 'nigger' and 'stupid whores,' dancing with rocking hips to the music, and talking about boring things like boyfriends, beauty, and food. I wanted to join the snake, to be him, to be different and hated just for my form instead of my standoffish and closed personality.

***

The grip my coils have around the Cat's neck relaxed after a few moments, sliding away in a long progression of scales which brushed along his pale skin. Despite this brief moodiness, he is a friendly character, and I trusted him from the beginning to treat my friend well in their romantic journey. As I relaxed, breathing out, I wondered as I breathed in what he would look like if I shaved off his tangles of stringy orange hair (and I do mean *orange*) covering his head and face (the guy has a beard as that reaches to his sternum). Cats aren't very adorable when shaved. The thought made me smile at him. (Not my snake self. Snakes do not smile. Those afraid of serpents would die of fright). Could I explain to him in words why I was smiling? No. That would have required a vocal mastery I did not possess. But he smiled back anyway.

***

Throughout my life, I have never been able to talk well in social situations containing more than two people. My voice cannot escape the phlegm that suddenly spills into my mouth; my words which come too easily and too unchecked on the page will never ring strong into the open air of the public arena. (A page is like sand. You can slither by, leaving an impression, without anyone else noticing you were once there. No-one pays much attention to the dirt beneath their feet).

In my twelfth-grade AP English Literature class, the situation became worse as I was expected to academically converse in a room containing nine people and a woman teacher who rattled with her dozens of sparking gold bracelets when she walked. At the beginning of the school year, I made a mistake in allowing too many secretive details about my past seep into a non-fiction exercise. From my allusions, she had the faint possibly of knowing throughout two agonizing semesters that some horrid flame-haired brat beat me up on a regular basis in my youth. She possibly knew when I wanted so desperately to forget, serving as a constant, rattling reminder. And I could not speak.

***

My inability to make my voice work reminded me of looking into a Cottonmouth's mouth. Those long rows of white flesh stretching from fang to throat, those pockets of pale tissue on the side of the cheeks, making the tongue nearly unrecognizable if it weren't for the shockingly black breathing tube located directly under for the moments when the serpent needed to breathe when swallowing its food. Like the frog my stepfather heard croaking out by the lake when he went fishing. A Copperhead was swallowing the frog from the head down and the frog was yelling out from inside its throat.

I chose to describe my mouthy problem as "Cottonmouth" not because the description is accurate. The Cottonmouth—Water Moccasin—*Agkistrodon piscivorus* is a stout-bodied member of the Viperdae family, a specimen endowed with hemotoxic venom, which is designed specifically to attack red blood cells and start digesting a body from the inside out. Unfortu-

nately, my spit does not perform such wonders. But since I do not currently know what it feels like to have a white, puffy, front-fanged mouth, I will associate the imagined sensation of having such a mouth to the feeling I had in English class—and in every class afterward. Now, every time I am called upon by a professor and my thoughts scatter and my voice pitches in a high manner too uncomfortable for a natural alto and my hands tremble and my body sweats and most of all my mouth refuses to cooperate in the way so many others cooperate for their masters in clear, fluid, and succinct steps I call it "Cottonmouth".

***

The description rings of the association versus accommodation idea, courtesy Piaget, explained to me in simple terms by a lovely psychology professor with a musk-flavored Lifesaver candy. According to Piaget, association is the process of using models to make sense of new experiences and accommodation is the process of changing a model in result of new information acquired through assimilation. (I will later butcher Piaget's theory to explain away a few things about my serpent obsession, so if you are interested in relating the topic to others, quote someone else). To demonstrate Piaget's cognitive theory, my perky professor asked for volunteers to try the musk-flavored Lifesaver, and I raised my hand—proud of myself for doing so, although I have yet to repeat that process. She asked us volunteers what the clouded grey-colored sugar ring tasted like. The class offered:

Gym socks

(Why would this idiot have ever tasted his socks?)

My grandmother

(Not that this male student had ever bitten, licked, or eaten his grandmother).

What roses smell like

(Actually, a wonderfully accurate description. Not given by me. I was quietly attempting not to gag, even though my cheeks were turning inside out. Musk in Lifesavers to me tastes very similar to fruit in tea).

Perfume

(Please contact the poison control center at 1-800-222-1222).

Herbal cough medicine

(The most logical, although perhaps the most disgusting to those like myself who cannot easily swallow medicine, being forced to taste it again and again as it keeps rising back up to the tongue).

My armpit

(Is that even physically possible? Try someone else's armpit).

Something dead

(Most things we eat are dead. Hopefully. The most undead thing I have ever eaten was raw beef from a Japanese restaurant which did not take the kindness to describe their beef as raw on their menu. Snakes often eat animals which are alive. Most usually paralyzed from the venom, or almost completely suffocated. My favorite species of snake, the King Cobra, has the Latin name *Ophiophagus hannah*. "Ophiophagus" means "snake eater." It is not uncommon for snakes to occasionally eat snakes of other species, but the King Cobra's main diet is of serpents and will even prey upon other King Cobras, which is uncommon. Does this knowledge scare you? Make the *Ophiophagus hannah* seem monstrous? It shouldn't. Despite the cannibalistic reputation which may coincide with these facts, King Cobras are the only species of snake which build nests for their young. The mother will incubate and protect her eggs right up until they are born, when she leaves so her natural instinct to consume will not overpower her instinct to care for her young).

We were told we then knew what musk tasted like—'we' being the volunteers, not those in the class who did not volunteer. We were now accommodated to musk because we had assimilated different terms to the flavor. If we ever were to try something else in the flavor of musk, we would know it was musk because we would already know what musk tasted like. Like how chocolate is chocolate. You don't use other tastes to describe the taste of chocolate.

***

So, my mouth when I don't—can't—talk is Cottonmouth. A Cottonmouth is a cottonmouth is a cotton mouth that someone slammed against the concrete with a freckled fist then later onto forced a kiss. Why call it anything else? Why call it anything closer to the truth? Why accommodate when I can assimilate?

But a Cottonmouth is not an Elapid, which I was underneath the table in the little café back in the high-brow building in the small town of Nowhere, Georgia. (Perhaps above it, but not below it). I would much rather be an Elapid than a member of the Viperdae family. Do not get me wrong—I find all snake species interesting in their own right. But if given a choice, Vipers are lower on the evolutionary scale than Elapids. They are more aggressive, not as fast, and incredibly fat.

The King Cobra is arguably the most intelligent of snakes, as it is the only known species in captivity capable of distinguishing their caretakers from other people. Forgive me for desiring that intelligence in my second self.

***

When I was six years old, I had the privilege of moving next door to my own living nightmare. He was seven years old, red-headed, and mean. (I refuse to use the phrase 'as mean as a snake.' Snakes do not have personalities developed enough to be mean, vindictive, or cruel). Before my family's new house was built, I was dropped off at his driveway after school every day so his mother could baby-sit me before my sister arrived home and so my little nightmare and I could 'play'. Too bad our 'play' usually meant me getting beaten up, yelled at, or made fun of, no matter how hard I tried to please my red-headed 'friend.' (During school, all of my fingers would be crossed over each other like mating King Cobras, dancing in their hope for continued survival.)

Over time, my young brain had the capacity to notice when I was being beaten up, it went somewhere outside of my body. I existed in two places at once. One place painful, the other place calm. One place with him, one place alone. Eventually, the separation of self refused to reunite again. Even after we moved away, lost contact with the nightmare and his family, I still retained that other consciousness, especially during rough periods in my life. Perhaps it is my cotton mouth which continues to keep my body and my other self separated in the realms of reality and imagination, since the two forms cannot fit over each other at the lips, the teeth, and the throat.

Years after the fact, I suppose my other self got tired of being nameless. It demanded its own identity. Not knowing how to address it, not yet being accommodated to the concept of psychological disassociation, I assimilated the form of the snake to my other self. And why not? I loved snakes, though most people hated them. Snakes could protect themselves. Snakes could kill anything that tried to hurt them. It would be cool to be a snake.

***

Although my snake self is always present, nowadays it is a rare occurrence for it to be as active as it was at the café. I wondered to myself as we packed up the cards exactly why my snake was so vividly present during the whole encounter. At no point was I in danger, and except for the fleeting mental spat with Kit, I was not unhappy. Perhaps it was the hazy atmosphere, or the odd feeling of being old enough to visit with 'old friends from the high-school days.'

Perhaps I am healing. Perhaps I have accepted the reason behind the snake, allowing it to finally share in the happy moments of my life.

As we gathered up to leave for Stephanie's car, my Lady Grey tea splashed against my palate, finally cool enough to savor in long swallows rather than sips, its hot and tiny particles having floated up into the chilled air of the shop. The liquid loosened up the thick white gunk in my mouth enough for me to roll it around with my tongue, pressing it against my bloody red cheeks.

ROGER SOLLENBERGER
Alternate Routes

We've all been better people, for one reason or another.

I'm 24, and I'm making a two-hour trip to my parents' house to wait for the mail. I need to intercept a speeding ticket so my mom won't find out I've racked up yet another one. This trip would be unnecessary, but after moving out of my childhood home I've been too listless to register my new address with the Virginia DMV. I look down through the steering wheel: I'm speeding. Surely I've been a better person than this.

When I was 17, less than an hour after getting my first speeding ticket, I dialed my mom long distance. It was Thanksgiving. I was with my girlfriend, Julia, visiting her grandparents, and she came with me when I carried the phone down the hallway, out of earshot of the adults. Julia had unfolded her arms and hugged me as she heard my mom's voice rising on the other side of the handset. It was a trying time for a seventeen-year-old honor student. But when all was said and done, I did the right thing and confessed. Why?

When I got that first ticket—a drizzling November morning, doing 19 over on a wide and sloping interstate—I'd been upset. Six hours in a Saturn, a losing scratch-and-win at the border—of course I was speeding. Naturally I was speeding. But my disappointment in myself had been inverted, subverted, and turned into guilt or something useful.

It is better, I think, when we have somebody to be better for: surely we won't let the both of us down. I was a better person for my first girlfriend, for Julia. I did things for her, those sweet things of the first-girlfriend order. I called my mother long distance; I gave her younger brother my old guitar; I brought goldfish to her. Somewhere in there, I stopped speeding.

Her father, I'd later learn, was a fantastic speeder.

"I'm a fantastic speeder," he once told me. "I fly low to the ground."

He was warning me, jokingly, about the risk I'd just incurred by consenting to ride with him for what should have been a two-hour trip to visit his daughter at her college. The way I'd seen it, I didn't have much voice in the matter.

As I was preparing to leave, her father had sneaked up on me. I was rummaging through their garage, looking for a Thermos. The Thermos had to be large enough to simulate an ecosystem capable of persuading two young goldfish to survive a two-hour ride at interstate speeds in a 1990 Chevrolet AstroVan. Julia assigned me the task of transporting her goldfish; it was her first semester away from home and she was missing them. I explained my mission, and her father rummaged around the garage with me. He wasn't much help, though, because he didn't live there anymore. I soon came across a stout, soccer-mom-sized Thermos that looked fit for the job.

We cleaned the Thermos together, her father and I. We de-chlorinated water from their kitchen tap, lined the bottom with light blue pebbles and planted a plastic tree. He filled the Thermos and helped me transfer the goldfish. They weren't gold, though. One was white, with speckles the colors of a blood orange; the other was a rich, embarrassed red. Their names (girlfriends insist they have names) were Ladies and Gentlemen.

After Ladies and Gentlemen had a few minutes to adjust to their new environment, her father screwed the lid onto the Thermos. I opened the drinking spout so they could have some fresh air.

"You know," he said, "we could go together in my car. It'll save you some gas money. Besides," he added, "I'd really like to see my daughter."

Julia's father had tried to murder Julia's mother. He'd gone after her with a razor in their bedroom, and Julia walked in on them. She was in the fifth grade. Her dog had been barking madly.

This was why her parents had divorced, and why her father didn't live at their house any longer. Julia's mother allowed him to come by, though, to use the garage or the couch if he needed a place to think or sleep. He stayed over often. He was on medication and didn't want to kill anybody anymore.

I cheerfully agreed with him, told him it was a nice idea. I believe those were my very words.

"That's a nice idea, Mr. Shockley," I said.

I carried the Thermos to Mr. Shockley's car. He drove a Chianti-colored Cadillac with Air Force vanity plates and a dirty windshield. You could see the dark, clean paths of the wipers from far away, the small

shark fin of dirt they always missed down at the bottom. His grandfather had willed the car to him, and it was Mr. Shockley's most prized possession. A while back he drove it into a lake. It ran fine, though.

"Except the engine overheats," he was explaining. We were on the road, rolling through the leafy suburbs of Northern Virginia. The Cadillac was trashed, filled with bowls of petrified soup and loose papers and candy wrappers. I clutched the Thermos in my lap. "So I have to crank the heater. When you're waiting for your car to warm up in winter, you're waiting for the engine to get hot. The heater takes that hot air off of the engine and blows it through the car. So if I keep the heater on *High*, I can off-set the engine temperature enough to prevent it from giving out completely." I didn't know any of this stuff yet. "If you get too warm, we can roll down the windows." He smiled. "Too bad they're not tropical fish."

It was about this time that Mr. Shockley told me about being a fantastic speeder, about flying low to the ground. He also told me he preferred to take state or county roads whenever he could, didn't like interstates or trucks, and to be quite honest the whole concept of bulk commerce in general could really set him off.

I'd already been dating Julia for several months before I discovered Mr. Shockley's domestic status. Julia didn't mention the divorce for the first few months of our relationship, and he was always around the house, writing or eating or sleeping. Every evening he'd be at his desk in the garage, hunched under the pill-shaped green shade of his table lamp, holding himself together at the elbows and reading, or scribbling away in one of his countless yellow legal pads. When I asked Julia if he was a writer, she laughed, led me to the garage and showed me what he was writing. It was nonsense, free-associative conspiracy stuff. Possible connections between actors, movies and political movements. Stock market plots. Invectives against Jews that I didn't get. His desk was festooned with those legal pads, the sheets wrinkled and appearing inflated from heavy use.

Laconic as Julia was on the subject of her father, I learned a lot about him on our road trip. He was extremely bright. He told me about flying planes for the Air Force; about general global market theory; about whom he found more difficult to teach, the disabled or the privileged, and his theories for why that was. We had a beautiful afternoon for the drive, but even with the windows down the heat flooded the car. Mr. Shockley didn't seem to mind, he was still wearing his bright green toboggan. He said the autumn heat in Virginia, if there was any, was often drier than the heat of summer or late spring, and not unlike Oklahoma. He told me he owned a couple of houses there. I'd never heard about that. I'd never heard about any of this.

We took state and county roads the whole way, didn't have one interstate minute. The sky above was big and blue, and there were tiny explosions of blackbirds in the hills.

Occasionally I thought of the fish.

Before our trip, the only thing I'd known about Mr. Shockley that was unrelated to his failure as a father pertained to his first year at the Air Force Academy, the year he'd met Julia's mother. Julia told me he finished third in his class that year, after which he stopped trying altogether. He'd already proven he could do it, was his reasoning. What scared me about this was that I recognized it in myself—that it made sense to me, intuitively.

So that afternoon, watching Mr. Shockley drive, I unconsciously made a mental note. It was one of hundreds, possibly thousands, of similar mental notes I'd been making over the past few years whenever I'd seen, spoken with, or heard anything about the man. That afternoon I told myself I would never speed again.

And if I did, I would always tell my mother.

I also told myself I would never get involved in day trading, or let my Cadillac go to rot, or take a stake in any real estate venture involving the great state of Oklahoma for any reason whatsoever. I would never join the Air Force. I would never wear a green hat.

I had someone to be better than.

Which is different, I realize now, much different from having someone to be better for. But sometimes it's hard to recognize the origins of an intention. The frantic, baseless associations of a lovelorn young mind are an ideal example: I would never wear that color hat—I would never try to

kill my wife. Speeding tickets and attempted homicide are not mutually inclusive, but it was hard to see the difference when I was so close to both.

When we arrived on campus, having made what should have been a two-hour drive in three, Julia was thrilled—more to see the Thermos, I think, than to see either of us. She bounded up the dormitory stairs ahead of us, her curly blond pony-tail bouncing off her neck. The other girls on her floor had helped her design an aquarium for the fish. It was posh. There were several fake plants, two castles—His and Hers—and a pastel rainbow of pebbles carpeting the bottom. They even taped a laminated color photograph of an underwater scene to the back wall of the aquarium. The scene was disproportionate to the little tank. One of the starfish in it appeared particularly ominous.

Ladies and Gentlemen, however, had not fared well in the sweltering, extended car ride. I tried to explain to Julia as diplomatically as I could, without blaming the heat or the slow backroad route. Julia asked me if the fish made any noises during the trip that might have signaled their discomfort. I reminded her they were fish. She responded by placing her ear next to the glass of the tank, listening, she said, for a squeak.

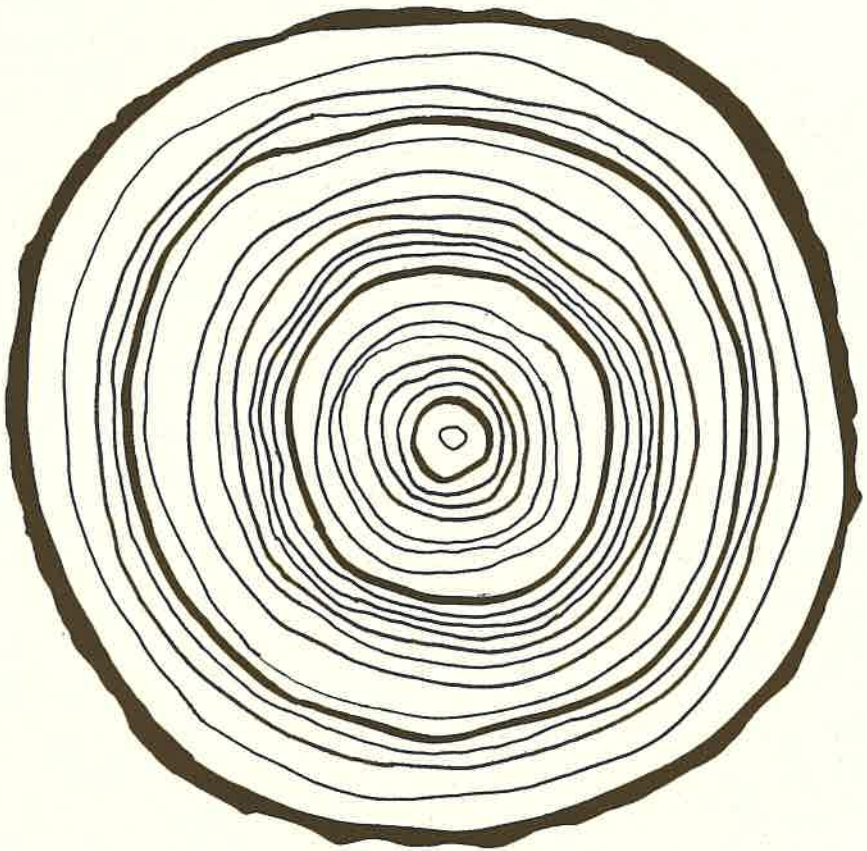
The fish died a few minutes after we poured them into the aquarium. I think Mr. Shockley felt pretty guilty—I know I did—but Julia placated us both with her insouciance.

"Let's just go get *new* fish," she suggested, and we did. So simple. The two new fish were also named Ladies and Gentlemen. Neither of them was gold, either.

Not long after the goldfish trip, Julia and I went our separate ways. Julia joined a sorority and I broke up with her when she said she'd break up with me if I didn't come to a dance. I've only seen her father once since then, and that was a few months later, back in our small Virginia hometown. He was walking alone by the side of the road.

Some of the light emitted by a star may take one path through space, and some of the same light, perhaps warped by the gravity of a nearby black hole, may take a slightly different one. The result is that the one real star in space appears as two stars from Earth. It's a phenomenon, but it's more common than you may think.

I'm pretty sure I'll beat my mom to the mail, safe for at least this evening. I am, if nothing else, a fantastic speeder. Through my steering wheel I watch the backlit orange needle on the speedometer. It dances with my heavy foot, always floating a little beyond where it should be.



one-act play

WILL CARTER
Line Please

List of Characters

JEAN: A pretentious actor

WILLIAM: A more soft-spoken actor

TIMOTHY: A young, obnoxious stage manager

FLORENCE: A middle-aged pizza delivery woman from New York

Time: Present, in the middle of a play

SETTING: There is a tree and a bench onstage. Other than that, it is fairly bare.

(The scene opens to WILLIAM and JEAN. The stage is bare except for them, a bench and a tree. Lights up on JEAN pacing as WILLIAM, who is sitting on the bench, writes something down, looks at it, then in annoyance, crosses it out, crumples the sheet of paper up, tossing it aside, and starts on another sheet. He repeats this process three times before JEAN speaks.)

JEAN. We've been here for how long now? No, don't answer that. I'll figure it out. There was...Tuesday, carry the two, subtract October, make sure the lunar cycle is accurate...ahh...yes it is accurate indeed, very accurate perhaps? But no time for semantics. Let's keep to the issue at hand. Our place. Here. This stage. Why! We're on a stage. Did you notice?

WILLIAM. I uh—

JEAN. No don't answer that. You're busy and slow. Yes, and I'm the thinker here. You're slow, and I can think and I can think fast. Too fast? No need for self loathing now. No today, tonight, umm uh, now! is too important. I'm here, and you're here, and they're here...
(stops pacing)
They? Why, we're being spied on! I say, I say, you!
(pointing to William)
You there, Mr. S is it?...Is it?

WILLIAM. Why I—

JEAN. (resumes pacing) Ahh yes of course it is. Of course Jean, of course it is. You let your mind wander you do. If you're not careful, you might let it wander away!
(catches himself)
Ooh!
(giggles to himself)
I made a funny! Oh...
(stops)
but it was figurative. It was, it was...a figurative funny!

WILLIAM. Yes quite.

JEAN. Now, Mr...uh...S as you say, as I say, as we say, we in the hereafter, even though I don't quite recall, what is after? What is here for that matter? How can we establish a here after if we don't know the first of the two to begin with? And who are you? And who am I? And who are they? And why us? Why Mr. S?

WILLIAM. You're Mr. S too you know.

JEAN. I am?

WILLIAM. Yes, you are.

JEAN. Well why is that? If I'm Mr. S and you're Mr. S, then...then...why then! We're a duo! Two heads are better than one they say. But they, who are they? And why does what they say matter? If I can't clarify, identify the they, then why should the they matter? Why should I bother with what they say? They say I'm important. They say you're important. But...
(addressing the audience)
I don't quite know what they say about you guys.

(looking at William)
Do you?

WILLIAM. (annoyed) Do I what?

JEAN. Do you know what they say about
(motioning to the audience)
them?

WILLIAM. I'd say they're bored.

JEAN. Who cares about you. What about *they*?

WILLIAM. Who are they?

JEAN. That's a damn good question William. Damn good, but I'm afraid I have no easy answer. Perhaps the they could be some conglomeration of an omnipotent being I uh—

WILLIAM. Omnipotent?

JEAN. Oh you know, some all knowing all seeing all feeling all touching all hearing all tasting all smelling all noticing all eating all smoking all chewing all exercising all gesticulating all being...uh being!

WILLIAM. All being?

JEAN. You know experiencing full existence? Being full of life and breath and breadth. And space and time and time of space...uh...say, what is the time to create space?

WILLIAM. 12 minutes.

JEAN. Really? How do you know?

WILLIAM. Heard it at a pub.

JEAN. Reliable source?

WILLIAM. The king.

JEAN. You met the king in a pub!?

WILLIAM. Well, he said he was the king, and then he fought a stool with a knife and then he collapsed on the floor.

JEAN. But he believed himself to be king. He thought he was king. He thought he was king. He thought he was king! Which can bring us to only one conclusion, one conclusion my good friend!—...err...what's your name?

WILLIAM. William Sh—

JEAN. Mr. Sh, it's a pleasure knowing you. It's a pleasure sharing the space of time and space with you, and memory and air and light and by god, thoughts! We're part of each other's thoughts! Breathing the same life from this same tree...Has this tree always been here?

WILLIAM. I think so.

JEAN. Why it seems like a new edition. I didn't know I would be talking to you near a tree and by god! You're sitting on a bench! Where is Timothy?

WILLIAM. (pointing to the right wing) In the darkness.

(JEAN crosses to the right wing.)

JEAN. Timothy!

TIMOTHY. (O.S.) What!?

JEAN. Come here this instant! We are struggling with unfamiliar territory! We're lost out here in front of all these people! And Timothy?...Timothy? Timothy!

TIMOTHY. (O.S.) What!?

JEAN. Explain the tree and the bench.

TIMOTHY. (O.S.) Guys, stop screwing around.

JEAN. You're too faint! Come out and face us!

TIMOTHY. (O.S.) I can't.

JEAN. What!?

TIMOTHY. (O.S.) I can't!

WILLIAM. Leave him be.

JEAN. Timothy come out this instant or I shall do things with my hands that I shaln't be proud of later. Terrible, monstrous, grotesque things that will murder the eyes and rape the ears!

WILLIAM. Please no raping now.

JEAN. Timothy! Come now!

(TIMOTHY enters, agitated. He is dressed in all black, like a backstage-man.)

TIMOTHY. What do you want? I'm not supposed to be out here now. I told you this last night, and the night before that, but I'm here because you summoned me away from a wonderfully delicious roast beef sandwich, so what is it?

JEAN. The tree.

TIMOTHY. Yes?

JEAN. And the bench.

TIMOTHY. Your point?

JEAN. Have they always been there? Because I don't seem to recall this scene. I recall more— no less!

TIMOTHY. For the gazillionth time, the tree and the bench have been here the *entire time*. Now if you don't mind, I'm getting back to my sandwich.

(starting to exit)

JEAN. No, don't leave! You can't!

(TIMOTHY stops.)

TIMOTHY. (half-heartedly) The show must go on.

(TIMOTHY exits.)

JEAN. Oh you rapscallion! I'll have your head on a stick! I'll burn your bo—...oh he's right. The show *must* go on! We can't cut it short. It *must* go on. The curtains can't rise or fall or open or close or spread in or out, and no one can peep out the curtain, dragging a long skinny finger across the shiny satin, though I suppose ours might be polyester or denim or wool for that matter. But no! We cannot all clasp each other's sweaty hands firmly and take a company bow until the show has gone on or...uh... finished...Do you see what I'm driving at?

WILLIAM. No.

JEAN. Oh don't be passive about this. *This is* our destiny, our future. Our lives, wrapped up in one small, blue woolen baby blanket and our fetuses interconnected at the hip.

WILLIAM. Gross.

JEAN. Don't get disgusted with your fate. You can't change it. It is part of you, intermingled with your DNA since you wriggled yourself out of your mother's womb. Since you embarked on the invigorating journey through your mother's majestic fallopian tubes into her welcoming uterus and established yourself as the transitory dictator of the placenta. It is becoming you, and hopefully, you becoming it.

WILLIAM. My fate?

JEAN. Exactly.

WILLIAM. My destiny?

JEAN. Precisely.

WILLIAM. I don't mean to be rude, but my destiny as of this moment considers nothing more than the writing down of something prosaic. Something thoughtful and...uh...waiting.

JEAN. Thoughtful you say? Consider the tree. The lonely patch of life and earth encroaching upon our not-life, our unliving. Think on this towering majestic spire.

WILLIAM. The tree? Consider the tree?

JEAN. On the mark my boy!

WILLIAM. What about it?

JEAN. Well, it seems to represent the transient state of reality. Think on it, this tree, this *very* tree, suddenly, without a moment's notice or attention or perception, sprang into being! And I rec—

TIMOTHY. (O.S.) It's always been there!

JEAN. What sort of dim-witted plebeian dares to question my exact, precise, ineffable judgment?

(TIMOTHY enters angry.)

TIMOTHY. Me. I'm the one who's questioning your stupidity. This tree has always been here. Every time you forget, and every time you get mixed up. Just forget the tree, and let's get back on track and get me to my sandwich. Thank you? Thank you.

(TIMOTHY exits.)

JEAN. Not a pleasant character.

WILLIAM. No, he is not. You're trying to say something groundbreaking, profound, beyond anyone's, not even your own, intellectual comprehension and—

JEAN. He comes in and calls me a liar, throws down his glove, and announces an argumentative duel, but he does not realize that he has jumped into a logical lake without a rhetorical paddle with the most grandiloquent fish he's ever seen, imagined, or imagined he saw.

WILLIAM. A battle of the minds...over what?...love?

JEAN. No.

WILLIAM. Truth?

JEAN. No.

WILLIAM. Justice?

JEAN. Is it? Am I after justice? What do you think?
(addressing the audience)
What does the simple proletariat think?...Well?..No, you've given bad advice before. Is it justice Mr....?

WILLIAM. S. Mr. S.

JEAN. Ah yes, the two Mr. S's lost between a tree and a bench. Wait.... this tree...and this bench...

WILLIAM. No.

JEAN. But I could've sworn with my hand placed without sweat upon a bible...

WILLIAM. No. You are mistaken.

JEAN. Such is the way with life.

WILLIAM. Spoken from experience.

JEAN. Oh, you too? You always sprint, sweat pouring out from every nook and cranny of your body down your thighs and running down your back, panting deeply and heavily, as though, like your wife, you too might be giving birth, but then just to be sure, you check yourself for a vagina, and bless the lord! It's absent today and there's nothing there at the end of the road but a mirror and in that mirror is a grown man checking himself for female genitalia.

WILLIAM. Can't say I've fondled myself in that manner.

JEAN. Well, don't bother. I'm always disappointed.

WILLIAM. You want to be crowning with kids?

JEAN. No, but I would at least feel like I was becoming something new, something with meaning, input penis, out-put kids, instead of where I am...you are, stuck between transient trees and benches, arguing with an empty-headed dolt named Timothy as to your words, as to the edits, as to your unintended improvisation.

WILLIAM. Something like that. I'm waiting on a messenger.

JEAN. A messenger you say? What for? How come? When? Why? Why are you so much more important than I to get a messenger?

WILLIAM. I don't know, but I'm sure one is coming.

JEAN. Oh great, fantastic, splendid. Why don't we break out the china and have ourselves a tea party?

WILLIAM. You brought China?

JEAN. Absolutely not! Life is too short for wasting yourself on trivial matters such as China.

WILLIAM. Life seems to drag.

JEAN. It does seem to march on and on with an indefinite end. Life is a toddler dragging its shoes on the cobblestone, with you, me, even...
(begrudgingly)
Timothy tugging at life's arm dragging her down to the grave with us.

WIILLIAM. But it's short?

JEAN. Painful, isn't it?

WILLIAM. Almost tragic

JEAN. Such is the burden of existence, facing each challenge, each dis-

gusted, shriveled nosed smirk of the bourgeois with a stiff chest and iron legs.

WILLIAM. Iron legs?

JEAN. So as not to flee, for you see, to become the better man, the harder, if you will, I will, they will, man, you must plant your legs in the ground and not be pushed aside by the currents of the world. You must stick your flag firmly in the ground and shout, "I claim this land for!"— your name please.

WILLIAM. Excuse me?

JEAN. Your name.

WILLIAM. My name.

JEAN. Is...?

WILLIAM. (unsure) My name is...?

JEAN. (still trying to drag it out of him) Is...?

WILLIAM. Is this some sort of game?

JEAN. You daft idiot!...sorry...you're
(as a correction)
slow. Try and follow me. My name is Jean.

WILLIAM. My name is Jean.

JEAN. No my name is Jean! Don't turn this into a debate on identity!...oh! A philosophical question! As to who exactly is Jean. Oh I see where you're going with this. Can we both be Jean? As in I'm Mr. S and you're Mr. S. Great question good friend! Every now and then a fat girl can dance with the prince! And today I'm your prince my slow friend, and while your appearance could use hours and hours, days even, of work, weight isn't your issue. Your issue is self esteem. You want to be me. But who doesn't? I am a man of great worth and substance..uhh...volume even, and you might say that I'm a never-ending drain of knowledge, swirling and swirling with facts, news clippings, and concocted narratives. My wisdom is like a magical sack. There is no end. The more you dig, the more you get... Why! They should open me on Christmas morning. I posses a great deal more substance than those silly presents children receive on the eclipse of Christ's birth. Those wasteful toys end up in a trash heap, but my wisdom is like a parasite; it eats away at other knowledge, spawning more and more until it takes over your brain! My mouth and mind are mighty dangerous weapons indeed!
(after awhile)
What were we discussing again?

WILLIAM. Fish.

JEAN. Disgusting creatures!

WILLIAM. They're not too bad, as long as you have ample salt.

JEAN. To kill the fish taste, to destroy the essence of fish, to eradicate what makes fish fish and replaces it with a notfish, salt.

WILLIAM. Salt is the opposite of fish?

JEAN. Precisely! Salt comes from the land; fish does not. Salt is hard and crunchy; fish is not. Salt goes with anything; fish does not. Salt is delicious...and...fish is not. Need more proof?

WILLIAM. Negative.

JEAN. Precisely what you see yourself as! Negative, so you feel as though you need to take on my identity. Thanks for bringing that up again.

WILLIAM. No, that was not the sound of a door opening. That was

the sound of me needing to get back to writing and concentrating my thoughts on the messenger.

JEAN. So you can take on his identity?

WILLIAM. This is not a matter of identity! I'm trying to write something profound and I could use the silence to think.

(Silence as WILLIAM thinks for a moment.)

JEAN. Anything?

WILLIAM. (more to himself) What hasn't already been said?

JEAN. From your mouth? A great deal. You sit in silence, caressing the lymph-nodes at the back of your head trying to force yourself to write something profound, ground-breaking, or, as the French say
(in a thick French accent)
earth-shattering, but my friend, it can't be done. There is nothing left worth saying. It's been all figured out, hasn't it?
(looking at the audience)
Hasn't it?

WILLIAM. I don't need their help.

JEAN. Polling the collective conscience is a great means to an end, the end, the way of ending of finding of searching the known and knowing the searched, of believing what is known and knowing what is believed. I think in the end through looking at what the majority of this pool of sad, sad human lives believe, or know, or believe they know, you can tackle what they believe they don't know or know they don't believe, or somewhere in between.

WILLIAM. Are you finished?

JEAN. Is anyone ever truly finished? It seems once we encounter one obstacle—

WILLIAM. No you're not.

JEAN. Are you finished? Have you completed everything your life was meant for? Because I—

WILLIAM. No, I'm not, and no I have not. Right now, I'm trying to think and this thinking will help my writing, and what will most help my thinking is silence.

JEAN. Oh.
(There are humorous moments while WILLIAM tries thinking in which JEAN has to forcibly stop himself from speaking, possibly letting out noises like ee, oooh, urm, or mmm.)
Have you written what no one's written before or thought the thought no one's thought before or imagined a world where no one has walked swam or flew before? Or philos—

WILLIAM. No. I have not.

JEAN. May I assist?

WILLIAM. The best inspiration comes from within.

JEAN. Or from without. For to reach the enlightenment, monks must abandon themselves, strip away their identity and eradicate everything that the individual is, which I think you're more than willing to do since you despise everything about yourself. The truth is old chap, my chap, their chap, you probably wouldn't mind that since you are always seeking to become someone else, particularly me.

WILLIAM. You're right, I want to be you. I want to blabber on as though I understand the show, as though I have any clue about what I'm talking about at all. You're right, I want to vomit soliloquies all over the stage as though, if I keep drilling, I might strike oil, perhaps, I'll hit the real gold,

the meaning of life! Wouldn't that be great? Wouldn't that be grand? So yes Jean S., I want to steal the show with my accidental analysis. I want to march on top of this bench and to the tree with a Thanksgiving gut, pretending as though I understand it all, for to admit that I can't box everything in, would be to accept defeat.

(WILLIAM sits down again to think. JEAN is deflated and defeatedly slumps down on the bench with WILLIAM.)

JEAN. (after awhile) Do I really have a Thanksgiving tummy?

WILLIAM. (realizing he's hurt Jean) It's more Easter than anything.

JEAN. (relieved) Oh, thank God! I was about to be worried I was becoming a massive planet of a man. But Easter, you say? My mother's always said, "A handsome man should have some Easter weight."

(WILLIAM smiles at JEAN.)

WILLIAM. Let the women of the world hereby beware.

(A pizza delivery woman, FLORENCE, visibly over 40, enters through the audience. Her shirt is dirty and wrinkly and her hat, visibly worn. She enters carrying 2 boxes of pizza.)

FLORENCE. (in a New York accent) Ey, eitha you two clowns orda a pizza?

JEAN. Absolutely not. We're planning our conquest of the female species, a sure-fire safari of brunettes, blondes, red-heads, black hair, brown skin, white skin, a true buffet of dames.

FLORENCE. You sound like my brother, Jimmy. He's got an appetite for girls like you'd never believe. It's too bad though cuz he hasn't got a clue bout pickin em up. He has no clue. Ey, get this. He once told a girl, an I swear to you dis is true, "your mouth looks like a good place as any to rest my tongue. Any vacancies?"

JEAN. My tongue is tired as well, and it too could use a rest. Where does this madam live? Paris? London? Barcelona? Venice? Rome?

FLORENCE. This rundown watering hole in Queens, a place called McGinneys.

JEAN. Of course she'd be at a watering hole! Men need water to heal their sore tongues! And this godly woman is doing a service to humanity by offering up her mouth to the tongues of beaten men.

WILLIAM. Or just beating men.

JEAN. I once saw a boy getting beat with a staff because he didn't know his times-tables. His teacher kept beating him till he cried. The boy's teacher was screaming into his ear "What are the times-tables!?" And the boy just kept sobbing "I don't know. I don't know." So the teacher just kept beating the boy until he lost consciousness, his "I don't know's" growing fainter and weaker.

WILLIAM. What are the times-tables?

JEAN. Well, one and one is two, two and two is four, plus the first two, making six. Three and three is six, making twelve, and so on and so forth. I wanted to help the boy, but I felt like it was a lesson he needed to learn.

FLORENCE. Kids need some bruises to make em grow right. As my mom would say, "black and blue makes ya true."

WILLIAM. Either true or it makes you cry.

FLORENCE. Maybe it makes you cry at first, but it makes em tough, tough enough to face the world.

JEAN. Of course beating a child only works if they have the right teacher.

If they're getting beat by some penniless pauper, what good does that do? The child will only bear marks of shame, rather than marks of learning.

FLORENCE. Ey, I only smack my kids when they're back-talkin or goofin off. As my mom would say, "I only hit a boy to make im a man."

WILLIAM. You seem like a woman full of wisdom and experience; maybe you can help me decide what to write.

FLORENCE. Write?

WILLIAM. Yes.

JEAN. He's trying to say something that's never been said, something that collapses every intellectual's cranium into a goulash of pudding and muck.

FLORENCE. Oh, you want to make a puddin, do ya? Alright, now I normally don't pass this along, an if ya tell anotha livin soul, I'll kill ya, capiche? But, I have the best pudding recipe. This pudding has always been a mystery to the world, a family secret, so ya betta cross ya damn heart and hope no piana falls down and cracks ya skull.

(Both JEAN and WILLIAM look up for a piano.)

FLORENCE. Cross ya heart?

JEAN AND WILLIAM. Cross my heart.

FLORENCE. Hope to die?

JEAN AND WILLIAM. Hope to die.

FLORENCE. Well, ya start out with a basic rice pudding, nothing too fancy or exotic, and after you think you've got a good batch-a- pudding, you add
(she looks around her)
you add
(almost in a whisper)
ketchup.

JEAN AND WILLIAM. What?

FLORENCE. (a little louder) Ketchup.

JEAN AND WILLIAM. What?

FLORENCE. Ketchup! Okay!? You add ketchup!

(JEAN and WILLIAM have a moment of confusion.)

JEAN. Ketchup?

FLORENCE. Yep.

WILLIAM. The red condiment wrought from tomatoes?

FLORENCE. Yep. Family secret, and I'd prefer if it stayed that way, ya hear? Or I just might have to call my cousin Bernie to go down to his basement, open up his gun cabinet, and kapow! Ya hear?

WILLIAM. Yes, yes.

JEAN. Ketchup, you said right? Goes great with a slice of grilled beef under a golden bread bun? That salty red liquid?

FLORENCE. That's the one. My husband Murph loves the stuff. Every Christmas, he says, "Santa's red. Ketchup's red. Let's celebrate Santa's birth and that reindeer his momma rode on with some ketchup pudding."... Ahh, those are the days when I feel like I'm makin an impact, when I'm really makin a difference in da world.
(FLORENCE takes a deep breath and looks off into the distance.)
But anyways, who ordered the pizza?

JEAN. I ordered no such thing.

(TIMOTHY enters quickly and nervously.)

TIMOTHY. I told you to come around back.

FLORENCE. Too long a walk.

TIMOTHY. Hand em over then.

FLORENCE. Nine forty seven.

TIMOTHY. What?

FLORENCE. You owe me nine bucks and forty seven cents,

TIMOTHY. Do you take a card?
(whipping out a credit card)

FLORENCE. I only take mullah senior.

TIMOTHY. (letting out a huff of annoyance) Hold on.

(TIMOTHY exits.)

FLORENCE. Who's the schmuck?

JEAN. Timothy, the most atrocious, annoying beast of a man if ever I saw one. He's always putting on ears and correcting us on why we're here, but who can answer that? One of those countless questions that requires well philosophized, well documented solutions, one that absolutely demands an answer. Purpose. Do we need purpose? Why, of course we do. Purpose makes the world spin round on its head, makes the king's coxcomb stand on end. So many questions and so many answers yet to be discovered... err, recovered!

FLORENCE. (unsure) Yeah..I know what ya mean...but like my Uncle Joey once said, "Isn't it funny how similar purpose is to porpoise? Maybe our purpose is with the porpoise."

JEAN. Nothing more than fish in the seas of time.

FLORENCE. Whales.

JEAN. Pardon moi?

FLORENCE. The porpoise is some kind of whale dolphin thing.

(TIMOTHY enters with a fistful of cash.)

TIMOTHY. Here. Nine forty seven. Now scram.

FLORENCE. (Letting out a huff at TIMOTHY.) C'ya later guys. Good luck with whatever ya working on.
(FLORENCE's cell-phone rings. She picks it up.)
Florence...huh...a message, ya say?
(WILLIAM brightens)
Yeah.
(putting her phone to her chest)
Is there a Mr. S here?

JEAN AND WILLIAM. Yes.

(They look at each other.)

JEAN. But I'm Mr. S.

WILLIAM. And I'm Mr. S.

JEAN. A quandary.

FLORENCE. Look, let me make a few more deliveries then I'll bring one of you guy's message back here.

(FLORENCE exits offstage through the audience.)

JEAN. I'm Mr. S.

WILLIAM. And I'm Mr. S.

JEAN. Don't turn this into a question of identity! I know for damn sure I'm Mr. S, and I know you're slow and sport an unsightly unkept appearance, but please, no I demand! That you cease and desist with trying to take on my identity! I know you wish you had a cranium even half the size of mine, but you don't, so stop! You will never be able to conclude and solve the conclusion, the conclusions rather, like me!
(TIMOTHY enters, choking. He keeps pointing to his throat. Through this whole ordeal, WILLIAM and JEAN are confused, while they try and figure out what's wrong with him.)
Oh Timothy, you scoundrel! You can't come out and interrupt my cathartic moment of physical, mental, and spiritual confrontation with these silly games.

WILLIAM. What's the matter Timothy? Do you have a sore throat? Do you need some water?

JEAN. I understand this quite correctly and completely. The pain of existence has finally crawled through the bony inner sanctum protecting your heart and soul and now it grasps at your throat, choking you.
(TIMOTHY waves his finger in affirmation at the choking part.)
I've solved another mystery of this world, this life, this plain of existence. If only you were alive today Mr. Aristotle, then, I would rub your face in the excrement that is my mind, my sharpened blade of consciousness.
(TIMOTHY falls over dead.)
Oh...has it got him? Stand up Timothy. Joke's over. We all had a good laugh. Hahaha. Now get up....Timothy?
(JEAN and WILLIAM rush to TIMOTHY's body.)
Timothy, get up. You're not a daft idiot, twit, or plebeian. Get up...please get up.

WILLIAM. (bending down to listen to TIMOTHY's chest) Dead.

JEAN. Dead? Oh no no no no! Dead!?...Line please....line please?...Line please! Oh come on! I'm sorry, it's the last night and I've forgotten, but I'm a human being! I'm allowed to forget, right? So, line!

WILLIAM. There's no one there.

JEAN. (addressing the audience) What about you guys? Do you know my line?...Doesn't anyone have a script?...Or know the play?...It's a play isn't it? So every act, scene, every ine is scripted! Oh come on! Haven't you seen this one before? Like a thousand times? Two idiots on a stage attempting to uncover every mystery of life and existence? Haven't you? Then, line please!...oh this is cruel, spiteful, and mean spirited of all of you. I'm just a simple actor in a silly play so you think it's okay to just hang me out to dry, but I'm not your father's boxer shorts! I'm a person, so for the love of God, line! Something! Anything! There must be something you can tell me! But no, no, no you'd rather sit there with your arrogant smirks on your puffed up faces, but you're just at the same loss for words as I am. I thought someone would have a script, but no, you don't have the answer to my question, my demand...anyone? Line!

WILLIAM. Maybe there's nothing left to say.

JEAN. But you have to say something, don't you? A man chokes to death on a stage in the middle of the cathartic confrontational climax; you don't just let him die. You give some profound, reaching to the very bottom of the pit of life Hamlet soliloquy that explains life and death and existence. Something that should then be written down in some charlatan's diary or loose napkin so that they can remember it once they get back home, something they can blurt out when a friend's sister dies, something that speaks to the core of the human spirit, but no, no, you won't intervene and give me my damn line! You'd rather watch me suffer. Is that it? Is it

fun or enjoyable to watch the emotionally unsteady, mentally unstable and spiritually unsound actor ramble across the stage verbally vomiting up nonsense that goes way over your heads!? Is that it? Well then, all of you can go to hell or you can give me my damn line. You can search those frigid black hearts of yours and tell me what I'm supposed to say... no? Well, I hope you too find yourself with a mouth as dry as a desert and a throat that cracks whenever you try and think of something thoughtful and empathetic to say.

(JEAN sits down on the bench next to WILLIAM.)

WILLIAM. Maybe there's nothing left to say. You've spoken too much and when you finally hit something truly difficult or painfully new, you realize speaking's no good....is that it perhaps?

JEAN. I just want my damn line.

(FLORENCE enters with an envelope.)

FLORENCE. I got a message for a Mr. S.

JEAN. But which one? Me? Or this false imposter?
(WILLIAM gets up and taking the envelope, opens it, and takes out a big, thick, white sheet of paper and reads it.)
What's it say? What is so prosaic and mind-altering that it solves every mystery and every clouded quandary?

WILLIAM. (holding up the sheet of paper) It is.

FLORENCE. Yeah, I'm not quite sure, but Danny, my shift manager, told me it needed to be said.

JEAN. It is? Why, that's absolutely ridiculous! It doesn't solve anything! No questions answered, no jewels of philosophy uncovered, no facts established and then corrected, nothing. It is? So many mysteries left mysterious.

FLORENCE. Well, as my Uncle Buddy would say, "sometimes ya find a pot of gold and sometimes ya get ya balls kicked in."

WILLIAM. Or the pot of gold is getting your balls kicked in.

JEAN. And that's your teaching for today?

WILLIAM. Yes. It is.

JEAN. *That's* your teaching for today?

WILLIAM. It is.

JEAN. It is?

WILLIAM. It is.

JEAN. And how will you tell the world, explain, expound, explore this new ineffable insight?

WILLIAM. I was thinking about this, something that's not quite tragedy and something that's not quite comedy, but rather, something in between.

JEAN. Comragedy?

WILLIAM. Pardon?

JEAN. Traumady.

WILLIAM. I was thinking about calling my school of thought, "Theater for the sick and deranged."

JEAN. And I will not only call your first play, presuming I'm the hero, brilliant, but also...dramady.

WILLIAM. That will work too.

JEAN. (after a moment) But what will I tell them?

WILIAM. Tell them about the tree and the bench.

JEAN. By god there's a tree! And a bench! Why I do declare! This is an outrage! Where is!—...oh right, we've already discussed this.

WILLIAM. Tell them again. I think some of them
(motioning to the audience)
still want everything figured out. And, I'll leave that up to you old mate.

JEAN. Aha! A tree! And by god! I've been sitting on a bench! Where did all of this come from? And who are you? And who am I? Why us? Why Mr. S?

WILLIAM. I'll leave that up to you old friend, but right now, I'm going to get some of that pizza.

JEAN. Away with you my mentally incapacitated self loathing comrade!
(WILLIAM exits.)
But this tree and this bench...where did they come from? Do they belong to me? Me. But who am I?
(The lights begin to slowly fade through the rest of this speech.)
And they...
(noticing the audience)
By god I'm being spied on!...But who. Who are these people? And where's the other one? Mr. S...why Mr. S? Why us? And who's this dead fool? Why did he die? Did he lose his morals? Is man born with morals? Maybe he lost faith? Sight? Refused seeing? Stopped trying to see. Yes, he simply stopped seeing.

(By this point, the lights should be faded to blackout. End of play.)

ALFREDA HENRY
Possum

List of Characters

ALYSSA: A thirty-five year old elementary school principal. She is a sweet, friendly woman who dresses to her comfort.

LOLA: A thirty-six year old elementary school teacher at Alyssa's school. She dresses to impress. She is wearing a necklace exactly like the necklace that Alyssa's husband Jesse gave Alyssa a year ago.

SERVER: A young woman, named Sean, a UGA student who has to work the summer instead of going home.

Scene: A small, out-of-the-way café tucked in a seldom-frequented part of Athens, GA.

Time: End of July, 2009, after the mass exodus of UGA students, around noon.

SETTING: A small, out-of-the-way café tucked in a seldom-frequented part of Athens, GA. There is a round table in the middle of the stage. On the table is silverware. A small vase with a plastic flower sits on the center of the table. There is a small cutting board with bread wrapped in foil and a sharp knife on the tale. On the side of the stage, there is a bar-like counter with three carafes on it and an assortment of glasses. There is a small salad bar in the background. By the entrance is a podium type stand with menus on top and a sign that reads, "Please seat yourself."

AT RISE: ALYSSA walks in. She is wearing comfortable pants and top with flat shoes. She has a bag in one hand. She picks up a couple of menus and walks over to the table. She places one in front of an empty chair and one in front of the chair she is about to sit in. Her phone rings. She reaches in her bag. She recognizes the ring as her lover, Michael.

ALYSSA. Hi sweetie, how is the conference? Are you there?
(beat)
You're breaking up.
(beat)
That's better. No, she's not here yet. If she were on time, she wouldn't be Lola. You know, Michael, I have had some time to think while you've been away and you're right. I can't let it go, especially with our annual Strong Women Road Trip coming up in two weeks. I need to clear the air before we go.
(sigh)
It is all so a divine comedy only with role reversals.
(beat)
No, not the band, you know, Dante's Inferno, second level of hell, Paolo and Francesca.
(beat)
Yes, I started reading it again last night. I just could see similarities, if Paolo and Gianciotto were female and Francesca was male. Well, all except the murder part. I mean, I knew who Jesse was when I married him. The others were not that surprising, but Lola...
(beat)
I can't help but wonder if it was love.
(beat)
True. I don't know that, but what else could it be if not love?
(beat)
Maybe, but...
(beat)
Fifteen years is a long time to throw away over a man—
(beat)
No, not you, sweetie. I just thought that after the divorce she might say something.
(beat)
Six months...
(beat)
You're right. She is fun, witty and an asset to our dinner parties but...
(beat)
We've covered this before. I agree our friendship can't survive with this between us, so today's the day. Don't worry if the timing doesn't feel right. I can always talk about the trip or our Fall Festival for next semester. When do you think you'll be home?

(beat)
That's sooner than you thought.
(pats her abdomen)
Yes, we're fine. I promise I'm taking my vitamins. Okay, see you in two days.
(beat)
Love you too, bye.

(LOLA enters a little winded, walks over to the table and sits down.)

LOLA. Sorry, I'm late. Can't blame the traffic with all of the kids headed home for the summer. What? No wait staff again. Honestly, Alyssa, what do you see in this place?

ALYSSA. What? Isn't it obvious with its elegant decor and their cuisine is the envy of chefs worldwide. So are you ready for our road trip?

LOLA. Two weeks traveling down the coast. I am ready.

ALYSSA. Are you sure you want to head south into Florida? We could do a little Civil War tour.

LOLA. Let me see, Civil War tour or Miami Beach? That is a difficult dilemma. We are talking Miami. Let's leave the job here for a change and do a real vacation, Madam Principal.

ALYSSA. Okay, okay and it's just Principal to my friends. Catch me up since you missed the last three lunches and wouldn't answer your phone. Are you feeling better? I thought I was going to have to move in and nurse you back to health.

LOLA. I told you it was just a summer cold. I just couldn't shake it. You know how those can be, clingy.

ALYSSA. You look better, in fact, much better. Have you done something different? Lost some weight?

LOLA. No.

ALYSSA. Cut your hair?

LOLA. No.

ALYSSA. What is it? New outfit? That's a...a nice necklace, Jesse gave me one like that a year ago, remember? But he said it was custom made—

LOLA. This, I've had it forever. You must've seen it before.

ALYSSA. No, I would've remembered.

LOLA. (reaches for the bread) Did they at least take your drink order?

ALYSSA. It looks exactly like my necklace.

(ALYSSA leans in for a closer look.)

LOLA. (stands and walks to counter) Honestly, we need to find another place to go when it is your turn to pick. You want some water? I'll just grab a carafe since it's obviously serve yourself day.

ALYSSA. (takes some bread for herself, picks up the knife and slices it in half) I like this place. It's different, not like every other chain restaurant.

LOLA. (brings the carafe back to the table and sits)
Where is that server, I'm getting hungry.
(picks up menu)
What's the special?

ALYSSA. (glances at the menu) 'Possum chili.

LOLA. You're kidding, right?

ALYSSA. No, it's 'possum chili. It's not too bad.

LOLA. Please tell me it's made with hamburger and they just named it that as a joke.

ALYSSA. It's made from real live opossums. Well I guess technically they're dead.

LOLA. (disgusted) I'm not eating that.

ALYSSA. 'Possums are pretty interesting. They'll lie down and fake their own death to fool an enemy but if they have an opportunity, they'll run away. I saw one once that was cornered by a dog. It dropped as if it had a heart attack. The dog wouldn't leave. It kept sniffing around and sniffing around until the 'possum hissed at it. The dog didn't have a chance when the 'possum attacked, striking its nose. The dog took off running.

LOLA. Is that supposed to convince me to try it? I am definitely not eating it.

ALYSSA. You have to admit it's different.

LOLA. Different is not always better. Speaking of which, what are you wearing? I thought we had worked on a better look for you. Just 'cause you have a new man doesn't mean you can relax. How is Michael, by the way?

ALYSSA. (smiles) He is fine, soaking up the California sun.

LOLA. (after a pause) I hope that's all he's soaking up.

ALYSSA. What?

LOLA. Well, you know I just have your best interest at heart and he is only the transition man. You can't be too careful after the divorce.

ALYSSA. I'm the one that makes that decision.

LOLA. You are still vulnerable. Wasn't I right about Jesse?

ALYSSA. Well, partly—

LOLA. When you told me you thought he might be having an affair and asked if you should hire someone, what did I say?

ALYSSA. You told me to save my money, if I thought he was having an affair, he probably was, but—

LOLA. Well he was, wasn't he?

ALYSSA. He was but—

LOLA. No buts. Jesse never met a woman he didn't like to see naked.

ALYSSA. I know that. I just needed to know who he was seeing, that's why I didn't take your advice, completely.

LOLA. What?

ALYSSA. I didn't take your advice, completely. I couldn't, you see. I didn't hire someone else. I am not one of those women who could be content not knowing. So I decided to do it myself and I followed him.

LOLA. You did what? How?

ALYSSA. I rented a car for a few weeks. After school, I drove over to Jesse's law office and waited.

LOLA. I...I can't believe you did that.

ALYSSA. That's how I found out about Cynthia. Good old Tuesday/Thursday Cynthia. Young, pert Cynthia, a personal trainer, for God's sakes, not that there's anything wrong with that...

LOLA. Well of course there is. Why mess around with a personal trainer when he was married to a perfectly beautiful, sweet, intelligent woman who is the principal of her own elementary school.

ALYSSA. A twenty-one year old, fresh-from-college, runs-five-miles-a-day, even-her-sweat-doesn't-stink, personal trainer.

LOLA. Still stings, doesn't it.

ALYSSA. No, not anymore.

LOLA. It's got to sting a little.

ALYSSA. Not anymore, I've got Michael and—

LOLA. You can't tell me that all those nights he claimed to be working didn't get to you. Thank goodness, it was only Tuesday and Thursday. Men, when will they be more imaginative? Working late, who believes that?

ALYSSA. Me, at least I did for a little while. Even though I knew Jesse wasn't capable of being monogamous. It was a one-day-at-a-time program for him.

LOLA. If you need to purge some more...

ALYSSA. You know I've thought about this quite a bit.

LOLA. I'm sure you did and probably still do.

ALYSSA. Yes, but no longer in that what-went-wrong type of way.

LOLA. You need to take some time off from men, maybe a year or two.

ALYSSA. Oh *yeah*? I don't think so. That's not what I was thinking about.

LOLA. That's what you should be thinking about. Some radio psychologist suggests you take a year.

ALYSSA. (after a pause) I was thinking that it would be easier to forgive if I knew they loved each other. Do you know what I mean?

LOLA. No, I'm not sure. If it were me, I don't think I could forgive anything.

ALYSSA. If she had fallen in love with him, I think I could forgive her that. Jesse is charismatic, funny, good looking and attentive when he wants to be.

LOLA. You sound like you're not over him.

ALYSSA. Of course I am.

LOLA. If you were, you wouldn't still be talking about it.

ALYSSA. I just meant that—

LOLA. What do you mean Alyssa? Are you going to analyze this to the grave? The man is gone. What does it matter now whether they were in love or not?

ALYSSA. I just think it would explain a few things. I wouldn't have to worry that it was me.

LOLA. Are you serious? Do you blame yourself for Jesse's infidelity?

ALYSSA. Well if he was in love with her, I could at least chalk that up to—

LOLA. Fine, call it that. Are you ready to order? I'm ready to order.

ALYSSA. Do you think love is an important factor when someone has an affair?

LOLA. (exasperated) Alyssa, I don't think so, no.
(beat)
This is ridiculous even for this place. Are they ever going to take our order?

ALYSSA. I—

LOLA. At least their salad is fresh. Do you want some salad?

ALYSSA. I'm just looking for another opinion on this.

LOLA. I gave you my opinion. Love is not necessarily a factor in an affair. If he did love her, I still wouldn't forgive them. Some things are not that easy to forgive. Now can we go to the salad bar? What's with you anyway, you have transition Michael.

ALYSSA. I wish you wouldn't call him that. Michael is special.

LOLA. Yes, special transition Michael.

ALYSSA. Lola—

LOLA. Transition special Michael?

ALYSSA. Stop please.

LOLA. I am just teasing you know. Things did happen quickly between you two. Maybe Jesse should have been following you.

ALYSSA. *What?*

LOLA. Again, kidding. You're a bit sensitive today. All this talk of the ex and Michael being out of town has you all wound up. I think we need some wine.

ALYSSA. I never cheated on Jesse. Why would you say something like that?

LOLA. It was a joke, all right? Everybody knows that you are too much of a martyr to cheat on anyone. You're like one of those 1940's heroines stoically marching on no matter what, regardless of how poorly your man treats you. What was the name of that movie?

ALYSSA. I am not.

LOLA. Oh yes you are. How long did the affair go on with Jesse and Tuesday/Thursday before you did anything about it?

ALYSSA. Well, um—

LOLA. When you talked to me about it, you said it had been going on for three months and then it took you five or six months before you filed for divorce. You never complained to anyone, except me. When people asked, "How are things with you and Jesse," you smiled and told them everything was fine. If that's not stoic, what is?

ALYSSA. Just because I chose to keep my private affairs *private*, it doesn't mean that I was vying for martyrdom.

LOLA. (slightly sarcastic) Vying?! You don't *vie*. You have martyrdom down to an exact science. A sorrowful look while holding your head high, you went on with your day. What *was* the name of that movie?
(beat)
Anyway, you're just a modern day Joan Crawford.

ALYSSA. That's just absurd.
(takes a drink of water)
Let's get back to what I asked you.

LOLA. Changing the subject? Is it hitting a little too close? I answered your question.

ALYSSA. Lola, what has gotten into you? First Michael and now this—

LOLA. I'm just giving you my opinion like you asked me to.

ALYSSA. I didn't ask you about this and you know it. Let's drop this and get back to what we were talking about, Jesse and his affair.

LOLA. What if we don't? We obviously haven't exhausted this topic. At least, I haven't.

ALYSSA. Well *I have*. Lola—

(SERVER enters from opposite side of entrance, puts her cigarettes and lighter on the counter.)

SERVER. Sorry to keep you waiting, I didn't hear the buzzer, it must be out again. I'll get you some menus—

ALYSSA. We have those already. Thanks.

SERVER. Well today's special is—

LOLA. 'Possum chili, we already know, thanks. Can we get some wine? What's good with the chili?

SERVER. So you want the chili then?

LOLA. I don't, but I think my friend may order it.

ALYSSA. Yes, I'll have the chili but no wine for me thanks. I'll just have an apple juice.

LOLA. An apple juice? We can't toast our Strong Woman Road Trip with juice. We need something stronger than that. What kind of wine, red or white, goes with 'possum chili?

SERVER. I don't know.

LOLA. You should know. You work here.

SERVER. This is my third day.

ALYSSA. Just order the wine that you want, Lola, and give the poor server a break.

LOLA. As long as we had to wait, I think the server has had enough of a break.
(coughs)
How many cigarettes have you smoked?

SERVER. (uncomfortably) Maybe I should give you a minute.

LOLA. Oh no, if you disappear in the back we may never see you again. We'll just have a bottle of merlot.

ALYSSA. Unless you plan to drink that all yourself, I suggest you buy a glass. I can't have any.

LOLA. Why not?

ALYSSA. Can we discuss this when the server leaves?

SERVER. I'll be right back with your drinks.

(SERVER exits.)

LOLA. *Excuse me*, you didn't take my order. Look at that, now it will be another who-knows-how-long before we're served. Why can't you have any wine? Are you on some medication?
(pause)
There's something different about you. Have you gained weight; is that it, trying to keep those empty calories down? Just because you have Michael,

doesn't mean you can let yourself go. Who knows—?

ALYSSA. I may have gained a little weight...let myself go, what year is this? My weight is not dependent upon whether or not I have a man in my life.

LOLA. Of course not.

ALYSSA. I am the perfect weight for my height under the circumstances.

LOLA. And those circumstances are...?

ALYSSA. I am going to have a baby.

LOLA. Oh my God.

(They both speak at the same time.)

ALYSSA, LOLA. Isn't it great? That's terrible.

(Pause.)

ALYSSA. What do you mean, terrible? Babies are a blessing. I wanted to get pregnant right away, but Jesse—

LOLA. Is that why we spent so much time talking about Jesse? It's his isn't it? Because you have that six-month rule about sex in a new relationship. How far along are you?

ALYSSA. Almost three months, but—

LOLA. Three months? Did he come back and try to reconcile? Did he stop by with sweet promises of devotion and vowed that he had changed?

ALYSSA. He came back to talk but nothing else happen—

LOLA. He caught you at a "weak" moment?

ALYSSA. No—

LOLA. You said it yourself, he is charming, charismatic and attentive.

ALYSSA. I did but—

LOLA. We both know you're smarter than this. Why would you want to be tied to that man for the next eighteen years?

ALYSSA. If I choose to be tied to Jesse or any other man is really none of your business.

LOLA. I am just trying to be your friend and it is obvious to me that you haven't thought this through—

ALYSSA. A true friend wouldn't have—

(SERVER returns. She is carrying a tray with a bottle and two glasses. She sets them on the table and starts to pour.)

ALYSSA. None for me thanks. I had the apple juice—

SERVER. That's right. We're out.

ALYSSA. What other type of juice do you have then?

SERVER. Umm, I'll have to check.

ALYSSA. Orange?

SERVER. We may be out of that, too. We're waiting for a delivery. They were supposed to be here this morning but—

LOLA. Can you take my order, now?

SERVER. —are delayed. We have lemonade.

LOLA. Do you have food? I mean real food, not the chili.

SERVER. Just a minute Ma'am—

LOLA. Ma'am? My mother is Ma'am.

SERVER. Yes, Ma...um.

ALYSSA. I'll just stick with the water.

LOLA. Now can you take my order?

SERVER. Yes.

LOLA. Is the chicken in your fried chicken sandwich an actual slice of chicken? Or is it pieces of compressed mystery meat that looks like chicken?

SERVER. What? I mean Ma...um.

LOLA. Is your chicken from the actual bird or some kind of patty?

SERVER. It is a breast of the chicken that is lightly battered and fried—

LOLA. What kind of bread is that served on?

SERVER. It comes on a bun.

LOLA. Can I have it on white or wheat bread instead with the crust cut off?

SERVER. Sorry, Ma'am, but there are no substitutions—

LOLA. You're kidding? We've sat here waiting on you to serve us for how long and you can't just make a small adjustment? I don't know why—

ALYSSA. Lola, give the server a break. Are you a student?

SERVER. Yes Ma'am.

ALYSSA. Local?

SERVER. No, Ma'am, I'm from Ohio.

LOLA. That's great, uh—

SERVER. Sean.

LOLA. Sean, can we get back to my order—

SERVER. Yes, ma'am, fried chicken sandwich.

LOLA. No, I'll have the chicken salad sandwich on wheat with the crust cut off. That comes with fries, right?

SERVER. Yes.

ALYSSA. Sean, I've changed my mind. I think I will have coffee. Thanks.

SERVER. Regular or decaf?

ALYSSA. Regular.

(SERVER goes to the counter, picks up a carafe and brings it to the table.)

SERVER. Can I get you anything else?

LOLA. Not for me, thanks.

ALYSSA. Maybe later.

(SERVER exits.)

ALYSSA. As I was saying, a true friend wouldn't—

LOLA. You're right, Alyssa, a best friend wouldn't treat your news this way. I was just surprised. If you decide that, you want to do something different about the baby...

ALYSSA. Lola, I think that we—

LOLA. No, Alyssa, I get it, but I just want you to know if you want to make a different choice, I know this wonderful physician.

ALYSSA. I am not interested. I want to keep my baby.

LOLA. It's just an option. I can't imagine going through all you have with Jesse and to be tied to him because of a child for the next eighteen years.

ALYSSA. (stares at LOLA for a moment) This place reminds me of Griddles; remember back in college when we both had those awful jobs at that waffle house?

LOLA. Mr. "Excuse Me" Peters "inadvertently" bumping up against us, the creep. Yes, I remember I wanted to quit and you insisted you needed the job.

ALYSSA. Yes, we worked there with that other girl the one who hung on his every word

LOLA. Melody, Missy something with an M, Misty that's it. I remember that day that they disappeared in the back supply room. I was out working the crowded floor. You were working the grill and we had that accidental grease fire.

ALYSSA. Well, it wasn't an accident.

LOLA. You?

ALYSSA. Yes, I accidentally on purpose set the fire so they would have to come out of the back room.

LOLA. You started that fire on purpose?

ALYSSA. Yes, so Misty would come out of the supply room and carry her share of the work. You and I were always stuck covering for them.

LOLA. I never even suspected. Was that why he fired us? But he fired Misty too.

ALYSSA. I think it was the letter. Didn't he tell you—

LOLA. Oh, I had forgotten about the letter.

ALYSSA. Did you send it?

LOLA. Not me, I thought you had. It was none of my business if Peters wanted to sleep around on his wife. Maybe Misty sent it.

(SERVER returns with the food. Places it on the table.)

SERVER. Will there be anything else?

LOLA. No, thanks.

ALYSSA. I think that's it for now.

(SERVER picks up her cigarettes and lighter from counter and exists. ALYSSA and LOLA start to eat.)

LOLA. Why'd you bring up the Peters anyway.

ALYSSA. I was wondering about Mrs. Peters. Do you think she was better off knowing everything?

LOLA. The letter just said he was having an affair. It didn't even mention with who. So why would you think she knew everything?

ALYSSA. The way she would stop in all the time to surprise him saying she was in the neighborhood. The day we were fired she had come in and they had that big fight in the office. I think she knew everything.

LOLA. Well I'm not convinced besides, I think sometimes people are better off not knowing some things.

ALYSSA. He was her husband.

LOLA. Yes, but look what happened. They got into a huge fight. The three of us lost our jobs. Do you think she was any happier knowing?

ALYSSA. Well she obviously suspected something dropping in all the time.

LOLA. Maybe she was in the neighborhood.

ALYSSA. She was in the neighborhood at eleven or twelve at night? She had to be at her job at Kroger's at five in the morning.

LOLA. She could've had insomnia. Or, possibly she just loved him that much and missed his company. They couldn't have had much time together with her on one shift and him on another.

ALYSSA. That could be.
(beat)
Or maybe he was starting to be away from home more days than he was there. Maybe instead of a couple of days it became three, then four. Maybe she began to suspect that there might be more going on than she first realized.

LOLA. What?

ALYSSA. Maybe Mrs. Peters and I have something in common. Maybe she had a friend who told her not to pursue it any further because she might not like what she found out.

LOLA. You don't know that.

ALYSSA. It could've happened. Mrs. Peters could've been tired of spending her time alone. That time when he claimed to be running errands that shouldn't have taken hours to complete. Mrs. Peters eating dinner alone because he hadn't come back or called.

LOLA. Alyssa?

ALYSSA. So maybe Mrs. Peters decided to follow him on one of those nights.

LOLA. Like you did with Jesse—

ALYSSA. Yeah, she follows him and finds out where he is spending his time. Maybe that's why she started showing up at his work unannounced saying she was in the neighborhood.

LOLA. Are we back to this again?

ALYSSA. She found out about the other woman but the other woman didn't seem to account for all the time that Je... Mr. Peters was spending away from home. So, instead of following him two days a week she started following him three—

LOLA. Alyssa—

ALYSSA. Then four—

LOLA. *Alyssa*—

ALYSSA. Then to those weekend getaways that he went on whenever he was working on some "big" case and didn't want to be "distracted" developing his opening statements or summations.

LOLA. *Alyssa!*

ALYSSA. What if she didn't recognize the new other woman at first. It was dark in that little intimate restaurant and she couldn't go in out of fear of giving herself away. But, there were other restaurants, motels, romantic getaways—

LOLA. *Alyssa no!*—
(knocks over her water glass)
Sean, Sean, can we get some napkins please.

(SERVER enters and looks at the floor.)

SERVER. I'll be right back

(SERVER exits and returns with a pile of napkins and mops up the floor.)

SERVER. Would you like to move to a different table?

LOLA. No, we should be fine—
(beat)
—once you clean this up. I think that I need something a bit stronger than wine. And, uh, maybe a dessert menu.

SERVER. Sure, just give me another moment and I'll get that for you. And you, Ma'am, can I get you anything else?

ALYSSA. No, thank you.

(SERVER takes the wet towels behind counter, gets menus.)

SERVER. What would you like?

LOLA. A double scotch on the rocks, more scotch than rocks. Give me a minute while I decide what dessert goes well with that.

SERVER. What about you, Ma'am? Are you sure I can't get you anything else? More coffee?

(SERVER reaches for the carafe.)

ALYSSA. Thank you, no.

SERVER. Do you know what you'd like for dessert? Our specialty is peach pie. It is absolutely delicious a la mode. Take your time.

(SERVER goes behind the counter and cleans up the wet napkins.)

LOLA. I guess Mrs. Peters has been a tad busy.

ALYSSA. (sighs) We should talk about this.

LOLA. No.

ALYSSA. What do you mean, "No"?

LOLA. I mean no, it's not what you think.

ALYSSA. (glances at the SERVER) We should order dessert and talk about this.

LOLA. There is nothing to talk about believe me. It's a misunderstanding.

ALYSSA. (glances over at the SERVER who is texting on her cell phone) We'll order dessert. The server will go back in the back and we can talk about this.

LOLA. I told you there is nothing to talk about. You are making a big deal out of nothing.

ALYSSA. (leans closer, whispering) *Nothing*, you think it's *nothing*!

LOLA. *Hey*!
(beat)
Double scotch.

(SERVER exits.)

ALYSSA. I think I am entitled to an explanation.

LOLA. I told you there is nothing to explain. You've worked yourself up over some imaginary story and now you see other women everywhere. There is nothing to explain.

ALYSSA. What about Cancún?

LOLA. What about it? I went on vacation. You approved it.

ALYSSA. How did Jesse end up there with you?

LOLA. Maybe you should ask him that. He may have ended up there but he didn't come with me. I went down on vacation by myself.

ALYSSA. But you didn't even tell me you saw him, Lola. Why?

LOLA. Why would I? I didn't know that you didn't know he was there. And even if I did know I'm not sure I would have told you. Bearers of bad news are not treated kindly.

ALYSSA. That's bull and you know it. We can tell each other anything.

LOLA. Really, like you told me about the grease fire?

ALYSSA. That's different and insignificant. This was my husband. He was supposed to be in Los Angeles working on a deposition. Instead, he was camped out next to you on some beach. I know I told you he was going to L.A.

LOLA. Did you? I don't recall. I guessed it slipped my mind.

ALYSSA. Slipped your mind!

(The SERVER returns. She brings over the scotch and two slices of pie.)

LOLA. We didn't order that.

SERVER. I thought you did.

ALYSSA. Leave it, it's fine.

SERVER. Will there be anything else?

LOLA. That will be all for now. Thanks.

(SERVER exits.)

ALYSSA. What do you mean, slipped your mind? Did it also slip your mind that you had been meeting him once or twice a week?

LOLA. I told you it was not what you think.

ALYSSA. That's what Jesse used to say, when I asked him about where he had been. "It's not what you think, Sweetie. I've been working on briefs and I must have dozed off." Is that what you mean, Lola? Were the two of you working on briefs? Is that why you would meet him at the Holiday Inn? Or maybe it was for some light conversation. What was it?

LOLA. It was perfectly harmless. We ran into each other in Cancún. We

had a drink and went our separate ways.

ALYSSA. You went your separate ways and ended up at the Holiday Inn twice a week?

LOLA. That was different we met a couple of times to discuss a gift for you.

ALYSSA. What gift are you talking about, Lola? You never mentioned a gift. What gift takes two hours at a time to discuss? Did you discuss the necklace? The one that looks exactly like mine that you're wearing around your neck. Is that what you discussed?

LOLA. What do you want me to say, Alyssa?

ALYSSA. I want you to tell me the truth. I want to understand what happened that our fifteen-year friendship came second to sex with Jesse. I want to know why you would do this.

LOLA. I've told you the truth. Nothing, and I mean *nothing* happened between Jesse and me.

ALYSSA. Don't tell me nothing happened. I followed him and saw you together, not just a couple of times, many times. I just don't understand why. You are like a sister to me, you know that.

LOLA. Sister?

ALYSSA. Yes, you are my family. Help me to understand this so that we can move on.

LOLA. Family? We are friends, albeit good friends, but just friends, Alyssa. You want to know what happened. I told you what happened. If you don't believe me ask Jesse.

ALYSSA. What makes you think I haven't asked him. Did you think I would have a discussion with him about Tuesday/Thursday and not talk to him about you? He's the one that mentioned that you were in love with him. That was one of our last "discussions" before he moved out. Is he right? Is that what this is? Are you in love with him?

LOLA. Have you listened to anything I have said? I don't love him. He is a fool. His biggest fan is himself. Can he be charming? Yes. Is he good looking? Yes. However, frankly, I've had better men.

ALYSSA. What?

LOLA. You said you wanted to know. You insisted we discuss this because you think that it will... what? Do you think this will turn into a heartfelt moment where we walk off into the sunset? Is that what you are shooting for?

ALYSSA. I need to know—

LOLA. I got that, you want some touchy-feely moment, where you get to say, "I forgive you." We hug and everything goes back the way it was. This is real life and it is messy and sometimes downright dirty.
(beat)
I just can't believe this. I knew Jesse was a man whore but I didn't realize he was a gossipy man whore. I don't even know why you married him. It was obvious to everyone that he was too narcissistic to be in a relationship. You probably thought that he would change.

ALYSSA. Yes, I married him. I loved him just as he was. He had a few faults—

LOLA. A few faults, of course you would think that having sex with everything that moved and lying about it until caught was a few faults. If you loved him the way he is you would still be married to him.

ALYSSA. Why did you sleep with him? Did he catch you at a weak moment? You say you're not impressed with his good looks and his charms.

Then what was it?

LOLA. You just can't let it go, can you? You are not content until you have worried something to death. I've always thought that was one of your less than stellar qualities. I don't know why Jesse told you what he told you. Maybe he wanted to hurt you because of the divorce—

ALYSSA. Don't you think I know when you're lying, Lola? You may be able to hide it when I am not talking to you face to face.

LOLA. You're calling me a liar. You believe the man whore over me is that it—

ALYSSA. I believe what I saw.

LOLA. What did you see, Alyssa?

ALYSSA. You know what I saw? I saw you meet him. I saw you pick up room keys and go into your room. I sat in my car for hours waiting for the two of you to come out.

LOLA. And!?

ALYSSA. *And*? Is that all you can say? Lola, we've been friends for a long time, college roommates, and co-workers. Why would you do this? Doesn't our friendship mean anything? I expected more from you.

LOLA. Now we are getting down to the meat of it, aren't we? Your expectations, your wants, and your needs, if something is slightly askew in your world the rest of us must jump to until it's corrected.

ALYSSA. What? It is more than slightly askew. That is no *small* thing to me; it is part of my marriage breakup. You have no right to try to make it seem so insignificant.

LOLA. What do I have the right to do, since you have crowned yourself martyr queen? I get to sit back, appear chastened and beg pardon in hopes that you will forgive me. Or should I tell you that I, too, fell for Jesse's charms and had no recourse but to have sex with him.

ALYSSA. I am not—

LOLA. Since you are so fond of revisiting the past today why don't we go back two years to the faculty dinner. Where the boring administration gets to make speeches, while their friends and family suffer in silence, huddled around the mini-bar. That's when I first approached him.
(beat)
Surprised?
(beat)
Yes, I approached him and to his credit, he held out for six months before succumbing to my charms. I bet he didn't tell you that, did he? While you were up working the superintendent's table, I was in the back working Jesse.

ALYSSA. Why?

LOLA. Why not? There you were again, in the middle of the bosses, kissing up and shining, probably on your way to another bonus or promotion. While I sat at the table in the back, no chance to talk to the bosses. I was not high enough on the food chain.

ALYSSA. What does that have to do with anything? You know that's not true. Everybody talks to everybody at those functions.

LOLA. But they only listen to the chosen ones.

ALYSSA. This is about a faculty dinner?

LOLA. No. It actually goes back further than that but it's my story and I will tell it in my time.

ALYSSA. Lola—

LOLA. No, you persisted until you wore me down. You want a confession. Well, now you're getting it. You don't get to complain about how it is presented to you. It's my time now.
(takes a drink)
There is no reason for you to get too upset. Jesse always found someone to amuse him at those events while you were sucking up to the bosses. I'm surprised you never noticed. He was well on his way to convincing Rachel to take a little walk with him. I had to break that up. You know she is not discreet. The whole school would have known about the affair before the week was out. So, in a way, I did you a favor.

ALYSSA. Am I supposed to thank you for it?

LOLA. Initially, he was quite nervous. I think he suspected that I was acting on your behalf and might entrap him. After that, since he was a bit skittish, I only approached him at different functions. It was easy. You always shared his calendar, as if you were his personal assistant. It really wasn't too difficult showing up where he was going to be. Jesse being Jesse...
(beat)
I would've liked to have seen his face when you told him that you rented a car and followed him. He never said a word to me about it. I guess he is only gossipy with you. The bastard could've saved me this hassle.

ALYSSA. I hired you to work for me. We've worked on important assignments. I've introduced you to people and this is how you repay me—

LOLA. Big *important* you has helped little peon me. Here Lola, here girl, have some of my scraps. There you go. You treat me like I'm one of your pets. Maybe you've forgotten but I remember the road you took to get this job.

ALYSSA. I remember it, too. We've talked about this before. I thought you were past this.

LOLA. Why would I be past this? My car was in the shop for almost a month and I missed a career making opportunity, an opportunity that you were able to step into by "chance." How fortuitous!

(SERVER returns.)

SERVER. Is there anything else that I can get you.

(LOLA and ALYSSA speak together.)

ALYSSA, LOLA. No! Scotch!

ALYSSA. I think you've had more than enough.

LOLA. It's back to you again, now is it?

(SERVER looks at ALYSSA then LOLA.)

SERVER. I'll... uh... give you a few minutes.

(SERVER exits.)

ALYSSA. All of this is about the GIFT program?

LOLA. Not the program, my internship, the one you stole from me by putting sugar in my gas tank.

ALYSSA. I didn't do that.

LOLA. It was going to be my summer. I was happy you were planning to go to California. I would no longer have to stand in your shadow. It was finally going to be my moment. I would've impressed my mentor. He would have offered me a job after graduation. He would've assisted me up the ladder until I became principal. I had planned that interview for months.

ALYSSA. It was a *coincidence*.

LOLA. You just happen to show up at my interview time with all your information and convince the secretary that you would be happy to interview, since I hadn't showed up. I have never been that naive.

ALYSSA. I never called you that. Why are you bringing this up again? What do you want me to say, that's how it happened. I was just bringing your resume that you left behind.

LOLA. That's why I *know* you're lying, Alyssa. I sent my resume in with the application. There was no reason for you to be there. But that wasn't the first time was it? That ten-page paper that I wrote for astronomy that the computer swallowed and miraculously the major points showed up in your paper. What about that? Prof. Whitcomb wanted to expel me for plagiarism.

ALYSSA. I explained to him what happened. You were a bit stressed. Your mom had been sick and you wanted to go home—

LOLA. Of course you did, because he couldn't possibly believe any explanation that I'd give him after you hinted that I was suicidal. Don't look so surprised. Did you think I wouldn't hear about it?

ALYSSA. I didn't hint anything. If he assumed that from the short conversation we had, I can't be held responsible. I told him that we talked about the class all the time. It was only naturally that there would be some crossover—

LOLA. Crossover, yes, if it were true, but we didn't talk about his class much. You hated it. You have excuses for everything and that "I'm so sweet" mask may have fooled them but it didn't fool me.

ALYSSA. It's not a mask. You know me. You know who I am, I didn't do any of those things. I wouldn't do any of those things.

LOLA. (sarcastically) And I didn't sleep with Jesse. What about the Fall Festival?

ALYSSA. What about it?

LOLA. Your first bonus as principal was based on the Festival, wasn't it? I created, planned and worked on it but I only got an afterthought mention.

ALYSSA. I did give you credit, but what's funny is how you can limit my part in helping to create the Festival. As far as I am concerned, we created, planned and worked on the project together.

LOLA. No, we didn't. I came to you with the idea. I had charts and a folder with plans. You just agreed to let it go forward, that was your big contribution. So maybe I should be forgiving you 'cause that's just a few of many things that you have done to me in the past and refused to acknowledge.

ALYSSA. (angrily) You forgive me? I should *apologize* to you...*for what*? For you fucking my husband, for you contributing to the break-up of my marriage, for you pretending you're my friend—

LOLA. You would know about pretending, wouldn't you? How upset you looked back in college when I told you about the sugar in my new red Fiero's gas tank. That car, the gift my mother had to work two jobs to pay for, never ran the same again.

ALYSSA. If you were this upset why would you continue "being" my friend?

LOLA. Keep your friends close and your frenemies...
(beat)
Besides I thought that you would eventually realize that our friendship was more important than the internship and confess all.

ALYSSA. I didn't do anything that warrants a confession. This was so long ago it hardly seems to me that it should matter anymore.

LOLA. Maybe not to you because it didn't happen to you. That's the whole point, isn't it, Alyssa. If it happens to you, it is of earth shattering importance but if it happens to me, it barely deserves mentioning.

ALYSSA. That's not true, we talked about it when it happened and you were fine with it.

LOLA. Obviously not. You still don't get it and you seem so bright when you're adopting my ideas as your own and making a name for yourself.

ALYSSA. I don't need you to make a name for myself. I was trying to help a friend along, to be a mentor like the one I had. You are an ungrateful cow.

LOLA. You expect me to be grateful for the theft of my life's dream. Then to be lectured on loyalty by someone who wouldn't know loyalty if it was spat on her face.

ALYSSA. Who slept with whose husband?

LOLA. Who put sugar in my gas tank?

ALYSSA. You compare some stupid car to the break-up of my marriage.

LOLA. It wasn't about the car! I guess I will have to continue until you finally get it. I wonder what will the other teachers will think when they find out that I am sleeping with your ex and you are expecting his baby. How much respect will you carry as principal then? What will the parents think when they find out? Maybe the Festival will not run as smoothly as it has in the past this next time. Since I organize the volunteers, will you have enough people to staff the booths? Perhaps the board would be interested in hearing about some of the creative adjustments you've made in this years budget. In addition, maybe some of the complaints that I hear from the other teachers will somehow find their way into the administrations inbox.

ALYSSA. What makes you think you can just keep treating me this way?

LOLA. Well, I can, because you let me.
(stands)
Lunch is on you, right? There must be a hundred different ways I can make you pay for what you did.

ALYSSA. What did you say? Let you? *Pay*?

LOLA. You heard me. I will continue to do whatever I want until I'm satisfied. Nothing you have is off limits as far as I am concerned. I thought an apology or acknowledgement of what you did would satisfy me but it is not enough. I deserve to be principal and I won't stop until I am.
(LOLA turns to leave.)
(ALYSSA grabs the knife and stabs LOLA in the back.)

LOLA. Ow!

(LOLA turns back around a shocked look on her face and sits down.)

ALYSSA. (insincerely) Sorry.

CURTAIN

Contributers

Monica Burchfield, a native of northern Florida, is completing the M.A. in poetry program at Georgia State University. Her poems have been published in journals such as *Kudzu Review*, *Mêlée*, *Rhino*, and *Terra Incognita*. *Lapis Lazuli*, her chapbook, was recently published in 2009 by La Vita Poetica Press.

Rachel Burger is a China-focused international relations major at Agnes Scott who is passionate about politics, music, and, of course, writing. When she isn't reading Jodi Picoult or engaging in online debates, Rachel can be found working in the Speaking Center and attending local concerts. She is currently studying at Peking University to satiate her desire to learn as much as possible about Sino-American relations.

Will Carter, originally from Roswell, Georgia, is a sophomore at Oglethorpe University. He has been writing for as long as he can remember, but he has been writing plays since his junior year of high school, when he wrote and directed "A Mexicali Kind of Sentiment."

Joanna Carver is a junior English literature-creative writing major at Agnes Scott, hailing from Atlanta, Georgia and Scottsdale, Arizona. Approximately 67% of her bookshelf is made up of books on or by the Kennedy family. She writes everything in longhand in spiral notebooks and only types when forced.

Mike Dockins, a native New Yorker, lives in Atlanta where he is completing a Ph.D. at Georgia State. His first book, *Slouching in the Path of a Comet*, was published by Sage Hill Press in 2007. His poems have appeared in *Crazyhorse*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Quarterly West*, *Third Coast*, and *The Greensboro Review*, and they have been reprinted in *Poetry Daily*, *Verse Daily*, and in the 2007 edition of *The Best American Poetry*. A singer-songwriter, Mike co-founded the acoustic-pop group Clop in 1996.

Trista Edwards is a graduate student of English at the University of West Georgia. She also received her B.A. in English at UWG and plans to further her education with an M.F.A in poetry. Her work has previously appeared in the *Eclectic*, *Cause & Effect*, and *Stirring*.

A. Kay Emmert is a teaching fellow studying poetry and nonfiction at Georgia College & State University where she reads for Arts and Letters Journal of Contemporary Culture. She also coordinates the Writers in the Schools (WITS) program in collaboration with Georgia College Early College.

Kristen Fox is an English literature-creative writing major and Philosophy minor at Agnes Scott. She transferred to Agnes Scott from the University of Miami in 2008, and plans to be finished with coursework in December, 2010. Everything in the world totally blows Kristen's mind, but her work focuses on taking a more skeptical look at the persistence of identity over time, both in the presence and absence of loved ones.

Michelle Haddad is a junior neuroscience major at Agnes Scott. She has been a storyteller her whole life, and fell in love with writing at the age of nine. Other creative pursuits have included performing with a Shakespeare troupe and an opera company. Michelle plans to pursue a Ph.D. in clinical neuropsychology and would like to be Oliver Sacks when she grows up.

Alfreda Henry is an Agnes Scott Woodruff Scholar, class of 2011 majoring in English literature-creative writing. She was born in Michigan. She has been writing for many years entertaining her family and friends. She is a single parent of a very talented and supportive daughter, Danielle. After retiring from a career in law enforcement, she moved to Georgia, returned to school and decided to share some of her stories with a larger audience. She self-published a children's book, *Willowmeena Worm*.

Sara Hughes is in her second year as a graduate student at Georgia State University. Before returning to school, she taught preschool and kindergarten for four years at Montessori of Macon. Her poems and reviews have been published in *Rattle, Rosebud, Arts and Letters Journal of Contemporary Culture,* and *Love Poems and Other Messages for Bruce Springsteen: an Anthology.* She also serves as an editorial assistant in poetry for the Chattahoochee Review.

James Thomas Miller is from Indianola, Mississippi, but lives in Atlanta. His work has appeared in *Blackbird, The Antioch Review* and *Ploughshares.*

Kayla Miller is a junior at Agnes Scott, majoring in Women's Studies. This is her first time being published.

Jen Pirkle is currently pursuing an M.F.A. in fiction from Georgia College and State University. She hopes to catch up to it in the year 2011.

Heather Sanders was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, where she spent much of her childhood before moving to Georgia for her middle and high school years. In 2009, she received the Al and Mary Nadassy scholarship for her work in Berry College's freshmen writing courses and was also honored with the publication of two poems in the fall 2008 issue of *Ramifications*—Berry's literary magazine. She is a sophomore at Berry majoring in English with a concentration in creative writing and minor in Spanish.

Justine Schwartz is a senior English literature-creative writing major at Agnes Scott. She is extremely excited to be selected as a finalist for the Writers' Festival, but prefers to remain cool and aloof on the subject.

Megan Scott is a native of Tyrone, Georgia and is an undergraduate at Berry College, attempting to understand the fields of English and Family Studies. Having desired to be a writer since the third grade, she spends a great deal of time pondering over journals or babbling thoughts onto worn recording devices.

Roger Sollenberger was born and raised in Herndon, Virginia. He attended James Madison University and eventually graduated. Though he loves to travel, he tries to keep close ties with his family, and would like to take this opportunity to let them know he's doing fine. He is a first-year M.F.A. student (fiction) at Georgia College & State University.

Benjamin Solomon is co-editor of *The Open Face Sandwich*, an anthology of uncommon prose. His fiction has appeared in *Diagram, Best Modern Voices,* and his essay in *Boneshaker #1* was chosen as a notable selection by *The Best American Nonrequired Reading* 2008. He also recently won second place in the *Creative Loafing* Fiction Contest for his story, "Slippage." He is in his second year of an M.F.A. in fiction at Georgia State University.

Cetoria Tomberlin is a native of Thomasville, Georgia who attends Berry College in Northwest Georgia. She is a senior who will be graduating in May 2010 with a degree in English, writing concentration, and a minor in international studies. Her future plans include pursuing an M.F.A. in graduate school and learning how to sew.

Writers' Festival Previous Guests

1972 May Sarton, Michael Mott, Marion Montgomery
1973 Robert Penn Warren, George Garrett
1974 Hollis Summers, Larry Rubin
1975 Richard Eberhardt, Josephine Jacobsen
1976 Reynolds Price, Michael Mott,
Nathalie Fitzsimmons Anderson
1977 Eudora Welty, Guy Davenport, Josephine Jacobsen
1978 John Young, Larry Rubin, Josephine Jacobsen
1979 Harry Crews, Donald Davis, Josephine Jacobsen
1980 Howard Nemerov, Josephine Jacobsen
1981 James Merrill, Theodore Weiss, Josephine Jacobsen
1982 Margaret Atwood, Doris Betts, Josephine Jacobsen
1983 Donald Justice, Josephine Jacobsen, Gretchen Schultz
1984 Richard Wilbur, Linda Pastan, Gretchen Schultz,
Kay Stevenson
1985 Maxine Kumin, Greg Johnson, Gretchen Schultz
1986 Denise Levertov, Andrew Lytle, Memye Curtis Tucker
1987 Tillie Olsen, Memye Curtis Tucker, Jane Zanca
1988 Michael Harper, Anne River Siddons,
Memye Curtis Tucker
1989 James Dickey, Memye Curtis Tucker, Elizabeth Bartlett
1990 Josephine Jacobsen, Alfred Uhry, Memye Curtis Tucker
1991 Gloria Naylor, Sharon Olds, Memye Curtis Tucker
1992 Rita Dove, Robert Coover, Greg Johnson, John Stone,
Memye Curtis Tucker
1993 Jorie Graham, Charles Johnson, Judith Ortiz Cofer,
Memye Curtis Tucker
1994 Carolyn Forché, Melissa Fay Greene, Lee Abbott,
Mary Kratt
1995 Michael Harper, Peter Carey, Julie Kalendek,
Memye Curtis Tucker
1996 Alicia Ostriker, Philip Lopate, Joy Williams,
Sally Ann Stevens
1997 Jane Smiley, Katha Pollitt, Pearl Cleage,
Anjail Rashida Ahmad
1998 Jamaica Kincaid, Thylias Moss, Sherman Yellen
1999 Tim O'Brien, Eavan Boland, Frank Manley,
Meyme Curtis Tucker
2000 Joyce Carol Oates, Li-Young Lee, Jim Grimsley,
Robert Earl Price
2001 John Updike, Marsha Norman,Sharon Olds,
Anjail Rashida Ahmad
2002 Marilyn Nelson, Bapsi Sidhwa, Scott Russell Sanders
2003 Julia Alvarez, Greg Williamson, Cary Bynum
2004 Chitra Divakaruni, Bo Ball
2005 Oliver Sacks, Linda Hogan
2006 Paul Muldoon, Percival Everett,
Nathalie Fitzsimmons Anderson
2007 Suzan-Lori Parks, Yusef Komunyakaa,
Beatriz Rivera-Barnes
2008 Martín Espada, Gillian Lee-Fong-Farris, Rubén Martínez
2009 Junot Díaz, Anita Desai, Quiara Alegría Hudes,
Memye Curtis Tucker

Writers' Festival 2010 Guests

Scott Russell Sanders studied physics and English at Brown University and, as a Marshall Scholar, completed a Ph.D. in English at the University of Cambridge. In 1971 he joined the faculty of Indiana University, where he taught until 2009, retiring as Distinguished Professor of English. Among his more than twenty books are novels, collections of stories, works of personal nonfiction, and storybooks for children. His writing examines the human place in nature, the pursuit of social justice, the relation between culture and geography, and the search for a spiritual path. His recent book, *A Private History of Awe*, is a coming-of-age memoir, love story, and spiritual testament, and was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. *A Conservationist Manifesto*, his vision of a shift to a sustainable society, was published in 2009.

Paul Guest was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and raised in Georgia. He received a B.A. in Humanities from the University of Tennessee and an M.F.A. from Southern Illinois University. His poems have appeared in *Slate, The Iowa Review, Mid-American Review, Pleiades, Quarterly West, Third Coast*, and elsewhere. His book *The Resurrection of the Body and the Ruin of the World* was winner of the 2002 New Issues Prize. He is also the recipient of a 2007 Whiting Writers' Award, and his second book, *Notes for My Body Double*, won the Prairie Schooner Book Prize in Poetry. In 2008, he published *My Index of Slightly Horrifying Knowledge*. He teaches at the University of West Georgia.

Sarah Scoles '07 recently graduated from Cornell University's M.F.A. program, where she completed a collection of short stories featuring female narrators who are intelligent, neurotic, and scientific and who feel some kind of disconnect between their brains and the world around them. She teaches writing at Cornell University and later plans to observe and chronicle the lives of astronomers at remote radio telescopes. Her work has appeared in *DIAGRAM*, *SNReview*, *Sotto Voce* and "Fringe."

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