

The background of the entire page is an abstract artwork. It features thick, wavy, horizontal lines in shades of orange, pink, and yellow, creating a sense of movement and depth. Overlaid on these lines are several black, stylized figures that resemble insects or small animals, possibly beetles or crickets, with long legs and antennae. These figures are positioned at various heights and angles, some appearing to be climbing or standing on the wavy lines. The overall composition is dynamic and layered.

TLR

TAHOMA LITERARY REVIEW 2.1

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ABOUT THE COVER

This issue's cover image is from a series by southern California artist Wendy Smith called "Inside the Brain." The series consists of four drawings in four series each for a total of sixteen images.

The inspiration for the series was Camillo Golgi, who is considered the father of neuroscience. He was the first scientist to dye samples of brain tissue so the neurons could be observed. Smith's drawings mimic this technique by using washes of color in different orders to illustrate the brain cells.

Smith did her undergraduate work in Nottingham England and then moved on to the Rhode Island School of Design, in Providence for grad school in sculpture.

Smith has done other "brain" drawings in her career, including a large set of drawings in Texas that are now owned by the Museum of Fine. As she likes to say, she left her brains in Texas.

Her other work often deals with subjects like evolution and mythology. Samples of her drawing and sculpture can be viewed on her web site, wendysmithartist.com.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

About this Issue: Poetry	VII
About this Issue: Fiction	IX
About this Issue: Nonfiction	XI
You, Tumbling, Linda Michel-Cassidy, Flash Nonfiction	15
Resurrection in Tercets, Ronda Broatch, Poetry	18
Place Your Hand Here, Lilliam Rivera, Fiction	20
The Inheritance of Loss, Laura Kendall, Nonfiction	26
Davenport and Ottomans, Stefanie Freele, Flash Fiction	35
Summer Solstice at 43, Heather Altfeld, Poetry	38
Iris and the Message Baby, Lynda Sexson, Fiction	41
A Genealogy of The Word, Nickole Brown, Poetry	55
Growing Up, All the Mobile Homes, Arian Katsimbras, Poetry	76
Christmas, 1986, Monic Ductan, Poetry	78
The California Water War, John Brantingham, Flash Fiction	79
Rebuilding Pearlington, Shane Pekny, Nonfiction	81

After Reading the News, Michael Lauchlan, Poetry	91
West Hollywood, 1992, Dani Burlison, Fiction	93
Polaroid #2: Crack Motel '98, Marcus Clayton, Poetry	100
Botox at Whitman-Walker / A New Man, Stefen Styrsky, Flash Fiction	102
The Vampires, Heather Momyer, Fiction	109
Derivatives, Tara Skurtu, Poetry	117
Contributors	130
About TLR	134
TLR Staff	136

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

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ABOUT THIS ISSUE: POETRY

The poems in this third volume of *Tahoma Literary Review* range the world over, from a condominium complex in Florida to a cemetery in Romania, and from mobile homes in the desert of Nevada to a fourth-story window in Punjab.

But despite their varied geographies, what unifies this group of poems, apart from the exceptional craftsmanship that we at *Tahoma* strive to make a hallmark of every issue, is their ability to tell stories just as cogently and powerfully as any work of fiction or nonfiction.

In these pieces from poets both emerging and established, we find compelling scenes grounded in time: a family's fragmentation captured in a moment in 1998, or on the Christmas holiday in 1986. We witness the depths of personal histories unspooled on the occasion of the solstice, or of Easter Sunday's unmarked passage. Some elegant, some subtle, some lyrical, but all urgent, each of these pieces tells a story that demands to be heard.

This volume also marks a development of *TLR* as a venue for the long poem; in this issue, two long sequences push the narrative capabilities of lyrical work to storytelling that is heartbreaking, timely, even difficult, yet important. Since the journal's inception, I've been dedicated to the project of making *TLR* a home for necessary work that isn't easily published in other journals, whether it's because that work is challenging, because it's lengthy, or because it comes from voices outside

the established mainstream. This issue of *TLR* gives readers what I hope is only an opening salvo in our presentation of work fitting that very description.

It is my hope that, in that in these poems, not only readers of poetry but also lovers of prose will find stories that resonate with our sense of truth, challenge our assumptions, enliven our senses, and linger in our imaginations.

—KD

ABOUT THIS ISSUE: FICTION

We all sometimes feel trapped to some extent—in our lives, in our jobs or relationships—and recognize the difficulty of making meaningful change. It can be a game of five-card stud: how good is this hand that was dealt to us; how best should we play it? Bet, or bluff, or is it best to fold and wait for a better opportunity? Good fiction centers on these moments of decision, intriguing us with situations that at least psychologically mimic those in our own lives. The stakes may vary, but the need to pull that internal trigger at some point is never far from the present moment.

Although the settings and characters in issue 3's fiction vary, the thread that runs through these stories is one of entrapment. Sometimes what holds us is a single person, someone whose personality overwhelms, as in "Place Your Hand Here," by Lilliam Rivera. Sometimes that entity is a family whose hierarchy and traditions can make a child want to break out of good behavior, as in Stefanie Freele's flash fiction, "Davenport and Ottomans." John Brantingham combines both family and political forces to hold his characters in his flash, "The California Water War."

But at other times our jailer seems to come from the larger world, holding us to patterns of behavior that repeat and never offer a better future. Stefen Styrsky's prose examines a segment of our society in which the characters seem to have given up hope of ever moving out of—al-

though sometimes such a depressing existence can foster a unique sense of camaraderie. And in “West Hollywood, 1992,” Dani Burlison paints an exquisite picture of how confining forces can come from both the world and from within.

Even those born into affluence can’t escape. The rich, perhaps more than others, create their own shackles. Such is the case in “Iris and the Message Baby,” by Lynda Sexson. This excellent story also holds a second form of confinement, a physical dimension, of a sort.

Yes, the physical prison is of course the traditional view of captivity. What better example of this than, say, a coffin? Heather Momyer’s “Vampires” is the most lyrical piece we’ve published in *TLR* so far, and it immerses itself in the archetype and causality of vampire life.

—JP

ABOUT THIS ISSUE: NONFICTION

Time, goes the old saying, waits for no one. And yet, in this issue, our three essayists use it to every advantage, as they ponder parts of their own lives through lenses as far-reaching as generations, as tightly focused as on a single moment. In doing so, the perspectives they choose become nearly as important as the incidents related, since they determine the meaning they (and we) can take away from what occurred.

Hurricane Katrina struck the gulf coast of the U.S. in late 2005. Shane Pekny went down to Pearlington, Mississippi, in February, 2006, as part of a recovery effort sent from Nebraska to help rebuild houses, remove debris—whatever needed to be done to help this small town outside the media’s main coverage of the storm and its aftermath. It’s taken nearly a decade for him to sort through the weeks he spent there, to settle on a more lasting meaning and memory of the events that affected millions of lives.

The long perspective also serves Linda Michel-Cassidy, as she recalls a few moments of a ski run gone bad, on a hill that was icier than it appeared. The trauma of the incident persists, so that Michel-Cassidy writes about the experience in second person, as though it might have happened to someone else. But of course it didn’t, and yet her account becomes both personal and universal through this unique essay.

Laura Kendall is twenty-six and losing her hair. This is not some-

thing happening far away, not an isolated incident with a beginning and an end. A young woman going bald in a society in which a woman's hair is one of her most important features. She lives with her condition every day and must continually adapt to it. It has a future that is unsure, yet inevitable. Kendall writes about her malady openly, honestly, and bravely.

These three talented writers comprise our nonfiction selections this issue. We consider your investment in our pages valuable, and hope you enjoy our writers' work.

—YSL

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YOU, TUMBLING

LINDA MICHEL-CASSIDY

Like little kids, we inventory our wounds, the injuries witnessed, as well as mere hearsay. Everything is epic.

“Had to pop my own shoulder back in,” said Bill, in the bar, after a few.

“It went melon-sized,” the alpine coach said of Erin’s knee.

“I couldn’t even find my second pole after,” said my daughter to a friend, thinking I hadn’t heard.

“My bindings are shot. Ripped right away from the base.” Could be anyone, the way we behave.

You were never a risk-taker, but neither did you carry around pockets full of anxiety. Some joker, maybe you, set your dins too high—but nobody wants their skis popping off in the powder, now do they?

Then came an afternoon of flat light. You were at the top of that hill that you hated to begin with, but this time, with ice. The thing is, you don’t even know how it happened. Technically, it was the sitting back. *Lean forward* you’ve heard since forever, repeated it to your own kid, who in the meanwhile, has surpassed you. She can get down this hill without thinking about it, even on a beast of a day such as this. Because she is a natural.

And you are not.

And just like that, you were on your back, your head, your fucking shoulder that hasn't been the same since that car accident in college—and now this. You were alert while tumbling, listening for snapping bones. You've somehow never even fractured anything and here you were about to split your head open. You heard the crumbly grind of your helmet lumping its way down the hill, felt the strap choke your neck, holding that headgear on, just like it's supposed to. Your skull bumped around like a superball and you thought: *This* is what a head injury is like. You realized your body was slipping—finding its gravity if you will—with the top of your noggin pointing down the hill. Something ripped.

Everything about this was new.

This is a long hill, so you had the time to attempt an out-of-body experience. You did not want to be you right then. You couldn't picture what this looked like. What you could see was in your favorite colors: green and white. The trees, the snow flashing by—and fast. Except that you were the thing with all the motion. Because of the fact that you were taking the hill on your back, this part is something of a blur.

Someone in the swirling distance yelled.

When you stopped sliding, your friends stood around looking down at you like you were an exhibit or an unearthed corpse. They blocked your view of the sky, saying things like, *Did anyone call the patrol?* and, *Should we move her?* You pictured the backboard that should be en route, its restraints flopped to the side, a warming blanket and a neck brace sitting on top.

The friends made an X out of two ski poles, jambed them into the crusty cover, right at your feet, which were pointed up the hill. Everyone, including you, knew that if someone came down too fast, you'd all be goners. Those skinny sticking-up poles felt like a premonition of a gravestone, rather than the warning they were supposed to be. One of them toppled over and rolled further down the slope. It sounded like a cheap toy. A single ski pole stuck in the ground has no meaning. It's just a thing to run into.

Your bindings didn't pop like they should have. This is why you slid head first. Those skis were the thumping noise. The drag was why you couldn't self-arrest. That or you forgot to try.

There were so many things to think about.

You got up. Dizzy, but standing. You palmed your hand across the dent in the back of your helmet, and you could tell it did not crack. You were woozy, but not vomiting. Your pupils were not dilated, or so you were told. So you finished the run. Unsupported, but slow. Someone said some nonsense about getting back on the horse, and someone else said they couldn't believe you didn't snap your back.

Now *you* have a story as well.

Skiing down on an easy run with four friends taking care of you is not getting back on the horse. It's more like viewing the corral from the safety of your car, and saying, *maybe someday* when what you are thinking is, *never; never; never*.

You still have the single-crash helmet with the grapefruit-sized crater in the back. You have kept the thing hanging in the laundry room next to the rack where your ski clothes dry. Someday soon, you'll circle the damage with a black marker and write *Do Not Use* in angry capital letters and throw it in the trash. You should probably saw it in half so that none of the dumpster divers in town try to salvage it for resale.

One day (maybe), you will look at that hill and not feel your heart pound in your ears, but for now, you take the easier, more circuitous route down, pretending that this was a choice.



Listen to Linda Michel-Cassidy read "You, Tumbling" on TLR's SoundCloud page.

RESURRECTION IN TERCETS

RONDA BROATCH

The other morning Jesus rose without me.
Some chosen words eclipse all others.
Even so, there are stars no sun can impeach.

Easter I ate with the heavyweight who
sued for millions. In the basement of my
mother's house he sits, writing his story.

My father's trapped beneath weight of his head-
stone. Only nine hundred ninety six years
remain till he becomes light once again.

I studied the bear says the boxer
over coffee grounds and a hambone.
I believe he has stolen my totem.

Father says *someone will move in with you.*
This is the second hurtful thing you've said
my mother cries. I wonder at the first.

Jesus forgive us for falling asleep.
The stars shine clearer after a night of rain.
Even words pale when the stone begins to roll.

PLACE YOUR HAND HERE

LILLIAM RIVERA

She had Pentecostal hair. A long black curtain that kissed the back of her knees. When she walked down 149th Street, her hair would do that dance, side to side, as if following the rhythm of a bitter bachata. The skirt was just as long as the hair. All of the Disciples of Christ wore the same plain skirt, but she tried to liven it up by wearing it with a loose floral top she bought over the weekend on sale for \$14.99. Today, they would go up Eagle Avenue and try the buildings there. Not everyone got asked to preach the word, but he asked her and she said yes.

“You look very pretty this morning, Hermana Yvelisse,” he said. His name was Rudolpho but he insisted she call him Rudy.

“Gracias,” she said at first, then quickly corrected herself with a “Thank you.” The others nodded their heads in approval.

“Why don’t we let Hermana Yvelisse try the next apartment?” Rudy asked the circle.

She stared at his long lashes. He was short, with a large gut and tiny black curls of hair. They were the same age but he’d been in the city for ten years. It was her cousin Annabel who took her to the Disciples of Christ when Yvelisse first arrived six months ago. The hours were so long in the factory that when she clocked out the sun would no longer be there. Her face turned paler every day. Those on the island always said the cold would send her running back. They were taking down bets

as to when she'd return but Yvelisse refused to even utter the name of the town she'd left behind.

"Would you like to receive the word of God this morning?" she said in English, just like Rudy taught her. She didn't look at him for fear he would laugh at her rough accent. She repeated the sentence again this time with more conviction. The person behind the door refused to open and Yvelisse felt useless. But when Rudy placed his hand on the middle of her back, Yvelisse was reminded that he held the key to conquering this unforgiving city.

"Very good," he said. His fingers smoothed a portion of her coat. She leaned in to Rudy's large hand, still pressed against her.

Yvelisse gripped her prayer book.

"Move!" the lady yelled at her husband who sat slumped at the foot of the stairs. "Can't you see the church girl gotta get in?"

The couple lived with three Chihuahuas in the apartment below her. When Yvelisse first arrived from the island, trembling with only a thin sweater to keep her warm, the woman pointed at her and shook her head. Back then, Yvelisse stared at the woman's fast-moving lips and felt herself shrinking under the weight of the foreign words.

"I gotta buy food for the babies," the woman explained, pointing at the tiny dogs shivering in her shopping cart. The woman's voice was harsh. Even when the couple tossed in bed at night, her bedroom moans sounded like punches. Sometimes, the punches turned real as their arguments leaked into Yvelisse's room. Her cousin explained that it was the drink that made them so passionate.

"Why don't you invite us to go to your church?" she asked, slurring the ends of her words. Her hair was the color of dry straw.

Yvelisse pretended not to understand.

"We sinners, that's why? Shit," the woman said. "We'll probably burn in hell but not you, you're going places. You got your ticket. Me and my dogs, we're staying here. Right, Puchi?"

The man muttered to himself and slid over a tiny bit, just enough for Yvelisse to pass. His bloodshot eyes barely looked up. Sometimes, she'd catch him checking her out but only when they were both alone. Never in front of his woman. He rubbed his calloused hands together the same way her father did the night she told him she was leaving for good.

Yvelisse carefully walked by the man. She whispered the word “ticket” over and over to herself.

Ticket. Ticket.

Sweat dripped down Rudy’s neck after his sermon.

“I’ll take you home,” he said.

Yvelisse felt that surge again. All those late Bible meetings leading up to this moment, the moment when Rudy picked her out from among all the other Hermanas.

He parked his shiny maroon 1978 Chevrolet in front of her building. Yvelisse glanced up toward her apartment and could see the flickering glow from the television. Her cousin sat upstairs watching her favorite novela, poring over the *NY Discount Furniture* catalog and calculating how much a sofa set would cost on layaway. If they pooled their money they could get that matching set.

“The women here are different from the ones at home,” Rudy said. “You’re not like those that stayed on the island and waited for the good to come to them. You made a choice to find what is good.”

To be the first to leave wasn’t easy, but once her cousin sent her a one-way ticket, those wishful dreams of another life turned yearnings into action. They said she should stay and marry the quiet boy with dirt-encrusted nails, but she wanted a man of strong words, someone better than anything she could ever find back home. All those boys back home with fragile hopes bound together with nothing but mist. This city, and the men that inhabited it, were made of firmer ground.

“You’re different.” His hand reached up to her cheek then to the back of her neck. “Una chica moderna. Modern.”

He leaned in and kissed her. The stubble on his chin felt abrasive, but he smelled new. He guided her head to his lap. His zipper unzipped.

Yo soy moderna, she thought. His hand pressed down on her neck as she felt herself shedding her role of the clueless girl from some forgotten caserio.

The air inside of the storefront church was stuffy. Windows were covered in fog from the humidity while outside, winter storm clouds gathered. Yvelisse stood by the entrance, saying goodnight to the others as they thanked her for leading the meeting. No longer the stranger, the

circle turned to her more and more for advice and she enjoyed that. It was Yvelisse that gathered the others last week to visit a young mother who had just lost her baby. A miscarriage. Each of the women arrived with aluminum foil-covered meals. Yvelisse came with the special rosary. She listened to the young mother's lament while carefully wiping away tears with a stiff paper napkin.

Yvelisse had worn the skirt that made everything easier for their trysts in Rudy's car. Rudy did take her out once to a fancy restaurant on City Island where each table featured a mini aquarium. She stared at the school of goldfish while eating oversized shrimp. But most nights, Rudy just drove her home and parked in front of the building. It didn't bother her that much. She just wanted to be with him, in the car, in a restaurant, or at the church. She didn't mind where. He led, she thought, and that's the way it should be.

When Rudy finally walked towards her, he had his hand on the new girl, parading her like a prized catch. Her name was Deborah, but she wanted everyone to call her Debbie. She said it sounded more Americanizada.

"I'm ready to go home," Yvelisse said, confused.

"I have to drive Debbie home," he said, unwilling to meet her eyes.

"You told me you would take me." She clutched the arm of his polyester gray suit.

Rudy wiped the sweat from his brow.

"I'm sure one of the other Hermanos will be more than happy to drive you home."

He called out to Hector, a widow with grown kids. Rudy's smile was wide. When he was done explaining the situation, he firmly shook Hector's hand, never once changing his expression. The knuckles on Yvelisse's fingers turned white as she clutched the back of a metal chair and watched Rudy walk away with Debbie.

The few remaining Disciples of Christ whispered to each other.

This wasn't what Yvelisse wanted. She had fallen for Rudy. No. She had fallen for the story she'd invented of a good, church-going couple, an image she could share to those waiting for her to fail. But that image was fading.

"I've got plenty of room," Hector beamed. His gray hairs swept to the side in the tradition of the men back home. His buttoned white shirt

was dingy and wrinkled. Hector lost his wife to cancer two years ago. He was a good man, always willing to help others, but he was also a simple man. He came from the same caserio as Yvelisse. He knew her parents well.

Yvelisse looked down at her shoes.

“Are you all right?” Hector asked.

She looked up at him and saw how her life would play out, her future here in the city no different than the future she left. This place was meant to save her. Now it had become a shell of a room with a familiar echo, a chorus of tongues drowning her remnants of hope. She walked away from Hector and into the cold.

The window displayed pairs of clasped plastic hands with square shaped nails in bright neon colors. Yvelisse had passed this nail salon many times when she went preaching with the others, but she never looked in for fear that they would label her. “Never bring attention to yourself,” Rudy always preached.

She stepped inside.

“What color do you want?” the nail lady asked and Yvelisse shook her head, unsure. She looked at the other customers. Different each of them. Confident. A woman her own age sat across from her. Her long nails like tiny swords painted in electric blue tips with white flowers.

A man in a large down jacket entered the salon. His phone caught under his hat as he spoke into it. He dug deep into his baggy jeans and pulled out a wad of cash. He handed the nail lady a few bills while his woman watched with pride.

“Hold up,” the man said into the phone attached to his head, and then he addressed his girlfriend. “Call me when you’re done.”

He kissed her before leaving.

“I’m going next door after this for my hair,” the young woman said, as if Yvelisse needed the explanation. “You know how we do it, right?”

Yvelisse didn’t quite understand but she longed to, to have someone pay for her nails, to be her ticket. A man to keep her from floating adrift in this strange city.

Fool, she thought. I am alone.

The nail lady selected a soft pink color, but Yvelisse found her voice.

"I want them like hers." She pointed to the woman with the electric blue nails.

The nail lady chuckled. "You want them like Brenda. You sure you want that?"

"Yes," Yvelisse said. She calculated the amount this new luxury would cost. It will be a strain for her but the decision was made. "Quiero eso. I want that."

During the Saturday service, Rudy recited the same verses. Those in the metal chairs felt his words, each allowing themselves to fall deeply into the promises they held. Some rocked violently back and forth. Others shouted out in tongues. Each had their choreographed dance to perform.

"We feel your presence here, oh Lord," Rudy said. "Holy Spirit, we welcome you!"

The words sounded hollow to Yvelisse, but she closed her eyes and swayed back and forth like the rest. She no longer joined them in the mornings. Even when Rudy asked her to lead the Bible meetings, she always found an excuse. Yet the church still held something for her. To quit completely would mean defeat.

"God is good! We're in his home."

This was not her home. Yvelisse had no manual to play off, but she would keep playing anyway. She stepped out to the aisle, her arms outstretched, hands wide open. Her nails, electric blue, ready to receive.



Listen to Lilliam Rivera read "Place Your Hand Here" on TLR's SoundCloud page.

THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS

LAURA KENDALL

In the shower, strands leave my scalp and find a new home on my hand, clinging to my fingers as I comb through, like bits of sticky spider silk. I let the water run over my hand, willing the fibers to fall. I watch as the hair spirals toward the drain and gathers. The water rises as the clump of what used to be mine suffocates the drain. A few minutes later, I hop out, soaking the bath rug, and reach in to grab the tiny bird's nest of brown hair; the water gurgles through the holes toward the sewer. I hold the hairball in my hand, silently willing the wisps to hop back onto my head.

When I stare into the mirror, my wet strands cling together, and in the blur before I put my glasses on, my scalp is zebra-striped, brunette hair stark against the white crossing its horizon. I'm twenty-six years old, and I'm losing my hair.

My hair falls unevenly no matter what I do; its spirals vary from one day to the next. When it gets too unruly, I cut it myself. I used to straighten it, reveling in the sleek look until a hot shower or the Indiana humidity destroyed my work. Now, I go months between assaulting my hair with the iron, remembering the stray hairs left behind with each touch of the wand. I worry about over-washing. I try to skip a day between washes, but I can't run my fingers through by evening. When I wake late and

skip the shower, my next-day hair is a Chinese finger trap that can only be combed after a double-coat of conditioner. I haven't been to a salon for about six years. I say it's because I don't want to waste money, but really, I don't want someone getting close to the growing bald patches on my head.

So three weeks before my wedding, I'm driving to a salon to do a test-run for my hair. I come with my fiancé Justin and my friend Bernardo, who will be the "man of honor" at my wedding. I don't invite my bridesmaids. I feel like I should be chit-chatting about how I want my hair to look, but if anyone is talking, it's not registering. I'm thinking of the things that won't work with the limp strands I have left. In the weeks before, I Googled retro hairstyles and 50s hair. I Youtube'd how to do victory rolls and pompadours, but every picture showed some big-haired broad, and I don't think my hair is capable of that pin-up girl bravado. When we get to the salon and Nacho (one of Bernardo's cousins) sits me down and asks what I want, all I can muster is, "something with a retro vibe." I don't want to be heartbroken when he sees there's not enough hair.

"I'll take what I can get," I say, gesturing toward my lackluster locks, "There's not much to work with."

"That's what extensions are for, honey," he says, grinning as he runs to the back. He doesn't have the right color, so for the practice run he'll have to use something that looks closer to auburn.

I cower beneath a leopard-print smock, trying to hide the twitching of my fingers underneath the synthetic fabric. I'm concentrating on keeping my feet still, but stillness has never been one of my traits. I'm glad that Nacho and I are occasional drinking buddies, that he knows me outside of my hairlessness. He makes small talk as he works, and I'm grateful for the distraction. I'm turned away from the mirror, my glasses resting in my purse, so I'm not forced to watch as he transfuses my sad strands with the brassy extensions. I can smell the heat of the curling iron, and feel him combing things this way, then that. I smile awkwardly toward the blur of Justin and Bernardo across the room, and hear them chuckle back. I feel like a little kid at the dentist, eager for the new toothbrush to be handed over, the symbol that the toothy torture is over.

It seems like hours before the first style is done. There's a side-swept bang, a little bump in the front and lots of auburn tendrils meticulously

pinned in the back. Nacho sticks a big, bejeweled, yellow thing onto the side so I can feel what it would be like with a birdcage veil or another hairpiece. I like it, aside from the hideous bird attached to my head, but he senses uncertainty and starts over. This time there's volume in the front but it's swept back into a sleek bun made entirely of extensions. It looks like something old royalty would wear, and I'm not classy enough to pull it off. As Nacho walks to the back, Bernardo says that from the front I look like a dude.

Nacho attempts one more style, a low, curly side pony I wouldn't be able to stand for a whole day. I imagine myself flipping it back and forth to get it off my neck, and I don't want to look like a braying pony in my wedding pictures. I decide the first style is best, and Nacho shapes my hair back into loose, wearable curls. I confirm the date and time for my wedding day, and I escape.

On the drive south from my hometown to Indy I compare myself to the before picture on the hair re-growth billboard on the interstate. Do I look like that lady? Does my hair look that bad? When I get home I Google "hair re-growth" and "Rogaine" and "women's hair loss" hoping to find an answer to a question to which there is no answer.

I know it's hereditary; I saw my mom's hair slowly disappear. I feel less alone when I read that thirty million women have heredity hair loss, then more alone when it says most starts at age fifty or sixty. There are countless treatments on the market, but they require a life-time commitment, no one-time application and "Ta-da!" I don't want to be slave to special shampoos, vitamins, medications. I know there is no quick fix. I see a future where my hair is not my own.

People often comment on my "beautiful curls," asking if they're natural, sometimes pulling at the twirliest bits. They don't see me carefully combing my hair over the barren spots when I put it in a ponytail or how I scrunch the mousse into my hair just so in the mirror. They don't see the white islands jutting out of the sea of brown curls because they're not looking. But I am, and someday, they will, too.

They'll notice it like I do when I see another soon-to-be-hairless woman walking down the street, or in the office bathroom, or at the grocery store. The barren places come into view as I approach, steadily becoming more spacious upon their globe-like crowns. What was once

an island is a continent, and what was once the size of eastern Europe is full-blown Asia.

I wonder what I'll do when my head is too barren for me to bear. Will I hibernate bald-headed, until one day I show up blossoming with petals of false hair? Maybe my exile will be long enough that the pictures of me in their minds will be blurred. The edges will disappear and they'll see my smile floating in the air like the Cheshire Cat's, and somewhere in their minds a tiny spark will say "something is different." But when they concentrate again on the picture they won't find anything wrong. They'll look at me, then back at the memory, trying to spot the difference, like in the puzzles of their Sunday papers.

And then there's the question of style: If I have to choose a wig, do I go curly or straight? Do I stay close to my natural color or go blond or red or vibrant pink? Should I parade myself around as if it's the hair I've always had, or flaunt a new head of faux hair each day? I think of bald girls donning hospital gowns, still smiling, or women who've had mastectomies wearing head scarves. I am ashamed I care so much about something so trivial, but who will I be when I am no longer "the girl with curly hair"?

As a kid, people called me Curly Sue. When I was a toddler, my short hair ran rampant, tiny curls falling in all directions in the messy style that only looks cute on children. I was adorable until age five when I headed to kindergarten, and my mother, a novice with curly hair, took to brushing out my curls, leaving a frizzy, triangular poof swallowing my head. It took half a bottle of Johnson's No More Tangles to get a brush through. In middle school I found a style closer to Jessie Spano á la *Saved by the Bell*. Girls at school stared longingly, saying, "You're so lucky you have curly hair." I would smile and roll my eyes, wishing for hair I didn't have to fight with.

Now, I just wish for hair.

I've got thirteen years of school photos illustrating the evolution of my locks. The years that follow will show its slow extinction, the strands becoming an endangered species. My curls make me unique. There were other girls with curly hair, but none of it fell just the same way; their waves were larger, their spirals looser. My hair matches my chocolate eyes and brings out the olive in my skin. It's always frizzy and never lies right, but I like how it's wild, telling the world it cannot stay within

bounds. In school, my best friend and I bonded over our twisted hair. When my locks grew long, a friend nicknamed me Weird Al. In a college lip sync contest, I was cast as Scary Spice because I was the only one with curly hair. I was preoccupied with learning choreography and making my hair look big and beautiful like Mel B's. I didn't stop to consider whether I was appropriating something that didn't belong to me; I just wanted one more memory of my hair before its disappearance accelerated.

Women's hairstyles are iconic; they're an extension of personality, a way of telling the world who you are. Jennifer Aniston still gets asked about "The Rachel," with its shoulder length layers. Marilyn Monroe was just Norma Jean without her bleach-blonde hair. We remember Farrah Fawcett's feathered style and Audrey Hepburn's updo in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Keri Russell's haircut was the demise of *Felicity*, when teens across America protested the loss of her curly locks.

"The most important thing I have to say today, is that hair matters," Hillary Rodham Clinton once said to new graduates, "Pay attention to your hair, because everyone else will." She was joking, but comedy is rooted in truth. Our society has shown us that having nice hair helps people land jobs or husbands. It makes people confident, things easier. We live in a world where we feel uncomfortable when average-looking people are on television. We gawk at pages of stars without make-up in the tabloids. Girls compulsively pin hairstyles onto their Pinterest pages. Women spend hundreds of dollars on weaves, extensions, hair dye, stylists.

Men's hair loss is out in the open, but for women, hair loss is hidden beneath layers of shame. Men can joke about their lack of hair, but when I notice other balding women, I'm voiceless. I want to tell them I understand, but I don't want to embarrass them; it's their truth to accept. In a survey, forty-three percent of men were afraid balding was ruining their attractiveness. They didn't bother asking women, because society has already told us the answer: women are supposed to have hair.

Balding men shave their heads because it's less scarring than slowly watching their hair disappear. But what about women? We walk around hairless and people assume we have cancer. A bald head is a symbol of disease, or inadequacy, for women; for men, it's simply a stage of life.

For a long time I ignored the signs of my own inadequacy. The

amount of hair in my brush was normal. Everyone had to un-clog their drain every day. The bald spot was just from parting my hair the same too many times. The terror finally overtook me when my mother washed my hair after I was in the hospital for four days, recovering from a car crash. That trauma was overtaken by the stress that surfaced as my mother worked the knots from my hair. I could hear strands breaking and feel the brush tugging until hair was pulled from my scalp. Pin-pricks of pain signified that more fibers had been emancipated. It felt like she had stolen half my hair. I sulked on the couch like my dog after his three-day vacation to get his balls removed. We shared a similar sense of loss.

I wonder how long my hair will survive. Ten years, maybe. Twenty, if I'm lucky. I think my mother made it into her fifties before she went wig shopping, but I think my belligerent loops will not endure as long as her thin, straight, tangle-free hair.

I remember the first time I saw my mom in her wig. She walked into the apartment where I lived with my brother. Joe and I stared for a moment, unsure who the stranger in the doorway was. In her pre-wig period, our mother had short hair that was blown dry and hair-sprayed into something that looked like a wispy mushroom atop her head. She would bogart the bathroom while she sprinkled on tiny brown fibers to make her hair look fuller. When she emerged the bathroom counter was dirty with little brown bits, and the hairspray fumes wafting out would make us light-headed. Our mother in the post-hair period was a different species. I thought she looked like the "after" in a TV make-over show, a younger, hipper version of our mom, but my brother didn't agree.

"Take it off," he said. "I don't like it; it's a lie."

I don't know why it bothered him. Maybe he viewed it as my mother admitting her god-given hair wasn't good enough. Maybe he was mourning our old mother and hadn't accepted this new one yet. Maybe the loss of familiarity was crippling. Or maybe, it just made him terrified of a future where his head was clad in cheap toupees.

My mom shrugged off his remark, but it hurts to imagine how she must have felt, being shunned by her own. She planned her switch from real to faux hair with care. She chose to do it in a time of transition at her job, when several positions at the small branch library where she

worked were in flux. One new co-worker saw her once with real hair, but didn't start work for two weeks. When the woman's first day rolled around, she didn't seem to notice the change. My mom debuted her wig on the day of an organization-wide meeting, and when she stood up to talk, she made note of the change, saying, "What do you think of the new do?" She didn't want to keep repeating the story. Maybe this is a better plan than hibernation. Maybe there is no easy path for wearing a wig.

I think my brother was wrong: I don't think wearing the wig is the lie; I think saying nothing is the lie.

My grandmother, my mother's mother, died when I was ten; she was nearing eighty. I know her real hair only from pictures, photos of her and my grandfather young and in love. I remember the tiny golden locket she bought me the birthday just before she died; I remember how she saved up pennies and gave them to us in little plastic bags closed with twisty ties at Christmas; I remember the way she always wore makeup on her wrinkled face; and I remember the vanity in her bedroom, with its glass perfume bottles, hat pins, and white Styrofoam heads holding up her hair.

The few times I was there late at night I remember her haunting the halls in just a head-wrap. Without the illusion of hair she seemed like a wise old sage, or the madame down the road selling fortunes from a back room, instead of the blush-faced woman I loved during the day. My grandma was already wearing a wig when my mom was in grade school and they moved across town. She would have been in her late forties when the wig stands appeared. I don't know what it was like for her buying wigs in the sixties. Maybe it was easier then; maybe harder. Maybe she mail-ordered them from a JC Penney catalog. Maybe she had a "wig man" who showed up at her door, toting the latest wigs from Milan. Maybe she was taught the secrets of wearing a wig from her mother, whom I'm told donned them, too. Maybe as a child her grandmother, wearing her own headscarf, whispered a warning of what would come to pass.

I've inherited a lot of things from my mother: her love of books and words and stories; her closets full of trinkets saved "just in case"; her penchant for ridiculous facial expressions; her ability to pay attention to old people who tell infinite anecdotes; and now, her deficit of hair. I'm

proud of most the ways I'm like my mother, but I would like to omit the last part of my inheritance. Of course, this thing we share bonds us together in a sense of loss and fruitless longing, a long line of women who learned to let go. Even if I know nothing else about my great-grandmother, one of many in a long, balding bloodline, I find comfort in the fact we share one thing for sure.

It's the day of my wedding and I've returned to my awkward perch under the leopard-print smock. Today, I have my three bridesmaids and my bespectacled little photographer along, and I'm giddy with anticipation. Nacho has been overly-gracious in creating volume, and when I glance in the mirror I feel like I should be headed to a Pentecostal church service. After a slight do-over, he finishes my perfect wedding hair. There's a marginally smaller bump than before, with a few curly tendrils loose in the front and the rest of the curls, mostly extensions, pinned up in the back. The style is finished with an entire can of hairspray and a small, white flower I've hand-crafted pinned to the side. Nacho brushes powder and blush onto my face while his sister makes headway on my bridesmaids. I'm grateful my hair is done so I don't have to anxiously watch their natural locks being pinned up.

Allison, my roommate pre-fiancé, was once drunkenly harassed about her "pageant hair" while out for someone's birthday. I've met her mother, and her grandmother, and she comes from a long line of perfect locks. Even in a simple ponytail, it's big and lovely; it's thick and gorgeous and bounces like in a commercial for Garnier Fructise. I'm glad I don't have to follow that show. Emily, my best friend from high school, used to be mistaken as my sister, even once as my twin. We were both built thick and curvy, with wild curls surrounding our faces, but her hair remained robust while mine dwindled to a limp bundle too small for a hair tie unless it's wrapped around three times. I'm glad when my sister, who shares my hair loss, but not my sense of direction, finally finds her way to the salon, and the extensions are again pulled from the back room to supplement her thin, dishwater-blond curls. I'm not the only one. This is our inheritance.

Later, after the ceremony, my husband and I are pelted with birdseed, and after escaping the sandstorm my perfect hair is brimming with bits of plant matter. We've still got pictures scheduled with the photog-

rapher so I shake my head trying to release all the seeds. I pick out the remains one by one until my hair is close to intact; I'm grateful for the can of hairspray that's acted as a barrier. As people file through the reception line, they keep telling me how beautiful I look, or how different. My father says he doesn't recognize me. He says he asked someone to make sure. I wonder how much of the beauty is me, and how much is the fake hair and eyelashes Nacho glued on.

After all the food has been eaten, toasts toasted, cake devoured, garter thrown, and all the dances danced, my hair is still frozen in place. When my husband and I arrive at our hotel, exhausted, I stare in the mirror with foreboding, wondering how many pins it took to hold the mess of hybrid hair down. As my husband reads wedding cards aloud, I start removing the pins, counting as I go. I'm tired, and I lose count around thirty, but the unpinning continues. In the end, there's an enormous pile of pins on the nightstand and three clumps of brown extensions in the trash. On my way back from the bathroom, I stare at the rubble my hairdo left behind; I look like a mistreated Barbie doll, hair hacked at and left in disrepair. The hairspray has left portions of it glued perpendicular to my face. It's worse than my normal bed-head, which is already the stuff of nightmares. I sigh, dreading washing the stiffness out.

I walk back to the bed and lay next to my new husband, who is nearly bald himself. He puts his arms around me and pulls me closer, oblivious to the disaster on my head. He kisses the back of my head and whispers, "I love you." I close my eyes and snuggle closer.

When I think about my future children, I wish for boys: Strong, healthy, beautiful boys who will grow into men. For men, baldness isn't an extinction of their identity. I want them to grow old and charming and handsomely bald, like their father. If I have a girl, hopefully I will have the wisdom to whisper in her ear all the secrets of her bloodline. By the time she is my age, I'll likely be wearing a wig, my curls just a memory stored in photographs, and I can teach her how to go about changing her identity, coach her on the courage to accept what you cannot change.

At least I'll know we have something in common.

DAVENPORTS AND OTTOMANS

STEFANIE FREELE

Everybody keeps talking about Maribel's patent leather shoes. How shiny! When they get to the door, her Great Aunt Agnes smirks. And, an almost-matching purse! Maribel knows what a smirk is because her mother always says stop smirking in that tone that means if you don't stop, you are one inch away from getting it missy. The crotch in Maribel's white tights scoots even lower, half-way down her thighs as she enters the hot holiday-decorated living room. The insides of her legs itch and are already chafing from the short walk across the icy parking lot and up the green carpeted stairs that smell like mold and rain, a confining smell she will forever associate with Great Aunt Agnes. She hates these ill-fitting tights, the crinkly dress, the stiff polished shoes, and her mother for making her wear all of this nonsense.

Her mother whispers in *smile and shape up*. The purse is senseless and at age seven even Maribel knows this. Little girls don't carry purses; mothers do so they can have something to ruffle through, to find that lost thing at the bottom, so they can say *Ab ba! Here it is*, as if they'd located a treasure or accomplished something grand.

What Maribel does like is the round trays of ascending shelves filled with candy on the counter. Quite badly she wants to touch the wrapped candies and line them up in groups of color or in rows of big to little. She wants to unwrap one of each color and shape, sniff them and make

a line of tastiest to yuckiest. Another Great Aunt, Patsy who is always wherever Aunt Agnes is, notices Maribel's beacon of hope focused on the colorful shelves. *Oh no*, she says, *not for you! Those are for something special*. This confuses Maribel, because after all isn't the dreadful getup she is wearing designed for *something special*? What awful combination of clothing would she have to wear for that sort of event?

The Aunts are fluffing over her mother, bringing coffee and saying things like, *I told you, don't even talk to her when she's drinking, she'll never remember anyway*. Maribel knows they are discussing her mother's sister Vicki, who Maribel loves more than anyone.

Once, after Thanksgiving Dinner Auntie Vickie fell asleep in their front yard, right by the mailbox, in the snow, and Maribel's mom and dad had to both carry her in after a neighbor called, while Maribel watched from the window. Maribel thinks anyone who can sleep in the snow without blankets or a pillow must be exceptional. She often considers building her own bed in a snowbank and if she wore her snowsuit, the purple mittens and her favorite boots, she discerns that she'd be warm enough to spend the entire night. Sometimes when her mother insists she bundle up and get fresh air, Maribel digs snow holes and curls up in them pretending to be her aunt, pretending to sleep deep enough no one can wake her until morning.

While trying not to look at the candy dish, and instead pretending to look at the prohibited fancy plates behind a case, Maribel imagines Vicki coming to this party, which she wouldn't; she isn't invited to family gatherings any more than a muddy dog might be. Auntie Vicki would say *tear off those tights* and *should we have two or three pieces of candy*. Auntie Vicki would be laughing loudly, teasing her mother about being rigid, winking at Maribel and ignoring—for at least a while—the under-the-breath comments from the Great Aunts.

Auntie Vicki would inspect the raw marks on her legs and find salve she'd call magic, because everything Auntie Vickie does is enchanted, and Maribel's legs would heal immediately.

As the ladies converse about the curtain patterns and how they match the davenport so nicely, using adult words like Naugahyde and paisley, eventually meandering back to *what Vicki said and how she had to sell everything again and now has no furniture at all*, Maribel's hand reaches toward the closest candy on the lowest tray. A plastic-wrapped straw-

berry jets from her hand into the purse. It was so easy. Her itchy uncomfortable legs walk as far away from the rest of the candies as possible, as if they don't even interest her anymore.

She retreats to the corner - with unladylike thighs separated so they won't rub - to sit on a footrest that has a fancier name, waiting for all this lady business to be over so she can furtively sneak her strawberry while wishing to grow up just like Auntie Vicki who allowed her scarf to drag in the snow until it became stiff.

That hand of hers, the same hand that stole, creeps beneath the ottoman to peel stapled material from the wood, tearing off tiny fabric pieces and dropping them to the floor. The three women in the overly-warm room continue to nod and agree with each other, so much agreeing and uniting and conspiring. While she almost-silently strips a bigger piece, she promises herself that she will never become like her orderly cross-legged coffee-sipping mother.

The urge to run seems as natural as can be and in this is sense, staying and not bolting, perhaps she is already too much like her mother, which angers her enough to give the fabric a good yank which would have caught the attention of the ladies if Aunt Patsy's nose hadn't chosen that exact moment to begin a series of sneezes. Handkerchiefs and honking. Discussions of parched throats, dry nasal passages and goulash with kaiser rolls.

Maribel's chest rises and falls quickly. Her stomach tightens so hard, she wonders if it might even bruise itself.

The freshness of cornflakes when stored in the oven. A better recipe for tomato soup. Something about Vicki and girdles and oh my goodness. That icky word Naugahyde again.

If the room gets any warmer, Mirabel is certain she will rip off the tights and sprint out into the snow before someone grabs her little wrist and says *sit down*. Although she is constraining herself with an effort she wasn't even aware she had, an effort that seems inhumanly colossal, it is becoming more and more impossible to keep her body still and quiet, like a dusty reliable piece of furniture.

SUMMER SOLSTICE AT 43

HEATHER ALTFELD

From here, death is a terrace,
high and wide and faulty,
that the unlucky children slip through
one by one, as though trying to find their way
back into the mother by invisible parachute,

sprinkling through the air like bits of dust.
Look, there goes another,
his or her fine curls drifting in that millisecond
that resembles breeze.
My godfather is from the Punjab province,
watched his baby brother

sail from a fourth-floor stone wall
like a diapered comet
to land on the other side of a world
where, with luck and the laws of his land,
he would be turned into a beetle
or a set of keys, something sturdy
and metallic. How could you come
to believe in the immortality of rocks if you
had seen that small flapping,

how could you believe in the infallibility
 of stones, or even gravity, as anything
 but a silent sort of mockery?
 Or maybe you could *only* believe
 in the great tether of the earth
 and its ejections, flaming tails
 hot from volcanoes, lit like the fiery pyre
 that carried his tiny body down the Ganges
 while they watched from the wet shore,

maybe you begin to worship the bits of sand
 compressed by time and wind
 and the vice grip of a rushing stream.
 Even calcite, those crushed bugs.
 would be a morning elegy for the teeth,
 a daily reminder as to the terrible impermanence
 of things. My first death was a spider

who left behind a pig
 who wrote her an epitaph
 that, at five, I decided to live by. It went
 something like this: *It is not often*
that someone comes along who is a true friend
and a good writer. Charlotte
was both. Two suicides

who walk the hollows
 of my sleep, four grandparents,
 two in-laws and a cat—still it is the spider
 I cannot bear to think of;
 how she must have looked,
 drained of all her flies,
 spun in the spring wind
 between fence posts in the fairgrounds,
 humble and thin and grey. *Leave me at the side*

of the freeway, my mother has decreed,
in the event of her demise,
wrapped in a sheet, just outside of Colton.
I don't want any fuss. Colton's a real armpit anyway.
I don't yet know if folding her up in percale
and depositing her at the side of the 10
just next to the beginning
of the longest rail line in the country
will be as hard as it was to learn about dying
from a spider in a barnyard,

or if that was what kept me in bed for days,
cool green otter pops pressed to my eyes
to reduce the swelling, re-reading
that last chapter, over and over—the pig
watching in horror at the aeronautic babies
ballooned away on the updraft.

Goodbye! they called.

Goodbye! I was always most terrified

of what would happen if she was gone,
departed from me forever, floating up
as I drove away, leaving her shell
in a sheet beneath the radiant pink sun
in the dust and the smog—such stone,
my mortar,
my mother.

IRIS AND THE MESSAGE BABY

LYNDA SEXSON

The mystery is solved, but the crime continues. I return to my index under B—

Baby (see also *Doll*)

Baptist

Beans

Billy (see *Charming*)

Bitter

Bleach

Blood

Bowl

Borrow

Botanical (also *Botanizing*)

Bread

Brooch

Bruise

Burrowing rodent

—then resume my examination of the page. Delicate, rusted script makes lace of the ragged mind of my great great grandmother Birdie. I am her second son's (the first was too fragile), first son's (after a disheartening run of daughters), only son's last chance son. Thus I have inherited a fine brick home, mining stock and livestock, an inactive mill,

and a decrepit rooming house. And this diary. I capture another page:

My house is Bleached and polished, even the Methodists would find nothing amiss. Tamara will not bring forth a brat after all. A Shadow leans into my flesh, but I endure. It has been an undertaking, dragging streetlights and side-walks into this SlapDash town, turning up the soil, botanizing the wild strawberries and raising up sweet peas, hanging draperies and stopping the fools from hanging one another. I have introduced eligible decent ladies to the men who have risen above dirt floors. I stake tomatoes and a couple of big-glens. I send my surviving sweet Boy to school back East. I give afternoon teas. When I go out my kid gloves cover the shadow on my hand that will not heal.

I gently lay the diary back on the scanner. The screen magnifies her script until the tremor looks like a polygraph recording and finally pixilates.

Indeed, Birdie's undaunted efforts have deposited me here, to dedicate my hours to the fleeting minutes she scratched in this little book. She cast herself into a future so that I, independent historian, will disinter her memory. She was a capable narcissist, Edwina Roberta Cage, named for her two grandfathers, tyrant and pioneer. My great great grandmother. She would have relished the title, Great, Great and Grand, as well as my dedication to reviving her handwriting from considerable foxing and a water stain.

I hear Iris let herself in from the back stairway that leads to her third floor apartment and studio. Fluttering like a sprite, she smudges the artifacts of my house and my life, disturbing the serenity and clarity of my existence. She never admits to the freckling of my books, my walls, my dishes, even me. I adore her.

"Hugh, answer me this." Iris scoots the old birthing chair to my side, perching on its impossible contour. "I ran over to borrow a grapefruit from Stephen and he criticized me for the paint on my fingers and told me that my hands should look like this stupid picture."

She sails a ripped magazine page into my lap. A sleek model curled like a comma, wears only her enameled nails. Whatever magazine this was ripped from, it was not from Stephen's reading material.

She holds up the pads of her fingers for my inspection, “Mulberry and Prussian. And those,” she jabs at the glossy woman in my lap, “fire-engine fakes supposed to be beautiful? Why do other women get rewarded for painting the tops of their fingers and I get punished for better colors on the undersides of mine?” She stands up and rearranges my desk into a still life that pleases her, which confounds the functional order that suits me.

“Iris.” I try to minimize her fidgeting by pulling her into my lap; the magazine woman crackles between us. “Iris, listen. Tell me what you buried in my backyard.”

“It’s not just your backyard. I don’t have a backyard, you think. I just have air overtop of your yard because I’m on the third floor of your old landmark?”

“What did you bury in my yard?”

“You expect me to bury something in my air?”

“What is it?”

She traces the arch of my eyebrow with her inky fingertip. “You’re beginning to age. You can tell with men; the hair of your eyebrows starts to get wild. Next it’ll start sprouting out of your ears and nose like vines.”

“What did you bury?”

“The past. The hatchet. Treasure. Want to have dinner with me? I’ll use your kitchen. Mine’s busy.” Her voice thins to a whisper, her fingers spread around my neck, and she tips her face to kiss me.

Rather, I hoped she was about to kiss me, but she leaves me with a single motion and alights on the edge of the library table. The paper woman flies from my lap too, to take Iris’s side.

“Iris, what’s out there?”

“Anybody home?” We turn toward the direction of the voice. “Hugh, are you here?” The screen door bangs; I rise and Iris slides under the table.

“Hi, darlin’.” Kerri kisses me. “Have you seen my sister? God, have you seen her apartment? Jesus, I can’t believe it. You should evict her or else marry her before we have to have her institutionalized.”

“Marriage is an inst...,” I try to remind her.

“Then I can be your faithful sister-in-law,” she gleams. “Don’t say it, sweetie. I know you’re working. It’s okay, I’ll cook. History isn’t re-

ally bunk, Hugh, but local history! Granite Falls is too recent; the corpses of the founders have barely had time to take their sorry ashes back to dust.”

“You’re repeating yourself, Kerri.”

“Just because some greedy people named somebody else’s land after themselves, killed an Indian, shot a sheriff, strangled a mistress, then dropped dead on the spot. Dig up something good, why don’t you? Do you want Granite Falls to be called Cage’s Stop again?”

“I would favor returning its name to Wakina.”

Iris’s stained hand snatches the magazine picture out of sight.

“Kerri, I’m not hungry. It’s hot.”

“It’ll take me ‘til dark. You’ll be hungry by then. People will think you’re anorexic.” She tickles my belly with her enameled fingernails, “instead of just a pedant.” She turns toward the kitchen.

Thinking of how her brown legs will look against the tiles, I am about to follow when I see Iris looking at me from under the table and hear Stephen at the door.

“Hello, Hugh. Have you seen Iris? She was over in my yard at dawn. I think she buried something there. Before I could find out what she’d been up to, we had a fight. Over nothing.”

I stand dumbly before Stephen; Iris is invisible again and Kerri listens from the kitchen. “Why don’t you dig it up?” I finally ask, meaning to draw Iris out from under the table.

“I need her forgiveness before I make her mad again. I don’t know if she was mad because I told her my divorce is final or because I’ve started a family tree or because I never buy the pink grapefruit she always wants to borrow. That’s all we talked about.”

“What do you mean, you’ve started a family tree?”

“Oh, you know. Nothing that gets into your area; you’re still the gentleman historian, I’m still the guy who works for a living.”

“Why do you want a genealogy, Stephen? Perhaps I can provide it. Keep your time free for your heavy movies and light novels.”

“Nope. It’s kinda fun. I’m helping Adam and Annabelle to remember they’re my kids. Even if we are the poor side of our undistinguished family, dear cousin.”

Stephen sits down at my computer, runs the cursor along the screen, *I see the path wearing Wider and Deeper between my garden and the*

widow's... then sends the file into oblivion, as well as my index for the letter B, bringing up some Angry Birds.

"Keep my files open. I am working."

He laughs at me like the sturdy pigs in his game. "I can give you a program, Hugh; just hit return and your index is done for you."

I cannot explain to him the nuances of my work.

"Stephen." Kerri makes another entrance. They give each other slithery glances, confirming my suspicions. She greets him with more heat and duration than she had bestowed on me.

"Kerri, I need to use your car," says a voice under the table.

Stephen and Kerri look at each other, then accusingly at me.

Iris emerges, pale orange stains on her violet gauze skirt, her disconcerted blush and cloud of hair that's currently yellow, green eyes, and blue-stained fingers.

"Wow, where'd you find this?" Stephen asks, carelessly handling the old diary. "Listen, who is this?" He haltingly reads one of the more accessible pages:

I near lost my patience. Putting up the garden since before proper Sunrise. Mr C beloved husband invites the ailing widow to step on over for supper. Tamara sits pretty on the porch, not what you'd call a portrait of Mourning. Widow Tam takes up scraps of Corn silk to fashion a doll, just as Babies learn to do to keep them from mischief. Mr C declared it the cunningest babe he ever saw. His departed brother's bride pinned the little man to his sleeve, much carrying on for the grieving. Taking the pin from her bosom. That should warn a man I should say. I did say, Where's your plaited hair Brooch, Tam? On my Sunday dress, she says. I had snipped that lock of hair myself, before Mr C got his brother's remains into the earth. I took care that Tamara be given some memento at least of her own mortality if not of the man she didn't love.

"I recognize the names. Must be old Birdie Cage, hmm? Wow. This, ladies, is the side of the family that gives the birthright to our Jacob here. And I descend from the impoverished, siren widow."

"We could use your grandma now," Kerri complains. "I bet she stocked the larder. Someone has to go shopping; you don't have a thing."

"You conveniently forget that I do not want dinner."

"Me," Iris volunteers. "I need some stuff anyway."

"Movable eyes?" Kerri narrows her own.

"Just give me a list."

Kerri scribbles a list and rips out the page from a leather blank book on my desk.

I of course provide the cash. "It would be easier to take you out. I could be rid of you faster, too." I hand over my car keys.

Iris leaves, fanning the cash over her head.

I watch her go. Unbearably moody these hot days, she is regretting, I suspect, her refusal of my recent proposal of marriage. I intend to ask her again when the weather breaks. I am resolved. Mark this day.

"Okay, Hugh, now that she's out of the house you'd better go see what she's done up there," Kerri presses.

"My ancestress intended the third floor as a refuge for artistic sensibilities."

"Don't say 'ancestress.' It dates you. And if you date yourself, nobody else will," Kerri taunts.

I resignedly follow them up the back stairs. Pushing open the door, we take in the sight, evoking little bursts from each of us: sigh, groan, whistle.

They wait for me to speak. "At least the great walnut table is blessedly sheathed in plastic. Even the molding is dislodged; the ceiling medallion is askew; the mantel is..."

"Dismantled," they shout together.

I am quartering my emotions. Birdie Cage said that:

I quarter my feelings.

I did not know if she had meant: to house, that is, as a place to heal; to give quarter, that is, to forgive; or to divide or partition off, that is to, well, cage.

"This is my sister," Kerri switches from scorn to pity. "She's slipping away from us. I thought she'd get better being with stodgy old you."

"Sanity is no antidote to madness."

"You two make me sick," Stephen interrupts. "She's not crazy. She's making art. Look. The drawings won her a traveling solo exhibition in the best galleries all down the coast, Vancouver to LA."

We both wheel on him, demanding, "How do you know?"

"Give her a chance," Stephen says.

"You're the one," I remind Stephen, "who has offended her. Over a grapefruit. And nail polish, I believe."

"What do I care about nail polish? You, Hugh, are the one who gave her a stupid magazine picture telling her how she should look."

I am speechless at the lies.

"Well, guys," says Kerri. "How do we clean up this mess? She's tacked and taped her drawings and plans all over Hugh's block-printed wallpaper and that's the least of it. Even on the ceiling. Look, she keeps drawing after she runs out of paper."

"Come on, don't be so rigid. Her draftsmanship is spectacular. Stephen gazes at the wall and ceiling as though he's in Florence.

Toxic wastes, spills and slides overwhelm me. "I am getting a headache. I must return to my work."

No one cares.

A dozen dolls' bodies have been relieved of their legs and set up on armatures resembling bird legs with particularly long talons. Some have been decapitated, replaced with bird-shaped heads. Arms snapped from some, transformed into wings, or feathered gestures. Each creature clutches—in beak, mouth, hand, wing, talon, or miniature mail bag—a letter. These missives are scrolled and tied with ribbon, or poking out from envelopes with hand-made stamps, one a miniature broadside. They are all losing letters of the alphabet; the chicken babies trample bits of words into crumpled, shellacked, vintage papers. Alphabetical bits uncannily float and fall about the scene. I wonder for a moment how she achieves that. Globes of her deep color cement figures and feathers, all tipped grotesquely toward a plaster figure.

"I hope Iris does not intend this as some sort of crèche," says Kerri. "It looks more like all those pictures of fetuses. It's really ugly."

"That's not the point," says Stephen. "But actually, it's beautiful."

"It's not finished," says Iris at the threshold.

"You can't be back from the store yet," snaps Kerri.

"I forgot my purse. Get out of here. It's not done."

"You've savaged my house," I regret it as soon as I say it. I had typed, only this morning, *I want this to be her home. I want her to love it, to pre-serve it, to dream in it.*

"No, you just came up here too soon. Get out."

"Iris, you can't . . ." Reaching toward her, I accidentally bump the table and a doll's arm blobbed with magenta rattles off the edge, the little hand and elbow writing on the floor until coming to rest.

"You're going to make a mess in here," Iris sulks.

"And besides all this, Kerri closes in, "I hear you've been digging holes and hiding things in the garden."

Perhaps it's an inherited weakness, this queasiness; I am reminded of another of Birdie's entries that I have deciphered.

Mr C, accustomed each sunrise to Dousing his head in the porcelain bowl like a baptist at the heavenly river; now will not dip even a finger. He sees the bowl still filled with bloodied linen from Tam's misfortune. Did he not suspect a little fish might Arise from that widow's sea? Did I not suspect the dainty transgressor himself had put it there? Would this Creature have turned all our Fortunes, and Mr C would have leapt the garden to bide with Tamara? Not now. And the fish, sealed in the English spice box, sealed behind stairs, sealed within walls, sealed in my heart, is the safest, Dearest, of all our babies. Mr C will soon forget, as men do, or he'll not have a face fit to sit at Sunday table.

"I must see to my work; I shall deal with this after you three make whatever reparations and recommendations you will." As I descend the back staircase, I see Iris has been loosening the woodwork. I should not have confided to her how I discovered the diary behind the wainscoting in the rose bedroom. Her smudges are not only behind the railing, but wantonly dot the trellised birds of the wallpaper.

I return to my study and set about untangling more of the faded script of the diary, preparing it for analysis, data-basing my progenitor.

"Hey, read us some of that thing," Stephen interrupts, the three of them invading again like puppies. Despite their simple voyeurism, my enthusiasm prompts me to read from the passage on my screen.

Charmin Billy dropped in for a good meal. Mr C doesn't like me taking Care. He says don't look good. How's Tam? I say, so pleasant. Mr C says he's going to get that half-wit Billy outa Town. Mr C, I say, Charmin Billy has a fine mind, he's just overcome by thoughts that burn up whatever he touches. I quarter my feelings.

"Who's Charmin' Billy?" asks Iris.

"That's the first interest you've ever shown my work. Billy has not been declared kinfolk, Stephen. There is some evidence, however, that his fermented seed has flourished in our family foliage."

"Why does he talk like that?" asks Iris.

I am stung. "Iris, that scorn is more customary from the other two."

Kerri suggests, "Maybe because you did not admire her bird babies."

"What?" asks Stephen, closing in on the diary.

"One of us," I hint, "has the half-wit Charmin' Billy for forefather."

They clamor like children. I remind them, "That's history. I thought none of you were interested."

"No, that's gossip," says Kerri, "the only history anyone remembers: George Washington had hippopotamus teeth. Ben Franklin was a traitor."

"No!" Iris pulls one of the bills from her pocket and kisses Ben's engraving.

That's my money I had given her for the shopping. It should be my kiss. "Please, all of you, get out of here and leave me to my work."

"Notice how the man who doesn't work is the one who always has to get back to it?" asks Stephen.

"Iris hasn't gone to the store yet; what about dinner?" asks Kerri.

"Goodbye. No dinner," I growl.

"Well actually," says Stephen, "we're about to exhume Iris's crypt. Don't you want to come?"

Iris, who wouldn't tell what she buried in the yard, now seems keen to unearth it, as though it's a mystery to her. I follow them outside and stand distracted until I hear a scrape of the shovel against something wooden. Stephen, displaying for two females, whacks the blade of the shovel against the object.

Suddenly I grasp Stephen's arm, sink to my knees, and lean into the pit. "Stop. My god. This is dated and signed." I dust off the box lid. The sun finally goes down.

"I have gazed upon the face of Agamemnon," giggles Kerri.

"Iris. It's the lovely painted box I gave you for Valentine's Day. I thought you really liked this box and that as an artist you liked the simple painted scenes," I am almost choking from the fresh soil.

"I do," says Iris, not apologizing.

"Did you put something in it, Iris? May we open it?" Stephen is deferential.

"I guess so. Just be quiet and don't talk about it."

Stephen kneels beside me, works the box free, blows on it and raises the lid. He lifts a crocheted shawl. Nestled in satin cushions...

"Iris," I mutter, "you cannot be trusted with the simplest artifact... Oh, my. These are the bloody heads and severed limbs from those unhappy dolls."

Stephen whispers, "Get a grip, Hugh. There is no blood involved."

"Oh, Iris, honey," croons Kerri, "shall we say a little poem and put them back?"

So astonished at the sudden affirmation of her infantile ghoulishness, I lay back flat on the grass, which is finally taking on the coolness of the evening or the chill of Iris's macabre joke. "The box is valuable—or rather was—before Iris damaged it and Stephen assaulted it with the shovel. Please replace it with a carton from the garage."

They make gestures of disgust toward me, as though the dolls have souls.

Perhaps they do. They appear frequently in Birdie's diary. I have just started indexing *D*:

Daffodil

Dead

Doll

Draperies

Dread

I fear the diary's working a spell.

The stars are flickering into position. "Destroying the textiles is on your own conscience." I watch them from the vast perspective I have from the ground.

"Shall we put it back, Iris?" Stephen asks.

"Yes."

"I think I still know 'Christopher Robin Going Upstairs'; will that do?" Kerri asks her, practically stepping on my fingers, giving me an astounding view of her mahogany legs.

"Don't be stupid," Iris says.

"Shall I put the dirt back, Iris, or do you want to?" Stephen bends

close to her face to ask. He's going to be devastated when we announce our engagement. I believe I shall renew my offer as soon as I can get Iris alone.

Iris tosses a handful of earth onto the box, and runs back into the house. Stephen fills up the hole and stamps on it. My palest peony, daffodil bulbs, and bleeding heart have been damaged by this mockery.

"Well," Kerri says, "That's that. Shall we get on with dinner?"

"Good. You and Hugh go find something edible. I'll go talk with Iris," Stephen says, and I feel as I did when I was eight years old, when they chose up sides and I never got to say which side I wanted. I don't move. Stephen bangs into the house, mercifully leaving his shoes on the step. Kerri tries to cheer me up, straddling me, grasping my wrists and tempting me with the proximity of what Birdie would have called her bosom. She'll have to do better than that. Of course she does.

"Shall we throw flowers or water?" asks Stephen as they return from the house. "Just stay there, kids, if you want to, but we left out the little detail of what Iris has buried in *my* yard. It's going to be more unpleasant, I suspect."

They step past us, heedless of the pansies, and even of the stand of giant irises I had imported, and which perversely have been multiplying into Stephen's yard rather than across the boundary of mine. I detest analogies. Of course, since they know the names of nothing but dandelions, I could safely say there is no analogy.

I close my eyes and ears to Stephen's exertion; he is making too much of work that Iris had accomplished rather easily just a few hours ago. When her object is unearthed, the profound silence forces me to rise and look.

"Where did it come from?" Stephen asks.

"You cast that monstrosity upstairs from..." I hesitate, "a genuine model."

"Sort of a mummy," Kerri offers.

"How could it be a mummy, it's only a baby," Stephen says. The two of them smack hands. "Once I saw a cat that had been dead and dried up under a house for a long time. It looked pretty much like this."

I know without asking, but ask, "Where did you get this?" Grand-

mother Birdie Cage, of course, had continued to write about it, unable to stop.

...wrapped in the Eastern newspapers, then in my own wedding shawl, then in the spice box, then in the Wall, the dearest of babies. Mr C will never know, Tam will start scheming anew. I will not forget.

"I found it," says Iris.

"You destroy my property and historical evidence!" My voice sounds far above my head.

"Can you distinguish between them?" Stephen smirks.

"I'll take Iris home with me. I'm really sorry," Kerri strokes circles around the buttons on my shirt. "I'll clean this up for you and find a more decorous tenant. She can stay with me until we figure out what should be done with her."

"I have to finish my piece before the opening," Iris explains. "And I'm not talking to you any more. And I'm not going to the store."

"Not so fast," I command. "You will have to speak to the police. You've buried human remains, not a doll, not a perverse art statement, not your dream toy." Oh, why have I spoken to her like this?

Stephen sighs. "It's pretty old; it doesn't look like much. I'm surprised you'd want the evidence brought out. If I subpoena the diary too, you think I can claim this house and those lucrative properties as my rightful inheritance?"

"Don't be absurd."

"I'll try, if you try to harm Iris."

"I didn't think it was yours," Iris says. "I just thought it was a sort of a medicine bundle, a sort of message baby. I really don't like to talk about my work."

"It's not your work, it's mine." I wish I hadn't said that. "Stephen, that thing, it should be obvious, had no heirs. What would you claim? I'll publish a paper describing in pitiless detail the half-wit Billy, and trace his lineage to your genes," regretting it as soon as I'd uttered it.

"That could be sweet," Iris considers.

"Granite Falls would start commemorating their old founder as a murderer. That innocent corpse ensured you this grand house and me the widow's modest bungalow across the way," says Stephen. "Otherwise, I begin to see, we'd be reversed."

The really upsetting element is that I have spent so long untangling this mystery, and Stephen, so unqualified, so unsubtle, so swiftly has much of it correct. "How can you overlook so many points," I hedge, "there is no evidence that Birdie killed the child; she was the unlucky midwife. We don't have Tam's diary, as it's unlikely she was literate. There's no proof the baby was a Cage, only Birdie's suspicion. That child may have changed the course of our family tree, but how can you possibly think it would have increased rather than divided your fortunes?"

"Because," reasons Stephen, snapping his fingers and laughing, "because, if Old Man Cage thought the widow Tamara had his kid he'd have moved in with her, since he was providing for his brother's kid anyway, and he liked her. Wait, don't interrupt, Hugh. And. And. He thought his own son was Crazy Billy's."

"Charmin' Billy," prompt the women, delighted.

"The baby," I say soberly, "was not suffocated, though Grandmother Birdie was relieved as well as guilt-ridden that it did not live. You see it was probably too small to live."

We pause to look at it again.

"Well, it's had time to shrink," says Stephen.

"Don't worry, Hugh," Kerri observes, "everyone has grand-smothers in their families." They actually clutch one another in laughter. It is as giddy as a funeral would be, pent up for generations.

"But you don't have to keep working for your great great grandmother," ponders Iris.

"I think this poor infant would have been Billy's," I explain. I'm really developing a fascinating database. I've written a program that should elicit some of a diarist's unspoken references. You see..."

"Christ, Hugh. By the way, this isn't a baby. It's a miscarriage. I'm going home." It has grown as dark as Kerri's mood.

"Not 'til we bury it again," says Stephen. "Want to say 'Christopher Robin' now?"

"Don't be sick."

"I know," says Iris excitedly. She darts into the house. I sit back down on the lawn. Iris hurries back with a candelabra and Birdie's diary.

"Open it anyplace," says Kerri, holding the light near the pages. I try not to protest the damage they might do.

“Oh here’s a place I can see,” says Iris, beginning to read, as Stephen replants the box.

Welcome back, I said. Mr C said welcome rain, we sure did need rain. Hills of Potatoes, pole beans, tomatoes, onions, corn, Squash, cabbages, carrots, cucumber bed, Reciting my rows. Mr C laughed. His laugh had been longer than the rain in coming. Can’t you see past your little plot to the cattle, he laughed.

Kerri pulls the light away and sets it on the sundial to stop Iris’s reading. Stephen stamps the earth over the box.

I get up and to prevent any of them from saying something foolish, ask, “May I take you all to dinner?” There are embraces all around, making it a thorough imitation of a genuine memorial.

To Iris privately, I say, “Be prepared for a renewal of my proposal.”

“I’m going to fly to Seattle,” she says as we meander back toward the house. We are touching, patches of cold and hot flesh in the dark. “I’ve got an offer from a film group, with their graphics team.”

She breaks away from me and runs into the house.

I find myself standing with the diary in my hands. I wait on the porch, listening to the moths beat themselves against the light and to Stephen and Kerri murmuring in the car. I walk over to the sundial and hold a page of the diary to the candles. Edwina Roberta Cage’s script takes to the flame and a curl of black paper floats into black night.

Iris comes from behind me, kisses my sleeve and says, “You have a grass stain on your elbow.” She extinguishes the flames with her fingers. She puts her fingers in her mouth.

“I am stained, but I seem to leave no impression.” How could she have seen a grass stain in this light? I feel teary, the effects of the false funeral.

Stephen and Kerri come late to the fire.

In the darkness Iris says quietly, “Thanks for asking me, though. I mean the proposing.”

The ridiculous word sounds like a doll’s arm rolling along the floor.

A GENEALOGY OF THE WORD

NICKOLE BROWN

1.

Saying “the n-word” is a cop-out, robbing
history of its essential
grit, faked out, vaguely
Pentecostal, pleated and ironed stiff,
like *dagnabbit* and *bullfish* and *flip it to dip*.

Fanny was authoritative
with her cussing, unabashed
with *cocksucker* and *fucker* and *dick*.

Most times, I’d laugh, pour her a fresh Pepsi
or do whatever else she was barking out,
but that word made me hot
with shame; out of her mouth

it was visible, a skidmark, a shit
stain.

2.

Bernie May came to the house regular
as the mail: she'd take a hair brush
to the shag rugs then to my ratty head;
she'd comet the toilets minty blue then squeak-clean
mirrored tables, mirrored counters, mirrored walls,
sometimes catching a glimpse of her dark
skin in Fanny's white rooms. She'd flour up cold chops
for popping-hot lard then ice green onions
for the day's bean soup;
she'd make a walking path
for the clean white floors by laying down
clean white sheets. And always, before the day was through,

she'd put on a pot of coffee and read
the paper with Fanny, always finding news
of some girl getting raped, cut into a million pieces,
and tossed in the canal for the fish
to eat. She'd make sure to read every single word,
out loud, doing her best to terrify some sense
into my head, because besides a string bikini,
I wore nothing
other than scrunchie socks to protect my feet
from hot sand. There was no getting past those two;
before I could head down to the beach, I had to cross

my heart and say: *No, Bernie. No, Fanny, no, ma'am.*
I swear my hand I'll be careful. I won't let myself
get raped.

3.

Sometimes, Bernie'd stop long enough to set up
 the joke, asking, *Mrs. Cox, now say again*
what would you do if your blonde grandchild here
fell in love with a black man
like my cousin Tyrone?

Fanny'd reach into her roller bowl, pull out her gun.
 She'd point it at my face.
If she was with a nigger man, I'd have to kill her.
A purdy girl like her can't get a white man?

Then Fanny'd put the gun
 down, and they'd both laugh
 and laugh.

Half the fun for them was to see me
 jump off the couch and stomp down
 the hall, but what they didn't know
 was I knew Fanny'd never hurt me,
 no. It was never the gun that made me
 flinch.

4.

The gun—brought back from the war,
the second, though by whom no one
would say—was greased to an assassin's
sheen, the sweet char of gun oil
cool, slippery to touch.

She kept it buried
in her roller bowl, a popcorn bowl
pink and plastic, chock full of granny
things: hard little cannons
of hair rollers the same color pink,
bobby pins, dentures, cold
cream, metal nail files, false
lashes, pills, safety pins,
those silver, spring-loaded
alligator clips
women used to use
to set finger waves.

With quickness, she'd noodle her hand
under it all, fishing
from the bowl-bottom
grit of tobacco flakes and crumbled
blush; she'd finger
a few stray bullets
then wrap her palm around
its handle,
pulling it up with a force
necessary to hold onto a live thing
that's never once had
its safety on.

5.

I want to blame

fear, blame poverty, blame
 stories back from a time
 when her daddy put
 butter in coffee, penny days
 when there wasn't a chicken fat enough
 for anybody to eat, when the hills hissed
 cottonmouth stories of a schoolteacher
 raped in the fields.

What I don't want to say is

the corn was high and hissed too,
 that the man caught there
 was shot
 in the back
 four times

and *still*, Fanny said,

that nigger lived.

6.

Close to death, Fanny grew more and more
afraid, and every night I couldn't get the blinds closed
tight enough: *They're always looking in at me,*
you know. And I can't walk, Koey, so I can't be
too careful.

We got all these Puerto Ricans and Brazilians
and niggers down here in Florida. The condo complex
is full of them; the boys keep tapping on my window;
they're liable to come in and slit our throats.

And your Uncle Butch wouldn't be no help, neither.
He's done gone to the track today, and he's just about
two sheets to the wind. They'd slit his throat too,
no problem. And after that they'd rape you,
put a dick in you that long and you'd wished
you was dead.

She also told me if I didn't lock the door that night
iguanas would waltz right in the condo and do
the same thing, crawl up between my legs,
until, she said, you wished
you was dead.

7.

That summer, a woman stops me in the hall.
There have been some complaints, she says.
The elderly woman in there. Is she your mother?

*Well, she's been waving a gun at the boys going past her
window; she claims she'll shoot them dead.
What on earth do you think we should do?*

I tell her the only thing I know to say:
I suggest you duck and get the hell out of her way.

8.

When Monroe was alive, he was her
fist, he was her gun.
They used to make splintered,
giggling love in the woods:

*We'd sneak off, do it under a tree.
And I said, "Monroe, somebody's gonna catch us."
And that was half the fun...and I said, "What if a big nigger
comes up here and gets me?" and he said,
"Ain't nobody gonna get you now that I'm here."*

This was the same fist who beat
his daughter for letting a black boy
ride her bicycle.

*His name was Rodney, Mama said. Was it Rodney?
Either way, he wanted to ride my bike around the block,
said he ain't never seen such purdy streamers
on a pair of handlebars in his whole life.*

Mama couldn't recall if the bike was blue,
but if it was, she was beaten
the same color.

9.

My grandfather, the same man who grew
 old and celebrated living
 through his fourth open heart
 by selling off all but one
 of the family cemetery plots
 to give money to a young girl
 grinning like a fool inside
 his brand-new 4-door, 4-wheel-drive
 shining white pickup.

The girl was my age, light-skinned.

Fanny said, *You know he was driving
 almost a thousand miles every month
 to give her \$900 out a his Social Security check?*

*And bad as his heart was, all she ever coulda done
 was rub his old head and scratch his back.
 Bernie May gave me a name for her—a digger—
 that nigger girl.*

10.

The summer of bedpans and sponge baths
and a well-oiled gun, the television was incessant,
kept on to keep out what was bound
to happen next. Fanny flipped to the sports channel:
Now that Tiger, they just hate him
out on the golf course. And I just love that nigger.

I want to say she loved Bernie, but she often counted
the bath towels after she was gone.

I just love that nigger. He done beat their ass on the golf course
and so they've got to shake his hand, and you know it's just killing 'em,
having to do that, but they got no choice. They got to be polite and
shake his hand and smile all big when you know it's just killing them inside.

I want to say she loved Bernie, but I wasn't allowed
in her part of town.

I just love that nigger. And I knew that little white girl he was with
wouldn't stick around long. I seen her run out on the golf course,
just a waving and screaming Tiger! Tiger! Tiger!
and I knew right then he wouldn't have nothing to do with her.
You just don't do that. And I'm sure he was out all day
playing—nine to ten hours on his feet—and came home
to her wanting to go out. I don't think so.

I want to say she loved Bernie, but I wasn't allowed
to drive her home.

You know, I never went nowhere without my husband.
I got invited to one a those—Koey, what you call them plastic bowls
with the lids that snap on top? Tupperware. Yes—Tupperware parties—
and Monroe looked over at me and said, "Where you think you're going?
I don't think so."

*And I didn't neither. And I sure was glad I didn't when I had to wake up
at six the next morning with seven kids. No, I didn't go nowhere
without Monroe. And Tiger ain't putting up with that shit neither.*

I want to say she loved Bernie, but she never
trusted her with Monroe.

11.

Sometimes, we reclaim words, make them
our own. *Dyke*, for example.

Say it: *dyke, dyke, dyke,*
dyke, dyke, dyke, dyke.

Say it enough times, and it's a spoke
disappearing on a fast bike,
something to blow your hair back.

But if we say this word over and over, can we make it
change: *Nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger,*
nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger,
nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger?

You see? It's immune, still a backhanded, redneck,
spitwad crack. It's mule stubborn, deeply
set, the only word I know not up to
this stupid-ass trick.

12.

There was one plot left
when my grandfather died,

so when Fanny's time
came, there was no room for her,

no way to bury her next to her mother,
no family earth left for her bones.

We had her cremated, and at his feet,
set her a simple stone.

I doubt Grandfather's girlfriend
knew where her sweetheart's money

came from, but if she did,
what would she buy? The bitch

in me sees a gaudy chain with her
name scripted in gold, a pair of acrylic

heels too tall to tramp her
around the block. But no. The real

sorrow—the deeper anger
harder to swallow—is for him:

he knew damn well that girl was
poor and needed cash

to live, just as Fanny needed it
to pay her doctor's bills, maybe

a few month's worth
food and rent.

13.

I doubt Grandfather's girlfriend wanted to go
to Tupperware parties.

I don't ever remember Fanny having enough
Tupperware to give.

Sometimes, Bernie would doggy-bag
her dinner in foil and take it home with her
across the tracks.

Say it: *Tupperware. Tupperware,*
Tupperware, Tupperware, Tupperware, Tupperware,
Tupperware, Tupperware, Tupperware, Tupperware.

See?
Most anything,
enough times, quits
making sense.

14.

Sometimes, I'm afraid I will die
an old woman blurting out
nigger from my sour bed.

It is not like the rational
fear of rape, no. More
the compulsive driving
across that dotted white

line, a full-on case of senile
Tourette's, an unexplained spark
in the orange can of gasoline
forgotten in the shed,

like a bullet
that's waited too long
for a trigger
that decides, on its own

just to get up and go.

15.

In second grade, I came home with a new word,
 ancestor, rolling in my mouth,
thought of greengreen Ireland, great-grandfathers
with shields or kilts, people all the way from a poet's place
called Wales.

I had to know, I begged:
 Fanny, please, can't you tell me where we from?

Right quick, she said,
 Child, don't you worry your pretty little head 'bout that.
 We weren't nothing but a bunch of chicken thieves.

What I thought she meant by this was *trash*, as in
 white. Always, her joke: *Girl, you was born*
 trash, and you'll die trash. We'd laugh, and she'd say
it again, *Yep, you trash alright. That's how you were*
 born, that's how you'll die.

Say it: *Born trash, die trash. Born trash, die trash.*
 Born trash, die trash. Born trash, die trash.
 Born, die, born, die, born, die. White,
 but trash, trash, trash, trash, trash, trash.

16.

The summer—
that last summer—

Fanny tells me there was a woman,
a mother
to her mother
to her mother,
to her mother,
count it—four generations

back—who was dark
as a bucket of water,
an unstirred pool of black
left out
for sleepers who thirst
in the dead of night.

She didn't make
much of it, just mentioned it casual
as if it were something she told
me all my life. *So there you go,*
Kunta Kente blood, she said,
laughing softly
before turning out
her light.

17.

A slave?

*In our family? Good God, Nickole, you'd believe
anything, my aunt says.
That was morphine talking.*

But I swear Fanny remembered things
clear, much clearer than before,
she told way-back stories
hard as the lichen-green apples
of Kentucky, hot as the place
where she and Monroe made their first
home, an attic apartment
with a small window to the roof:

*I'd sleep there with my little top
and a pair a bloomers, all sexy,
cause my legs weren't like they are now.
And I didn't take nothing
but a little blanket and pillow and wasn't nothing
above that roof and me but those stars.*

She looked up to show me
just how she looked up then. I, too, looked
at that low popcorn ceiling, searching
for cloud shapes
in the mop stucco, when she said,

*And then the wind picked up
over top those trees, it hit me,
and it felt so good, you wouldn't believe.*

18.

Bernie May taught me how to hex
and how to protect: in a tree right outside
your front door, tie up bottles with string
long enough to sway from the bough.

When the sun comes out, the spirits—
the ghosts and memories meddling
from another time—get distracted by all that broken
light, all that pool-bottom beauty,
and fly into the trap, dazzled inside.

Once, I dreamt that dark
water, took a cool drink
from the night to find that
woman, that secret mother,
arches fallen and arms strong.

She wrung the necks of chickens
and beat rugs to a thread, and when her work
was done, the bit of light
left over let her
tie bottles to a tree
that wasn't hers.

19.

Great-mother, if I ever lose my mind and call you
 nigger would you know it was because I was
 eaten alive with the cancer
 of this history, this fear working my skull up
 through my face?

Because for you, I would cross over—
 the living haunting the dead.
 Would you let me carry what's left
 of you across the river?

Not far, in Indiana, is that good earth
 where at least your bones could be set free, a cemetery
 right across the dividing line, a place where women were not
 purchased, even though they may still be cajoled into selling
 themselves to an old white man once his heart gives out
 and he's gone limp as his own flag.

20.

Forgive me. Now, I can see:
 in one bottle, a tiny black knot,
 not much more than a raisin—a mulatto's
 umbilicus dried and broken free. In another bottle,
 dumb as a housefly
 and thumping against the glass, is me.

From the humid, from the stink
 of old tincture, from this scratched and sugared
 cage, I watch. You are bent in your garden,
 on your back a colicky baby the high yellow
 of rape, rounding its tiny mouth *ab, ab, ab, ab*—
 to you, it's just milk-tongue all babies make, but to me,
 it's those first syllables

needed, this terrible word softened, still bristling but
 between family. Can you hear the hum of me,
 begging, *Please, your real name?* Would you let me call you
 a mother of mine? What name opens the warm mouth
 of your cabin door?

Tell me, tell me how to call
 you, how to conjure the sounds that bring
 you here. It's me—your long-gone
 grandchild, caught in this heat, in this glittering,
 haint bottle in the wind.

GROWING UP, ALL THE MOBILE HOMES

ARIAN KATSIMBRAS

looked like orphan teeth in the Nevada
desert. As a boy I dragged myself street
by street, searched in every man's hand
for food, clothes, medicine.

I looked in every retired sky dragged
open and talking me into rough repair,
searched in the burning head wound
where my stepfather's steel hands

coaxed my mute blood out in puddles,
and those hands are still there
like a crude halo threatening to glow.
Every tree was tinder, no treehouses

were built. I hid instead in crawlspaces
with only earthworms for music
until I became old enough to know
what haunting was by listening

through the vents to all the thunder
 about electrical bills, about who the fuck
 is she, about silence after the dull
click as my mother's ribs caved,

that familiar sound of grief's keep,
 its needed maintenance, singing along
 to its own tradition; because I grew up
 where graveyard homes baked deep

in the western heat, out of doors
 like starving apertures came the chorale
 of mothers and sons, singing the human
 death dance, the constancy of the poor.

This is the last time I'll write I grew up
 where fathers levitated like electricity
 in power lines, throaty hum constant,
 tire fire kind of dangerous, the black eyes

my stepfather gifted me my mom momma,
 ma' please make a book of matches burn
 for days like this, let the sky and earth reclaim
 what they will of these wasted boxes, metal

bodies and waterless pine, reclaim our fathers
 who holler in the street high on their want
 for death, high above us like patron saints
 of the hammer, of quick, clean brutality.



Listen to Arian Katsimbras read "Growing Up, All the Mobile Homes" on TLR's SoundCloud page.

CHRISTMAS, 1986

MONIC DUCTAN

I lie across a crocheted bedspread.
Daddy stands beside me, his head
Blocking the light, sending shadows.
He says, *If your mama and me
Were hanging off a cliff,
Who would you save?*
My brother's voice says, *Both y'all.
I'd save y'all both.* But Daddy
Is leaning toward me, eyes narrowed,
Waiting. I say, *Mama. I'd save Mama.*
He looks through the window
At the outline of Mama's body standing
Under a naked maple tree. He draws
Away from me, pretends to laugh.



*Listen to Monic Ductan read "Christmas, 1986" on TLR's
[SoundCloud page](#).*

THE CALIFORNIA WATER WAR

JOHN BRANTINGHAM

While his brother Felix is taking one last look across the valley to make sure no one is near, Guillermo lights the fuse and drops the stick of dynamite into the aqueduct.

“Let’s go,” Guillermo says, and he tries to hide his smile as Felix figures out what he’s done.

When he does, Felix says, “Hey, it was my turn.”

Felix is right of course, but what can he do? The fuse has been lit, and the stick has been dropped. Now they need to run like the white man who gave them the explosive said to, the man who had the idea that maybe little explosions could do as much as the big explosion the ranchers did last year. They’re a good half-mile away out into the scrub when the thud comes echoing out to them, and they dive behind a bush just like the man told them to.

“You lit the last one.”

And Felix got Delores. That’s what Guillermo wants to say, but he just shrugs as best he can lying on his stomach. “Sorry. Next time.”

They lie there, watching for fifteen minutes to make sure no one heard, and no one will come. The man said thirty minutes, but after fifteen, Guillermo starts to stand. Before he can get all the way up, Felix grabs his wrist and pulls him back into the dirt.

“Stay down.” And Guillermo is going to thrash him, but he’s point-

ing across the valley to a cowboy trotting toward where the explosion was. The cowboy is scanning the desert looking for people. The cowboy has a rifle.

“Is he alone?”

But Felix doesn’t answer.

The cowboy walks to the spot where they dropped the stick and stares at it. After a minute, his head snaps up as though he heard something. He raises his rifle and shoots into the scrub, but it’s nowhere near Guillermo and his brother.

They stare at him silently until he turns his back to them. “Delores is pregnant,” Felix says.

Guillermo almost says, “Do you think it’s yours?” Then he almost says, “Well, then she’s a whore.” Then his rage vibrates through his brain until it knocks his ideas loose, and all he can do is stare at the sandy dirt in front of his face and breathe. When he comes back to himself, he says, “When are you going to get married?”

“Tuesday. You’ll be the best man.” This is a big brother’s order, not a question.

Guillermo lets the rage come and go again. He thinks about standing up and walking toward the cowboy. He will walk within rifle range and stand until he’s shot down. He thinks about offering his death up for his brother so no one will think to hunt for Felix. There is a chance now that the cowboy will form a posse, and they’ll both be caught and killed, but not if Guillermo offers up his life right now.

He thinks about Felix’s wedding on Tuesday. They would have to delay it for Guillermo’s funeral, and when people make speeches at the wedding, they would be about Guillermo and his courage. Delores would think about him, and Felix would cry, and everyone would know that she should have chosen him over his coward brother.

Instead of standing, however, he gets up on his hands and knees, and he hears Felix start to follow him. He wonders how far they’ll have to travel like this before they can finally stand and walk like men. It will be miles, he thinks. Many, many miles.

REBUILDING PEARLINGTON

SHANE PEKNY

Each of the smashed, broken, slanting houses of Pearlington, Mississippi, had been tagged with an X and four numbers. To the right of the X was a FEMA tracking code. On the left, the number of people found living in the house. On the bottom, the number of dead bodies. Above the X was the date FEMA inspectors had first reached the house. In Pearlington, the date on every house was 9-11.

That's September 11, 2005, a full thirteen days after Hurricane Katrina.

But Glen T. Locklin didn't waste his breath whining about FEMA. He had a town to rebuild. After the storm, the painter and business owner from Gallatin, Tennessee, drove his truck down to the Charles B. Murphy Elementary School, set up camp, and posted a new sign out front: Welcome to the Pearlington Recovery Center.

I first met him six months after the storm, near the Recovery Center's campfire, where volunteers gathered each morning to find some coffee and shake off a rough night's sleep. A big, bearded guy with skinny white legs, Glen had rolled up his shirtsleeve to reveal his tattoo. It was a big laughing clown, and its face had been sliced the day before by the sharp edge of a steel roofing panel.

Like many of his volunteers, Glenn lived in a bunkhouse for months at a time, returning intermittently to work and family life. Other vol-

unteers, like me and my team from Omaha, came down for a week and pitched tents or slept on cots in the nearby school auditorium. We'd come to pick up debris, swing hammers, paint – whatever Glen needed us to do. That first morning, with the light of day beginning to warm my back, I was eager to get started, to pitch in, and to see what difference we could make.

Every morning was much the same for Glen: He milled about the volunteers, mostly quiet, with a Diet Dr. Pepper in one hand and a Marb Light in the other. He'd stop by the fire for a moment, sometimes stepping inside the fire pit itself, stooping with his cap held in the smoke, just above the flames. The smell of smoke helped repel the biting gnats that swarmed his face, buzzed in his ears, and left dozens of itchy spots on all our arms and legs.

By around 8 a.m., his flabby but powerful arms shining with Deet 40, Glen would down the last bit of his soda, toss his cigarette butt into the fire, and shout:

"All right everybody, here's what we gotta do."

That's what Glen did all day. He delivered commands in his smoker's voice, his black cap pulled low, his eyes hidden by small, round sunglasses. There was no question of what we would do or could do; only what we gotta do.

By nighttime, he'd soften; the Diet Dr. Pepper became an Old Mil Light, and he'd remove his sunglasses and rest his heavy frame on the edge of a flatbed trailer. There he'd sit, smoking more Marbs and telling a few stories, sharing a few laughs. Later on, he might break out a gallon milk jug of strawberry- or coconut-flavored moonshine and pass it around the fire. "240 proof," he joked.

Only once did I see Glen crack. Only once did he waste his breath.

"I tell you what," he said, speaking in the dark from his seat on the trailer. "I love my country and I love my president. But they don't care about poor people. They don't."

New volunteers wouldn't notice right away that the Pearlington Recovery Center sat on a football field. There were no lines, no bleachers, not even any grass. They'd see two semi-trailers packed with two-by-fours, windows and doors, two trailer-like bunkhouses, and a colony of big green army tents. They'd eventually notice one yellow goal post

standing at the west end of the center, and beneath the goal post they'd find the first-base dugout of the adjacent baseball diamond. It didn't look like a dugout though; it was covered with blue tarps, converted to shelter for a volunteer. It was a simple chain-link structure, but any standing structure was put to use in Pearlington, and no one was planning to play baseball.

Next to the fire pit rested a log that no one wanted to burn. It was more than a foot thick and three feet long, and snapped in half. Someone cut it from a fallen tree in one of the many groves of tall, mixed timber that filled unoccupied lots in Pearlington. It sat there, like a neatly cut section from Goliath's toothpick, reminding volunteers of Katrina's power.

You couldn't forget anyway. First off, Pearlington felt vacant; only half of the town's 1,684 residents had returned. Every house was broken and uninhabitable. The forest-like groves of trees had become jungles; the storm had broken most of the tall conifers clean off at 20 feet or so. The fallen trees were broken, twisted, and tangled with man-made debris – everything from cars to refrigerators to teddy bears.

Ditches separated the jungle from the roads. To begin drying the town's usable land, contractors hired by the Army Corps of Engineers dug these ditches on both sides of every road. The ditches were filled with the brown, murky remnants of the flood – a cocktail of salt water, bacteria, and unknown chemical contaminants. When new volunteers arrived, Glen immediately told them his two rules regarding the ditches: "Don't take *anything* from a ditch, and if you drop something in the ditch, *leave it*."

Before Katrina, raccoons and rodents dug through the trash at night. Now, heaping piles of waste sat outside the elementary school and remained undisturbed every morning. Floodwater soaked and ruined drywall, plaster, and insulation everywhere, except for the ceilings on two-story homes, well above the high-water mark. Locals said the songbirds returned only two weeks ago. Every car was junked. Every cat died.

Down on the banks of the Pearl River sat a tugboat. Its black hull stood a story and a half tall, and the deck, cabin, and bridge made two more stories above that. It sat atop what used to be a nice brick home, the red bricks spilling out from beneath the boat.

Resting on everyone's mind, as heavily as that tugboat rested on the house, was the always-present thought: Pearlington lost 10 people to Katrina. Eight of those were found dead. The other two were missing. They simply disappeared.

How loud is the crack of a 12-inch tree trunk? What does it sound like to crush a brick home with a tugboat? Where did the two missing people end up?

Katrina's power was impossible to miss, yet hard to wrap your head around, even in the face of visual proof. The town had suffered sustained winds of 150 miles per hour. I tried to imagine leaning out the window of a high-speed train, or sitting on the hood of a racecar, but it was useless. Such storms are a rare force with strengths beyond human tolerance, or even imagination.

There were no landmarks. With the wind gone and the floodwaters beginning to recede, the clouds broke apart and the sun lit an alien landscape. Buildings, roads, the fixtures of everyday life, the physical collection of objects that we christen with a name – Pearlington – were mostly buried or whisked away.

What makes anyone think you can undo this? What makes you think Pearlington still exists? What good could I do?

Every Walmart in the country looks pretty much the same. I'd never walked into one surprised – until my trip to Walmart in nearby Slidell, Louisiana.

You could see all the way across the store: Floodwater had destroyed the original shelving, and in its place stood shorter, more rugged steel racks. Unpainted plywood covered all the walls, floor to ceiling. This Walmart even closed: 5 p.m. Sundays, 8 p.m. Monday through Saturday.

Walmart responded to Katrina with economic acumen. There was no vision center, no hair salon, no photo studio. Since no one was taking checks, Walmart sold money orders. The store supplied everything that was in demand, nothing that was not. All the essentials sat up front: mattresses, tarps, trash bags, bottled water. And flowers – rows and rows of brightly colored flowers, all tucked into little black plastic trays.

It seemed everyone in and around Pearlington was planting flowers.

One of the army tents at the Pearlington Recovery Center had a mailbox hanging next to the door. The pink, neatly hand-painted name

on it read “Laurie” followed by a star. Laurie Spaschak originally came to Pearlington from Albany, New York, with the American Red Cross, but when that organization pulled out, she stayed. She had long blonde hair and a soft, warm face. Her tent was furnished much like a typical apartment: a table and chairs, a couch, an overstuffed bookshelf. She was known around camp as Hot Lips – after Major Margaret “Hot Lips” Houlihan from M*A*S*H.

One night she found a string of Christmas lights and asked some volunteers to nail them up between the bunkhouses. She painted a sign with a little house in the middle and hung it below the lights. It read: “It takes teamwork to make the dream work.”

Some mornings she cooked breakfast for the volunteers. She cracked eggs and dropped them in bacon grease on a little propane stove at the edge of a flatbed trailer. It was a damn good greasy breakfast, but if volunteers failed to clean their plates, Laurie’s puppy, Katie, took care of the leftovers.

Katie, a little light-brown beagle-looking thing, was a Katrina mutt. Nobody knew what she was or where she came from. Her white paws were pretty small, so no one predicted she’d get more than a couple feet tall. She was playful, hungry, curious – and had a special curiosity for the ditches. Laurie and her other caretakers constantly called her back from the road’s edge.

Flowers, a fatty breakfast, a good nickname. Twinkling lights in the night, a little paint applied with a steady, caring hand. And a puppy. There was something about a puppy in Pearlington.

Night, at the Pearlington Recovery Center. There was a big, beat-up Ford pickup parked outside the reach of the campfire’s glow, and a few volunteers from Omaha chatted with the driver. As I approached, the driver introduced himself as Larry Randall, a long-time local, and I shook his gritty, sweaty hand in the dark. I could not see his face. He held out a tall, half-filled Aquafina bottle.

“Here,” Larry said in his slow southern voice. “Try a bolt of this.”

My fellow out-of-towners chuckled, and I could sense Larry’s grin in the dark. I unscrewed the cap and took a whiff; it smelled like nail-polish remover. I tipped the bottle back and let a few drops hit my

tongue. I snorted and winced. Only a few drops, but it felt like a full shot of Rebel Yell whiskey.

“Moonshine,” Larry said, laughing. “Strawberry moonshine.”

Then he recommended that we check out the Turtle.

Turtle Landing – “Turtlelly Cool,” read the sign – was Pearlington’s only bar. Katrina had trashed the original building, but the bar reopened around Christmas in a big white tent – protected, like everything else, with a layer of blue tarps that flapped in the chill wind. In this temporary home, the bar became known as the Softshell Turtle.

The bar served as a different sort of recovery center. Carpet scraps covered the dirt floor, and all the tables and chairs wobbled on uneven ground. The barflies were a bunch of unshaven, flannel-clad older men. They asked me where I was from, how long I was in Pearlington, and what I’d been doing there. Then they thanked me. The bartender was a sweetheart; she passed out plastic gold medallions, Mardi Gras trinkets, each redeemable for one free drink.

The chicken gumbo was free and self-serve and loaded with little chicken legs, bones and all. A few locals played poker at a round, green-felt table, sopping white sandwich bread in their bowls of gumbo. A TV with rabbit ears sat on a shelf behind the bar, and Johnny Cash played on a small three-piece stereo. The late-February night was chilly, so some of the patrons took turns standing next to a small, humming electric heater.

All in all, it was a typical bar: a place full of friends, a place to go between today’s work and tomorrow’s. The Turtle probably felt much the same before Katrina.

Later that night, I got a good look at Larry Randall, the guy with the moonshine. His face was hard, his eyes, squinting, even in the soft incandescent glow of the bar’s lights. But his bushy gray mustache couldn’t disguise his slow, effortless smile. I had yet to see him take a bolt of moonshine himself. I wondered whether *he* would wince.

Volunteers in Pearlington smelled like a campfire all the time, and they liked it. Smoke seemed to be the most effective gnat repellent. Our group from Omaha immediately built a fire at each work site we were assigned. We burned scrap lumber, trash from roadside piles, and almost anything else that produced a lot of smoke. I always searched out

the thick cardboard tubes from spent rolls of tarpaper. I lit one end and let it smolder like a giant cigar, sometimes moving it about the worksite with me. The risk of melting the soles of my boots or burning myself was well worth it – anything to ward off the gnats.

With the town so thoroughly wrecked, Glen and the other leaders of reconstruction had no way to prioritize. Sometimes they caught flack: “Why are you cleaning up *his* house first? When are you going to help me with *mine*?” They took requests from residents, got started, and then moved to the next request as time and supply inventories allowed. Residents were certainly grateful, but each time the volunteers moved on, plenty of work remained.

One day, a few of us went with Larry on an odd-job hunt. He hauled us around, piled into the back of his truck along with propane tanks, sacks of concrete, and a wheelbarrow. We cleaned up debris, helped a few older guys raise a heavy porch beam, tore out moldy drywall, and removed twisted aluminum siding.

The living room in one house had a vaulted ceiling done in darkly stained and varnished hardwood. The water at this house had risen to 10 feet, so some of the wood was discolored or falling down, exposing once-soaked and now moldy insulation. The homeowner said he wanted to save the wood on the ceiling, so we left it alone.

Man, I thought, if this were my house, I’d tear that shit down.

I found myself saying that often in Pearlington. When an entire house was tipped off the blocks that serve as a foundation; when the roof was ruined; the siding, ruined; the drywall, soaked and rotting; the framing and sheathing, equally soaked; the floor, risen here and sunken there; the wiring, corroded and useless; and all the windows and doors, gone – what was worth saving?

But these houses were not mine. And if they were, I might have tried to save them, too.

We helped rip the siding off one such house. The owner, a smiling, balding, grateful father of two girls, had already gutted the interior and replaced the roof, mostly on his own. The storm ripped the overhang off his back porch, and he rebuilt it with debris found in the woods. While they slowly rebuilt, he and his family lived in a white FEMA camper-trailer parked next to the house.

His daughters drew pictures with pencils and markers on the

stripped walls inside. In one spot on the exposed wall sheathing, one of them wrote, “I hate Katrina.”

I stepped inside, camera in hand, to capture the words and pictures. The father and his eldest daughter were there. She was helping him replace the electrical wiring. I suddenly became aware that I had entered someone’s home, not a condemned building.

I am not a tourist, I thought. I am here to help.

As we left, the home stripped and ready for new siding, I heard the father and daughter working in the living room:

“Grab the yellow wire, Baby,” he said.

“Which one?” asked the little girl. “This one?”

“No, Baby, no. Grab the *yellow* one.”

There was not a hint of frustration in his voice.

On Fat Tuesday of the 150th Mardi Gras in New Orleans, just 35 miles southwest of Pearlington, the revelers drank and sang at the Bourbon Street Sing Sing. An old man in a purple brimmed hat and matching suit wrapped his hands around the microphone.

“Katrina, Katrina,” he sang, “just look what you’re doin’ to me.”

We’d heard that this Mardi Gras, the first since Katrina, would be smaller than usual. I had never been to Mardi Gras, but I couldn’t imagine a bigger party. Could more people fit onto Bourbon Street? No way. Could the pools of trash, beads, and spilled booze swell any deeper along the curbs? Not possible. And, as I stepped into a portable toilet – well, I was absolutely certain that not another person could take a seat there.

I did see a few small signs of Katrina, though. There were hats shaped like little blue-tarp covered roofs, with stir sticks to look like wood lathe. There were the T-shirts: “FEMA Evacuation Plan: Run, Motherfucker, Run!” And then I tried to send a letter.

I asked the bartender at the Sing Sing about the nearest post office. She replied: “Yes, there is a post office. But they haven’t fixed it yet.” So she directed me to the Royal Sonesta Hotel, where I could try to persuade the bellhop to add my letter to the outgoing mail. “That’s what I do,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. The mail still didn’t work.

“Katrina, Katrina,” sang the purple performer, “all I got is the clothes on my back.”

That morning, seated at the campfire with his Diet Dr. Pepper,

Glen had scoffed at the Mardi Gras revelry. “Just think,” he had said, “just think of the houses you could build with all the money wasted on beads.”

But by 6 p.m. that night, Glen held a bright yellow “hand grenade,” the New Orleans drink of choice, reflexively mocking anyone who suggested returning to camp, turning down a drink, or merely sitting down for a rest. His barrel-like chest boasted a big, shiny pile of medallions and beads.

“C’mon, everybody,” he shouted, “let’s go play!”

“It’s gettin’ cold down in the city,” sang the purple man, “and all I got is the blues to keep me warm.”

Walking down a quieter side street on my own, I overheard two bead-draped women holding hand grenades.

“This is the best Mardi Gras ever,” one said.

I stopped and asked why.

“Because,” she explained. “We lost everything. We used to be neighbors, but we lost everything.”

Neighbors no more. The storm wrecked that, but it was OK. After all, becoming neighbors was coincidental, and over time, became merely incidental to becoming friends. They were right; this was the best Mardi Gras ever.

“Katrina, Katrina,” I sang to myself, “just look what you’re doin’ to me.”

On our last evening in Pearlinton, we sat down for loose-meat sandwiches at the Turtle. Connie Crapeau, the bar’s owner, retold the story of how she waited out the flood on the roof of her home. She had kept her cigarettes in a cooler to keep them dry, sitting there for 10 and a half hours – if you said 10 hours, she’d correct you – smoking and waiting for the water to recede. I got the feeling she told that story to every group of volunteers that passed through.

When she started retelling it to us, Larry Randall left his table and took a seat at the bar, out of earshot. I figured he’d probably become bored with the story. But someone said later that he was crying.

Later in the evening, back at the Pearlinton Recovery Center, I sat with a small and dwindling group of volunteers in the smoke of the crackling campfire. The fire’s light danced on their faces and the glass

of a wine bottle as it made its way around, its contents sloshing with every swig.

Our caravan would depart the next morning, and a new vanload of volunteers would arrive in our wake, fresh, energetic, untouched by gnats. “All right everybody,” Glen would proclaim the next morning, tossing a butt into the fire, “this is what we gotta do.” Every morning, that statement was a bold one. After all, we don’t *gotta* do anything. Glen could return to Tennessee. Laurie could pack up her tent. Connie could give up on the bar. Larry could head up Highway 90, his distillery loaded in the truck bed. Instead, they and many others believed in rebuilding Pearlington.

They were resolute, but not invincible; indeed, they could falter or even fail. But I saw evidence of their faith and vision. A few new homes, small but utterly functional, stood bright and strong. A father and his two daughters would salvage theirs. Walmart was open, and so was the Turtle. The moonshine burned as strongly as ever. Mardi Gras remained a legendary party. Neighbors became even closer friends.

Six months after Katrina, Glen and his band of rebuilders still had a long way to go. Through the campfire’s smoke and the memories of those lost, beyond the piles of debris and the feeling of being forgotten, and in the absence of all that is familiar, they saw this town rising again.

I am no Glen T. Locklin. Few are. But my fellow volunteers and I – we pitched in. And on that last night, squinting through the grit and smoke in my eyes, scratching my gnat bites, I believed in rebuilding Pearlington, too.

AFTER READING THE NEWS

MICHAEL LAUCLAN

You long for a cloudless sky--
only stars, planets, moon-shard
cutting through the dark absolute

like a friend smiling one tough night
broken down on a highway, her eyes
and crooked teeth reflecting stray

light toward you as though things
might turn out OK, as though
we'd soon laugh at our luck

getting stuck here, beside
a loud road at a dead time.
At deadly times, we hear

voices cackling how stuck
we are, how we'd be OK
if we had a spare or a light,

AFTER READING THE NEWS

if we could fix our crooked ways,
as our sweating planet sheds us
as we grip shards of steel

to flay one another, or (luck
betraying even loss) to carve
a new way in the dark.



*Listen to Michael Lauchlan read “After Reading the News” on
TLR’s SoundCloud page.*

WEST HOLLYWOOD, 1992

DANI BURLISON

I'm heading to Los Angeles on a twelve-hour train. Two suitcases of clothes, a few journals and photographs of Ricky tucked into my small bag of makeup are riding along underneath me, close to the tracks. Mt. Lassen is already dissolving behind me, and Central California, with its vast dry fields and aqueducts, rolls past. Migrant farm workers in strawberry fields, almond orchards and Chevy trucks, they all bow as if to bid me farewell. The sunflowers north of Bakersfield are looking away. I'm looking away from me, too; moving south, fresh from the fever that rose and dropped over the weeks since my abortion. I'm hoping the trips to the emergency room are done with, but the cramps still grip me, a link to those protestors, lined up and down the sidewalk like heads on sticks after a medieval battle. Before they set the fire, my mother pushed through them, ushered me into her old Dodge Dart.

West Hollywood, with its lights and star maps and its neighboring streets freshly cleared of the Rodney King riots, waits ahead. I will sort my heart and my head while sleeping on the psychiatrist couch in my brother's living room. The white-washed apartment complex, just south of Sunset Boulevard, stands blocks away from Beverly Hills. My new high school diploma serves as a ticket into a job at The Beverly Center, selling overpriced costume jewelry and tacky gold tops adorned with anchors and jewels to women with flesh pulled up and back by cosmetic

surgery. Most of the women are planning vacations with their rich husbands. They'll fly to The Bahamas and Italy and the French Riviera, they tell me. *Do you think this top is too young for me?* they'll ask.

The city bus will take me to work and every crazy conspiracy theorist in Los Angeles will seem to seek me out. They plop down next to me, asking me about poison in the laundry detergent they just purchased at Vons. They'll tell me they dreamed of me the other night and comment on how weird it is that I am alive, right here, next to them on the bus. *You were attacked by a stampede of elephants*, they'll tell me. *Do you want to get coffee sometime?*

My brother's apartment complex resembles Melrose Place without the pool, and the residents, dressed in their best Hollywood grunge, smoke cigarettes and tell stories under the shade umbrella and tropical plants at the courtyard's table. One teaches kindergarten. Another has a Doberman Pincher that scares the shit out of me every time it barks. There's an artist who designs Grateful Dead album covers and somebody's father is a famous actor who disowned him for being gay. They all offer me sympathetic smiles. *I heard she almost died*, one of them whispers outside of the apartment window. *That she is recovering from a hospital stay*. One couple argues when they get back from barhopping down Sunset. It reminds me too much of home, of my faux step-dad kicking the shit out of my mom. I take a hit off of a joint, close the windows and wrap my pillow around my head. I have wild and outlandish sex dreams about Bobby Brown from New Edition. *It's my prerogative*, I laugh to myself. Maybe this is a sign that I'll meet someone famous who will save me from everything I left five hundred miles away.

Heinrich lives in the complex, too. He's in his late twenties, pale with dyed black hair hanging in curls around his eyes, and he plays bass in an up-and-coming rock band. His band shares a studio with Jane's Addiction and the Red Hot Chili Peppers, my sister-in-law tells me. There are always rocker dudes going in and out of his apartment, sunglasses firmly in place over their eyes. I'm eighteen and Heinrich takes a liking to me. *You have such nice hands*, he says. *Especially with that black polish*. After work, the bus drops me a block away from the complex, I walk to his place, listen to records, smoke weed, drink Snapple. Sometimes we'll line up cocaine, invite it into us through cut-up straws and five dollar bills and though we never have sex, we usually make out a lit-

tle bit before the sun comes up and I sneak back into my brother's apartment. I dye my long hair the color of eggplant, buy fishnets and Doc Marten's to wear with my cut-offs, try to transform into someone new, someone who can forget what's behind her. Heinrich tells me how hot I am, starts taking me along to bars where no one asks me for an ID, where everyone tells me I'm pretty and funny and offers me free drugs to snort and smoke with my vodka tonics. He wants to set me up with his friend, a famous guitarist in one of the bands he shares a studio with. *I mean, I like you a lot, he says. But my ex is a psycho and it would be better if she thinks you're Dave's old lady, you know?*

Within weeks, the fever returns, rises up from some dark place inside of me. My sister-in-law takes me to a doctor who pokes and prods and hands me pills and news that my ovaries are destroyed, that I'll probably never have kids. *Scar tissue, he tells me. It has ravaged your reproductive system.* The infection won't ever let me forget. I believe that this is revenge or karma for my abortion; I wonder if there is a spell I can cast to erase those weeks and months. The protestors, like so many bad dreams haunt me again: the woman tearing at my sleeve, the man with the poster of the dead, bloody babies. I swallow my antibiotics and codeine and go to Heinrich's apartment for cheap wine and bong hits. I return to the psychiatrist couch and fall into more bad dreams.

More work, more crazy people on the bus. Marjanne, my Iranian boss, wears such short skirts. *You are skinny and in a free country, she says. If I wore this back home I'd be murdered. Why don't you show off your body?* She takes me downstairs in the mall, picks out a short plaid skirt, a low cut top. *It isn't my style, she says, but you seem to be—what is it? Gothic? So you will look sexy in this.* I wear the outfit to work the next day, help a man pick out a tennis bracelet and matching gold earrings for his wife. He'll give them to her before their anniversary cruise in Mexico. *Will you try on these tops for me? She's your size and I want to see how they fit.* I'm creeped out but Marjanne insists. *He's got money, she says. Sell him more things!* He drops hundreds of dollars, calls me later to thank me. Asks me if I'd like to put my pretty mouth on his cock, let him put his cock inside of my young, sweet pussy. I hang up, think *my young, sweet pussy is damaged. Fuck you, creep.* He waits for me after work. Security asks him to stay away from the mall, insists that I have my brother drive me home for a couple of weeks.

Soon, I am back on the bus again, working a side job on Melrose for a shop that specializes in leather jackets. Musicians that I recognize from MTV like Sebastian Bach from Skid Row enter the store with their long rocker hair flowing, prancing like peacocks, their groupies are lined up outside, mouths gaping, *OhmyGod, OhmyGod, OhmyGod, It's him!*

From the bus, Los Angeles keeps pulsing, stretching out into a vast maze of boulevards and freeways crisscrossing back and forth under the desert sun. This city was once a part of Mexico, populated with Chumash Indians, elder trees and yucca before pavement covered it all and skyscrapers and smog filled the sky. Some call it The City of Angels as they sip on filtered water that has been piped in from hundreds of miles away. I've been here for months and the only angels I've seen are the dark ones; the ones that haunt my sleep.

Soon enough, the summer ends, folds into fall. The sun keeps shining. I need a break from the mall and leave to visit my best friend in Santa Barbara. While munching on mushrooms, we decide to drive to the Bay Area the next day, to attend a huge concert. We snort cocaine off a Black Crowes cassette case at gas station stops between Santa Barbara and Oakland. I run into Ricky at Day on the Green. He's wasted on Southern Comfort and banging his head to Metallica. He pulls me aside to talk, I chew the inside of my cheeks. He misses me. He's sorry his mom had lectured me about the abortion. He wants to try again, to move to Los Angeles. He's falling over, pulling on my arms, sobbing like an injured child—tears and snot and everything—begging for me to take him back. *I can be there by Christmas, by your birthday*, he tells me. *I'll save money and drive down. We'll get our own place. I love you*, he adds before he is swallowed into the mosh pit.

More cocaine, more weed. Someone—I think it's Ricky—is smoking meth off tinfoil in the cheap Oakland hotel where we were staying. My best friend is spun out, holding my hands. We stare into each other's eyes, laughing, cackling like witches as most of Oakland sleeps beyond the after-school special we're creating in this small, cramped room. We've been up for three days. I crave pineapple juice. I send Ricky to get some, hope he won't run away with my money like he did the night of my abortion.

Morning comes and stings our eyes as I crawl back into my best friend's white convertible and on to Santa Barbara and then back on the bus from there to Los Angeles. Heinrich says he missed me, says the fa-

mous guitarist he tried to set me up with has an angry ex-wife, says she's on to me. *But I've barely met him*, I say. *I might be getting back together with Ricky, anyway*. He tells me his band will be featured in an upcoming episode of MTV's "The Real World." To celebrate, we take hits off of his bong, swallow pills, turn up Alice in Chains while the chemistry in our brains goes gray, blurring the details about who we are and what we're doing here in this Los Angeles apartment. He falls asleep on his dusty black leather couch. His roommate gets home, sits down on the floor in front of me, asks if I'm okay, cautions me not to get wrapped up with Heinrich and his scene. *You're so young*, he says. *I'd hate for you to end up like him*. *Be careful*, he adds as he walks into his room.

Halloween arrives with hoards of sexy rocker nurses and sexy witches. Ricky hasn't called me in weeks. I sit in the courtyard, smoke cigarettes, read Anne Rice and articles about Sinéad O'Connor destroying a photograph of the Pope, paint my toenails black. Heinrich's roommate sits down, invites me to a party in the Hollywood Hills. It's at the home of a famous musician. I think it will cheer me up. Maybe Ricky will be jealous, maybe he'll come back to me when he hears that I've been there. The roommate promises he'll be the sober driver, assures me that he won't ditch me there. He fetches his costume, a mad scientist coat. Heinrich arrives with a mug of tea, says I'll need it before the party. He adds honey, I gulp it down, ask for more. He suggests that I pace myself. *It's mushroom tea*, he laughs. *Tonight, you're going to fly*. He grabs his werewolf mask, leads me to the car.

We climb Laurel Canyon in the roommate's convertible, the sun dropping beyond the Pacific, all of Sunset Strip a brightly lit spreading cluster of clubs and bars and rocker dudes behind us. At the party, wigs and cauldrons and Gene Simmons masks slide into each other and fog from buckets of dry ice licks at my hands, which morph and contort from the mushrooms that are clearly carrying out their mission. The roommate keeps checking on me, telling me I'm drinking too much. *Slow down with the punch*, he says. *That shit has Everclear in it*. I see more famous musicians, flash to scenes of The Wall, wonder if this whole party is being taped for a new Jane's Addiction video. Women parade past me, heading to the bathroom. They emerge with pink noses, sniffing like bunny rabbits, their men grabbing their asses, ogling their silicone breasts.

I lose my footing. The roommate helps me to an outdoor couch for fresh air, gives me ice water, brushes my hair from my eyes. Heinrich approaches, says he can help me. *Do you want a line?* He asks. *It will make you feel better, I promise.* He helps me to the bathroom, lines up a rail on the back of the toilet while his roommate goes to get his car. *I saved this for you. I don't need any right now,* he tells me. The jolt of energy I expect doesn't come. Instead, I float in a sea of warm water, the ceiling circling above me through a kaleidoscope. I remember that a neighbor once mentioned that Heinrich loves heroin.

The convertible shakes with loud music and cheers. A couple presses next to me, the woman's skirt up around her waist, the man's hands between her thighs. The roommate helps me to the bathroom of their apartment, holds me while I vomit fruit punch and Budweiser and Jell-o shots across the toilet. He presses a cool washcloth to the back of my neck, leaves the bathroom, argues with Heinrich, comes back and moves me and my torn dress to the couch, wraps me in blankets while I shake, while my insides wince. *What's happening?* I ask. I'm afraid to go to sleep. The roommate rubs my back and leaves for his room. Heinrich is passed out on the floor beside me.

As I sleep—drugs and alcohol and fear in my veins—the world moves on in bedrooms and bus stations and convenience stores scattered across this filthy, blinking city that was meant to save me from my past. Wives pack their vacation luggage with sparkly tops from the mall, double check their passports. Groupies give blow jobs, homeless scout out safe corners downtown and kids sleep, protected behind closed doors while parents lie awake in worry down hallways. Garbage men and janitors start their early morning shifts and abortion doctors tuck hate mail into their desks.

Slowly at first, my sleep is interrupted. I feel weight on me, clammy hands under my shirt, tugging my bra aside, pinching my breasts. I'm dreaming. *Another weird Bobby Brown sex dream,* I assume, and doze back off. The same hands have moved from my breasts, are parting my legs, pulling my panties down my thighs, shoving a penis inside of me. The body is moving on top of me, my gut is clenched, and he's thrusting, slowly, sloppily. He seems as asleep as me. I feel curls falling into my eyes, hear moaning, feel wet, sour breath on my neck. It's Heinrich. I don't stop him. *Maybe I started this,* I think as his hand covers my mouth

and his other hikes up my hips underneath him. Maybe I don't deserve anything more; maybe this is what I traded everything in for. I wonder where I could go next, and then realize that I've already left.

POLAROID #2: CRACK MOTEL '98

MARCUS CLAYTON

See him lurch
down steps of chipped stone

from the silhouette-soaked motel
the brandy-glazed motel
the motel with freebase burns
along the whittled paint of the walls.

See his jaw line, coarse shadow
peppered in grey
stained with saliva three hours old.

See the German shepherd circle you
in the maroon sedan
the same shade of blood coursing
your dad's thinning veins.

The dog barks at your palm
pressed to the fogged backseat window,
it barks at your mother
with palm pressed at her chin,

her eyes drawn away
from her descending
husband.

Feel a ghost made of soot
kiss your hairless cheek
with chalk-stained lips.
Chipped,
whittled.



*Listen to Marcus Clayton read “Polaroid #2: Crack Motel ’98”
on TLR’s SoundCloud page.*

BOTOX AT WHITMAN-WALKER / A NEW MAN

STEFEN STYRSKY

Botox at Whitman-Walker

I once went to the Whitman-Walker Clinic with Victor so he could get his Botox injections. The clinic was only a few blocks from his apartment, but he said he wasn't feeling great and didn't think he could make it there on his own. We were friendly that way even though Victor also used to sell me drugs.

He was waiting for me hunched over on the bottom step of his building's stoop, his head down, and his eyes cupped in palms.

"Why does an AIDS clinic give out Botox?" I asked. The name Whitman-Walker made me think of HIV-meds for poor people, the uninsured, the unlucky.

Victor reached out a hand. I pulled him to his feet. He wore a sweat-shirt, and as we walked, I saw that he shivered, his chubby stomach jiggling with each spasm. "It's a healthcare organization," he said. "They do whatever."

At the corner we stopped and waited for the WALK signal. The sun blazed, a reflected star in the windows of the townhouses lining the street. I tilted my head so the rays could warm my face.

"Look at it this way." Victor hugged himself and stamped his sneakers. "I get my wrinkles erased and a mother of three can afford a pediatrician."

I put my hand on his forehead. "I think you have a fever," I said. He jerked away. "I don't have a fever."

The light changed, but we stood there, the timer for the blind counting down the seconds. "Maybe you should go home," I said.

"Are you crazy?" He shoved his hands beneath his armpits. "It'd be a month before I got another appointment."

We kept on. Victor could barely match my pace. When he leaned against a lamppost, I draped the sweatshirt's hood over his head.

"You're really ill," I said.

"I'm withdrawing," he said. "I've been up"—he ticked off fingers—"three days." He gnawed at a cuticle. "I think."

"So take something."

"So take something!" Victor mimicked. "I'm saving what's left for when I get there."

I spun him around by the shoulder. I said, "You're out?"

"Yeah." His eyes were dull pearls.

Your dealer out. I couldn't think of anything worse.

He noticed my expression. "Cut the worrying. Just get me through this."

We were there on a Tuesday, testing day. I knew this because of a sign taped to the front door. A bunch of guys shuffled across the lobby's dusky linoleum, not making eye contact, waiting for instructions. I recognized most of them even though our faults lay exposed in the daylight.

Victor slipped past the crowd and told the receptionist why he was there.

She tapped the keys of her computer. "You don't have an appointment."

"Oh, most certainly I do," Victor said. "I marked it on my calendar with a big, red X."

There was more clicking.

"I really have an appointment," Victor said.

"We all do," she said.

I saw my friend Brian swallowed in the sagging, mint-green cushions of the waiting room couch. His knees were higher than his waist, and his hands hung between his legs. I left Victor arguing with the woman.

At my approach Brian said, "The moment of truth." His face was so open and pale he looked twelve years old. He was more beautiful than I'd ever seen him, a martyr from a Renaissance painting. I didn't think it was fair Brian had this kind of thing looming over him.

"How does it work?" I said.

He handed me a brochure that explained everything. You swiped the inside of your cheek with a testing stick, like sucking on a popsicle, zipped the specimen end into a plastic bag and wrote your assigned number on the outside. The number ensured the test was anonymous.

Some old guy came over and sat next to Brian. His receding hairline made him seem devious. I used to think anyone over twenty-five was practically the grim reaper.

The guy said, "Don't be nervous." He patted Brian's clasped hands. "You won't know the result until Tuesday."

"Great. I get to shit myself the whole week," Brian said.

"Let me tell you my first time." The man looked familiar, but I was sure I'd never seen him before. "Josh and I had the same doctor. I went in for a checkup and my doctor said, 'So, is your relationship open, or more don't ask, don't tell?' And I'm like, Jesus, I guess don't ask, don't tell."

I took the empty cushion, and dust coughed up. I sneezed.

"You weren't asking and he wasn't telling," Brian said, his tone familiar, as if he knew this wandering stranger.

"My doc's like, 'We better draw your blood.' Next thing, I'm sitting there, the nurse strapping my arm with a rubber tube."

"I hear the pills aren't too bad," Brian said.

"They have those names like weird foreign countries," his friend said. "Places you'd never want to visit."

"Crap." Brian was looking at someone across the room. "I slept with that guy's boyfriend." He stood and handed me the testing stick and the ticket with his number. The zipper on Brian's jeans danced in my vision. He went for the exit.

I didn't know who Brian meant. Half the guys in that room had probably taken a tumble with him at some time or another.

"Anyway," the guy continued, sliding over. "What do I think about right then? The last time I got stuck by a needle. A tetanus shot before I went to Guatemala with Josh, the bastard."

The guy didn't have a ticket. Given a moment to consider him, I now saw his eyes were like someone who'd come through a long, restful sleep. He talked. "Our guide took us to a spot where they'd just carved some temples out of the jungle."

A voice called: "Twenty-nine." Brian's number. I wondered if he'd run the swab inside his mouth. I touched the end. It felt dry. I wrapped the ticket around the stick and put everything into my pocket.

"Is that where they filmed *Star Wars*?" I said. "Guatemala?"

"How should I know?" he said.

More numbers were called.

"Temples naked as newborns, the place completely empty." He waved his hands to conjure the vista. "We climbed a pyramid. From a ledge we watched the sun fall behind the mountains. All around was this clearing, totally new."

Sometimes I think I hallucinated the whole thing, that the guy really wasn't there. Kind of like the angel from that movie who talks to the famous actor on the bridge.

I heard Victor singing. "I'm so pretty, I'm so pretty." They must have found his appointment. He was at my side, his face a stretched sheet.

"Smile," I said.

His lips pulled back. He showed me teeth, bright and full.

A New Man

Then there was this time Donnie and I sold drugs out of the Motel 6 on Georgia Avenue. We didn't mean it to happen, but Donnie was staying there so he could be near his brother, Winchester, who was down the street at Walter Reed after he was shot in Afghanistan.

I was at the window smoking a pipe and watching television. The door opened and Donnie came in on crutches and wearing desert camouflage. I mean, that's what I thought, but it was Donnie's brother. Like brothers, they had a resemblance.

"You scared me," I said. "You should've called."

Donnie was behind his brother. "Your phone is off."

Actually, I'd dropped it in one of those recycling kiosks that pay cash for used phones. The phone was brand new and the machine had spit out three hundred dollars. It was something I didn't remember until now.

"Tell me your name again," Winchester said. He looked good; thinner, but good.

I shook his hand. "Thank you for your service." I'd always wanted to say that.

"Part of my femur is now stainless steel," he said.

"A new man," I said.

Winchester eased himself onto the bed and lay down. "This place is worse than the hospital."

Donnie was gone. I'd been staring out the window and hadn't realized he'd left.

"Where's Donnie?" I said.

"Getting beer," Winchester said. "They don't let us drink at Reed."

But he was right. As hotels go, the Motel 6 on Georgia Avenue was pretty bad. The floors were that thin linoleum you can peel up to expose the concrete. Voices echoed. All the lights were fluorescent tubes so it was like you were in a doctor's office. And they didn't even put free soap and shampoo in the bathroom. Something I was hoping to take when I left.

Donnie returned with two six-packs. We drank.

"How're mom and dad?" Donnie said. I'd heard his parents had been by yesterday to see Winchester, but made sure it was when Donnie wasn't around.

Winchester sniffed. "One of you is smoking."

"That's me," I volunteered. The beer and crystal had put me in a fabulous mood. Zippy and relaxed.

"You know my brother has a real problem, right?" Winchester said.

Donnie cut him off. "I wish everyone was as excited about my sobriety as they are about my relapses."

"How're you even affording this dump?" Winchester said.

"Friend," Donnie said.

Then I remembered what we were doing there. Victor had rented

the room because he thought someone was watching his apartment. He figured a dumpy hotel would throw them off long enough he could sell his current stash.

"Where's Victor?" I said.

Donnie gave me a look like I should be so stupid. "Delivery."

Just then Victor showed up. With him was a kid on roller blades. "What great hallways," the kid said. "If they were longer they'd be awesome."

He was a giant on the skates, his muscular boy-legs like two beanstalks rising into the gentle puffs of his ass. Donnie stared at him. Winchester raised an eyebrow.

"He followed me home," Victor said. "Can I keep him?"

"I'd climb those legs," I said.

All faces spun towards me. Victor said, "That's the first dirty thing I've ever heard you say."

I shrugged. "I'm feeling good."

Winchester was on a mission. He said their mom and dad wanted Donnie back in rehab. I puffed a few more times on the pipe.

"I'm a dealer, and I think you need it," I heard Victor say.

I swallowed a pill and went to the bathroom for a pee. I make faces in the mirror. My expressions shape themselves into those paired laughing and crying masks outside theaters. When I get out, there are two black guys in the room, some fat white guy wearing a T-shirt that is way too tight, and a really cute kid on skates.

The standing black guy says, "Dad was always on my case about the way I should live my life."

"He was worried," says the other black guy, who I notice has a bad leg.

"I'm not joining the Army," the first says. "I'm doing what I want."

The guy closest to me is sitting on the bed. His left foot is strapped into a bulging orthopedic shoe.

I hold out my hand. "Hi, I'm Seth," I say.

He looks at me like I have bad breath, then extends a hand.

The fat guy says, "Dude, you are whacked."

"I feel great," I say.

"No kidding," Donnie said. "You should have heard yourself laughing in the bathroom."

The scene came back together and I recognized everyone. “That was amazing,” I said. “I didn’t know any of you.”

Later that night I was wandering the hallways of the Hotel Rouge downtown. The kid on skates flung out a door.

“He filmed me.” He held the door open, yelling back into the room, “I can’t believe he filmed me.” Then he was down the hall, a long straightaway like the one he wanted earlier. Once you’ve found what you’ve always wanted, what do you do next?

I knocked. No one answered. Not even the noise of a TV sounded in the depths.

THE VAMPIRES

HEATHER MOMYER

Outside, the vampires saunter and glide through urban streets, leather shoes in sulky-lit alleys, motors running on highways from there to here. In the car, they change the station on the radio and roll down the window part way. They admire the cityscape full of lights and notice the shimmer on the window looking toward another skyscraper, or the river, or maybe even the sky itself. And the lights and their reflections, those phantoms bobbing dimly, hazy reminders from somethings elsewhere, and the vampires fall in love and press lips to pulse.

Afterwards, they decide it is time to get out of town, and they take their cars down two-lane roads and parade down country lanes, stepping farther and farther from those lights. In the evenings, they grace the woods, tipping their hats to the wolves that remain, haunting old, haunted forests. They float ghostly into barns in disrepair, flutter among the owls and swallows, trail the forests along deerpath and pawprint.

There is something to be said for déjà vu. The coffin lid goes down, and outside there are the vampires. Perhaps it is all too absurd, but this is what I hear, and it seems in these bones that I have heard it all before.

“And how many times has the lid closed?” Marie asks herself.

She lies in the coffin and the air is damp with her own breath. It

seems that the world presses her down to her back, but no dirt is thrown on the lid. It is dark, and she hears something like sniffing, like the dogs are out, like her breath reaches the outer air, like the smell of blood and sex, and those in the street with leather shoes on pavement, a strut down the sidewalk to where she lies, locked up, but not tight enough.

But maybe she imagines the sound because there are the hums of voices she has heard too many times before, the groan of a man, her mother telling her to clean her room and to do it right because she wasn't going to go outside at all until the bed was made. And the chatter of her sisters who had too many vodka tonics, slurs and giggles, the man who stomped up the steps and announced, "I just fucked your sister," the sound of someone barfing, the whine of a dog left behind.

In the coffin it is dark, with the sound of breath and the bump of elbows and knees, and the red dots flickering and flying like tiny infra-red cosmonauts, and is that light coming through the joints of the box because it may be daytime outside, or most likely, it is the streetlight coming through the windows and into the room where the coffins sit. In the dark, there are cracks of light, and maybe they'd never think to look for her there, but the orange light comes through, and no seal is ever tight enough, and they could smell like dogs, and there she is with breath and body and the odor of living.

Marie hears the scratching of nails, moving into timber, and she presses to arch her back, her spine against a space never quite tight enough, and from somewhere inside or outside, she hears herself moan.

There was a room, and in it sat two people. They were seated on thickly upholstered chairs from another century, wood carved with care, backs tall and erect. The room itself was textured with fabric, and the ceilings were high. Books lined the shelves with discussions on the natural sciences, the make-up of the human body, the revolution and rotation of the earth. It was a room of grandeur that I can only imagine as I have never seen such a space in real life. It was something akin to the rooms one might find in the châteaux of the Loire Valley during the height of the French Renaissance. The room belonged to the man.

The man asked if she would like some warm wine, but Marie said no. There was something else that she wanted. Neither spoke for a moment, as if assessing the situation, considering the negotiations of trade.

They looked at each other, and it was evident that Marie was an experiment, a Petri-dish that he wished to hover over, to see if indeed there could grow such a thing as a woman's soul, to see with his very own eyes and make certain. He leaned toward her, and Marie thought that if he asked, she couldn't easily tell him the truth.

But that was lifetimes ago.

At the house, Marie sits on the porch, and the man plays a banjo. They are near the lake and a wet yellow dog comes running up to her. It is not like the time the dog came running and smelled like something dead, and it grinned and rubbed itself on her legs with affection and adoration, and Marie led it to the hose and washed the remains off the dog. This time is not unlike that time, but the dog does not carry the dead, and the three sit on the porch. All in all, it is lovely because the air is golden, and the sun is setting, the dog at her feet and the man beside her, and the music is lingering over nerves and in the bones of the ear, and yes they are alive. "Except none of this is true," says Marie. "I made it all up."

It seems that I have known Marie forever, and though she is much older than I am, I remember what it was like when she was young, and she walked along a garden path, and the young man swore that his heart bled for her, and he cut open his palm, as if it could prove such a thing, and he waited and waited—three whole days, but Marie never could return the gesture.

"If only I did," Marie thinks, as if it could have proved any such thing, as if any such thing could matter, then or now, after all these years. She closed up her fists and wondered if they were tight enough.

At night, Marie hears the vampires come asking for her blood, as if all the gods suffer because they too live heartbroken.

The Gospel According to Mary

"A person sees neither through the soul nor the spirit. The mind, which lives between the two, sees the vision."

"Where the mind is, there is the treasure."

Here lies a history of gardens, and Marie swears that she was the first to arrive, but so does everyone else, and the proof is not in this pudding, for none of these gardens are the kind that imply a gardener

who planted and ordered, structured a greenery with mind to light, wind, or drainage. These are not English gardens with systems of aesthetic, pathways of stone or brick, reflecting pools with benches aiming views toward waters mirroring the self or just the light of the sun. Instead, the gardens just grow, random, haphazard, exquisite in their disarray, and, as no one standing could take credit for the creative cultivation and horticulture, the matter of who arrived first is a matter of he said, she said. The others in the gardens, men and women, shamans and priests, scholars and carpenters, soldiers, prostitutes, and politicians, argue all the arguments, make claims on all the who, what, and whys of existence, but Marie lets the issue go; she chalks it up to the unknown, to mystery, that which registers in our minds as chaos, and we are back to the beginning. Chance, chaos, mystery—in other words, the inexplicable.

Though who wouldn't like to open that treasure chest of knowledge buried somewhere among the trees? Many indeed, including Marie who would have sold her soul, though not to the devil, for that kind of clarity and sense and, if what they say is true about origins, for that kind of love. What she would have given to make this exchange, but the only one suited for this commerce was another woman. But this woman, whose name was Sophia, was not selling.

Sophia, the enchantress, sister to Daphne who escapes our grip, though our fingers may touch the bare skin of her shoulder; her skin is soft, her features delicate. She is swift like the hare, and we are huntresses all.

I had a glimpse of her once and fell madly in love in the Chicago streets. Afterwards, I fantasized about making love to her, penetrating her and pushing myself further and further inside her. I dreamt of becoming her. I wondered what it would be like to be adored the way she is adored, to be chased, to be looked at with longing the way Marie looks at her when they are alone, because, if you haven't guessed already, Marie was the first to get close, and perhaps she got closer than anybody else. She ran faster than she ever thought she could, her fingers scraped a wrist, reached for an ankle and missed, grazed the small of the back, then, with another leap, quicker than any other Marie has taken, she sprang forward, her fingers taking hold of the nape of the neck, and Marie bit down as if Sophia's throat were a throbbing fruit of perfect

ripeness. Because, if you haven't figured out already, Marie has always been a vampire.

Tonight, as I lie awake and think of Sophia and all the men I could have been, I'd say that I want her to fuck my brains out because what I really want is to be consumed by her, and it occurs to me that perhaps the one I really love, above all others, is Marie. It's an archetypal fantasy—to be hounded by the insatiable appetite of the vampire.

But, a love bite from Marie was not enough to fell Sophia. She was something much larger, much stronger than Daphne's laurel tree. Sophia was the whole of the forest where you might raise an ax and drag out a birch but where you also just might lose yourself. And if you were lost under the leafy canopy, with the sun dropped behind this cloud or that, or if it were night with only a hazy moon, and there you were, stumbling and confused in your momentary loss of direction, you may worry that you will not find some clearing soon enough, that there is no place to rest in the security that comes from an open sky. It will be then that the wolf will find you, and you will find yourself devoured at last.

My Everlasting Werewolf Nights

Time is cyclical, witchy sisters say amongst themselves, as if to cast a spell and make it true. The three are crones. Past maidenhood and motherhood, they share a disease of womb and blood and bleed only into themselves. They are always at the edge of the forest; they feed the wolf and cover Sophia in her sleep.

I suspect she is the only one who can sleep. The sisters keep watch, and Marie lies quietly and still in a coffin, hoping for an invitation, and perhaps for forgiveness as well. I myself lie restless with visions of men, a farm, and a lake, a dog running. I can almost remember who I used to be, and it is always a man—the man who put yellow roses on his wife's funeral casket; the lid closed tightly, and if the box allowed any light to pass through, he never knew. The ground dropped over her, and he never saw her again, though he dreamt of her once, once when he put a rose on her casket, and the lid was already closed tight, much too tightly, and there is blood under my fingernails from scratching at one side of the lid or the other.

There are two sides of man, the crones whisper while the werewolf howls. There are silver bullets under my bed, though I have never fired

any. I pull one from the box and finger and smudge the metal. There is a glimmer of reflection, and I place it on my naked chest.

I go back in time, and I am a man farming a crop that is not my own, and I am covered in mud. My son scrubs and scratches the dirt from my back. He is my only son, and there are no women here. I lie on the ground with my arms outstretched. I am not a good father, and I wonder if my son knows.

At night, I am the werewolf racing through the woods after the rabbit who becomes the girl. I catch her by the throat with claws and hands, and suddenly, I cannot breathe. I fuck her anyway.

I go back in time. I am in the garden, and I see Marie come out of the tent at dusk. The others are the vampires, and they want our blood, though that isn't exactly the point we try to argue. They do not listen, and I finger and smudge a silver coin in my hand.

But, because the question of origin is never ending, we can go back even further, back to one night when the moon was hazy and I ran through the woods, dirt under my toenails. I sniffed the air and the rabbit was out. A man pushed himself inside a sister. The rabbit ran, and the dog chased her, but I was the bigger wolf. The sister got up, leaving the man in the room, and went outside with blood on her thigh. I smelled it dripping down her leg. The tops of the trees creaked in the wind, and I ran over wet moss and scratched my arms on twigs and bark. I ran until I finally found the clearing and the gardens of flowers, and there was Marie, her lips touching Sophia's face and her hands cradling her head. How much love can be buried away? I, too, wanted to taste the pulp beneath Sophia's skin. I, too, wanted to know what was just below the surface, below breath and heartbeat. I, too, wanted to feel something kept warm and secure.

The Gospel According to Judas

"You will become the thirteenth, and you will be cursed by other generations."

"But you will surpass all of them, for you will sacrifice the man who bears me."

We can't have Sophia, so the vampires feast on the body and blood of another. The man moans softly, deliriously, and Sophia, that forest-that-can't-be-seen-for-all-of-the-trees goddess, returns to her perch like

a ripened pear, and I am lost with Marie in the woods. We try to conjure the sensation of sweetness at the tips of our tongues, but mostly we fail. Most skin, after all, tastes merely of sweat and salt, and our memories get in the way. I imagine the lithe flawless body of Sophia, but the feel of stubble and the slow breath of a man replaces her just as quickly, though this isn't to say that there isn't some kind of pleasure here. One phantom replaces another, but while bearded men are freely given, Sophia is always locked up tightly.

Marie goes to the garden, and the vampires hound her because she is a woman and not a man, because she is a vampire of a different kind, and the throat she bit was not the right throat, not at all. "You're going about it all wrong," they say. "It's all your fault—this something—this 'this and that.'" But she'll have none of it. With witchy sisters, Marie sets sail, finding herself in what would become a land of castles and grapevines, where several French kings ride horses whose hooves prance over a green terrain rolling with bright red poppies.

In that other life, I kissed the first man who mattered, and I am haunted by him still. I run through the woods after Marie after Sophia, but he trails behind me and bullets fly. If only I could turn around and take him by the throat, if he would fuck my brains out, and then I'd become him, know what he knows, but behind him, the vampires chase, lost and confused, but always trying to sniff out the trail in the late, late hours of night, stumbling through allies, seated on bar stools, or sometimes, even in the midst of day as they wait in line for tickets to the show or to pay for a gallon of milk. So, I dodge silver, desiring to turn and face him, to choke something away, something like this 'this or that,' something that I just can't say because that reason doesn't matter, and yes, a body does matter, and the vampires might be right, and maybe that is the point after all.

Instead, I find a girl who might be Marie though there is nothing that I can see clearly now. I strangle her tight as a noose around the neck. I envision the act of self-destruction before I am delirious, and yes, there is some kind of pleasure here.

The Curse and Blessing of the Whole of Memory

But I am not Judas Iscariot. I am not a man at all, though slippery thoughts and images come to mind in sleepless nights. "Memory is not

memory but the imagination” is what they say these days, though, say what you will, I remember what I remember. There was a mother pregnant in an unmade bed, and soon there were sisters who drank too much and laughed when young men said they’d bleed for them because nobody bleeds for anybody, but then they grew up and learned that life was something different.

But Marie is still Marie, a vampire exiled by the others, and at night she comes to me. She tells lullabies from long ago, about those early loves—Sophia and the man in the garden who did indeed bleed for her, but she was young and selfish and stupid and certainly never deserved any such thing. They are ghosts to her now, and she is merely the undead, concrete and finite, but she can remember it all from her very first moment onward. She tells all of it to me late in the evenings, and we go back in time.

So, I tell her a story of my own. There is a man who lives along the lake and a yellow dog and the music from the porch lingers over nerves and in the bones of the ear, and I say this and make all of it true. His skin tastes like salt and sweat and nothing like a peach, but I press my teeth into it nonetheless, hoping that one of us can always remember this time on the porch with music and dog, with lips on pulse, all of it happening soon.

And this must be some kind of love story, I say, because I realize standing in this kitchen near a lake, I’d cut open a hand with a paring knife if any such thing could matter, though perhaps it doesn’t, not for Sophia or the man I kissed in the garden because blood is just blood and only finite in measure, and there are so many different kinds of love—so Marie, open your fists because you can never close them up tight enough, and, just in case, just in case it matters at all, we’ll stand and face each other, bloody palm to bloody palm.

DERIVATIVES

TARA SKURTU

Romania, 2013-14

I.

It's fall today, was winter last week.
I was happier then, the lined mounds

of raked earth, the potatoes dug up.
In the summer kitchen, a fly zips

into the flytrap. Its body puttied
to the glue strip, legs waving

like six wet strokes of black ink.

In a park by the city wall, you search
out a green-gold leaf in the grass,

unzip my breast pocket, insert
the stem as it starts to rain.

*

*This is the park where new lovers
come to walk*, says a passerby.

This is the park of my childhood,
you tell me in the back of a taxi,

pointing at the green blurring
through the triangular glass.

Love no far, poetry no far,
says the taxi driver two weeks from now.

Fingered into the sidewalk
in a Union Square on the other side

of the world, *I loe you*.

*

You told me you wanted to change
the title of my poem from “Desire”

to “Need.” We walked to Cinema City.
You pointed out the neighborhood

cemetery, and I climbed the stone wall
to peek over red-lit rows of glass

rooms and graves. When I reached
the ledge, it crumbled in my grip.

*

—But that poem wasn’t about
you. Desire, a blind spot

supplying the vessels of mind
and sight a peripheral view,

and need, this preverbal lump
of a poem I try to unstick,

to unravel while I walk before
the rain to be rained on, thinking

about the Lermontov pin
you never take off, and how

the dueler either shoots up
in the air and gets shot,

or, in the name of honor
or love or spite, aims

for the opponent's left lung.

*

Pushkin never learned, Lermontov
never learned, that the thing to do

is avoid the duel altogether.
I'd quote Pushkin, but I can read

him only in translation:
I want to understand you,

I study your obscure language.
You're so selfish with your fear—

you say man, to thrive, must fall
into a vacuum, must be a bird

inside a vacuum. I've lost
your guilt, and I want it back.

*

I couldn't unstick the poem
on my walk in the rain, but when

I reached the market in Berceni,
the curbside cabbages calmed me.

Crenellated pyramids of cabbage,
spring green and veined, each head

stabilizing at least several other heads
like a network of humming, healthy

minds, and the waxy squeak of one
pulled apart from the rest.

*

My last night in Bucharest, I leave
the subtitles off. Today I learned

that a baby bird in the care of
human hands needs one worm

per hour. There's a couple
on the TV, naked, in the woods.

The man turns his back to the camera
and urinates into his cupped hands,

shows the woman how to survive
a little longer without water.

*

After our embrace in the hotel
lobby, Lermontov leapt

from your lapel and landed face down
on the pink marble. His copper nose

wobbled like a top between
my suitcase and us. You said,

He did it because of the emotion.

We made sure he wasn't damaged,
then you pinned him back.

I thought he did it in the name of
an untranslatable word.

*

The news says today is the last day
of spring weather for the year.

Yesterday the moon was out all day
and no one seemed to notice.

I open the dictionary and look up
the word *dictionary*, again—

The poet is a limit, you said.
I thought you were talking calculus:

love, no far: poetry, no far.

II.

Late October, you lay beside me
and I stared at the evil eye

hanging from the bookshelf.
I began to draw it in my notebook—

noted in black what should have been
primary blue, white, baby blue—

and you crossed your legs, your knee
blocking the pupil from my view.

*

Over coffee, I show you how to discover
your dominant eye. All you need

is a sheet of paper with a hole
the size of a pencil eraser.

I hold it in front of you
at arm's length, tell you to look

through, focus on one object
in the near distance. *Close first*

your right eye, then your left.
You don't see a thing.

*

All night you transcribe poems
in the corner bedroom, the door

closed. After ten, I take
a walk down Strada Moldovița.

Two churches beside each
other at the end of the street—

one orthodox, a single wooden
cupola, an open gate. The other

evangelical—brick, boarded up,
covered in scaffolding, Xs

in the arches of the bell towers.
On a park bench, I listen

to the strays of Bucharest
calling out, responding—

the only English I hear, in my head.

*

*This feeling continually approaches
a given word, but doesn't*

meet it at any finite distance.

*

Ultimately you will leave, you said.

*

Last night you edited translations.
You wrote the French word

DERIVATIVES

for love instead of death, realized
your mistake, shook your head.

*

The flower pot at your door, full
of dirt and sticks. In your bed

I fold a piece of paper in half,
half, in half again. I cut a crescent

fractal, craft a snowflake
flower, give it the tallest twig

for a stem and stick it in the dirt. It lasts
the night, goes missing by morning.

III.

You gave me three Romanian words
for love, two for missing.

On the train at dusk, I rearrange
magazine cutouts of clauses—

sunt mai aproape, I am
closer; *mai bine să nu*, better

not to—I don't know how
to make a complete sentence.

*

Outside the window, the late summer
corn is beginning to crisp, each

sunflower bent like a burnt match.
Crows scribbling indecipherable

signatures around the crops, around
the stork's nest on the power lines.

I pick one, follow it like one blade
of a ceiling fan until I blink

and it blurs, becomes many crows.

*

In Braşov, a student brings up images.
Why don't you write about emotions?

Perhaps I'm the squirrel that runs
three quarters of the way across the road.

*

*How do you define “emotional damages”
so I know how to answer the question?*

*

Between villages, five old women sit
side by side beside the paved road, each

selling the same pile of curled yellow fungus.
How would I make the right choice?

From Sibiu to Braşov to Bucharest, memory
out-faiths my will to forget.

Between Bucharest and Braşov, I remember
last night’s dream—I sent

you to the hospital. You were allergic
to the food my mother fed you.

*

Some people need their mothers.
Ştefan told me about a Romanian poet

who, after losing his, wedged the butt
of a blade into a wall, and with open

arms, thrust his chest into it over,
over, until he made an object of his body.

When you were a boy, your mother prepared
daily for her funeral. But today is a good day.

*There are no waves. There are only dolphins
in the Black Sea. You give her a hand-*

carved cutting board, and she prepares
a feast for us, shows me black

and white baby pictures of you,
and later, your head in my lap.

*

In bed you once remembered the feeling
of a verse in German, but couldn't explain

it in English. I'd dreamt you and I were beginning
a three-legged race on the shore. Hundreds

of rubber bands rained down at our feet,
and I turned to you and said, *God is good to us.*

*

Now my mind does nothing with the hour, says
I must make use of these thoughts of you,

which is like trying to understand a poem—

*

*How do you define the question
so I know how to question the damages?*

*

Some people have birds in their heads,
but you have every single bird in

the world swirling in yours. A love-
bird nudges himself between

my breasts tonight, stays while I change
the bed sheets, have a coffee, then

another. Now he's asleep, his beak
still, his quick pulse quicker than mine.

*

Self-perception, cognitive dissonance,
the idea that a behavior can change

a thought. I think of you.

Self-Perception Theory, Cognitive
Dissonance Theory, the belief

that thoughts migrate toward
an action, behavior will change

my thoughts. I'm not thinking

of you. I've decided to leave
the bird in my shirt.

*

I press the nib, I push out words—
place words, blank words.

*Don't forget to smile across
the ocean* is what you wrote—

but the page can't strip
its cotton ribs of ink,

and between two plates
of glass above my bed,

the green-gold leaf is brown.



Listen to Tara Skurtu read “Derivatives” on TLR’s SoundCloud page.

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Studio Center.

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ABOUT TLR

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

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

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

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

TLR will offer both payment and exposure to our contributors by using a substantial portion of our total income to support our authors. Payment for fiction ranges from a minimum of \$50 to \$300. Payment for poetry and cover art is \$25 to \$50. The amount is determined by the rev-

venues received from submission fees, print journal sales and contributions from sources such as donors and foundations. To ensure transparency and fairness, we will publish an audited quarterly revenue statement to verify the funds received for the submission period.

Even if a submission is not accepted for publication, submitters get value for their fees. Their payment gives them access to our Endnotes area, which features artist interviews, writing advice from experts, and more. Supporters (donors and print subscribers) also have access to this area.

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

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In This Issue:

POETRY

Heather Altfeld

Ronda Broatch

Nickole Brown

Marcus Clayton

Monic Ductan

Arian Katsimbras

Michael Lauchlan

Tara Skurtu

FICTION

John Brantingham

Dani Burlison

Stefanie Freele

Heather Momyer

Lilliam Rivera

Lynda Sexson

Stefen Styrsky

NONFICTION

Linda Michel-Cassidy

Laura Kendall

Shane Pekny

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