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Andrew Gibeley

Quietus

The night before we unplugged you
we ate burritos and accidentally entered
a Petco before buying a large white
poster board to collage your life's photos
upon for everyone to enjoy at the
post-funeral luncheon on Friday

We visited you one last morning
and there were air-pumped plastic sheets
like pool rafts along your hairless legs
which I pressed down with my fingers
so your frail, pale skin was unexposed
to the elements of the ICU, which smelled
raw and stale and sounded silent

The nurse told us it could take hours
or even a day or two since you still
breathed on your own a bit over the
ventilator tubed down your throat
but you died within minutes before all
our crying eyes, choking viciously
on your final gasps of air, then nothing

That night the summer sky erupted
thunder storming all around us while we
drove through the dark in the downpour
to pick up our 9:30 pizza and white wine
as your umbrella broke in my hands
and your body lay idle in the morgue
waiting out the lightning like us

Arja Kumar

Indigo

Solstice is cruel—
fog and dead grass,
dead town, those sleepy spirits
noosed by telephone lines,
dark snow showers,
silent question, no answer indigo skies,
where the lamplights by that small
frozen pond burn orange and we
walk by the edges in the cold holding
each other's shadows.
He tasted like cancer
and I close my eyes
tracing his soul with stardust fingers smooth edges of the universe,
vein rivers down spine and bone,
mountains of mortal.
I dream him closer
until the nausea drowns.
He is always ill with something—
Sanatoria
Philosophia
Pneumonia.
My ankles lay heavy on
his conscience,
the hollow I
try to fill.
How much more
can you wring
death from the jaws
and hands of a phantom?

Peek of sun just once
please come.
Life, please don't fantasize an adoration
after teasing me with the grieving.
Please bless me with another tempest.
Good grief,
I could've been some mediocre philosopher,

if you just told me instead.

I piece off my clothes again
and lay naked under the heavy blanket
or weight of fate,
those cosmic hands that made
me.

I wish all ghosts understood
Solstice like this.

Breanna Leslie

1961

1961

Every day in Miriam Ford's life is the same. Or at least it has been since she married Hank at the tender age nineteen. Sure, they've added a couple babies since then, which livened things for a bit. First came Jimmy, then Ethel three years later. Still, each day is the same.

Get up
Breakfast
Pack the lunches
Kiss the husband
Goodbye
Wash
Scrub
Lunch
Scrub
Wash
Dinner
Wash
Goodnight

And repeat. Of course, Ethel offers up some rogue diaper changes and atomic tantrums to liven up the day. It's exciting enough for the average housewife. Miriam's life is "fulfilled" in the words of her mother-in-law.

Miriam's mother would agree, too. Hank scooped her up from that holler in West Virginia and carried her off to the suburbs of D.C. where he works for the Federal Narcotics Board, cleaning up the streets and taking care of that reefer madness. Yes, she has a husband that supports her, two beautiful children, and a sparkly new laundry room. What more could a girl of her standing ask for?

A life of her own, that's what.

See, Hank is a misogynistic dunce that kindly ushers Miriam back to the kitchen when she has any thought that pushes the realms of critical or abstract. He wants her neat, pretty, and in an apron.

It's a growing pandemic, at least in Miriam's eyes, who's used to seeing women take on a more active role from her deep Appalachian upbringing. Down the street Beatrice, Penny, Susie, and Rose all complain of the same monotonous frustration day in and day out. Motherhood is hard but being a mother while cramming all free thought into a quiet little hatbox while one's husband holds the lock and key is excruciating.

That's why Miriam pays for a discreet nanny one day a week to watch Ethel while she drives back to her holler. Her particular region of West Virginia, where the sun barely peers down over the mountains, is like traveling back in time a decade.

Her granny, lovingly referred to as the town "granny witch," grows a special supply that the housewives on Lexington Boulevard clamber after, kitchen aprons blowing in the wind and bobby pins flying. With one relaxing two-hour drive there and a two-hour drive back, Miriam has secured enough green to keep the neighborhood wives from drowning in their boring lives for another week.

She's the head wife in this suburbia and she learned the game from her great uncles that used to run moonshine during prohibition. She could run that too, but the other wives have plenty of liquor hidden in their China cabinets as it is. No, she has her crop that never leaves a wife too groggy to care for the casserole in the oven.

Most of the husbands are too dense to suspect anyway. Bloodshot eyes are nothing for a woman society has already deemed hysterical. The men assume their wives have been crying over her dry pot roast and move on. Each and every one.

Except for Hank.

That's why Miriam always keeps her personal product tucked away in the root cellar, behind the beans, carrots, and potatoes. Hank wouldn't be caught dead cooking, so it's a safe enough spot. Though he has smelled the aroma a time or two, and Miriam has been able to write it off as an oriental spice that Susie passed along from her mother's old collection. Hank is bad at his job really.

He comes in, smug and gloating about breaking up some country boy's operation or raiding a record store on the wrong side of town. None of those people are hurting anything. No one is giving out joints to school children and teaching them to worship Satan. Miriam grows more resentful with each cackle and "you should've seen them run" story.

But nothing changes and each day runs into the next. At least with her side business, it's a little less painful.

Get up
Breakfast
Pack the lunches
Kiss the husband
Goodbye
Inhale, exhale
Wash
Scrub
Lunch
Inhale, exhale
Scrub
Wash

Dinner
Wash
Goodnight

1963

Not much has changed in terms of business, aside from the new additions of Celia, Ann, and Sarah to the circle. The wives have collectively built a successful "book club" that gathers at Ann's house on Thursdays. They sit in a circle and read the most progressive and enlightening works. Ann has no children and her husband works evenings. Ann is an integral part of Miriam's operation.

With the establishment of their weekly meetings, Miriam has doubled her revenue, which she stows away in a loose floorboard under her bed. No one touches the money unless she or the children need something that Hank would deem unnecessary or less important than his new golf clubs. Of course, Miriam treats herself to weekly salon visits on the down low, but she works hard for her children and unappreciative husband. It's justified.

Marriage is harder than motherhood at this point and Miriam has caught Hank with his secretary three times. She let it go the first and second time, on account of her own dirty secret. Best not to poke the sleeping bear after all, but this last time the conversation became heated. Too heated for her comfort.

Thursday Morning

"Earth to Miriam? You okay, honey?" Ann beckons a response. Miriam often drifts off in thought. She has too many, after all.

"Yeah, sorry. I was thinking about how Hank was rummaging through the kitchen cabinets last night. He said he was looking for a tonic for a stomachache." Miriam takes a long drag from her cigarette and taps her fingers on the laminate tabletop.

"And you don't buy it?"

"Of course not. That man has never looked for anything on his own since we've been married. It's always, 'Midge can you grab my keys? Can you find my shirt?'"

"Do you think he suspects?" Ann's face, framed in cat-eye spectacles, is long and questioning.

"I think I pressed him too hard after I caught him with that Jezebel at the office this last time. He's probably trying to find a way to blame me for a divorce if he files."

Both women sit in silence, taking puffs between anxious glances. If Miriam gets caught, there will be devastating consequences for both. Ann's hands are splattered with guilt, from her weekly meetings at her own home to her signed bank checks to Miriam. If someone looks hard enough, there will be enough to cause trouble. Enough trouble to take Miriam's children away. "So, what do we do?" Ann clasps her hands, rings on every finger, in front of her on the table, leaning down to meet Miriam's drooping eyes.

"I have to find out how much he knows and go from there. If it's too much, I have means to take care of him back in West Virginia." Miriam doesn't have a concrete plan, only the knowledge that hogs can consume a body before anyone will come looking for it.

"And you'll let me help, Miriam. Don't even debate it. You're doing a good thing for us here. I won't let you be swallowed up by his patriarchal chess game."

"Don't worry, I ain't getting swallowed up by nothing. Not on his accord." Both women tap out their cigarettes and resolve to protect what they've built. Come Hell or high water.

Thursday Night

Miriam sloshes in her frothy bubble bath, cucumber face mask cooling her stress away. Hank missed dinner. He does that often but says he can't help his work. Miriam knows his "work" wears a pencil skirt and writes in shorthand.

The soft rattle of the furnace is welcome tonight. No other sounds clawing at the bathroom door means both children are fast asleep, and Miriam finally has an hour to herself. She takes a sip of wine from the side table where a flickering lavender candle rests.

If every night could be like this, maybe she'd stop selling. But that's a pipe dream.

Miriam's silk nightgown slides down over her skin, still fresh with the almond scent of her lotion. She throws on her housecoat to make the walk down the long, dark hallway lined with sleek windows on either side, a modern touch she welcomed when she moved from her parent's dusty farmhouse. Light peeks out from her cracked bedroom door and her cheeks burn upon realizing Hank arrived home and went to bed without speaking to her. After everything he's done lately, she deserves even the most basic courtesy.

She inches the door open, but a violent slap twists her head to the left, leaving her deaf to the world for a second, or maybe ten. She cowers on the desk chair, clasping her throbbing cheek. "What the hell?"

"What the hell is this, Miriam?" Hank holds a Mason jar within an inch of her face, his hand trembling. She lifts her gaze to meet his eyes and takes note of the beads of sweat adorning his wrinkled brow and the bulging veins in his neck. She's never seen him like this, hyped up on who knows what. Maybe he's just thrilled to have a reason to be rid of her.

"If you don't know what that is, I suppose you're worse at your job than I realized. Maybe if you paid attention in meetings instead of meeting that hussy secretary in the broom closet, you would have earned that last promotion." She musters a smirk to accent her deep-seated disgust. Hank slams her petite frame against a nearby bookshelf, knocking the wind from her lungs and bruising ribs. She lets out a deep groan and collapses onto the bedroom floor, clasping her aching side.

"I ought to just kill, you know. Save myself from my subpar wife. Sheila is a real mom. She'd cook circles around your rancid meatloaf." Hank laughs to himself as he strikes a match to light the cigar perched between his lips. He crosses the room to the nightstand where he picks up

a heavy glass ashtray. He tosses it between his hands like a baseball. A wretched smile spreads across his vile face.

Miriam pulls her knees underneath her deflated body and watches Hank turn away from her, still holding the ashtray. Thinking. Gauging its weight. Her adrenaline races and she crawls to the bed where she hides a pistol wedged in the slats of the frame.

Time freezes, but she pulls the hammer back and fires faster than he can deliver the skull-crushing blow. The rest is a blur, but Miriam quickly finds herself with rubber gloves and bleach, dialing Ann to come watch her children.

In a distraught frenzy, she managed to clean up the mess and heave Hank into the trunk of her Chevy. By some miracle, neither Jimmy nor Ethel woke up, despite the racket.

"What did the bastard do?" Ann takes a drag on her cigarette, shaking her head at the scene in the trunk.

"He tried to kill me, that's what the bastard did. He found my stash and came within inches of smashing my head in with a freaking ashtray!"

That would be the day. The day he kills me and lets some pretend wife play mommy to my kids." Both women stare down at the body wrapped in floral sheets. Any mother knows how to clean up the mess, but those cotton sheets are a loss.

Ann gives Miriam a long sorrowful hug before slipping into the house to sit with the sleeping children and Miriam takes a deep breath as she turns the ignition. Two hours and she'll wash her hands of this mess. She'll wash her hands of her toxic, idiot of a husband and cross her fingers that none of this comes out.

Tomorrow, she'll file a missing person report. Of course, she'll have to let it be known he had a serious girlfriend on the side, to throw off suspicions and such.

Two hours. Two hours into the safety of the mountains.

Eight Months Later

"Can you hand me that floral wire, Ethel?"

"Here you go, Mommy." The giggly blonde-haired girl nestles into her mother's apron, and Miriam gives her curls a pat.

"It's a beautiful place you have here. I can't thank you enough for giving us something to work towards," says Ann as she carries a fresh crate of blooming peonies to the counter.

"Well, you know, all in a mother's day's work." Miriam grins as she takes the shipment for bundling and sale at the local farmer's market. She's managed to build a budding flower business from the sale of Hank's investments. She's still his wife on paper, even if he did run off with one of his no-count hussies.

She employs several of the wives on Lexington Boulevard, giving them time away from the house and spending money of their own. She has goals, dreams, and industrial grow lights in her basement. But no nosy husband waiting to crush her goals or third-quarter sales.

All in a day of the life of a mother.

Brian Rihlmann

Preparation for Adulthood

I hear it when I walk in
and as I round a corner
I see the source—

he sits in the basket
of the shopping cart
about two years old
screaming
while dad pushes
and mom inspects the fruit

their jaws are set
their eyes trained elsewhere
statues of stoicism

as I approach
I see his little face
reddened cheeks
shiny with tears

and as I whisper
“poor little guy”
a single
powerful sob
wells up
and shakes me

the screams
don’t even bother me—
I wanna hug that kid

but what do I know
about being a parent?

maybe letting him
cry it out
is best, you know?

after all
how many of us wind up
in that same situation…
sitting alone in a room
cold as the metal cage
of a shopping cart

with a bottle
or without one
or pills
pipes
needles…

surrogate family
on the tube
virtual lovers
on the computer

except we don’t scream anymore
because no one will hear
and no one will come

and we’re used to that

Carl Parsons

The Postmistress

1.

The Ohio River makes its long descent from Pittsburgh more or less to the southwest. But at Locust Hill, West Virginia, it encounters a steep embankment—a series of cliffs, really—that forces the river to bend toward the west before it again finds its way south. The inhabitants of that spot call it Zion Ridge, though mostly by that name they mean just the rolling hills at the tops of the cliffs, the places where they live.

So steep and densely forested are Zion Ridge's cliff sides that no one has ever attempted to farm them or graze their livestock there, for even goats and sheep find the terrain difficult. And while many families have owned parcels of that land since their forefathers first wrenched them from the Shawnees, the cliffs themselves remain wild.

Atop Zion Ridge lie its scattered farms—some devoted to dairy, some to corn, but most to seasonal produce. Many of the fields are without houses since the holdings are often scattered, the fields of one family separated from their homestead by the fields of their neighbors.

In this rural setting, a scandal once developed and persisted for many years. It involved the postmistress, Livia Perkins, a wildcat of a woman, and her man, Harvey Satterfield, an amiable, ruddy-faced construction worker, whose family had lived on the ridge longer than anyone could remember. Despite Livia's temperament and facility with profanity, she was authorized by the United States Postal Service to manage its Zion Ridge facility. The USPS even allowed Zion Ridge its own address, separate from that of the nearby Locust Hill office, and produced a rubber stamp with which Livia could duly authorize that posts sent from her parlor truly came from Zion Ridge.

For that is where the Zion Ridge Post Office was located—in the front room of Livia's farmhouse with its worn wooden floor, divided lengthwise by a long table separating the work area from the narrow reception room and its coal-burning fireplace. On that table, from the patrons' vantage point, sat a tall wooden wall that presented them a set of poster boards framed in walnut on which Livia duly placed the regulations of the Postal Service along with the FBI's "Wanted Posters." Between two of these poster boards was a grill through which Livia could greet her patrons and hand them their mail and stamps. For larger packages, the patrons simply walked to the far end of the table, which did not extend to the room's rear wall. Thus, the wooden wall that greeted the patrons was something of a sham.

On the work side of the table, however, the wooden assembly consisted of a set of pigeonholes with the names of Zion Ridge's residents on labels thumbtacked below their assigned slots according to their addresses. Those who preferred to pick up their own mail had red labels; those who relied on the postal carrier, white. Livia sorted the mail into these slots each morning before the postal carrier arrived. She then helped him load his truck for the day's deliveries, gave him instructions about any packages to be delivered and sent him on his way by 8:00 AM.

While there was rarely a complaint from the patrons about their postal service, there was in time, an accretion of heated opinions, volcanic at time, about its postmistress, her man, and their affair.

2.

"Dammit, Liv, why not? After all this time! Don't you love me anymore?"

This was Harvey's perennial question to Livia, asked in a plaintive, almost whining tone. His proposals broke ground, grew, and bloomed about every six months, especially when he'd been away for weeks at some construction site, driving rivets into steel plates. The proposals were sown by loneliness and self-contempt, but also by genuine love and concern for Livia's reputation, which Harvey couldn't quite concede had been compromised long ago by their romance.

"Of course, I love you, but that don't matter. I'm not goin' to marry you. We've had twenty-one good years together, so why mess it all up now with a piece of paper that don't mean nothin' no how. Just causes trouble, if you ask me. And you're just doin' this cause of what people say. To hell with what they say! That shouldn't matter to us. We're together like we want to be and that's enough." Livia never in these arguments allowed for the possibility that Harvey might truly want to marry her.

So, this was the same answer, the same pruning back of the same withering rose, only to have it bloom again in a new season of shame. They would love, he would feel remorse for having taken advantage of her, he would propose again, she would say no again, and then they would argue again, just as they were doing now. Afterwards, he would go away, feeling hurt and rejected. Then he'd be back with gifts and sweet words. And she would welcome him—and the gifts—with love and late dinners. They would drive into town daily. As they went, people would see them and gossip. He would hear their calumny, repeated quite often by his own family, and feel once again the piercing guilt they intended him to feel. Then he'd propose again—the only way he believed to end the cycle. For twenty-one years he had proposed. The whole process was just as lovely and satisfying to Livia now as it had been when it first began. But for Harvey it was just as frustrating and damning.

"No roses without some thorns," she'd tell him as he moped, flopped down in his recliner, pretending to read the Parkeston Morning News. She would rock with her Chihuahua in her lap, a dog he'd given her after one of their quarrels, and she'd stare at him, smiling when he'd look her way over the top of his newspaper. Soon his hurt would soften enough for him to speak again. He's just noticed something in the paper they should investigate in town. Yes, now, this afternoon, since the post office is closed. Some items on sale downtown—Parkeston's Old Fashioned Bargain Days, in fact. Store clerks in costumes. They'd already missed the morning parade, but still they should go and see the town pretending to be what it once was and never will be again. She'd agree. Then satisfied for the moment that he was truly loved, Harvey would scan the rest of the newspaper, always looking for items that might interest his Liv.

3.

Every Wednesday morning the most devout and earnest women of the Zion Ridge Temple of Mercy would set aside their farm and household chores to clean the church and prepare it for the Wednesday night service. While removing their cleaning equipment from the utility closet in the church's basement-fellowship hall, they would gossip.

They'd haul pails and brooms, polishes and polishing rags, dust mops and an old Electrolux sweeper with a friction tape patch on its electrical cord up the church's narrow stairs. As they ascended, they'd pulled themselves along by clutching the black galvanized pipe that served as a handrail. Their weekly goal was to make the interior of the aging church as clean and attractive as it was capable of being; responsibility for the church's exterior they gladly conceded to their men.

But as they swept and dusted and polished, one constant thought galled them—just down the road, within plain sight of the church—was a den of promiscuity. And no amount of polishing had yet erased that blemish from their community. To make matters worse, the sordid hands of the fallen woman living there daily touched their letters and packages—items that came into their very homes and might even be touched by their children! Moreover, it was into this house of evil that they had to go to conduct their own postal transactions!

As they cleaned and dusted in small clutches, they spoke of this problem in increasingly hostile tones.

"Something must be done about her?" said one.

"Who?" asked the other.

"You know very well who—that Livia just down the road from here—that's who!"

"Well, I agree, but what can we do?"

"Not we. I think that Preacher must do it. It's gone on long enough. I'm surprised he hasn't been willing to take on the job by now."

"I think all the men are afraid of her, if you want to know the truth."

"Or agree with her way of thinkin' about things," offered a third lady who had overheard the other two and now joined them. "I'll tell you what I think," she went on. "I think we need to have Preacher's wife talk for us. She can let him know just how we feel and that we've put up with this all we're goin' to. Don't you think I'm right?"

"You're so right," said the first. "Fact, I'm goin' downstairs right now and talk to Susan Whitlatch. You just watch me!"

4.

But among the men of Zion Ridge there was great respect for Livia. In particular, the members of the Carvers Club, who met each Saturday morning at the Locust Hill Feed & Seed Store, often mixed her praises with the wood shavings they brushed from their laps—onto the floor by the wood stove in the raw weather or onto the store porch in the mild.

These men and those who stopped to chat with them held contrarian views on many topics, but most of all on matters associated with Livia. "The women, they gossip 'bout her," the

men maintained, “whereas we discuss, analyze and understand the doings of our community right down to the fine causes and effects. Damned if we don’t. And we’re all better for it.”

The group was headed by Burt Farley, owner of the seed store and a highly skilled wood carver. He was a man who led mostly by virtue of his brevity.

“What’ch you whittling there, Burt?” Billy Fairmont would ask him.

“Bowie knife,” would come Burt’s reply.

“A Bowie knife, you say?”

“Yep.” Burt would hold up the objet d’art for Billy to see.

“So, you’re usin’ a knife to make a knife, is that what yer asayin’?”

“I am.”

And so their conversations would go—rambling questions, brief answers. But when their conversations turned to local affairs, especially regarding Livia, they’d all become loquacious.

“You suppose them church ladies are ever gonna get ole Liv kicked out of the Post Office?” they’d ask each other.

“Naw, I don’t think they will,” someone would reply. “And what’s more, they just better watch out or ole Liv’ll take a fit an’ go an’ scratch their eyes out—just like some of them cats she lets live in her barn. Liv don’t put up with much. She’s got spunk.”

“Yep, got to admire her for that,” another would add. “Besides, I believe a damn big ole cat fight would do Zion Ridge a lot of good! Clean the air better’n a thunderstorm.” Then they’d all laugh before going back to their whittling, a pile of graceful white pine curls collecting on the floor in front of them.

5.

Preacher Amos Whitlach drove an old Ford, for everyone in Locust Hill owned a Ford, even out on Zion Ridge, if they owned a car at all. And if they didn’t, most likely there was someone else in the family who did own some kind of Ford—perhaps a tractor or a truck. Amos’s Ford came to a stop just beyond the stone walkway that led straight, more or less, from Zion Road to Livia Perkins’s front porch. He had pulled across the road to park, so that now his Ford was facing the oncoming traffic, which normally consisted of no more than one vehicle every half hour. He stepped from his car into the dusty roadside weeds which soiled his black trousers before further steps placed him in the mowed grass of Livia’s front yard. He was wearing his dark suit, even on this hot July day, since he considered what he was about to do official church business.

He looked at the house that was also the Zion Ridge Post Office; a weathered sign over the porch entrance said so. A story and one-half high, the farmhouse had a metal roof troubled by vast patches of rust. An aged, faded red chimney, blackened along the top but idle on this hot summer day, rose up from the middle of the roof. The roof itself slanted steeply toward the road before its pitch leveled out considerably above the porch. The porch sat little more than the width of a floor joist above the ground and was reached by a large steppingstone with an uneven

surface that often-held ice in the winter. The ladies of the church had declared this stone a purely deliberate trip hazard.

Despite its many imperfections, the house had withstood the vicissitudes of West Virginia weather for more than eighty years. Now the whole thing was just shy of dilapidation. Only thinning vestiges of white paint peeked out here and there from crevices in the wood siding. Otherwise, the house was weathered to a dull grey.

Along its right side was a smaller porch with a sagging floor, due no doubt to a rotting joist or two. There, Amos saw a black cat curled into a ball, snug against a galvanized wash tub. In the yard chickens clucked, cackled, pecked, and strutted. A few steps from the side porch was a cistern, topped with a cast iron hand pump.

Having heard the car stop, Livia was already standing on the front porch, her arms crossed, looking hard in Preacher Whitlach's direction. "Howdee, Amos!" she called to him and waved with exaggerated neighborliness as he walked toward her, for she loved to have visitors, even though she was wary of this one. "What brings you here?" She never called him Preacher as all the other people on Zion Ridge would do. She had known him as a feral teenager and just couldn't adjust to the reality of his having grown up and become a Man of God.

"Thought I'd come visit for a bit, Liv, if that's all right," he replied, stepping up on the porch without tripping on the cursèd stone. "Haven't seen you for such a long while. How have you been?"

"Fine," she replied. Though still suspicious of his real motives, she asked, "Want some lemonade? I made some fresh this mornin', figurin' it would be another hot day. Got it in the ice box. Plenty cold by now."

"Lemonade would be just dandy, Liv, it really would. Could we have it here on the porch, though? There is a bit of breeze come up from the river, and maybe some rain on the way, too."

"Well, I hope so. My cistern's nearly gone dry." Then she added, "Yeah, sure, we can have it here."

Livia entered the house, letting the screen door bang close behind her, stirring up a small cloud of flies which had hoped to follow her inside. Amos could hear Livia's footsteps crossing the wooden floor of the post office-parlor, heading toward the kitchen at the back of the house. Her infamous Chihuahua, Tiny, was yipping madly as she went.

Amos seated himself on the porch swing, thinking its motion might cool him on this humid day. Besides, he knew that Livia always sat in one of the two wooden rockers she kept on the porch. The only other chair was reserved for Harvey, who today was miles away, slung over the Monongahela River near Pittsburgh, most likely driving rivets into a bridge support as part of a repair project.

As Amos made himself comfortable, he saw the black cat again, wide awake now, hopping onto the far end of the porch. It seemed so much larger than before and displayed an extraordinary suppleness, even for a cat. Unlike Livia's other cats, tattered and torn as they were, this one was sleek and comely, as though it were brushed and groomed daily. Its dense black fur seemed iridescent in the sunlight. Stopping beside Livia's rocker and sitting back on its

haunches, the cat stared at Amos with bright golden eyes, eyes that glowed with danger and cunning and some unknowable, unearthly power—immense and ominous it seemed to Amos.

Livia returned with a large round glass pitcher filled with lemonade. She carried it in one hand and two plain drinking glasses in the other. Thin slices of lemon swam in the pitcher and some ice cubes clinked against its sides. Livia turned and pushed the screen door open with her hip. She backed onto the porch with a motion that somehow she made graceful, all the while yelling mild curses at Tiny, who, though still out of sight, was determined to escape the house, bite the preacher's ankles, and thus confirm local opinion that he was a dog from some torrid Mexican hell.

"Here, hold yer glass out," Livia instructed Amos after giving him one of the drinking glasses. "The dog'll shut up soon. Don't worry about him." She poured lemonade into Amos's glass and then into hers. Taking a quick sip as she moved, Livia seated herself in her rocker before placing the pitcher beside her on the dusty porch floor. The black cat looked at her and then at Amos before leaping with a single swift motion into Livia's lap. She had just enough time to move her glass out of the way before the cat nestled into the folds of her gingham apron. There it resumed staring at Amos.

Amos tasted the lemonade and puckered a bit at its tartness before saying, "That's a beautiful cat, Liv." He was truly surprised at its grooming, for of all the stories that swirled around Zion Ridge concerning Livia, and there were many, none, not even ones about Harvey, were more persistent than those tales concerning her barn full of partially dismembered cats—cats which preyed on one another, fought for the very delight and devilment of torturing and killing their own kind, since they had long ago eaten every rodent and bird within a mile of the barn. Cats, they were, with missing eyes and ears, cats that limped and groaned with pain and grief, cats with oozing wounds and bleeding eyes, cats reputed to carry off small dogs, rabbits, gerbils, and other pets from the surrounding farms, snatching them at times from within their homes and dragging them into this barn of horrors where they were harried to death, slowly, since cats always deny their prey the dignity of sudden death. With the coming of each dusk, their feline cries and howls and shrieks issued from the barn as they might from a pack of demons in some ritual dance, cries that canceled the softer sounds of whippoorwills and great horned owls in the woods about Zion Ridge. The cats, people said, had formed their own cult and now were beholden to no one, not even Livia. They, like the Chihuahua, were actually the Devil's own creatures.

"Thanks," said Livia. "Yes, he's my favorite of all the cats 'round here."

"What's his name?"

"Why, his name's S…," Livia caught herself, just in time to change "Satan" to "Sam." She thought for a moment about whether lying to a preacher is a mortal sin but quickly decided that it couldn't be, given the track records of most preachers she knew. Satan sat up in Livia's lap at the sound of the strange name and looked into her face with a puzzled expression, as if to say, "Who the hell is Sam?"

"That's a mighty plain name for such an elegant cat," Amos noted. "Why, he looks like a small panther instead of a normal cat."

Livia smiled. "That just what he thinks he is—or more." She sipped at her lemonade again to clear her throat, for she had decided that now was the time to start in on Amos. "But I bet you didn't come here to talk to me about cats, now did you?"

"Well no, I didn't." No matter how well people knew Livia, they were rarely prepared for her bluntness.

"Then why are you here? The post office is closed for the day. Can't sell you no stamps, even if I wanted to."

"Oh, I don't need stamps or anything to do with the mail."

"That's right. I know you don't, 'cause I gave your mail to the carrier for your route this morning, so you got it already. You're here for some other reason. Now what is it?"

"Well, Liv, this is a hard matter to broach."

"Broach? Is that some preacher word you learned? Just spit it out, Amos. What is it?"

"Well, Liv, it's that some people don't approve of you being postmistress anymore."

"And what is it they don't like, as if I didn't already know." Livia had many sympathetic informers all around Zion Ridge.

"Well, there's several things. First, they're afraid of your dog, Tiny. You have to admit that he's a might feisty. And likes to nip an ankle or two when he gets a chance."

"I already took care of that and discussed it with my boss, the postal inspector in Parkeston. When the post office is open, I keep Tiny in the kitchen behind a gate. That dog can't get out no way. Besides, how people could be so scared of such a little dog is beyond me. So that's not it. Now what is, really?"

"Well…there's Harvey, too."

"Harvey! Hell, he don't bite anybody. An' I'm damn sure not goin' to keep him behind a gate, if that's what you're goin' for. Fact is, there's not a kinder man in this whole county than Harvey Satterfield and I'll pull the hair outta anyone who says different, preacher or not!"

"Now take it easy, Liv. It's not me asayin' this."

"No, it's them damn hypocrite women in your church asayin' it! That's who it is! And you know I'm right."

"Well yes, it is our church women."

"See, I knew it!"

"But you got to look at it their way, too, Liv. They're good Christian women just tryin' to live by their faith."

"And how am I astoppin' 'em? Just answer me that!"

"Well, to their way of thinkin', your house is a sinful place 'cause you let Harvey stay here without bein' married to him, yet this is where they have to come for their postal service. People see Harvey goin' up the road from here real late at night sometimes, and that don't seem right to 'em."

"I suppose they do see him. And if they'd git up early enough, sometimes they might see him slippin' up the road then, four or five or six in the morning, if they've a mind to look. Sometimes he don't even go up the road at all, if you really want to know the whole truth. But what of it? Nothin' we're ashamed of, I can tell you that. And nothin' that's anybody else's business! It's mine and his'n and no one else's, not even yours, Amos Whitlatch."

"No, maybe not mine directly, but it is God's business to look over all of us and judge us in the end for what we do."

"Then some of them ole biddies that's apointin' their fingers at me are in for a whole lot of trouble, I can tell you that, preacher man, if that's the game you want to play." Livia was leaning forward now, looking as though she were about to leap from her rocker. Even Satan was disturbed enough to jump down from her lap and sit beside her again, yet ever alert to encourage a fight, just as he liked to do with the barn cats.

Amos set his glass of lemonade on a nearby windowsill, the better to fend off Livia's attacks. "They're just concerned, Liv," he continued, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, "concerned about the message all this conveys to the young people in our community. We don't want them growin' up thinkin' that marriage is . . . well, optional. That's not God's plan for us."

"Well, since your bringin' that up, just what is God's plan for us? Was it His plan to take my daddy away from me and my brother and our mother, leaving us with next to nothin' to live on after he died? Was it His plan to make my mother have to work in a factory and leave us kids alone all day with just a neighbor woman or two good enough to check on us? Was it His plan to make me leave school in eighth grade and go to work making cardboard boxes so we could have something to eat and clothes to wear, but with no chance ever again for me to learn anything? So just go on and tell me about them high kaflootin' plans God's got for us, 'cause I'd really like to know."

"We all face hard times, Liv. That ain't nothin' new, nor is it somethin' that hit only your family. Plenty of folks around here have had it even worse that you, but God brought you through it all. Now you got a nice job and a home of your own."

"You're damn right I do because I fought for them. Nobody give 'em to me. Now some people—your wife included—and don't think I don't know this—want to take it all away from me 'cause they think that cause they go to church and I don't that they're better than me. Ain't that it, when you get right down to it?"

Amos shook his head but had no chance to reply.

"Well, they may think they're better, but by heavens they're not!"

"No, now wait, Liv, I don't think that's it. When I say God's plan for us, I mean He intends for us to live by His law. In this case, why don't you and Harvey just git married? You obviously love each other and belong together. And have for a long time. Why, marriage would solve the whole problem. And I'd be glad to do the service for you—in private, if you like. Nobody's got a problem with you two bein' together—as long as you're married."

"So, because some women who don't even really know us want to bitch and complain, we're supposed to git married! Well, they can go to hell and you can lead the parade, if that's what you think. These are our lives to live, Harvey's and mine, not theirs or yourn. We don't go around tellin' them what to do and they shouldn't be tellin' us."

"But, Liv, be reasonable. Marriage is normal. It's what God intends for us."

"Now I've seen plenty of bad marriages, Amos Whitlatch, and I'll just bet you have too in your line of work. If Harvey and I are happy with each other and a comfort to each other just as we are, what's that to your wife or to the other church women? Or to you? Or to God, for that matter?"

Amos shook his head. He had known before he came that this would be a difficult counseling. Now he looked out at the road as the Kellermans' farm truck went by. One of the Kellerman boys leaned out the window, laughing, and waved to them. Nearly everyone waved to Livia, at least the men and boys. Both Amos and Livia waved back.

"I like those boys. The Kellermans are good people," Livia said, knowing that it would irritate Amos, since the Kellermans were Catholics.

"I can see that we're not goin' to reach an agreement today, Liv," Amos said slowly, still gazing out at the road where the dust was slowly settling back into place. "So, I guess I'd better go now, but if you change your mind, just remember—I'm not your enemy and neither is God. And we're both of us just up the road from you." He gestured toward the dust-coated Temple of Mercy in the distance. "When you're ready for us, we're ready for you."

With that, Amos drained the last of the lemonade in his glass, smacked his lips at its tartness, and thanked Livia, saying how refreshing the drink had been. Handing her his empty glass, he walked toward his Ford. "Good-bye, Liv," he said, looking back over his shoulder, "and God bless…both you and Harvey."

Livia waved to him, her anger spent now, for she was always sorry when people left her, often feeling she'd driven them away with her fierce attitudes, attitudes which she knew she couldn't control. She sat for a while after Amos drove off, finishing her own lemonade. Satan jumped back into her lap. She scratched his neck and rocked a bit, while he purred, and the old rocker complained with squeaks at every movement.

Then suddenly she rose, sending Satan flying. She picked up the pitcher, pressed the glasses against her stomach with one arm, and entered the house. After returning the pitcher to the ice box and placing the glasses in the kitchen sink, she scooped up Tiny, who had finally stopped barking, and sat down in her indoor rocker with the Chihuahua, contended now, in her lap. She looked at Harvey's empty recliner next to her. Then she took a tissue from her apron pocket, and then another, and into them she wept.

Clara Burghelea

Impermanence

A walk on crunchy mollusk shells,
the way they gorge inside your mouth.
Cupping tadpoles with bare hands,
a limp fish yourself. Later, summer asphalt
under the feet, a gaping-bird road ahead.
A man reads braille on your ribs, fingertips
soaking in flesh. His face, a splintered sun.
He will make you coffee in the years to come
and not once, scorch your ruffled wings.
When I look up, there he is, thrusting his arm
through the twinned chambers of my heart.
Resurfacing within the lustered geometry

of a belated snowflake. Snow smelling sessions.
Overnight, ghosts return, a polished wound.

David A. Gray

Murmurations

Eric counted the maggots devouring the rat, using the same technique his mother had taught him in order to tally starlings above the fields at dusk. First, imagine a small square on an edge of the murmuration. Quickly estimate the number of birds enclosed. Now fix that square in your mind, and overlay it on the larger picture, guessing how many times it might fit.

The starlings had numbered in their thousands, then. The evening air had pulsed with high cries and a stuttering of wings as clouds of sharp silhouettes expanded and contracted. Eric had read recently that the little birds were in decline, that the skies back in Scotland now belonged to gulls on chevauchees from the coast.

But where the starlings had been a billowing three-dimensional puzzle, adding complexity to the count, the maggots were a slow seething coating atop the lumpy gristle of the rat. Eleven seemed about right. Eleven times twelve, equaled 132.

One hundred and thirty-two maggots the color of old ivory. No, one hundred thirty-two. Eric's son had chastised the old man for his extra "and" when they'd last talked a month and three days ago, had seemingly forgotten that Skype would show the irritation that passed quickly across his face.

"How long have you been in America, dad?" he had asked, shaking his head in exasperation.

Eric had started to defend his stubborn grammar with as much good grace as he could muster.

"Hold on a minute, son," he began, only to be interrupted by a chorus of children mocking their grandfather with loving casual cruelty.

"Hawd awn a minnit!" they had shrieked in crude imitation of his Scottish accent. "Hawd awn jist a wee minnit, son!"

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Eric had pretended to laugh as his daughter-in-law ducked past with an apologetic half smile, to shush the unkind chorus.

The maggots' feast was coming to an end, Eric saw as he peered down to the subway tracks from the platform's edge. The tracks had been recently cleaned, wiping away the drifts of dropped and aimed trash. The bottom of the channel was a rich brown. Was it rock? Or painted and smoothed concrete? Eric felt a momentary and overpowering desperation that it be soil, packed hard and deprived of sunlight but alive, if sleeping.

Maybe his son was right. Maybe Eric's mind was starting to wander. "Wander," with a carefully pronounced capital W and a judgmental pause after, to let the suggestion take root. Such a lovely word to describe such a horrid decline. To be young and to wander was to embark

on a brave adventure. To be old and Wander was to be shuffled into senility with fake smiles and childlike words of comfort.

The rat was little more than a writhing outline, except for the long cataract-colored tail, which was untouched. Eric briefly wondered what exact question he might type into his elderly computer to elicit a sensible answer to that mystery.

Most of the maggots were content to squirm in their tacky dessert. But some explorers were inching away in both directions, and to the sides. Those were, Eric noted, the larger maggots. One, seemingly intent on climbing up toward the electrified third rail, kept rolling back, before trying again.

A press of warm air and a distant light heralded a train's approach. The fastest maggot was positively sprinting towards the source of the breeze. Eric estimated that it was moving at a speed of an inch per second, which made for a pace of five feet a minute, therefore 300 feet an hour. Did rats eat maggots, he wondered? Were the maggots accustomed to the regular howling wind? Would the pioneer survive long enough to become a fly? Then what?

Eric imagined a person-shaped outline down there, pictured the glee with which the maggots would greet their bounty before it and they were whisked away, and the stragglers and stains sprayed with bleach.

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A hoarse cry echoed off the station's sooty tiles, was distorted by tiny stalactites and obsolete cables hanging like plastic vines. Eric turned to see a ragged man with a bushy beard running more or less toward him.

The man was young and filthy and barefoot. He had started his sprint at other side of the platform, and was angling across the widest part, waving his arms. His long black coat was tattered like mangy feathers, flapping out to the sides and behind as he gained speed. There were little silver buttons on the coat, Eric saw, that caught the lights and glittered.

Eric estimated that it would take the man fifteen to twenty steps to cross the platform, at which point he would be running as fast a regular person could – around sixteen miles an hour. His course would be irreversible soon and would bring him on an intercept with the front of the train, which was in the station, and decelerating. At that point the train would be moving only a little faster in the opposite direction. Assuming the howling man was intent on collision, the closing speed would be a little over thirty miles per hour. Impact would be on the metal and glass front of the first car. Which would surely be fatal, if you added the subsequent rebound down on to the tracks ahead of the train.

An estimated five steps remaining, and the only sounds were screeching of the braking train, the rasping yelling of the man, and the slap of bare feet on cold stone.

At the last moment the runner veered a little, possibly correcting his course, and clipped Eric, spinning the old man around and causing him to tumble to the floor. Away from the tracks, at least.

Eric did not see the moment the man hit the train, but he heard it. The sound reminded him of the bonnet of their first car slamming, hard, and his dad climbing back into the old Austin Princess, rubbing his purple hands in front of the little dash heater as the wipers failed to clear freezing slush from the windscreen. Windshield. Hawd awn a minnit, old man.

"Your tights make a fine fan belt, Agnes," his dad had said, grinning at Eric's mum in appreciation and something more. Eric had laughed along, knowing he was missing something but unconcerned.

Eric lay on his back for a bit, feeling the cold of the floor through his coat, admiring the craftsmanship that lay under the grease-blurred ceiling tiles. After what might have been a second, or possibly a minute, a knot of chittering passersby lifted him to his feet and brushed him off.

"Here, Grandpa, you lost a button," a woman with a cheerful knitted hat said, pressing something into Eric's hand. The old man saw a tiny silver star in his palm, trailing a fine black thread.

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"He was standing in the middle of the field, just watching the sky, then he fell ower, deid," the older of the two boiler-suited men said, raising his collar against the cold that reached eagerly from the ground to greet the darkening sky.

"Deid from what?" his younger colleague said with morbid interest. He looked around, took in the lack of people filing out of the tiny chapel, the absence of cars parked. "Loneliness?"

"No, apparently he had a big smile oan his face. And an American passport in his pocket, wi a wee silver star tucked inside it. That's what the newspaper said, anyway."

"A silver star? Was he a sheriff, then?"

"A what? No, he was just touched in the heid."

"Doolally, then," the younger man said. "My gran was like that, too."

"Well, whatever he was, he's somethin' else." The older man nodded to the crematorium's pitched roof.

Smoke gouted up from the chimney, a plume of black soot particles that caught an unfelt breeze and wheeled and swirled for a moment before dispersing through the bare branches of the oak tree.

December Lace

Divinity

The theater is my church, the stage is my altar
I pray at the red curtains,
applause giving me holy light, the pain
divine

I pray, *oh how I pray*

The lights shining brighter
the congregation
surrounding me in seats priced by bids

their applause
lifting me to the skies
and I am a saint

worship me
my feet my crucifixion
my painted face my master's creation
the demon within
never rests

D.M. Kerr

Starting to Realize the Enormity of it All

The place Carole and Garth rented didn't rate being called an apartment. Their super, a gruff but kind-hearted man whose breath often carried the faint anise scent of ouzo, had pieced it together for them from some leftover spots of the building's basement–a corner behind the stairs, a drain the laundry facilities didn't need, a cupboard that used to store paint. It was small, but they could afford it. And it was theirs.

In the evening, after cooking and cleaning, Garth and Carole spread out a blanket in front of the sofa. Carole lay on her side to keep the baby's weight from pressing too hard against her stomach. Garth lay beside her, on his back.

The yellow curls of Carole's hair lay limply across her puffy cheeks, and her eyes, with their faint lashes, were almost closed. Garth placed his hand on Carole's blouse, ash-brown over white. The baby wriggled in joyful response.

Carole let her fingers drift lazily across Garth's shoulder. "What are we going to do?" she asked. Her voice barely carried.

"About what?"

"About…everything." Her 'everything' was not a complaint. It had become an expression of wonder.

Garth didn't reply. He stared at the ceiling he had painted when they moved in. The latex had congealed in thin layers of frozen cream.

"When I was coming from work today," Carole said, "this nice old man gave me his seat on the bus."

Garth grunted.

"Garth. You asleep?"

"No." Garth turned his face toward her. Carole's cheeks were so calm and her breathing so steady she could have been asleep herself.

Garth began to trace the outline of her chin with his finger, black on pink. Carole giggled, and, as if that had been a switch of a battery-driven doll, began talking again. "He told me about when his son was born."

"Was he a white guy?"

"Yeah."

"Oh." Garth rolled back to stare at the ceiling.

"Garth. So, he said…he said he was so nervous he almost drove his car off the road."

"Why was he taking the bus?"

"Who?"

"The white guy."

"I don't know. Why?"

"Like, if he had a car, why was he taking the bus?"

"I don't know!" Carole's exasperation lacked force, which made it sweetly childlike. "He was kind of old. Maybe he didn't have a car anymore."

"If I had a car, I wouldn't take the bus."

"Garth, you silly. If you–ow!" Carole clenched Garth's shoulder.

"What?"

"Just a cramp. Oh-oh-oh, it's okay now. It's going away." Her grip faded on Garth's shoulder and her breathing returned to normal.

"Just relax, and sleep. You'll be fine."

Carole didn't say any more. Garth stared at the ceiling. His mind had begun to fill with things he had never considered before.

Elizabeth Stoessl

Incursions

They first show up as blisters
on the bird's pink and sinuous neck.
When she looks behind the framed poster—
Audubon's American Flamingo, 1838—
she sees its cardboard backing pocked
with pinholes, and a damaged wall,
ominous in its softness and its blistered paint.
And on the floor beneath the wall—
like sawdust—tiny tan pellets.
Sabotage by termites.
She'll attack the wall with money and poison—
pesticides with a proven history of success.
The bird she can replace.

Soon
another marauder, another inside job—
silent, swift and aggressive.
Overnight, her own neck
swells, her voice vanishes,
her very breath in jeopardy—
stealth assault by hostile cells
that will have already made inroads.

She will fight back
and attack her entire body
with a welcome array of toxins—
proven histories
of success….or not.
She will ally herself with the hopeful.
She will make plans.

Fredric Hildebrand

Autumn Frost

Dogs wait patiently at the door.
Outside the frozen leaves.
Over the twilight roof,
moon like white muslin.
Orion rises in the southern sky.

My father said, “We’re waiting for winter now.”
His death was another season, long.
That evening the cold, woodsmoke waiting.

Silence now except a faint whispering.
Then great flakes of wet snow.
I turn to the sky; I receive the blessing.
Dogs wait patiently at the door.

Fredric Hildebrand

A Funeral

In the twilight a church bell
tolls for the neighbor's son.

Nearby a weathered shed,
a broken farmer unable
to speak of grief.

Woodsmoke, heat, glowing coals.
Hammer and tongs, and despair.

Plowshares must be repaired before spring,
a father's anguish in each blow.

The hammer and steel ring.

Gary Beck

Judgments

The minute they walked into the store I knew they were cops, but not locals. Some kind of state boys come up from Cheyenne by the look of them. I started for the bathroom to avoid them, but the meaner looking one, in a blue suit that looked like he found it in a thrift shop, called me.

"Just a minute, sir. We'd like to talk to you."

I turned to my assistant, Bobby Runs-with-Elks.

"Why don't you help these gentlemen, Bobby."

"We need to speak to you, sir," the oilier looking man said, taking off his sunglasses, revealing black eyes as soulless as lumps of coal.

Bobby, a full-blooded Shoshone, had been working with me for several years, as his father and grandfather before him. He got a small salary and 50% of the profit from the store at the end of the year, which went to his family. We outfitted a lot of hunters and tourists, so it sometimes added up to a good sum of money. I met his grandfather, Joseph Shiny Elk, at Parris Island, in 1968. We served two tours together in Vietnam and saw and did some terrible things. We were both wounded in a sapper attack and invalided out of the Corps at the same time. He didn't want to go back to the reservation, and I didn't want to work on the oil rigs. So, we formed a partnership and opened the general store in the Great Divide Basin, near the Killpecker Sand Dunes, a wild and beautiful place.

Joseph was a part-time deputy on the reservation and late one night on his way home was killed by a drunken driver. His son, Daniel Speaks-to-Elks, took over his share of the business and we got along real well. I never married or had a family, so Daniel was like my son and Bobby like a grandson. They would get the business when I died. I had been around for a while and was pretty fit, still working as a hunting guide now and then, and in no hurry to check out.

I saw there was no way to avoid them and put on my dumb storekeeper face. Bobby had already sensed something and was playing stone-faced Indian.

"What can I do for you boys?" Which immediately riled them since they expected to intimidate me.

"We'd like to talk to you in private, sir," Oily grated.

"Bobby knows everything that goes on here…"

"Alone, sir," Meanie insisted.

"Well we can go out back, though the winds a bit stronger than you Cheyenne boys are used to."

"What makes you think we're from Cheyenne?" Oily asked.

"You got that townie look, like you're used to telling folk what to do," which annoyed them.

I wasn't going to take them through my living area, so I led them outside and around the back. There were several wooden chairs and a bench sand stripped down to a smooth surface. I gestured for them to sit. They declined, but I sat, willing to let them think they had an advantage towering above an old man.

Meanie looked at Oily, who said: "I guess this will do."

"Alright, boys," I said pleasantly. "Who are you and what do you want?"

They both pulled out wallets with badges and Oily said, "We're criminal investigators from the governor's office. We're investigating the accident that destroyed the Grand Teton Resort and Hunting Lodge and led to a number of deaths."

"What has that to do with me?"

"We heard you know Sam Zona. He may have been involved somehow in the destruction of the place."

"I don't know anything about that."

"But you know Sam Zona," Oily insisted.

"He's dead?"

"We don't know. Now you know him."

"Yeah. Casual-like."

"You know him better than that. He worked for you for several years when he was a teen-ager," Oily stated.

I just shrugged, and Meanie glared.

"We can make things difficult for you if you don't cooperate," Meanie threatened.

I guessed they could, and it would hurt Daniel and Bobby, so I decided to tell them whatever was common knowledge.

"What do you want to know?"

"Tell us about his background," Oily said. "Start with his parents."

"I don't know much about them. Manny came from up North someplace and married a Shoshone woman. They lived on the Rez for a long time but didn't have kids. There was a story that an old medicine man told them they'd have a son, if they left the reservation and saved the injured animals."

Meanie laughed. "We don't believe in witchcraft."

"Well they started a small ranch in the Great Divide Basin and they took in all kinds of hurt critters, birds, antelope, wolves, they even had a bear for a while…"

"Sounds like a fairy tale to me," Oily sneered. "How'd they make a living?"

"Manny captured wild horses and sold them… Now do you want to hear what I got to say? If not, go back to the city."

"Go on," Oily said.

"Sam was an exceptionally strong and bright kid. He rode to school on the Rez on his pony five days a week. At first some of the older kids tried to bully him. Calling him a half-breed, but he fought back and beat them until they left him alone. He was twelve years old when

he was riding home one day and his pony stumbled on a rock. Sam got off to check his hoof and a big cougar went for the horse. Sam grabbed the cat and they fought, and he killed it…"

"Bullshit!" Meanie growled. "No kid that age could kill a cougar without a rifle."

I concealed my growing anger and replied, "I don't need to talk to you…"

"Ray didn't mean to insult you," Oily said. "The story seems a little far-fetched. Tell us the rest."

"Sam got bigger and stronger. When he was about sixteen, he went to town, which was mostly owned by Mr. Phillips' oil company. He met a waitress at the diner and he really liked her, but the riggers and roughnecks told him to leave her alone. There was a big fight and he whipped a lot of them, but she was scared and wouldn't be with him. One of the roughnecks said she had a younger sister, if he'd wait for her, but Sam refused. Then someone from the oil company offered him a job. When he said 'no', the man said wildfires could burn his family's ranch. Sam didn't like that and punched him. That night he caught a couple of coyotes, tied torches on their tails and sent them into the oilfield. A couple of rigs burned, costing the company a lot of money, but they couldn't prove it was Sam."

"You're saying he did it?" Meanie demanded.

"It was just a rumor."

"What happened next?" Oily prompted.

"His mother and father were attacked in town one day. Some say the oil company was behind it, but no one knows. Then a bunch of men went to their ranch and tried to burn it, but there was a big fight and Sam chased them away. Nothing happened for a while, then the oil company started pressing the ranchers to sell. A couple of them went to see Sam and asked for help. He set up a night-watch system to warn them if there was an attack. One night a bunch of thugs from the oil company came to a ranch that Sam was guarding. He ambushed them, beat them, then sent them back to town naked. They complained to the sheriff, who owed his job to Mr. Phillips, who said he'd look into it. On the advice of his friends, Sam joined the Marine Corps and went away for a while."

"But something else happened before he joined the Marines," Oily prompted.

I quickly reviewed the event to be sure I told the same story that was in the record.

"He came home from school on the Rez one day and found his parents dead. There had been a gun battle and there was a blood trail heading back to the oil rigs. He followed the trail and found three men wounded on the side of the road. They were trying to decide whether to go to the hospital or go ask the boss to get them a doctor. They fought and Sam killed them. The sheriff, who was owned by the oil company, ignored the murder of Sam's parents and started building a case against him. That's when Sam joined the Corps."

I didn't tell them that he came to me for advice. I told him to join the Corps and that Bobby or Daniel would take care of his ranch. Oily kept eyeing me, trying to figure out how smart I was, but I made sure to look as dumb as possible.

"So, how long was he gone?" Meanie demanded.

I shrugged. “Maybe two or three years. He was wounded in Iraq or Afghanistan and they discharged him. He came home to the ranch and did the same thing as his dad. He tamed wild horses and sold them and took care of injured animals.”

“The record shows he got into trouble sometime after that,” Meanie said and pulled out a tablet and looked at the screen.

“He got into a fight, but the charges were dismissed.”

“He’s a real troublemaker,” Meanie remarked, “always getting into fights.”

“Not so,” I snapped. “He was seeing some girl who worked as a bartender at the Last Chance Saloon. Her ex-boyfriend and some of his oil worker buddies jumped Sam one night. He beat them so badly they went to the hospital. The sheriff wanted to arrest him, but witnesses saw what happened and defended Sam and said the hooligans started it. Friends of the injured oil workers wanted revenge and they went to the ranch one night. They brought an old pickup truck, set it on fire and aimed it at the ranch house. Sam stopped the truck and pushed it back into their jeeps and trucks and they blew up. A lot of the men got burned, but nobody died. They couldn’t complain to the sheriff and they were afraid of Sam, so they left him alone after that.”

“Are you telling us he pushed the truck by himself?” Meanie sneered.

“Sam’s a strong guy,” I said softly.

“What happened after that?” Oily asked.

“Things were pretty quiet for a while.”

“Until Mr. Phillips wanted to build his resort,” Oily stated.

“I don’t know about that,” I muttered.

“Bullshit!” Meanie yelled. “Tell us what you know.”

I briefly considered giving them the shock of their lives when this old man kicked both their asses. But I realized they’d be back with reinforcements, so I told them the public version.

“The oil company took over most of the land in the Great Divide Basin for their oil rigs. Nobody who cares about the land wanted that, but Mr. Phillips is a rich and powerful man. One way or another he got what he wanted…”

“Talk more respectful about him,” Meanie demanded. “He’s a friend of the governor.”

I was getting fed up with these hired badges, but before I could respond, Oily said: “Alright. Take it easy, guys. We’re just getting to what brought us here.” He looked at me and said, “Go on.”

I guess I decided to take the easy way out because I didn’t want any more trouble for Sam. It was probably a waste of time trying to make these jerks understand how some of us felt about the land, but I made one last effort.

“The Red Desert is the largest unfenced area in the 48 continental states. It’s got all kinds of animals and birds and should be preserved.”

“Yeah. Nice dream,” Meanie muttered. “But there’s oil there and money to be made.”

“There are more important things than money,” I responded.

Oily held up a placating hand. “Go on.”

"Mr. Phillips decided to build a big resort. I don't know how he got the rights to public land. Probably bribery and threats…"

"That's slander," Meanie yelled.

"Take it easy, Ray," Oily urged. "Hear the man out."

By this time, I was resisting the temptation to go inside, get my 1911 Model Colt .45 and send them on their way, but it would have meant trouble.

"One way or the other, Mr. Phillips got a hold of most of the property he wanted. Sam led the fight to protect the environment and supported the hold outs who wouldn't sell. About this time a woman came to town, Delia something. I don't know her last name. She was real high-class city type, and the sexiest looking woman I ever saw. Sam fell for her hard. I don't know how she did it, but she cast a spell on him or something and he followed her around like a puppy. She got into his head and started him on drugs. He went downhill fast. He stopped protesting the land sales and challenging the building permits. He got weaker and weaker, ran out of money and lost his ranch. Then she dumped him. Some of his friends claim they saw her with Mr. Phillips."

"What do you think?" Oily asked.

I shrugged. "What do I know? But it was a little strange that a slick woman like that would come here and get involved with a guy like Sam."

"Are you accusing Mr. Phillips of using her to get him?" Meanie challenged.

"I'm just telling you what I heard."

"You know about the explosion that destroyed the resort and killed all those people, including Mr. Phillips."

"There was some talk about that, but I haven't been there."

"But you heard about it," Oily said.

"Yeah."

"Do you know where Sam Zona is?" Oily asked.

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"I said no."

Oily said to Meanie, "Let's go."

As they were leaving, meanie turned to me. "We'll be back."

I didn't say anything, watched them get into their SUV and drive off. Bobby came outside and stood next to me, watching the dust plume recede in the distance.

"I was listening from the back window. Is there any way those guys can find out that Sam bought that load of black powder from us?"

"Not if we don't say anything. There's no receipt or anything is there?"

"No."

"Good."

"You think Sam blew up the place?"

"Yes."

"Where is he now?"

"Dead along with the others."

"How do you know that?"

"I know Sam. He was reduced to a wreck of a man who had nothing left. They laughed at him on the streets and weren't afraid of him anymore. They took away everything he had, then built that temple of luxury to destroy the land he loved. I knew what he was going to do when he bought that powder."

"Why didn't you stop him?"

"It was his choice, Bobby. He pulled himself together for one last fight and took his enemies with him."

"That's it? That's all you got to say?"

I smiled. "Too bad the governor wasn't there."

He stared at me wide-eyed for a moment, then laughed, and I laughed with him.

Geoff Cohen

Afton Canyon

I scrambled down the rocky embankment and crossed under the railroad bridge. My boots kicked up sand. The Mohave appeared through the high grass, cane, and willows. A greenish smallish frog/toad? No bigger than my thumbnail hopped away from my foot. A Western Spadefoot, perhaps, the green was almost emerald. A bridge of one by fours made crossing the five feet of black tadpoles in shallow water easy. Standing at the mouth of Gem Canyon, thinking of March a year ago, crossing the river with my mother. Harder that day. No boards, but we managed. Right away, I realized how hard the hiking was for her. As usual, she was determined to hike up the canyon, then up and out on top of the mesa-like canyon wall.

Up the rocky wash, cobblestone streets, I walked in Barcelona in the summer of 1981. The narrow old streets, the beautiful wood doors, the voices of mugged American sailors reaching the windows of my room in the pensione. Of course, Cora, her long reddish blonde hair, the green of her eyes, the serious way she grabbed my arm and pulled me against her. What caused that change? After six weeks together, we decided to move in, I'd drop out and teach English. She would paint. Still unclear how we managed to come to that decision. My poor Spanish and her poorer English.

Gusts of cool wind came down the canyon, the sound of the Mediterranean, the sea, the wind, before Barcelona, before the weeks in Rome, another fight with Joanna. This time, on a cliff near Palermo, she'd stuck the knife in again, twisting it over and over, verbally stronger and impassioned. We had been drinking from a liter bottle of cheap red Sicilian wine. Standing at the edge of that cliff, looking out on the dark water, feeling the wind pushing, the wine strong in my mouth, in my throat, in my stomach, in my veins. I hung my toes over the edge, looking out to the horizon and raised my arms outstretched, the wind again, pushing, whispering.

Gem Canyon, wider now than when I first hiked it with four-year-old Tess, pieces of green volcanic rock, basalts, pebbles of jasper, chalcedony, sand. Zebra-tailed Lizards ran from me, their black ringed tails up over their backs like scorpions. A rabbit tail, a flush of birds, cawing crows catching the rising thermals in the canyon. We…we hiked Gem Canyon almost every year for the last 30 years. I took my mother out a year after Tess and I first found it. Rock rules: If you want it, you have to carry it. Tess, filling a large Ziploc bag; Esme following alongside her, always, alongside her.

Katherine and I walking arms linked, the volcanic tufa overlying the red sands of Mallorca, 18-month-old Malcolm toddler running, on his toes, leaning forward in front of us. The Mediterranean slapping a few yards away. Great rain clouds blowing with broken patches of rain crossing the sea towards us.

I walked the canyon floor looking for a white stone or rock. I found a large rounded bleached granite rock, heavier than I wanted, but with a nice flat side. Carrying the extra five pounds slowed me down. A long rectangular piece of white sandstone, flat, barely a half an inch thick, 8 X 11, weathered on top with a small curved bay, and a set of ripples. I dropped the

burden of the bleached granite and took up the new altar stone. The weight difference was immediate. Relieved; released. I passed the point where I realized she could go no further. Too tired. Too hard to breathe. I should have known. She did not fuss when I said we should go back. She slowly ate her lunch sitting on a flat edge of a reddish boulder.

I reached the white spine ridge that led up to our goat trail. I was about the age of my mother when she first climbed up that path. I went up, the white, the greenish mudstone, soft to two inches beneath my feet, a forty-five-degree angle, passed the white ovals, the spine of a dinosaur, on to the broken brown shale, the path flattened for thirty feet, then stepping up a talus slope of broken brown shale, my feet slipped. But I stayed upright. The path curved into the cliff face where we always found fresh mountain goat droppings. There were only old dry white oval pellets. The second to last slope, close to sixty degrees on that dark brown broken shale, I kept my purchase.

The sandstone slab tucked under my arm, my thirty-year-old walking stick in my other hand, up I went, then across the shallow slope of broken basalt, jasper and chalcedony to the top of the mesa. I saw the perfect spot, almost what she had described, but I thought she wanted to be higher. I walked around climbing different knobs, checking each view. I had been right the first time. I cleared, level a space, creating an area to place the sandstone altar. I took up the bunch of dried sage, split it into three smaller bunches. The first I lit, the white smoke drifting over the space I had created. The sage still burning, I placed the alter down. When the bunch burned out, I took the Ziploc bag of gray-white ash and carefully dumped it, shaking as much of the powder out. I burned another bunch of sage, the smoke curling around the altar, the pyramid of ashes.

I wondered what to do next: do I hike further in and look for crystals, opals, geodes; do I leave? I looked out across the basin towards the high pyramidic Cave Mountain. Sit. Stay. I lit the last bunch of sage and placed it in a crevice next to the small altar. The smoke blew up, bluish-gray, then white, on a sixty-degree angle disappearing into the bright blue Mohave desert sky. I sat there, staying present in the moment, remembering to breathe as my mother recommended year after year. As the smoke dissipated, I reclaimed the desert, the light purples, the greens, the reddish stone, the far-off small lava cones, the broken reddish-orange spaces of prospectors.

Ian Nathan

The Ballad of a Self-Proclaimed Bastard

I promise I'm not
The man I say.
Pure and divine,
Forever cliché.

Never be fooled
By my smile and laughter.
I am a sinner
To be hung by the rafters.

For I have lied,
Like every lone soul,
To protect my heart,
To never feel whole.

I've smiled and waved
But I never did care,
For what people said,
For how people stared.

It was easy to do,
Behind the screens you see,
For my intentions were hidden
But my words could never be.

They were merely a vice,
At least their purpose to me.
Each reluctant to run,
Each reluctant to leave.

For all they wanted
Could not be found.
Love to be true,
But I was a hound.

So many I smuggled
Under my sheets.

Some were so soft,
And others too sweet.

Then on they would go
And the void grew bare.
As I, lone again
Without a body to care.

So such is life,
A metaphor at most,
Where years pass by
And memories fade to ghosts.

And as my final days
Ticked across the clocks,
I prayed for a salvation
Never to begot

Then like most men,
I would die in a bed.
Alone in my heart,
And pain in my head.

And then I would walk
To the end you see.
The end of my life,
The end of my spree.

I'd walk to the end
Where the light fades away,
Where my lies no longer work,
And my smile no longer suedes.

And there I would be,
For who I truly am,
A mimic at heart.
The heart of a worthless man.

J.R. Lindermuth

Brandt's Secret

The wind wasted itself in the night, whistling and whipping round the grim black hulk of Brandt's house and down the silent, empty, sodden-cindered streets to rattle windows and shake the dark houses of the sleeping village. The mountains, which stood like ramparts around the valley, frozen hard under a blanket of soggy snow, and leaden clouds scudding across the black sky, were the only witnesses as we crept along the wall and took shelter from the wind in the lee of the cellar entrance.

My cousin, Peggy, leaned forward and shoved the door which, as we knew from previous reconnoiters, flung open with an ominous creak of its rusty hinges. "Well," she hissed as I hesitated.

Shivering and knowing it wasn't from the assault of the wind, I was glad to hear the quiver in her voice. "What if he catches me?" I asked, stalling.

"We seen him drive away," Ed Yeager, my best friend, said from behind as he gave me a push toward the door. "He went to church—just like he does every Saturday night. That's why we picked tonight. Remember?"

"I'll bet he worships the Devil," Peggy said, narrowing her eyes. I could barely see her but her eyes glowed, catching and reflecting the light of the scudding moon. "I mean, what kind of people go to church on Saturday?"

"Maybe we oughta go home," I ventured, swallowing hard.

Ed gave me another shove. "Are you getting chicken, Nick?"

"Me? No. But what if he comes back?"

"That's why we're here," Peggy told me. "If he comes back, we'll see him and warn you so's you can get out."

I took a hesitant step toward the entrance, then turned back to them. "What about the dog?"

Peggy sighed. "We saw him lock it in the shed like he always does. If you don't get going, he will be back."

Reluctantly, yet without a backward glance, swaggering with the kind of bravado boys will use to conceal any evidence of cowardice, I took the two paces separating me from the door and stepped through into the dank darkness of the cellar, closing my eyes and clenching my fists as though these futile gestures could protect me from the source of my dread. A malevolent odor of mold and mildew assailed my nostrils and set my stomach to churning. Behind me, despite the wind drumming against the bulk of the house like the doleful back-time music in one of those horror movies we kids loved, I heard the shrill whistle of Peggy and Ed breathing through cold-clogged nostrils. Slowly I opened my eyes and waited for them to adjust to the dark, hating Brandt for having brought me here.

It was easy to hate Brandt.

Though the feeling was not that genuine repugnance which only can be known by an adult, it was enough to make three children risk the wrath of their parents by sneaking out on a cold winter's night, intent on housebreaking. It was in the winter of my twelfth year, Christmas only a week away, and my mind should have been filled with anticipation of gaily decorated trees, family gatherings and presents. But it was no gift I sought from Brandt the night I invaded his house. Revenge was my motivation. I meant to expose his secrets and bring down on him the condemnation of the village.

Brandt had been an enigma all the years of my young life. He was a blacksmith in a time when no one in our village kept horses or mules. In an age of automobiles, this tenacious clinging to the trade of his youth might have been excused had the man not practiced so many other eccentricities.

While everyone else in Alliance worked at the colliery or farmed full-time, Brandt clung to this antique trade, eking out a precarious living by forging and repairing tools, doing other iron work and selling the milk of the small herd of goats he kept in his pasture. In a village dominated by a confident and oppressive Methodism, he practiced an even more stern religion which forbade its members meat, sent them to church on a Saturday and believed the Coming was imminent (our parents believe this, too, though no one seemed in any particular hurry for it to happen). In a village where neighborliness was more than just a word, where pride demanded regular applications of gleaming white paint to clapboarded houses and where picket fences bloomed like flowers around well-kept yards, Brandt again ran contrary. He kept to himself, his clapboards were weathered black as though they'd never experienced a coat of paint, his yard and pasture flourished with weeds and untrimmed bushes, all surrounded by a barbed wire fence intended to keep goats in and people out.

Brandt was a challenge to all of us in Alliance. No one in town walked by that house without wondering what dark secrets lurked within its walls. It stood on the corner next to Reamer's store, a black carcass of a building as cold and unfriendly as its owner. The windows were shuttered winter and summer against intruding eyes, and the door was never opened to anyone. Salesmen had long ago learned not to rap. If anyone wanted intercourse with Brandt, they knew to approach him at his shop during working hours.

Brandt frightened children and intimidated strangers. Our elders—lest they had need of his skills—mostly ignored the man. Still they were equally puzzled by his solitary and bilious manner. We are a gregarious people and one who holds himself off becomes the subject of much speculation.

The village hummed with stories about Brandt. Unpleasant stories. There was rumor he'd killed a man in a drunken brawl in his youth. It was said he'd spent years in jail and had joined his strange church out of remorse for his crime. Some said he'd been married once. Older people remembered the woman. A good woman, they said. Unlike her husband, she'd liked to talk. She'd confided his odd and miserly ways to neighbors. She'd told how one night they'd gone without supper because Elmer Reamer had raised the price of some victual he craved by pennies.

There had been the woman, and then she ceased to be seen.

She was not from our valley and it was believed she'd left Brandt and gone back to her own people. Others said he'd beat her, and she'd fled. A few believed just as fervently Brandt had killed her and buried the body in his cellar.

No one knew anything for certain and none dared seek the truth from him.

Despite all this, Brandt had one thing in his favor as far as we children were concerned. The apples on the trees in his yard were the best in town. We knew. We'd sampled them all. When we got to feeling particularly adventurous, we'd sneak into Brandts' yard at night and hook apples.

And it was those very apples led me to sneaking into his house this winter night. Peggy, Ed and I had been plotting it since Halloween.

Knowing there'd be no "treat" at his door, we'd appropriated a supply of his apples as our Halloween "trick." Unfortunately, Brandt anticipated our raid and was lying in wait. We quaked in fright when he caught us, expecting to be cast into his furnace like the balls of our summer games that rained onto his property. Instead Brandt did the unexpected. He delivered us to our parents. Because of his reputation, we were confident we'd escape punishment. Alas, it was not so. We were but children and didn't conceive of our theft as a crime, nor did we see the hidings we received as just.

There's no spite like that of a child who thinks himself wronged. Many a day afterward was spent in conspiring how we might gain revenge and vindicate ourselves in the eyes of our parents. Finally, it was mutually agreed there could be no better way than by exposing the secrets Brandt had hid these many years.

Like those Romans before the cross of Jesus, we cast lots for the honor of being the one to invade his privacy. It fell on me, and the honor was quickly replaced by stark terror—though I dared not admit it to my friends.

The last vestige of my courage evaporated like snow in a warm room as I descended to Brandt's cellar. It took everything I could muster to strike a match for a look around the cellar. I don't suppose I really expected to see skeletons, coffins or other ghoulish things, but I was greatly relieved when the light revealed no more than the boxes of apples, barrels of potatoes, crocks of sauerkraut and other provisions that might have been seen in any other cellar in Alliance.

The match sputtered and went out against my flesh, eliciting a sharp cry. Another wave of fear swept over me as I was plunged once more into darkness. Oh, if I had only thought to bring a flashlight.

"Whadja see?" Peggy croaked in a low voice from the stairwell.

"Nothin'."

"You gotta go upstairs."

I didn't answer.

"Nick!"

"I'm goin', I'm goin'." Heaving a deep breath, I crossed the room to where I'd seen the stairs by my match. I knew there'd be no living with Peggy and Ed if I didn't complete the

mission as we'd planned it. Despite my trepidation, I had to go all the way up to the second floor. We figured Brandt wouldn't leave any evidence of his crimes downstairs on the off chance some stranger did gain access to the house.

As I crept up the stairs, cringing every time a riser creaked under foot, I ran my hand along the wall, searching for a banister. There was none. But just as I came to the landing, my hand struck a shelf and bumped an object that fell with a clatter at my feet. Kneeling and feeling around, I found it. A flashlight. Flicking the switch, it came on, shining a dim pool of yellow across the floor. I smiled. The batteries were weak, but at least now I was confident of seeing where I was going and not bumping into any of the grotesque fantasies my mind had conjured up.

Opening the door, I found myself in the kitchen of the house. Shining my light round the space, I was disappointed to find this little different from any other kitchen of my experience. A black coal stove against one wall, sink and cupboards on another, a refrigerator humming its familiar song and a pillar table and chairs in the middle of the room.

The flashlight revealed a hall leading through to the dining room and on to the parlor at the front of the house. Other than the refrigerator and the clinking of the radiators, the only sound was the wind rattling a window and the pounding of my own heart. Gulping another breath, I headed out the hall. The stairs to the upper floor were probably near the front door.

I'd just got through the dining room when the flashlight went out. I halted, bumping it against my thigh in hope of reviving it. Fortunately, it did come back on, but the light was even dimmer. After gauging a path clear of obstruction, I shut the flashlight off. I needed to conserve its power for upstairs.

A loose shutter banged against an outer wall, startling me. I dropped the flashlight and bumped into an end table, nearly knocking over a lamp. I made a grab and prevented the light from falling. As I was setting it back on the table I jumped again as I heard a voice call out. I paused, straining my ears, but the sound wasn't repeated. I figured my imagination was playing tricks on me.

Searching for the flashlight on the floor, I thought I heard the voice again. My throat went dry and I scuttled back until I came up against the sofa. I sank down on the cushions, steeling myself against a desire to run and get out of there. My hands shook and I felt half sick with fear. The wind banged the shutter again and it was followed by the squeak of a tree limb against the house. I breathed a sigh of relief. That must have been what I heard. Brandt wasn't home. There was no one else in the house.

Calmer now, I searched again and found the flashlight. With its aid I located the stairs just where I thought they'd be.

Come on, I told myself. Just take a look upstairs and then you can go home. But as I peered up into that darkness, fear took me again. Did I really want to go up there? I didn't, though I knew if I told them I had Peggy and Ed would catch me in a lie. The thought of their reaction outweighed my fear. Flicking on the light, I took a tentative step. Just to the top of the stairs. Then I can truthfully say I went to the second floor.

One step. Two. A riser squeaks underfoot. Stop. Listen. Go on. The wind bangs again. Stop. Listen. Go on.

I'm not sure how long it took. Eventually I reached the top. By my light I saw a closed door to the left. Cautiously, I pushed it open. The hinges creaked loud enough to make me jump once more. Shining the light inside I saw an array of sheet-covered furniture. A storeroom. Okay. There's another door down there to the right and it's standing open. I'll check that one and then get out of here.

Just as I reached the door, my light flickered out and this time no amount of bumping could rejuvenate it. That's enough. I'm out of here. If old Brandt has any secrets, he can keep them.

"Jim?" a voice called out just as I was turning away.

If that wasn't enough to scare me out of five years growth, the light that illuminated the whole area and momentarily blinded me was.

"Jim? Is that you?" the voice, plainly a female voice, inquired again. Blinking against the glare of light she'd switched on, I saw an elderly woman sitting up in bed and staring out at me from the room.

"I-I…" I muttered, staggering back.

The woman picked up spectacles from the bedside table, put them on and peered closely at me. "You're not Jim," she said.

"No, ma'am." I wanted to run, but my feet wouldn't cooperate.

"Well, come in here, boy, and tell me what you're doing in my house." She said it calmly, so it wasn't exactly like an order. Yet I couldn't resist. I made my way over to where she sat. "Who are you?"

"Nick Becker, ma'am."

"Kin to the Beckers from the alley behind this house?" she asked, peering closely at me.

"My parents," I said, nodding.

"So, what are you doing in my house, Nick Becker?"

I swallowed a couple times before finding my voice. "Thought nobody was home," I croaked.

"Oh? You only break into houses where nobody's home?"

"No, ma'am. I mean—I didn't exactly break in."

"You're here, no?"

I shrugged.

The overhead light flashed off her glasses as she scowled at me. "Grab that chair over there. Bring it over here next to me. Sit down and explain yourself to me."

I dragged the chair over and sat down as she'd asked. My heart was up in my throat and thumping like a frog on a griddle.

"Well?"

I had no idea who she was nor what I could say to explain my presence in the house. She didn't look mean. Yet I couldn't be sure of her intentions now she'd caught me.

"How did you get in? I'm sure Jim would have locked the doors."

"Through the cellar. Who's Jim?"

She gazed at me as though I were stupid. "Why my husband. Who'd you think I meant?"

"Mr. Brandt is your husband? We didn't know he had a wife anymore."

She stared at me over the top of her spectacles. "What do you mean—anymore? I've always been his wife since we got married."

I explained about the stories of her leaving or being murdered.

She gasped and then broke out in a sputter of laughter. "Nosey busybodies with nothing better to do than gossip." She laughed again and it was a good sound, not mean at all. "So, did you break in here expecting to find a body or, maybe, some treasure Jim had accumulated?"

There was no way around it. I had to tell her the whole story of how and why I'd been delegated to sneak into her house and ferret out her husband's secrets. When I finished Mrs. Brandt grinned and asked, "Your throat as dry as mine after all this talkin'?"

I was parched, but I didn't figure it came from talking. I nodded.

"Well you go on downstairs to the kitchen. There should be some soft drink in the refrigerator. You bring us up a couple bottles and I'll tell you a thing or two about my husband which you can take back to your friends and whoever else you choose to tell."

I could have run off then. But she'd sparked my curiosity and I was anxious to hear what Mrs. Brandt had to say. I brought the drinks as she'd requested and sat down next to her again.

After a couple swigs of RC Cola (right out of the bottle like any kid would have done), Mrs. Brandt fixed me in her sight and told her story. How she'd been taken with health problems that confined her to her bed and how Mr. Brandt had been taking care on her ever since. "Like any decent husband would," she said. "Jim is a private and proud man. He's not the kind to go advertising our problems to others. He does his work and he minds me. We married for better or worse. If it had been him took sick, I'd be doing the same for him as he does me.

"Jim Brandt is no murderer. He's a fine man. And people who spread those rumors about him just because he didn't blabber to them about our troubles—well, they should be ashamed of themselves."

I saw there were tears glistening in her eyes and I felt ashamed for the things my friends and I had thought about her husband. She patted me on the shoulder then. "You'd best run along home now," Mrs. Brandt said. "Just one thing I want you to remember, boy. Things aren't always what people say they are, and you shouldn't judge people without knowin' all the facts."

"Yes, ma'am," I said and started for the door.

"Nick," she called after me.

I turned.

Mrs. Brandt gave me a big grin. "It was nice talkin' to you, Nick. Your mother and me used to talk a lot over the back fence. You tell her, she has a mind to, it'd be all right if she came over and knocked on the door sometime. You're the first company other than Jim I've had in a long while."

Karen Shepherd

This Box

I wanted to leave it unopened,
keep it on the doorstep to be stolen,
let it get rained on or rot in the summer heat.
I don’t know who delivered it.
I contemplated giving it to someone else,
blowing it up or dumping it in the creek.
But I knew it would only be re-sent.
So, I brought it inside,
set it on the kitchen table, took the scissors from the knife block.
I felt the blade puncture the tape
before I opened the flaps.
I didn’t have to lift the contents out,
they spilled and overtook the room.
I breathed it all in,
let it enter my lungs and push through my blood,
weight my bones, flood every organ.
I let it finally occupy be.
And then it slowly drained out
and I heard the windchime in the garden,
the maple branch tapping the window,
the gate swinging back open.

Keb Burns

A Christmas Gift of Rubber Bands

Mom stood by the open car door, shielding her new bouffant hairdo from the rain with a thin plastic hood, the kind that folded up into a tiny bag, and which you kept in your purse for emergencies. Her breath came out like fog in the cold. "Keep the door locked and don't open it for anyone. Understand? And don't touch the gear shift. You could knock it out of gear and the car would roll." In those days, all cars had standard shift. They also had tail fins. With Sputnik and President Kennedy's ambition to go to the moon, cars were designed to tap into the consumer's fascination with rockets. Mom's warning was a regular spiel after I became old enough to prefer staying in the car to the boredom of walking around the grocery store with her. I rolled my eyes to remind her that I'd heard it a million times. I was ten, for heaven's sake; I knew the drill.

The evening was wild and bitter. I was glad when the door slammed, shutting out the cold, muffling the wind, allowing the patter of rain on metal and glass to fill my ears. Red taillights and yellow fog lights made wet pebbles of color on the windows. As it was the height of rush hour, I knew my mom would be in the store for quite a while. She would be waiting in a long line with all the other people who, like her, were wearing suits rumpled by a long, weary workday. I had time to play.

Oh, such delicious drama! I was riding out the storm in the radio room of a ship, wondering how long I could swim should she go down. "Keep that May Day going on the radio!" "Aye, Aye, Captain! May Day, May Day!" I called into the imaginary mic in my hand. I pretended my school uniform was sailor's garb and the notebook papers with scribbled homework were maps and navigational charts. I had recently become an avid reader of adventure stories. I couldn't wait to grow up and have "Real Life" adventures like the ones in my books. I did not know that at that moment *real* "Real Life" was about to intrude into my make-believe world.

It was then that I saw him, a teenage boy, sitting under the overhang of the store, which only partly sheltered him from the rain, along with a row of fresh-cut Christmas trees and bundles of firewood. I froze for a few seconds, staring. Then I climbed over the seat from back to front and wiped my coat sleeve across the windshield to get a better view.

I didn't know what was wrong with him. I only knew he could not control his movements. He sat in a wheelchair by the door of the supermarket with a stack of newspapers on a metal TV tray next to him. On his lap, braced by one trembling hand, was a cigar box without a lid. His head bobbed and jerked, his tongue popped in and out of his mouth and an occasional smile, turned grimace, turned smile again, erupted on his face as he tried to get the passing shoppers to buy his newspapers. Apparently, he could not speak. I watched, transfixed, as people came in and out of the store without stopping. Some broke stride for a second, long enough for a fleeting look of disgust or pity or guilt to flash across their faces. Where was my mother? There

she was, heading for the same door, walking towards him. She would stop and buy a paper from him. I knew she would.

Suddenly, the boy's arm flailed uncontrollably and hit the cigar box, sending the box and all its contents flying all over the pavement. Several coins rolled like wheels and disappeared under parked cars. The paper bills floated then sank in the puddles of rain. A look of agony crossed his face. I wiped the steam off the windshield again and peered through the raindrops. Many people passed by, but my mother stopped. I saw her pick up the empty box. Then, in spite of being elegantly dressed and in high heels, she went down on her hands and knees in the greasy puddles (tearing her stockings) and gathered up every coin and bill she could find. She even reached under the cars. After she found all the money, she put it back in the box and put the box back in the boy's lap. She did not buy a paper. Without speaking to him, she walked into the store.

I was proud of her for helping but also disappointed. I was sure she would say some comforting words, pat him on the shoulder, buy ten papers and give him all her grocery money besides. That's what I wanted her to do, anyway. But she didn't. I didn't feel like playing anymore. I sat still and watched.

Shortly, much too shortly for the grocery list she had, my mother reappeared at the boy's side with a tiny brown paper sack. She pulled out a plastic package, tore it open with her teeth, reached in and grabbed a handful of rubber bands. She took the box from his lap and balanced it on the arm of his wheelchair, using several rubber bands to secure it to the armrest. Then she balled up her hand into a fist and hit the box a few times. It shifted a bit, so she dug out several more rubber bands and made the box more secure. Another round of box-hitting proved that nothing would move it.

Then she patted him on the shoulder, spoke to him kindly, bought a paper from him and chatted with him a bit. He could not speak but the look in his eyes was indescribable. She might have been an angel from heaven for the glow on his face. After a while she went back into the store and did her shopping. When she came out of the store, she spoke to him once again, smiling, and gave the box one more wiggle to make sure it was still secure. I watched her as she approached our car. She still had a smile on her face. When she got into the car with brown paper bags of bread, milk and dinner, she didn't mention the incident. I, on the other hand, was eager to know all about it. "What's wrong with him?" I asked. "You saw that?' she asked. I think she hoped I hadn't. I'm pretty sure she thought I was too young to understand. But she had a parenting philosophy about such things. She believed that if we were smart enough to ask tough questions, we were old enough to know tough answers.

"He has cerebral palsy" she said and then gave a brief description of the condition. She explained that there is no cure. Then she changed the subject to let me know that she didn't want to talk about it anymore. For some reason, she seemed a bit angry. She drove us home and no more was said about it.

Winter passed and the February narcissus were in bloom. Mom and I were once again in the car, in front of the same door of the same supermarket. There were pansies, baskets of potato

sets, and onion starts for sale in the place where the boy had been. As Mom started to open the car door, I ventured to say that I remembered the boy in the wheelchair and often wondered how he was doing. She was silent for a bit, lost in thought. Finally, she turned to answer me. She too had been unable to dismiss him from her mind. It seems that a week after the incident, she dropped by the grocery store and asked to see the store manager to see if there was anything she could do for the boy. "No, no, he's fine" the manager told her. He knew the family. "Thanks for asking, but he is well cared for."

It seems the boy was born into a loving family who believed that having a handicapped child was as much of a joy and privilege as having a healthy one. "He wasn't selling papers out of need" the manager said. On the contrary, to express his gratitude for the love his parents and siblings had given him, the boy wanted to buy Christmas presents for them with money he earned himself. After discussing various ideas with his parents, he decided he should sell newspapers. His parents arranged it with the local newspaper and the grocery store manager. That Christmas, for the first time in his life, the boy had the dignity and joy of buying presents for his family with his own money, which he earned by sitting in the bitter cold on a rainy day and exposing himself to the unpleasant reactions of strangers.

I was quiet as I pondered that for a minute. All kinds of thoughts and feelings were racing around inside of me. After a while I said to my mother, "That was a really good thing you did."

She shrugged. "I would want someone to do it for me. Wouldn't you?"

"Yes." Then, treading carefully, I said "You seemed really angry at the time. Why?"

"I *was* angry." She said. "I saw all those people walk by and I saw the looks on their faces." And then she pointedly changed the subject to one of her favorite topics: keep-the-door-locked-and-don't-touch-the-gearshift. She never spoke of the boy again.

All these decades later, I can't remember what presents I received for Christmas that year, but I vividly remember the gift that boy gave to his family, the gift my mother gave to the boy, and the gift that both of them gave to me, a "Real Life" example of the only life worth aspiring to: not a life of adventure but a life of love.

Kylie Ayn Yockey

Interstellar

Can you imagine it
    The sunlit scene of you and me
Can you see it in your mind's eye
    A moon and a star meeting
It's on the cusp of my rotation
Intersecting somewhere in your ellipses
    But the planets have aligned already
Too much gravity in between

Marie Anderson

Sharp Curves Ahead

"For Christmas," Lottie said to her husband, "I want us to start trying. I want to throw out my diaphragm and foam."

Charles kept his eyes on the snow-covered highway, but Lottie saw his hands tighten on the steering wheel, his knuckles popping white.

"Get back down to your sexy fighting weight," he said. "And then we can talk about making babies. Calories in. Calories out. Simple as that."

Lottie sighed, looked out the window at the waves churning Lake Michigan. Thanksgiving was not the day to start a diet. She was 29. They'd been married six years.

A few hours later, sitting around the long table in her in-laws' dining room, her mouth full of pumpkin pie (her second piece) homemade by her mother-in-law's live-in housekeeper, Charles whispered in Lottie's ear, "Ten pounds. Just 10 pounds. That's what I want for Christmas from you."

After Thanksgiving, she tried. She gave up Starbucks lattes and Oreo cookies and at work swapped salads for her usual grilled cheese sandwiches from her company's cafeteria. But two days before Christmas, her curves were still strong, and the scale still stubbornly showed 145 pounds on her five-foot-five frame. So, she rushed into the Burberry store on Michigan Avenue and paid $400 for a tan trench coat for Charles.

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On Christmas morning, he handed her a little stuffed dog, white, tied with a red ribbon. Attached to the ribbon, an envelope.

Lottie felt hopeful butterflies flutter in her stomach. A handwritten note? Telling her that yes, toss the foam? Ditch the diaphragm? Let's make a baby?

She smiled at Charles, trembled her fingers under the envelope's flap.

Inside was a gift certificate, a $400 certificate to Shear Magic.

"You'll love this salon," Charles said. The coat she'd given him puddled at his feet. He hadn't tried it on.

"Ali suggested it," Charles said. "She says it's the only place in Chicago that specializes in the Bio Ionic method of thermal hair retexturizing." He refolded the Burberry coat and put it back in the box under the Christmas tree.

"Your secretary," Lottie murmured.

"No," Charles said. "Not since summer. Didn't I tell you? Ali upgraded. She got her paralegal certification in September."

"Good on her," Lottie said, despite annoyance stinging like a wasp.

Ali was like most of the support staff hired by Charles's law firm. She was slim everywhere but her bosom. She was young, smart, and blonde, her brown eyes soft as a cow's, and her long hair straight and shiny as a searchlight.

Lottie had met Ali at various law firm functions over the past year. Ali was always polite Their last encounter, she'd looked Lottie right in the eye and praised. "If I wasn't so worried about skin cancer, I'd be joining you at the tanning salons."

Charles, approaching with chardonnays for Lottie and Ali, chuckled. "You can't blame tanning salons for my wife's color," he said.

"Blame?" Lottie murmured, but Charles and Ali had both turned away to greet a senior partner.

It was true. Her color didn't come from tanning salons.

But Charles was *blaming* her for that?

• • •

Six years earlier, driving from Chicago to Vegas for their honeymoon, she and Charles had stopped to visit her grandma in a Nebraska nursing home.

It was Charles's first time meeting her maternal grandmother. Photos filled one wall of her grandmother's tiny room.

Charles looked at the largest photo: Lottie's grandma, a young bride standing next to a seated, mustached man wearing an ill-fitting tuxedo.

"Her second husband?" Charles whispered to Lottie.

Lottie frowned. "No. Why would you think that?"

"Was your mom adopted?" he asked.

Lottie felt her frown deepen. "No. Why would you think that?"

"He's black."

Lottie shrugged. "Yeah, my mom's dad was part black."

"You never said."

"I never thought to say. I mean, does that matter to you?"

"No, of course not."

• • •

Now Lottie stared at the gift certificate for Shear Magic. "The Bio Ionic method of thermal hair retexturizing?" she echoed.

"You're always needing to spend so much time with your hair iron," Charles said. "Straightening all the kinks out of your hair. You won't need to do that anymore to keep your hair straight. And the extra time you'll gain, you could use to walk to work. Shrink those curves a little faster."

Lottie looked at their Christmas tree instead of Charles. The tree was metallic white. Red glass apples hung from every branch. It filled the bay window in their living room, blocking her view of the elevated tracks across the street and a Montessori school, pre-K through grade four.

It was the condo's price, high ceilings, and maple floors that had appealed to Charles. But it was the school that had attracted Lottie. She'd envisioned skipping across the street, still in pajamas, coffee in hand, escorting their child to class.

• • •

Charles made the appointment for her.

"I got you in on Monday. You'll just have to leave work a few hours early. They had a last-minute cancellation. Otherwise, the next earliest appointment is not until March! Talk about timing! You'll have your hair fixed in time for New Year's Eve!"

"Timing certainly is everything," Lottie agreed. She was thinking of her basal body temperature charts which tracked ovulation. She was hoping that with soon-to-be (hopefully) shrunken curves, Charles would agree to start baby-making.

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Snow-lined the sidewalks and curbs in black-crusted heaps. The fresh snow Charles and Lottie had stridden through after Midnight Mass three days earlier now lumped ugly as dirty laundry. Wind pushed against Lottie, tangling her hair.

She hadn't bothered subduing her wild hair before work—after work it'd be bio-ionicized into perfection. Charles was right. She'd had more time this morning, time to walk now through icy muck, 16 blocks to her Fund Office.

Her stomach rumbled. Breakfast had been only an obedient bowl of oatmeal sprinkled with four docile raisins. She strode past the neighborhood bakery without pausing to admire the window display of muffins and cookies. Her nose dripped. She unzipped her coat pockets, reached for a tissue, found only the little stuffed dog Charles had tied to her Shear Magic certificate. She'd perch the pup on her work desk.

"Excuse me, miss?"

A black woman called from the curb.

"You got a minute?"

The woman stood by the open trunk of a dirty white Cadillac. Its trunk overflowed with boxes of peanuts, candy, cigarettes, gum. Through the car's broken back window, Lottie saw cages, the kind pet stores use to confine dogs or cats.

"Actually," Lottie said. "I'm kinda in a hurry. I have to get to work."

"You be passing that building? The high rise one?" The woman pointed to a ten-story brownish crumbling rectangle a half-block ahead. Like a wart on an otherwise smooth face, the

building blemished the rest of the block: rehabbed gray stones secure behind wrought iron fencing, occupied by mostly white, high-earning, child-free, couples.

Chicago's north side neighborhoods were that way: poverty next to posh. The poor displaced when the mayor demolished the public housing high rises and moved the residents into scattered site "Section Eight" housing in solid neighborhoods, giving them federal vouchers for rent.

"Fucking Section Eighters," Charles often complained.

"I'm waiting on my girl, see," the woman continued. "She had to run in quick, use the facilities, you know, but I been waiting a while now. She got some issues with me right now, you know, so I expect she probably be taking her time and what not while I'm waitin' on her out here. So, if you see a little girl in a red snowsuit inside that building? Got a dog on a leash? You tell her go on out help her mama carry in this stuff. You do that for me?"

Lottie nodded and hurried away.

She stopped at the building, did indeed see through glass doors a little girl. Chubby, maybe ten, her hair corn rowed and festooned with red and green beads. She held a leash attached to a bull terrier.

A gray-haired black man was patting the girl's shoulder. A priest's collar circled his neck.

The girl was crying.

Lottie looked back at the woman. She was leaning against her car, guarding her treasures, while here, inside this Section Eight building, her little girl was being, what? Comforted? Hit on by some pervert priest?

Lottie plunged through the doors, squished her boots across a gray rubber floor. Brown water stains splotched the low ceiling. Pine scented the air. A fat green Christmas tree filled a corner, strung with paper snowflakes and photos of smiling children, all black. Against the far wall, multicolored beads covered a doorway. Over the door, a sign:

Prayer Warriors Salvation Church
The Reverend Dr. Charles Dwight Raven, Pastor
Services Daily

"Excuse me!" Lottie approached the girl and the man—the Reverend Raven? Behind the man, a wheel-chaired woman trembled. Drool leaked from her mouth.

"Good morning, sister." The man smiled. A gold tooth glinted.

The dog sniffed Lottie's boots. It had no ears that Lottie could see. A red scar pimpled its chest.

"Honey, your mom is waiting for you. She needs you to help carry stuff in?"

The girl burst into fresh tears and pressed her face into the man's white shirt.

"Ah, her mom." The man shook his head. "O'sheron is worried for her dog. Last night she lost the brother of *this* dog."

Over the girl's head, he extended his hand. "I am the Reverend Dr. Raven."

His hand swallowed Lottie's.

"My wife, Serene." He nodded at the wheel-chaired woman.

The woman managed a smile. She whispered something unintelligible.

"Serene suffered a stroke," the Reverend said. "You must be one of our new residents? I don't believe I've seen you here before."

O'sheron emerged from the Reverend's hug. She looked at Lottie.

"Me? Oh, no. No. I don't live here. I was just passing by on my way to work. I don't live here." Lottie felt her cheeks flame.

The Reverend nodded. Behind him, his wife was either laughing or having a seizure. The Reverend turned, lifted a folded towel from his wife's lap, and gently blotted drool from her chin.

"I'm sorry you lost your other dog," Lottie said to O'sheron. *Would Charles take care me of I suffered a stroke?* she wondered.

The little girl sniffed. "She said it be a accident. She *said*." Fresh tears bubbled.

Lottie found herself offering her floppy stuffed puppy. "Well, here you go. I hope you find the dog you lost."

O'sheron's eyes widened. A dimple winked. "Thanks!" She cradled the stuffed dog in her palm. "He cute. He one of those mini-flops." She looked at the Reverend. "They hard to get."

The Reverend smiled at Lottie. Something fluttered in her throat. "Bless you, young sister, who was just passing by. Bless you."

Lottie patted O'sheron's shoulder. "Sure. No problem. I can tell my little pup will have a good home with you, honey."

Lottie turned to leave, but then remembered the mother. "Oh! But now maybe you better head out and help your mom?"

To Lottie's surprise, the little girl shook her head so hard her beaded hair whirled and clacked across her face. Fresh tears brimmed her eyes.

The Reverend motioned Lottie to follow him to the front door. "I think we will not worry about helping the mother right now," he said. He leaned down so that his face was nearly level with hers. His breath smelled like sweet oranges. "Her business is dog fights. So we will not worry about helping her just now."

"Dog fights?"

A phone rang. The Reverend pulled a cell from his pocket. He looked at the screen, frowned. "I am sorry, sister, this is a call I have to take. Thank you for your kindness to O'sheron."

Lottie nodded and went outside. She looked back at the woman, still leaning against her car, now smoking a cigarette. The woman waved and shouted. "You find her?"

Lottie shrugged, lifted her arms in a "sorry" gesture, and walked on. The woman hollered, her voice screeching outrage.

Lottie turned the corner, wind whipping her hair around her face. For a moment, all she could see was coarse brown hair. She could no longer hear the woman. She recalled the Reverend's voice, so deep. A beautiful voice.

Sister, he'd called her.

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She left work early and treated herself to a taxi to Shear Magic. Inside the salon, a tall, cream-skinned young woman wiggled up to Lottie. A name tag bounced on her right breast: *Melanie/ Hair Chemist*. Short yellow hair spiked from her head. A purple cross tattooed her left arm.

"You must be our Lottie!" Melanie exclaimed.

Lottie agreed and presented her gift certificate.

Melanie squeezed the certificate into the rear pocket of her tight red capris. "I remember your hubby. What a sweetie! And a hunkalicious, too, you lucky gal!"

Melanie plunged her hands into Lottie's hair. "Follow me, hon," she chirped. Her voice was soft. "We'll show you the way to beautiful hair salvation."

Lottie frowned. *Salvation*? Salvation was in a little church in a crumbling Section Eight apartment building. Salvation had nothing to do with hair. Blasphemy. Lottie suddenly felt the meaning of that word.

She followed Melanie down a long aisle, past chairs occupied by chattering women in various stages of hair salvation. Young stylists in tight capris and bright tank tops chewed gum and chattered with their ladies while wielding scissors and combs.

Melanie ushered Lottie into a small room. A TV dominated one wall. Lottie looked at her reflection in its glossy black screen. Her wild hair stormed from her head like a thunder cloud.

"Good Lord," Lottie said. "I look like I've just stuck a fork into an outlet."

"Well, hon, you'll be kissing that fork goodbye," Melanie said. "But first things first. There's a little video we have our clients watch before they start the process. You'll see highlights of what you can expect during your three-hour session today.

Melanie dimmed the lights and motioned Lottie into a white leather sofa. A young woman with bubbly orange hair entered and handed Lottie a glass of white wine. She set down a platter of cheese and crackers on the coffee table in front of Lottie.

"Sit back, relax, and enjoy," Melanie said as she exited the room.

The TV hissed on. Lottie sipped wine, ignored the food, and learned she'd be shampooed, conditioned, and creamed with a "patented re-texturizing cream." Next, blow dried with a patented Bio Ionic blow dryer, ironed with an Ion Re-texturizing flat iron, rinsed again, shampooed, conditioned, vent brushed, and blow dried yet again. Then, she'd "enjoy" a final session with a flat iron. A black woman smiled from the screen; her long hair as smooth as her high-cheek-boned face. From a velvety voice, she purred:

"You can't wash your hair, ponytail it, wear a headband or barrettes, or even tuck it behind your ears. Even though your hair will be straight, the chemicals need to set, and you don't

want to do anything to dent it. Then you return for another shampoo, blow dry, and flat iron service, but after that, and here's the great part, it should take you about ten minutes of blowing after you shampoo to keep your hair straight. Not the hour or more it probably used to take! Just remember, you'll need to commit to this service. Your hair will still keep growing out kinky, so every four months or so, you'll get the whole re-texturizing service again."

The TV screen faded to black. Melanie and two other hair chemists entered the room. One turned off the TV, one turned on the lights. Lottie once again stared at her frizzy-haired reflection in the glossy black TV screen.

Melanie carried an open bottle of chardonnay. Lottie smiled and held up her empty glass.

"Ready, hon?" Melanie asked as she splashed wine into Lottie's glass.

Lottie slugged down the wine and nodded.

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Forty-five minutes later, Lottie exited the salon. She was pleasantly buzzed from the wine. Wind rushed behind, pushing her forward.

Lottie spread her arms, running, laughing. Her briefcase, slung over her shoulder by its long strap, bounced against her legs like it was applauding her.

She slowed to a walk. Other pedestrians huddled and hurried through the cold. It was just after five, and office workers streamed from buildings and clogged sidewalks. But Lottie did not feel the cold. She felt light, free. She ran her fingers through the short springy curls that hugged her head like a crown.

"My curves keepin' me warm," she murmured.

A simple cut had taken only $100 from the gift certificate. She'd cashed out the surplus. She had $300 in her coat pocket.

She spun around, ignoring the puzzled looks of her fellow pedestrians rushing along Michigan Avenue. She smiled at a street musician by a Walgreens who stopped blowing into his clarinet long enough to belt out, "Right on, sister!"

She stopped suddenly, causing pedestrians to swerve around her. She felt like Moses parting the Red Sea.

She plucked a twenty from her pocket and dropped it through the slot in a box next to the musician.

"Bless you, Sister," the musician said.

"You too, Brother," she replied.

She resumed walking briskly, curving flawlessly through tiny openings in the mass of humanity.

Would the Prayer Warriors Salvation Church be open now? She'd find out the service times, drop the rest of her Shear Magic cash into their collection basket.

She'd offer Charles the option of attending services with her. Poor guy. He wouldn't see that curve ball coming.

She passed a McDonald's, a Starbucks, a Corner Bakery, but she kept walking. She'd had nothing to eat since breakfast, but she wasn't hungry. Not hungry all. She was full of sharp curves and sweet possibilities.

Martin Toman

Low Pressure

Phillip drove without thinking. He looked squarely ahead at the strip of bitumen, a single carriageway heading away from the small town where he worked as the senior engineer at the paper mill. The trees that bordered each side of the road waved their limbs in distress, the blasting gale that preceded an imminent storm whipping their bare forms. Every time Phillip passed a break in the trees, he felt his truck veer across the centre line, buffeted by the blunt fists of air that compressed through the gaps. All the while vehicles driving in the opposite direction barreled down against him. At their passing Phillip could feel their speed as his truck struck the low-pressure pocket left in their wake.

All day, the approaching storm front had framed the horizon. The weather bureau had forecast it would come down in the late afternoon, but as Phillip pulled off the road and onto his property it had yet to fall. In the last moments of daylight grey clouds scudded across the blue-black sky. The horizon was all darkness, and no stars would peep through.

When Phillip pulled into the shed, he turned off the engine and took the keys out of the ignition. Through the closed windows he could hear the wind pushing at the sides of the car port. He opened and closed the truck door without bothering to lock it and walked to the adjacent side entrance to his house. As he put his key into the lock the wind abated for a moment, as if holding its breath. He paused, the pinging sound of the engine popping in the shed as it cooled, the air cold even through his thick coat. And then the rain came, at first individual drops on the tin roof, and then merging to a steady din. The day long wind made a return, the gusts too lazy to go around him. Phillip opened the door.

His first thought upon entering was: *This isn't how I left it.*

Every workday morning when Phillip left his house, he had the habit of leaving it in a certain way: the toilet seat down, the bed made, books stacked neatly on the coffee table. Years ago, when he had first arrived in town, he had entertained the idea that he would bring women home with him. They'd walk in after he'd met them somewhere, the instant chemistry guiding them to the bedroom, where everything would be prepared for him to show off the way he lived, how female friendly he was. Eventually it became a habit, a checklist of things he would do before he went out. But in a town as small as the one where he worked there were few single women, and most of them were attached to his workplace. Phillip knew better than to mix his personal and work spheres. And as the local women were all paired off with local men, there had been no ladies to seduce in his well-kept bachelor pad, no spontaneous moments of attraction to turn his fantasies into reality. The closest he got to an available female company was Kelly, the hairdresser in town.

Despite his aspirations, loneliness was a natural state to Phillip. When he was a child he lived with his mother. He had no brothers or sisters, and had no memory of his father, who had left when he was a baby. His mother would walk him to the school gate and collect him from the

same spot in the afternoon. Phillip spent long afternoons in his room, school holidays in the park. He spoke to himself. He invented friends in his head for company.

Sometime since he had left this morning, there had been violence in his house. The sofa was overturned, a side table and lamp upset. The lamp was turned on, the naked globe exposed by the bent angle of the lampshade. Phillip paused at the front door, unmoving. The storm, metastasizing through the day, hammered on the roof. He tracked his eyes across the room. A picture on the wall had been shifted and hung evenly. Near the sink in the adjoining kitchen there was a dinner plate pool of blood and leading from it were more blood marks: boot prints, a trail leading to the corridor, a handprint on a wall.

Phillip followed the blood down the hall. He concentrated upon his senses: what he could see, what he could hear. The foot marks faded the further he walked from the kitchen, but the consistent trail showed him the way. The dark lines and drops curved around the corner to the bathroom. There was another pooling at the foot of the door. The handle was smeared with blood. He touched it with his finger. It came away tacky. He put his ear to the door, but he couldn't hear anything above the sound of the rain beating on the roof.

He opened it. A naked woman submerged in the bath. The bathwater bled out red. The woman's face unrecognisable in the murk, her shape amorphous in the semi-opaque water. Phillip walked towards her on legs that suddenly felt as if they were controlled by someone else. He dipped his hand into the bath and thought, lukewarm. The ground rushed up to meet him. Darkness.

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Phillip awoke in the midst of a dream. The room was still winter dark, but it felt like it was almost morning. He reached out to the side table where he normally kept his mobile, and found it plugged into its charger cable. He looked at the screen. Half of five. The wind that had excoriated the countryside yesterday had blown away. It was silent. In his mind's eye the remnants of his dream had already started to fade, but he could still remember what it had been about, even if those visions would soon disappear as most dreams do. Phillip had dreamt about his childhood cat.

When Phillip was twelve, his mother bought him the animal. A simple de-sexed male, grey and white. Denied the company of other children he poured his affection into the feline, projecting himself onto his soulless form. When the cat was seven, he escaped the house when Phillip was putting out the garbage bins. Out of his usual environment, bewildered by the bright streetlights and traffic noise, the cat ran out onto the road and was struck by a car. Phillip gathered the body from the gutter. Sharp teeth drawn back in grimace, a crescent spray of blood across the bitumen. Phillip buried the animal in the backyard in the darkness, wiping the tears from his cheeks with the back of his hand as he shoveled the dirt. His face became streaked with earth and cat blood, like war paint. Afterwards he went inside and ran himself a scalding hot shower. Under the water, he wept.

And then as the thoughts of the cat washed away, Phillip remembered. The body. The blood. Immediately his skin felt overly sensitive, prickly. His clothes and sheets were scratchy. He lay in the silence, desperately attuned to the noises of the house. Nothing. The rain had passed, and he could detect nothing in the still. He pulled back the covers and swung his legs out of the bed. He had to find out.

The bathroom was spotless. Everything was as he would normally leave it. He ran his fingers around the bath, it was dry and clean. The door handle shone its normal dull chrome. Phillip walked down the hall. The floor was clean, no marks visible on the wall. A stack of clean dishes from a meal sat in the drainer next to the sink, the white tiles blemish free. He bent down. Even the colour of the grout was consistent. His lounge was as normal, the furniture in its regular place, the lamp upright and in the centre of its side table, the picture straight.

Phillip took a glass out of a cupboard and filled it with tap water. He closed his eyes. *I must be losing my fucking mind.*

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Two hours later, as Phillip drove to work, there was standing water on the edges of the bitumen. It must have rained through most of the night. Washed out gravel from driveways had run into the roadway.

Phillip was first into the mill. He went to the office and checked his emails. There were more than usual, a few backed up from yesterday. Sometimes, the local server dropped out and there was a delay in correspondence getting through. He wrote his replies, and went down to the factory floor, started the machines, ran the safety checks, and filled out the compliance ledger. The first shift arrived, and he went back to the office and looked out the window. His staff were on board, machines ticking over, cutting, and sorting. Jenny, the second plant engineer and his understudy, was looking at him.

"You feeling ok, Phill?"

He glanced at her. "Why do you ask?"

"Yesterday, you know, when you left work, you said you weren't feeling well."

"I did?"

"Yes, you did. Are you ok now?"

Phillip ran his hand through his hair. His scalp felt sore, like every hair follicle was irritated.

"I had the strangest dream—well, actually two dreams. The second was about the cat I had when I was a kid. The first was so real I dunno, but it turned out to be nothing."

"I'm not surprised your dreams were freaky. When you left yesterday you said you had a migraine and were just going home to sleep it off. You looked out of it. I covered for you when you left. Nothing happened. It's all good."

"You covered for me?"

"Yes. You left early. You weren't well. But you're better now, yeah? Or do you want to take the day?"

"No, I'm fine, really. Just fine. Let's get about the day, eh? Paper and all that. Pressing, folding, cutting."

Jenny turned away. She bent over and put her lunch in the office bar fridge. Phillip thought to himself, *I'd rather take you home and press you up against something.*

The rest of the day passed without incident. The events of the night before seemed to take on more of a dream like quality as the day stretched out, the sharpness of the images blurring into a fog of unreality. By the time he finished up he was sure that he had imagined it. That he had driven home from work yesterday with a blinding headache, had an early dinner and went to bed to sleep it off. Except he couldn't remember doing any of that, and when he tried to recall anything of the previous evening, he felt queasy and hot, like he was nursing a brooding fever.

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Phillip arrived home from work in the deepening dusk. After the storm front of the day before, the sky patched out between isolated clouds and a bleary blue, as if it couldn't decide what mood it was in.

He stood at the side entrance and inserted his key into the lock and waited. He held his breath and opened the door. It was as he left it this morning. The air locked in his lungs escaped like an explosion. He leant against the doorframe and closed his eyes. *Some dreams are just dreams.* The rest of his night was unremarkable. The last thing he did before turning out the light was plug his phone into the charging cable. Outside the night was silent. All Phillip could hear was his own breath sliding in and out.

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Phillip woke under the brightening sky. His first sensation was cold and then the discomfort of the surface beneath his back. He propped up on his elbows and tried to get his bearings. He was lying in the tray of his truck. It was nearly light. He was parked down near the river, at the far end of his property. He could hear the sliding sound of the water passing through the river stones. He looked up. The fading stars stared down on him coldly. *What the fuck is going on?*

It was then that Phillip noticed the grey tarpaulin next to him. It was covering something about his size. The shovel from his shed was lying between him and the sheet of material: the lump.

Phillip leapt from the truck without thought, landing on the muddy grass of his paddock. He noticed that he was fully dressed. *Whatthefuckwhatthefuckwhatthefuck*. Phillip stared at the tarp. Even in the half-light it was unmistakable: a person-shaped lump under the sheet. He undid the latches at the back of the truck, lowered the rear, and flipped over the edge of the tarp. An

exposed naked foot, shin, calf muscle. Chipped blue green nail polish on the toenails. White skin, almost luminous in the dim.

Phillip grasped the tarp and flung it over, the material landing on the grass. A naked woman. Beautiful. Voluptuous. She lay on her back, arms by her sides, palms down. A deep gash under her chin to her ear but no signs of bleeding. He walked around the side of his vehicle and looked at her face. He knew her. It was Kelly, the hairdresser. She was the woman in the bath. It was her blood on the door handle, carpet, walls, and kitchen floor. Dead in the back of his truck, under his tarpaulin, with his shovel resting next to her, on his property. And then he realised it was no dream. He must have murdered her. He had done this. He had no memory of it, just a series of blank spaces over the last two days.

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Phillip pulled his truck down the road away from town. He was making every effort not to think. As the engine droned away under, him he concentrated on his breathing, searching for the point where one breath stopped, and another started but never finding that moment of stillness. The emptiness. He looked at his hands. There were traces of dirt under his fingernails, still there no matter how hard he had scrubbed. It was nearly dusk. He had spent much of the day burying Kelly near the river. He chose the nicest spot he could find. He had placed river stones on top of the disturbed dirt but was under no illusions that the grave would conceal her body permanently, but he felt he owed her the effort, nonetheless. When he returned the shovel to his shed, he found a bag with her clothing and shoes and a pile of bloody rags and cleaning products. His vacuum cleaner was also in there, the dirt canister full of dark fibers and dust. His phone had rung three times while he was digging: two calls from Jenny's extension at work and one from his own. He expected that he had maybe two days at most before Jenny or someone else made their way to his property to check on him. Phillip also assumed that people were searching for Kelly and that it wouldn't be long before someone made the connection.

So, Phillip drove. He harbored no hope of escape, but the thought of telling the police his story was unbearable. And then the shame of facing Kelly's family in court, admitting his guilt to the world.

There was no explanation that he could find. It was utterly inexplicable. He searched his mind for a memory, any recollection that would tell him the story of his actions. There was only the suspicion that there was another voice within him that knew what had happened. Another version of Phillip sleeping restlessly within the dark fugues of his existence, that was as much a part of him as any of his memories, any moment of his past. An imaginary friend that dreamt his own dreams. He hoped that there was only one story to tell, that there were no other graves scattered across his land, runaways and hitch hikers and prostitutes long since missing, now under his earth.

Phillip thought of the cat he had loved when he was a child, struck by a car and killed in an instant. The split second of fear the cat had felt before impact, and then the immediate darkness. He hoped that he would share such a moment when it came.

The truck chased its headlights into the dark. If Phillip had the eyes of a cat, he could have seen another winter storm gathering on the horizon, a cell of low pressure, soon to break.

Michael Blair

Division and Unity

What a silly little boy, slapping his little hands against the shallow water, creating a wave and pushing his pet green frog away from him. The tiny green frog took this opportunity to swim away from his owner, but the boy would bring him back over just to violently splash the water again. He would even drop his open-face hands right next to the frog to see if he would jump or have some other reaction.

"Can you please stop for a minute?" pleaded the frog. The boy slapped the water once more. "We've been doing this for a while, don't you want to take a break?"

"No!" exclaimed the boy. "I'm having too much fun!" His hands made harder impact with the water, releasing his frustration on the poor frog.

"Son!" hollered the boy's father. "Get your stuff and come inside for dinner."

"I'm not done yet!" the boy hollered back. "Can I come home later?"

"That was not a request," the father said unyieldingly. It was enough to get the boy to listen.

"Fine, I'm coming!" The boy's hands lunged towards the frog.

"Wait!" the frog yelled. "I know this has been a long time coming, but can you please let me go?"

"Why would I let you go now?" the boy questioned the frog.

"I'm tired of living in a tank and having you try to kill me in the river. I want a better life for myself, in the marsh, where the other frogs live."

"I can't do that!" the boy explained. "If you're not in your tank, then I can't play with you."

"Please! I'm begging you, let me go!" the poor frog restated.

"No!" the boy yelled with frustration. "Now stay still while I pick you up!" The frog was stunned. No matter what he said, the boy wasn't ever planning on let him go. So, the frog took the opportunity to jump out of the water and get away from the boy. The boy was confused.

"What are you doing? Get back over here!" He started to chase after his pet frog.

"That's enough playing around, get home, now!" yelled the father.

"Yes, father," the boy murmured with a frightened yet sad tone, knowing that he was going to lose his frog forever. With this amount of luck, the little green frog was grateful. He kept on hopping further and further until he saw something that astonished him; another frog. However, this frog wasn't like him, this one had a shade of brown to him and was hopping around the grass and dirt with further distance that he knew was possible.

"Hey, you!" the green frog yelled.

The brown frog stopped right where he was.

"Me?" he asked, confused.

"Yes! How are you able to jump all around the place with such distance?"

"What are you talking about?" the brown frog questioned. "All frogs can hop as far as I can."

"Really?" the green frog replied in astonishment.

Still confused, the brown frog responded, "Yes, how do you not know this?"

"I lived in a tank for most of my life," the green frog said, still surprised by how far the brown frog could launch himself. "I didn't get to see any other frogs, just humans!"

"That's sounds awful!" the brown frog asserted with pity and disgust. "How were you able to eat?"

"They dropped frozen flies for me," the green frog replied while trying to match the brown frog's pity.

"Heh, at least it wasn't all bad," the brown frog scoffed, trying to lighten the mood.

"Perhaps," the green frog responded with a slight smile. Suddenly, he noticed something behind the brown frog. It was a creature that came ever closer. It was bigger than the both of the frogs and had a bloodlust and hunger in its eyes. The green frog had to warn the brown frog quick.

"Look out!" the green frog shouted with fear. The brown frog looked behind himself with his eye widen and his mouth gapped open. It was a snake looking for its next meal. The brown frog jumped as quickly as he could, but the snake was even quicker. It got its poisonous fang in the poor brown frog, paralyzing him, but not killing him just yet.

"Oh, no!" the brown frog whaled with pain.

"This can't happen to me, not now!" The green frog was traumatized.

"What do I do?" The snake was about to fit the rest of the brown frog in its mouth.

"Listen!" the brown frog spoke with frantic speed, "Run away, it's too late for me! Just get away to a safer place while you still can!" Without hesitation, the green frog hopped as far as his short hops can carry him away from the snake. He did not stop hopping until he became tired and hungry. It was then that he noticed some flies that flew about. He tried to catch some, but with very little practice at eating flies while they were in the air, he couldn't get any. This was horrible. How could he survive in the wild if he couldn't do what most frogs could? Life was easier with the boy. There weren't any other predators to deal with except for that boy. The green frog had made a hard decision that would affect his way of life forever. He hopped all the way back to the boy's yard where he was playing and apologized.

"I'm really sorry for leaving you! I promise I will never do it again for the rest of my days."

"Oh, little froggy," the boy responded with joy, "I can't wait to get back to playing with you again!"

Purbasha Roy

Algebra

We wait on either sides of algebraic expression
our variables holding unknown shapes
of all highway metaphors
reflections of what we learnt of distance
sometimes to ease our entanglements
we revise edges to shrivel
something drifting our oblivious expansion
metamorphosed to a black hole
none of our versions wanting to abandon me
compressing our imagined sequels
into singularities of loneliness
when random frequencies of wind
get drawn towards winter gravity
shadow lines of our shapes shall rebound
the way I close doors plunged
to meanings of unfamiliarities
I was told our futures are our arriving pasts
we keep holding onto

Scott Wiggerman

Process, Not Product

Start with a setting. A forest
in the mountains east of Albuquerque
will do. Add a sprinkle of moonlight
straining through the pinnacles of pines
as they shift and swoosh like fields.
And enough breeze to catch movement
around you—an animal skittering
across the forest floor, a branch falling.
Throw in a back story. A retreat
from an overbearing boyfriend. Time
to think things through. Blend in
a twist. A scruffy stranger
who approaches your camp site
at dusk. His leer as he fondles
a knife. The mindless run, the pure
escape to directionless darkness,
flickering shadows circling about.
Include a stumble—and blood, dribbling
down your head, your gashed hand.
Mix in a mountain lion—or even
just its low roar from a distance.
Scatter in a parcel of prayers.
It's going to be a godforsaken night,
and the end is entirely up to you.

Tucker Lieberman

Eternity on Endless Loop

When one current pushes you down
and another pushes you up,
I am swimming under you to save you,
and I am the current pushing you up.

The amount of the exhaustion is yes.
The will to persevere is yes.
Give me certainty that this is the moment.
Give me patience to sweat it out.

Build me in sand and then uncastle me.
Let my silence speak consent.
Make me the lamp lifted by your door.
Let me in, turn me off, turn me out.

Give me a shell in which to enclose your voice
when you feel you are ready to trade it.
Give me the memory of whose voice it is.
Give me the willingness to return it unasked.

Let your light into the world.
Let the current bring you up.
Don’t look back to see if it is I.
Don’t listen to the tape.

Give me the adulthood to stay awake while you sleep.
Give me the liberation not to be mad.
I am eternity on endless loop.
I snip the tape, hearing only waves.