

# *New Haven Review*



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# Business Trip

**BD Feil**

I asked well  
wasn't it a pain travelling so much  
when we were young  
when your family was growing  
when your wife waited at home  
for your return and he said  
yes at least I think he said  
yes and I just didn't drop it  
in the top of my head like a kiss  
on the forehead the way a father  
does a son sometime out of the wide ocean blue  
and he said well  
it replaced a different kind  
travelling did  
and I watched him  
not sure what he had meant  
but sure he had meant it  
he meant travelling replaced a different kind of pain  
a pain of of daily courtesy  
a pain of unerring constancy  
a pain of repeated devotion  
he was talkative at least  
I think he was and it just wasn't me  
then he said the goddamned pain of love  
and there was a pause or was it  
silence but yes  
to answer your question he said  
yes  
travelling was a bit of a pain now that you ask

# The Legend of the Little Niangua

*True tales of an East Kansas outlaw*

**John Kuebler**

## **1. The Man His Self**

He'd be on the river right now, Wilde told me, but he worked 8 hours yesterday and made 140 cash and decided to stay home and fix a flat tire and paint the south side of his garage instead. He'd planned to drive down to very southwest Missouri to check out a river (Indian Cr.) and a Civil War battlefield (Newtonia), but he chose instead to be a homebody and get some shit done.

"I haven't been over to the Homo Depot yet or the Blowes," he says, "but my friend swears by this Behr paint. It's 35 or 38 dollars a gallon, but he says it's worth that because you'll never have to paint again."

The man we call Wilde is a wiry fucker, ponytailed and goateed. He's an irregular and decidedly non-union carpenter picking up odd jobs from a guy he knows in Topeka who owns a few properties, though Wilde is a framer by trade and officially retired (at 55). Wilde on unions: "You gotta answer to all those union guys. Shoot, I don't need another boss." Last few jobs include building a wheelchair ramp off some guy's front steps, breaking up a sidewalk and repouring concrete, replacing the soffit and fascia on roof overhangs and slapping on paint—turd polishing, Wilde calls it. He drives little 4-cylinder Japanese pickups and pushes them well beyond 200,000 miles before he trades up for something newer. With gear under camper shell and canoe atop, he left his house in Perry, Kansas, every chance he's had the past 30 years to float the Ozark streams of Southern Missouri and Northern Arkansas, usually with a joint between his lips and a hit of acid dissolving on his tongue. He's been busted by cops on the road and even on the river itself, for possession and sundry other offences, but it has not deterred nor discouraged him from answering his calling. To say Wilde is a river rat is to state the obvious.

So fabled is he, his friend Stan Kramer dressed as Wilde one year for Halloween: mesh ballcap with fake ponytail, denim overalls, green rubber galoshes.

The rap sheet is lengthy. Here's a sampling:

Spring Break '78: pulled over in Garibaldi, Oregon, and charged with possession (pot). His friend Rob Scott (Great Bendian) was charged with weapons possession. They had a rifle and pistol on loan from another friend in Wichita. "For protection," Wilde says. Cost them \$55 and a night in the Tillamook County Jail.

Spring Break '80: Big Bend N.P. Texas. Possession (LSD). "The arresting ranger was named Billy Lumb," Wilde says. "I don't know why, but I've always remembered that name. They had to test the LSD, which was pretty comical. They were a real hillbilly crew down there." Wilde had to pay \$500 in 20-dollar travelers checks to bail his truck out, and he had to sign every one of them. "That was also the trip I ate a meatloaf in Laredo and got the flying shits."

April of '80: Wilde got a OUI in Lawrence for popping a quaalude. Plea bargained down.

January '88: Headed to the Eleven Point. Pulled over for speeding outside Jeff City on Friday. Cops discovered a baggie and a pipe. Got out of jail at noon Saturday. Missed one day of floating but made the next. Had to go back to Jeff several months later to Cole County Jail for a 5-day stint. Drove himself down and parked in a pay garage near the jail. "Played Spades with the brothers the whole time," he says. "I did my five days, got out of jail, got in my truck, and drove home."

"I never fucked with anybody," Wilde insists. "It's all possession stuff. Just some man-made law. It's not like it's written on a stone tablet."

**I met Wilde through Rusty Mather, my old boss at a Lawrence** BBQ joint called Buffalo Bob's Smokehouse. I did two tours at the Smokehouse ('97-'98 and '99-'00), and I got to know Rusty doing early morning prep while he pushed spuds (cut frenchfries) and manned the giant smoker with pitchfork in hand, soot-faced, jutting-jowled, a hairy-armed devil out of Dante's Inferno, stabbing the briskets. We wore plastic gloves for prep but everything had a little arm hair in it, particularly the whale sperm (coleslaw dressing), the fritter goo, and the smokey joe—a goulash of burnt ends and spare parts that also notoriously boasted through the years plastic gloves, chicken bones, paperclips, a writing pen, a woodscrew, a cassette tape, and other ephemera. Paraphrasing Zappa, Rusty croons: "Watch out where the huskies go, and don't you eat that smokey joe."

Rusty and Wilde met during college at KU when Wilde was bartending part time at 7th Spirit under the old Lawrence Opera House (now the band dressing rooms in the basement of Liberty Hall). Rusty was already working for Buffalo Bob by then and dating his future ex-wife. Wilde was pounding nails for a guy named Billy Greene, and they helped rebuild the Smokehouse after a fire in the spring of '80. Rusty and Wilde started the ball club "Mr. Cid" with some college buddies and settled in Lawrence, though Wilde moved across the Kaw to Perry in '89. Since Wilde's wife Marty passed away and Rusty got a divorce, the old friends have been hanging out more, meeting for happy hour at the West Coast Saloon or holing up in The Bunker (Rusty's Apartment) with a case of PBR. "Drinking at home is cheaper," Rusty says, "but at the bar you get to look at the pretty girls and listen to the chatter of the brainiacs, and that's why you pay the premium."

It is 14 miles from Wilde's place in Perry to The Bunker in Lawrence. "Two stop signs," says Wilde, "and one of those you can just sorta roll through." The Bunker is a homely little garden level condo just south of the turnpike. Worn-out and mismatched bachelor-pad loveseats and lamps, unkempt countertops, bare cupboards. Rusty

has the necessities though: dining room table and four chairs, radio/CD boom box, PBR in fridge, autographed glossies of Jamie Farr and Meadowlark Lemon on fridge, and even his own square of concrete back patio. And on out past a common greenbelt: basketball court, swingset, see-saw, a gurgling stream running through.

Rusty says of Wilde: “Saint Louis boy. Pounds nails for a living. Asthmatic. Train head. Civil War buff. Calls bowling ‘kegling.’ Pronounces scenic ‘skeenik.’ Got shot at by a land-owner one time on the river with Clay Henning, DeSoto boy.” Rusty is laughing now, recalling the story. Then his eyebrows raise and his smile slackens and he looks at me in earnest.

“Wilde is a very colorful character,” he says.

2. Encounters with the Anarchist

On the night Rusty gets the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue in the mail, Wilde cuts and divvies up six lines of coke and we each do a couple off buxom Kate Upton’s spellbinding cleavature and chase it with PBR. Somebody Wilde knows over at the West Coast where we’d met for a couple pre-Bunker beers had put this little baggie in his palm, and smoke em if you got em, init?

Rusty changes out *Excitable Boy* for *Some Girls*. He’s got CDs checked out from the library: Lucinda Williams, CCR, Roy Orbison, Alice Cooper, and Peter Wolf mixed in with his own collection. I load a bowl of Colorado Proud in Wilde’s antler pipe and pass it around. Wilde adds his research materials to Rusty’s bible (*Dr. Oz Hawksley’s Missouri Ozark Waterways*, revised 1989) and Rand McNally: a royal blue 200-page Top Flight 5-subject spiral notebook that contains his amended river log since ’85, with one addendum dated earlier:

April, 1979	Scholarship Hall Float Trip	15.7 miles
	Baptist Camp/ Akers Ferry	
	Current River	

and preceded by a ’74 or ’75 float with his older bro Neil and Neil’s frat brothers from the Meramec Community College (Missouri’s largest) in Kirkwood, and an even earlier Boy Scout float not included. Wilde sets up also a picture of Marty and a small turquoise urn containing some of her ashes. “My traveler,” he tells us, and presents us with gifts of turtles: a little black ceramic sea turtle for me (for my son) and a nice woodcarved box turtle for Rusty (for The Bunker), part of Marty’s thousand-piece turtle collection he’s giving away portions of. He’s also been trying to sell off some of Marty’s book collection: hundreds of paperbacks, “mysteries,” Wilde says, “and true crime, Green River Killer and stuff like that. She used to trade bags of that stuff.” The books are warped and curled with water damage. One proprietor asked, “What’d she do—read these in the shower?” No, she read them on the river. Perched in the bow of Wilde’s canoe, seldom ever dipping a paddle in, which is just as Wilde would have it.

At time of writing, Wilde has canoed 3,699.9 miles of mostly Ozark streams, 20 miles at a time, in pretty much just three boats:

The *Delta Dawn* (1,697 miles & counting), a hunter green fiberglass Old Town Discovery 169 (16’ 9”). Bought her from an outfitter on Beaver Creek with Marty in March of ’95, and floated her for the first time on the North Fork April 1 of that year with Marty, their dog Jake, their buddy Sloan, his girlfriend, her son.

The *Eclipse* (1,223.8 miles), a 17-foot aluminum Grumman Eagle. Rocksticker. Wilde and Neil re-riveted the transom. “Had a click chair mounted on the bow for Marty.”

And Dave Smith let him borrow a 15’ red Royalex Coleman canoe for several years. “I don’t remember how many miles I put on it, but it was a neat craft. I thought about buying one—you know Coleman’s made in Wichita. But they’re just too expensive is all there is to it.”

Me (moving to the fridge): “Beer? Wilde? Rusty? Beer?”

Rusty: “I’m ready.”

Wilde: “I can *be* ready.”

As is customary in the Bunker, I rotate stock—pulling our beers from the freezer and rotating three more in. We crack into the cold PBRs and return to our studies.

The original river log was written on paperclipped sheets of typing paper and stored in a manila envelope. Written, not typed. “I gave away my typewriter a long time ago,” Wilde says. Each entry contains the when, the who, the where, the what:

April 16, 1988	Me & Steve Conley; Sam, Rick & Bob Milton Ford/Hwy 215 Mulberry River	18 miles
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and sometimes one additional tidbit having to do with the why:

\*First green heron sighting 4/17

\*High-water float! Intense water

\*Lunar eclipse 3/23

\*Snowflakes as big as a Sacagawea dollar

amendments to the Hawksley bible (the how):

\*Roads aren’t numbered anymore. Take road off

Hwy 63 to Forest to Mineral.

\*Recommend access @ Big Eddy—6 ½ miles above

Milton Ford & Campbell Cemetery

\*Great access to Pedestal Rocks!

and gray admonitions (or the how not):

\*Took drink from Posey spr. & got ill.

which fit together in perfect historical gems:

May 27, 1989	Me & Marty & Jake	2.5 miles
	1st Access Rd. east of Roaring River St. Pk./ Munice Bridge; Munice Cemetery Roaring River	

\*River was so low we called it the Whispering R.

“I wisht I had written down more over the years,” Wilde says. “Like if there was a dogfight. Or if we saw a eagle or something.”

Rusty follows me out to my truck to fetch beer. There’s a car parked in Rusty’s space but no sign of Wilde’s truck. Rusty goes for a closer look and calls out “This is it. This is Wilde.” I walk over to where he’s pointing into the front seat and see an open Pabst can in a coozie in the cup holder.

Wilde explains that the sea green 2001 Chrysler Sebring is Marty’s old car. She saw it at the Topeka Mall and said, “Honey, I’ve got to have one.”

Rusty says, “It’s a nice lookin car, Wilde.”

“She bought it new and paid it off a year before she passed. It’s got a hundred’n’forty-five thousand and change on it now,” Wilde says. “I drive it around town. Try and save my truck for the river.”

Current truck is Lucille. Well, wait—here’s another list happen-  
ing. Wilde’s trucks:

Louise. “Baby blue ’83 Datsun pickemup truck. It had some kind of experimental engine that burned exhaust fumes or something or other. It had 8 plugs even though it was only a 4 cylinder.”

“Lucy was a black ’91 Mazda pickup. Test drove it with 10 miles on the odometer. Sold it with 279,000 miles. That was the truck Marty and I took on the um, the trip down in the desert Southwest, the um...”



Rust: "The Bur Oak Trail. The Ho-Bag tour."

Wilde: "The—yes, thank you, Rasta—the Ho-Bag tour. Gosh, let me see, Bryce, Zion, Cañon de Chelly, Calf Creek, the Bur Oak Trail, Mesa Verde, the trains. That was an expensive tour."

Lucille is current truck. Named after B.B. King's guitar. '98 Chevy S10—his first American truck. "Bought it on 9/11 strangely enough. Had 42K and change. Now has 188 and change."

Me: "What about the truck that got confiscated in Great Bend?"

Wilde: "It wasn't Great Bend, it was Big Bend. That's an important distinction—you might wanna write that down. Let me see..."

Wilde's first truck. '73 Datsun. "Bought it from some guy in charge of the parts desk at Tony's Datsun, which I don't think is around anymore. It's not Tony's anyhow. I'd sand out the rust spots and paint em primer brown till by the time I got rid of it it was mostly primer brown.

"To be honest with you I can't remember the name anymore. That one might've been Louise—no..."

"Well Wilde, you've named your trucks Lucille, Lucy, Louise," I say. "It's no damn wonder."

I tell them how my truck ('90 Ford Ranger, 117K) ran out of gas on the other side of Topeka driving out here. "Gas gauge is broke so I gotta use the tripometer."

Wilde (excited): "Tripometer you say."

Rusty: "You've got one too, Wilde."

(general chuckling)

W: "Wonder what mine reads."

(chortling)

R: "Wilde, Kuebler. Kuebler, Wilde. You know?"

Wilde and I were first introduced in Y2K at a Mr. Cid softball game at Lyon's Park in North Lawrence. Mr. Cid is the legendary

Busch-drinking, hard-hitting softball team that Wilde helped found but never apparently played for.

From the "City Slowpitch Report" on page 7 of the Lawrence "Urinal World" sports section:

#### EXPERIENCE PAYS DIVIDENDS FOR MR. CID

Named discreetly for their drug of choice with an apple-crate logo as their insignia, Mr. Cid played together almost 30 years, winning 5 league titles and boasting one undefeated season.

"I think you played in a game or two, Wilde," Rusty says.

"I remember shagging fly balls a few times at practices, but I don't think I ever played a game. I watched a lot of games though. Me and Marty. Drank a lot of beer. I always liked Lyon's Park because we could bring the dog or we could watch from the car and I could smoke a big fat one."

Rusty hitches a thumb at Wilde and crosses his eyes and gives me his look. "Spiritual leader," he says.

Wilde (holding in smoke): "That's right."

#### I ask about the ashes and Wilde tells me it's his travelling urn.

He's been spreading them on the 11-Point, the Current, a favorite spot on the Big Piney (MO), and some have been interred in the Topeka Cemetery next to her brother's remains. "Eight or nine scatterings," Wilde says, including at Turner Mill on the Eleven Point where he and Marty were married, even though Wilde had sworn off the Eleven Point after he got busted there in May 2000.

"Was that the LSD bust?" I ask. "Okay, Wilde," I say, bringing forth my notebooks, "can you fill in a couple holes in this rap sheet I'm compiling?"

Memorial Day weekend 2000. River rangers glassed them from the trees on a Sunday morning. Crept up to their camp in a johnboat and just about tackled Wilde when he tried to stash his pipe. First thing out

of Wilde's mouth: "How come you guys ain't in church?" With probable cause established, the rangers searched Wilde's gear and found, in addition to a film canister of weed, four hits of blotter acid in his river box. Cuffed and stuffed and put in the back of the johnboat. Marty had to steer their canoe to their takeout in Riverton.

His entry for the trip reads: So long Eleven Point.

"Man, Marty was pissed," Wilde says. "We boycotted the Eleven Point, and I didn't float it again til '09."

May '01—one year later, and two months before his August sentencing on the federal possession charge (4 years probation), returning from the Jacks Fork, pulled over just west of Mountain View for DWI. Arrested and taken to West Plains, MO.

"We swear we saw David Crosby on the Jacks Fork that time," Wilde says.

"What is it, Wilde?" I ask. "Is it bad luck?"

"Cop magnet," Rusty says, eyes crossed, lips curled, hitching his thumb in Wilde's direction.

Wilde: "No, you know, I think the odds just caught up with me is all. I've been floating since '85—five or six floats a year. That's a whole lot of driving."

For all his time spent bucking law and order (Rusty calls him The Anarchist) and inciting the ire of the courts, Wilde is touched by good fortune also. He's certainly had his share of—what can I call it?—sunshine on a dog's ass. It might even be possible to say Wilde has got out of more trouble than he's got in.

Late '80s. Returning from a Moody Blues concert at Sandstone, Wilde and Marty took the scenic route home through Tonganoxie. Stopped for a piss and a state trooper pulled up. "And he said, 'hey while you're at it, why don't you touch your nose, walk a straight line and all that.'" Wilde failed the field test but the cop let him go. "I think he knew he'd

broken protocol—he was a young guy. Shoot, he didn't even pull me over; I was already stopped."

Memorial Day weekend '97. Driving down to the Eleven Point to get married, he and Marty encountered a checkpoint on Hwy 13 near Humansville, pretended ignorance, and drove right through, Wilde's thumb over the pipe he was about to hit, a couple lines of coke laid out in the glovebox. Cops did not follow.

Same weekend—return trip. K10 between Eudora and Lawrence, Marty and Wilde consummated the marriage by the side of the road. Got pulled over 6 miles later in the Pricilla's parking lot at 23rd and Naismith for weaving in and out of the lane. "We were fairly toasted. Marty opened the door and a beer can rolled out." Cop let them go.

Wilde says, "I think most times I got in trouble I was being profiled. I wasn't doin nothin."

"Except exactly what they thought you were doing." (this from the peanut gallery)

"Well darn, you got me there."

### 3. First Day Out

Seven minutes after we put in, we take out on a gravel bar for a smoke. Wilde loads a bowl from a film canister and we partake. Fifteen minutes later we are all still very stoned and some of us surprised when Wilde in the lead boat takes out again. We smoke. We crumple up our empties and fit our coozies with fresh beers. In this manner we progress slowly down the river. The river being the Little Niangua, which once upon a time flowed into its bigger namesake, though they both now flow directly into the reservoir—the Lake of the Ozarks (formerly the Osage River). The we being five: Wilde, Rusty, me, Wilde's bro Neil Wisness who works for Missouri Tool in South County, St. Louis, and Rusty's bro Dave Mather who installs

fire suppression systems up in Olathe. Dave's got a wife and four youngins: three his and one step. Neil has two grown kids, son and a daughter, and an ex-wife who lives in his basement.

The weather is mild for early November in central Missouri. There is some faded color left in the surrounding hardwood forest—some yellow on the hickories, red in the dogwoods. “Very Vermon-ty,” Neil says. No Mr. Cid to trip out on this trip, but between the weed and the PBR our senses are sharpened nevertheless. Or dulled. Or altered anyhow. The river is low, but we are high.

Wilde on not dropping 'cid much anymore: “Mainly cuz I can't find it. But I notice now dinner gets cooked, the tent gets put up. It's maybe not such a bad thing.”

I am steering Neil's old boat, a heavy 17' 2 or 4" unnamed Grumman square stern, all aluminum. I'm calling it the gravel dredge, using it to cut new channels through the shallow rifles, building up speed, speed being figurative here, aiming for the tongue, the deepest trickle of water, paddle already digging into the gravel, paddle a prybar, skooching back and forth like I've got an itch, trying to keep my momentum. Inevitably I end up getting out of the boat and dragging it down the shoals.

My wet Chuck Taylors don't bother me much. I'm in quik-dry pants, flannel shirt and stocking cap. Flannel shirt over t. I'm not often without a t-shirt. This one is a Denver band t: the Legendary River Drifters. Appropriate enough. The others are similarly attired. Wilde in longjohns and overalls. He finds an owl feather on a gravel bar and sticks that in his ballcap. Dave in Keller Fire & Safety windbreaker, KU ballcap and sunglasses. Rusty looking like a park ranger in khaki pants, khaki button-up, and khaki ballcap. Neil wears a hunter orange version of his trademark Gilligan cap over his balding and wispy orange crown.

Text from Rusty:

Ginger or Marianne?

Results as follows (from 26 polled—river rats, Smokehouse kids, et al.):

Ginger: 6

Marianne: 19

including a vote from Neil, our first mate, a ginger himself, with one vote each from me for the answer:

both at the same time.

Solid answer, sure, but not as clever as Rusty's—

Q: Ginger or Marianne?

A: yes please

or Dave's one vote for Mrs. Howell.

The brothers Mather are paddling together now like old pros, and I am competent enough in the gravel dredge, but Wilde and Neil are the real boatmen. They are practiced and seasoned, conserving paddle strokes, moving their canoes at will and with ease. They take up their respective positions: Neil dropping back to the rear guard and Wilde in lead boat, standing up amidships to scout the shoals, the rest of the party snug inside the flotilla.

Coming through a long, slow, deepwater hole, sunken snags drawing their mossy fingertips along the hull of my ship, I spot movement on the steep, wooded bank—a member of the weasel family skittering down to the water. My eyes gone wide I call to the nearest boatman, whispering loudly: “Dave! Dave!” Dave turns his head my direction but does not answer me.

We take out on a long gravel bar opposite Lower Burnt Mill Cave, what Wilde calls the Bat Cave. There is an interesting steel structure here like a flue, meant to let bats in and keep us out, and Rusty and I paddle back over there to see if we can breach it, but we cannot, not

easily anyhow, and that is the idea behind the structure of course, it's done its job, and so we chuck firewood instead down the steep grade of the spring and paddle it back across the river. We are not to our planned takeout at Bannister Ford, but this gravel bar will do nicely for a first camp. Rusty on the beach says to Wilde, regarding his partially docked canoe: "These boats aren't going anywhere, are they, Wilde?"

Wilde: "Give it a yank for good measure, Rasta."

After a pause, someone says: "Did you hear what he told you to do, Rusty?" and we hee haw Merry Christmas and drink our beers.

Tentbuilding. Fire. The drying out of my Chuck Taylors. The leathery flittering of little brown bats. Dinner (pre-made foil meals by Rusty, what Rusty calls MREs, Neil calls foil burgers, and Wilde calls Rusty's meatloaves). Drinks (some kinda cherry flavored whiskey Dave brought). General mayhem. We paraphrase Twain: *Too much whiskey is almost not enough*. And, *it's easy to quit smoking—I've done it a hundred times*.

#### 4. Second Day Out

Ten miles on an Ozark stream isn't much to paddle, even in low water. It's all the taking out that slows us down. Wilde would be better off just smoking in his boat, but he likes to pass the pipe around and be social. He says that on more than one river they've stopped for a bowl and seen the smoke still hanging above their last gravel bar. We've got us another beauty of a fall day—a little bit cooler than yesterday and a few more clouds moving across the sky. In one narrow channel, a canoe-wide rivulet, the very last lane of runnable stream, we have to get out and portage the boats over a tree trunk. We do this just by standing in the cold thigh-high current and handing the boats over. An elderly couple floats down behind us and we help them do the same and they move on ahead of us and we never see them again. Wilde: "I love bluehairs."

I have to catch a plane in K.C. Sunday night at 5. The boys

all have to be at work Monday morning, except maybe for Wilde. Anyhow, we're in no hurry here on Saturday morn. When we finish having a bowl and a piss on any of several gravel bars, Wilde rallies us: "Well," he says, "let's do another mile."

Pulling alongside Wilde in a long slow pool I ask him if he's ever encountered barbwire on any of these small rivers, because I've read about such things. "No," he says, "not barbwire I don't think. Electric wire. On the Little Sugar, a tributary of the Elk River. The water was high and we were running a low water bridge, and there was a wire running above it, and I got zapped when I touched it with my paddle. It was a virgin float. We were just floating by the seat of our britches on that one. I believe that was my only time on the Little Sugar. No, I'm more worried about a fisherman's hook hanging over a limb than I am barbwire." Wilde points with his paddle and I follow with my eyes to the bank. "Right at the end of that log," he says, and I look hard and finally make out the little mud-colored turtle on a mud covered snag right before it plops into the river.

Wilde continues his litany on the next gravel bar. "We had a pot shot taken at us on the Osage Fork of the Gasconade. Me, Clay Henning, River Ron, and Steve Byrnes. We stopped on private land. It was actually just a gravel bar in the middle of the river. We were eating cheese and crackers and some guy starts yelling at us to get off his property and this and that. And to drive the point home he decided to discharge a double barrel shotgun in the air, which I wasn't too happy about."

I am barely able to get the slippery Wilde halfway cornered for a photo, and I hand my camera to Dave to take a portrait of Rusty, Wilde, Me, and Neil. I look in the viewfinder and the photo is blurrier than a Van Gogh, and now everyone has scattered and Wilde is long gone, my opportunity foiled. "Jesus, Dave," I whine.

"Well what was I supposed to do?" Dave inquires.

"Well, you hold still for one thing."

Two fishermen drift by in canoes and we wave howdy. "Do you ever fish these rivers, Wilde?" I ask, and Rusty answers for him, like

he's reading a signpost:

WILDE DON'T FISH

"Wilde don't fish," Wilde agrees, "but I do stare at the water a lot."

As we put back in, Wilde says we can't be more than a mile from our takeout, and Rusty wonders aloud: "Is that a regular mile, or a Wilde mile?"

We float into a small slough at river right and anchor our flotilla and follow the bluff around just a short stretch to Blue Spring Cave. Neil has seen the place before and, as there is no good takeout here, he sits his boat and drinks his beer. We nose around a minute in the mouth of the cave and gaze into the gazing pool. Dr. Oz tells us this spring flows at 3 million gallons a day. It's only a trickle this day, but I imagine after a spring thunderstorm the entire room filling up with water.

Back on the river Wilde gets fired up thinking about the new NO CAMPING sign posted at our takeout at Firey Fork. He is determined to camp there anyhow, itching for a fight. Possibly this is the sort of behavior that gets him in trouble with the authorities. "If they wanna come all the way down there to mess with us—let em," he says. Famous last words. Someone suggests a gravel bar instead. That way we'll get one more day on the river. The group mumbles its approval. Wilde acquiesces.

Tents pitched and fire started, Wilde's red chili warmed and portioned out, Wilde pulls out a little battery-powered tape deck and plays from his repertoire of CCR, Clapton, Little Feat, *Low Spark* (Traffic's *Low Spark of High Heel Boys*), Stones (*Exile*), The Band, and Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* cuz Marty really liked that one.

Wilde: "We encountered a no camping sign on the Big Piney, me and Marty. Guess what the first thing in the fire was that night?"

Round the fire Neil and Wilde list the names of some of the dogs they've floated with:

Sundance

Jake

Buck

Ghost

Sheba

Jewell

Argus

Khaki

Neil: "We've had more dogs than people on floats before."

Somebody—The Stones?—speaks of Memphis and Rusty asks: "Ever been to Memphis, Dave? Ever spanked a girl named Memphis, Dave?" Dave: "No and no. Got a handjob once from a girl named Tex. She didn't say where she was from." Rusty says he made out with a Haskell undergrad outside the Knife and Gun Club (Players bar in E. Lawrence). "We're talkin about a full-blooded 250-pound Native American." I'm laughing and Rusty sneers at me with a half smile. "Well exsqueeze me. John Kuebler Mellencamp over here," he says. "Little pink houses. That's where you were the other night, Kuebler." Laughter. Joy.

Rusty (imitating me): "Dave, Oh Dave! It's some kinda weasel!" Laughter.

"Dave never answered me," I say. "Did you see the thing, Dave, or did you not?"

"It most likely was a mink," Wilde says, "to be honest with you."

"Some kinda weasel," Rusty murmurs. "You know?"

Wilde: "Or an otter, possibly. I don't know, I didn't see it."

Dave leans toward me from his campchair with the same sort of wry sneering grin his brother is known for. I'm ready for his contribution to the weasel debate, but he's apparently still thinking about his handjob of yesteryear. He leans in close and "Hey," he says. "Kuebler. Call me Shady Dave."

## 5. Third Day Out

Wilde wakes early and I can picture him scuttling about, crouched and bandy-legged, stirring last night's ashes and getting a breakfast fire started. One by one and soon thereafter the remaining crew emerge from the tents, onto the gravel bar, into a cold fog. Coffee is percolated and Neil heats his pre-made Egg McWisnesses in the fire. Last to rise, Shady Dave disappears back up into the woods with t.p. and trowel. We are quiet this early in the morning. Contemplative. Half froze. But the food and the fire slowly bring us to life.

Neil is telling me about the tribute bands he goes to see in St. Louis: Thunderhead (Rush tribute), Celebration Day (Zeppelin tribute), and El Monstero (Pink Floyd). He likes an indoor venue, he says, better than the outdoors. "I like the closeness of the pageant." He tells me he and Wilde did a float on the Meramec in the mid '70s and Wilde got hooked. If it's 4000 miles Wilde has floated, Neil's done at least half that with him. Neil looks at me over the tops of his glasses. "Wilde is the best riverman I've ever seen," he says.

Wilde has been running around, taking down tents and packing gear. "I've got another pot of coffee over there," he informs us. "That'll help the chili slide out." The coffee is weak but it's hot, and I am happy to have another cup while I pass the pipe with Wilde. He had to appear in court last summer in Dent County, Missouri, for blowing a .081.

"Memorial Day weekend, Current River—hadn't even floated the river yet, and I got popped near the Cedar Grove bridge after slamming two beers. Blew a point oh eight one," he says, disbelieving.

And so the legend grows.

Wilde: "Yeah, we did pretty good for a decade or so. And then I started getting in trouble on the river."

I am the last to pack his boat and the last to put in, and I take my place behind Neil for the final stretch of perhaps 150 yards. We take

it slow, cutting the thick fog with our vessels. I think about shouting: Third day out, boys! but the quiet river does not want my raucous intrusion. Morning birds only. The slip and splash of our paddles only. I look downriver at Neil and his boat loaded up and sitting low in the water. Drybags, picklebuckets. One dip of the paddle and it returns to his lap. The Brothers Mather a perfect tandem in their warmest coats. Wilde is out ahead in the *Delta Dawn*, pointing at something (take-out? turtle?), out here where he belongs, leading the way.

Text from Rusty:

Dave says Wilde did  
multiple pipeloads &  
PBRs on drive home.

## 6. Perry, Kansas

I wake up dazed in my sleeping bag on Rusty's loveseat, Rusty already gone to work at Bob's, sink full of PBR empties. I go out and fire up my Ranger; get the defrost blowing and the wipers on. Following Wilde's hand-drawn map, I drive N on Michigan, over the interstate, zag W a mile, then N on Iowa, then W again on the Farmer's Turnpike and roundabout to the Kaw River crossing at Lecompton and into Perry. I'm taking Wilde up on his invitation to "hop on over to gay Pair-ee."

His home is a two-story what he calls Pioneer style house built in the 1880s. He and Marty moved in and rented in '89, and bought in '96. I find Wilde on this dark rainy morn at his kitchen table in lamplight with coffee brewed and a pipe going. The last of his pets, an old tomcat named Cracker, preceded in death by the cat Bogart and a couple good cocker spaniels, died sometime last week while Wilde was in St. Louis, and his house is quiet and still. Never any children. "I was sterile as a two-by-four. And then Marty had a hysterectomy."

I bring forth my notes, and Wilde shows me a couple of his

photo albums and gets up and cooks bacon and eggs and potatoes for us. There are pics of Wilde and his river mates and the deep green foliage of Ozark summertimes with tall limestone bluffs showing through. Some pics just of water or clouds or trees. Wilde: “Must’ve been trippin—takin pictures of trees.” His mates through the years are a couple lawyers (a necessary evil), a good number of geologists, an English Ph.D. (who turned Wilde on to mushrooms and Castaneda), and other ne’er-do-wells: Wilde’s friend Sloan is serving time in Pacific, MO, near the Six Flags. “He was drinkin vodka,” Wilde says. “And he assaulted a guy with a baseball bat. Sloan’s just a Springfield river guy—Ozark, Missouri, to be exact. He grew up on the North Fork and the Finley. But his drinking got out of control. I’ll tell you this: if he wasn’t in jail, we’d have buried him by now. I truly believe that.”

“Did he kill the guy?”

“Didn’t kill him, no. But I don’t think he’s quite right anymore.”

The better part of an entire album is from his and Marty’s infamous Ho-Bag tour of Southern Utah and Southern Colorado—red stone spires and hoodoos, precarious ledges, cryptobiotic crusts and other Four Corners regularities. The one or the both of them. “We stopped at just about every Indian trading post so Marty could buy a turtle, and somehow we got to calling ourselves the tribe of the Ho-Bags, and Marty of course was the queen,” Wilde explains. “I can’t remember the chant exactly, but hey-ya, hi-ya, ho-bag was the bulk of it.”

Other pics show Marty and Wilde in late ’80s younger years, smiling, happy, with Jake, with Sundance, with matching white undershirts, Wilde with a blonde goatee that is now gray, long hair pulled back in ponytail, like now. “Marty would never cut my hair,” Wilde says. “I guess her first husband beat the crap out of her for a bad haircut.” Marty on inflatable raft with book and beer. “I would pull her behind on a tow rope.” Little baby snapping turtle in Marty’s hand. “No bigger than a fifty cent piece.” Neil with and without a full fiery red beard and sporting various incarnations of the Gilligan cap.

“Yeah, that’s his trademark. Now we’re trying to get him to wash em.”

I check Wilde’s river log for my name, which appears twice, twelve years apart, misspelled slightly but part of the history nevertheless:

Nov. 2-4, 2012	Me & Neil; Rusty & Dave Mather; John Kubler Howard’s Ford/Fiery Fork Cmpgrd. Little Niangua River	9.5m
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\*Only floated 1.9 miles on 11/2. Camped at Burnt Mill Spr.

and

April 15-16, 2000	Me & Marty & Sundance; Neil & Sloan; Rusty & John Kubler Akers Ferry/ Pulltite Current River	9.5 miles
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\*Flapping beaver @ Cave Spr.

That beaver flapped its tail in warning as we walked into the mouth of the cave at dusk, Wilde and Marty lighting candles and setting them on the rocks. We were stoned and possibly drunk—still coming down from our morning dose.

I look at photos of Marty and try to conjure her whole with my mind’s eye. I met her at the one Mr. Cid game I attended at Lyon’s Park, and then the two days on the Current, and that’s it. Hazy recollection of a gravelly voice calling across the water. Marty’s making sure Sloan the consummate fisherman is practicing catch & release. He is. He releases the little 9-inch rainbow he just reeled in. We feed him a BBQ pork steak for dinner instead.

We eat our eggs and Wilde brews another pot of coffee, and

through the window over the sink we watch the rain turn into big flakes of spring snow. The kitchen walls have pictures of Marty and pictures of Marty and Wilde, turtle kitsch on a knickknack shelf, sawblades painted with country scenes, a bulletin board filled with family pics, girly pics, a Three Stooges postcard, quotes by Red Cloud and Ambrose Bierce, old notes from Marty, various other ephemera, business cards, bumper stickers: pee for enjoyment/ not for employment. There are turtle footstools, turtle magnets on fridge, turtle ashtrays. Wilde uses his Kenmore dishwasher as a file cabinet. He built a little back porch on the place with a cedar closet on one end. "Which I got a lot of sexual favors for," he says. "Marty loved that cedar closet." Wilde also built the garage out back back in '99. Marty's dad helped him pour the concrete and then Wilde had the lumber delivered and built it his self. It houses the Sebring, the S10, and right above the S10 the *Delta Dawn* hanging from the rafters.

I get up to take a leak in the bathroom off the kitchen. This is where Wilde found Marty one morning seven years ago, dead from an aneurysm. I feel bad about peeing here; I don't want to disrespect this place. But it is, in the end, I suppose, just a bathroom. And it's the only one in the house besides.

About Marty and her sister Carol, Wilde says: "Those girls could drink. I'd come back from a week in Saint Louis, there'd be four or five 30-pack boxes all broken down. They'd just Hoover it down. And you could cut the cigarette smoke with a knife." He smiles to himself, fingers his wedding band.

Wilde shows me the living room: turtle statuettes in bookcases, turtle art on the walls, Christmas garland draped across the ceiling (the ghosts of Christmas past), and a toy train table made out of 2x4s and plywood, which features an impressive layout of complex switchyards. Bright light seeps out the front of the table from behind a bath towel curtain. There is something impressive under here also: four little seedling marijuana plants growing in Dixie cups. Behind the train table, the living room window faces the home of Wilde's

neighbor Phil, a Jefferson County sheriff's deputy.

In winter, from this window and through the bare trees to the southwest, you can make out the freight trains rolling by on the Union Pacific RR on the north shore of the Kaw. Wilde lives within a half mile of the Perry P.O. so he gets a free box but no home delivery. His friend Rob Scott addresses letters to him thus:

Wilde  
Perry, KS

no zip code or nothin, and Wilde gets them. According to Wilde, the Casey's General Store has a pretty decent pizza. And though he does not frequent the bar around the corner from his house ("My bar is my kitchen, man"), he admits that he "probably should go check out the local strange. I know there's girls that go to the biker bar out by the Thriftway." When Marty was alive they'd go swimming in the summertime at a secret spot on Lake Perry. His house is at the end of a tree-lined block with easy access to river and highway both. "I can hear the church bells and the train," he says. "Man, I love living in Perry."

Wilde says he sunk 15 grand into homeowners insurance before dropping it. Now, if the house burns down, he gets no \$. Says he'll stay in the garage or put a Winnebago out in the yard. Rent a bulldozer and flatten it all out. Rebuild it.

I'm still beer leery from last night's escapades, but when we finish the coffee, and though I decline, Wilde cracks one back. He cues up one of his favorite Stooges episodes for me on the VCR while he takes a few hits off his nebulizer, opening the passages for the imminent reintroduction of cigarette and pot smoke. The snow quits and the sun makes a dim appearance, and Wilde says he guesses he ought to drive me over to the lake to have a look around. Take the truck out for a drive. "Take a little tour de jour." He grabs some road beers from the fridge, offering one out to me, and by this time...

"Aw what the hell. Yeah, I'll have one. Thanks, Wilde."



The 4-cylinder Chevy S10 putters out of town and over to Perry Lake, an 11,000-acre impoundment of the Delaware River. We drive back on unmaintained roads to a windy cove and swimming beach. There are picnic tables and the remnants of a playground, and I walk out in the wind with my PBR and climb up the rickety slide and slide down once, remembering a kid from Roeland Park who lost half his ring finger on a sharp snag of steel on a slide like this. Wilde sits his truck, loading a bowl, and we pass it back & forth on the drive out. He points alongside the road to the scrubby winter trees with little hard red poisonous fruits. He says, "I need to come out here and harvest this bittersweet and sell it to the Hobby Lobbies."

Back in town we park in front of the old Highway 24 bridge, which has been bypassed and closed to traffic very recently, though it looks like it's been abandoned for decades, the asphalt roadbed cracked throughout and crumbling off the sides and the steel looking rusted and brittle. Posted: No Traffic of Any Kind. We walk out on it and I take a piss over the side and down into the Delaware. Hock a loogie down too. Wilde says the state is going to demolish it ... sometime. Next bridge down is a train trestle and Wilde points and says just downstream where the Delaware meets the Kaw is the Rising Sun access, where he and Rusty put in when they floated down to Lawrence last summer.

Text from Rusty:

Did 4mi from  
Lecompton bridge.  
Sunny-95. 4 trains-  
no snakes.

A diesel horn sounds through the bare trees in the distance. "Well what do you know," says Wilde, "we're gonna get us a train."

**We drive back to Lawrence in the late afternoon and Rusty**  
greet us at The Bunker, home from work and showered. He says:

"Gentlemen, we killed a 30-pack last night."

While we still have daylight, Rusty wants to take us out to some old abandoned train trestle beyond the Dirty Bird. It's a place he found with his son Jake several years ago and he's been wanting to show it to Wilde. So he drives us out north of the river, we see a bald eagle roosting in a huge cottonwood below the Bowerstock dam, and we drive east from Johnny's, past La Tropicana and Lyon's Park, past Bismark Gardens, and out beyond the turnoff to the Flamingo, aka the Bird, aka the Dirty Bird, aka the North Lawrence Country Club, the titty bar where many a KU co-ed has subsidized her tuition. "We went out there a lot during construction days," Wilde says. "The St. Patty's Day parade used to end there." Rusty meets a few dead ends, and doubles back, and we see the RR, but he can't find the right road. He finally parks the car where some tire tracks peter out in the middle of a farmer's muddy field. He gets out and walks toward the trees, toward the river. "It's gotta be right out there," he assures us. Wilde does not believe and lags behind, smoking a cig, as Rusty leads me across the plowed earth, sunk in to our sneakertops, leaving evidence of our trespassing in our wake. Wilde, when he follows, walks out along the broken corn husks on the drier terrace beside the field. Rusty drops into an irrigation ditch and appears again on the levy opposite, a small simian figure in jeans and windbreaker, following his nose.

"Here it is," he calls back, pointing toward the trees.

"He found it, Wilde," I relay the message back.

"Way to go, Rasta," Wilde says, impressed, and crushes his cigarette underfoot and walks faster to catch up.

And there it is, just a little bridge over a little creek, though maybe this isn't the one Rusty remembers after all, for it is not abandoned. We walk across and gather underneath and the oldtimers light fresh cigarettes and smoke as a coal train rumbles over overhead.

After the train moves past, Rusty tells us Bob is selling the restaurant. In the next month or two Rusty will be out of a job he's

worked for more than three decades.

“What’re you gonna do?” I ask.

“Well, I don’t know,” he admits. “But I’d like to do a little traveling before I go work for somebody else.”

Wilde has worked construction for three different guys in that same amount of time, from 1979 to his official retirement in 2010, and now he’s picking up occasional work from a fourth guy in Topeka who went to high school with Marty. Once upon a time, Wilde was a scholarship student studying architecture at the University of Kansas. He dropped out his junior year and went and built houses with hammer and nails for the rest of his life instead.

Rusty wants to treat us to Mexican for dinner, so we hike back to the car, keeping to the terrace in the failing light. I drop behind a little, taking in everything I can and trying to memorize it all for later, for always—the smells of wet earth and chaff, the distant crunch of car wheels on gravel, the train sounding again now through the trees. And the muted silhouettes of the two friends walking ahead of me along the berm in the cold Kansas twilight.

Text from Rusty:

Wilde pulled 9 - 5  
today in group  
counseling 4 dui.  
Stopped by Bunker &  
got high on way  
home.

Text from Rusty:

Just did 3 hr tour  
w/yur protagonist in  
hopeful soon to be  
released Midnight

Express thriller! He  
drank all my beer.

Text from Rusty:

Kate Upton or  
Scarlett Johansson?

# Two Poems

Maya Polan

## Visitor's Abcedarian

*Connecticut, 2013*

Anniversary imminent,  
but I'm still on the airplane,  
crossing the country home.  
December, Connecticut,  
earth of hard trampled  
firmament—meaning  
gets gestured at, Christmas  
hangs by its wreaths.  
I'll go inside my liquor store  
just for the annual hot rum.  
Know the owner, the kind  
loyal to his customers, again  
meet this everybody's-known-  
ness. My state is the size  
of a smallest child. Little  
pawn, intricate  
quiet of the painted eyes,  
runt heart of a Russian doll.  
Sacred, the seedlike snow  
that drinks in the ground  
under the angeled trees.  
Veins in our caroling throats.  
Willful singing, lights, no  
x-shaped crosses. The holiday  
yearning: not a marked  
zone, no memory children.

### I Never Knew Before a Hot Spring

In your mountain  
town I see how far  
my city's harbor lights  
have quenched.  
I've seen the sky  
strained and strained  
to only strings of them.  
I see—stars are meant  
to be a liquid: night  
and skin and rock  
and skim; I am another  
naked mineral. A stillness:  
maybe we've found Orion,  
dead so long, but the death  
of light the slowest  
one there is, he hangs  
by his bright belt.  
The moonrise vulgar,  
yellow, too soon  
and too much—I reach  
for my suit top, feel  
myself splitting—  
you tell me *it's a trap*,  
*we're due extinct*  
and I say *yes, I take*  
*my comfort at the speed*  
*of light*. A few astronauts  
have slipped away—  
headed for the sister solar?  
The Mayan ending  
of the world. I think I could  
be ready. My childhood

friends are men.  
Everything won't happen  
now. But on this peak  
I climbed with you,  
we found this  
round cold lake  
with clouded light.  
Irises stretching  
in July snow.  
In case.

# Eric's Towing

David Rice

1

Then, yesterday, after eighteen months of nothing, a call. When he picked up, the voice was different.

“Hi Lester.”

Each time the phone rang felt like the last time anyone would reach him on a working number. So he listened. She spoke like she was leaving a message and he let her.

“Tomorrow. A restaurant. My treat.”

She told him the name of the restaurant, in downtown Seattle, and the time. The place was, as far as he knew, semi-private. Not for walk-ins, though he'd never tried. He stayed with the phone by his ear after she was gone, trying to get her exact wording into his mind.

Aside from his landlord and people at the grocery store and on the way to and from, she would be the first person he'd seen since the last time he'd seen her, on what he'd come to consider his last-ever night in Seattle.

So he closed out his apartment in Tacoma. He hoarded all that time's worth of sauce-sticky Asian Slim Selects boxes into thirty XL black plastic trash bags and hauled them down to the dumpster in the back courtyard, past a dog and a puppy.

Back inside, hands wet with what'd come through the bags, he prepared to scrub his knife in the sink. It'd been his main utensil here, dirty with the remains of everything he'd tried to eat.

He filled the sink with hot water and bubbled remnants of dish soap. Dipping the knife in, he let it go. He stepped back, short of breath, and pushed his attention down into his feet, planted on the ground, trying not to fall backward with further recoil. He thought about all the superstars who were into Transcendental Meditation and wondered what it was.

Then he heaved forward and reached back into the sink, under and around in the white, until his fingers touched it. They recoiled again. There came to him an ancient prohibition, from his childhood or before, against losing track of a knife down where it cannot be seen.

Lester got confused. The soap bubbles in the water convinced him it was boiling, all the more reason not to put his hands back in there.

So he said goodbye to his knife. He imagined it slipping down the drain, flaking off into pipe coating when the acid reached it.

Forearm hair slicked down with sink water, he gathered up the \$35 he had left from the Seattle episode of *Ghost Daddy*, which he and Michelle had both had small parts in the reshoots of two years ago, because the original actors had been unable to return.

Just before leaving, he brushed his teeth with warm water to celebrate the end of confinement, which he hadn't been sure would come. In the hall outside, he checked to make sure his door was locked, feeling for a moment like someone else trying to break in. Then he put the key under the mat. The security deposit—he wasn't getting that back anyway.

**He was on the road, glad for the car that was still his and still** worked, though he'd barely driven it in more than a year.

Getting up to speed on the highway, he tried saying, "Goodbye, Tacoma." It came out like *Goodbye* was the town, *Tacoma* the state, printed on a sign up ahead with the distance beside it.

He listened to himself add, "He will emerge into the city at night, an unwrapped mummy still good inside." He growled it, purred it, drawled it, narrating the trailer.

"Heeeeeeeeeee's back!!!" he shouted a moment later, recutting the trailer for overseas.

Crunching an unexploded toothpaste crystal, he watched the northbound trucks. In their light, he saw his reemergence as the first step toward something else, the route precarious but laid out before him.

"He's streamlined his mind and firmed his body into that of a bet-

ter man," he went on, "through the bottom and onto the other side."

His voice had to get lower and richer.

He stopped at a gas station. He breathed and straightened his veins to wash them through with clean blood. Truckers lingered among the pumps, watching him with mouths propped on immense cans of Red Bull.

### **The outer Seattle exits.**

The drive had been comically short, after all this time. Already the months in that apartment were cordoned off; it was a time and place he would never deal with again.

Downtown.

"Here begins the hunt." He was doing his old Kenyan safari voice, scanning the dusk for curbside parking.

The buildings gleamed in the almost-rain.

"He left in a fog," doing noir now, or video game noir. "And in a fog he returns."

He circled the blocks around the restaurant, nosing up drive-ways and doubling back, catching the harbor at angles, Mt. Rainier and the islands about to fade.

Some other cars joined his in trying to park, inching forward with the tentative hurry of children needing badly to pee.

**It got wet enough to be raining. With his wipers on, he turned** into a pay lot near the restaurant, scowling, scraping at his nose. He got out. The city felt hunkered down, in remission.

"He's about to get treated to dinner, and drinks during, and desert, and drinks after," he said, explaining why shelling out for parking wasn't about to ruin him, though it would mean no more gas.

As soon as he stood up and touched the concrete of the lot, he could tell there'd never been a question of parking somewhere else. He'd always had instincts.

A big Caribbean guy held out a hand, took Lester's ten, dried it on the underside of his poncho, and handed over a ticket, nodding

derisively, like he'd just sized Lester up and was barely letting him by.

He nodded over at the car and asked, "That your car?"

Lester was taken aback. "Yeah. I just got out of it."

There were only a couple of others, parked way in the back.

The guy scrutinized him some more. "Why you taken aback? You got something going on?"

Lester didn't say anything.

"So I ask again, like this: that your car?"

Lester didn't feel like answering.

So the guy read off the license plate number and asked, "That your license plate number?"

Lester nodded reflexively and wished he hadn't, felt somehow coerced. This went on for a while, the guy asking again and again. Each of them wondered if it would turn into a fight.

"Okay, man," the guy said, and Lester flinched. "Well, you coming back to pick it up?"

"Yeah, of course."

"Because it's not overnight parking."

"I know."

"So you be back?"

"Yeah, I just said so."

"Because you can't sleep in your car here, or anywhere near it. Don't matter who you are. You gonna have to move. You understand what I'm saying?"

The guy looked like he wasn't sure Lester could.

"I won't sleep anywhere, okay?"

"Man's gotta sleep," the guy said, on the verge of reassessing Lester's basic soundness yet again. "Just, like I say and I hope you get it, not here."

Lester put the claim ticket in his back pocket under his wallet. He hurried around to the front of the block, reminiscent of how he'd always pictured London, even as a kid growing up in Spokane, and then at acting school, drunk out of his mind outside of Boise.

2

"Yes?" asked the hostess.

Hefting his car keys in one hand and adjusting his boxers through his pocket with the other, he looked the place over and said, "I'm meeting someone."

He pointed her out. Michelle sat alone at a corner table, face lit by her phone. She looked at him and then away, cracking open a bound stack of papers and assuming a pose like she'd gotten here early just to sit there like that.

Lester stood by the hostess watching Michelle, and felt someone watching him. Someone had clicked on a timer.

Then Lester was at her table and the hostess was gone. Michelle took her phone out of the napkin where it'd been swaddled, pressed it and waited, then put it in her purse along with the papers.

She and Lester were face-to-face, he standing there dripping from outside, she in her rubbery or plasticky black dress, just as he remembered her, or not just. For a moment he'd been sure; now he wasn't.

He looked down at her purse on the floor, near her shiny leather boots, and remembered his own feet in their rubber sandals, caked with dirt and stiff with driving. They felt almost rusty. They longed to reach out and touch her purse, maybe dip inside.

He sat down.

"Before you say anything," she said, "I'm going to talk until we're no longer in the very first stage of this. You don't have to listen."

He made an expression like he would listen. She was talking about a screenplay that people were into, how she'd just started it but already feared the worst. "So it comes down to jealousy, greed, privacy, the agony of change. The awareness of death without the more religious element, which I think it's saying is the only real way to ..."

Lester nodded. Nearly spoke.

She lowered her greened-out eyelids. "What, Lester?"

“You called me back here, right? After everything, I mean, the whole, before. I won’t ask why, but ... well, no, I truly won’t ask.”

The waitress was standing there, listening. She had a glass of white wine on her tray that kept almost falling off.

“The city’s the same, only not,” said Michelle, tipping her wine-glass side to side. She must’ve ordered a while ago. “Since you’ve been gone. Nothing about it is different per se. It’s just that, certain things are going on while others have stopped. I feel I’ve been here a long time, but not quite as myself. It has something to do with when we were together, and what happened, though not directly. My weekends have taken a turn ... ”

Lester nodded, knowing, in a way, what she meant. He was getting back his feel for the language. He knew the last eighteen months must’ve had some effect on her, though he wasn’t certain he could tell what or that she would tell him.

Her expressions kept missing him, like she was trying to relay information to someone standing behind. By the time his beer arrived, he was starting to crawl. He was ready to drive with her through the rain and out to the white city he’d envisioned while locked in that apartment in Tacoma, some elegant sprawl laced with all the good he’d ever wished for the two of them. He imagined his car keys were the keys to their home there.

“The career thing’s going well, actually, you know in certain venues and so forth, online, but I can’t help feeling ... ” She reached under the table and again checked her purse. Lester watched the top of her head, the tan triangle of exposed scalp toward the back she’d been so concerned with hiding in their early days of trying out for parts together.

“It’s nothing I want to get into. It’s just, it’s like I’m in an exhibit room, the one we sat in for so long in Paris, and I’m looking at that giant Kiefer on the fourth floor, and it’s still where it’s always been, but then, right under my nose, the other paintings start to move, being swapped out or put into storage, or stolen, and now I’m sitting in this mostly empty room not even knowing that it’s empty, like I’m the one

there’s something wrong with.”

She looked up, less composed than before, like she wanted to make sure he was still here. There were always new drugs in the city; it wasn’t easy to keep up on the warning signs. He looked her over as carefully as he could, intent on not missing it if some salvageable part of her was asking for help.

“And then these sounds behind the walls come,” she went on, speeding up under his heavy attention, “and there’s this burning in my body as I realize that all kinds of things that I hadn’t thought were doors are doors, and now these huge shapes are moving in, and there’s like one last thing I can do, and after that it won’t be up to me.”

He leaned into his hands, into a nest of images of holding cells rattling in the shanks of volcanoes and knights breaking free to surge up in transports of fire and ash.

“I miss just talking like this, Lester. But I hope it’s clear why it couldn’t, why we can’t ...”

She was dancing around a name.

His third beer came. “Have we eaten?” He hoped the answer was no because he could use some food, or some more food.

He said, “I dissolved my knife today.”

“It’s too late for that,” she replied. He couldn’t tell if she’d heard what he said, but he knew better than to try repeating it.

She pouted. He could tell she’d been practicing. Something about her cheeks looked, if not bruised, slushed and touched up.

She was back in the purse, fingers working under the black leather. Then she took her lip balm out of a side pouch, puckered her lips, smacked them, and said, “So I’ve sort of gotten into a thing with this guy.”

Lester had been bracing for it.

“I can’t say too much, just that, some things about it have been great. There is, for one thing, a kind of frontier, art-wise, involved, that I’d never been able to consider before. And money.” She held up her purse, stretching it open so Lester could see the envelope inside, stuffed thick.



She paused, then added, and he knew it'd be the last thing, "And, Lester, I wanted to say, since you're here and I don't know when you necessarily will be again, that he might have a little thing, if you're interested, for you too. I could mention you later tonight."

**When she got up, she picked her purse off the ground and** placed it on her seat, looking from it to Lester and back, and back. She primped it until it sat nicely.

Then she was gone.

The waitress cleared her place.

All the other tables had young couples, some just starting out and others seeking closure. Through the window behind the purse, Lester could see a roped-off line outside a nightclub, some of the people in costumes and others just dressed up. The line doubled before his eyes, then doubled again, and again, and he had to look away.

He clamped his eyes on the purse.

He looked at it sitting across from him, in her place, full not only of money but of messages, and notes and keys and tubes or vials of makeup and tiny mirrors and forms of birth control against a future clawing its way out of eggs made of sewn skin, summoned from caves deep beneath the Arabian Desert. Years which, years ago, had seemed to be coming too fast for the two of them.

A kind of juggernaut felt born in Lester's stem. It groaned and snarled, uncoupling chain. He tore through the hesitation that wanted to coat his body in mold, into the restaurant's surge, belting out profanities, bumping hard into waitresses, clutching something hard to his chest.

"Look at my wrists," he panted, "and the bubbles of soap that percolate around the veins." He showed them off to the bathroom mirror, unshackled, only just beginning to see where he was.

"I'm boiling!" It felt good to scream.

He stood boiling in the corner, by the big metal trashcan, looking at the dicks on the walls. He tried to remember what it was he'd come here to do, and what, now, he wanted to do.

Someone pounded on the door. "The fuck? You giving birth in there?" The sound pried him out. Michelle's purse filled his eyes.

The pounding went on. He kicked the purse against one wall and leaned flat against the other, feeling its wetness through his shirt.

"So I've gotten you alone," he told the purse. For a few good minutes, they lived in here together, good as any bedroom in the promised white city.

Then he began to plot their escape. He rehearsed how it'd go, shuffling around the bathroom, feinting and creeping on his haunches and toes. The door rattled again and he whipped it open so fast whoever had been banging fell all the way inside, past him.

On through the restaurant now, behind the swaying waitress, past the table where he'd been with Michelle.

He burst through the doors, past the hostess and the bouncer.

Rain digging him a hairline, he waited for someone to run after him, and for what would ensue. He tore around the back of a convention center, hid for a while, then looped around to the pay lot.

**He found the Caribbean guy leaning against a pole, holding a** pamphlet or novella, shielding it from the rain with one hand like a lighter.

Lester was all the way upon him before he looked up. For a moment they regarded each other like they'd both just arrived at an empty track at a foreign train station, and could not determine if they were early or late.

"Where's my car?" volunteered Lester.

"Towed," said the guy, chewing his cheek and wincing.

"What?"

"Towed."

"Why?"

The guy shrugged, spilling the question off his poncho.

"You took my ten bucks, no?"

"Yes."

"So I was parked legally?"

"Uh-huh." Instead of looking at Lester, the guy was now riveted on a fence that sloped down a hill into a kind of trash river.

"So why'd it get towed?"

"Eric towed it."

"Eric?"

"Yes."

"Why?" Lester asked again, feeling the purse grow heavy with rain.

"He saw your car, man."

"Eric saw my car?"

"Eric like *really* saw your car, if you know what I'm saying." He leaned way in and whispered so that Lester was rocked by a gust of cologne. "He looked inside it and saw his chance."

"Can I get it back?"

The guy waved goodbye and hailed a taxi in one grandiose motion. "This is Saturday night," he shouted from the window, "and everyone, I mean *everyone*, is gotta have a good time!"

**Lester patted himself down to make sure he still had his keys,** for whatever that was worth. His lips were whispering, dripping water.

The guy had left his little book in a puddle. He picked it up and peeled mealy pulp away from a number dissolving in a bath of blue ink. The pages were standard ruled, most blank, some with sketches.

He opened Michelle's phone and, tying off the desire to read everything on it, dialed the number from the pad. It came up as "Eric Operator."

A very slow voice answered after a few rings, a woman who left huge spaces between words.

"Hey," Lester replied, kind of guilty and giddy, as if he were soliciting a favor. "I'm looking for my car."

"Oh yeah?"

*Tell me about it, baby*, it sounded like she said. Warmth was

starting to take shape in the damp of his pants.

"Yeah, they say Eric towed it."

*Oh do they? Who says that, baby? Who did this to you at school today, Little Willie?*

They stalled for a while. "They say that Eric ... saw my car."

"That he saw it?" she asked.

"Uh-huh. And wanted to have it."

"He wanted *me* to have it?"

"No," Lester reached into his pocket and tried to adjust. "No, *he* wanted to have it. Like him, himself."

"Oh, in that case, I wonder which Eric it is that you mean."

Her tone had cooled by at least ten degrees, and dried down to jerky.

He could see himself standing at the bottom of an apartment complex that reached deep into the sky, begging some raving widow on the top floor to buzz him in.

He almost hung up before she told him the address.

### 3

"So how long since you don't been to Seattle?" the driver asked, covered in what looked like rain but smelled like sweat.

Lester didn't answer, not even inwardly.

The driver kept looking at him, shaking his head, nearly forgetting the road. He came to a puddle-spraying halt.

Lester hesitated.

The driver shined a flashlight at him and barked, "What, you gonna get out of the cab or am I?"

Lester got out. He took a twenty from Michelle's purse and forked it over.

"What no tip?" the driver scowled. Lester peeled off another twenty and forked that over too.

**He rang a doorbell that was up a few steps from the street. The** shapes of skyscrapers were visible in every direction, through the watery air, but weren't exactly nearby. His vantage here was that of looking up from a pit.

He rang the doorbell again, peering over the fence that extended away from the door, bounding a sea of slick black forms.

The door opened onto a man in a suit.

"I'm here to see Eric," said Lester, belting it out like he knew what it meant.

"You better wash up," the man said.

He showed Lester to a door. In the bathroom, which was so bright it hurt his forehead, a man in a white undershirt and no pants masturbated frantically into a urinal in the corner while four other men in business suits with fedoras leaned against the wall, looking tired as they read newspapers draped over their arms.

"What is it, 1939?" asked Lester.

One of the businessmen checked his watch. The masturbating man asked if he could take a break and the businessman checked his watch again.

The other urinals were mounted on the wall at about shoulder height, one near the door, the rest further back, draped in plastic. It seemed possible that each contained a smiling shrunken head, bedded down in wire mesh, a mothball in its mouth like an apple in a Christmas ham.

Another businessman looked at Lester. Folding his paper, he clapped a hand on his shoulder and led him back out the door, warning the masturbating man not to stop.

They went up and down hallways until he was suitably shaken.

A nurse handed him a key, crisply announcing that his room was ready. She took him by the hand, down more hallways, to what looked like an outdoor motel that'd been built indoors, rows of doors with awnings overhanging and parking spots drawn onto the carpet, big piles of dirt with palm trees propped in them and some parked motorcycles.

She left him near a door with a pair of teal pajama bottoms and a matching top in his hands, telling him to change.

Before he could get the door open, a tall man in overalls and a cowboy hat loomed up behind him, turning off the lights with one hand and touching Lester's shoulder with the other.

"Name's Ebb. Live next door," he whispered, in a sludgy Western accent. "Just fired up some porn." He said it like it was a pot he'd put on the stove.

"How's about it? You and me, George." He took out a knife and gently tapped the side of his head.

Lester lunged into his room, pushing the TV and a La-Z-Boy against the door. The TV burst alive, a girl in a van with three construction workers. She had on a very thin latex mask molded into the face of another girl, or perhaps a facsimile of her actual face, underneath, though her body skin was a few shades lighter.

She had a tattoo across the top of her back, bold lines and colors, but she squirmed in such a way that he couldn't read it.

He sat on the floor in a spread of teal pajamas, mesmerized though his heart was still pounding. He pictured the actress stepping out of the van, taking notes from the director, chewing a Tic Tac under the latex, then getting back in when an assistant hoisted open the door for the next take.

"But it's not her," he whispered.

Still, the dream of rescue flickered up from down in him. Maybe he could find her. He started toward the bathroom, where he would wash his face, clean his veins again, summon the ...

The floor started to rumble. Plaster flaked down from the ceiling. People flew through the walls, naked and pushed through from behind, sweaty heads appearing with hats of torn wallpaper. He heard a crash from the bathroom and the shower exploded.

He had to knock down his barricade and flee the room before it flooded completely. Outside, he found Ebb sitting in a lawn chair, knife stuck in the carpet next to his foot. The lights had come back on.

He handed Lester an envelope. Inside was a certificate that said

PORN WARRANT in gold letters.

“Means I can come into your room any time I please, for any old reason.” Then he made a motion summoning it back.

**Someone tazed him.**

When Lester came to, he was in the teal pajamas. His wet sandals were back, or still, on his feet, and the purse was propped on a chair near where he lay.

He sat up, eying its opening to see if everything, or anything, was still there. It looked to be.

Pillars of steam came in from the sides.

Standing, he found the ground soft, strewn with sand and fern fronds. Statues of women surrounded him, one of which appeared to be Michelle, though rendered generically. He went up to it, studying its face and neck, and then felt someone behind him.

His back clenched and folded in, ready to be tazed again.

When the pain didn't come, he turned around.

“Face-to-face with Eric,” said Eric, his breath minty with the mint of chewing tobacco. He had a narrow reddish goatee and teeth of a similar color, and wore round purple sunglasses.

He stared close at Lester. “I know you.” He had, or was doing, an old radio voice.

Lester waited for him to go on.

“You're a little bit of a lucky man,” Eric went on. “To have made it out of all that and into all this. Very rare.”

He pulled his hair off his shoulders and stretched to show off twin tattoo cobras that ran around his forearms and wrists, into spitting heads on his palms.

“It breathes fire,” breathed Eric, into Lester's face, then laughed and shuddered, elbowing Lester's solar plexus. “Ach, it lumbered across my grave,” he laughed, shuddering again. “Get us a beer from the fridge.”

Lester got up and opened a fridge in the corner. It was mostly full of ferns, with a few beers wedged in.

“They're twist-off,” said Eric.

“Well, cheers.” Lester twisted and sipped.

“To what?” Eric asked.

“To something moving tonight,” said Lester, hearing more authority in his voice than he'd expected to.

“I'll drink to that. Like what, moving?”

Lester brought it up. “Like my car. It got towed.”

“By me?” Eric peered into his bottle.

“Yes. So I'm told.”

“Could be.”

“Why?”

“You parked in a tow-away zone.”

“No I didn't.”

Eric laughed. “Apparently you did. You got towed away.”

Lester tried to decide. “You could say that.”

“Well, why'd you do it?”

“I don't know.”

“Yes you do,” said Eric, speaking as he swallowed. “I might be able to help you. Maybe, maybe not.”

“What did she tell you about me?” Lester asked, but Eric was out of the room, through a back door, across a porch that seemed about to fall off. Lester followed into a kind of meadow, fireflies sparking in imitation of UFOs.

**They were walking among fields of parked cars and tractors** and flatbeds, huge lawnmowers and woodworking tools, and cages, mostly empty.

The shapes of the city buildings were even vaguer than before, specters in the stormy distance.

All around them creaked piles of telescopes and globes, their paper maps peeling off and floating like flags. A few gypsies in long dresses and fur hats worshipped in a pond, shaking rattles.

Convex cemetery walls ringed the perimeter, stuffed with drawers. A van at the bottom of an incline rattled with fierce inner life. This

caught Lester's eye, set him to wondering if it was the source of the feed he'd watched in his room. He waited for the masked girl to get out, pulling a white robe over that big tattoo across her shoulders.

Then they'd walked past it. "You just take all this stuff?" he asked, more cars coming into view in the trampled grass, like a parking lot at a county fair.

"You can have anything you want," said Eric. "If you have a place for it. My cinema is unbounded."

Then he laughed in a new way. "I don't know if I truly believe in Eric's Towing. But I know that things come to me. I've seen it happen." He gestured across his domain. "Things not staked down, under battened hatches," he scratched at his jawbone, "are wont to roll."

He rubbed the two cobra heads on his palms together and groaned like they were spitting. He wiped his hands on his pants.

Holding the purse under one arm, Lester waited for his car to be revealed. After a while, he started pointing wherever his finger would go, insisting that each was his. "That's my car!" he'd shout, pointing at a crushed Mazda convertible. "That's my car!" he'd shout again, pointing at a Jetta or a Honda Civic with no doors and no wheels.

Eric nodded each time. They were getting along.

Finally, he handed Lester a pair of keys. A few paces later, he asked, "Do you have the keys?"

"Yeah," replied Lester, holding them up, while feeling his old keys in his pocket.

"Good. Let's get in."

Lester clicked the UNLOCK button on the new keychain, and a nearby Hyundai beeped and flashed red. They walked over to it. It looked to be in decent shape except for the hacked-away lid of its trunk.

He got in the driver's side, settled Michelle's purse down by his feet, and reached across to open the passenger door for Eric.

"You good to drive?" asked Eric, fastening his seatbelt.

"Yeah, why wouldn't I be?"

"I don't know, maybe you're a drunk or have recently taken something or are in the grip of a waking nightmare. A watery cocktail of delusion and paranoia, perched on a plank wide enough for one foot but not for two." There was sympathy in the way he said it, for Lester and the long night he'd had, and would have.

Lester claimed to be fine.

As they rolled out through a hole in the fence, Eric loosened his shoes and told Lester he'd brought an extra passport. "Some joker who auditioned for me," he said. "It'll work for you."

#### 4

**They were back on the streets, Seattle at one A.M. Lester did** feel a little stoned now, the back of his throat numb like after dental work.

Eric was looking out his window, fingers on the radio, never stopping long enough to hear what was playing. The purse heaved again, a low growl, probably Michelle calling her phone from someone else's, trying to get her life in order before dawn.

"You want me to leave the city?" he asked, as signs for the highway came into view. He resolved, for now, to go as far as this took him. There wasn't exactly an alignment of good stars smiling down on his prospects in Seattle, nor anything left in Tacoma.

Lester got on the highway, following signs north toward Vancouver. They passed the entrance to 90 East, toward Spokane, and he thought for a moment about veering back home, looking up old friends, getting a job in his old high school's drama department. The reverie petered out on a lawn chair under some bridge that, as far as he remembered, wasn't actually in Spokane.

The highway went through its outskirt stages, tunnels and bridges, rotaries, pastures of open parking spots, the visible streets on either side deserted except for teenagers dragging plastic rings that'd once bound six-packs.

Beyond the airport, they fell to speeding past outlet stores, surrounded by neon-lit trucks that made him yawn.

**It got to be hours.**

The Canadian border station was already a while back, so uneventful that Lester kept thinking it was still to come.

His eyes burned with long stretches of dark through country whose daytime features he could not imagine. He got a little choked up at the thought.

"I could turn us around right now," he whispered, seeing if Eric would stir. A hundred miles later, he whispered it again, like it hadn't been true before but now it was.

The longer he didn't, the more he got to picturing what lay ahead, maybe the city he'd been looking for, or a field he could rile into a kingdom with the money in Michelle's purse. Once he was armed, he'd parcel the surrounding countryside into timeshares and fiefs.

The car had found a way to move through space with no contact on any side, like those Soviet sensory deprivation tortures he'd read about. Deer and raccoons flowed through the headlights in a constant stream.

**When Eric spoke again, after so long that Lester had almost forgotten he was there, he said, "Pull off."**

Lester pulled off, the exit sign softly dabbed onto its background.

In the tattoo parlor, lying facedown on a sweaty leather banquette, a person, a man or a woman, worked on his back.

It hurt about as much as he'd heard it would. "You will bear the mark of your resurgence," he explained to himself, muffled by the leather.

He gripped the underside of the banquette and saw Eric sitting on a chair in the corner, smoking and running his fingers over the pages of a magazine, phone on his knee.

"Let it dry," said the man or woman after it was done, "until dawn. That means no shirt."

"Was I given an anesthetic?" Lester asked, waddling in his teal pajama bottoms.

"Coffee," said Eric. "And donuts."

It came in a pink cardboard box, the standard half-dozen, and two big Styrofoam cups without lids, instant creamer. The place was empty except for an old woman hooked up to a respirator at one table, two cops conferring over a phone book at another, and a very thin Asian teenager with a mustache as sparse as arm hair, drinking orange juice under the muted TV.

A runaway, thought Lester.

He and Eric sat at the high counter by the window, watching the abandoned street, lit orange and blue by the CLOSED sign in the Persian rug outlet directly across.

"Is it an Eric's Towing tattoo?" he asked.

Eric smiled and rolled up his sleeve to show more cobra running toward his armpit. "Not bad skin," Lester mumbled, through lips unable to hold any usual amount of donut.

Someone started a vacuum cleaner.

"I'll get us more," said Lester. At the counter, he gazed almost lovingly at the kid on duty and saw the possibility of spending the rest of his life here, again teaching high school, holed up in a cottage on the outskirts where he'd read scripts on weekends and upload videos of himself talking.

"Let's get gas and get drunk," said Eric, taking a donut from the new box and leaving the rest half-crushed on the counter.

At the station, Lester walked around the car, tightrope tired, while Eric pounded can after can from a thirty pack of Molson Ice. Lester put his heel down in front of his toes, tipped forward, then alternated and repeated, while Eric drank and drank, breathing through his nose.

Then he spread his arms as far as they'd go and burped into the sky.

**On they went, into the Canadian sunrise.**

Lester felt newly awake, well into the chamber beyond what he would once have called the last chamber.

He felt his tattooed back stick to the fabric of the car seat.

Eric sat in the passenger seat, still drinking, wiping his cheeks and neck, and then he peed and opened the door and pushed some of it out with his foot.

Lester wondered how far Michelle's money would go in Canada. He would need not only arms but ammunition, vehicles, structures. He would send for her, or have her found.

They drove through the day, stopping for more gas as needed, purple-lipped from soda, streaks tearing through the windshield from all the times Lester had squeegeed it dry. His teeth felt made of wax; he tried to push his tongue through.

Light spilled over the tundra. Traces appeared in the air before Lester's eyes through the windshield, footprints recording the things that'd been there, or would come.

There were reflections stretched like bodies made of string across the horizon. The gas pedal, as Lester pushed it harder still, tangled with that string, like an antique loom. He'd woven the horizon into an army of sacral forms by the time he pulled into the passing lane and it crossed his mind that Eric might kill him.

"How did you actually tow my car?" Lester asked, as the dial approached 100. "Do you have a tow truck?"

"This here's my car," said Eric.

The engine started to rasp and jitter, and the emergency light bloomed up so bright and thick it was all Lester could see. He felt his back and neck turn to muscle as his hands gripped and re-gripped the wheel.

**"Get out," barked Eric.**

Lester got out.

Flat tundra extended into an undotted distance.

"Am I going to die here?" Lester asked.

Eric held his purple sunglasses far out to one side as he puked on a rock.

Lester walked back to the car and took out Michelle's purse, opened it all the way. Under his phone there were a few tampons in paper wrappers, some Chap Stick and face cream, an address book with only first names, a keychain with keys and supermarket discount cards, a bottle of saline and other contact lens products, two vials of perfume, a makeup kit with a foldout mirror, a pack of cigarettes and two lighters, stray Q-tips, a crumpled receipt that'd lost its ink, and the script pages she'd been reading when he went in to meet her.

He looked for a long time at the blank screen of her phone, his puffy cheeks reflected into a sleek rectangle. He smelled it for a second, bit down, then put it back in the purse and yawned like a man at the very end of the world.

He tried to trace it all the way back, down the stalk to the ground and through the ground to the roots, the idea of nipping it in the bud, if it ever would have been possible, or if the roots went straight through and came raging out the other side and deep into space, and now there was no one inside or beside him to ask what could possibly still be left, what tiny far off cell he could hope to find waiting, what hole to crawl into and stay there, what people he could have any prayer of living among, or living as.

And yet, between bends in the light, maybe not in this world nor even in the next, he glimpsed a room, in a hotel in some immense city, reserved by some agent or manager in his name, a tiny slice into the bulging exterior that was his way in, if he could just get there, holding onto the image long enough to find it, the room decked out with everything he would ever need, even a lump under a sheet that might have meant someone curled, waiting with lungs full of breath. Or, at least, a hotel phone on a desk that was just about to ring ...

And next year, tomorrow, when he got to where he was going, he would pick that phone up and deliver an ultimatum.

After Eric had loped away, into the blind spot between the rearview and sideview mirrors, a cop bore down on Lester, who'd climbed back into the driver's seat to wait.

"Okay," the cop began, "what can we do for you? Got something on your mind?"

He squinted at the hacked-away trunk and then at the piss smell, and then squinted harder at Lester.

Lester thought of some inanity, like "What day is it?"

But held his tongue.

The cop nodded, like, sure, he knew what this was all about, and turned to walk back to his car. Then he reappeared by Lester's window. Lester glanced in the rearview and saw that the cop's car was gone.

"Towed," he said, enjoying how it felt to say.

The cop leaned on the window, his posture different.

"Well, look here mister, do you think you could, if it's no trouble that is, give me a ride to the station?"

Lester looked through the window at him, trying to keep his eyes open. "You're asking me?"

The cop made a motion of assent.

"So then, you mean to say," Lester weighed his words. "And let me get this right, that you've resorted to hitchhiking? Cast out on the road, with not a soul to care if you live or die?"

The cop thought it over, dust seeping over the lip of the road. A train of birds crossed the sky. Looking down from them and back at the car, he mustered his head into a nod.

"Yes sir I am. Not a dime to my name. Hardly a name to my hide. Lost the last of what was mine and can't say I don't know why."

He waited to see if this obeisance would be enough. Lester took his time, marinating in it, then nodded at the passenger's side door.

The cop let himself in, propping one foot on the other knee to minimize contact with Eric's piss.

**At the station, which had taken at least an hour to get to, Lester stood before a satellite image of all of British Columbia.**

There was a rocky river dividing the northern territory from the south, a row of canyons making a mess of the topography, and it all felt familiar, like the place he knew he'd end up in.

The cop was gone. Someone else in a police uniform was giving him directions, treating the satellite image like a road map.

It was Eric.

"It's even further north than that," Eric was saying.

Behind the counter sat Michelle, dressed also in uniform, typing back and forth between a laptop and a desktop. Her nails were painted turquoise and were so long that, from the sound of it, her fingertips never reached the keys.

It was just the three of them in there, an Audubon Society Butterflies of Canada calendar and a digital clock set to military time on the wall, stacks of papers at rest under paperweights, everything silent but for the typing and the sighing of a fish tank.

They stood on thin brown carpeting, black in places where coffee had been spilled or mud tracked in. There was a row of heavy-duty work-boots along one wall, bookended by two small benches for putting them on.

Lester remembered that he still didn't have a shirt, and asked where the bathroom was. Eric smiled like no one had asked anything. He straightened his badge on his chest, looking down at his fingers.

Lester stood there, looking at the telephone on the counter and a notice on the bulletin board about a species of invasive pond algae that was clogging drains and culverts. CHECK ALL ANCHORS BEFORE DOCKING.

"Can you give us one second?" Michelle asked when it seemed clear that Lester wasn't about to take a hint.

He looked from her to Eric and back, nodded.

"Thanks," she replied, with a businesslike smile. "We'll be right with you. We just have one item to discuss, in private. Please make



yourself comfortable.”

Eric showed him to the waiting room, guiding him delicately by the shoulder.

Propping the purse on one of two chairs, Lester sat in the other and looked out at the lot behind the station where the cruisers were parked. He tried to fix his attention somewhere, fearing that if he fell asleep he would revert. A crane rose over a low building and blocked off one edge of the sky. The other edge looked open.

The fish tank bubbled, full of chubby, lazy-eyed masses.

For now, Lester bubbled along with it.

# Error, Redacted

*Failing not necessarily  
better*

Nora N. Khan

**“After you graduate, a good eight or even nine out of ten of** you will never write again,” the director of our writing program told us on our first day. She was joking, but she also meant: Your being here might be a serious mistake. We laughed. We were nervous. It showed.

Many of us were unproven, though some of us had some bits published here and there. We had moved to the middle of the country to learn how to practice a really hard art, operating under mild to grand delusions. Someone might have made the mistake of telling us the way we arranged words was pretty good, even exceptional, without warning us of the massive costs ahead. Someone had made a possible misstep in writing us warm, lovely recommendations. Someone had foolishly woken up before dawn to help us haul our furniture down to an East Village curb because, good grief, they believed in us. Someone, once, might have given us a copy of *Pale Fire* or *The Autobiography of Red* and written *Can’t want to see your own one day!* inside, and we didn’t register their gentle sarcasm.

The director was brutal, but her words, necessary. We had zero assurance of success and there would be little to no pay. Most of us would postpone the vital markers of adulthood for years and years—marriage, children, stable careers, homeownership—in exchange for the dubious bliss of being chained to the page. We were committing to being obsessive, irrational, and nearly impossible to live with, for a few hazy ideas, a handful of unclear scenes: a woman twisting into an angel; a man waking up alone in a burnt-down city; a couple bent over a desk together, examining an old script; a warship in flight. We were to throw everything away and give everything up, for the privilege of wrapping the right words around memories: a look someone once gave us from across a crowded room, a sensation of awe or terror or beauty that we once felt, then could not shake and could not forget.

Right then, on the first day of the program, admitting that we might have miscalculated wasn't a possibility. Having that kind of insight and grace and self-awareness would compromise the system, melt us down into pools of gristle and bone and regret. By *we*, of course, I mostly mean *me*, projecting my experiences on others. But I can't say *me*, yet, without this distancing; I haven't learned how to yet.

**The idea for this piece came out of a mistake: a misreading.**

This past summer, Norwegian magazine *Natt&Dag* interviewed Lars Holdhus, an artist and collaborator-friend. I right-clicked "translate to English" to flip the profile from Norwegian to English. "Jeg har gjort alle de feil valgene," the subtitle read. This translates, it seems, as "I have made all the wrong choices." In my mind's voice, I re-translated this as, "My life is a series of mistakes."

In the interview, Holdhus was asked why he applied to change his name. He replied, "I often make choices without realizing the consequences. I make changes overnight that I must live with the consequences of for the next ten years."

Over the next weeks, the image of the body as a product of a chain of successive mistakes took shape. I was kicked into mulling over all my wrong choices, on how many unconsidered moves, prompted by inscrutable reasoning or blind impulse, that I've made, often hand in hand with more reasonable, strategic choices. Sensible, irrational, right back to wrong, again. Five years ago, one turn seemed as arbitrary as another, and yet the outline and substance of my life now hinges entirely on that turn. Maddening.

**I would like, for once, to see a social media update that reads,**

"I've known nothing but ease and success for 18 years, but as of 2014, I did not get the job I hoped for right out of graduate school, and am moving back home with \$200K in debt to reassess everything." We might know quite a few people with that story.

Or: "Just spent a month unable to eat or drink properly because of crippling and all-consuming anxiety, but have emerged!—feeling *pretty alright, for now.*"

Or: "I cheated on my wife with my co-worker. Left her and our new family, but [name redacted] and I have moved to Austin, Texas and we are living in bliss, without much guilt."

Or: "I've frittered away my talents by never investing in them fully and am now in a career I hate for prestige and stability."

I don't know what this site—Realbook? Truthbook?—would look like, and I doubt everyone would sign up for it, but I suspect we'd certainly feel a lot less alone reading it.

The social media sites we live with now form a compact, glittering compendium of universal success. The flawless self, whose every step is sure and premeditated. This is not a new point. We opt into these places. The story these sites tend to tell, though, is what I find most troubling: that total accomplishment and unarguable happiness are the right goals for all of us, that we should be striving to perfect ourselves.

Maybe our frayed and thirsty dendrites might be better nourished by some hard truths, some honesty and fearlessness about one's flaws and dents. I'd like to see people talk honestly about their violence against themselves and others, their addictions and betrayals. I want to hear about how your dad had your record expunged and then put down money for your anger management, but doesn't really speak to you. I want to hear you say that not being there for your friend when his mother was dying was not really such a *valuable learning experience*. I want to hear about how you've f--ked up past the point of reasons or possible redemption.

**One journey of many I made in my twenties: from Point A,** complete self-absorption, to Point B, being slightly more self-aware. At twenty-one, my five-year plan and my ten-year plan didn't have any loopholes, any allowances for crippling anxiety and depression.

I did not know that I would have to set aside breaks for the days, weeks, and months lost in the past decade to Styron's darkness, Churchill's Black Dog, or, in my mind, a three-headed dog as tall as a house.

Ten years ago, it would have been an irredeemable error to write about depression, to write about myself truthfully. It would have been repulsive, because it would interrupt some false image of the capable and striving person, the person family and friends knew. In that story, I was supposed to be able to handle anything.

Depression is not exactly a mistake, but it is a bad tone. There isn't a singular, headline-worthy catastrophe I can refer to, but more an entire state of being in which the difficulty of finishing a single day is almost comical. Just, you know: a genetic, environmental, and chemical amalgam converging to make one's life a sealed-off hell. It is not wanting to write. It is not wanting to connect. At many points, it is just not wanting to live. Close friends' voices, even my mother's voice, can feel so distant: a train whistle thrown across a plain.

This isn't to say I'm special in any way or deserve any exceptions. It is just a thing to live with, as so many others live with it. Years of chaos and therapy and being lost to myself and to others are mostly behind. But I know that more trouble lies ahead, too. It is what it is.

Some blessed days, I wake up and the fog has completely cleared. I am filled with a million words and a billion crystalline images that have to be taken down until I am spent and sleep at my desk. This is the paradox: hand in hand with serious melancholy comes a transporting cobalt blue flood of ecstatic, manic production. Caught in it, I feel, clearly, that none of this is a mistake, that all this suffering is worth it, that this is what I've been put on earth to do. What other reason to be trapped in this cycle of transport and creation, this Sisyphean task of trying to speak clearly across the abyss to someone tiny and listless on the other side?

I work through these rotations, from the bottom to the top and

back again, at least five times a day. I'm always exhausted. I can't always show up. The effort of explaining why is just too much. For instance, right now: I need to take a nap. My phone's been off for a week.

### **Tackling failure is a hot theme in graduate school these days.**

Learn from the massive, life-stopping bumbles of great leaders. Learn how to boldly, bravely navigate trying times with a steady compass. It is great fun, and cheerful melodrama for students. Each mistake can be slotted away as a neat little hurdle in the story of one's eventual ascendance into professional and social domination.

And yet writing teachers talk about how you need to mess up in horrible, irredeemable, grotesque ways. They describe how failure is part of the territory, part of the job, a necessary condition for creating. The reason, of course, is that without errors and unplanned, off-road expeditions, there is no traction, no pressure on the self, and so, no artistic progress. Only after I've grinded to a halt do I feel how much I love running. Being wracked over my betrayals of myself and others helps me imagine forgiveness, or earning forgiveness, with an acute urgency. When I am immobile in a closed half-darkness, I remember that I most want to be outside the city, walking under a night sky, looking for Jupiter and thinking about its storms.

"Failure is big right now," Stephen Marche tells us in *The New York Times*. The quote is in one of a couple of major pieces the newspaper has run in the past year on failure and art. On its About page, the industry and technology site *Unwinnable* reads: "a videogame is rendered unwinnable when it allows a player to make a mistake that cannot be corrected." Artist Addie Wagenknecht's new book, *Technological Selection of Fate*, is a compilation of her LiveJournal account, where, for nine years, she archived her personal failures exclusively for her online friends. Last year, the *New Yorker* printed Tony Kushner's speech at the Whiting Writers' Awards, in which he said, perfectly:

We write to negotiate our own relationships with momentariness and permanence, to speak with the dead, to bring them back to life, or try to, and of course we always fail to bring them back, and we call that failure art.

In a *Slate* piece on the misappropriation of Beckett's "fail better," Mark O'Connell points out what the quote's surrounding passage (from *Worstward Ho*) actually means: Everything is error, everything is failure. There is no perfect end state. There's no unified being, no one work that will ever be It, that gives me, or you, permission to rest.

**From the ages of seven to twelve, I drew a comic series about** a woman who was a highly trained detective on horseback. I sent her out on her horse to throw down on felons, catch them in the act. She never failed. She never did any less than perfect; she made everyone around her happy. In sum, she was me, wound up under years of extreme pressure, achieving, forever achieving. There was no alternative.

But on the page, my detective also had freedom to transgress. She would go off to do what she really wanted to do all along: throw *Eyes Wide Shut* parties in her weird mansion; commit some grand theft auto herself; and perhaps most horrifically, do nothing at all. I remember that I tore those pages in thirds and flushed them down the toilet so no one could find them.

Recently, I watched a good friend, a former all-star college athlete, an outstanding defense attorney, scream inchoately like one possessed at her father on her phone. We were on a sidewalk in the middle of the day. She called him every curse in the book for ten minutes as I stood looking around, pretending this wasn't happening, and then she hung up.

Her face was blank and I sensed that she'd shut down completely. I suggested we walk down to the river. There, we sat and

watched the boats pass in silence, and after some time she just said, "Nothing is alright; everything is a mess, and no one even knows." I didn't know what exactly she was referring to, but I knew the feeling, that inability to speak truthfully because the truth is too terrifying.

In gathering material for this essay, I canvassed friends about their mistakes. One wrote to me about what she'd missed in order to have the time and space to make art: birthdays, weddings, children's birthdays, funerals, even. She'd lost so much time with her parents that she couldn't get back. I thought of how I've grown apart from lots of dear friends because I have needed a perfectly clear, uncluttered mind to protect this absurd undertaking day in and day out.

There really is no preparation for precisely how angry, disappointed and hurt your friends will be when you've canceled or changed plans on them for the fortieth time. *To hell with you*, your friends might say to you, either under their breath or right to your face, and rightly so.

**True grit is one of those phrases, divorced from the outstanding** novel and film, that fills me with palpable hope. I imagine it inscribed on my wrist to remind me of what I've been through and what I need to go on.

Writing may be an act of slowly solving mysteries, but I'm also learning that it's a matter of purposefully choosing experiences that are inexplicable. Pick up a book you don't really understand and force yourself to review it. Try to explain your obsession with a certain abstraction, a certain sound. Look at work that scares you out of easy sleep. Move to an unknown city on a whim and see if you can make it there. Seek out other artists who constantly confront the uncanny, if only for a little inspiration.

My biggest mistake has been thinking that I knew my own story perfectly and there was nothing new to tell. Moving backward, I can now better sense my blind spots, the gaps where I routinely skip to the next track.

**After we finished our master's program in writing, we headed** back to the cocoons we'd left: the work force, more graduate school, freelance gig life.

Each act of creating can become an effort to justify the original misstep of trying to create. Redact the error. Bronze it, or maybe, if lucky, cast it in gold. Show that this is the only way the story could have been told.

But out in the cold light of the real world, well. Slapping your messy self on the page doesn't feel quite as safe as it does in a cod-dled workshop. Whether writing about oneself, or fictional selves, the act will require actual feeling, and feeling all the hard feelings is difficult to sustain every single day.

Thank God for all the opportunities I've missed and all of the wrong turns I've taken. Each step off the main path has brought me closer to my limits. If I didn't take the wrong turns, I wouldn't have met some of my closest friends; if I didn't follow some strange sound into a place I was uncomfortable, I wouldn't know anything new, or glimpse just how much I did not know. If I'm lucky, after the bad choices, I will still get to come home. If I'm really fortunate, at the end of each day, there is still an idea, and a bit of energy left to imagine a future time in which I'll make that idea real.

This is a bit like choosing to toss a coin to flick a railroad switch: watch the train then veer off far, wide, right, into recondite spaces.

An idea, or an image, is what I hope I'll always have left. Let's take that warship, again: black carbon, inscrutable, its shadow over the new colony sudden and stark.

With that image comes a hard drop, further and further down into galactic space, until I fall onto a thin, metallic, winding stairway, on which I'll then walk until I enter a playroom made of glass.

In this room, my breathing slows down. Here's a full-body sensation, a deep-cell rolling wave, a muted electricity under the skin; this is all of the same feelings as when in love. I want to

linger here, in this room, as long as possible. I always want to feel this irrepressible, ecstatic joy, in pressing my sticky and completely unworthy hands up against the pane of the unknown.

# Ode to a House Centipede

Mark Lamoureux

*Scutigera coleoptrata*, execrated  
dasher, content to leave us  
as you prefer, most alone.

Who suffers our dumb dread,  
you who are happy  
to patrol our waste

& feed on the children  
of our filth,  
leaving nothing behind

yourself save a desiccated  
thorax or a tangle  
of emptied limbs—

savage cuneiform  
to message us  
*no hard feelings.*

Your fleet loops & uncanny  
stillness contemplating  
your million moving parts

in impossible silence—nothing like us:  
yatterers, discarders,  
writhing in clumps

like your prey, our own shadow-  
selves equally  
ubiquitous & tenacious;

you have no taste for us,  
or for scraps,  
but blood alone,

immune to our fear, you are  
an avatar  
of it—Silurian feather

for Hecate's crazy coif,  
you who deal with our pests  
& slip into the shadows

like everything else  
we must abide  
but cannot understand.



# Gatekeeper

Richard Gray

My collarbone is discovered  
Stuffed inside a duck-feathered coat.  
His hand stops on the crooked place  
where it broke.

Any guns or knives? he inquires,  
Sweeping down to my crotch.  
He squeezes jagged keys and my wallet.  
In my bag he uncovers sonnets.

Poems, I crack, and he spots an unusual  
slant in my fake front tooth.  
The original got knocked out.  
Mine too, he shows me, and pockets my book.

# His Ocean

Meagan Black

*After Nyonweh died, there was no reason not to.*

*The ocean embraced him like a lost child.*

She had stopped eating their fourth day on the ship, pushed the bowls of strange, bland mush beyond the reach of her chains.

Until she grew too weak.

He'd watched her die, as the mud of his shock dried and cracked, began to fall off him in pieces, revealing the tender, red-brown skin beneath. He'd watched her wrists grow boney, as the ship sailed over an endless ocean.

If this was the journey, what was the destination?

They'd seen the ocean from their mother's breast, fallen asleep in her lap to the sound of waves. It called to him.

He wasn't brave enough to starve.

He wasn't brave enough to see where the pink men were taking them.

They'd noticed. Come down, two at a time, shoved their short, fat fingers into her beautiful mouth and spooned paste down her throat. She choked, but swallowed.

By then it was too late.

The illness ate her up. After three days, they stopped coming, stopped trying.

His new skin was tight and hot, his blood laced with venom.

*The ocean pulled him to her bosom like he was a infant again, feeding from her teat. The ocean closed over his head, an endless world of blue-green blood.*

*He choked, but swallowed.*

When they took her body away, his sister was dead.  
He held her empty eyes before his own, ignored the slight twitches of her bird-thin legs.

Once he had seen them opened, the shackles weren't hard to understand. His wrists had grown small with grief. His skin, unwashed and slick.

*He opened his eyes to see his mother, to look upon a world—not home, but homely—as he died.*

*For one airless breath, he thought Nyonweh had found him.*

There'd been talk of fighting, among those that spoke his language. He thought the other men and women—children—had discussed the same. Their faces had held the same rage, fear, animal desperation.

Then the disease had come.

Tehpoe had died, his white beard stained yellow.

Then she had stopped eating.

*Her hair was the wrong color and moved oddly, like snakes over sand.*

*Her skin was darker than his sister's.*

*His ocean, smiling with an impossible joy.*

He had waited until the pink men were deep in the hold, stooping under the low ceilings, moving among the bodies behind him.

He hadn't known their language.

He'd never seen their faces.

He hoped they were dead.

*His ocean embraced him, and he felt the cold slide of her fishtail against his legs. Ignored it. Held her crocodile eyes before his own.*

Nyonweh had almost escaped into the jungle. His little sister had made it.

He never saw his father.

He'd flown out of the ship on wings made of fear, toes barely touching the rungs of the ladder.

The pink men had shouted behind him, loud and unintelligible.

*His ocean's hands, strong as his father's, soft as his mother's. She ran her fingers over his bare jaw.*

*He clung to her tenderness, carried it with him into the dark.*

Why hadn't he gotten away? If he could run like that.

Nyonweh had watched him eat, odd textures inside a mouth raw with screaming. She hadn't said anything.

The deck had slipped beneath his feet, the world bucking like an antelope thrashing in the jaws of a snake.

Real flight was his feet, landing on a ship that wasn't there.

Hot pain had turned cold, an enveloping nothing, like night on his skin.

Underneath he was a raw wound, poisoned by her empty eyes.

The ocean would wash him clean—a burn of salt.

*More sounds like language. Daylight, on his skin.*

*He'd been in the dark for so long. For a second lifetime, longer than his first.*

His mother's blood, red on the sand. Blue-green under the pink men's ship.

Black, white and endless on his tongue. In his chest.

*The wind felt like a father's speaking breath.*

After Nyonweh died, there was no reason not to.

After he died, there was an island, like a pepper flower floating on the blue-green ocean.

*His ocean swam up to the beach and unclenched his stiff hands. His head and chest were white with dried salt. Her hair clung in ringlets to her head, coiled tighter than his arms around her shoulders, his legs around her scaly waist.*

*She cooed at him, a language like birds.*

His mother's warm eyes—dimming. He had pulled up handfuls of sand, an animal digging its own grave.

Nyonweh, yelling for him.

*He dug his hand into the wet sand, embraced the earth one finger at a time.*

*His spindly fist closed around a spiral shell.*

The pink men on the deck—he hadn't expected them. But his small body had slipped between them like a fish in the river, their short, fat fingers closing on salty air.

*He pulled himself onto the beach. His ocean trilled, a voice like the first pattering of rain.*

He'd looked back from the sky, suspended above the water.

No Nyonweh, stretched out like a fallen tree under the blazing sun. No brown bodies, given over to an unimaginable disease.

Maybe his sister was in the ocean.

*Stay, he called, but Mother! stuck in his throat like tears, like a strange, grainy mush.*

*She drifted in the retreating tide, slid slowly away from him.*

*His lips cracked, salt stinging in the wounds. His mouth tasted like her gentle breath. The wetness on his face—he'd thought he'd forgotten.*

*Her smile was filled with impossible joy.*

Nyonweh, embracing the ocean like a lost mother.

*She slipped beneath the blue-green water, her fishtail glittering black in the low, red sun.*

*He looked back, at the trees that were not his, the sand that was too white, the birds speaking in languages he could not understand.*

*He stood on sore, swollen knees, and walked towards the jungle. There was no reason not to.*

# Shades of Yellow

*How to not walk away*

David Fitzpatrick

**West River Memorial Park, near the New Haven–West Haven** border, features an impressive, World War I statue in bronze and granite carved by Karl Lang in 1936. Timothy Francis Ahearn, the sturdy doughboy hero, has thighs like a Heisman Trophy winner with a tapered trunk and muscular arms. When I was returning to life in 2007, slowly kicking back into gear after a two-decade long struggle with self-injury and bipolar II disorder in the mid-2000s, I visited the park frequently. The soldier stands around nine-feet high, and is oxidized green from the weather. He's caught mid-stride, writing a message to officers in back of him, warning of what's ahead. He's a hero, a symbol of bravery, of resilience.

In that period, leaving a New Haven group home, trying to reconstruct myself as a mostly healthy, middle-aged man, I'd sometimes stop and touch the statue's base, or take a snapshot. I've seen him covered in snow, rain, and Mother Nature's dander in spring, and he looks the same—dependable, reliable. Like nothing would ever knock him over.

Nothing.

**The first time I saw my father fall I was four. He tumbled off** a friend's motorcycle in our neighborhood's cul-de-sac. Maybe he skinned a knee, but the fall gave me a panic attack. I gasped and sprinted to him. He laughed it off, but to me it was excruciating. I made him promise he'd never ride again.

It was an irrational, silly thought, but, to me, Dad was always Dad. He'd always known what to do, whom to call, what the correct, rational and moral decision should be in any situation. When I'd see photos of my three-year old father, adorable, hanging on to his mother in the sea at White Horse Beach in Plymouth, Massachusetts, I sensed, I *knew* he could already grasp everything. Looking at his little pudgy boy-face, I figured that kid was just inordinately

wise. OK, maybe he couldn't *drive* as a three-year old, but he could handle everything else. There was no doubt.

Some years later, I held my father's penis in my hand and steered it towards the plastic urinal as he lay supine in the ER at St. Raphael's in New Haven. He broke his neck in a freak fall at the local gym. Dehydrated from a long trip to India, he exercised the next day back and slipped in the shower. He fainted twice but struggled each time to a standing position. On the third fall, he passed out and fractured neck ligaments. Surgeons said a millimeter more to the left and he would've been paralyzed. For months he wore a neck brace, and today his feet and hands are slowed somewhat, lacking their former dexterity.

The Christmas Eve after the accident, I took him to a ten-dollar barbershop in Guilford, and helped him into a swiveling, lime vinyl chair. I took his brace off and there lay the wounded neck, tender and kind of wobbly looking. His shoulders sagged, and his face was pale, stricken. Oprah's talk show was on in the parlor, famous faces were singing holiday songs that day, and my father recounted his story.

"What an odd thing," the barber said, when my father finished. "One slip and your life changes forever."

The barber didn't fit my stereotype—no chubby veteran or wizened Italian senior citizen, but a middle-aged woman with heavy makeup, and a nice round ass. The walls were covered in advertisements for Brylcreem and Ivory soap, and—straight out of a Norman Rockwell—boys scrambled to grab a seat in the corner. They picked up the local newspaper, snuck glances at Oprah. Later, when she finished with Dad's hair, the barber lightly touched his neck and said, "You take care of that thing, hon."

"Jesus," he said soon after the accident, "all I want to be able to do is zip my own goddamned pants."

During that first week in the hospital, I escorted my father to the restroom, helped him urinate and zip up after, and realized a corner had been rounded quicker than I ever anticipated. Face to face again with fucking yellow.

**That color is multiple things in my world, most of them alluring** yet simple: flowers, corn on the cob, sunshine, a crayon, bananas, a Cheerios box, legal pads, a bunch of M&M's, and an aching Y2K song by Coldplay. But in our family, growing up, "yellow" was also a covert term, a stand-in more polite than piss and other crudities. *Never use them in the house*, my grandmother bellowed.

For the most part, our unfinished saltbox on Cape Cod was dominated by the malodorous stench of three young brothers. Starting from toddler-ages through junior year of high school, bedwetting was the great equalizer, a bond of raw shame that drove us to silence, or, at most, a peculiar kind of self-lacerating sarcasm. My sisters, one the baby and the other, the oldest, escaped this wrath somehow. We brothers were close in age, myself in the middle with a three-year younger brother, and an older one by two years. No matter how unique or talented, or developmentally disabled each one of us was, in the end, morning would come and greet us with sheets stained yellow. Our family didn't have the money for much counseling, and pediatricians told my mother: "The boys will grow out of it, just wait and see, time will tell."

Years later, a therapist of mine said aptly: "Each of you brothers, in your own fashion, were royally pissed off, and anxious as all get out." Growing up, the topic of urine had a place, a stature in our house. As a kid, I remember my Dad setting the clock for midnight to wake us up, only to find we brothers had already drenched our mattresses. Christ, the frustration my poor father must have felt. Even my grandmother, a dynamo who held off death until ninety-eight, ended family visits with the credo: "Tank out—everyone must *fully and thoroughly* tank out!"

At times, it felt like my whole family—cousins too—were rigid with anxiety and possessed an excessive-urine gene. My parents spoke about purchasing a bed alarm clock for us that was sensitive to moisture, but they nixed that idea because the minor electrical current involved might cause a shock. In my family, people steered clear of talk about electric shock. Whispers of psychic nightmares—

suicide, lengthy institutionalizations, and other miseries in the extended family oozed out to children's ears from time to time, and after a while, skittishness and silence ensnared the topic of the brothers' shame in the same way.

When my father checked on the three of us before he headed to bed, and found us wet, he never chastised us, or mocked us, just had us get some towels to sleep on until morning. My poor mother, who had to face the daunting laundry pile daily for years, was enraged not so much at us, just at the gender roles in the sixties and seventies—why she was the one that had to stay home and do the washing and drying.

Years later, after I'd briefly "dried out," the behavior returned to haunt me as an adult. I'd grown psychotically depressed and obese in my twenties and thirties, and doctors responded by shoveling in their medications, trying to ease the blackness. My bladder was helpless against the onslaught, and I soon found myself at thirty-two, stuck in quite a physical and psychic rut. The only decent thing about that period was that my roommate at a New Haven group home, a schizophrenic-compulsive from Palo Alto, suffered from the same. We both dawdled in our dampness in the mornings, pretending we didn't know this fact about one another. I remember thinking, "Well, at least he won't mind the smell."

Every morning, I shuffled over to the Howe Street Laundry, plunked down significant change, and listened to the washers and dryers chug, swirl and hum. Still, it wasn't such a big deal when I awoke soaked at the group home. I mean, after all, a few colleagues were leaving turds in the shower, so my retention difficulties didn't weigh me down a ton. It was uncomfortable and awkward, yes, but at that point in my life, I took any advantage offered. To not be on the bottom rung gave me an odd solace.

Now, for the first time in forever, my father looks mortal, fallible to me. Over the past years, as his body healed from his accident, he left behind a wheelchair, a walker, and a cane, so he did, in fact, return. He's steadfast, a rock. Or, should I say now, a partially

damaged rock. I always imagined those circle-of-life moments were going to wait till he was 101 years old. That they'd wait for a better time, when I could handle things with more clarity, finesse, and maturity. I know it's too easy and crass to say that, in the end, what binds us isn't talk shows, barbershops, or statues—if I wanted to end as tastelessly as possible, I'd say what binds us is yellow, pure and simple.

But I'd never end that way.

**A buddy of mine speaks of a Zen-like balance in caring for himself and his SUV.** He's a successful, full-time automotive service writer at a GM Dealership in Fairfield County, and also is an adult with schizoaffective disorder who preaches basics: setting the tires, rotating them, keeping an eye on the engine. The metaphor gets beaten to death, I know, but it's an effective strategy. Take life step by step. Eat right, do your work with pride, take your meds, write good stories, and have supportive people around you, and if you don't, seek out new ones. Hank has always maintained a groove of stability, even in his most riotous and horrific days. We'd sit next to each other at a local psych unit and I'd listen to his advice. Hank was the guy to go to if the hospital started sinking into the sea at three a.m. I always knew he'd find a way to get us the hell out.

When I'm back in New Haven, which I lived in for twelve years, I can feel dislodged by the pace on the streets. I see many striving faces—young women and men on fire, burning up the universe with their iPads, notebooks, Samsung gadgets, and their ambitions. It's a grand thing to be reaching for better days, more fulfilling lives. And it scares me to feel so outside of that sometimes, and I know many of my old colleagues feel the shame.

I see a few of them on the street around the group home I lived in for a decade on Broadway, I notice that stunned, harried look in their gaze. So far from sharing a warm embrace or a substantial conversation. A long ways from feeling needed and loved. Instead, a few have approached me when I'm in the neighborhood and ask for

five bucks for a Red Bull and a Snickers at the bodega, or a bucket of wings and a biscuit at Popeye's. Often, when I see myself reflected in their glasses, my own doubts slam me like a kick to the solar plexus: How can I be sure I won't end up alone again, dragging blades through my body? How do I make certain that the swirling blackness won't obliterate me like it did so many times before?

**My father is now seventy-five, a savvy businessman, a philanthropist, a friend to so many who don't have the emotional tools he acquired over the years in struggles with the mental illness in his son, and with losing a younger sister. He's on the elliptical each day, but his latest problem is a hip that needs to be replaced, so he's slower, but not by much. Today what I notice most are his hands: they're sore and dark with age spots, and remind me of his mother's.**

Grammy was a wild force of a lady. She taught French at Lexington High School in Massachusetts for years, and sometimes treated her grandkids to a taste of what she was like in the classroom. When we mumbled at her growing up during holidays or visits, she suggested better posture to begin with, chins up, and added her very own *pencil rule*.

"When addressing someone, and properly articulating each consonant and vowel, one should maintain eye contact, and *easily* balance an unsharpened number two pencil on one's upper lip for the length of the conversation." Years later, after she retired, and became a widow, she toured Europe on her own, and offered lectures to senior citizens and any type of community. Her lectures were on the Civil War, and her most popular talk by far: "The Unmentionables—Antique Underwear and Lingerie through the Ages."

When I was a boy at her house in Lexington, Grammy once told me that, during the nighttime, enormous bushes, beach grass, peonies and pear trees would sprout from her hands and arms.

"I was panicked when I first saw these things," she explained to me. "I thought people would think I'm nothing but a useless potted

plant, or that I belong alone in a forest, surrounded by insects and wild, cackling animals."

"What'd you do?" I asked.

She gritted her teeth and balled her fists: "I reached in and ripped those shrubs, flowers, and trees out by the roots—just tore the damn things off, and tossed them through the back window, and soon I had these age spots."

I studied her face for a trace of smile, but didn't see one. I followed her to the back door, and she pointed to bushes, stray weeds and flowers growing beside her stone walkway.

**From time to time, I still drive by Timothy Francis Ahearn's** likeness at West River Memorial Park. Maybe artist Karl Lang's creation only works as a visual pep talk for me when I'm feeling depleted, but if you happen to be on your way to the Yale Baseball stadium, or along Route 34 behind the Yale Bowl, take a gander. Pull into the park, walk over to him, and reach up. Feel the strength.

I think of my Dad, and how much I'll miss him when he's gone. I also ponder lost peers, old roommates from the group homes and psychiatric hospitals who took their lives, or who've receded deeper inside themselves, and who don't appear to be coming back out. Are there any lessons for us in an old statue?

There's a memory that still makes my eyes wet. In late June of 1989, after my first breakdown and hospitalizations at St. Raphael's, patients had a walking group twice a week led by this vibrant, pretty nurse named Diane. On my first outing, Diane toured Edgewood Park with us. The nurse and I were the same age, twenty-three, and I'd yet to pack on the 150 pounds from all the psych medications that would soon be thrown my way.

Later in the week, it was cool and gray and we vowed to make it to West River Memorial Park, despite the light rain. Diane and I said there was no way in hell we'd return to the hospital until we touched the statue, who Diane referred to as Napoleon, and when we made contact, she said: "See you next week, Sarge."



The brisk walk of a half-mile felt so important to me—essential. I was young and depressed, and would spend the next two decades trying to live a life without thrusting cigarettes, cigars, and razors into my flesh. But for those mornings, maybe three or four all together, I could flirt with a pretty nurse and feel the pulse of desire, and pray desperately that the anguish and rage inside would end so I could return to my life, and start over.

Substantial and true psychic health can be quirky, and hard to predict. I've observed many with emotional storms tumble, sink into the mire, and disintegrate completely, never to be heard from. And yet other times I see those with despair and anguish reach towards life, turn towards a pulse. They rise up, partially redeemed, and get another shot. They step out and away from the emotional formaldehyde that's been coating their skin for years, sprinting free and clear, and shake that crap off for good.

Look on the nightly NBC television news: a depressed woman with PTSD, who lost a leg in Iraq, is now married with kids and a medalist in Para-Olympic games. Or on a park bench near a hospital in Topeka, Kansas, twenty years ago, a peer of mine with schizoaffective disorder, and OCD, once so traumatized she was mute, became a text-book reader for a visually-impaired patient, giving freely of her voice.

Light does emerge somehow. And yes, that shade of yellow and its odor lingers for me, like the smell of entropy and disaster, but there's things to be joyful over as well. And though it's ancient news, nothing explosive or revelatory about it, life continues despite the ECT, suicide attempts, scars, and four-point restraints. Or more recently, dancing with my wife ten years to the day since my last hospitalization. Silence and mourning, yes, prayer and meditation, absolutely, but then we sow, water, and re-emerge.

We beat a drum, write the lyric, strum the mandolin, dim the lights, cue the projector, or just put our feet up, and enjoy the show. Because just when you've checked people off the useful and necessary list—or when that *unsteady, unusually disturbed* bag of bones

mumbling in the corner at the city trolley stop seems without purpose—do you grasp what can occur?

Well—for one—the late afternoon sunlight might touch her face just so, and tulips, magnolias, bonsai trees, and hydrangeas could sprout up along her hands and arms, and presto! A wounded, broken woman transforms into a human arboretum. Suddenly, she's a nature poet, spinning earthy, verbal tales, showing off golden petals, twisting and undulating like a seasoned performer, opening herself up to vast possibility. Maybe even making your day.

For what the troubled lady was selling at the trolley stop years ago was hope for sure, dignity, too, but more simply, beauty. A slightly worn and redemptive yellow rose. All for the price of one dollar.

Now who in the world could walk away from something like that?

# Last Letter Home

Chris Vanjonack

**In October, Payton McGuire's wife decides that she wants a baby.** Andrea has always known that she would one day want a child, but it is only then, on the eve of her twenty-ninth birthday she decides it is time.

"Ask me what I want for my birthday," she says to Payton in bed that night.

The lights are out. He runs his fingers lightly up and down her thigh and repeats the question. His voice is soft. "Anything you want," he tells her. "Anything under twenty dollars." Smiles.

"The moon," says Andrea. *It's a Wonderful Life* is her favorite movie and she still knows how to act young like she was when they first met. Payton tells her that he'll see what he can do, but that she might have to settle for a meteorite or a large block of cheese. Andrea kisses him and rolls onto her side.

Just as Payton McGuire is about to fall asleep, his wife asks, quietly, "What if we had a baby?"

**In November, Payton smokes weed and watches the stars from a lawn chair in Jonah Scott's backyard.** Jonah's wife bought the chairs from a thrift store. They can hear cars driving by, and through cracks in the fence they catch quick, fleeting glimpses of speeding headlights. The night sky seems to go on forever in ways that bother him. Payton does not draw attention to the anxiety it causes him. The sky's too big. The sky's too endless. He could not even begin to count the stars.

Among the things that cause Payton anxiety: road-kill, lips, swallowed gum, stories with unsatisfying conclusions and the mental image of how bloated and drained of color his face is sure to look after his heart has stopped. Lips in particular have always bothered Payton. They have been on mind since before his wedding, since before he even dropped out of school. "They're little slits in the mouth

that we eat and kiss and talk and vomit out of,” Payton once said to his father during a trip home from university. “They’re just weird.”

“Well,” his father said, nodding as he sipped Coca-Cola from a thin black straw. “You’re going to have to get used to it.”

Next to him, Jonah tells Payton that he has a new idea for a screenplay. They know each other from work. FedEx. Wake up real early and lift boxes on and off of trucks. They smoke weed on Saturday nights. Andrea doesn’t smoke anymore and Jonah says he gets sad whenever he smokes with Kendall and so they smoke together. They talk about their wives and about their jobs and about the Bruins. Payton has never really understood hockey and Jonah is a much sadder man than Payton ever was. Jonah never married the love of his love and he always wanted to be a father. All his life he’s had unfulfilled aspirations of being a screenwriter.

“An Abundance of Detectives,” he tells Payton. “It’d be a romantic comedy. A guy thinks his wife is screwing around on him, so he hires a private investigator to see what she’s up to.”

“All right,” Payton says. He takes a hit from the joint, coughs.

“But here’s the thing—the private investigator is the guy the wife is screwing.”

“I think that’s probably a movie already.”

“Hold up a second,” Jonah says. He disappears inside and returns with a white napkin and a blue ink pen. He mumbles something under his breath. They’re out of printer paper. Carefully, he writes out the words “Husband”, “Wife”, and “Private Investigator #1” on the napkin. He underlines each and draws arrows connecting them. “What happens though,” he says, “is that the husband and the private investigator fall in love with each other. You ever notice how nobody in movies is ever a bisexual? Well everybody here is bisexual, basically. And so anyways, when the wife notices that the husband is acting distant, she hires another private investigator to follow him around.” Jonah writes and underlines the words “Private Investigator #2” on the napkin and draws arrows connecting him to the wife and husband. “You follow?” he asks, and then he continues, going into extravagant,

never-ending detail about the boundless web of private investigators and spurned lovers. The private investigators keep multiplying and piling up until eventually there are dozens of private investigators all private investigating each other and the friends, family and loved ones of the original husband and wife couple.

“What do you think?” Jonah asks. The napkin looks crazy.

Payton coughs again and laughs. “Why are there so many private investigators running around?”

“Well that’s the thing,” says Jonah. “It takes place in Colorado. You don’t need a license to be a private investigator in Colorado. And that begs the question: what makes somebody a private investigator in the first place? That’s the whole idea of the movie, that maybe we’re all just private investigators, you know? It’s about trust.”

Payton laughs and passes the joint to Jonah. “Write it,” he says. He coughs.

“What about you?” Jonah asks. “You got any screenplays locked up in a closet somewhere?”

“Nope,” Payton says. “Nothing like that.” Which is bullshit. He still imagines himself wearing a white lab coat and holding a stethoscope to a dog’s chest. All day every day. At work. At home. With his arm wrapped around Andrea. He changes the subject. “How’s Kendall?” he asks.

“Shit man,” says Jonah, and he shakes his head. They talk like this a while longer, watching the world pass them by from used beach chairs and feeling like much older men.

### **One night in late December, Payton comes home from work**

before Andrea. He is always getting home first. After his morning shift at FedEx, four days a week he works part-time at an office supply company. His manager is an asshole. Not much older than Payton. Late thirties. He berates his employees for their language, lax-professionalism and occasional tardiness. This last point is particularly egregious, as the manager himself is late just as often as the employees. He always blames it on his diabetes. His blood sugar

is always too high or too low or too something. He makes it a point to publically test himself during breaks and he is always sure that his employees catch him eating a sugar cookie during lunch.

The work is easy but tiring. This is especially true on days when he works both jobs. Some nights he is so tired that he can't even get an erection. "No, I'm serious," he tells Andrea some nights, pulling back from her weird lips. "I can't get it up. I'm sorry." Since her birthday they have been having more sex than normal. Sex without condoms and birth control pills.

"It's ok," Andrea says, rolling back onto her pillow, "We can try again tomorrow. Get some sleep tonight." She is always very kind but Payton can tell she is getting impatient. Since October, Payton's successful, fertile ejaculation into her vaginal cavity is all she seems to think about. She has an ovulation calendar mapped out on the white board in the kitchen, her particularly fertile dates shaded in red.

Payton's occasional impotence evens out though, because some nights Andrea doesn't have the energy for him either. She teaches third grade at an elementary school a little ways into Rutherford. Most nights Andrea comes home happy, rejuvenated by successfully implemented lesson plans or some little victories. Those nights are the happiest, the nights that Payton forces himself to have enough the energy even when he feels like death. They drive out to the Passaic River and talk like teenagers. Lately she had been going on and on about babies; she's already thinking names. Last week, she told Payton that Henry is off the table because she has a student named Henry who is always giving her trouble, even if sometimes she really does feel like she's getting through to him.

"Or we could name him Mike," she said, "After your dad."

"Maybe," said Payton.

Some nights though, Andrea comes home and her voice is hoarse and she takes cough drops and it is all too obvious that she had been screaming at the top of her lungs and pounding on the steering wheel the whole drive home. Sometimes when Andrea gets frustrated she hits herself on the forehead.

When Payton gets home before his wife that night in December, he reads the newspaper and stretches out on the couch and cleans the second bedroom that they really only use when Andrea's mother and father visit or when Payton's whispering gets too loud for Andrea to sleep. The guest bedroom is littered with mementos and photographs and old *Time* magazines that Andrea always talks him into keeping. The *Time* magazines are stacked like Jenga tiles next to boxes of his father's old things.

When Andrea finally makes it home that evening, Payton is mouthing words into the bathroom mirror. Real slow and articulate. Playing with his lower lip. He sees her reflection through the mirror. Andrea's bright orange shirt has been covered in multi-colored handprints.

"Watercolors," Andrea says. Arts and crafts every Thursday. She drops the day's mail onto the table. "You still busy in the bathroom?" She slides past him and drops her pants. "Oh, Jesus," she says. "Long day." She pulls her underwear down over her ankles. "Mail's on the counter."

Payton picks up the pile of mail and reads off each item as he flips past it—"Cable bill. Junk mail. Letter from your mother. Sears catalogue."

His voice trails off when he sees the last letter. The return address has been smeared and he doesn't recognize the name of the sender. He's never met a Robert Carpenter. Andrea comes back from the bathroom and opens her mother's letter. Payton tears the envelope open.

The letter is written in blue ink pen on a piece of wrinkled legal paper. It reads as follows:

Dear Mr. Payton McGuire:

I was abducted from this Earth on October 17th of the current calendar year. The details don't matter. What's important is that I'm here now, held joyously upon the bridge of a flying saucer. My abductors are letting me send word to someone back home and your

name seemed as good as any. It was picked at random from a phone book.

Living conditions here are poor. I am locked in a cage and tortured at the whim of my captors. They stick needles into my veins and prod me like an animal. Everything hurts.

I will admit there are moments of reprieve, such as the hour a day during which I am allowed to meditate on the observation deck that looks out onto the vast recesses of space. They say it's cleansing for the mind and they're right. It's beautiful.

The sight of the naked universe reminds me of a trip I took with my mother and father when I was very young. We took a plane to Florida. I had never seen the ocean before. The first time I saw the Atlantic, my jaw dropped. That's what it feels like every time I stare out that window.

The real draw for me though, is all the anal probing. I love it. They stick a probe into my anus several times a day. In and out and in and out. It feels like a big wet sloppy dick. I love it so much. I never want to leave. I can't believe that I was sticking it in Earth pussy for so long.

And now, here I am, up on a spaceship and getting anal probed and loving it like a big gay faggot. I leave you with the following words, friend, written as I stare out the window at the limitless potential of a vast and wonderful universe, waiting another half hour or so until I can finally feel the pleasure sensors on my anus get all tingly again:

Vindication is beautiful.

Yours,  
Robert Carpenter

A crude drawing of an alien head is sketched next to the signature: bug-eyed, oval shaped, hastily colored in with green crayon. Payton stares at the legal paper and asks Andrea how her mother is. His voice is quiet.

"Still writing letters at least," Andrea says. She nods to the letter. "What's that?" Andrea takes it from him before he can answer. Payton sits on the couch and scratches his fingers against the fibers

of the cushion as she reads. "Jesus," Andrea says once she's finished. She almost laughs. "Who the hell pulls something like that? Probably the Jackson twins, right? God damn homophobes. Plus they're always doing shit like this. You know they lit up somebody's mailbox with fireworks just last week? Like the 4th of July." Andrea picks up the pile of junk mail and hands it off to Payton. "Would you mind tossing this?" she asks. The letter from Robert Carpenter is on top.

"Yeah," Payton says. "Crazy kids." He dumps most of the mail into the trashcan. When Andrea is not looking he folds Robert Carpenter's letter into a square and shoves it into his back pocket.

**Throughout the holiday season, all Andrea talks about is** children and all Payton thinks about is the letter. It is on his mind through Christmas, when Andrea's parents visit and complain about the boxes stacked in their guest bedroom and comment on the dryness of the turkey. On New Year's Eve, he and Andrea drive to New York City to see the fireworks. As the sky catches fire in an orgy of light and color, he cannot help but wonder about the logistics of mailing a letter from space. After the fireworks, they return home and open a bottle of champagne. Andrea is tipsy when she runs her hands through Payton's bushy hair. She tells him that she loves him. "Do you ever just wonder about it?" she asks, and she pushes him gently up against the wall to which they have pinned the New Jersey state flag. It was in her dorm room when they met and it has followed them ever since. Like they never stopped being college students. "What are you thinking about?" she asks later. He is always quiet after sex and she always asks this question.

"You," he says.

The letter takes over Payton's thoughts of elderly dogs and decomposing faces. Even the strange way that Andrea's lips curve together in the exact center. He reads the letter before bed each night, in the guest bedroom if he has to, just after he is done whispering to his father. He takes it with him to work and reads it over again and again. In the bathroom. On lunch breaks.

In early January, Payton sits hunched over the computer while Andrea watches the nightly news and obsesses over lesson plans. He searches the wide reach of the internet for anything concerning the disappearance of Robert Carpenter. He doesn't find anything.

Payton looks away from the computer and towards his wife and television. He thinks about how strange it is to try to teach eight year olds anything and how odd it is that anyone could rail against the liberal media. Brian Williams' voice is so calm and reassuring. It reminds him of his father. Of the voice that would talk him down before bedtime when his thoughts got in a knot. When he couldn't stop whispering to dead people. The voice that would reassure him when he called home from college, upset at his roommate for tossing used condoms in their shared trashcan. The voice that told him, repeatedly and assuredly, that it was all going to be OK.

Andrea stands from her lesson plan. She stretches. "I'm going to get some tea," she says. "Do you want anything?" She starts towards the kitchen.

Payton shakes his head no. His attention is fixed to the television.

On her way to the kitchen cabinets, Andrea stops, distracted by the ovulation calendar on the white board. "We should try tonight," she says. "This whole week, I'm fertile."

Payton turns away from the television and looks down the hall. He drums his fingers against his knee. He decides suddenly that he has to go. "I can't tonight," he says. He stands from the desk and pulls his coat from the closet. "Jonah's refurbishing his basement. New carpeting and paint job and everything. I told him I'd help tonight. Might be a while."

Andrea looks away from the conception calendar. "Do you have to?" she asks.

"I promised," Payton says, opening the drawer beneath the silverware where they keep the flashlights. "I'm sorry."

Andrea nods. "Oh," she says. "Yeah. Don't worry about it."

"You'll be asleep when I get back," Payton says.

This is when he starts leaving most nights.

**It is two weeks later when Payton and Andrea finally conceive.**

After she has urinated on several pregnancy tests, she cries and wraps her arms around Payton. "I could tell," she says. "I could just tell while it was happening. There was just something about it. There was just something about you." Payton agrees. He does not tell Andrea that as he ejaculated inside of her, the only thing on his mind was the way Robert Carpenter described space.

Jonah and his wife Kendall invite Payton and Andrea over for dinner. Kendall says over the phone that she has been meaning to invite them over for some time, but has never gotten around to it somehow. She says that congratulations are in order. As good an excuse as any for dinner.

Kendall and Andrea do not know each other very well, but both are friendly and sociable. Andrea purchases a medium priced bottle of wine from the grocery store. She presents it upon their arrival. "I want to make a good impression," she tells Payton as they wait in line at the self-checkout. It seems so silly.

Payton and Andrea arrive at exactly 7:30. The door opens and Kendall seems surprised by the bottle of wine. Jonah shakes Payton's hand. It is obvious that he has gone to some lengths to make himself presentable. He has shaved his facial hair and he is even wearing a long-sleeved, button-down shirt. Sitting around the dinner table, Jonah looks uncomfortable in his skin. He keeps laughing nervously and making forced but well-meaning attempts at small talk.

"So, your father died about a year ago?" Jonah asks. He chuckles nervously at Payton's uncomfortable affirmation and immediately apologizes.

Kendall serves lasagna. She and Andrea listen politely as Payton and Jonah retell the story of a co-worker who accidentally sent a crate of blow-up sex dolls to an elementary school. It's the thousandth time they've heard it. Andrea answers an accusatory set of questions about the state of the public education system and Kendall goes on at length about the stresses of managing a small business.

She owns an antique store on the far side of town. It is kept barely afloat by the bored, affluent septuagenarians who frequent it.

"I swear to God," she says, chewing. "I don't know what I'm going to do when they all drop dead."

Jonah pushes scraps of lasagna back and forth across his plate. "Shoot for a younger demographic," he says.

Kendall gives a fake sounding laugh. She wipes her mouth with her napkin. "Shoot for a job that pays more than eleven dollars an hour," she says, folding it back onto her lap.

Jonah gets quiet again and looks back down to his plate. Silence falls over the table but Payton barely notices it. He puts his fork down, wipes his hands and checks his back pocket to make sure the letter is still with him. He is always worried about losing it.

Andrea gives Payton an uncomfortable look and she searches for something to break the silence. "Oh!" she says, affecting enthusiasm. "We got the strangest prank in the mail not long ago." Andrea leans forward and makes pretend like she is sharing some great secret. "From a gay spaceman."

Payton is suddenly very aware of his own expression and tries not to look too engaged.

"From this guy who said he was—" Andrea's voice trails and she snaps her fingers. "What was his name again?"

"Robert," Payton says, not looking up from his plate. "Robert Carpenter."

**After dinner, Payton and Jonah load plates into the dishwasher** while their wives discuss children in the other room. Kendall says that she and Jonah wanted a kid way back when. She says that they got pregnant even, but that it ended in miscarriage. Andrea looks mortified.

Payton loads the last plate into the dishwasher, and says, "I have to show you something."

"All right," Jonah says. He nods towards the backyard. On the

way out, Payton catches the last snippets of his wife's conversation before stepping out of earshot:

"The worst part is telling everyone that they should stop being happy for you."

"Like your parents?"

"Parents, friends, co-workers. Everybody. You tell everybody when you're pregnant."

"Oh God. I'm so sorry."

"It's all right. It's been a while."

"What was it like?"

"The miscarriage?"

"Yes—sorry. The miscarriage."

"Painful. Painful and bloody."

"Why didn't you try again?"

Payton closes the sliding glass door behind him. Their voices disappear. It is colder than Payton had been anticipating. There is no snow on the ground but the air is bitter. "So what's up?" Jonah asks. "I'd offer you a seat, but one of the beach chairs is missing."

Payton doesn't say anything. He reaches into his back pocket and feels the letter.

"So what are you hoping for?" Jonah asks. "I always wanted a boy, myself." He digs the heel of his toe into the grass. "Never told Kendall that—I would have been happy with whatever she squeezed out. I always wanted to teach a kid to throw a ball, you know?"

Payton doesn't answer. He takes out the letter and unfolds it.

"You know, I was scared shitless," Jonah continues, "when Kendall first started talking about kids. She brought it up when we were at her parents' cabin for the weekend. A hundred miles from anything! We weren't even married yet. It got less scary though, for a while."

Payton interrupts Jonah and holds out the letter. "Here," he says. "It's the letter about the spaceman."

Jonah smiles. "Why didn't you say so?"

“Read it,” he says, and as Jonah’s eyes fall upon it, Payton looks up at the sky. He looks at the stars and the darkness. The overwhelming everything. He wonders if Robert Carpenter is up there sitting in an observation deck meditating or journaling or massaging his nether regions.

Jonah finishes. “OK,” he says. “What about it?”

“What do you mean what about it?”

“This is a very strange prank,” says Jonah. “It would make a decent premise for a screenplay. What do you want me to say?”

“No. No, no, no,” says Payton. “It can’t be a prank. It’s too specific. It’s too weird for it to be a bunch of fifteen-year-olds.”

Payton,” Jonah says. He looks down to the letter. “It feels like a big wet sloppy dick,” Jonah says, reading it aloud. “I love it so much. I never want to leave. I can’t believe that I was sticking it in Earth pussy for so long.” He laughs. “Come on,” he says. “Teenagers.”

“Teenagers won’t talk about the ocean!” Payton says. The volume of his voice surprises him. “They’ll try to make you think there’s an invasion coming or that you’re being watched by little green men. They won’t talk about the Atlantic Ocean. It’s too weird. It’s too specific.”

Jonah says Payton’s name again and asks if he is OK. “Are you high right now?”

Payton takes the letter back and folds it. “Your screenplay ideas are terrible.”

“Come on.”

“No, I’m serious. They’re awful.”

“You don’t have to be an asshole.”

“Someone has to tell you.”

“I’ve been sending them out,” Jonah says suddenly. He sounds so vulnerable.

“You have?”

“Yeah. Well, I mean, just the one. Just one right now, to a couple of agents.”

Payton’s voice lightens, “The private Investigator one?”

“The one about the man eating rainbow,” Jonah says. “From a few months ago.”

“You actually wrote that?”

“Yes.”

“Have you heard back on it?” Payton asks.

“No.” Jonah says. “No, not yet.”

“You know they’ll never take it.”

“Fuck you.” Jonah says. He laughs. “Fuck you, I know that.”

“Then what’s the point?”

Jonah shoves his hands in his pockets and looks up at the stars. The moon is bright and full and there is not a cloud in the sky. “You know what they say,” he says. “You shoot for the moon and miss, you hit the stars.” He gives a weak smile and laughs.

When the two men return inside, Kendall and Andrea are still in the living room discussing interior decoration.

### **Two nights later, the first night of February, Payton interrupts**

a quiet evening at home to announce that he is leaving. Again. To Jonah’s house. It is the twelfth time he has told Andrea this. He says that they are painting the basement walls. “Bright red,” Payton says. “Like blood. I’ll be back late.” Andrea says OK, and that she is going to the supermarket. He says goodbye and Andrea leaves right after he does.

Payton does not notice that Andrea follows him.

And so it is funny then, that as he drives he thinks about all the little things that his wife does not know. She does not know that he still has the letter. She does not know where he goes most nights. She does not know that he is no longer working at the office supply store. Payton has not yet divulged the story of how he came in late one day and when his diabetic boss asked why he had not shown up on time, he replied that he had been on a spaceship. “A million miles away,” he had said. “Looking out over everything like little specks of dust.” His manager fired him right then and there and took a bite out of his diabetes cookie.



Payton parks at the usual spot by the Passaic River where he and Andrea go on the good nights. They started parking there his junior year of college. It was a semester before he dropped out and it was still during the early stages of their courtship. Back then they'd stay up late in her dorm room, passing a joint back and forth and watching *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* from the top bunk. They never watched much past the opening monologue. Naked by the time the first guest came out. Andrea thought that Payton never smelled better than when she could taste the marijuana on his lips. He never liked her better than when they were watching alternative comedy.

"You taste good," she would tell him, breathlessly.

"You look good," he would say back.

For the longest time he wasn't sure about her. Some nights he thought he was in love with her and some nights he thought he hated her and some nights he just thought he was just happy to be sharing a bed with someone. There was so much about her that he found weird. "Dad," he said, that holiday he went home for break, "I've met this girl. She has the strangest lips. They sort of curve together in the exact center. Lips are weird, Dad. They're these little slits in the face."

So much about her was strange— her red hair, her pixie nose, her habit of urinating with the door open. "It's nothing you haven't seen before," she told him. "It's nature."

They were parked by the river the night he settled on loving her. They had been meaning to listen to rock music on radio while they pushed their weird lips together, but they ended up just talking. They almost always ended up talking. That particular night she was tripping out on something that some guy gave her in the back room of a house party. She was freaked out and sketching out and she kept touching Payton's face and telling him how happy she was. That she couldn't believe it. Sitting in the car, Payton accidentally said something to offend her. Something about their relationship. He couldn't remember. All he remembers is that she replied by saying, "I think that the biggest cause of disconnect between us is that you think that

this is a romantic comedy but I know that it is an apocalyptic romp." He never really figured out what that meant and she could never really remember, but right then and there he settled on loving her.

Payton turns off his car. He locks the door and slams it behind him. He takes Jonah's lawn chair out of the trunk. He holds it in one hand and his dimly lit flashlight in the other and marches off on the trail. He has the letter on him, like he always has it, always with him and always tucked gently in his back pocket.

**Payton is sitting on the lawn chair, camped out towards the end** of the trail when Andrea finds him. "I followed you," she says. "Come home."

His father had told him something similar back when he was still in college. "I can't do it, Dad," Payton had said over the landline in the common room of his residency hall. "I can't get a handle on it. It's this place and classes and it's Andrea. She's always here, it's like I live with her. I can't do it Dad, I can't handle all this." A pair of guys playing pool a few feet away began to stare as his voice cracked. It was not the first time that Payton had called his father like this.

"Come home," his dad had said, finally.

Andrea steps towards Payton. "I asked Kendall to see the basement," she says.

Payton doesn't say anything.

"She didn't know what I was talking about when I asked about the renovations. I played it off like I was all mixed up." Andrea's voice wavers. She's not dressed for the cold. "Is this where you've been going?"

"Yes," Payton says, "This is where I go at night." The letter is in his hand. It flaps in the wind. Like a dying flame. "You know I grew up a half a mile away from a beach? Five years, I spent on the coast."

"This is about the letter, right?" Payton doesn't say anything and Andrea tilts her head up. "What are you doing anyway? Waiting for a spaceship to take you out here?" Her voice cracks. "Out of New Jersey and away from me?"

“No,” Payton says. “I’m not waiting for anything.”

Andrea crosses her arms and sits next to the lawn chair. “Do you have another one of those or did you want to join me down here?”

Payton nods, lifts himself out of the chair and joins Andrea on the ground. The dirt feels cold and he can feel the moisture sinking through his jeans. He props up the flashlight by the crotch of his pants and sits with his wife. He thinks about telling her that he is longing for something that makes his jaw drop. He thinks about telling her how close he was to just up and leaving her all those years ago. He thinks about telling her how weird her lips look and how strange it will be when her pregnant belly starts showing. He feels shaky just imagining it. He thinks about telling her that he doesn’t know what it means for them that she’s pregnant. He thinks about telling her that he has lost his job, but that he still wants to be a veterinarian; that some nights he stays up, wide awake and restless, wondering how he was ever young enough and stupid enough to drop out of college to begin with. He thinks about telling her that that they can’t name the baby after his father. It wouldn’t be fair to the kid to have to live in the shadow of a dead man or for Payton to have to look at his son as a walking, melancholy reminder of the passage of time. He thinks about telling her about road kill and baseball and how much he still misses his dad some nights. He can’t believe it’s been a year. He thinks about telling her that cancer sucks and that he still can’t really talk to her the way he used to talk with his father. He thinks about telling her that he doesn’t know what she meant all those years ago when she called their relationship an apocalyptic romp but that he still likes the sound of it.

He doesn’t tell her any of that though.

The only thing Payton says, sitting like that with his legs crossed, is, “You look very beautiful, in the moonlight.”

Andrea takes his hand. Neither says anything. With his wife’s hand in his own and with babies on his mind, Payton wonders how he got there and where he is going and if there is only one definitive path

for him and if he is happy with that or if he isn’t. Payton wonders if Robert Carpenter is up there in space, staring into vast recesses of the universe from the observation deck of a flying saucer. Andrea scratches her index finger against the palm of Payton’s hand and he wonders if Robert Carpenter is asking himself the same questions.

# Fortunate Traveler

Charles Douthat

At first, all that can be seen beyond circumstance  
and the broken car beside the road  
is the road itself, looking back with one eye from its rise,  
the other turned beyond the next curve.  
The pavement here is oyster gray—asphalt cut with granite dust  
and sparkling stone. This far north  
the violence of spring wreaks havoc with the roads.  
Warming days will heave the earth and roads crack  
and the cracks fill with a rainfall's runoff  
that freezes at night and spreads. All summer  
you'll see road gangs with steaming pots  
and ribbons of molten tar blacking the cracks.

It's a state highway, centered by a double yellow line,  
pristine but for a smoked skid a motorcycle left behind.  
At the far road-edge is a second line—a wider one  
of thick white paint which now a field mouse is half across—  
and beyond the pavement lip, gravel bedded a yard or so  
to keep the weeds down. Above this border  
an uncut band of summer grasses rises  
full of play and light, and overshadowed  
only here and there by the blanched, upturned faces  
of Queen Anne's Lace.

Some farmer's planted a rail fence  
to separate the first green arm of his pasture from the road.  
It's bounded on the left by a mature wood of birch  
and tamarack, and on the right by aldered second growth.  
But the trees go only so far. This field is cleared  
like an upside-down letter "L," and the bottom of the letter  
opens deeply past the right-hand woods.

Smoothly, the pasture flows in the distance,  
it's chewed turf placid as waters in a lake.  
The few caramel-colored cows seem to float  
swollen from feed. In the grass, their hooves  
are hidden as if in waded shallows.

But somewhere there is a real stream.  
Now and then, a plash of hidden water carries on the wind.  
Likely it flows in the mid-pasture dip  
where earlier a blackbird back-winged down and disappeared.  
Far beyond that place, beyond a last cow  
and distant matchstick fence, forest foots the valley hills.  
The ridges ride low to reveal other hills  
and then others beyond those and then elevations  
of creamy August sky. And isn't it the sky, finally,  
that all eyes rise to? Though blue today  
the sky's not quite blue enough somehow. A whiteness  
burns the curtain. An almost winter threat of light.

From downhill an ancient flat-bed truck approaches  
bearing a pyramid of split firewood.  
Passing this roadside spot, it roars past the traveler  
where fortune broke him down.  
Then it's field crickets again, a disgruntled cow lowing  
the tang of truck exhaust in New Hampshire air.

# Supernova

## *On losing a friend*

Katie Karpenstein

**We've dressed for summer weather but it's chilly and damp,** a misty rain swelling and receding like a tide. The ancient pines that surround our campsite scent the air and darken the sky. Even on a bright day, it would look like dusk in these woods. Avi begins unpacking the car and methodically preparing the site. He is good at it and it's good for him. A software engineer, his normal habitat is a desk and computer screen, but he loves to work with his hands. Four-year-old Lily is exploring the forest. She flits back to me, her big brown eyes shining.

"Mama, will you build a fairy house with me?" I tell her no; I'd rather help build the actual camp.

Charlie is back in the car reading a book. I'd made him get out when we arrived but he'd climbed right back in after briefly surveying the dampness of the campsite. I start to get annoyed. If he'd only get out and play with Lily, she'd stop pestering me.

I open the car door. "Charlie. Charlie. *Charlie*. It's time to get out."

"But I don't want to get out." At seven, he's perfected the art of whining. "Daddy said I could stay here!"

"How about I set up the hammock and you and Lily could play with that?"

"I want to read my book!"

"We didn't come camping for you to sit in the car all day! It's ridiculous!"

He just looks at me, angry, miserable. "Fine," I half-shout, and I slam the door shut a little too hard. I'm instantly ashamed. My Great-Grandma Button had this saying: Why say no when it doesn't matter? I just want him to be here in the woods with us, to be present, to get out of his head.

But I'm not really here either. One moment I am waving hello to our friends Matt and Lisa, who are camping with us at the neighboring

site. The next I am thinking about how Matt used to date my best friend Jo. I'd always hoped she'd come camping with us one day. She would have found Charlie's car sit-in protest so funny. She always found a reason to laugh. Until one day she didn't, and she walked in front of a train.

I'm hammering a tent stake into the earth and I'm seeing sparks. They hover around me like fireflies, like stars quivering with explosive energy. I'm not here. I'm in my old kitchen the day I got the call that Jo had been found on the tracks, and I'm falling to the grubby linoleum floor, unable to breathe.

**Our engagement party was at the apartment Avi and I shared** in Queens. I'd put huge tree branches up in the archway between the living room and kitchen, hung little multicolored lanterns from them, hot-glued silk leaves to the tips of every twig. A disco ball spun spots of red onto the living room walls. I wore a flared white skirt and a tight white corset I'd bought at a fetish shop. I was going out to nightclubs a lot in those days, and corsets were kind of my thing. I flitted around barefoot, feeling like sparks were flying from my fingertips.

At the party, Jo and I were chatting with my cousin Ben. Jo was a beauty, tall and blonde with green eyes, and five years younger than me. Ben asked how we met, and she and I looked at each other and just cracked up. This was in 2003, and at the time, it was so hard to explain meeting online to someone who didn't post on message boards; it just sounded creepy and lame. I started to say my usual line—*we met through a mutual friend*—when Avi popped over.

"They like to send each other pictures of dogs in clothing and then giggle about it," he said.

Jo threw back her head and laughed her huge, room-filling belly laugh, and I just about fell over, holding my gut, wiping away tears. What Avi said was true. But it sounded so dirty.

Jo and I met on a nightclub message board. It attracted twenty-something city dwellers, adventurous enough to dance all night,

drinking and popping pills, but nerdy enough to spend the next day chatting about it online while pretending to work. Jo was living in Illinois when we first met, so our friendship was digital at first. Sitting at my desk at my somber insurance company job, my face would turn bright red from suppressed laughter at Jo's latest message. We teamed up for goofy online games. We Photoshopped each others' heads onto hot dog costumes.

Once she moved to New York we got to see each other in person, on the dance floor with our nightclub crew, playing Scrabble, or just making burritos at the apartment Avi and I shared. Jo made great strawberry margaritas.

"Dude," she'd say, "Avi. You have to help us out here. We made a whole pitcher and you're not holding up your end."

Avi would do his best but eventually he'd fall asleep and Jo and I would bring the pitcher and a bag of tortilla chips up to the roof, telling stories and giggling until it was too late for her to go home. She'd sleep on the couch and the next morning I'd make everyone pancakes.

"Dude, Avi," she'd say, "you have to make the coffee because it's totally your fault me and Katie had too much margarita."

When Avi and I moved to Yonkers and had a baby, a lot of our friends stopped coming by so much. But more often than I could believe, Jo would take the subway from Brooklyn and then get on the Metro-North to come see us. Waiting at the train station for her in my car, I'd fiddle impatiently with the radio and then spot her on the platform with her enormous handbag and we'd wave, and I'd think, *Jo*.

She adored our son Charlie, who called her Doe once he could talk. Our apartment complex had a pool and Jo and Charlie loved to swim. Before Charlie, Jo and I had done a lot of beach trips and we both loved floating in the ocean. Now we liked to race through the pool, idiotically, competitively, using those brightly colored noodles as pogo sticks. Once, as we ate lunch before a long-planned swimming day, the sky began to darken, and thunder rumbled. Charlie

started to get upset.

“Doe, it’s yightning? It’s gonna wain?”

Jo said, “You know what the forecast is, Charlie? Cloudy, with a chance of *ticklestorms*.”

She pounced on him and he squealed. We played board games and ate Cheerios from the box and watched the rain fall.

When our next baby, Lily, came along, Jo was her first babysitter. Lily was only four months old, but Avi’s boss was getting married at the Plaza in Manhattan and attendance was a must. We booked a hotel room nearby and set it up with snacks for Jo and pumped breast milk for Lily.

“This stuff smells like ass and hay,” Jo pronounced.

Jo’s other best friend Lacey came to keep her company. Over the years Jo had tried to make the three of us into a little group, but I didn’t have as much in common with Lacey. I think I also just wanted my time with Jo all to myself. That night, I hated to leave little Lily but knew that Jo would take good care of her. When we came back from the wedding Lily was asleep and Jo seemed tired but happy. “She’s just so freaking cute!” she said. Lacey told me years later that Jo had walked Lily up and down the hallway in the stroller forever to get her to sleep. Then after about an hour, Jo woke the baby up so she could play with her.

**One Wednesday morning in July, I got an email from Lacey** saying that Jo was missing. Lacey said Jo’s mother hadn’t heard from her either. I knew it was bad. I wondered if she’d hooked up with the wrong guy or gotten in an accident. I was supposed to be packing for our move to our new house in Westchester, only two days away. But I spent the day pacing, thinking up scenarios that ended with Jo still alive.

That afternoon Lacey called again. “I’m sorry, but I have really bad news. Jo died yesterday.”

“What?” I kept saying. “What?”

After that, Lacey’s words blurred together. Something about

a train in New Jersey. Something about a lawsuit at her job. Lacey and Sam and Lena came to our apartment in Yonkers, all the way from New Jersey and Queens. Sam was Jo’s ex-boyfriend—they’d remained friends—and Lena was her good friend from college. I huddled with them in my tiny kitchen, trying to keep our voices down so four-year-old Charlie wouldn’t hear.

“I just want to hear that it was an accident,” I said.

“Katie, it wasn’t an accident,” said Sam.

They told me she jumped in front of an Acela express train. I sank to the floor, hands over my face. They said there was a note. They told me not to read the news articles about it, which of course I did. There was a photo of a train with a big dent and red stains on its sleek nose. It took over four hours to recover the parts of her strewn across tracks going in both directions. One part ended up on the platform. (Which one? I wondered. A hand? A foot? Jo always liked to paint her toes orange.) People in the comments section complained about how long their commute had been. One guy said the station reeked of rotting meat for days. I composed responses to these comments but never sent them. *She wasn’t an inconvenience, she was a person*, I thought. I wanted to plaster the train station with pictures of her. I searched obsessively until I found grainy black and white surveillance footage someone captured with their cell phone and posted online. One moment she’s in her black dress on the tracks. Then the screen fills with train and she just disappears. I watched it over and over but it didn’t make her death seem any more real.

Avi stunned into silence, took care of the kids so I could be with Jo’s friends. We sat around, cried a little, mostly just stared. Lacey’s and Lena’s phones rang nonstop as people started to hear. So many people loved her, even people who knew her only a little. Lacey and Lena didn’t give out any details, but everyone knows what it means when a young person dies and no one will say how. They had long discussions about who should be told what and how much, while Sam and I looked at each other like, *does this really fucking matter?*

But we shrugged. This was their way of dealing.

There was a memorial gathering that Friday night in the city. Our move was happening the same day, so we rushed in just toward the end, pushing the kids in strollers. I walked into the packed room and felt like all eyes turned to me at once, with such a surge of sympathy I was drowning in it. I greeted a few people, then tried to hide in a corner. A long hug from someone I didn't know that well, a sweet guy from the old nightclub days, finally got me sobbing. Jo's parents were there from Illinois; it was my first time meeting them. Both of them are ministers. Her mom actually comforted me. Jo's dad had his daughter's eyes; I couldn't bear to look at them.

"You can only grieve those you loved," he said.

I nodded and wept, unable to speak. When it was time to leave, Avi signed the book and started crying. If not for Charlie's stroller to hold on to I would have fallen to the ground. I howled like a wild animal with a broken leg. I began gasping for breath. I was choking. My stomach twisted into a hard knot and I felt like I was going to pass out.

"Be strong, be strong, Katie! Jo would want you to be strong!" A girl named Colleen shouted it, as though from behind a veil. My little Charlie was twisting around in his stroller to look at me, confused and scared.

"Mama? Mama?" he said. I knew I had to stop screaming, so I pulled myself together and we left.

**The funeral was the following week in Aurora, Illinois. JOSEPHINE AVERY SIMMONS, MEMORIAL SERVICE,** a sign read at the church, and seeing it in print like that, it seemed so impossible. *This should be Jo's wedding*, I thought.

People slowly processed through the flower-filled church. A bishop gave the eulogy. He'd known Jo through her parents and from Jo's days working at the church office. He and Jo had shared an interest in sailing.

"She loved heavy weather," he said.

It was true. Jo had always faced adversity with such courage and a grin on her face.

"I never knew she was in so much pain," people over the past week had said. "I guess this is what she wanted."

*Fuck that*, I thought. I wished people would stop thinking of her as a pitiful, melancholy creature. She was a motherfucking pirate.

She'd had some mild chronic depression but she was not suicidal. She'd had a thriving career as an artists' rep. She loved her family and friends. She'd just rented her first roommate-free apartment and had IKEAed it to the hilt. The only thing somewhat amiss was that over the past few years she'd become obsessed with her job to the expense of other areas in her life. She wasn't really dating and had less time for friends, including me, because nearly everything she had went into her work. I thought of it as a phase and admired her fierce work ethic.

The day before she walked in front of that train, she'd received a legal packet in the mail at her office. Her family has kept the details private, and Jo never called me about it. All I know is that this professional calamity terrified her. I'm guessing she feared she'd lose her job and maybe even her apartment. Independence was everything to her. She had worked so hard to move to New York. But ninety-nine times out of a hundred, Jo would have faced this problem, kicked its ass, and kept on trucking. This time she snapped. But even then, I think she could as easily have ended up getting on a bus to Mexico, or running naked through the park. Just our fucking luck, her temporary insanity ended up being permanent and fatal.

The force of the love for Jo at the funeral was so strong that I didn't want to leave. Then it would be over, and she'd really be gone. Daily life afterward seemed strange and wrong. I'd buy eggs at the store and the clerk would try to make small talk, and I'd think angrily, *I can't chat about the weather with you, you dick. My friend is dead*. I only wanted to talk with Lacey and Lena. But we were all so lost, it was hard to help each other much. A week after the funeral I



helped Lacey and Lena pack up Jo's apartment because her mother couldn't bear to do it. I remember holding an old pair of fuzzy socks in my hand and wondering how it was possible that she wouldn't wear them again.

In those early days of grief, a little kernel of a belief began to take root in me, that there were places where none of it had happened. Those places became tangible, other worlds just out of reach. I read everything I could find about parallel universes. Like Borges' "The Garden of Forking Paths," in which a character conceives of time not as linear, but as a garden with a labyrinth. Every moment happens in parallel, the paths branching into infinite destinations. I spent my days unpacking boxes and caring for the kids, making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, reading library books, washing faces. At night I paced the labyrinth. I needed to find the path that had turned right instead of left, away from the train instead of toward it. I wished I could go there, just for a few hours, to have one more silly phone chat. Or play Scrabble. Or go to the beach, if that wasn't too greedy.

### Path One

Jo had been feeling down for a while. Then at work on Monday, she got the package of legal papers. She was likely to lose the job she loved and maybe never work in this field again and oh god, what about the huge security deposit on the apartment? Something burst in her psyche, like an emotional aneurism. The next morning she called in sick. She did some research online and found a station that's a popular place for suicide because the trains hit speeds of 150 miles per hour, and it's easy to get onto the tracks. So sensible. She rode down there, writing her note on the way. It all seemed right to her at the time. She left her big bag on the platform, waited until she saw the lights of the Acela, climbed down in one smooth motion, and stepped in front of it. She turned her head to the side—you can forgive her this one moment of fear—but she stood her ground. As

the train slammed into her, she realized what she'd done.

"I'm so sorry," she said. She sent this message to me, to her family, to Lacey and Sam and Lena, and we received it. She said it again and again. "I'm so sorry, dude. I didn't mean to."

I told her, "I know. I know."

### Path Two

Jo got the package. She was destroyed. She did her research and made her plan. Rode to the station and wrote her note. She sat on a bench at the platform and watched a few trains roar through. She thought about the peace that would come. Then the thing that had burst in her psyche healed a little, the flow of poison abated, the fever broke. She hugged her knees to her chest and started to cry. She called her mom. Her mom told her to call a friend. She called me. I left the kids with a friend and raced down there. I held her and we cried together. I carried her big bag for her and joked about how much stuff she had in there. I brought her to a bright clean hospital in the city. Lacey and Lena came and we all waited with her through various exams, tests, doctors. She slept. Her parents came and I went back to my family.

"Thank God she called," I kept saying to Avi. "Thank God."

I visited her in the hospital. To keep her company, I brought her the fluffy white stuffed bunny she'd given Rosie for her first birthday.

"Ooh, the ears!" she said. "So soft!"

She was really embarrassed. I told her not to be. We laughed about the crappy TV at the hospital, the gowns, the food. I snuck her in a burrito. She got better. I made more time for her. A year later, we went to Mexico with Lacey and Lena for a girls' weekend.

"I'm so glad you're here," I told her.

She said, "Yeah, me too."

### Path Three

The package came, the twenty-four-hour brain flu seized hold. The train collided with her and scattered her parts like a toddler with a too-fragile doll. But though her poor body stayed behind, her spirit zipped skyward like a hummingbird. She went somewhere bright, colorful, musical. She loved it. Soon she stopped missing us so much. She even stopped feeling so bad about what she'd done, because she could see everything so clearly now and had compassion for everyone and everything, including herself.

Meanwhile, the rest of us lived our earth-lives. Years passed. I lived to be ninety and died with Avi and one of my kids at my side, and a couple grandkids nearby. I was ready to go. I breathed in, breathed out in a long sigh, and began to float.

I was greeted by relatives, some of whom rushed to say hello and some of whom, like my grandma, just gave a wink and a wave and allowed me space to get settled. And then I saw her, honey-blond hair past her shoulders like it was when we first met, green eyes sparkling, a wry-half-smile on her lips.

"Hey dude!" she said, and wrapped me up in a big hug. It had been over fifty years, but I remembered the feel of it, the warm Jo smell of vanilla and spice.

We started catching up. We had a coffee and a pastry. I started telling her about my life, my family, and she just laughed and says she knew. But then she let me tell it anyway, every detail. I started right where we left off, with a story about Lily at two getting into pirates and walking around going *arrrrrr!* She told me how it had been for her here, what she saw of her own family and friends still on earth. We had all the time in the world. She showed me a door I hadn't noticed in the brick wall at our coffee shop. We walked through it into a long black hallway which opened up to a huge nightclub. A statuesque drag queen strutted over and took us each by the hand. He wore a feathered Amazon headdress and a loincloth and his dark skin glittered with a pattern of glued-on sequins. He

led us to the center of the dance floor, offered a long-lashed wink, and melted back into the crowd. The bass thumped in my chest and the air was steamy with sweat and cigarette smoke and I smacked Jo's ass and we fell over laughing. I went looking for the bar and stumbled into my grandmother's kitchen in Montana. She looked up from rolling out a pie crust and waved me over. She was wearing one of her terrycloth housecoats and drinking a Diet Coke. She handed me my own kid-sized rolling pin and I got to work. After we got the pie in the oven I went upstairs, where I found Charlie's little yellow nursery room from the Yonkers apartment. He'd just woken up from a nap and was standing up holding on to the crib bars. I ducked down, then sprang up.

"Peekaboo!" He squealed with laughter and plopped down on his plump diaper bottom. I scooped him up and raspberried his tum-my so I could hear that laugh again. I set him up with some board books and went back downstairs. Avi was waiting in snorkel gear on a little crescent beach and together we slid into clear blue water.

That part of the labyrinth is hard to find. I'm not much of a churchgoer. But I can see it blurrily sometimes, the outlines maybe. A flash of a scene before I lose it. I like it there. For the first time, I wish I had some certainty in the fact of it. I wonder if it becomes more clear the more people you lose, or if you just ache for it more. A few years after Jo died I lost my dad to a sudden illness. At his deathbed my sweet Aunt Patty hugged me and said my dad was looking down on me from heaven now. I could see she believed it. I just felt that same ache, the wanting to believe. It's not the same thing.

### Path Four

Jo rode down to the station, scribbling her note, her mind ablaze. She found the right platform, left her bag, adjusted her hair and dress. She avoided catching anyone's gaze, afraid they'd figure out what she was up to if they saw her eyes, her trembling hands. She

heard the roar of the approaching engine, felt the rush of wind, and jumped smoothly to the track. She was dimly aware of a gasp behind her from a woman on the platform, and then her scream reached Jo's ears but the fever burned it away, like water droplets on a cast iron wood stove. She stepped forward to the center of the track, and turned to her chosen killer. The train's nose touched her, just a kiss really, and in a blinding burst of light she was suddenly everywhere. A supernova. Droplets of Jo-light were instantly transported around the universe. Everyone got some, including me. I didn't know it yet because I didn't find out about her death until the next day, but the little sparks were already there inside me, making themselves at home.

I feel them blaze up when I need courage, when I need to remember to laugh instead of taking things too seriously. We're camping in the woods, and my son is still sulking in the car. Jo would have laughed so hard at that. The man who used to be her boyfriend is here with me. He's with someone else now. Avi is setting up the camp. I'm hammering in the stakes to our tent and there are sparks all around. They remind me to ask for help when I feel crushed and hopeless. I tell them not to worry, that I'm doing okay.

And the sparks say, "I know, I know."

# Two Poems

Raven Leilani

## Wanderlust

She listens for the bell of your voice over the ooze of traffic  
blotting itself to a yawn of headlights and lo-fi winter buzz,  
she saves all your voicemails, and erects them into a chorus  
she can press her hips against with the mechanical fervor  
of a Top 40 hit, of the porno flick regarding its plot more seriously  
than the flesh around its starlet's face, hanging slack and vacant,  
a fist of beaten clay, a scream maintaining its song  
by snaking through the teeth  
of kids with guns and housewives burning duvets  
and the legs off of spiders  
for what is hidden carefully inside the home.  
But not too carefully she says. She says, don't be careful with me.  
have you existed under such perfect hair all your life?  
She wants you the way any woman wants sinew,  
stacked up upon itself like mile long car crash.  
Her dress is lined in circuits in the cold  
soft light of fridge, and she thinks of her husband  
when she pours the drinks.

## Extensions

It was Tuesday when you and I parsed the oily kinematics  
of the New Jersey ponytail.  
The way to slick up your hair, attach it with zircon pins and glue.  
Sexy as anything synthetic can be,  
like aspartame frothing up compounds through the condensation, beading like tears.  
Or drawing eyebrows on for the first date, just so he will get your jokes,  
and in the days we kept our eyes like saucers below our bangs,  
you weighed 100 pounds  
less than the celestial tease of hair wrapping itself  
into the fists of every boy with brown eyes along the seaboard,  
still acting as if you had never once existed in the daytime,  
as if we weren't cocky, matted derivatives of every fake orgasm  
cutting on spined feet through a modem and erecting a norm within its choir but no  
understand that my hair can castrate, simply by lying here above my ears,  
render the hands of men too delicate,  
too petal-like to hold.

# The Wrath of Nature

Suzanne Reeder

**Laura's bedroom was above the summer kitchen, where her** mother had rolled out pie dough on an old oak table with one short leg and a hole in the middle. Pearl was the mother's name. Charlie's first wife. At thirty-six she fell asleep at the wheel and swerved off a ravine into the Wabash River. The year was 1969.

After Charlie married Vita she got rid of the oak table when her two daughters said it was rotted and ugly. The Grace Hopkins Society was grateful for the donation. Vita sorted through clothes and undergarments left in Pearl's dresser and closet as long as Charlie had been widowed, almost two years.

Laura was fourteen and made fun of Vita's town lady ways. Told her perfume attracted mosquitoes, that lipstick was only for Sundays. Cats, even pretty ones, belonged in the barn.

From Charlie's girl Vita learned how to milk cows, butcher chickens, drive a tractor, load and fire a shotgun, spit watermelon seeds into a can. How to skim cream and make butter, watch caramel cook just long enough so it wouldn't burn in the pan.

All this and Vita still starched her aprons, collected fancy lotions, bought shoes she never wore at Jacqueline's. She painted her nails before bed, every Sunday night. By sundown on Wednesday all that shiny red was ruined. Chipped from tip to cuticle.

**Late afternoon, Vita arrives at Larkspur Manor, in gray slacks** and a white cashmere sweater. Her lipstick is red but not garish. Mascara brightens her pale blue eyes. Her white hair (blond in her youth, dyed a honey shade in middle age) is chin length and cut in layers. She's worn the style for years, ever since a waitress told her she looked like the actress Helen Mirren.

The door to Charlie's room is open wide. Inside, the television is blaring, tuned to a talk show with a couple arguing on a stage. Vita turns the television off, admires the flower bouquet she brought

yesterday. Not daffodils from home, blooming wild outside the barn, but tulips and hyacinths purchased from a florist.

She kisses Charlie below the tube that runs across his cheek. His dark eyes look past her, at the wall painted mauve. Two pillows prop up his back.

“Pearl, my sweet darlin’,” he says. “Love of my life.”

Vita pats Charlie on his arm without correcting him, moves a chair closer to his bed. She sits and removes a magazine from her bag. She starts flipping through pictures of entertaining ideas, dream gardens, and spa bathrooms the headline says will *Soothe Your Soul*.

She turns another page, asks if Dr. Rice had already come by.

Charlie stares at her blankly. “Our boy, Byron. He was here today.”

“Not today, Charlie. Byron and Aileen came yesterday. With the grandchildren.” She keeps her eyes on the magazine, admires a white duvet and pillows edged with lace.

“And Byron wasn’t your boy,” she says, not unkindly but evenly, for this is the part, not the Pearl part, that she wants corrected, if only for the walls to hear.

“That boy was a hellion. That’s what they said, darlin’.”

Vita feels the stab to her heart. She knows this was true, despite her best intentions.

*Not just a handful but a hellion.* Decades ago, this had been the word around town, since Byron’s father had shot himself in the head at the age of thirty-nine. Found face down in mud by the reservoir, his best suit ruined, his bank briefcase empty except for a thermos of coffee gone cold.

At seventeen, Vita’s fatherless boy was calling her dirty names in public, taunting girls at the A&W. Up to no good at the reservoir at night, skipping school on Fridays.

When Charlie caught wind of the gossip, from a waitress named Lillian Butz, he was sitting at the lunch counter in Rick’s café. Charlie got the specifics he needed. That evening in May he addressed a letter to Vita, still Mrs. Lange in correspondence. Full-time farm

help that summer was needed. Fair wage, room and board were offered. Wife had passed on, he wrote, but there was a daughter who cooked up a storm. No one went to bed hungry.

At first Vita balked. Her pride was offended. By the last of the month she was at her wit’s end. Arrangements were made in a day. Charlie fixed up the attic with insulation and three walls, a bed and a dresser.

For all of June Byron worked at the farm, went to bed restless and angry. He skipped Sunday worship and lunch with his family, found another church to his liking. By July—his body lean from labor, his skin golden-brown—his demeanor appeared greatly improved. At his childhood home in town he gave his mother a bouquet of daisies and a kiss on each cheek. At lunch he said please and thank you, a prayer to his savior. When his two younger sisters fought at the table he told them to be good.

“He shaped up, though,” Charlie says now to Vita. “Our boy shaped up right fine.” With his fingers he kneads the blanket on his bed, sighs as his eyes glaze over.

“We always wanted a boy. Didn’t we, Pearl? A son for us. A brother for our darlin’ Laura.”

**Afterward, Vita walks down a peach-colored hall. Outside a room with one window and closed curtains she watches a sleeping woman, lying on her side. Last week the woman turned ninety. There was a small party with staff, a niece, a sister-in-law still living, balloons and chocolate cake. Vita attended.**

A buttinski, the woman was. What Charlie had called her. She stopped by every week after Pearl died, to check on him and Laura. Her name was Ellie Holt. Had eyes the color of lead, Charlie said. A face like Lyndon Johnson’s.

He and Vita were talking and drinking coffee at the farm. The first time had been in town. There were suppers, too, what Vita cooked and Charlie complimented, though he salted everything twice and ate, mainly, bread with butter.

Ellie had let loose, Charlie said. Got all high and mighty. Told him Laura was acting strange, not right for a girl fourteen. Took after Pearl in looks. When Pearl was young, that is. Just as pretty, with those green eyes and auburn-colored hair. Ellie wondered if Charlie had noticed the resemblance, or his daughter's odd behavior. Knew the Lange boy was there for the summer. Hard worker, she agreed. Turned pious, too. Still, she said, the boy was unsettling. She reminded Charlie she was a devout Episcopalian.

Charlie told Vita he spoke up for her boy and showed Ellie the door, said the next time she came by with a casserole or pie a shotgun would greet her.

"My girl needs a mother. I need a wife. You need a husband. Only problems there are. All need fixin'." This was his proposal.

At the courthouse Vita wore a pink silk suit. Charlie gave her a ring, a bouquet of white carnations. By then, Ellie had been shipped away by her brother and his wife. For several years she lived with an ailing cousin in Aurora.

After Charlie and Vita married, Laura was quiet most of the time but also helpful and patient, eager to please. When Vita had mind to scald a dead turkey Laura took over, plucked the feathers off dry. She bleached the cellar floor every week, canned tomatoes in sweltering heat.

Vita's girls feigned illness when work was required, never during trips into town. They called Laura names, concocted cruel lies, said her mother did dirty things with men for money the night before she died.

Years passed and once, in the middle of winter, Vita couldn't sleep and found Laura lying on the porch, on the bare floor with one blanket covering her. Vita helped Laura to her room, checked in on her for a week when she came down with the flu. In Vita's ear, Laura whispered she had to stay sick. She pleaded with Vita to open the windows and let in the cold air. She begged Vita to let her starve. She said Byron would come back to her room at night and do terrible things, but maybe—just maybe, she said—he'd stay away if she didn't

get better.

Vita told Laura to hush. She told Laura she was delirious from fever. She made Laura soup from a can.

After she recovered Laura ate to get fat but couldn't gain a pound. She chopped her hair above her ears and bit her nails to bloody stubs. At sixteen she ran off to Texas, with a nineteen-year-old who promised a ranch and white horses, his constant love and devotion.

Charlie was heartbroken, never spoke her name again.

The boy's name was Lewis. Lewis Grubbs. With two b's, not one. Vita remembers distinctly.

Outside Ellie's door, Vita remembers, too, the frail old woman's birthday cake, purchased from a store. The cake had five or six icing roses, all of them blood red, so sickeningly sweet she almost retched after eating one. She remembers the cake she ate the day she married Charlie. Laura made four perfect white layers, buttercream frosting that tasted divine. She arranged a dozen sugared nasturtiums on top of the cake and around the edges of an heirloom china plate.

To make the cake fancy, Laura had said. She picked the nasturtiums herself.

**Last of May and Charlie's been dead for a week, buried next to Pearl at Mount Salvation, with an epitaph that reads *Loving Husband and Father*.**

Byron runs the farm. He comes around often. Every other morning, at least. He doesn't stay long. His wife and children come over on Sundays. They pay no attention to Vita; they come to eat and text.

Her daughters live far away. Neither one has children. The oldest, Eve, is divorced. She quit the piano for good and works for a chiropractor near Yale in Connecticut. Janine teaches Pilates in Santa Fe and lives with her boyfriend who fixes motorcycles and grows hot peppers for profit. Once, Vita remembers, Janine told her he studied



electronics for almost half a semester at a community college.

A white sedan turns into the gravel drive as Vita sweeps the porch. Gray clouds hover over the barn.

She looks out at the car with a driver she assumes is lost.

The car stops. A tall, thin woman steps out: in flat shoes, a straight skirt, a pale yellow sweater. A gust of wind blows past; she tucks her hair behind her ears. It is wavy and shoulder length, a dark shade of auburn.

She faces the barn, the ominous sky. She stands like this for seconds, then minutes, before she turns around.

Vita watches but remains inside the porch, her broom in one hand.

The woman walks across the grass and glances up toward the hill in the distance, where her horse, Trixa, used to graze.

When she comes closer, or too near to be turned away, Vita opens the porch door. Casually, as if no time has passed at all, she says, "Careful, Laura, or the wind will get you."

She steps away and places her broom in a corner. She turns to face her guest, with several feet between them.

"I must apologize. The rattan set isn't out yet," Vita says. "I've had it just three years. Two chairs with the prettiest cushions, in cobalt blue and fuchsia. And a matching table with glass. Byron put it all away for the winter, in the sitting room, where that old kitchen and oak table used to be. You remember. I think it's warm enough for him to bring everything out. Wouldn't you agree?"

Laura digs the heel of her shoe into the spotless cement floor. She swallows what starts to rise in her throat. "How is he? Your son."

"Your stepbrother could not be better. He's a deacon at his church. He and Aileen have four boys. I don't see them as much as I'd like, but I can hardly complain."

She pauses. "We play cards every Sunday. They always bring me flowers."

Her lies come as easily as breath.

"How fortunate you are," Laura says.

"I am," Vita says, "truly blessed."

Vita gestures toward the door that leads inside the house.

"Come, won't you? I'll make tea for us both."

Laura hesitates then follows Vita up the familiar two and a half steps, to the main kitchen. The only kitchen now. The walls are no longer white but robin-egg blue. The open shelves her father built and painted when she was five—what exposed mismatched glasses and plates, canned tomatoes and mincemeat, peaches and spiced pears—have been torn out, replaced with maple cabinets, shiny white knobs on the doors. The floor is stained and polished hardwood, not chartreuse linoleum, what her mother had chosen because she loved that particular shade of green. The porcelain sink, what had a single worn spot, black and the size of a pebble, is now soapstone, with a fancy faucet and sprayer.

From a cupboard Vita removes two mugs and a box of Earl Grey, another with Chamomile. She fills the kettle with water, places it on the professional gas range. She turns the front burner to high, sits down at the table. Not the pine drop leaf from Laura's childhood but another painted what Vita calls distressed antique white.

Laura pulls out a cushioned chair and sits on the edge of it. Her back is rigid. She holds her purse in her lap.

"That tea kettle," Vita says. She points at the black-and-white kettle, designed to look like a cow. "Isn't it precious? Came from the church bazaar. Someone, a young newlywed, I think, brought it in brand new. Said she had another one at home just like it, if you can imagine. At five dollars, I couldn't resist. We raised money for all those tornado victims. Poor people. They still need our help. It's terrible. The wrath of nature. You see the pictures on TV. Sometimes I can hardly stand to watch." Vita sighs and shakes her head. "But I take heart in the other stories, too. It's just amazing to me what humans will do to survive, what they're capable of."

Her face expressionless, Laura listens and watches Vita.

"Deb Heiney," Vita says then. "You remember. Her mother, Virginia, used to do my hair. Deb said we set a new record. We raised

over five thousand dollars.”

“Congratulations,” Laura says. “Good for you.”

“For the needy, you mean.”

“How is Eve?” Laura asks, doing her best to sound sincere.

“Does she still play the piano?”

“She does. She just started teaching piano at Yale.”

“Yale. Really?”

“I know. Impressive, isn’t it? I couldn’t be more proud.”

“And Janine?”

“Janine’s in Santa Fe. She’s engaged to an electrical engineer.”

The kettle starts to rattle then whistle. Vita rises from her chair.

“Chamomile or Earl Grey, dear?”

“Chamomile, if it’s not too much trouble.”

Vita drops a tea bag in each mug, pours the hot water.

“I live in California now,” Laura says. “In San Francisco.”

Vita opens the French-door refrigerator, gets a carton of milk she sets on the table. She hands Laura her Chamomile, sits down with her mug of Earl Grey.

“Rita Gilroy,” Vita says. “Always a big-boned gal. She had an aunt who visited from California. Rita married Lewis. Lewis Grubbs. You remember him. When he came back from Texas he said he wasn’t cut out for ranching. He and Rita had six children. The youngest, poor thing, had one of those genetic diseases that skips generations. She died last spring.”

Vita closes her eyes and sighs at this sorrow, then says, “Where are my manners? Would you like a cookie, dear?”

“No . . . Thank you, though.”

“Are you sure? They’re biscuits, actually, with dark and milk chocolate. Came in a beautiful gold box. I ordered them from a catalog. They’re genuine European.”

Laura shakes her head and smiles demurely. She watches Vita pour milk into her Earl Grey, lets a silence pass. She remembers, for surprise guests, her mother served tea from a silver pot, not in mugs but china cups and saucers, on a tray with fresh cream and

sugar, cloth napkins, silver spoons from the buffet. Cookies, home-made, would be out, not just offered. And pie. Always pie, baked that morning, with flaky crusts of butter and lard, cream or fruit filling.

Laura remembers, too, her father who called her a liar and whore, and Byron his innocent boy. She remembers pleading with Vita to help her. She remembers being told to hush. She remembers leaving this place, this farm that had once been a part of her, as much as her own skin and bones. She remembers being sixteen years old, miscarrying her stepbrother’s child at a rest stop in Oklahoma. She remembers loving and leaving five men, including Lewis Grubbs, who beat her black and blue in Texas. She remembers surviving two mental breakdowns, passing her GED, tending bar and cleaning rich people’s toilets, for money to live and travel in France. She remembers making croissants and petits fours, a kind woman named Irène who taught her. She remembers eating cherries in the Loire Valley, reading Colette by the Seine. She remembers waking to a misty morning and sunrise in Lourmarin, believing it was such a beautiful sight that she could have died right then and there a blissful, grateful woman.

“I own a bakery,” Laura says. “A bakery called Pearl Marie’s.”

Vita sips her tea, stares into her mug. Behind her the wall clock ticks and ticks.

“Such a shame about Anna’s,” Vita says then. “You remember. Best bakery in town. Cherry cheesecake, almond macaroons to die for. Closed last year. Her daughter Gayle couldn’t keep it going. Poor dear was heartbroken. Told me the rent went sky high.”

“How awful,” Laura says.

“Yes,” Vita agrees. “Tragic, really.”

Laura waits for Vita to finish her tea, listens to more detailed town trivia. She doesn’t mention her father. She doesn’t ask if he had spoken her name, even once, before he died. Instead she praises Vita’s stylish updates, says the kitchen looks like a picture in a magazine. As she rises from the table she thanks Vita for the tea and conversation, her warm hospitality.

The hour is nearing seven o'clock. The cloudy sky is grumbling.

"It was lovely to see you, dear," Vita says. "Pity you couldn't stay for supper. You must remember. Don't be a stranger."

She waves to Laura's back when she is several paces past the porch door.

**That evening, Vita eats supper in the living room and watches** a nature program on public television. She learns about the endangered Iberian lynx. Scientists had studied the young and discovered that siblings kept in captivity could turn on one another; in some cases brutally, until death. When a fight breaks out, the narrator says, researchers sometimes have to brave the claws and step into the fray. Vita watches the young woman on TV. Wearing thick gloves that stretch past her elbows, she charges in and separates two cubs, to stop an attack when the lynx mother couldn't, or didn't.

After the program Vita raises the volume for the ten o'clock news, listens next door in the kitchen. She washes the few dishes in the sink, scrubs the copper pan, any remnants of canned chicken noodle.

The female broadcaster's voice is soothing and calm. She reports that a fifty-seven-year-old woman was killed shortly before 8 p.m., during the storm that passed through the northern part of the state. Police said the woman was driving on County Line Road, near the entrance of Mount Salvation, when high winds caused a tree to split and fall on her car.

Vita dries the dishes with a clean linen cloth. In the living room she turns off the TV and lamp. Reluctantly she goes upstairs, to what had been her escape and solace just before and after Charlie died: her son's former room, where she was afraid, for the first time she could remember, that the walls her husband built would collapse all around her.

# Two Poems

**Sarah McCartt-Jackson**

## **Coyote**

Never have so many coyotes  
been held in one hand, all gray and gaunt and howling  
each bearing this thought in its wildblack eyes:

a woman somewhere stands in a long-fallow field  
where trees have begun to return to the sunlight  
the ground not solid but grassblades and rag shade.

She hears an animal rushing through the plants,  
twigs breaking, breath heavy enough to push her down  
but she cannot move because she doesn't know

which way it is coming, and the sound has pinned her  
to her shadow. She recognizes panting, legs thrust before body.  
Holds her cry as a coil just behind her tongue.

## Compass

Fireflies, tiny yellow heartbeats  
outside Ora's window, tap the edges

of the panes, their glassed faces shine  
in the onion-bulbed lantern:

Twelve children and so many gone  
but who would not leave her:

Lily was flame-wing smoke,  
the shuffle of feet. Prairie was sigh  
of the green beans' opened lid. Alva was  
bloodroot that blooms for one day  
on a hillside ripe with Homer who was  
liverwort burst from bouldersprings.  
Eldred, second, had no middle name.  
Opal was the hush of snow piled  
on a limb. Ola B the wind that shook it.  
Elmer was rivershore mud song  
mushing up between your toes. And Ruby  
was fistfuls of clover ripe to eat. Sharon was  
eldest, who lived long and longer  
than the rest. Hobie the horse  
who chewed a hole through barnwood.

When springtide ends, Ora cuts her arm off  
to count the rings—two for each season. None

for summer. The glacier-melt begins to rise from her

chest light as bodysHELLs of insect-molt:  
something that tiptoes between light and dark.

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