

# *Flights*

2015

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KATRINA ANGLE

**Duck. Duck. Duck. Goose.**

The tiny room was cramped, and the five children sitting in a circle playing a game made it seem even more crowded. To Sam, the worst part of being locked in the toy room was knowing what was happening on the other side of the door, in the kitchen. The brown paneling and the dingy white curtains did nothing to help brighten their play space. In fact, it seemed sometimes as if the walls were closing in on them. But the alternative was to watch his dad punch holes in the walls, or worse, beat up on his mom. Except for eight-year-old Meg, he figured that the rest of his siblings were too young and innocent to notice that all was not peaceful in their home.

“Duck. Duck. Duck. Goose! Run, Bubby! Run around the circle and chase me!”

Bubby hooted with laughter and lurched to his feet as he tried to catch his big brother, Sam. The circle was small; only three kids when the other two were running around it. The baby was too little to stay put for very long which made the circle even smaller. Sam’s journey, in a scramble of arms and legs, was soon over, and he plopped down in the empty spot with a triumphant whoop.

Now that it was Bubby’s turn to tap heads, Sam coached him on the steps of the game while trying to keep Baby Bink interested and seated in the circle. It was good to be busy and to hear the happy chatter and laughter of his siblings. It helped him to keep the shadows at bay, helped him to forget that he was not just their big brother, but also their protector. For a while, it drowned out the angry shouts and desperate pleas. Their laughter made it easier to pretend they were just another happy family.

The sound of breaking glass shattered their tranquil façade and Sam’s breath caught in his throat as his eyes met Meg’s across the circle. With unspoken consent, they both knew. It was time. Silently, he wedged a chair under the door

knob to keep it secure. It had never really helped before; nevertheless, it was a part of the plan. Unlocking and opening the ancient window was another part of the plan. He prayed that it wouldn't stick, or announce their escape with a squawk, and that he wouldn't drop his baby brother while making their get-away.

The window refused to budge. *Please God.* With shaking hands, he struggled with it until it gave in, and Megan threw their duffle bag out the window. Another crash came from the kitchen. This time it was accompanied by a thud that rattled the windows. They would have to hurry now. He made Meg go first. Fear was shining out of her eyes as she eyed the five foot drop from the window. "Be brave." he whispered, then gave her a gentle push. Amazingly, she landed on her feet. She spun around; determination and pride had replaced the fear.

"Hand me Bubby."

"Easy as pie," Sam announced in a stage whisper when Bubby slid through the window. "Adventure must be your middle name." He remembered his mom saying that to him once in happier times. The remark had made him feel as if he could take on the world. It must have had the same effect on Bubby. He strutted around on the grass below the window like a rooster, his scrawny arm curved up like a muscle man.

"No! Stop! Please!" Sam could hear his mom begging. It took all his strength to resist the urge to go to her. She had made him promise to keep the door locked between the kitchen and toy room, no matter what.

Sam remembered once when he had made the mistake of opening up that door. His dad had forced his mom to her knees, had yanked her hair back until her neck was exposed and vulnerable. As Sam ran to her, he could see her vein throbbing as if in slow motion, a reminder that their lives were in the care of violent hands. The warrior in Sam swelled up and let out a shriek as he hurled himself onto his father. He couldn't recall how he ended up slammed against the wall, but he did know that a steel-toed work boot could leave a long-lasting mark on the tail bone. He wondered if he would ever lose the limp.

Taking a deep breath, Sam looked around for Penny. The tips of her toes were showing from behind the toy box. He knew he would have trouble with her. Five year old girls could be so difficult sometimes. He'd have to tread carefully. The avocado green carpet felt rough and crusty on his hands as he crawled over to Penny and poked his head into her hiding place.

"Hey, Pip." He hoped using her pet name would sweeten her up a bit. "Are you ready to go on a little adventure?"

She drew her legs up and hid her face in her knees.

"Come on, it'll be fun."

Penny's brown pigtails wagged back and forth as she vigorously shook her head.

"When we're in the tunnel, I'll give you candy." He was glad he had thought of that earlier and stashed some away in his backpack.

Sam could see a blue eye peek above her folded arms.

"What do you want, chocolate or lifesavers?" Now, he could see her red, rosy, baby lips. They were quivering.

"Both," she whispered. The two of them jumped as a crash coming from the kitchen shook the floor.

Time was running out. Sam pulled Penny out of her nook and led her toward the window. He cleared his throat to remove the tremor from his voice. "You're Super Woman," he pointed to Meg waiting below, "and Cat Woman is going to take you to our secret lair."

Penny wouldn't let go of the ledge even though Meg had her around the knees. "Come on, Pip, you can do it! I promise it won't hurt." Sam hated to pry her fingers loose, but it was the only way. She cried and resisted as Meg dragged her away. He'd make up to her later with the candy.

The only one left was Bink. He sat in the middle of the floor, sucking his thumb and tugging on his hair. He looked sleepy. Sam wished he had thought to grab Bink's stuffed elephant out of the crib. But there was no time for that now, it was time to jump.

*I'm abandoning my mom.* It was the last thought he had before he left the window ledge with Bink's little arms wrapped around his neck like a pet monkey. It wasn't the first time he'd had that thought, but he hoped it was the last. Maybe this time their plan would work. If his mom could find the courage.

Duck. Duck. Duck. Goose. Their silly little game popped into his head as he headed to the meeting spot. This sort of felt like a game, but their dad was always 'it', and they were always the goose. Forever running; forever hiding. This version of the game was never fun.

The security light attached to the garage encircled the yard with its yellow-blue, unnatural light, but Sam and his mom had thought of that when they had laid out their strategy. The line of evergreen trees planted by the road stood just beyond the reach of the light, and he could see Meg's shadow hovering furtively there now, like a ghost. That morning, Sam with Meg by his side, had tucked two back packs loaded with the essentials for their escape into the green, abundant arms of the trees; the perfect spot for a rendezvous.

Running silently, Sam cradled Bink in his arms, trying not to jolt him. Things would definitely be more difficult if Bink started to cry. As he neared, Meg stepped out and pulled him into the silent embrace of the trees just as Penny started to whimper in the blackness.

"I want to go home," she whined.

"Remember the candy, Superwoman? Let's go find it in the tunnel." He knelt down beside her and pulled on his backpack. He patted his pants pocket, checking for his trusty pocket knife. "Are you ready to finish our adventure?"

Penny scrunched up her face, but stopped protesting. The promise of candy would bolster her courage.

Meg already had her pack on, and Sam shifted Bink in his arms as he instructed the children on the next leg of the journey. Find the creek a hundred yards away from them and follow it to the tunnel. Stay close, and no matter what, be quiet.

Sam was glad for the darkness. It made things a little easier even if he wasn't sure what to do with the two inches of water flowing through their hiding place. He hadn't taken into account the storm they'd had yesterday, when he and his mom had formed their plan. Drain pipes in Ohio in August were sticky with mud, but hardly ever full of water. Shining his flashlight, he spotted a hump of ground sloping up from the creek bed. This would be their nest for the next hour or two until their mom came for them.

The hours seem to trickle by as Sam waited for her to come. Meg, Penny, and Bubby slept, half laying, half propped up, by each other on the blanket Sam had spread out. He shifted Bink slightly to give some relief to his aching arms while his mind raced. *What if Dad kills her this time?*

Faintly in the distance, he could hear the crunch of uneven footsteps, and his heart leapt with relief. Finally! But as the footsteps came closer, he could tell that it was not his mom who was approaching.

He forced down the panic as he nudged Meg. "Wake up! I think Dad found us."

Instantly, Meg was awake. "What do we do?"

Sam quickly covered her mouth with his hand. "Don't make a sound and don't wake anyone up." Carefully handing Bink to Meg, he stood up and took off his shoes. He would have to be as silent as a tiger.

Leaving the huge drain pipe, Sam looked around him. The sky was cloudless and studded with millions of stars. On any other night, he would have loved to lay in the grass in front of his house and look for the constellations that he had learned about in school. But now, his only mission was to see who was coming their way. Grasping at a small tree as he clawed his way up the steep embankment, his other hand found a rock. It felt nice and smooth, a bit heavy, but it fit into his hand almost like a glove. He'd hold onto it for a while.

Just as Sam realized that he could no longer hear the footsteps, a rough hand grabbed him from behind.

“Thought you could get away, huh?” His dad’s breath was hot and sour as he lifted Sam by the collar and stared him in the face.

Sam’s breath came in short puffs of terror as he struggled, his legs dangling a few inches from the ground.

His dad gave a bored laugh as he threw Sam onto the ground. “You know you’ll never get away from me. You might as well stop trying.”

Sam’s head rang, and he tried to rise. His dad’s boot connected with his ribs, and he fell back to the ground, striking his head. He lay there, stunned, the breath knocked out of him as “Duck, Duck, Goose,” ran through his head. His dad was always ‘it’. Always the winner. Always.

Kneeling, his dad placed one knee on Sam’s chest as he reached with his hands to take off his belt. “You must be stupid, boy, you’ll never get away from me. Maybe a whippin’ will cure ya. Turn over.”

Sam fought, twisting his body and kicking his legs, but his dad only laughed at him like an oversized bully. Just as his dad lifted his hand to deal a blow across Sam’s face, the bone chilling cha-chunk of a rifle cocking broke through the darkness.

“Let him go, or I’ll blow your head off.” Out of nowhere, the timid voice slid toward them. Sam resisted the urge to cheer.

Sam’s dad snorted and tightened his grip. “You’d never have the guts, Jane. You don’t even have the guts to show yourself.”

Sam’s mom stepped out from behind a group of bushes not ten feet away. In the brightness of the moonlight, Sam could see the bruise forming around her eye. Her shirt was torn and one sleeve flapped awkwardly around her elbow. She took another step toward them, still aiming the rifle. Sam’s dad paused, staring her down, but did not move his knee from Sam’s chest.

“Whatchya gonna do, honey,” he taunted, “kill your bread and butter? You can’t live without me and you know it.”

The moment seemed frozen in time, and Sam lay as still as he could, hoping that his dad's concentration would not be broken. He could tell already that his mom had lost her resolve. The gun had slipped down a little off of her shoulder. He held his breath and waited for the right moment. Now or never. Sam gripped the rock that lay like a weighty secret in his hand and swung with all his might. It made a satisfying crack as it connected with his dad's head, and Sam's inner warrior once again rose to the surface. A war whoop grated out of his throat as his dad slumped to the ground, and Sam surged to his feet. Whipping off his shirt, he cut it into strips with his knife and quickly bound his dad's hands and feet. Look who the winner was now!

"Sam! What did you do?" His mom's voice was shaky as she knelt beside the still form. "Please don't be dead!"

Sam pulled on her arm. "Come on, Mom! He's not dead. We've gotta get out of here before he wakes up." Urgently, he shook her shoulder as she continued to bow, breathing heavily and whispering how sorry she was.

"Mom!" He was yelling, but she ignored him. His dad was beginning to move. Sam stepped back a few paces and watched her grovel beside her helpless captor. He hoped that one day she could see his dad the way he truly was, the way Sam had started to see him. Even though, time after time, she helped Sam plan their escapes, she always gave in in the end. Sam had always tried to protect her from him. Had tried to avoid making him angry. Had tried to keep his siblings out of his path. He had given up on trying to please him; that was an impossible feat. Now, it seemed as if he must give up his role of protector as well.

"I'm leaving now," he said quietly. "Will you come with me and take care of us?"

The question seemed to break through her stupor; she lifted her head and turned to look at him. Looking once more at his dad, she paused, then straightened her torn blouse. Nodding her head firmly, she rose from her knees. "Yes. I will take care of you now." Still holding on to the gun, she propped it against

her shoulder, barrel pointing to the moon, and turned away from the source of her misery.

The children were stirring when Sam and his mom arrived back at their makeshift bed inside the tunnel. Penny hurled herself at Mom. “I’m Super Woman, and Sam gave me candy,” she said softly.

Sam swung Bink to his hip as he gazed at his mom. To him she looked like a victorious warrior. Battle-scarred, but the winner nonetheless. “Are you ready to leave?” He asked a simple question, but it was heavy with meaning. Sam and his mom turned their heads at the same moment to look at the still, dark form of their captive. A moan wafted to them on the gentle night breeze. Sam’s chest filled with pride and courage. His dad would not win again.

Sam’s mom, with Penny’s fingers twisted in her skirt and Bubby’s hand held tightly, nodded firmly. Meg, brave and dauntless, stood waiting for their mom’s direction. “Sam, lead the way. We’re going home.”

Sam straightened his shoulders and held his head high as he stepped out, leaving fear behind.

AMELIA DANIELLE BAILEY

### **Bite Your Tongue**

His steel-toe feet scrape  
against the hard packed ground  
as I drag his body  
across the yard.

He's heavy like lead,  
I stumble on numb heels.

Mama's waiting with shovels  
and an oil lamp for me  
in her ratty pink bunny slippers.  
His work shirt bunched up at the sleeves;  
her golden hair bouncing in the wind.

A cigarette dangles from her lips,  
the glow of the lamp frames her like a halo.  
I wish I could be that beautiful,  
even with her swollen eye.

I watch her ground the bud in the dirt.  
She hands me a shovel

We dig.

She hums quietly to herself,  
*This Little Light of Mine.*

I hum too,  
and little Johnny on the porch swings in time to the melody;  
His stuffed bunny dangling in his arm.

Mama stills and I stop.  
Words roll from her tongue.  
Quiet, gentle.  
and the wind carries them to Johnny's ears.

He runs through the chicken wire screen door  
in blue-footed pajamas.  
I hear the squeak of his red wagon,  
the rusty plaything full of empty glass.  
Jack, Jim, and Morgan glitter in the moonlight.  
Mama and I swing him into the hole;  
His blood shot eyes stare back at me.

Mama hurls a bottle in,  
it smacks his face.  
The bottles clank together  
as we drop them inside.

Johnny giggles at the sound,  
too young to know it ain't funny.  
The hole disappears  
and the shovel slips from my hands.

I stare at my once white nightgown,  
a birthday present from him.  
My sweat. Our blood. My tears.

The sun's coming up  
and Mama wants to make breakfast  
like a family should.

I rock, stroking Johnny's hair  
as Mama tends to the screaming baby in the cot.

The pancakes swim in butter and syrup  
as Johnny pushes them in his mouth like it's his last meal.

Fat drips from the bacon  
as Mama nibbles on it,  
baby against her chest.

My eggs  
scrambled like his brain,  
they spill around the fork  
    like the axe  
in the back of his head.

I'll have to wash my sheets.

I stab the eggs,  
jam them in my mouth,  
and chew.

GLENN A. BRUCE

**The Slow Walk**

Slick and black  
Shiny  
Scraping across the Berber  
Reluctant  
For the rectangular  
Thing at the front  
Of the small room,  
Chairs in lines  
To guide his way,  
Her favorite James Taylor  
To pace his steps.

Laces new and taut  
Never tied  
A first time for everything  
This, too.  
Aglets hard and glimmering  
Against the neutral grey weave  
So many shoes have traversed  
As slow or slower  
For the same reason  
The same thoughts.  
With the difference

He's young, he's seven,  
He's lost and losing  
He's shuffling  
Resistant  
Knowing  
But not understanding.  
Being told is not the same  
Being held is nothing new  
Having his shoes tied  
By an uncle  
Whose tears make no sound  
Falling on new black leather.

## Walking the Old Tracks

Walking rusted tracks of a line going nowhere  
once vital, vivid and racing, taking and delivering.  
Cars alive with the chattering and the solitary

all with the purpose of destination.  
What better place to go!  
Windows blurred and stirring when viewed straight

give dimension when heads are turned  
looking, giving no thought to the why of it  
but looking nonetheless, turning to see

the long views, defining the edge.  
A traveling world of image, flash and idle,  
up close, the streaming trees and bridges

the smear of the other way racing past  
taking the same chattering and solitary  
back where they started.

Or coming anew, never having been  
or thought about going or considered change.  
An experience, forced or decided

by fate or friends, bosses or lovers.  
Tracks only go one way, one way  
at a time, then apart and back.

Race of the rusting past a glow, fading. Laced  
countrysides recall the hustle and scream of promises  
held at the end of the line, the end of the line.

JOHN F. BUCKLEY and MARTIN OTT

### **Blind Date**

It was a set-up of opposites. Matt Murdock,  
blind lawyer, was pushed by his pal Foggy

into meeting Paolina Gentry, free-clinic  
physician, in Flor de Kyoto Sushi Cantina.

Hell's Kitchen that night was a fusion of raw  
fish tacos, favorite of Yakuza and Los Zetas

alike, and half-ironic ambiance riding the line  
between ethnic kitsch and honest hotness.

Daredevil had a secret that no arch enemy yet  
knew. The man without fear had a weak stomach,

the flip side of a sharp nose that could track  
the botulism in the wasabi salsa to the unwashed

hands of fiery celebrity chef Toshiru Garcia, eager  
for revenge after Paolina had dumped him in front

of *Daily Bugle* food critic Ken Zurich. Murdock  
could taste the tang of eye drops in his iced tea,

calling him to question whether it was a deadly  
poison, turbo laxative or sinister soporific agent

poised to dull more than his awkward small  
talk with Paolina, who sipped a complimentary

ginger-lime horchata. His stomach was pummeled  
by the ghost of his boxer father, his memories

resounding with the staccato of heartbeats off  
fiberboard ceiling tiles, nothing like the costly

drumming of nails on the wine menu. He excused  
himself and slipped into the kitchen to find the anti-

date dastard dosing their order of uni ceviche  
with powdered ghost chili and 100 mg of Pavulon.

The turn from wounded bird to firebrand would sting  
with acid reflux, so instead he knocked the curved

clay bowl off the counter with the arm holding his  
white cane, then asked the way to the men's room.

Loosening his bowels in the unisex stall was a lesson  
when two hours later he'd lost his date to a new foil,

the commodities broker at the next table, who'd  
spotted Paolina and made his move, catching

her off guard with a bottle of wine, a catechism  
of how men disappear and a smoothly timed exit

without the bill, the devil very much in the details,  
the red uniform under his skin barely holding him in.

## **The Rise and Fall of Brand X**

Commander Capital cruised through the smoke and blaze to rescue the partly-singed orphans. He charged by the life, ten grand a pop billed

to the city for cryo-ray charges, jetpack fuel, and heroic good looks stuffed into a form-fitting suit pimped out with logos and sleek gadgetry.

"I'm no vigilante, just an independent contractor," he told the reporter, pausing the interview to stop an out-of-control bus (\$5000) headed

for a kitten that witnesses swore he'd planted that morning with milk and saucer. His mom had told him he'd never amount to anything

better than a public-university alumnus, but the most recent quarterly statement swore otherwise, proved that good guys finished

tax time with offshore accounts and women interested in biceps, billfolds and bad ideas. The alien origin of his tech was shrouded in hearsay, rumors of glowing green meteors, parables of invisible, implacable hands from extra stellar markets. His ticker-tape snare

gun caught a whole city once in forced adulation, the streamers snakes and star confetti ricocheting off eyeball billboards,

corneal coupons offering one discounted Lasik procedure after the fifth daring escapade. Only dastards like Red Flag and The Collective Man

dared switch from villain to hero to muscle in  
on his turf, to purchase the other corner condos  
in The Elemental, where the crème de la crème

of crime fighters didn't bother having a secret  
identity as passé at pâté at the invitation-only  
soirees with politicians, actors, and heroes all

indistinguishable in moonlight. How had his  
mentor, Lady Lucre, handled her own brush  
with obsolescence, diminished market share?

With signal in the sky replaced with billboards  
and banner ads, the man behind the masks  
found himself wandering alleyways unshaven,

a temporarily embarrassed millionaire more  
flushed than flush, one percent stalwartness  
and ninety-nine percent perspiration. Occupied

with diminished desire to hustle for victim crumbs,  
he found himself against a Commander Capital copycat  
placing him into a sloppy half-Nelson after he peed

behind a dumpster. "I was out of sight of the public!  
Give me back my wallet!" The glove button for  
his oil-slick escapulator jammed. He wriggled

in handcuffs as a flurry of misunderstood catch  
phrases kept him from posting bail, from claiming  
himself in the ledger, from escaping his own net.

CHRISTINA DENDY

**Night Commute**

No bedtime story. At night,  
he walks. Home shuts tight the day,

village and farms retire, his feet wake.  
In Uganda, they walk to sleep

spinning straw to golden brick road,  
dirt ground to gift walls against the night fields

where bullets weep in the warren  
and blades sweep soldiers from sprouts.

He does not need a bed to pillow his bones,  
only the moon to guide his guise and  
the stars to salute his migrant hope

until the sun lifts its breaking hand  
to wipe the city from his eyes

and turn him out from the patchwork  
of broken hearts where he lies.

## **Waking Rites**

Man stretches at the window, and walks to the shower. He closes the door, and dog settles to guard, to bide. Ten minutes, fifteen, he worries at skin and hair, scrubbing off the remains of the day, breaking clean, washing off old things. Free and fresh, he stands, arms crossed, legs pillared, face upturned into hot rain. While she waits. Ears flat. Eyes open. Muzzle a mime.

Faucet off, towel on, the fan flips to stir the morning. A brush, a dust of deodorant, and man presses open the door.

Love blocks the way.

A nudge, a word. She stretches—and yields with a yawn and a whine. Lets him go.

Together, they pace to window to dresser to porch and grass. Tails wagging.

## **Mirror**

A package of hairclips  
and a brush delay the day,  
two dozen or so moments  
that slip by  
watching themselves in the mirror  
looking for some sign  
that they are beautiful  
while I watch from the stool  
and know without the fuss  
that they are.

ARVILLA FEE

## **The Getting Younger Business**

Martha and Lola held hands as they stared at a silver tube of cream lying on the coffee table. Neither spoke for several moments, each woman entranced by the tube – as if expecting it to suddenly levitate.

Lola broke the silence first. “Will you try it with me?”

Martha shook her head. “I’m not sure! Are there any side effects?”

Lola snorted. “It’s a beauty cream, Martha! Come on! What’s the worst that could happen?”

“Well,” Martha said, “We might break out in a full-body rash! We should at least read the ingredients!”

Lola sighed, rolled her eyes and gestured for Martha to pick up the tube.

Martha adjusted her bifocals and began, “Gly-col-ic acid...Sal-i-sy-lic acid...hy-dro-qui-none...ko-jic acid...”

Lola snatched it away from her. “For heaven’s sake, Martha, let me read it!” She rattled off the remaining twenty-three ingredients – drill sergeant style.

“Geez-Louise!” Martha said. “I’m old, not deaf, Lola!”

Lola snorted again. “Just trying to keep your attention! Look, there ain’t a single ingredient in this tube that ain’t in all the other beauty creams in the world! I say we slap it on right now!”

Martha shrugged. “Maybe you should just rub it on an inconspicuous spot...then wait for the results. You told me that the new sales lady down at Lawson’s Drug Store said wrinkles, age spots and cellulite would disappear overnight? And that it’d even make you lose weight? If you tried just a smidge on the top of your leg...”

Lola slapped herself on the forehead. “I’m gonna get naked right here and smear this stuff from head to toe! If you want some, let me know, and I’ll save you a dab!”

Martha put out a hand to stop her. “Wait, Lola. You don’t even know the lady who sold you this stuff. Where’d she come from? And why wasn’t Pearl working today? Pearl hasn’t left that beauty counter at Larson’s for over thirty years!”

Lola put her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes. “Look! Pearl took a personal day! The new woman’s name was Miss Alice, and she just started working there. She looked a lot like Alice Davis did – at least the high school version of Alice Davis. I was going to ask her if she was any relation, but she started talking about that cream, and I forgot. You remember Alice Davis? She was a couple grades ahead of us in school...and died of a heart attack this summer?”

“Yes, I remember. But, Lola, I...”

“No buts!” Lola snapped. “This is a *miracle* cream, Martha! A miracle – and sweet Mary, mother of Jesus, knows I need one!”

Martha sighed and dropped her hand. Her best friend had once been the popular, funny, outgoing, bossy, drop-dead gorgeous “Miss Sauerkraut Queen” three years in a row in their little town of Waynesville, Ohio. She had the guts and the talent to make it big everyone said – and Martha had agreed. She’d been genuinely shocked when Lola, after spending five years in New York City trying to be an artist, decided to come back and marry Raymond Hamilton, of all people! Sure, Raymond had had his charms and that killer smile – but still! He’d been flat broke when they married and had spent the next two years drifting in and out of jobs while they lived with his parents – before finally settling on a measly job at the meat counter in Moore’s grocery store. Between his job and Lola’s job at Nick’s Diner, they’d been able to rent their own house in their third year of marriage – and then Raymond had to go and get himself killed in a car accident two years later on a night when he’d drunk too much beer and lost more than \$500 – a whole month’s rent – in a poker game. Lola had sat stoned-faced at his funeral, refusing to look at him. She said he’d been about as useless as “a huntin’ dog without a bark” and she wasn’t about to look at his “no-good-sorry-carcass” in the

casket. She'd worked overtime at Nick's for sixteen months straight to stay afloat and pay off bills, thankful every single day that two miscarriages and an onslaught of ovarian cysts early on in her marriage had kept her from ever producing Raymond Hamilton's offspring!

Martha figured Lola married Raymond for two reasons: one, because he'd been one of the few young men in town who hadn't gone off to Vietnam after high school – bad back, he'd claimed – and two, because she was too depressed about her failed art career to consider other options! During the time Lola had been away, Martha had gotten her nursing degree and a great job at Midwest Regional Hospital. She'd ended up meeting an injured soldier during her first week on the job – her beloved Melvin – whom she'd married the following year, and whom she'd lost to pancreatic cancer just two years ago. Melvin's death was the only piece of bad luck Martha had ever had in her life! Their two beautiful girls had both graduated from Ohio State, married wonderful men and now had half-grown children of their own. Unfortunately, they all lived in Arizona, and Martha rarely got to see them, but she considered herself lucky to have shared 45 years of her life with Melvin and to have watched their girls succeed.

The sound of Lola's zipper brought Martha back to the present as Lola unzipped her dress in one, smooth motion and dropped it to the ground. Her bra and panties soon joined the heap.

“Here I go!” Lola announced, as she began lathering herself with the cream: arms, legs, face, neck, chest...every part she could reach.

Martha turned a sunset shade of red and looked away. “For heaven's sake, I have a bathroom, you know!”

“Oh, fiddle!” Lola said. “Ain't like you've never seen me before!”

Martha acknowledged that with a nod, but kept her head turned. Lola had been her best friend since second grade – and they'd had numerous slumber parties – but still, she didn't really relish seeing the 70 year-old naked version of her best

friend rubbing cream on herself in the middle of her living room! But, maybe this cream would help. Maybe it would be the “break” that Lola needed. Lord knew she’d had enough heartache in her lifetime. First Raymond, then another “sorry-ass” guy named Sam, whom she’d briefly dated after Raymond’s death. Sam had made the mistake (once) of smacking Lola across her mouth one night during an argument about football – or something – and Lola had nearly “knocked his damn block off” with a skillet. Sam never pressed any charges, seeing as how Lola had a fat, busted lip – but he did call Lola several days later to say he thought they were “incompatible.”

Lola had almost sworn off men when, at age 47, she met Thomas Banks, the son of one of the oldest doctors in town. Thomas Banks had been a doctor in Indiana for years, but moved back to Waynesville to take over his father’s practice. He and Lola had had a passionate, whirlwind romance and a blissful marriage. Lola had *finally* been happy – had even begun to paint again – until prostate cancer took Thomas’s life one week before their tenth anniversary. After that, she’d put men and paintbrushes aside forever. She’d gone into the flower business instead – saying that flowers “were the one thing people bought for the living and the dead!”

“There!” Lola announced. “I think I’ve covered every single place I can reach! Can you just put a little on my back, Martha?”

Martha hesitated, grabbed a tissue and squirted the last of the cream on it. She rubbed it on Lola’s back, careful not to get any on her fingers. Something about this “magic” cream made her jittery, and she didn’t know why. Maybe it was Lola’s notorious bad luck! Maybe, if something sounded too-good-to-be-true, it usually was!

After Lola re-dressed and grabbed her coat to leave, she looked solemnly at Martha. “I know you think I’m crazy – but I *need* this! If this cream does half of what it’s supposed to do...”

Martha hugged her gently. “I hope it does,” she whispered. “I really do.”

“Me, too,” said Lola, returning the hug. “Maybe if I can look young and beautiful again, I can start over. It’s too late to enroll this fall, but I might enroll in art school again in the spring – you know – a second-chance kind of thing!”

“You could do that anyway.”

“Yeah, but why should the young girls have all the beauty *and* the brains?” Lola said. And, with that, she turned and walked out into the crisp October air with one backward wave of her hand.

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A sudden, furious pounding came from her front door, and Martha nearly dropped her empty lunch plate in the sink.

“What the...” she hurried as quickly as her arthritic hip would allow her to the door.

“Open up! Martha! Open up!”

Martha peeked out the security hole and saw Joyce Weathers – a good friend of hers and Lola’s since high school.

She yanked open the door and gasped at the look on Joyce’s tear-streaked face. “Joyce, what is it? What’s wrong?”

“It’s Lola,” Joyce cried. “She’s dead! She’s dead, Martha, and I knew you’d want a friend to tell you – not some stranger or the news channel!”

Martha’s throat worked frantically to swallow, and her eyes burned with pooling tears. “It can’t be true,” she murmured. “I just saw her last night...she was here – in my living room – putting on...putting on...”

“Putting on what?” Joyce asked. “What did Lola do this time?”

Martha swiped at the tears, now free-falling down her face. “She put on some beauty cream...and...and...oh, Joyce...how did Lola die?”

“They say it was a heart attack. Lola’s cleaning lady found her this morning. She said it was the strangest thing – because she found Lola on top of the covers, dressed in a mini

skirt and a pink blouse – the same things she wore to the Homecoming Dance – in 1961!”

“No! How...what?” Martha couldn’t form a complete sentence. Her mind raced. There was no way Lola could have fit into a size 6 skirt and blouse! She’d put on too much weight after Thomas died. Besides, those clothes, if they were the same ones, were over 50 years old!

The next few days were a complete blur for Martha. She mechanically ate, got dressed, did dishes – everything – as though she was a wooden puppet and someone else was pulling the strings. She’d gone to Larson’s to see if Pearl knew anything about an “Alice” working there – an Alice who sold magic beauty cream. Pearl said she’d never heard tell of any such person or any such cream! She also said, “And I don’t take personal days,” obviously offended that Martha had even considered that possibility.

Lola’s funeral was beautiful. In spite of Lola’s life-long streak of bad luck, she’d had hundreds of friends, and the funeral home was full. Everyone commented about “how young” Lola looked – “how lovely and smooth.” Someone said that death had “taken years off of her face – and that she looked “remarkably thinner.” Martha agreed, although she knew something the rest of them didn’t! Lola’s “lovely-in-death look” had come from a fatal tube. She’d tried to tell the police about the cream – had even gone down to the station to file a report and turn over the empty tube of “magic.” The young officer asked if she’d like a glass of water, and she could see the naked skepticism in his eyes. No one believed her, not even the Chief of Police, Nathan Turner. He suggested that she might be “in shock” and said to come back in a couple of weeks. Martha knew he’d never waste department money to run tests on that empty tube. The coroner had ruled Lola’s death a heart attack – and that’s where it stood. End of story!

The day after the funeral, Martha decided to stop, once again, at Larson’s. Maybe Pearl had remembered something now – or maybe someone had seen the mysterious “Alice”

again! She still could not believe that the strange woman and cream had had nothing to do with Lola's death.

Martha's heart jumped into her throat as she approached the beauty counter. There, standing right in front of her, was Lola! Only she wasn't the 70 year-old, Lola; she was the 19 year-old Lola – thin, long-blond hair, stunningly beautiful – right down to her manicured artist fingers.

Lola laughed. "See, I told you it'd work!"

Martha opened and closed her mouth several times – like a fish on a dirt bank.

"You're going to catch flies!" Lola said. "Come here; let me show you some products."

"W-what?" said Martha. "Lola, don't you know you are..."

"Dead?" finished Lola. "Sure I do, but ain't death grand? Look at me! She spun around, making her frilly mini-skirt swirl around her trim, girlish hips. "I'm a knock out – a regular Miss Sauerkraut Queen!"

Martha couldn't deny Lola's beauty, but this could not be real! Lola was *dead*. She'd just seen her in a casket yesterday. Yes, the dead Lola eerily resembled this...this...whatever this was standing in front of her, but things like this did not happen! Not in Waynesville, Ohio – not anywhere!

Lola laid her slender fingers on Martha's arm, but Martha felt nothing, except a cold sensation – almost as if a piece of ice hovered just above her skin.

Lola reached out, with her other hand, and grabbed a long, silver tube off the counter.

Martha recoiled, as if Lola held a rattlesnake.

Lola giggled. "I've decided to change careers again. I'm in the 'getting younger' business! I've had enough flowers in my life – and death."

Martha took a step back.

"Come on, Martha! I'm not going to bite! Here! Try this cream. It's the same kind I used! Oh, and guess what? I just bumped into Alice yesterday, who turns out to be our Alice

Walker after all, and she swears by this stuff – and so do I, of course!”

“Alice is dead, too, Lola,” Martha whispered. She looked around to see if anyone else noticed who she was talking to – and if anyone was looking at her like she’d flipped her lid. She spotted Pearl over by the perfumes – her back turned to them.

“Pearl!” Martha said – a little too loudly.

Pearl bustled over to the counter, which Martha was now leaning on for support.

“Why, Martha! Are you alright? You look like you’ve seen a ghost!”

A bitter, parrot-squawk laugh came out of Martha’s mouth. “Do you see anyone here with me?” Martha glanced toward Lola, who was waving her hand like a lunatic.

Pearl looked around, frowning her brows. “Martha, honey, I think you might need to sit down. It’s just me and you, sugar.” Pearl pulled out a large foot stool and pointed to it.

“N-no. I’m f-fine...” Martha turned her head; this time, Lola was gone.

“Yeah? You don’t look so good! You’re not still thinking about that wild tale Lola told you...about someone named Alice and some magic cream?”

“It was – real,” Martha said, more to herself than Pearl.

Pearl shook her head. “Now, Martha. I think what you need is a long vacation! When’s the last time you saw those cute, teenage grandchildren of yours?”

“Too long,” Martha murmured. “Too long. I – I need to be going now.”

“Do you need any beauty products before you leave?”

A horrified look flashed across Martha’s pale face. “No, thanks! I’ve got all the beauty I need! Besides, I’ve heard that certain creams may lead to – heart problems.”

Pearl patted Martha’s arm. “Now dear, don’t get all worked up. Go get some rest!”

Five hours later, Martha was safely on an airplane, winging her way to Arizona. She’d packed enough clothes to stay for a long, long time.

CHARLES FREELAND

**How Do We Speak to the Young?**

What strange alphabet of silence  
gets through, which premonition drawn  
from those we carry, overloaded,  
anxious to spill? The hours shatter,  
fall in on themselves, we say, like panes  
of glass, the names of objects alter  
the objects themselves with repeating.  
Their patience is not patience at all  
but a stubborn incomprehension, a lust  
for sound and light, even afternoon.  
How do we speak to the young?  
Tell them of the increase, the resignation  
like that the forest must feel when  
soil gives way to the cliffs, to the ocean?

## School Project

*for Olivia*

Even after we've been to the summit,  
taken pictures, made a model at home  
of clay and paint, she wants to know

if it is a hundred years old, this mound  
constructed by people called Adena  
twenty times that long ago and more.

Her confusion is the same as mine finally,  
an inability to accurately measure time  
when it is right before us, embedded in

the things of the world and those we make  
for reasons that seem obvious enough  
at first, and then disappear like bodies.

I tell her what I know, what I have read  
on the helpful copper plague at the base:  
burials over centuries, the fires built

at the top to call their scattered members  
home. All speculation, a grasping at light  
where there is none, just unbroken forest.

## **Messenger from the Sea God's Palace**

Japanese folklore has the lengthy oarfish  
rise from the deep to predict earthquakes,  
warn of the impending shift of ground,  
the toppling of towers and pagoda walls.

They wash ashore, all thirty dull silver feet  
of them sometimes in numbers unheard of  
when the soil keeps to itself, refuses to move.

But how do they know? What tremors run  
their ribbon length in tune to those to come  
as much as a year after their mute arrival,  
eyes black, blind, with the intensity of sun,

their toothless mouths made small, circular  
with shock at shallows and the rocks that rise,  
that join themselves to make a solid planet?

## Tractatus in Glass

He rode his bicycle along the fencerow  
and wondered why there should be a fence  
at all and asphalt on which to ride and  
overgrown fields full of red-winged blackbirds  
that repeat the same series of sounds  
without variation as if they were machines.

He stopped at the abandoned school  
and threw rocks through the few windows  
that hadn't already been broken and thought  
he was always arriving late, to ideas like  
the idea that he might not have existed at all,  
and to the uneasy dismissal of that idea  
provided by the sound of shattering glass,  
by the familiar thrill of picking up a rock  
and making it go where it wouldn't otherwise.

The birds around the school, crows mostly,  
said things he thought he understood,  
not the necessary utterance of machines  
but something willed, something that had to be  
the way the fencerow when he pedaled home  
had to separate the overgrown fields from  
the asphalt, and one another, and the sky  
had to shatter before you saw its constellations.

SUSAN FUCHTMAN

## **The Collector**

“We need to talk.”

Walter put the phrase on the ring finger of his left hand. Not literally of course, but it helped him remember if he stored his collection somewhere, even if it was mental storage. This was the ninth “We need to talk” he had heard since he started his new collection, almost eleven years ago now.

Usually “We need to talk” was the beginning of a conversation between two people standing in his room, talking with each other. Twice he had heard the phrase as one side of a phone conversation. Today he was surprised because it seemed that his best friend, John, was directing the phrase straight at him. It made him wonder if he should start two new Super Categories, one titled Conversations Directed at Me and the other titled Conversations Directed at Others. And where would he store them? The minute he asked the question, he knew. He would store the Conversations Directed at Me category on his right ear, and the Conversations Directed At Others category on his left ear. This would open up his whole system for reorganization and would take at least a week to complete.

Walter had always been a collector. As a child, Walter collected bird eggs, sloughed snakeskin, seashells, empty cocoons, discarded exoskeletons. He didn't know that his collection had been the topic of several whispered conversations between his mother and father, who would rather have seen Walter bringing home stray puppies or hermit crabs instead of what his mother called “those dead things.” His parents even consulted a psychiatrist who assured them that collections of this type were not usually a precursor to the kind of aberrant behavior they feared. Oblivious to their concerns, Walter proudly exhibited his favorite pieces carefully pinned to cardboard or, in the case of the entire snakeskin that was the

gem of his collection, spiraled into a shoebox and centered on his dresser.

As an adult, he collected menus, invitations, pamphlets, postcards, tickets; the category called “ephemera.” He moved from the cardboard-backed displays of his youth to lignin-free paper, glass-encased display boxes, and well-catalogued files in cabinets that lined the second bedroom of the home he shared with his wife, Marie, who was not the type of person to consult psychiatrists and had no concerns about Walter’s collection. “A busy husband is a happy husband,” she would say, when the topic came up, mentally ending the sentence with “and a husband who stays busy makes for a happy wife.”

As far as Walter could tell, for the last twelve years he had been in a coma. During the first year, all he had was a dim memory of the passing of seasons—Maria sneezing with her usual Spring allergies, leaves burning in Fall, Christmas music in midwinter with *The Little Drummer Boy* ad nauseam, and then the waft of lilacs outside his window when Spring arrived again, accompanied as the night with the day by Maria’s sneezing. Smelling the lilacs eleven Springs ago was when he first realized he must be in the upstairs guest bedroom, no longer the hospital. He spent that day remembering the feel of the dirt in his hands and the pleasure of extracting a large rock from the hole he had dug for the lilac bushes Maria had asked him to plant the summer that the cat died. He started collecting again the next day.

For the next ten years Walter’s condition stayed the same: he could hear, he couldn’t move, he collected. But lately there were some changes that made him think he might be about to wake up: his hand would twitch the littlest bit when he wanted to scratch his left side; his eyes would open and shut when he wanted to see something. The eye movements caused great excitement and the doctor was called, but Marie was reassured that she was only seeing involuntary responses, probably the result of further degradation of his neuromuscular structures.

The last thing he remembered before his coma was visiting a home the day before an Estate Sale was to take place.

As he built his ephemera collection, Walter had become acquainted with several Estate Sale Agents who, because he was such a good customer, gave him early access to Estate Sale sites. This Estate Sale was on behalf of Margrave Solomon, the recently deceased owner of a The Water Hawk Company, a ferry service that shuttled people and their cars between Boston and Nova Scotia. Walter thought someone who traveled to Nova Scotia regularly might have a unique item or two.

Walter sifted through the dresser drawers, hoping to find tickets tucked under tidy whites or postcards slid beside a pile of t-shirts, but only finding the expected clothing and a few coins, he moved on to the bedside table on which there was a neatly stacked pile of paper straddled by a partially read copy of *The Bully Pulpit* by Doris Kearns Goodwin. He moved the book to the bed, being careful to maintain its open position without thinking that Mr. Solomon was now past caring, and then sorted through the pile of papers, which turned out to be print-outs of articles about ferries, a topic that might be interesting but was definitely not ephemera. Walter took a final look around the room and spied a cigar box on a shelf that hung above the doorway. An artificial vine of some sort trailed out of the box and obscured most of it, but he thought it was possible that it was a Misanta *Perfectos* box. It would be an incredible find. It was exactly the kind of thing that could be purchased in Nova Scotia when Cuban cigars were embargoed in the U.S. Walter was slightly under average height at 5'5" and, while every chair, table, or pant leg he encountered was made for a man closer to six feet, he usually didn't mind. But on days like this, when he couldn't reach the thing he hadn't ever dared to hope for but now which was the object of his total desire, he silently cursed his genetics. However, the problem was quickly solved when the sales agent, a man named Norris Wember, happily provided a ladder. It was an ordinary ladder and had to be leaned against the wall. Given the anticipation of holding such a find in his hands, he was hasty in setting up and climbing the ladder. The box was almost out of reach, but Walter was confident that desire alone

would give him the extra inch. It almost did, but at the last moment the ladder slipped out from under him and he fell, hitting his head on an old iron-shaped doorstop and, based on conversations in low tones around his bed, has been in a coma ever since. Walter never heard, however, whether the cigar box was indeed a Misanta *Perfectos* nor whether they put the cigar box into his collection.

John continued, “Walter, I’ve wanted to tell you something for a long time, and well, now I *have* to tell you. I don’t know if you can hear me. I kind of hope you can’t. But either way, I’m going to come right out with it. We’ve always been straight with each other, haven’t we, and this has been killing me. Literally killing me: I started having chest pains last month and even though the doc says it’s probably a muscular thing, I know it’s because I’m holding this in, see?” Walter could hear John’s coat rustle and tried to imagine what John might be doing--clutching his heart? Pulling out a picture? Taking a drink of water?

“Walter, here’s the thing. I’m in love with Marie. You probably wondered why I never got married, and it’s because you married the only girl I ever loved. I figured it out too late to do anything about it.” John was still talking, saying something about when he first met Marie, but Walter stopped listening. He thought he might be having a stroke. No, it wasn’t a stroke, he could think just fine, his blood pressure must have risen a bit, that was all. Was John still talking? Walter wished John would go away; he certainly didn’t want to hear details about how John discovered that he loved Marie. But what was he saying now?

“So,” said John, “we’ve decided to get married. We could live together, but Marie doesn’t like doing that. She hates the idea of divorcing you, but the doctors say you’re not likely to wake up and I know you’d want her to get on with her life.”

John was right; Walter loved Marie enough for that. If he couldn’t have her, at least he knew that John would treat her well. Where had he put this conversation? Oh yes, the ring finger of his left hand. How appropriate, and how odd that the

ninth “we need to talk” landed on that ring finger. The universe was full of coincidences; in fact, one of Walter’s collections was comprised of coincidences, like the dentist with the last name of Moeller, and twins separated at birth who married women with the same first names. Walter kept the coincidences collection on his feet. The Ripley’s Believe it or Not show last week had given him so many coincidences that he had run out of toes to keep them on, but maybe if he modified the Super Categories with another for Television, which he could store on his Adam’s apple, then other appendages would be available as well. All of this re-categorization might take more than a week. And he needed to think about how he would handle this collection when he woke up. Would he continue to keep it figuratively attached to his body, or transfer it to a card system? There were advantages both ways. Walter was leaning toward the card system so that he wouldn’t have to continually refresh his memory on the whole collection. He had time for reviewing it now, of course, but when he woke up he would have other things to attend to.

“But we still want to keep you with us, Walter. Once we get married, we’re going to move you to my house; that way you will be on the first floor and Marie won’t have to go up and down the stairs to take care of you. I think you’ll like your room – it’s in the front corner and you will have a nice cross-breeze.”

John was right. Walter liked a good cross-breeze.

John coughed and shuffled his feet, and then said, “The only problem is, well, the only problem is that there is no room for your collection. It’s a fire hazard anyway, all that paper, so we’re going to sell what we can and donate the rest to the University. But we figured that would be OK with you. We thought you’d want to get it into the hands of someone who could enjoy it.”

This time Walter was sure he was having a stroke. His ears were ringing and if John was still talking, he couldn’t hear anything. Walter felt like he was under water a mile deep and the pressure would soon kill him. Soon, however, the pressure

eased and he felt like he was moving up through the water-- slowly at first, then faster and faster; the pressure was getting lighter now; the speed was exhilarating, he almost got lost in it until he thought again about his collection being sold and then – “NO!”

The word croaked out because his voice had been unused for so long. But croaking or not, it was a clear “no.” Walter’s mouth stayed in the shape made by the “o” in “no,” the sound still ringing in the room, his eyes open but unseeing. John staggered back and then ran out of the room calling “Marie, Mah-reee! Maaahreeee!” Walter could hear Marie’s footsteps coming up the stairs, and then John’s galumphing back to the room with her.

John and Marie rounded the corner in time to see Walter’s mouth fall slack and his eyes close. They looked at Walter and at each other, in quick succession--if Walter could have seen them, he would have said they were almost cartoonish. When they stopped looking back and forth and finally stood, just looking at Walter, the air remained electric, as if static had been created by the friction of hope and despair.

Marie had spent many years wishing that Walter would wake up, praying that he would wake up, writing down little stories in a journal to share with him so he could catch up on what he’d missed. But lately--and she could hardly bear to think this, and certainly never said it-- lately she wished he would just finish dying. Only the most annoying parts of him were alive now: his snoring; his intestines, first taking in food from a feeding tube that she had to keep stocked and clean, then excreting the waste into bags that she collected and threw out; his skin that sloughed and stank and required washing and dressing and clean sheets. Marie wished those parts would die too, so she could be released from the suspended animation that being his wife had become.

John loved Walter in his own way, although love isn’t the word he would use. He had enjoyed spending time with the awake Walter. He even liked listening to Walter go on and on about his ephemera. Walter was only interested in the facts

about his collection, but John liked to imagine what happened before the items were left behind: a movie ticket from 1962 that Walter carefully catalogued and mounted was, in John's mind, the beginning of a lifetime together for some tender young couple; an invitation still in its original envelope was tangible evidence to John of a party filled with laughter and dancing; in fact, John could almost see the people laughing and almost feel the condensation from the cold beer glass in his hand. But now when he saw Walter lying there, neither here nor in the hereafter, all John could see was a story that had been ending for a long, long time.

Meanwhile, Walter was reeling.

The "O" from "NO!" was echoing in his body, bouncing around like a giant eraser. First it erased the new Super Categories; then it blanked out, one by one, the conversations about his own health that were stored on his face. The "O" kept bouncing around, going down now to the conversation starter "We need to talk" that was stored on his hands. One after another, his fingers changed from orderly storehouses of rich memories to unmoving, empty appendages. His toes were the last to be emptied, the "O" bouncing on each memory, erasing those marvelous coincidences one by one.

The "O" was completely gone now, no longer an eraser, no longer a sound, not even a hole, just gone.

The emptiness was surprisingly peaceful.

As Walter lay on the bed he didn't wonder, didn't categorize, didn't remember; he just was.

He could hear that it had started raining outside, but his mind no longer thought of it as rain, simply as sound. Soon, even the consciousness of sound diminished.

He felt very tired.

His breathing slowed, then stopped.

The room was quiet now, except for the sound of the rain.

Marie was calling the doctor from the phone downstairs.

John was still standing in the doorway.

Walter had finally become like his collections--a shell left behind; ephemera, meant to be used a short time, then discarded.

CARLY GATES

## **The Drowned Meadow**

Dolores leaned against the countertop as her nieces sat side by side at the old Formica table, swinging their legs and eating sandwiches. They chattered about the salamander they'd spotted on their journey through the woods to her house while she fingered the letter from her husband carefully folded in her apron pocket. *To hell with these Commie bastards*, he wrote, *I'm coming home*. As if she didn't know the exact date his enlistment was up. Dolores sighed. So much had changed since he'd left for Korea. Her youngest niece took an enormous bite from her cream cheese and jelly sandwich and smiled, her brunette curls bouncing beneath her barrettes. Dolores loved the way the girls could fill the house with so much laughter, as if the shadows momentarily disappeared and everything was painted with a warm, bright light.

A faint cry echoed from the north side of the house, and Dolores hurried to the baby's room, her thick, heavy heels clunking across the pine floor. The door was slightly open, and she peeked through the crack. Charlie squirmed in his crib. A bad dream, perhaps. He often tossed and turned in his sleep, but rarely cried. Creeping across the carpet, she knelt and reached through the wood slats to hold one of his soft, doughy hands, running the pad of her thumb along the single crease in his palm as he fell back asleep. She could hardly believe he was just a few months away from his first birthday and he'd not yet met his father. Their miracle baby. Charlie was all her husband seemed to write about anymore, the boastful banter of a man whose first child, whose only child, was a son.

"Dolores?" her twin sister, Grace, called from the kitchen.

She quickly wiped her damp cheeks and stood just as the door to the bedroom swung open.

"Thanks for feeding the girls. I thought we could do the wash together today, and—" Grace paused. "What's wrong?"

She rushed to the crib and peered inside, but the baby was sleeping peacefully.

“It’s Martin,” Dolores said.

Grace turned to her sister, her eyes wide and lips pulled into a thin line. Dolores could tell she was not thinking of Martin, but of her own husband, far away in the same war.

“He’s coming home.”

“When?”

“Two weeks.” Dolores pushed past her sister and out into the living room, sank heavily onto the sofa. She didn’t have to tell Grace he would blame Dolores for all of this, for being stupid enough to go over to Grace’s when she knew the girls were sick. It had been a mild case of rubella, just a pinkish rash and a fever, but the doctor had told her it could affect the pregnancy.

Grace slunk into the room and sat next to her. “What are you going to do?” She reached over and cupped her sister’s hand within hers, twining their fingers like a chrysanthemum. “You know he’s not going to let you keep him.”

Dolores wrenched her hand away. “It’s fine. He’s fine. He’s just a little premature is all.”

Grace sighed, smoothing a few stray wisps of hair back from her forehead. “It’s not just that he’s still not crawling, or even sitting up for that matter—”

“Stop, Grace. Just—stop.” She jumped up. Her sister’s face crumpled as she bit her lower lip. Dolores glanced at the clock. “I need to, I have to go. I have to go to the market. Would you watch him?”

“Of course.” Grace stood, awkwardly extending her arms as if to hug her before crossing them over her chest.

Dolores was already moving into the hall, untying her apron and gathering her pocketbook. As she walked down the drive she tried to concentrate on the crunch of the gravel beneath her feet. Even though it was May, the air was still cold and damp and she wished she’d thought to grab her coat.

She never took Charlie with her anymore. She used to love bundling him up and taking him in the pram. When he

was six months old she'd taken him on a picnic in the park. She had spread out a blanket, and Charlie—who had just learned to roll from his stomach onto his back—pushed himself over, lolling in the warm sun. As Dolores unpacked she had suddenly had the distinct feeling they were being watched and saw an older woman standing a few feet behind them. Once she made eye contact the woman approached, ducking her head apologetically and tugging at her kerchief.

“Oh, I hope you don't mind me looking,” she said, and gestured toward Charlie. “May I?”

Dolores nodded, and the woman bent to touch Charlie's cheek. He smiled, blowing tiny bubbles from his lips. The woman stood back up.

“I used to have one of those,” she said, flashing a tight-lipped smile.

Dolores must have looked perplexed.

The woman continued, “A mongol. The doctor told us to give him up, to go home and try again, so we did.”

She waited for a response, but Dolores just stared. The woman shifted uncomfortably on her feet then walked away. Her appetite lost, Dolores wrapped the wax paper back around her sandwich and packed up to go home.

After that she had the sense they were being stared at everywhere they went. She stopped taking him shopping first, then noticed the reactions of the other mothers in the coffee and toddler groups. Frances had the nerve to jerk her son Billy away when he'd tried to peek into the pram himself. So Dolores stopped going. She'd even quit the Ladies' Auxiliary. Now she just stayed home most of the time, her only company Grace and her nieces who were always just a short walk through the woods away. But all of that was going to change when Martin came back home. Grace and Martin had never gotten along, and he was always yelling at the girls about something. And now there was Charlie.

Dolores had ignored Martin's requests for a photograph of Charlie, and instead filled her letters describing him. How he was such a content and easy baby, sleeping through the night

since he was two months old. How he never screamed, and hardly ever cried, except when he was hungry or needed a diaper change. How he was so ticklish he would burst into fits of giggles when she bathed him in the sink. How mesmerized he was by the mobile Mother had bought him, watching the fabric ornaments printed with praying children and singing bluebirds twist and turn on their strings.

She'd been walking toward the bay and suddenly found herself staring up at the two-story house at 401 Beach Street. Her mother had told her the story about the Sturtevents once. How the husband killed his wife, step-son-in-law, and beat his step-daughter mercilessly before killing himself. His step-son escaped by hiding under a bed and was sent to live with family upstate, but the step-daughter Martha lived in the house until she died, never remarrying. Dolores imagined it must be a peaceful life, being a widow. The house had been empty now for years—no one wanted to buy it—the once bright white paint chipped and faded, the wood in various stages of decay. The volunteer fire department had been discussing burning it down as practice. She tried to imagine orange flames licking up around the window sashes, the wallpaper blackening and peeling off into curls of ash.

\* \* \*

She focused on preparing the house for Martin's return. She wiped down cabinets, washed windows, organized the pantry and the closets. When she got to the roll-top desk she found Charlie's birth certificate. September 7th, 1952. She ran her finger over the footprint, the sandal gap between his big and second toes. Martin had wanted to name him James, after his father, but she had spent time at the library researching names and hadn't been impressed with that one. She'd looked up her own name as well, and found it meant "lady of sorrows." That was the funny thing about names. Port Jeff had been named Drowned Meadow until the mid-1800s because of the way the lower village flooded. Then they'd realized it wasn't exactly enticing, and they'd named the village after President Jefferson. She thought about reading Hamlet in high

school, about Ophelia. She wondered what the name Ophelia meant. Charlie meant “free man.” She thought most people would find it funny—so damned funny she wanted to scream.

She searched the drawers until she found the paper the doctor had given her before leaving the hospital, deeming Charlie “uneducable.” She had told the doctor she couldn’t understand how they could possibly determine that already, without even giving him a chance to grow and learn. She had tried to hand the paper back, but he refused to take it from her. For weeks he had kept trying to talk to her about Willowbrook State School on Staten Island, but she just shook her head, harder and harder as if she could have shaken out those ideas, forgotten what they meant. Eventually he had quit trying, said, “Let Martin deal with it.” But *she’d* been dealing with it. She was dealing with it. “Uneducable.” It didn’t even sound like a real word. She ripped the paper into tinier and tinier pieces until she had a palm full of confetti. Careful not to drop any scraps, she walked into the kitchen and placed it in the garbage underneath the other trash.

\* \* \*

The day before Martin’s return they started baking his favorites, starting with a walnut strudel. Dolores patiently worked the dough until she could see the faint floral pattern on the floured cloth below. Grace stood near the sink, chopping nuts, while her daughters played with Charlie in the next room. Every now and then she would hear one of his high-pitched squeals and pictured the big smile on his face, his almond eyes crinkled with joy.

“They say Eisenhower’s getting close to ending the war,” Grace said, her back to Dolores. “And now that both Gail and Charlotte will be in school, I think I’ll interview to be an operator at the New York Telephone Company. They just completed an addition in the back, and Frances said they’ll be looking to hire soon.” Grace turned to glance at Dolores. “I thought, with Martin coming home, you might apply with me.” She set the knife down on the cutting board and wiped her forearm across her brow.

Dolores used the back of a spoon to spread the melted butter evenly. “I don’t think Martin would like me taking a job,” she said. She gestured toward Grace who passed the bowl of walnuts, then busied herself carefully sprinkling the nuts over the dough. “Besides, I’ll need to be home—with Charlie.”

Grace stood still for a moment, watching her sister. Her lips parted as if on the cusp of speech, but nothing came. She turned to pour sugar for the strudel. Dolores used a butter knife to trim the uneven edges from the dough, which she balled up and set aside for the children. Grace passed the chipped white coffee cup filled with sugar, and as Dolores took it their fingers touched.

As she folded in the edges of the dough, slowly lifting the cloth beneath to roll the strudel evenly, Dolores felt the warmth of the sunlight spreading across her back like the heat from a hearth fire. She imagined the sun would stream through the window like this if she took a job taking orders at Penny’s Luncheon. Charlie could nap in a playpen in the back, and on the way home—Home. She and Charlie’d live in the Sturtevant’s old house. It would be autumn by then, and after leaving Penny’s she’d swing through the park, laughing with Charlie and pointing to the orange leaves covering the maples like flames. After supper she’d pull him tightly against her and sit in the rocking chair. He wouldn’t protest. He’d nuzzle sleepily against her neck, his tiny left fist clenching her collar. She’d close her eyes, rest her lips against his forehead and inhale, slowly rocking on the balls of her feet. Beneath his milky scent there’d be a sourness, a slight tinge of sweat. She’d put him down to claim her own rest, only to find a new sheath dress hanging from her bedpost, silky and red. When she slipped it on it would hug her tightly like another skin.

“Dolores?” Grace had already placed the baking sheet down next to the long roll.

After rolling the strudel off the cloth and onto the pan, they covered it with a clean dish cloth to let it rest. Dolores looked down at her pale yellow shirtwaist dress, the flour on her apron. She swept a few escaped walnuts into her palm.

They ate supper together as usual, pork chops with potatoes browned in the pan, peas with onions. Dolores held Charlie in her arms and busied herself spooning airplanes of mashed peas, most of which he pushed back out with his tongue.

“I think you’d better give him a bottle,” Grace said. “I’ll warm it for you.”

Dolores bounced Charlie as she waited, her own dinner untouched. She smiled to herself as she caught Gail depositing tiny handfuls of peas into her napkin when her mother wasn’t looking.

Afterward Dolores changed Charlie and put him down in his crib while Grace brewed coffee in the kitchen and the girls set up a game of Scrabble. Charlotte always teamed up with Grace, and though Charlotte was two years older, Gail and Dolores almost always won. Dolores loved feeling the smooth wood tiles as she reached into the bag for more letters, loved pointing and whispering about possible word combinations, two-letter word plays. Throughout the game the girls begged for their favorite stories about their mother’s youth: their younger brother Johnny setting the mop on fire while everyone slept, Dolores and Grace going to each other’s classes in school, trying to trick each other’s dates. With each story the girls grew sleepier and sleepier, and by the time the clock chimed ten o’clock each mother had a sleeping girl’s arms circling her neck.

They gently woke them so that Dolores could say her goodnights, kiss each girl upon the cheek. She watched through the screened back door as Grace walked carefully across the yard, hand in hand with each daughter. Even after the moonlight no longer illuminated the trio, she stared fixedly at the point where darkness had folded in behind them.

C. P. HARNER

**March 8, Two Hundred Thirty-Nine\***

A long, empty fuselage, maybe cracked open at both ends  
like a bobbing broken femur  
bobbing up and down in the bigness of the Indian Ocean. A  
submerged engine.

Sheets of twisted metal

like the twisted upside down smiles of friends, fathers, mothers  
with ears

hard-pressed to radios  
and eyes that have been straining hopefully at television  
screens

turning them off, then

turning them back on again, as if this sacred act might bring  
him or her back home.

A half-sunken wing. Bones. Clothing.

A still-fastened floating necklace like a hole in the ocean. An  
empty wallet, riding

the waves,

riding the waves up and down. These things should be strewn  
in shifting patterns

illogically across the Indian Ocean.

A bird, tired from its journey, should be landing and perching  
on a drifting piece of debris.

And though I have yet to take a framed picture in between my  
two trembling hands

and drip tears onto the glass

of a trembling photo of a son, daughter, or friend who did not  
die, but was just no more,

I miss them. And wonder.

Shouldn't submarines be descending the murky depths to  
retrieve the

un-illuminated black box  
sitting like a silent stone, rumbling with data, beautiful,  
luminescent data,  
under the weight of the sea?

Shouldn't reporters be giving play-by-play updates on each  
item found

instead of each item not found?  
Shouldn't rescue divers be leaping from tired helicopters and  
from sagging boats  
with worn out sailors

retrieving lifeless bodies? There should be a man or a woman  
or a child clinging  
to a bit of plastic  
or one of those floating cushions that she's been squeezing for  
days and nights  
that seemed like never ending chasms

and when it seemed like all hope was lost she sees the rescue  
diver  
and the rescue diver sees her—  
Sees her, emptied of energy and emptied of breath, she smiles  
and gasps,  
"Thank God."

One year. No trace. Just a long, empty ocean and empty  
families adrift and queasy  
on the ceaseless sea of mystery—

Maybe one day, I'll be standing on the seashore with all those  
families,  
looking out into those depths  
and we'll see the plane swallowed up by the Indian Ocean, now  
covered in barnacles

filled with colorful fish swimming

in and out of the cockpit with an octopus hugging the fuselage  
and the plane

will look like the seascape of the ocean  
and coral like cathedrals will grow there thousands of years and  
all the shattered

broken things now smooth sea-glass

under our feet and in our hands then with loud voices, like the  
most beautiful prayer,

floating on the ocean wind,

filling the sky from which the plane fell to the sea beneath,  
we'll say

all two hundred thirty-nine names out loud.

*\*There were 239 people aboard Malaysian Airlines flight  
MH370, which went missing on March 8, 2014 somewhere  
over the Indian Ocean. The plane or its passengers have yet to  
be found.*

## **White Light**

My brother Finn and I took long exploring walks through Tallahassee Memorial Hospital as our mother was having her first open heart surgery. She wasn't exactly my mother. She'd adopted me when I was sixteen months old. I was ten and a straggly dark haired, dark eyed, tomboy. My older brother Finn was thirteen, and even though he was her actual son, I still couldn't help but wonder if he wanted her to die as badly as I did.

A week before her surgery, Mother made me kneel on the brown shag carpet beneath her living room chair in front of old Mrs. Helen. Mrs. Helen was a sweet woman and a more recent friend of my mothers. I had no idea where they'd met, but I'd long been used to my mother being able to draw the kindest people into friendship. I was much older before I understood that this was what dark people did.

Mother sat in a silky blue oversized nightgown that didn't quite cover her ample pale white legs, looking deep into my eyes. Mrs. Helen sat next to my mother's chair watching the two of us with a worried expression. She'd been fussing over my mother all morning, trying to show my mother that she cared about what happened to her.

I was unnerved being summoned, and I was never asked to kneel before my mother unless she wanted to slap my face so hard that I'd see stars. I stared at her nose when I could no longer bear looking into her hard brown eyes. As her voice became a sweet doting simper I understood that my mother wanted Mrs. Helen to believe she was an attentive caring mother. I'd seen this behavior many times with my teachers and my doctors over the years.

"Don't you worry, Missy," she warbled. It was always bizarre hearing my name minus some terrible slur of profanity. Like, "Get in here now, you little bitch!" In that moment though, I'd almost wished she'd called me the usual slur

because the feel of my actual name crossing her lips made me want to come out of my skin. "Nothing's going to take your mama away now, don't you worry," she said. Her face was wide with jowls from years of poor eating habits. Her dark graying shoulder length curly hair was unruly. She didn't brush it much since she was playing the part of the dying.

She waited for me to say something but my mouth flat-lined. My lips were tight against my teeth. I didn't know how I was supposed to respond in front of Mrs. Helen who had silent tears rolling down her plump cheeks. Her frosted beehive hair-do was lopsided. Her perfume competed for air time with my mother's cigarette smoke. The dark yellow and brown ashtray beside my mother's chair was packed with the filters of Marlboro 100's.

I couldn't move as Mrs. Helen said, "I'll take care of her, Bev. You know I will," she looked at me with great concern and pity in her large green eyes, leaning forward like a good Cocker pup. With sudden animation in her face she squeezed my shoulder, and because I knew that both my mother and I were acting, I did not know what to make of Mrs. Helen's simplicity. My automatic thoughts were to wonder if she lived with a husband or boyfriend who would eventually make me sleep with him as had been my experience in my Mother's house.

In the hospital I followed behind Finn as he walked away from the grown-ups in the waiting room. The doctor had already come out to speak with Mrs. Helen and my other older adopted brothers. The surgery was beginning. "Don't follow me, Missy! I mean it!" Finn said coldly as the soft lights of the waiting room gave way to the bright lights of the hospital's main corridor.

But, I followed Finn anyway because I'd always followed him for as long as I could remember. I held on to a time when we were younger when he took care of me, and allowed me into his life. This was before our mother poisoned all of our family against me. As her hatred of me grew and as her physical violence toward me grew, no one could be completely

sure that there wasn't something badly sick or defective about me that I would bring out such hatred in her.

When I was seven and afraid of the dark I'd beg Finn to let me come in and sleep with him after our mother had gone to bed. I'd hear the lock on her bedroom door click and her steel fan running. The house was lightless, black, like impossibly starless nights, and because I had no grounding or foundation in the world in my continual state of survival, I always felt like something unnamable was coming for me. I developed over time a continual feeling of floating, of not being real, of being between this world and whatever came next.

"No, get out," Finn ordered, "Mom will kill you if she finds you here in the morning." He lay on the floor with a blanket over the heating vent. A bubble rose around him from the warm air.

"Please, I don't have to be under your blanket. I just want to be with you," I pleaded in a way that I thought might reach the deepest part of his soul.

"Fine, but you aren't getting my cover. Bring your own. Mama's going to kill you in the morning," he said. "I'm not going to save you from her. You're asking for it."

I was so happy that I wasn't going to be alone. My racing heart relaxed in my chest. I ran back to get my blanket, shut the door behind me in his room, and sidled up beside him as close as he would allow me to be. I didn't say a word when he eventually lifted his blanket allowing me to climb under with him in his heated bubble.

I kept following Finn through the white of the hospital ignoring his angry words.

"Why me Missy? Why me? I don't want you here! I'm always stuck with you following me!"

I was okay while on his trail, though the smell of antiseptic in the air made me want to vomit. The only certainty I had in the world was following Finn's feet, and the fact that I knew our mother was on a table with a surgeon slicing down the center of her chest, cracking her ribs, possibly giving me

the chance for something different, though I didn't know what that something different might be.

I followed Finn onto a crowded elevator, "You won't find your way back," he said without looking at me. "I won't come looking for you. Then you'll be lost, Missy. I swear I won't come find you."

I watched Finn's back as he got off the elevator without me. He was a dark headed, tall, olive skinned boy. He was a piece of something in the world that I was trying to build on. He was this scrap of human life that I was trying to ground myself with.

I went to his room one night again that same year I was seven to beg to sleep in his room like so many times before. He was on the double bed under two broad open front windows. I watched the shape of him for the longest time in partial light before he announced, "I know you're there. You can't sleep with me. She'll kill you if she finds you."

"I'll be out before she wakes up."

In bed next to Finn the half-moon softly ebbed its light through the windows with gradual grace. I raised my body up, looking out over our neighborhood. The night created a haunting blanket of shadowed streets and shadowed houses. A tapestry of silence that overwhelmed me with the contrast of what I normally experienced of my neighborhood during its active day. I was faced with a loneliness that I felt grew from the center of my belly. It became distorted. Huge. What did me in completely was my becoming fixated on a red blinking light in miles and miles of distance, at the exact moment that a train whistle began its slow mournful call, filling the emptiness of the night with the sound of loss. I understood the reality of the impermanence around me. I felt light headed, sick with fear of the one darkness that would never end, death. And that same death would be the only escape for me from my mother, or so I believed at ten.

"I'm afraid to die, Finn."

"No Missy, not tonight. Go to sleep!" He pulled his pillow over his head as I began to get more hysterical.

"I'm afraid of the dark, Finn! I'm so afraid! Everything just gets blacker and blacker!" I was shoving his back, trying to get him to turn over and be with me.

Yanking the pillow from his head he whispered through gritted teeth. "Stop it, just stop it! You'll wake her and I'll have to watch her beat you!"

She never beat Finn, only me. It killed him. I saw it. He withered when she grabbed my wrist, swinging me in the air as she flung her thick leather belt at different parts of my body.

"But I'm afraid, Finn," I began to cry from the stress of having a living mind.

"We all have to die, Missy! We all do! There's nothing we can do about it! We just have to go to sleep and try not to think about it!"

I paused my hysterics, pulling the covers up tighter around me, leaving him be, because I understood that he was close to the edge where he would force me into the darkness of my own room across the hall. I couldn't risk that, and knowing he was wide awake while I tried to sleep was some comfort to me. I didn't feel so alone in that darkness.

White walls, white tile, and elevators, that's what I found on every floor of the hospital. There was nothing distinctive that would have guided me back to where my day began in the soft lit waiting room where people talked about the possibility of death and the possibility of a different life for me.

Of course I was as lost as Finn said I would be, but I began to feel good walking among dozens and dozens of people both sick and well, walking or in wheel chairs, on gurneys, or I'd peek through doorways seeing people in comfortable beds watching TV or reading.

I wouldn't understand until years later that I'd let a piece of Finn go for the first time when I didn't get off the elevator with him. I also didn't know that this was the start of a lifetime of letting him go by increments, by degrees. And though I knew my future was uncertain that day in the hospital, I started to feel this pea sized happiness resonating inside of me. I felt this general sense of well-being that I'd never felt. For the first

time I was realizing I was a person who wasn't just an extension of Finn.

I felt so intoxicatingly good from that pea sized happiness that I broke into a run on the eighth floor. A nurse yelled for me to slow down and walk. I broke open the stairwell door marked emergency exit only. Sweat poured from my temples as I was stunned into stopping in my tracks by the blinding whiteness of the small stairwell space that was nothing but the sun shining in on white walls coming through floor-to-ceiling uncurtained windows.

I felt like I glowed as my small pale hands reached out spreading across warm glass as I looked out over the city I would finish growing up in. A city I would eventually leave for good, but at ten I could not know that.

I stood for a long time glowing like a magic trick in the brilliance of pure white light, looking down over dark green treetops, over cars that looked like toys on Miccosukee Road, watching ant sized people crossing streets and moving in and out of buildings. The world seemed so big to me, so spectacular. And I couldn't have explained it, but my heart felt like it was growing larger and larger in my chest.

In my growing elation with my hands spread across the glass I hadn't noticed that Finn had stepped into the stairwell of white light behind me. He came and stood next to me, spreading his own hands along the heated glass.

He seemed different to me somehow, when he wasn't all that mattered to me for my own survival and for my own having of something. I noticed for the first time how sad a person he was, and how sad he'd always been.

"We have to go back," he eventually whispered. "They'll have word by now," but he didn't move, and as suddenly as I'd burst into the stairwell, I burst backwards toward the corridor door and through to the hall with Finn following close behind me.

“Hey, slow down. You don’t even know where you’re going,” he yelled.

And I shouted back, “But I do...,” I continued running, not really sure where I was going, with the echo of my voice trailing behind me, “I do.”

DARBY LYONS

### **Upon Hearing The News Don Draper Is Not Real**

Women lie when we deny we want someone  
like him, someone to be a wolf  
lurking in our fairy tale.

We know all the good ones are boring.  
We want to be taken. Even if he leaves  
a bruise, at least he leaves a mark.

Surely he sits, brooding in a cocktail lounge,  
squinting through a cigarette haze,  
fine wrinkles at his eyes.

The alcohol makes him brilliant; at least  
it makes him smooth. And smoking  
never kills someone who looks so good.

When the smoke clears,  
and the ice stills, in his eyes  
you see another life, without

graying piles of laundry, growing  
stacks of bills, just dark suits in a closet,  
waiting for those evenings out

when he steers you through the cocktail talk,  
his hand at the small of your back,  
while other women glare at you, wishing

they could go home to be devoured,  
leaving behind predictable  
boy scout husbands, reliable ones

who've never thrown them down  
and made them feel the thrill  
of fear, a racing tremor of doubt.

Who doesn't want some little lies  
to make plainness disappear? Who doesn't  
want to imagine the wolf is at the door?

## Books in Bed

He repositions me  
diagonally across the double bed,  
for better leverage, I suppose,  
sliding my head into a hardback  
T. Coraghessan Boyle with a thunk,  
then pauses, smiling,  
“You have books in your bed.”

I am uncovered:  
a single woman who never sleeps alone,  
inviting multiple authors  
into bed with me. And, I confess,  
I’m promiscuous, unparticular—  
men, women, all persuasions  
fill my bed with fantasy, confession,  
personal history and ambition,  
all but narrow genre fetishists welcome.  
And, truth be told, I’ve flirted along the edge  
of that prohibition with a thriller or two.

But back to my story:  
the man, leverage, Boyle.  
I knock Boyle to the floor,  
knowing he’ll be there later,  
because the smile on the man’s face,  
his amusement at books in the bed,  
is both recognition and revelation,  
like meeting a colleague at the coffee urn  
in the back of an A. A. meeting—  
a shared secret  
and leverage.

## Connectivity

birds on wire            two  
with wings folded up looking  
like high-heeled sling-back pumps  
askew            one pigeon-toed

what woman stepped out of heels  
left behind on the wire

the angle suggestive  
of speed  
like she was  
tripping up  
or down stairs

snagging the edge of a heel  
in carpet threads

trying not to pant            like a dog

though that was how she felt  
all she felt            wanting

to be where she could lie  
with the man following her  
on the stairs

and so she abandoned her shoes

## **Balcony**

You walk up to the front door and grasp the handle; it's cold. The door glides open to the left. You shuffle in from the stairwell and flip the light switch upward, nothing. On your right is a glass coffee table consisting of unpaid bills, a pink slip, and letters of condolences that have been heaped upon the surface. The heat is off. Dead flowers within vases adorn your countertops, shelves, and tables paying the deepest of sympathies to you.

You drag your bag and place it upon the ground. You're on Academic Leave from the school you attend until further notice. Grades drop when you can't find a single reason to keep them raised. You amble forward through a thin corridor with two doors lying on either side, one to your bedroom and one to your bathroom. You decide left, to your bedroom. Your feet drag slightly across the foul carpet as you enter. Why clean when no one is ever present to witness it. A stuffed gorilla is resting on the floor.

It was your favorite toy as a child. You kneel down grasping its petite arm. You embrace the plush figure; it's cold.

It doesn't make you feel happy or safe like it used to, nothing does anymore. You return out to the living room with your pet. The air is stale from lack of filtration, so you decide to step out onto the balcony for fresh air. You walk past the coffee table and grab the handle that leads to the balcony. The sliding door sticks as you force it open. The air rushes over you, it's brisk, but refreshing. You hold onto your gorilla leaning against a guardrail, long way down from twentieth floor. The view is of smog, factories, and a filthy city life. *Why did I ever leave home?* You ask yourself. A breeze sweeps across your face. Vertical streams sketch a path below your eyes. Silver despair paints your frame. You brush the hair from your face. People at school were never fond of it. Didn't suit your plain face they said. Makes you look stupid they said.

Those words are forever etched within your brain. You discover that you propped yourself up on the rail. Swaying your feet back and forth, dangling them, the frigid air has embraced your whole body now, the cold matches both inside and out. You rock back and forth gently, your hands loosen with each pass. Before you can halt yourself, you release your grip from the world, no time for a second thought. Plummeting forward you accept your fate, too late to return now. So many unrealized regrets at the end, if only you had a second chance. The concrete below is an unforgiving mistress, but it will accept you soon nonetheless.

Your gorilla is still tightly clutched within your hand; it will remain with you, until the end, bidding you the final farewell.

**Fixed in the Batter**

Paulette's musical howl transformed the whole air into a coveted, mid-afternoon gaiety before it waned and settled into a relaxed line of pleasure on her face. As she tipped the bowl and continued to beat cornbread batter into a swirl of lumpy maize-silk, spreadable and thick like an autumn coverlet, the glint of her incisors was no longer visible, but moist laughter remained in her eyes.

“Do you know the number four, mama?”

“Well... sure, baby. I've heard of the number four...”

“What if you add four?”

“That's eight, sweetie.”

“Okay, okay, wait! What if you plus four more?”

“That's twelve, sweetie...”

“I know! I know, mama! Four eight twelve!”

Sanaa stood on the seat of the rickety baby chair where she had anticipated and eaten a thousand hotdog pieces over the last five years. The chair was nicked and wobbly; an innocent piece of childhood preserved by its storied wear and tear. Standing atop her perch she still had to look up at Paulette on the pretense of having grown up into an off-kilter, comedic mathematician with useful knowledge hard-won over recitation of “plusses”; creatively dispensed and with wit to boot.

“Get it mama? Four ate twelve. Gobbled up a four then an eight. Umm, good—I ate a twelve said the four.”

A surprised guffaw had sped through Paulette's throat and escaped so easily it pierced the air like a gunshot over the quiet swish of the wooden spoon rasping against the tin sides and bottom of the mixing bowl. She realized that Sanaa now knew how to make things add up for the punch line.

“Well, aren't you a smart character?”

“Yes mama, I am.”

Her miniature feet hit the floor, and she ran into the bathroom off the kitchen with the hem of her skirt bouncing off of her smooth knees.

“Well that was sudden,” Paulette said, half to no one other than her, as she followed the baby at a distance that kept her private and unsuspecting. She peeped around the corner; saw her scramble up on the toilet and asked, “Does mama’s baby have to make tinkle?”

She looked at Sanaa’s straight-forward gaze of serenity peer back at her and thought of the only tangible offering she could muster in the moment: cornmeal, flour, eggs, milk and butter—the sole food items in the house. She had toted them in a used paper bag from the food pantry earlier that day hoping that no one who passed her in her shiny Volvo saw the prayer she said, choked out through muttering, crazy-person lips, to replace the gas that used to sail her to and from the grocery store where normal people spent money to buy food. Those days were on hold for her and Sanaa until someone or something returned to the life she pretended to lead. Barely enough. Absence. The threat of something looming overhead that would swoop down to claw at the last thread of vulnerability, yank, and trail it through a baleful sky like the weakened prey their former happiness had become.

“Let mommy know if you need help, okay?”

Paulette stared into her batter. It had swelled into a puffy stiffness laced with pin-head sized craters of air, huffing and blowing silently in random patterns of intermittence, ready to pour and bake. There was no salt. She gave it one last stir to mix in the few glassy tears newly splattered onto its surface.

## **Popcorn Memories**

Sunday nights at Grandma Little's house were like mini family reunions. Three siblings and their respective broods gathered in mid-afternoon, trickling in as work schedules, ball games, and other duties allowed. All the cousins, those of us labeled baby-boomers, filled the remaining hours of sunlight climbing the neighbor's willow trees, hanging over the fence at Grandpa's pig sty admiring the latest litter, or making up adventures around the crumbling shack in the far corner of the lot.

It was always a special treat to help Grandma make the evening's dessert. Toll-house cookies as only she could bake them—I still can't duplicate her recipe, but the aroma never fails to take me back to Grandma's kitchen. Fruited Jell-O, quick-set with ice cubes we'd fight over after Grandma pulled them out of the gelling mixture, coated with slicks of flavorful color. Or maybe Rice Krispie treats. I swear she invented them. Set out with leftovers from the after-church chicken dinner, the sweets made up a spread to satisfy every appetite.

But no matter how delectable the treats, or how abundant the leftovers, no Sunday evening meal was complete without popcorn. In the huge cast-iron skillet handed down from Great-Grandma, then in later years in that new-fangled pot with the rotating lid to stir the kernels, Grandma would pop bushels of fluffy, crunchy corn, filling serving bowls for the adults to share and cereal bowls for us kids. Grandpa always got his bowl of popcorn first, and it was white corn, not the hull-filled yellow stuff he grouched about. Sharing a handful from his bowl was an honor he bestowed generously on his spoiled grandkids.

When all the corn was popped and our hunger temporarily satisfied, we'd settle down in front of the fourteen-inch black and white television, elbowing each other for a front seat in the crowd on the floor while the adults watched over our

heads. *The Lawrence Welk Show*, *Honeymooners*, *Death Valley Days*, *Hee-Haw*—the entertainment varied with the years, but never the warmth, the camaraderie, the *rightness* of those Sunday evenings.

At Grandpa's funeral in 1986, I was more involved in corralling my two-year-old than in mourning him as I should. My life was chaotic: two young children, a recovering marriage, unsatisfying full-time employment, depression. The Sunday gatherings had long since ceased as Grandma sank into Alzheimer's. Numbness filled my heart during his services, with only a hint of sorrow at what had been. It wasn't until several years later that grief pushed its way to the surface. I was flipping through a catalog of kitschy household gadgets when an item caught my eye. I can still see the glossy photo—on the upper left corner of the page was an oversized grey crockery bowl with rough-stenciled blue letters: Popcorn.

I cried more that day than I had in months.

The old house is gone now. My own children are grown. They barely knew my wonderful Grandma and Grandpa, and our extended family is scattered. Cousins visit for holidays or birthdays in unsatisfying encounters for all concerned. Sunday evenings are a scramble to prepare for another hectic week.

I still enjoy a bowl of popcorn fairly often, microwaved now—Grandma, I see you shaking your head! It's my basic comfort food, right up there with chocolate.

And I'd love to share that first bowl with Grandpa again.

RICHARD KING PERKINS II

**The Wife Thief**

I wake up thinking that  
it was just a dream—

the solitary black and white  
country in the north  
fading to color.

I watch as you fall  
into my oversized shirt—

still,  
what do we really know  
about each other

dressed or undressed?

I'm busy claiming victory  
against an enemy

that didn't want to fight

who hadn't even known  
a war had begun.

## Seed

The men who chopped down his family tree  
are all but gone.

When he thinks of it now  
it seems like a fairy tale.  
But when he really thinks of it,  
he sees the shared nightmare  
his parents can't wake from,  
the always grey village  
where even the sun has been taken hostage.

Then the last night;  
his mom puts bread  
and the last bit of chocolate into his pocket,  
whispering instructions  
before she pushes him out  
into a question mark of rain and fog.

Pissing himself in a trunk  
when soldiers board the train,

willing himself to non-existence  
so there is nothing to kill—

pisses himself again after a short nap,  
finds a Mylar balloon tied to his wheelchair  
wishing dad a happy birthday.

When he thinks of it now  
it seems like a fairy tale.

His head tips slightly to the window,  
toward sunlight.

NICHOLE REBER

## **Back to the Cult**

On a lazy day meandering through the architecture of Arizona State University's campus the *shushushushu* of approaching feet sounds from down a wide sidewalk path. A small Chinese woman shuffles toward me, barreling really, with an energy that magnetizes. Slightly hunched with age and clad all in black despite the oven-like heat, she has salted hair held back by barrettes. Wrinkles parenthesize her blissful smile and her gaze centers on me. Her placement of a shiny piece of paper into my hand as she passes is barely noticeable but then she speaks, something in Mandarin I don't understand but which sounds like cherry blossoms blown from a gusty tree.

"*Xie xie.*" I at least remember how to say thank you.

"*Ah, ni hui shuo putonghua...*" She turns to acknowledge her native tongue, changing her hustling steps to a sort of standing-in-place jig while a huge grin blooms across her face. Then she blinks and continues on her way, growing smaller along the path.

Still watching her, a second or ten minutes pass before I look back at the paper in my hand. It's a bookmark. With "Truthfulness, Compassion, Forbearance" written in five languages above a drawing of a Chinese woman floating on watercolor clouds. "Falun Dafa is good," it reads.

A chill races through me. Memory moves time and space to four years and many thousands of miles back to China, where they teach that Falun Dafa is a cult. I yank my head back toward the old woman, but she's gone. Quicker than a protest in Beijing.

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Television documentaries and news reports about Jim Jones and his People's Temple or Marshall Applewhite's Heaven's Gate bring these cults into popular culture. They foment images of cult members as hollowed out shells of

people who once had normal lives, who fell prey to some charismatic leader, a snake charmer who hypnotized them against thinking for themselves, who persuaded them to relinquish possessions, professions, family, and friends. Cult members followed these leaders to form private communities. They shut out the rest of the world to pursue some quality-of-life spiritual quest.

It's not only unusual occurrences like these that cause Americans to bandy around the word cult. We're prone to applying it to people whose passions differ from ours. That damned cult of California liberals. Apple fanatics, Alcoholics Anonymous, tree huggers, vegetarians, Comic-Con attendees. On any given day, someone somewhere is calling something a cult. It's as commonplace as Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman writing in one of his columns that the modern conservative movement is a cult. Still, when we hear that word, we get the innuendo.

Life as a new expat in another culture, however, doesn't afford that linguistic luxury. Neophyte expatriates take most every word literally. Everything is accepted at face value until experience, and more than a few cultural faux pas, enables expats to decipher the nuances of the culture and its language. Fifteen minutes in Peru, for example, means thirty-some. The word uncle in India doesn't necessarily signify filial relation. Until you've earned veteran status in expat life, however, you don't know these things. Critical thinking gets tucked away. You're like a child who believes every word mom and grandpa tell you. You hear, for instance, about a local cult and you believe every word of the story.

That's what happened in 2009, when I took a job at Bohai College in Xing Cheng, a small city in Northeast China. Shortly after a group of us neophyte expatriates arrived from countries all over the world, we gathered at a bar with our young American supervisor. Neil enlightened us about various cultural practices over a couple of beers. His being married to a Chinese woman and having been in China for a few years translated to a credibility we didn't question. Among the things

he told us about was Falun Gong, a name used interchangeably with Falun Dafa. He immobilized the half dozen of us with his tale. His slow, avuncular tone was like that adults use to scare children with campfire tales of local myths and horror stories. All over his old apartment building, he said, he used to find flyers about the group. The flyers came from the tenants upstairs. Lots of people visited that apartment. Late at night. In small groups. One night, strange sounds from the upstairs apartment woke him. He lay frozen in his bed, staring through the dark at the ceiling, listening.

"There were a lot of people. They were moving around in patterns, like they had set up a shrine in the middle of the room and were circling it. They chanted in low voices like some séance." He paused, looked into our saucer-sized eyes. His sudden silence made us shudder. "I don't know what they were doing. Communing with the dead. Sacrificing small animals. Who knows? But I'll tell you what: The police drive around here in white vans at night. Unmarked vans. They're hiding, watching. They're looking for people in Falun Gong and they know where they are. Just wait. You'll see."

The fear in Neil's blue eyes turned our skin turn goose-pimply. "After they're collected, who knows what happens? Labor camps? Execution? So, I'm just telling you, if someone tries to recruit you into Falun Gong... run."

My knees shook for weeks after that, every time a white van passed. The memory of Neil's story grew distant a few months later upon moving to Shenzhen, the South China city Deng Xiaoping developed as an experiment in capitalism. In many cities like this and others along China's eastern coast, worship of Mao's little red books has been exchanged for worship of little red envelopes of Chinese currency, the *renminbi*. Mysticism has faded with the rise of nationalism. There was, despite the change of government, no return to the pre-Mao days in which denizens honored and perpetuated the country's ancient culture of mysticism. In 21<sup>st</sup>-century China, Buddhist temples do not line major metropolitan streets along

the rich coast. Monks do not throng buses or bullet trains. Young people do not join the elderly in practicing tai chi in public parks. Religious icons seem ersatz. For instance, a Buddhist icon known formally as the endless knot hangs from nearly every taxi's rear-view mirror. This triangular, red silk icon is one of hundreds of auspicious symbols the Chinese revere. Yet question these taxi drivers about the knot's significance and you'll get shrugs or vacant stares.

It's a practice in futility to ask about religion or spirituality in China. One local finance professional whispers about *feng shui*, which was banished during the days of Mao to prevent it from becoming more popular than him. Ask him why he's whispering and he says, "China has many hidden police. They can arrest you any time." In another example, despite the fact church bells are ringing in the background, a young Chinese chanteuse looks around furtively before claiming pride in being Christian. No one, whether Chinese or expat, talks about Falun Gong. After the relief of forgetting about instances like Neil's bogeyman story, it doesn't occur to wonder why there's such silence on the matter. Is it fear or ignorance?

Even after leaving China, the memory of the Chinese bogeyman story never made a blip on my mental landscape. Then came the little old Chinese lady at ASU. And for months afterward, my inability to connect her gleeful, contagious energy with my American preconceptions of hollowed-out cult members.

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In his book *Oracle Bones* Peter Hessler mentions Falun Gong. Actually, it's more like a whisper. He explains that Li Hongzhi founded it in China in 1992. It was derived as an offshoot of *qigong* (chee-gong), a breathing and meditation exercise kin to Taoism and Buddhism. A means to deep spiritual connection, it espouses no particular deity. It has no leaders or initiation practices, no sacrifices or rituals, no buildings for worship, or even ceremonies.

The *Zhuan Falun*, the group's official book, is freely available online. It reads: "Our cultivation method has strict character criteria that allow you to temper your character and improve while in human society, under the most complicated circumstances-- like a lotus flower emerging out of the mud." These cultivation methods include chakras (a row of energy sources in the body) and the Third Eye, both of which are also prevalent in Hinduism. Falun Gong practitioners espouse non-attachment and mindfulness (both of which are components of Buddhism), and practicing goodwill, like any religion.

Despite these sentiments, Falun Gong does not have good standing in its country of origin. Beijing initially supported the group and its beliefs. Party officials, in fact, encouraged lectures from Hongzhi's books and extolled the practice's abilities to improve physical and temperamental health. Countless soldiers practiced *qigong* beside civilians. But by 1999, Falun Gong swelled too big for Politburo comfort. Beijing denounced it a cult, state-run media shifted sway, and practitioners were shunned. Still, in public squares practitioners dare to continue gathering. They quietly unfurl banners bearing the words truthfulness, compassion, and forbearance then sit in the lotus position to demonstrate their breathing and meditation exercises. Mainland Chinese followers, however, know they won't get far. Surrounding them, omnipresent plainclothes cops lurk before springing to action. Beating, arresting, and imprisoning the practitioners. Driving them away in white vans.

I never saw any of this in my two years of living in China. Never even heard of it. So after the black-clad lady I took to the Internet. A former expat told me in an IM conversation, "I see Falun Gong demonstrators in Chicago. They have this huge Chinese music and dance performance every spring. It's heavily advertised and is put on at the Auditorium Theater, so seems legit to the average Chicagoan. But if you read the fine print of the flyers, it says it's produced by Falun DaFa. So I've never gone to see it. Everyone I know from Hong Kong and China think [*sic*] they're quacks."

I later realized she was talking about Shen Yun, a springtime dance and music event that's heavily advertised across the country.

"Well, where are we getting the idea that it's a cult, that they're quacks? From the Chinese government?"

"Perhaps, but also my Hong Kong friends, who are no fans of the PRC (People's Republic of China), think that Falun Gong is a cult. But they're also skeptical about Christian missionaries."

This kind of conversation would have been dangerous in China – in person or via computer. Type Falun Dafa into Baidu, the country's most popular search engine, and you're greeted with a 404 error message, just as happens with Tibetan politics and the Tiananmen Square revolt. Type that in on this side of the Chinese border and you're directed to FalunDafa.org, which boasts a membership of 100 million people across 80 countries.

You can also find a 2006 report by Canadian MP David Kilgour and Canadian human rights lawyer David Matas. They investigated claims that the 6-10 Office, part of China's Leading Bureau for the Prevention and Procession of Evil Cults and said to have been established because of Falun Gong, is behind those white vans. Bureau officers routinely capture Falun Dafa members, "re-educate" them by various means (which I'll talk about later), and commit atrocities that should make Western medical tourists change their minds about having their much needed procedures done in China.

Even some within the US compare Falun Gong to Nazism. Such was the rather comic case of the self-published booklet, "Falun Gong: The Force Is with Us," which is filled with research of a level somewhere between *The National Enquirer* and urban legend. What does its writer, a self-professed "student of the occult," member of the British Society for Psychical Research, and fabulist of astrology and "magick" have to say about Falun Gong? He says that Falun Dafa doctrine is a "leavening of UFO-ology." Its practitioners blame "inhabitants of flying saucers (of) carrying out a

systematic breeding program with abducted humans." Members use The Force to command weaker minds to obey and practice "quigong" (not to be confused with Qui-Gon Jinn, Obi-wan's mentor) to gain preternatural powers such as levitation and psychokinesis.

The writer didn't stop there.

First consider this: The swastika is an icon most of the world recognizes as it was used by the Nazis. For Jains, Buddhists, and Hindus, however, it has been an auspicious symbol for tens of thousands of years. The word comes from the Sanskrit word *svastik*. The symbol or likenesses of it appear in cultures including the Chinese, Japanese, Islamic, Tibetan, Greek, Jewish, Celtic, Aztec, and Hopi. The *Zhuan Falun* explains this seemingly reversed swastika, which Falun Gong calls the Law Wheel, stands for good fortune and well-being. In other words, it holds about the same meanings as a yin-yang, a big-bellied man meditating beneath a bodhi tree, or a horseshoe over a barn door. To the booklet's writer, however, the Falun Gong's swastika proves its goal of creating a Stalinist police state. The group, he asserts, will probably become the next and worse form of Al Quaida [*sic*].

Such absurdity squelches all but lingering doubts that it's a cult. And so at Scottsdale's Chapparal Park, a clearly public space, from a shady picnic area about a hundred feet away from the group, I watched Falun Gong practitioners go through their routine. Passersby showed little to no interest. They ignored the group's English-language newsletters and poster boards showing policemen beating protestors. They didn't stop to ask about the pictures of gory X's stitched across the chests of Chinese corpses. No one cared about the group of middle-aged Chinese gathered, eyes closed, oblivious to the encroaching heat, faces soft with relaxation, demonstrating poses as graceful as the *tai chi* practiced in their native country. No one but I looked around fruitlessly for an old, black-clad Chinese woman to show up. And so only I felt a confluence of excitement and sympathy when one of the practitioners told me

where to find the bogeyman. The bogeyman who had escaped China's persecution.

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I'm back on ASU's campus, just yards away from where the little Mandarin woman first appeared. Ling\* and her mother, Jiao, meet me to discuss Falun Gong. We're sitting at a small table before a window overlooking a library vestibule. Ling is translating for her mother. She tells me that Jiao started to practice Falun Gong in late 1998, months before the government began its persecution of the group. The practice helped her to be a better woman, to gain tolerance, compassion, and truthfulness. It tempered her migraines, stomach problems, and a painful breast duct that modern medicine had failed to cure. Then overnight, she watched the headlines change:

"Falun Dafa is an illegal organization and the decision is to outlaw it."

"They spread superstition and hearsay, deceive the public, provoke trouble, and are ruining social stability."

"*The People's Daily* reports that the Falun Gong is an evil cult."

Ling lived with her father in Shanghai while her mother lived in Hefei. She became concerned when texts and calls to her mom went unanswered. Calling around to her mother's neighbors, one informed her of her mother's arrest-- on account of a Shen Yun CD. She had given a neighbor a CD of the classical Chinese music that Falun Gong practitioners use as a means of getting back in touch with their history and culture before Mao tried to obliterate it. The neighbor tricked Ling's mother, calling the police and detaining her until their arrival. The police then searched Jiao's house. They gathered a notebook, flyers, books about Falun Dafa, and other materials as if they were drugs and drug paraphernalia. They took her to a detention center, where she lived among thirteen women arrested on charges such as thievery and anything trumped up after failure to pay bribes. These criminals shared a large, frigid room and a toilet within full view. They slept on hard boards.

They washed their hair by sticking their heads in freezing cold water. They covered each other with filthy, flea-filled blanket scraps.

Jiao's tale mirrors the story Jennifer Zeng told in *Free China*, a Michael Perlman documentary. Arrested one night in 2000, Zeng, a formerly high-tiered Communist Party member, found herself placed for a year in a government re-education program, or labor camp, where police officers tortured her and other practitioners with electric shock before forcing them into manual labor. Nestlé was one of the beneficiaries of that labor. "On one hand they tortured us to death, and on the other they spent so much effort, so much money to check out our physical status," Zeng said on the documentary. "It wasn't an examination to show their health; it was an examination to see whether their organs were good for sale to foreigners (many of whom are American) or wealthy Chinese," retired Canadian Secretary of State David Kilgour (of the Kilgour-Matas report) explained. The often excellent physical status of Falun Gong practitioners made them a great commodity. Transplant patients want their organs because they don't smoke or drink. On *Free China*, a recorded phone call backed that up. The voice of a doctor reassures a patient that the organs are indeed from a Falun Dafa member. He personally selects all organs for transplant, he said.

Like Zeng, Jiao was not one of those "personally selected" for organ transplants. I don't want to ask if they knew anyone who was. Didn't want to ask if they knew anyone who wound up as a photographed corpse with gory X's on his chest. Nor did I see remnants of such memories in the mother's or daughter's eyes. I watch as Ling turns to her mother, whose words tumble out of her mouth, fingers grip the table in a moment of emotion she had otherwise contained until then.

"What the police are fighting is freedom and culture," Jiao tells me through Ling. "The Communist Party fights against any god, any belief. When they begin to say something is bad, that thing is actually good. They drag Falun Dafa into politics. We have nothing to do with politics. So they make

some fake movies and fake news in the social media to cause everyone to think we were involved in politics. Everyone says, 'Oh, you deserve it. You got involved in politics.' So the Chinese people are living in a lie built by the Communist Party."

That lie caused Jiao's husband to divorce her. It caused Ling to hide her own practice from her father. It left employers unwilling to hire anyone suspected of practicing. Eventually, it also helped Jiao to screw up her courage and board her first flight, leave China for the first time, surreptitiously abandon her friends, her home, everything she'd known.

"She is happy to see other practitioners here. Other practitioners here taught me how to do the visa for my mom because we had to do it in secret," Ling tells me. "My mother is on a black list. That means a police man follows her, spies on her in China. I felt very scared before she came here-- maybe some police man will arrest her at the airport. My mom knows one practitioner who was arrested at the airport and was sent back to a labor camp. But now everything is good. We can sit here at ASU and tell you all about this." A smile bursts across her face as she tells me that the university has asked her and other students in the university's official Falun Gong activity group to demonstrate during its international culture day. She clasps Jiao's hand as they talk about how her mother's life has changed now that she can practice openly with other people from their country.

Yet they admit a long, unknowable road lies ahead. There are rumors within the grapevine of Chinese people she's met. They say that the Chinese government still reads their emails and even their text messages. That fear hasn't stopped simply because they've crossed the border. They are cautious in building hope in their pursuit of political asylum, remain on the lookout for governmental acts of espionage like those that interfere with political asylum cases around the world. Until then, they will enjoy their liberty.

I hope they are successful in their mission to stay here, I tell them. I hope they become citizens. I smile but do not reveal

my thoughts that someday they will buy a car and dangle an endless knot from the rear view mirror. That if they pull up beside a white van at a red light, they think nothing of it, having forgotten to fear for their safety.

(\*Ling and Jiao are pseudonyms used for the women's privacy.)

JAMES J. SIEGEL

## **How Ghosts Travel**

I've seen ghosts  
move like liquid —  
like rain creeping through  
a crack in a window.  
This is how they enter  
and rearrange the furniture,  
turn the faucets on,  
peel the sheets from the bed.

They understand the engine  
of running water  
and ride the currents,  
the channels and connections  
that tie Ohio together.

It's a slippery secret  
that Lake Huron shares with Erie.  
And Erie can't resist,  
runs its mouth to the Maumee,  
the Sandusky and Cuyahoga —  
a thousand souls sliding down the state.

Look at the St. Mary's River  
rushing out of Mercer County  
only to return again  
with a handful of souvenirs —  
stowaway souls  
on their way to Fort Wayne.

This is how the dead travel —  
attaching their energy  
to the rising tides of Indian Lake,  
shifting their weight  
until they reach the Shelby Reservoir.

They dissolve into foam  
on the surface of Raccoon Creek,  
charged particles  
bending the tides,  
rippling into the Great Ohio.  
They touch the shore of Kentucky,  
take a human shape  
and walk again.

It explains the inexplicable,  
how boys that drown in the Little Miami  
can chase the pretty girls  
playing in the suburbs of Cincinnati,  
how a man shot on the docks of Cleveland  
can roam the empty homes of Lexington.

CRISTY LYNNE TROTTER

### **Gramma's Wringer Warsher**

I was five when the cinnamon lady from the state dropped me off at my grandparents' farm. I remember it was early November of that year; the Maple and Oak trees almost bare of their leaves. The sky was a shade of grey that told everyone fall was over; winter was moving in, and fast. Grandpa used to say that when the sky got dark that early in the fall, it meant we were in for one hell of a winter. That first year, I had a hard time adjusting to the life the farm offered; it was primitive, the way my grandparents lived. They heated the house with a wood-burning fireplace and about six kerosene heaters. One week, Grandpa forgot to order kerosene and the entire county was snowed in. We went without it for a week until the roads opened and the delivery man could get to us. During that week, I slept between Gramma and Grandpa on the floor of the living room in front of the fireplace. Every night that week, Gramma made pallets out of quilts and sleeping bags. The fireplace kept us warm enough, but the living room floor didn't do any favors for my back. As the fire would die down, Grandpa would wake, as if on cue, and toss more logs onto it.

It was the early 1980s, but one would have thought we'd stepped back in time to the early 1900s. We had electric and running water, but Gramma was old school and did all she could to save a buck, which meant using as little gas as possible. She was one tough broad, and despite my persistence at not wanting to be so tough at age five, I had no choice but to relent. It was toughen up or let the farm kick me down to the ground. That first winter, I heard my father's voice say to me often, "Hey, kid, would GI Joe let a farm kick his ass? Hell no. He'd take an axe and go chop wood to stay warm." It's hard to believe a five year old chopped wood with an axe, but I learned quick and got good at it. Grandpa helped, more often than not.

That very first day though, I'll never forget. Two things saved me: Tater Tot and Gramma's words.

Crusted leaves and bits of gravel had crunched beneath my weight as I stepped out of the cinnamon lady's car and stood at the end of my grandparents' driveway with a small suitcase the color of pea soup at my feet. The lady from the welfare department, who smelled of cinnamon gum, packed it for me, throwing in "only the essentials." I considered Legos essential, and insisted that they make the move with me; and they did, nestled between pairs of socks, a few tee shirts, and my favorite set of pajamas (army green in color with a GI Joe logo, near faded because I wore them almost every night). Even though I'd outgrown those pajamas the following year, for years after that, I couldn't part with them. They reminded me too much of what I knew I'd never get back. The one true memory I had of my father lived in those pajamas. When he'd come home from working second shift at the GM plant, he'd come into my room to say goodnight. I'd be wide awake, waiting for him. Aside from playing catch in the yard on his days off, our nighttime ritual was the one thing he and I shared; just the two of us.

"Hey kid," he'd say.

"Hey, Dad."

"What're you still doin' up?"

"Waiting for you."

With the bathroom light illuminating his face from behind, I could see him smile. "How ya gonna be a soldier as strong as GI Joe if you don't sleep?"

"Cause GI Joe doesn't *need* sleep. *Sheesh* Dad. That's what makes him cool."

"Okay, well kids named Josh need sleep, so get to it."

My father would close my bedroom door, leaving just enough of a crack so that the bathroom light cast a dim shadow on the edge of my dresser. I'd listen for his footsteps to make their way back down the hall to our tiny kitchen, where my mother waited with his dinner plate that she'd warmed in the oven. Most nights, I'd fall asleep listening to them talk in

hushed tones about adult things like the car, work, bills. Sometimes, I'd hear them through my wall, their bed squeaking and my mother laughing in a way that told me how much she loved my father. It was the kind of laugh that I grew up hoping all women had: a delicate, carefree, wispy laugh that melted a man's heart the first time he heard it. A laugh that would light up a room brighter than the strongest of light bulbs; that would keep a man wanting more from the first time he heard it. It was the type of laugh that would make a man stop what he was doing, lose focus, and know, without a shadow of a doubt, that he was in love, and never would be again.

One morning over breakfast, I asked my father why he made Mom laugh like that. He reached over the table and tousled my hair. Because I love her, he'd said. My mother blushed, her face a deep red against her thin, white bathrobe that she wrapped tightly against her shoulders and across her breasts in a self-conscious attempt to shield her young son from knowing the secret workings of a man and woman in love.

It seems so cliché, what happened not long after that, but two months later, as they drove back from Chicago after attending a wedding, a car ran my parents off the highway. Driven by an elderly woman, I'd later find out, the vehicle entered the highway from an exit ramp the wrong way, and to avoid her, my father swerved his car too far to the left and hit a concrete pillar supporting a highway overpass. I'm not sure my grandparents would have ever told me what happened, or maybe they just waited for me to ask, but one day, when I was ten, as I searched through a kitchen drawer for something, I came across the news article on the accident and my parents' obituaries. It was only then that I began to confront the explanation of why my parents disappeared so early in my life.

Sometimes I feel like I should have been in the car with them that night. After finding their obits, I rationalized that if I were with them, then maybe the accident wouldn't have happened. Maybe God would have spared the three of us. Instead, he took only them, and because of that, my faith in God waivered. It took a long time and more loss for me to

understand that things happen for reasons we aren't always supposed to know or understand right away.

It's funny, the things we pick and choose to remember. It's funny, the things our mind *lets* us remember, *wants* us to remember. I don't recall much following their accident, and I'm not sure I want to or *need* to. One minute Mom and Dad dropped me off at my cub leader's house for a weekend campout, and the next, the cinnamon lady dropped me off at the farm. And it was on that first day at the farm, that cold, grey November day, that even at age five, I knew life as I'd known it was over, but I didn't understand why. Had anything else greeted me that day, my transition to becoming my grandparents' ward would have been more difficult, but then there was Tater Tot, my grandparents' Jack Russell Terrier, the first to greet me in the driveway. He was small, friendly, and licked my face when I bent down to pet him. He was white and tan in color, hence the name I gave him, Tater Tot.

Gramma called him Mutt on account of his fuzzy, wiry looking face covered with whiskers. Tater Tot made life on the farm bearable. He became my dog, my responsibility, until the day he was hit by the mail truck. My grandparents let me cry for the month straight that I did, never once telling me that a twelve year old boy shouldn't shed such tears, especially over a dog. We had seven good years together. Tater Tot was almost as tough as Gramma was, but not tough enough to survive the wraith of the mail truck. I had come home from school late that day because I found myself tied up in a fight with Jimmy Thompson over a girl in our class. Each of us thought that the prettiest girl in school, who always wore pink lip gloss that smelled like bubble gum, would pick one over the other for the Sadie Hawkins dance. She picked neither of us, which was fine with me. What spurred the fight was that Jimmy called me a farmhand; a no good, loser that no girl would want to take to a school dance because my hands were always dirty and cut up. Granted, by age twelve, my chores on the farm had accumulated to quite a bit, and there were times, that yes, my hands reaped the benefits of scars, cuts, and dirt. But by then, I

was protective of my upbringing, proud of the hard work I helped my grandparents with. I was more than a farmhand, and I let Jimmy know it by throwing a right hook that landed square on his perfect Nintendo playing, Reebok wearing nose.

Sometimes I feel like I should have been home on time because then Tater wouldn't have been hit by the truck. Instead, I got home just as it happened, and as I sat in the middle of the road, Tater's head in my lap, his hind legs limp, me cursing Jimmy Thompson's name, I watched Gramma cry. I'd never seen her cry before, and I never would again. Despite lack of tears, Gramma was, and still is, the wisest person I ever knew, and as I arrived on the farm that very first day, the first words she ever spoke to me would be the second thing that saved me. As she and Grandpa met me in the driveway, she reached down to hug me. I looked at her hands and pulled away. Her fingers were crooked and her hands were chapped and scarred. "What's wrong with your hands," I had asked.

Gramma smiled and straightened her back, something she'd only be able to do for a few more years before it would give out on her. "Sometimes, Osh," she said (and she called me Osh because she dropped the J in my name on account that she had a few missing front teeth), "you can only judge a person's worth by their hands because sometimes that's all you have to go on. The worth of your hands can remind you that you're not afraid. Remember that and you'll do just fine in life."

I'd be well into my adult years before her words of wisdom would make sense, but I knew then that what she'd told me was important. Her words, along with her calloused, crooked knuckle bones, saved me. As I grew older and I watched her work, I learned that my hands would become as important to the success of my life as breathing would. Yet, I always felt that my hands could never match Gramma's and that I could never compare her hands to those of anyone else. She lived and worked on a farm her entire life, the latter part of it alone. What continues to intrigue me to this day, and what has always startled me about Gramma, is why her hands were the way they were. It wasn't just from doing farm work her

whole life. For the better part of the time I lived with them, she washed all of our clothes outside, in a metal basin, with an old wringer washer (the *warsher* as she called it) that her mother used.

When I was a child, I'd watch her for hours on end. She'd take a whole day alone to wash one load. It would take another day to dry everything. She'd let the clothes soak in Borax, and then one by one, she'd wring each piece of clothing through the wringer five times. She'd wring, scrub, wring, rinse, wring, wring, and wring again. Even in the dead of winter, she'd do the laundry this way. And with no dryer, she'd hang the clothes out to dry – a thing my grandfather hated, at least in the winter. Sometimes the wooden clothes pins would freeze into the fabric of a shirt or a pair of pants. I'd then be called in to hold the clothing over a small kerosene lamp flame to thaw the pin. On occasion, something would catch fire. I wore more than my share of underwear with holes in them.

My grandfather despised the process. “There’s nothing worse than putting on overalls,” he’d say, “that are as stiff as the face of a mountain rock. Icicles in your britches makes for a hateful man.”

I tried not to be hateful about my stiff britches, or the holes I caused. I accepted that the placement of random holes was my fault, but I couldn't fault the way Gramma did our wash. I never fully comprehended why she did it the way she did, but I didn't fault her for it. And I don't think she faulted me for anything, including the fact that the sudden death of my parents took several years to resonate with me. It wasn't until my freshman year in high school that I experienced the prolonged effects of my parents' deaths, especially my father's. I played golf on the freshman varsity team and as we prepared for the school's annual father/son scramble, it dawned on me that my father wasn't going to be there and my grandfather was not a viable replacement. He was old, tired, and cranky most of the time, and frankly, I preferred he not be around my classmates. No one wanted to hear how Gramma made his life intolerable by air drying his overalls. It was just as well, but I

still wanted him to *ask* me if I wanted him to go. He announced his discomfort at the thought of participating, and I knew what was to come before I said it, but I said it anyhow. My heart ached and throbbed and all I could do was scream to release the pain.

“I wish Dad was here!” I yelled through the old farm house. “Why can’t he be here? When I need him, he’s not here! All I have is you and Gramma and this stupid house! I hate it!” I’d stormed out of the house and onto the front porch, passing Gramma on my way out, avoiding eye contact. She looked like a wounded bird fighting back tears. My grandfather followed me to the porch. The look on his face was more painful to see, but the damage was done. I had spoken words that I couldn’t take back. Lucky for me, my grandparents knew that I meant them no direct harm, that years of anger and confusion built up, and thanks to a golf scramble, I had to face what I didn’t face before then. My grandparents knew that they could never bring back or replace my parents, so my grandfather did the only thing he knew to do.

The weekend of the scramble, he gassed up his old 1975 black Chevy Impala, and we drove the five hour trip to the cemetery where my parents were buried, not speaking a word the entire time. I didn’t know where we were going until we arrived. I hadn’t been to the cemetery since their funeral. As we stood looking at the headstones, my grandfather spoke to me, careful and slow with his words.

“Look son,” he said, with his arms crossed, standing over my father’s grave, “you got the short end, no doubt about it. Truth is, you held out a hell of a lot longer than your Gram and I thought you would. But just because you got the short end, doesn’t mean you have to hate the world. Not that you do, but you got that tendency. Know what I’m sayin’?” He looked at me and shifted his weight.

I nodded.

“Things beyond your control will keep comin’. That’s just how life is for some of us. Look at these graves, Josh. Look real hard and then leave it. Leave it all because Gram’s

gonna need you real soon here. Take what your momma and daddy left you, and take what we've given you and leave the rest. You hear me?"

Had my grandfather given me this speech when I was five, I am not sure it would have done any good, but at thirteen, it made more sense. Maybe it shouldn't have, but it did. Over my parents' graves, Grandpa broke the news that he was sick with lung cancer. He wasn't doing chemo because he didn't want to be hooked up to machines all the time. He was willing to take his chances with the date God had set for him.

Grandpa's words to me that day still ring in my ears. He had grabbed my hands and looked them over, nodding. "Good hands," he said. "You got your father's hands." And with that, we went home.

Grandpa passed the following spring.

Gramma didn't cry at his burial. Neither did I. It's not because I didn't want to or couldn't. I knew he wouldn't have wanted me to. Instead, I followed his advice and did my best to be there for Gramma and take care of the farm.

One year, Grandpa had bought them a GE washer and dryer set. Gramma never let him install them. It was enough for her that we had a hot water heater for showers, never mind that it went out more often than I can remember. Sometimes, it would take the repair guy a week to get out to us and I'd have to bathe in a metal basin (similar to the one she washed our clothes in, but larger) that Gramma filled with heated water from the fireplace. That washer and dryer set sat in our shed for a good ten years. I remember it killed my grandfather, especially in the winter, to watch Gramma go out on Saturday after breakfast, wearing her winter coat and boots, stand outside for hours, hunched over the wringer. It didn't kill him because of the stiff britches, mind you. It killed him because he couldn't believe that she wouldn't let him make her life just a little bit easier, but he respected her way, teaching me that love could be shown with different shades of purpose; not just laughs, but compromise and patience too. I just thought she was crazy. She'd return before dinner, her hands cracked and

bleeding from the cold weather and water. I'd help her peel potatoes for dinner because she couldn't wrap her hands around them. She was set in her ways, like I said, but I never thought her ways would include me bathing in the kitchen in a metal basin. As I began my senior year in high school, I'd had enough. I won the battle on installing the washer and dryer. By then, Gramma was almost 85 and couldn't lift the laundry basket, much less bend over the old wringer that she loved so. The day she died, I asked her why she never let Grandpa install the washer and dryer.

"Osh," she said, "people will tell you that there is a better, easier way to do something, but sometimes, there is no right or wrong. There just is. I just am. I learned, at the age you were when you came to us, to do warsh that way. I never cared to change. It made me stronger, made me last longer."

Last long, she did. She died at the age of 102, a month ago.

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I stand in the same place in the driveway as I stood the first day I arrived, 30 years ago. I haven't lived on the farm since I'd graduated from veterinarian school. I commuted from the farm during my college years because Gramma was stubborn and didn't want to live in a nursing home, nor did she want a stranger living in her house tending to her. I didn't like the idea of her being alone so much, so I didn't mind the commute. Once I graduated, though, I took over a vet clinic a few towns away, so I moved out on my own, coming by for Sunday dinners and still doing odds and ends around the farm. Gramma knew I needed my own space, my own time. She'd done her job and it became my turn to do with my life what I could.

Now, I have options to weigh, decisions to make. My grandparents left me the farm and I have debated heavily on whether to sell it or not. Even after years of watching and helping under their watchful eyes, I am not sure I can run it as well as they did. Farming was in my grandfather's blood, just like factory work was in my father's. I knew the day Tater Tot

died in my arms what occupation my blood carried and that I would become a veterinarian. I've saved horses, dogs, cats, goats, a pet pig, and have birthed new life a hundred times over. The job brings me happiness, yet I fear that my hands still haven't bled as my grandmother's did. Or maybe, they just bleed differently.

The house is weatherworn; paint peels from every wooden sideboard. The windows are cracked in places. Roof shingles are missing. It would take time and work to make repairs. The inside is still livable. Gramma, despite her back and hands, made sure her home was always clean. Maybe some plumbing and electrical work needs done, but it's nothing a contractor can't fix.

Selling the farmhouse itself would bring me no money. A realtor told me it's the land that holds promise. A retail company offered a considerable amount for it, but I don't need money. From the driveway, I can see the small, fenced in area where both Gramma and Grandpa are buried, right beside Tater Tot. They wanted buried on their land, near their home, the only place either knew for the near 65 years of their life together. How can I sell the land with their graves on it? I remember the summer Grandpa and I put up that fence, actually. In fact, we fenced the entire area around the house, and it took us almost the whole summer. I was ten. A few of my friends from school even helped out here and there. Grandpa would pass the time between digging fence posts holes and untwining fence wire by telling me stories of his childhood and how he met Gramma. She wasn't always a hardass, he'd swear. She had a soft spot that very few could ever see.

I leave the comfort of the driveway and walk toward the shed. It could use a fresh coat of paint and a new door, but otherwise, it's as sound as the day I helped my grandfather build it, if you consider me sitting in the grass playing with my Legos while I listened to him saw boards and pound nails, helping. The door creaks open and a mass of cobwebs greet my forehead as I walk through. Upon instinct, I reach to the left

and flick the light switch on. A bulb hanging from a wire chord attached to the center ceiling beam comes to life.

The shed is empty except for a few boxes lining one wall. I see a box marked “Josh.” I walk over and pick it up. Setting it on the makeshift metal countertop my grandfather built, I think back to the day he installed it. He sliced the back of his hand open on one of the sharp edges. I remember seeing blood drip down his arm as he said words I’d never heard before.

I open the box and peer inside. Smiling, I pull out three golf trophies from high school, a Ziploc bag of Boy Scout patches, a Nerf gun, and a plastic bag. The bag has a hole in it and the contents fall to the metal countertop. Legos. Once, Gramma tried to throw my Legos away. I was about 14 and she decided to spring clean the house. I happened to catch her carrying a box to the trash and stopped her, asking what was inside.

“Your old toys. Legos,” she replied as she held the box away from me. “You’re too old to play with Legos, Josh.”

“You don’t understand,” I said, as I pulled at the box. “They aren’t to play with. They are to remember.”

“Remember what?”

“My parents,” I said.

She thought for a moment and I remember her eyes softened. She handed me the box. “Keep them, honey. Keep it all.”

I take a yellow piece of Lego and stick it in my pocket. My mind drifts back to the task at hand, selling the land. Cut my losses, save the heartache, sell? Forget the memories, save the hands? Some things have no price. I flip off the light, close the shed door, and walk across the yard to the cemetery.

I bend down to Tater Tot’s headstone, still standing in the earth, yet slightly worn and faded from years of sun and rain. On the day we buried Tater Tot, my grandfather told me that when I was at school during the day, Gramma would sit on the porch with Tater Tot on her lap and watch the laundry dry on the line. She’d stroke his head and ears and he’d lie quietly

until he heard the school bus coming down the road. Then she'd let him down, and he'd run out and meet me. Tater and Grandpa were similar, he'd say, because neither of them seemed to mind Gramma's rough hands because he knew she had a kind heart.

I place the yellow Lego on Tater Tot's small headstone and look at the palms of my hands. The lines tell me it's time to come home.

TJ TURNER

### **from Lincoln's Bodyguard**

*I expect to maintain this contest until successful, or till I die, or am conquered, or my term expires, or Congress or the country forsakes me.*

- Abraham Lincoln

### **Prologue**

Death creeps quietly behind a man. This lesson I learned early in life, and on that April night, the Old Man learned it, too. The audience below strained in their seats, desperate to glimpse the President. A single actor held center stage—his monologue bringing laughter, rising till it filled the theater. The gas lamps issued a constant hiss luring me toward sleep. And the Old Man reached out to hold his wife's hand, then let go.

As I stood along the back wall, obscured in flickering shadows against dark wallpaper, a noise reached me—the Old Man's messenger talking to someone outside. The far door opened behind us, and then closed. Footsteps followed down the short corridor of the vestibule. I readied myself. No need for a pistol at this range. I pulled my knife from its sheath.

I waited as he opened the inner door and closed it making no sound. He moved past me, placing each foot with deliberate purpose to keep the flooring silent, confirming his motive. Even with his dark suit and felt hat I recognized him, his movement graceful and confident. He was a famous actor, the Hamlet of our day. I had seen him onstage before, other nights when I stood watch behind the Old Man in this theater. He paused, watching the play over the Old Man's head, like a man standing at a cliff gathering courage to jump.

I should have leapt—cut him down before he had the chance to strike. But I hesitated. When more laughter erupted from below, he drew a pistol in one hand, a knife in the other.

As he lunged I jolted to action. From my position I had the advantage. Grabbing his shoulder, I spun him toward me. With my free hand I gripped his gun while my knife tore through soft tissue, deflecting off bone. I drew him near, locked in a dance. For a moment our eyes met. He had accounted for everything except this. Twisting my blade, I stripped the pistol from his hand.

His eyes lost their focus—dying men see another world.

The audience below knew nothing until he shifted his weight in a final act to reach the President. I guided him past the Old Man, throwing him over the balcony. A spur on his heel caught, snagging a flag decorating the Presidential box. He tumbled and crashed onto the stage, ripping the Stars and Stripes down on top of him. The play stopped, a collective gasp rose from the audience and actors scrambled off-stage. The Old Man leapt to his feet. I faced him, the pistol in one hand. My other hand still gripped my knife, blood dripping from the blade to the floor.

Death stalked the Old Man in the theater that night. But sometimes, even Death has to wait.

1.

### ***March 1872***

I approached the White House slowly, my first time back in seven years. I left after saving the Old Man, after things changed. Washington looked as before, but the feel of the place had shifted. No one loitered or met the gaze of fellow citizens on the street. A cold city—scared. There were rumors of attacks in the heart of the Capital, of daring rebel assaults in broad daylight, meant to terrorize. The papers never reported them, but the rumors circulated, passed by word of mouth until truth and myth were intertwined but un-reconciled.

As the sun reached higher the fog dissolved around the White House. The building took shape, a gray mass against the pure white of the mist. Something deep nagged that I should ask admittance and let the walls of the palace shield me.

I took the letter from my breast pocket. My fingers traced the outline of my name.

*Feb 22 1872*

*Joseph,*

*I know much time has passed unspoken between us, but there is something important to discuss.*

*Please, I need you.*

*—A. Lincoln*

*Please.* The word pleaded through the letter. Maybe I assigned it gravity beyond its intent. *Please.* I tucked the letter back into my breast pocket.

Once inside, my fingers tingled, anticipation mixed with fear. Two soldiers led me down the corridors I knew so well. An air lingered about the place, a scent—musty with the taste of history and power, like the building itself sweat it from the walls. My shoes found the well-worn path, the slight indentation down the middle of the carpet from decades of wear. We walked past closed doorways, behind which my mind could paint every turn in vivid detail. With my eyes shut I could walk to the Old Man's study, take my post along the back wall and blend into the dark green wallpaper. I was home.

One of the soldiers showed me inside the great wood door. The room was empty. Two windows laid claim to the far wall, spanning from floor to ceiling. The first framed the Washington monument. It remained partially complete, the sun blinding off the bleached white stone. During the War, maps plastered these walls, obscuring the wallpaper as they tracked battles and the movement of armies. At times they covered the windows. Without the maps the place felt empty, but the walls knew the truth.

I walked to the middle of the room, something I rarely did in my earlier days when I preferred a solid structure at my back. The fire hissed, a few pops betraying overly wet wood placed into the flame. A table stood in front of the fireplace and

I ran my fingertips over the edge. It hadn't budged in years, the carpet under it more plush and vividly green than elsewhere.

A map covered the wood tabletop, its corners curled from repeated rolling. It showed the South, the land from Richmond and below. Even though the generals had surrendered their swords the fighting raged on. The War wouldn't give up. Though no longer the boil of '63, she simmered, nine years later. She still claimed lives, and would until the day she died. The Confederates had disbanded their armies to mold themselves into an efficient enemy—small networks of rebels who attacked and then dissolved into society. Fighting ghosts. Small *x*'s dotted the roads in all directions.

“Ambush sites.”

I never heard him coming, one of the things I hated about this carpet. Anything could creep quietly behind you.

“How are you, Joseph?”

“I'm fine, Mr. Lamon.”

Ward Hill Lamon, the President's right hand. He had always despised me. His body language betrayed him. I had worked for Allan Pinkerton, the famed detective and forerunner of military intelligence, while Ward Hill Lamon was the President's best friend, advisor, and confidant. They competed for the Old Man's loyalties.

“I see the President's note found you. Mr. Pinkerton told us to expect you today.”

I played over his intonation in my head, searching his choice of words. He stood more bent, though he still cut an imposing figure. His suit spoke of wealth and power. How a man composes himself and how he dresses tells an immense amount about his status, both real and self-imagined. In this, Lamon had grown more powerful than last we met.

“Will Mr. Pinkerton be joining us?” I asked.

“Not today. We need to discuss matters of great sensitivity, and discretion will be the priority. There are things he doesn't need to know. Do you understand?”

I lied and nodded. Another political chess match.

“Do you know why you’re here, Joseph?”

“I received the President’s letter. That’s all I know.”

“When the President arrives we’ll explain the situation. He insisted on having you. It’s only proper we wait for him. I’ll go check on things.”

He turned to leave but then stopped. “Joseph, I don’t want to leave you with the wrong impression about Mr. Pinkerton. Someone is reporting to the enemy—a fox in the henhouse, as the President would say. I have long suspected it to be among Pinkerton’s people. These things happen, but what we will discuss cannot be compromised. The very life of our nation depends on that.”

“My loyalty belongs to the President alone,” I answered.

Lamon considered my reply. “Very well. I will not mention it again. If the President trusts you, that will suffice.” This time he turned and left. When the door closed I stood alone.

I turned to the little marks that littered the map in front of me, filling the roadways from Richmond all the way south. Parts of Louisiana and lower Mississippi had a line drawn across. The country remained divided, the result of a failed surrender. When General Joe Johnston walked from the negotiation table years ago, the Old Man had called it the greatest treason. It surpassed even General Lee or Benedict Arnold. Other rebel leaders followed. Eighty thousand men burned their uniforms and returned to their farms. They melted back into the fabric of the South. But they kept their guns and the country knew no closure.

As I studied the map a younger man entered the room, resplendent in a three-piece suit fashioned from a shimmering cloth. Behind him the Old Man filled the doorframe, pausing to get a good look at me before he walked across the room with the aid of a cane.

“Joseph,” he held out a hand after switching the cane. “How we both have changed. I’m afraid that in beauty, neither of us has any more to claim, my friend.”

His hand felt frail, the bones barely covered by the tissue paper masquerading as skin. Tall and thin, he towered above me still. I felt like a child. The cane in his hand forced him to stoop—too short for his height. His suit hung loosely, indicating weight lost. His knee-length jacket appeared hollow, his neck gaunt inside the white collar and bow tie. But time had weathered his face the most. The lines were deep and furrowed, as if recently plowed. His beard had grayed, and his hairline retreated. It had only been seven years, but the office had drained him, pulling his very essence from the shell of his suit.

“It has been too long.” He motioned for me to sit at the table with him as the younger man circled the room and stood along the back wall, like I had done for years. Lamon entered the room and closed the door behind him. He joined us at the table.

“How is your mother?” The Old Man asked.

The question caught me by surprise, amazed at how far her influence spread. In retirement she had become famous, articles published on her exploits, the newspapers using her story to blot out the little marks on the map.

“She is fine, sir, the last I checked. I haven’t seen her in a while.”

“She was here once, did you know?”

“No.” In my mind some worlds were never meant to mix.

“Many of the conductors came, your mother, Harriet Tubman, a few others who risked so much. I hosted a ceremony and a banquet. Several years back now. She told me a few good stories about you. To think, the things you withheld in our time together.”

The event would have been bald-faced propaganda arranged by Lamon to mask the sour reports from down south. My mother would cringe if she heard herself called a distraction.

“I hope we find time to catch up, Joseph. But my schedule is worse than ever, and I am sure you are wondering why you are here.” The Old Man nodded toward Lamon.

“As you might suspect, Joseph,” Lamon began, “the rebellion has grown.” He flattened a curled edge of the map. “Some say we are losing. A fight like this is ugly, and even with our best efforts we have been unable to rid ourselves of it. But we have a rare opportunity. A senior member of the resistance wants to end the fighting. The information he has would be devastating for the rebels. We could break them—push the fight out of this stalemate.” Lamon swept his hand across the map.

I looked to the President. He held one hand across his chest while the other rubbed his beard.

“Who?” I asked.

Lamon looked to the Old Man before answering.

“Norris.”

“Colonel Norris?”

The weight of the name caught me off guard. It made me nauseated. I slouched, grateful for my chair, letting it hold my weight. Colonel William Norris had been the head of the Confederate Intelligence Service during the War, Pinkerton’s nemesis. The end of the organized fighting accelerated his rise as leader of a decentralized yet effective resistance. I tried to kill him once and damn near succeeded. His name appeared last on my list—a roster of the men who left my wife for dead and took my daughter to avenge their failed attempt to kill the Old Man.

“He grows tired of the fight,” Lamon answered. “I believe his letters and the promises of his envoy to be sincere. He sees the error of this conflict—that nothing will improve until we close this final chapter and move forward.”

I looked at the Old Man. He was lost in thought.

“So what do you want from me?”

“He requested you,” Lamon’s voice was flat.

“Norris did? Why? Last time you sent me to bring back his body,” I said.

Lamon provided the list that I had worked from.

“There’s symbolism for him. You killed Booth, and Norris planned the attempt on the President. He says he will trust only you.”

“Maybe he means to kill me?”

A smile flickered on Lamon’s face before he suppressed it. “He’s gone to a lot of trouble to convince us he wants to come in. Do you suppose you’re so important?”

“No,” I lied. But that was exactly what I thought. Years ago I had made a deal with Norris—a deal to spare my daughter. Unable to do what he asked, he would want me dead for my failings. “Even if I agree, how am I to find him?”

“He provided meeting instructions. You will take Baxter with you,” Lamon said.

“Baxter?”

Lamon motioned to the young man standing along the wall. “Mr. Winston Baxter, the President’s security advisor.”

The suggestion surprised me. I glanced at the man in the shiny suit standing against the bookcase. He was almost ten years my junior and far too confident for his age. Proximity to power can have that effect. The light material of his suit shimmered, the cloth likely from Europe. Polished leather boots extended under the pleats in his trousers, and his slicked back hair lent an oily appearance.

“I work by myself.” I turned toward the Old Man.

“Absolutely not,” Lamon answered. “You have a history with Colonel Norris, and we cannot run the risk of that past getting in the way of what needs to be done. You’ll forgive me, but the stakes are too high to trust this matter to you alone. You’ll take Baxter. He knows the particulars of finding Norris. There is no room for compromise on this.”

“Why would I take someone of such little—,” I paused, trying to find a word that would somehow diminish Baxter and Lamon alike, “—experience.”

Lamon smiled. “You and Baxter are quite alike. He is young, but not green. You will find him a hard customer, with more starch than one his age should lay claim to.”

Baxter stood motionless along the bookshelf—a complacent look on his face. A partner would make killing Norris that much harder.

“And if I say no?”

The Old Man reached out and placed his hand on my arm. “Please, Joseph. This is my chance to end this. I had so long planned to leave after my second term, like Washington himself, or Jefferson. But I promised I would not step down until the country was whole. I came in with this mess, and I will see it done right. I fear that with my stubborn disposition and with Congress refusing to impose limits on the office, I may never leave unless something helps us end this war.”

I avoided his eyes. They would remind me of my dying wife as I held her, and of Aurora, the little girl stolen from me and if still alive, old enough that I might not recognize her.

“Fine.”

“Good,” Lamon said. “You will leave tomorrow morning. Baxter will guide you to the meeting, and then you’ll both escort Colonel Norris to Washington. If there are no issues, we’ll have his sword this time next week.”

“Thank you, Joseph,” the Old Man said.

Lamon stood and placed a hand on my shoulder. “We need Norris *alive*.” His voice lingered on that last word. “That’s why Baxter goes with you tomorrow.”

I nodded, though I would never let Norris speak of our arrangement to save my daughter. Lamon headed toward the door, leaving me with the Old Man who struggled to rise. I helped him to his feet.

“It is so good to see you, Joseph. I’m afraid I have a cabinet meeting. But you will stay the night.” The Old Man looked to the door and Lamon. Baxter held it open, not looking our direction. When they were out of earshot the Old Man lowered his voice. “We will visit later. There is another purpose for my letter.”

\*excerpted from TJ Tuner’s first novel, *Lincoln’s Bodyguard*

CHUCK VON NORDHEIM

**Shane Evaluates His Quality of Life After the Accident**

the kernel of what I was  
sticks in my mind's teeth

instead of transfer handles  
I pushed back on oars

instead of motorized chairs  
I captained quad sculls

instead of bed sore lotions  
she rubbed erotic lubes

*slickupslickdownslickupslick*  
two bodies    one lust

memories chafe this mind caged  
in its maimed meat jail

then the river soothed my thoughts  
during dawn workouts

then deer swished in shoreline groves  
while cranes swooped ahead

then synced exertions added  
gospels of splashes

*smoothstrokesmoothstrokesmoothstrokesmooth*  
four rowers    one grace

my old self haunts this limp husk  
it mocks my dead limbs

now a corset compresses  
so I can still crap

now my piss dribbles into  
condom catheters

if my wife understood me  
she'd sink this sad boat

*smotherpillowdownsmother*  
two hands    one mercy

JOHN WELLS

**Goodnight**

She's gone to bed before me  
again: carting some apprehension  
up the stairs like a corpse, dragging  
an abandoned promise by its feet.

My hands are bound from the inside  
out. My temper is wound  
so tightly it slashes my cheek  
when I let it loose, although what  
I'm after  
I don't have a goddamned clue.

It's midnight. It always is.  
It's Monday. Or some other night—

I always let people down.  
I've got a mean streak  
ten years long  
and still going strong.

What must I have harbored  
within my heart to let it eat  
away at me all this time?

When the baby cries  
she wants her mother,

who loves me enough  
to hide  
the way she feels  
about me.



I keep memories  
like bread crumbs  
to throw out occasionally,  
if only in the privacy of thought,  
in case I need to find my way  
back;

so in that way I am.  
In that way I never left.

And I was right but not  
about everything, or  
I was wrong and reluctant:

leaving is always  
a sort of loss  
or it's the other way around:

loss, a leaving or having been left  
behind. Similarly,  
some time ago

I thought nostalgia  
and sorrow were the same.

It's taking years to understand  
that it only just feels that way  
most of the time.

## Communion

The troop of beggars descends  
on the riverbank: no shelter  
and caught in a trick of carnality.  
They speckle the water's edge, hiding  
each with another  
from a cold so ruthless  
    there's nothing else.

I've been walking, watching  
from ancient train tracks resurrected  
as an endless footpath, in the middle  
of another frozen night.  
I can smell ice on the air like juniper;  
I can hear water moving like blood  
through the heart of the city.  
I have never been more alone

when another transient materializes  
behind me, inspecting me—  
he grabs my wrist,  
    says, *No funny business.*  
I try to explain: *I'm not here*—  
but when he lets go  
I feel his absence in my hands.

He brings an arm around me,  
pulls me into his chest, rubs my back  
with his bare hand  
and asks *Are you ok?*

It's four in the morning.  
I don't know why I've lingered  
though I've come to know need  
here; *I'm not trying to get warm*  
I try to say, but I keep quiet,

meaning to take what little—  
whatever— he can give.

## CONTRIBUTORS

**KATRINA ANGLE** is a creative writing major at Sinclair Community College.

**AMELIA BAILEY** is a creative writing major and tutor living in West Carrollton, Ohio with her sister and their imaginary cat and dog, Skittles and Taco. She loves eccentric and honest character-driven storytelling with a dark twist. Her work appeared in the 2013 edition of *Flights* and she received honorable mention in Sinclair's 2015 Spectrum Awards.

**GLENN A. BRUCE** has an MFA in Writing and was associate editor for *The Lindenwood Review*. He wrote the movie *Kickboxer*, as well as episodes of *Walker: Texas Ranger*, *Baywatch*, and *Assaulted Nuts*, and is an award-winning video writer-director. His short stories have been published in *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, *Shotgun Honey*, *RedFez*, *Defenestration*, *Beat Poets of the Forever Generation*, *Alfie Dog*, *LLR*, *Oval*, *Carolina Mountain Life*, *Loud Zoo* (Bedlam Publishing), *The Rain, Party, & Disaster Society*, and *Green Silk Journal*. (Finalist in *Defenestrationism* short story contest.) He has published five novels and two short story collections, along with one non-fiction political treatise. His play *A Man's World* has been accepted by the In/Visible Theatre and he recently optioned his novel *Rubric* to Luculent Films.

**JOHN F. BUCKLEY AND MARTIN OTT** began their ongoing games of poetic volleyball in the spring of 2009. Since then, their collaborations have been accepted into more than seventy journals and anthologies, including *Barrow Street*, *Drawn to Marvel*, *Map Literary*, *Rabbit Ears: TV Poems*, *Redivider*, and *ZYZZYVA*, and gathered into two full-length collections on *Brooklyn Arts Press*, *Poets' Guide to America* (2012) and *Yankee Broadcast Network* (2014). They are now writing poems for a third manuscript, *American Wonder*, about superheroes and supervillains.

**AMY DEAL** (cover artist) is a long-standing member of the Dayton art, design, and advertising community. She received a BFA in visual communications from Kent State University in 1988, and has shown her art at the Rosewood Arts Center, Dayton Art Institute, Dayton Visual Arts Center, and Missing Peace Art Space. Recently she was part of the Art Comes Alive show in Cincinnati at Art Design Consultants, and was invited to show two paintings at this year's Ohio State Fair. She is the designer of the nearly 1000 foot long River Run Mural that is currently being installed along the Great Miami River.

**CHRISTINA DENDY** writes K-12 social studies material professionally while investing treasured moments into her poetry and fiction. She is the founding editor of *Mock Turtle Zine*, and lives with her husband and children in Dayton, Ohio.

**ARVILLA FEE** is an adjunct English professor at Sinclair. Before coming to Ohio, she and her husband lived in Alabama, and she taught at Auburn University at Montgomery (AUM). Teaching and writing are two of her greatest passions. She has had numerous short stories and poems published in other campus magazines, including *AUM*, *IUPUI* and *IUPUC*.

**CHARLES FREELAND** is an English professor at Sinclair Community College who has published several book-length poems and a number of poetry collections. He has twice received the Individual Excellence in Poetry award from the Ohio Arts Council.

**SUSAN FUCHTMAN** lives in West Chester, Ohio, where she leads a writer's group called Word Bums. She won the Poetry award at the 2014 Indiana Faith & Writing Conference and received Honorable Mention in the Adult Poetry category of the 2015 Sinclair Community College Creative Writing Contest. She writes poetry, short stories, and is working on a novel.

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**DARBY LYONS** lives in Cincinnati and is a recent graduate of the MFA program of Sewanee School of Letters. Her poetry and creative nonfiction has appeared in The Plymouth Writers Group anthology *The Heart of the Matter*, *The Ohio Journal of English and Language Arts*, and *The Ohio Writing Project E-Zine*. She is about to begin her 30th year of teaching high school English in Wyoming, Ohio.

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**CYNTHIA L. PAUWELS** has published a number of short pieces over the years both in print and online, including in the 2013 issue of *Flights*. Her debut novel, *Forty & Out*, was released by Deadly Writes Publishing in September 2014; and her award-winning non-fiction, *Historic Warren County: An Illustrated History*, was published in 2009.

**RICHARD KING PERKINS II** is a state-sponsored advocate for residents in long-term care facilities. He lives in Crystal Lake, IL with his wife, Vickie and daughter, Sage. He is a three-time Pushcart nominee and a Best of the Net nominee, and has had work appear in hundreds of publications including *The Louisiana Review*, *Bluestem*, *Emrys Journal*, *Sierra Nevada Review*, *Two Thirds North*, *The Red Cedar Review* and *The William and Mary Review*. He has poems forthcoming in the *Roanoke Review*, *The Alembic* and *Milkfist*, and was a recent finalist in *The Rash Awards*, *Sharkpack Alchemy*, *Writer's Digest* and *Bacopa Literary Review* poetry contests.

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**T.J. TURNER** is a novelist, a historian, a research scientist for the US Air Force, and a Federal Agent. He graduated from Cornell University; he has served three tours in Afghanistan as a reserve military officer, and was awarded the Bronze Star Medal in 2013. His essay about his deployments to Afghanistan – “The Power of Teddy Bears” – was read on NPR's *This I Believe* national essay series. He lives in Yellow Springs with his wife and three children.

**CHUCK VON NORDHEIM** is a long-time resident of Montgomery County who lives in a yellow house that overlooks the Miami River. His work has appeared in the sort of small press publications that support poetry, including Wright State's *Nexus* and *Mock Turtle Zine*.

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