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WHERE WOLF
A.M. Kennedy

Perhaps it’s the disappointment, after all.
Girl who doesn’t love you,
not with the bone and gristle,
not with the coffee grounds poured
into rose beds, you’re thorn and she’s flower,
you’re bolt and she’s window,
you’re just like your mother before always trying to
pin her down where no one will touch her high cheekbones or
pluck out her long eyelashes,
but just this once couldn’t it be like it is on TV,
we knock down the barriers, carve the cake,
and at the kitchen table it’s easy
to say, what you’re doing is hurting me.

But maybe you’ve never been a baker,
couldn’t home-make to save the four walls she
grew up within, couldn’t even keep out the
boogeymen, safe to say she now thinks the monsters
are only fictional, are all your make-believe,
and all the pleading on bleeding knees
won’t get the girl who doesn’t love you to see
that you’re afraid of what she’s got lying
in her bed.
The knock on the door came at midnight as if it had been planned. Befana hushed her sweeping by the cradle and strained her ears. Only the howling wind, except...no. Stamping feet. Muffled voices. Befana gripped her broomstick. The only people who ever reached her home—perched as it was, small and dark, on the side of the snowy mountain—were those who sought her healing. No one arrived by mistake.

The knock came again. The quick rap-rap suggested a different, more insistent hand. She shuffled toward the door, tightening her lopsided shawl as she went. Maybe it was the cold or the late hour, but tonight Befana felt old. In the circle of snows and thaws, plantings and harvests, birthing and burying, she had long ago forgotten her true age. Tonight she felt beyond years, much as sweeping was beyond years—a simple sfshh, sfshh, sfshh across a worn floor, useful only for a moment in time, soon to be undone.

The minute she touched the door bolt, the muttering voices
outside ceased. Even the wind paused to hold its breath. Befana opened the door the width of her good eye. Bobbing within the light of a single lantern were the faces of three dark men.

“Yes?” she said. Her voice, not used in weeks, cracked against the cold like a finger snap.

The man on the left spoke first. His cultured voice was warm. “Sayidati”—his companion coughed politely—“eh, Signora, we have traveled a great distance and in this storm find ourselves lost from our path. Might we stop here to warm our hands and rest our animals?” He waved an ungloved hand toward the clearing in front of Befana’s house, and when she followed the glint of his gold rings, she saw the faint outline of three haggard camels tethered to a pine trunk.

The middle man bowed and eagerly added, “We have been following the brightest star we’ve ever seen, but the unexpected snow has obscured it. All we ask is warmth and a place to rest while we wait for it to reappear.”

Befana felt a small snow drift forming at her feet. “I have no food to share.” *Best to see these strangers on their way, and soon.*

“We have our own stores,” the second man said. “In fact, perhaps we can provide you a meal in return for your hospitable shelter?” Though he was taller, his voice was higher than the first man’s. The third man said nothing. The lantern, which he held, cast its light directly across his eyes. His gaze was a glittering green, more cat than man.

In betrayal, Befana’s empty stomach grumbled. She gripped it in shame, and with her hands down, the wind took the opportunity to thrust open the rickety door. Icy gusts tore through the shabby
room with glee, cycloning the old dust piled on the floor and shaking the bunched herbs tied to the rafters. The empty cradle shuddered in the blast and began to rock and creak like a battered ship. Befana covered her ears against the accusing sound and shrieked, “Fine, yes, come in! Hurry!”

With a scurry of lanterns and robes, all three visitors clustered next to her kitchen table at the center of the tiny room, and the wind-whipped fire revealed the mysterious guests in full. Draped head to toe in silk, they beamed forth more colors than a summer sunset—vermilion robe, amethyst turbans, sapphires and emeralds and rubies peeking around every tuck and fold. Even the dirt and grime of their journey did not diminish their royal air, especially in contrast to her mean surroundings. Without thought, she dropped to her knees.

The first man laughed sheepishly. “Come now, no need for that. Our dress elevates us beyond what we as mortals deserve. Please, Signora. Take my hand and rise.”

Trembling, she sat with the men at the table. They smelled of winter nights, dusty roads, campfires burned in different woods—the scent of travelers. From their satchels came fare Befana had never seen, dried fruits and odd nuts, preserved meat free of fat and gristle, bread so thin and crispy she thought it didn’t deserve the title. She poured wine, and together they raised their glasses.

“To the star,” said the second man.

“To the star,” echoed the first. The third remained silent, though he tapped his glass against the others. Befana watched him consider her home—the hock from the old hog drying near the hearth, faded jars and vials spanning the mantel, the now-quiet
cradle tucked in the corner where the firelight couldn’t reach. She searched his face for judgment, for contempt, but found something else: the dawn of understanding. She blurted out, louder than she meant to, “What is it about this star, when there are so many to see?”

Warm with food and drink, the first man leaned back as if to see the sky through her roof. “Ah, this star. The prize that is dearest to us and farthest from us. It appeared nearly a fortnight ago, so brilliant in the night sky we could cast our instruments aside to gaze on it. We three have tracked the heavens for many years, Signora, awaiting the appearance of just such a sign, awaiting what it portends.”

“How dare He give Himself this gift, but take it from me. God? Befana tugged her ear lobe. God has a child? Then a most blasphemous thought:

How dare He give Himself this gift, but take it from me.

Melchior clapped his hands. “Signora, do you realize what this means? It means God has deigned to take our human form. He has made himself a weak and helpless innocent so he might walk among us. No wonder the star is so bright! It reflects the magnitude of a promise fulfilled!” His voice became a disbelieving hush. “The Messiah. What an age to live in. What a time to see.”

Befana’s head swam. She glared at her empty glass. Or perhaps
the fire was too hot? She rubbed her eyes; when she opened them again, a thousand little stars, none like the star they described, danced across her refocusing vision.

“But isn’t this the case with every child?” she asked. “Isn’t every baby of God?”

She caught the third man’s cat-eye. He tilted his head toward the cradle and for the first time spoke. “To whom does that belong, Signora?” His voice was the smoothest, quietest, and yet most incisive. His gaze did not leave her face. A choking lump rose in Befana’s throat.

“Gaspar, is now the time for such a question?” Melchior’s light tone was spiked with caution. Gaspar shrugged and said, “I’m merely curious—in such an old house, to whom would a cradle belong? We are, after all, searching for a baby.”

His question threw the years away in an instant, collapsed the walls against the ground, opened the windows to the first spring day, and once again she was holding him—him—in her arms, his warm weight and spontaneous movement, so new he could hardly cry. Oh, but he knew her voice, she was sure of it—her soft crooning, her whispered affirmations, the tickling brush of her lips against his perfect miniature ear, sfshh, sfshh, sfshh, the secrets she shared with meaning beyond language, secrets only infants are equipped to protect. He was with her once more, hotter than this raging fire, more incandescent than these strangers’ glimmering robes, and she stretched her arms toward the empty cradle over a keening she was certain issued from the sizzling logs, for surely that desperate sound could no longer come from her old, aching, broken body.
Befana slumped in her chair, tears soaking her cheeks. With great tenderness, Balthazar reached for her hand.

“Your only one?” His soothing voice enveloped her.

“I could not heal him,” she said. “All the people in this world I have saved, but I could not save him.”

A sob escaped, prompting Melchior to stand and add the weight of his jeweled hands to her shoulders. Gaspar regarded her from his seat. His chin rested in the crook of his thumb and index finger, indicating deep thought, or—as the fire kept shifting—pity. Befana could not bring herself to look at him, the man who dared probe the pain she most dreaded. Instead, she stared at her cracked, empty palms.

How long they stayed in that tableau, she could not tell. But the spell broke when Melchior cocked his head and dropped his hands. “Listen,” he whispered. “The wind.”

The mournful whistle had stopped; in its place was a beckoning hush. Gaspar went to the door and peered into the night. “The clouds have broken.”

In a beat, Balthazar and Melchior joined him. “So they have,” Balthazar exclaimed. “Come see the star, Signora, and in your sorrow know its grace.”

Heart and bones aching, Befana squeezed through the three men. When she twisted her neck toward the now-clear sky, she saw what her visitors had been describing. Her quiet, lonely mountain was glowing—a cold hunk of rock made vivid and visceral by the silver light above.

“What say you, Signora?” Melchior whispered. “Will you join us in our journey?”
Beneath the star, the travelers’ skin had ripened and their clothing glowed. They appeared straighter, younger, more regal. *What do I look like to them?* Befana wondered. *Am I less hunched? Less wrinkled? More at peace?* She shuddered, though the wind was gone, at the prospect of no longer keeping her timeworn wound open. Would memory disappear along with the pain? Would love?

“No.” The word dropped from her mouth as an egg from a lopsided nest. “I cannot join you.”

“Why, Signora?” She could not make out who asked it.

“I have too much to clean, too many salves to prepare…” Her voice, thin in the outdoor air, far from the sanctuary of her crumbling walls, trailed off. The men’s faces betrayed nothing. The windless silence deepened.

“We understand, Signora. It is your choice, always your choice. Thank you for welcoming us in our hour of need,” Balthazar said. All three bowed, then he and Melchior strode off to collect the long-suffering camels. Gaspar lingered. He kept his voice low.

“Are you sure, Signora?”

“I am old, sir. Too old to change.”

Gaspar hesitated, then leaned to meet her eyes. “Even God, who is eternal, has just seized an opportunity to change. You are a healer—you know the strongest salves require hope. Come with us and heal yourself. Please.”

“Gaspar!” The call echoed across the clearing; Gaspar straightened and nodded. “Farewell, Signora.”

Within moments the party assembled. With one last wave goodbye, they wound down the mountain in a short, single line,
the animals reassured of their footing beneath the unrelenting star beams.

Once the travelers turned the bend and disappeared, Befana closed her eyes and listened to the world she inhabited day after day, year after year. She wasn’t sure how, but the star made everything sound more crystalline. She heard flakes nestling against the pine needles and boughs relaxing under comforting weight. Ancient roots groaned with the pleasure of slow movement, while aloof rocks inched closer to their neighbors. For the first time in years, she listened to her own heartbeat, *sfshh, sfshh, sfshh*, and it was louder than she remembered, more resolute, not as far away as she’d believed it to be.

“Wait.”

Another word said unbidden. She whispered it first, but it could not penetrate this blazing new world, so she tried again, louder. “Wait. Wait!”

Befana lunged from her doorway into the powdery snow. She dragged one leg behind the other, hoping the travelers were not out of earshot of second thoughts. The pines, unused to her voice, swallowed her desperate cries, but she shouted them anyway down the mountain, on her way toward the light.
THE HEART, THE HEART
Anna Graziosi
We were talking about discipline and intent in the restaurant over drinks, talking about crime and punishment, how to raise right-minded kids here in riot-land, the county of hit first then think, the district of deny then deny again with stamping feet. The pauses between our retorts throb with meaning. I wonder if you are cleaning guns in your mind while I am packing suitcases. You say, *Prison doesn’t work*, as you pull a piece of gristle from your mouth and napkin it. I say, *Neither does execution, if the goal is to teach.* The orange sky out the window looks trapped between two panes, a rusty hinge displaying the damage that time and oxygen always inflict. It is freezing out but the sunset makes it look warmer than it is. I have an urge to open the window by our table but clearly it is bolted. You sip beer, I sip wine, you ask, *Does suffering educate better than quarantine?* We both say, *Maybe yes.* We smile because we are finally agreeing but in our pretend city, how can we tell what works when we all slap the kitchen table and run to the medicine cabinet at the first sign of suffering? When we get up to leave, both of us stumble into the frigid outside, then catch arms to steady our legs. The sunset is entirely gone now as if erased. In the darkness, at the top step, now glassy-rink,
we pause, afraid of slipping, yet get our phones out to videotape, to capture this hilarious soft-shoe, *Oh how it shuffles our feet!* Tomorrow, the video will look canted and blurry, displaying us, dancing on a precipice, laughing at the distance we might fall, looking so human, so unaware of all we might break.
you chose five photos to introduce yourself.

two are semi-automatic rifles. in another, a pregnant blonde wraps an arm around your waist, holds the back of her left hand to the camera. light winces from diamond to the “meninist” embossed on your ripped t-shirt. the next cradles your son, newly minted and in his mother’s arms (it’s four months later. your ring finger remains empty). in the last, you’re bare-chested and finger-gunning the camera, head cocked to display the faux-mullet and horseshoe mustache that screams, “i actually enjoy the taste of PBR.” this should have been enough. but i have to know more.

fourteen public photos cover your wall: guns on the kitchen table. guns riding shotgun in your blue truck. you holding an antique pistol. your infant son holding your middle finger. your not-yet-fiancée uncomfortably holding a bolt action. an ill-attended baby shower. you arching the sky above your blue truck with a flame-thrower—a tiny American flag on the dashboard. an empty water park. a dirt bike. two pre-pregnancy date photos. two pictures of the blue truck you’ll own once you “scrape together the money to have it repaired.” a cartoon of a priest with his pants down, his wrinkled pink gristle on the forehead of a child. i click tabs, scroll, and try to understand.
your education stopped at the eleventh grade. you have no ‘Friends’ of color— at least none who will accept you on social media. one of your white “bros” posted a meme about *Black dicks and white chicks*. you smiley face emoji in reply, but aren’t a racist because the only TV show you ‘Like’ is *The Boondocks*. no favorite books are listed. your self-assessments are poignant and many (the use of apostrophes escapes you. commas are liberally employed like bacon bits on a wilted hotel salad). you can’t hold down a job because of “drama” in your past, “struggle” that has not made you stronger. every day you sit in front of the computer and play video games, “especially in the winter.” you ride your dirt bike, every day, because you spent $200 on its parts. you enjoy the beach and every “event that involves drinking,” but never drugs because you’ve learned that lesson. you believe an “eye for an eye is fair;” and will blast your music next to me because you wish for me to listen (you need for me to listen). you feel you are a better person now. and unique. and humble. and “more intelligent than most.” you describe yourself as “a human being from the planet earth.” and i nod. and weep.
TO THE WOODS
Randall Brown

STEVIE had forgotten to take her Ritalin—again left on the kitchen table—and that made the car ride all the more surreal. She was driving her dog Bella back to the breeder in Canada and her son E.B. to the Adirondacks, to a retreat for teen smokers. The fog that hid in the valleys frazzled her, the soy latte buzzed in her ears. In the rearview mirror, her son E.B. reached his finger into Bella’s soft crate, scratching under her chin as she leaned her face toward E.B.’s palm.

Bella! Stevie spent her days with Bella in the kitchen training and housebreaking, watching Bella every single second of Bella’s life. She’d trained Bella to sit before being fed, before going out, before going up steps, climbing on couches. But E.B. ran into rooms, chased Bella, stared Bella down—and Bella began charging at E.B. when he walked in, growling when he entered Bella’s space, and finally bit E.B. on the leg. So they were taking her back.

The audiotape continued its drone, the History of US History.
A male voice actor—maybe Matt Damon?—said flatly that there’d been one hundred million Indians in the Americas, ninety percent of them killed. The high school teacher she’d been dating had left the tape, along with the persistent itch of a yeast infection.

From the backseat—Bella now yelping and rustling in her crate—E.B. asked for the radio instead of whatever crap Stevie was listening to. He wanted classic rock, said there would always be a guitar solo, just wait.

Bella continued whining in the crate, still unable to settle, Stevie’s crotch burning, itching, the pain making its way north, all the way to her nostrils, dripping, the audiotape moving to woods and forts, and through the fog arose her own lost fort in the woods along with the fire she and the neighborhood kids built, the rolled-up rhododendron leaves, how they once burnt down a tract of trees in Brian Dunston’s backyard.

“Change it,” E.B. yelled to her over Bella’s whimpers—and she did, the road winding its way up and up, the trees clinging to the sides of the mountains, dressed in their winter clothes, leaning like figures waiting for her at the pass.

“You missed the guitar solo, Mom.” E.B. said, sometime later. New Riders of the Purple Sage. Before the wonder of Google searches, she thought they were singing “banana bed” over and over. “Panama Red,” she said aloud.

E.B. kicked the back of her seat.

Then the gas light buzzed and a rest stop appeared and E.B. said he had to eat and probably poop.

Inside, E.B. got pretzel rods and peach rings and pink water. Stevie said something about not lighting the pretzel rods up, and he
muttered something. JK, she told him, and he said just leave him alone. Could she do that? Just once listen to him.

She stretched, rubbed her crotch against the door handle, the Diflucan clearly not yet clearing anything up.

On the other side of the cart, an old couple looked in the car window at Bella. They bent into each other, grown that way.

“What kind of dog is that?” the woman asked Stevie. The woman wore a straw hat like Walt Whitman might. And stood akimbo like him, too.

“A Coton de Tulear,” Stevie told the woman and her husband.

They gazed at Stevie as if Bella were her baby. The man pointed at the crate. “There’s a contract, I see. Are you buying or selling?”

The folder’s flap lay open atop the crate. Stevie wanted to explain the whole thing, All Stevie said was that they couldn’t keep her anymore. She didn’t mention that they would then drop E.B. off in the woods afterwards to learn to quit smoking. She didn’t say whom she’d miss more. She didn’t mention the fear and disappointment and sickness she felt each time she pictured that cigarette dangling from E.B.’s lips, the road she saw ahead of him, the stink, the cost, the black gunk building inside him, E.B. taking breaks to smoke on corners, nicotine patches that wouldn’t work, his lungs dark like gunpowder, that cigarette like a fuse, being lit over and over and—

Next to her, outside the car still, E.B. opened the bag, stuck a pretzel rod in his mouth. She could almost taste the salt, the crust, how soft the insides would become. “Smokin’,” he said, in the voice of someone else, from a movie she couldn’t remember, and maybe
he was no longer that person she’d named fifteen years ago, now that he’d filled himself with so much goddamn junk.

“You get any of that money back for her?” The man wanted to know this.

Stevie shook her head. E.B. removed the rod, pretended to blow out smoke.

“Can we see her?” the woman asked.

“She doesn’t like people,” E.B. said.

They both looked at Stevie. “That true?” the woman asked.

“It depends. I think men—young men—it should be fine. I mean for you just to see her.”

Stevie opened the back door, unzipped the soft crate. Bella sat waiting, tri-colored, brown and white and black with wide brown eyes and a face that smiled. Bella loved kissing faces, in ears, up noses, even a tongue down the throat. E.B. had scared her, and the aggression hid that fear, and Stevie knew this because she had a bookshelf of dog books.

Her fur like goose down, and Stevie imagined it went like this through to Bella’s heart, covered in baby feathers. Stevie held Bella against her chest, and the woman petted Bella under the chin and Bella licked the woman’s arm and the woman giggled and looked to her husband and the look said, “Can I have her?”

“We’re going to be late,” E.B. said.

The man and woman were talking to Stevie, but she didn’t hear much, watching her son. She heard “farm” and “quiet,” a world away. The woman held Bella now and Bella licked the woman’s face, the husband’s arm and wrist. E.B. could’ve looked at Bella the way he looked at Stevie, with annoyance and mistrust. But he
didn’t. He looked tiny again, that kid unable to sleep in his own room, afraid of fires, burglars, monsters in the toilet, that someone would bury him alive in his sleep.

“Oh, honey,” Stevie said.

“You promised,” he said. “We’d take her to the breeder. With her mom and dad.”

“I know. But you can see, can’t you? How happy she might be—I mean they’re older.”

The woman laughed. “Yes, we are. Aren’t we, Hal?” Her husband said that was true, indeed, they were older.

E.B. crept up to Bella, in the woman’s arms, then reached for Bella’s head, probably to tap it. Bella twisted away, lunged toward the tip of E.B.’s nose, and the woman dropped her. Bella landed on her side, rolled under the car, then bolted. E.B. dropped the pretzels, the peach rings—and went after her. Bella ran with a hitch in each step and a yelp, away from the highway, toward the trucks and then away, to the woods.

Stevie yelled their names, screamed stop, but it didn’t matter. She could’ve been yelling anything, and they’d ignore it.

“I guess that’s that,” the man said.

The woman, red now, shaking and holding onto her husband’s sweater.

Stevie swore, picked up E.B.’s stuff. When she opened the door, his backpack spilled out. Before, she’d have been surprised to find cigarettes, pot, an airplane-bottle of vodka being pulled out of E.B.’s stash, but now the surprise was that none of that appeared, just gum, technology, cables, power bars and wrappers. She closed and locked the doors, and then made her way over the concrete,
the barriers, past the trucks, to woods backed by mountain, and an echo of E.B. yelling, "Bella, Bella, Bella."

Maybe it was that audiotape—history—but the woods made her think of Thoreau, and she repeated “deliberately” as she walked. She didn’t quite know what it meant. She remembered Thoreau’s repeating “simplify” and not much else.

Her crotch, at least, had settled down. Part of her hoped that Bella’s injury was serious enough to stop her from getting far, but what would that mean for Bella, for her pain, for her return home?

Spring, with the ground wet, and E.B.’s prints like a Sasquatch. Or was it just Sasquatch? How many were there? One, many? Steve Austin, the Six Million Dollar Man, chased one, then befriended him, yes? How much would Steve Austin be worth now? She pretended she had bionic ears like Lindsay Wagner. Her mind wandered like this, adult ADHD, a drifting from here to there, like a camera unable to find its centered target.

No more shouts from her son. Maybe he’d light up a cigarette and she could follow the smoke, the way she had to find him in the willow by the pond. On a branch. Like an egret. At first, she’d thought pot, then smelled the tobacco and she wanted to shake that tree until he fell.

“E.B!”

It was still only noon or so, so no darkness coming. Just the following of footsteps, a path in the woods, Thoreau, Robert Frost, Hansel and Gretel. She didn’t see Bella’s prints, so what was E.B. following?

She’d lost him once at a Renaissance Faire. Jack had left
months before. She asked to see a sword, pretended to pull it from a boulder, then lifted it high over her head, felt lightning enter its blade. A princess, the warrior kind. No one abandoned the princess-warrior, a combination of fierce determination and ethereal beauty. She returned the sword and three-year-old E.B. had disappeared. That panic twisted her insides and she couldn’t move. And he came to her, holding a policeman’s hand, saying he brought her someone to meet, and was she okay?

She walked to the side of the tiny mountain, and the footsteps led to a pile of evergreen branches like a Christmas massacre. She heard them first, E.B. giggling of all things.

She crouched down, wanting to stay hidden. Through the pines, E.B. and Bella, Bella atop him, licking his face as she sometimes did when she wasn’t lunging for his nose or feet or fingers. What did E.B. make of such love that turned on him without reason?

Again, that sense of time shifting, and it was she on her back, E.B. on her chest, his fingers twisting her nose, finding her eyelashes.

A sharp burning all the way up to her nostrils again. She sneezed, and as soon as Bella saw her, Bella ran, jumped up to reach her face. Stevie fell back on the floor of pine—and Bella licked her with the desperation of a mind that could only grasp basic things, like lick, bite, eat, run. E.B. stirred, moved to them, and Bella growled at him.

“It’s your fault,” E.B. said. “You make her unlove me.”

Resource guarding, the books called it. Bella thought of Stevie as a high-stakes thing, a thing worth protecting. It could be worked on, a bit, with training, but it would always be there,
this aggression toward E.B., whom Bella sometimes perceived as dangerous.

“It’s no one’s fault.” But she didn’t believe it. She saw that then, her own disbelief at the diagnosis, at her protecting E.B. from the truth: He did this. He ruined her. He couldn’t be trusted. He grew up.

She had sat up and now Bella curled in her lap, as E.B. once had, huddled against her, as if the world were set against him. Curled as if in the womb—in the gristle, as her grandmother had said—a term that made her think of bones not yet formed, amenable, full of possibilities.

A long silent time, Bella fluttering off to sleep, E.B. staring out at the woods, anywhere but to her and Bella. “Why cigarettes, E.B.? Of all things.” She hadn’t expected to ask that. But there it was.

“Why you?” As if they were tossing something back and forth, the thing Bella represented to E.B., something his mother took from him that he’d have if she weren’t around. What was that thing? The freedom to smoke all he wanted? “Why did Bella pick you?” he asked.

“Hamburger underwear,” she said.

“No. Really. I want to know.”

She almost said it, but stopped. It was his fault. Not hers. That feeling that she should be the one taking the blame had something to do with her growing up with addicts, with that responsibility that everyone refused to take on. But she hadn’t done anything, had she?

“Her leg seems fine,” E.B. said, then stood up and started
walking back.

Stevie followed, Bella in her arms, asleep. And she understood E.B., that feeling she had as a kid when parents choose anything instead of you, whether it’s the restaurant, or the late night poker games, or the giant glass of Wild Turkey before bed, and you’d give anything to possess what those things have, and you try to become whatever it is that makes them return to those things instead of you, but you can’t, no matter what. That was the look E.B. had, something of jealousy; he looked at her as if she’d turned from him. And maybe she had, maybe Bella had offered some kind of love she’d lost in the world, that unconditional kind one got from infants, tiny things, until they grew into something else.

The breeder wanted to meet at a truck stop, but Stevie had convinced the breeder to meet here, at the rest stop in the woods across the border. The breeder was late. Bella, like a gosling on a long leash, followed E.B. wherever he ran.

She leaned against the front driver’s side door. Grey clouds made their slow way over the border. E.B.’s window went down.

“I don’t smoke,” he said. “I just wanted—.”

“What? You just wanted to be dropped off in the woods for no reason.” She looked for the breeder, Bella’s whimpers like E.B.’s when she hid in the bathroom as he cried it out in his crib, unrelenting, two, three, four in the morning. “Do you know much that place costs?”

“Why does Bella hate me, Mom? No bullshit, okay. Why?”

“I told you. It’s genetics. Her fear aggression. It had to be somebody. A teenage boy makes perfect sense. They are—
unpredictable. And she doesn’t hate you.” She just couldn’t count on him to be the same thing to her, day after day, didn’t know what to make of the mood swings, the running to her, after her, cuddling, then wrestling.

She flicked through the photos on her phone. Where was the breeder? Bella’s paws scratched at the crate’s soft sides, digging toward her, help me, help me, help me. E.B. looking like Winston Churchill in the baby tub. Dressed as a chipmunk on Halloween. On her lap in music circle, his hands on hers as they clapped. The swim with the dolphins. The space between her and E.B. grew frame by frame until the fences of tennis courts dominated each shot. And finally the pictures she stole from his Facebook, E.B. at music festivals and dances and sweet sixteen parties and proms and…

“What is it, Mom?”

He had come home with a hickey. She’d been reading about the newest thing teens did, involving pure MDMA and spring water bottles and she’d found his backpack full of the bottles, had them arranged like bowling pins in the living room when he stumbled over them, that mark on his neck like a birthmark, a tiny heart. He smelled sweaty. He said they were just water. He looked at her as if he had wanted something else from her—something beyond this doubt, this continual search for how he’d lost innocence and her trust. Or maybe it was his lying look. She couldn’t remember

“That hickey,” she said.

“I did that to myself,” he said. “Brooke and I were thrown into a closet. We twisted the skin on our own necks.” E.B. took Bella out of the crate but Bella couldn’t settle into him. Bella went for the
window, but E.B. held on, rolled the window up, only then letting go of her tiny body, Bella running frantically all over inside the car, on guard, hyped-up.

Stevie didn’t believe E.B.—about not smoking. She’d caught him in the willow tree, and if he wanted her to think that was staged for her benefit, well, he’d have to show her the plans, the diagrams.

She wanted to believe, though. Wanted that relief. Really, really wanted it. Dark lungs, hacking coughs, yellow teeth and fingers, her little boy stained beyond recognition—all these images could then slowly dissipate.

She breathed in the fresh Canada air. Bella hit her paws against the window. Help me, help me.

E.B. hooked the leash to Bella, went skating away toward the boundaries of the rest stop.

Why did you go to the woods? As a kid, she stayed in the fort in the woods with Marathon Bars and a Chief Crunchie and Wise Barbeque Potato Chips and a transistor radio with Kasey Casem forever counting down the hits and did she really hear her name as a long distance dedication, the song John Stewart’s “Gold,” a song about elsewhere? In that long-ago fort, she pretended that the world was old, unsettled and unknown.

Oh, what did it all matter now?

E.B. continued to skate with Bella on the expanse of frozen ground. Bella didn’t know a thing. Innocence. What use did the world have for such a thing? It was something to be destroyed or let go; holding on led only to madness and asylums.

Let go.
E.B. stood still and Bella slid past him, like a cartoon dog, legs a blur of going nowhere.

A car beeped, insistent, like on city blocks. With the breeder, Bella would have the woods, a stillness, and Cotons, dozens of them. Bella would not wonder where Stevie and E.B. were, because she was a dog. She was always home.

“There were stains,” E.B. said, sliding next to her, Bella cradled in his arms. “On your shirt.”

“I have no idea what you mean.”

“When Bella first came.”

Oh, E.B. Yes, she had lactated when Bella arrived. Yes, she’d felt that rush through her body of connection, of ownership.

“It’s not like you could help it,” he said as Bella squirmed, trying to get to Stevie. E.B. put his mouth to Bella’s ear. Bella licked the inside of his lobes. “I looked it up. Women used to breastfeed baby animals. Way back when.”

“You looked it up?” She saw Bella’s face, E.B.’s face, upturned, that feeling again of a complete connection.

E.B. whispered something to Bella, and then E.B. handed her over to Stevie, and then he ran to the car, slipping, sliding, falling twice before making it. Stevie held Bella this last moment, Bella’s face nuzzled in the crook of Stevie’s neck, almost purring. Where would she find such love now? In the way back when? Tiny little paws that smelled like corn chips. A tiny black nose. Tiny pink tongue. Why couldn’t the world find a way to keep things like this, so tiny, so precious, so—

The shadow of the breeder’s body announced that yes, she had arrived, ready to take Bella away. The exchange. Not a word
spoken except for the breeder beginning to say to Stevie, “You shouldn’t have—” But Stevie ran too, making the car without so much as a slip or slide, the world cracking under each step.

Stevie and E.B. sat in the car, until it got cold, and then she turned on the car, found the classic rock station.

“What did you tell Bella?” Stevie asked. E.B. had red eyes, not from pot, not from cigarette smoke.

“I never lost anything before, you know,” E.B. said. “I mean no one died or left. Dad is still around and I was young anyways. It’s weird. The way we’ll never see her again.”

“Is that what you said to Bella?” Stevie asked him.

“I said, ‘You broke my heart. A fucking dog. A little fucking dog.’”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“I could use a smoke,” he answered. She looked at him through the rearview mirror. What did it all mean? He looked very young, and she thought it odd, expected him to look much older. The snow had melted on him. He glistened a bit.

“JK?” she asked.

“Ninety million,” he answered as they pulled out of the woods and back toward the border. “That’s a lot of dead Indians.”

Native Americans, Stevie wanted to say. She wanted to praise her son’s math skills, the ninety percent of one hundred million. She wondered why they’d cry over a dog but not genocide. She wanted to know how many cigarettes he’d smoked before she found him, how many he might smoke still. She wanted to know about Bella, what E.B. thought she might be thinking, how she might be doing. She wanted to go back in time. She didn’t want to take him
into the woods, wanted to take him home.

“Isn’t it?” he asked.

Yes, she said. It certainly was.
BLOOM
Elizabeth Austin

sticky
red seeping
between the lips
between your legs, no
cotton bolt rolled
and stuffed inside.
You are not your kitchen table
not your blood
not the rag you sit on or slide
into yourself,
not the copper scent
or the crust of it drying at the stain’s edges,
the center soaking through,
a softening
spread across white cotton,
red from sour to sweet
in a single generation,
can you walk
with nothing wrong at all except
that you are woman, thing
there to take
has been taken
is taking a long time
like chewing through gristle;
Don’t be afraid.
I will tell you what it is to be stained
and when you are older, daughter
things will be different, I
am making sure of it.
the tattooed men in long baggy shorts and the men nailing plywood over their windows and the men rowing boats through neighborhoods and the men shouting at a tv in the bar and the men in fire trucks in their uncertainty and the men lying low in the desert in their religion and the men hunting them in their religion and the men out searching for someone in the snow and the men underwater diving for bodies and the men at the intersections with their cardboard signs and the men in pulpits and the men slumped in unmarked cars and the men who tighten toggle bolts and the men who throw up in the parking lot and the men who have come unstuck in time and the men who are stuck in the past and the men who let everything but the engine light wait and the men walking up to microphones and the men who loathe themselves and are lonely and the men who love themselves and also are lonely and the men who are experts and the men who deal out the cards and the men who push their chips to the center of the table and the men who drink beer at the kitchen table and the men who smoke second-hand cigarettes and the men who toss gristle to their dogs and the men who eat donuts over the sink and the men who cut themselves with razors, who cut themselves with bourbon, who cut themselves with politics, who cut themselves with lust and the men who love women and the men who love the idea of loving women but who really love only the idea of loving themselves loving women and the men who are speaking in tongues and the men who are speaking in courtrooms and the men who are punching the walls and the men who are punching their wives and the men who are punching the
clock and the men who sleep through the alarm and the men who pace at midnight
and the men who take their chances and the men who have your best interest at
heart and the men who will make it all up to you if you only give them the chance
ON a balmy Sunday in January, I found myself in Dallas at the controls of a Boeing 737 passenger jet, engines idling at the end of a two-and-a-half-mile-long runway. A voice cleared me for takeoff and I advanced the throttles, steering with my feet on the rudder pedals as the airplane gathered momentum.

With one hand on the yoke, I felt for the sensation that the aviator Mariana Gosnell wrote “differentiates pilots from all other people, when the weight of the plane is transferred into your hand and now you’re a bird.” In that instant, it took only the slightest touch to lift the 65-ton jet—an awkward, ungainly thing on the ground—gracefully into the crisp morning air.

There was the visceral thrill of acceleration—of raw power unleashed, as the turbines roared and the altimeter spun through 1,000 feet. I asked my first officer to retract the landing gear and flaps; I set the autothrottles for climb. In a matter of moments, we’d be seven miles up, the continent unfurling beneath us at three-
quarters the speed of sound.

Suddenly, there was a blaring alarm and a red warning light—a fire in one of the wheel wells, where there was no built-in suppression system. Our only option was to lower the landing gear and hope that our airspeed—230 knots—would be enough to blow out the flames.

The first officer’s hand was already on the gear lever. I gave the order, he pulled it, and I banked steeply back toward the airport.

“What’s the procedure, now that the fire’s out?” he asked a second later, craning to look at the guy sitting behind me, in the jump seat.

“The handbook says you leave the gear down for twenty minutes, to cool it off,” the instructor replied. “But let’s assume the requisite time has elapsed.” He punched the computer screen to his left as the first officer retracted the gear. “Nicely done, gentlemen.”

My heart was still pounding as I reached up to turn off the “fasten seatbelt” sign. This simulator wasn’t merely convincing; with six degrees of motion and a photorealistic world outside the cockpit windows, it was completely indistinguishable from reality. I now understood why the FAA allows pilots to log their practice landings as real—and how airline trainees could go from zero 737 experience to fully flight-qualified, all without setting foot aboard an actual aircraft.

But I was no airline trainee. In fact, I was little more than a tourist in this cockpit, with only a sport pilot license and no experience flying anything larger than a two-seater. This visit to Dallas offered a rare chance—as an amateur aviator—to try my hand at serious jet training and get way outside of my comfort
zone.

That’s what I had told friends and colleagues about this trip, at least. The truth was that my weekend in Texas was much less about where I was headed than what I was flying away from.

_________________

Two years ago, on an autumn evening in 2016, I strapped on a parachute and flying helmet, clambered into the cockpit of a 1941 Boeing Stearman, and spent an hour flying the 75-year-old wood and fabric biplane upside down.

There was an instructor in the backseat, but it wasn’t a simulation. The big radial engine coughed oil and the wind shrieked through our wing struts as we put the old U.S. Army Air Corps trainer through its paces. First, stalls: pulling the nose up until the wings stopped flying and the airplane began to lose altitude. Next, spins: stalling the wings and then kicking a rudder pedal, causing the aircraft to tumble, propeller-first, into a steep, spiraling dive. Finally—after triple-checking the harnesses that would hold us inside the open cockpit—an elaborate, airshow-style aerobatics routine: four-point aileron rolls and barrel rolls; spins, loops, and Cuban Eights, strung together; and then an aggressive pull to bring the nose vertical—g-forces pressing us into our seats—followed by a series of lazy diving turns down to the deck, so low our landing gear plucked sawgrass from some farmer’s field.

By the time we landed, I was relaxed—maybe a little overconfident in my stick-and-rudder flying skills—and thoroughly content. More content, it occurred to me, than I’d felt in the longest time.
It was a startling realization. I put away my parachute and sat beside the hangar for a long moment, trying to get it out of my mind. But it was more than a passing thought—because what troubled me wasn’t the feeling itself.

I didn’t feel content that afternoon, in spite of my wife’s absence. At least in part, I felt that way because of it.

I met my future ex-wife a decade ago, on Capitol Hill, when we interned together for our home state’s junior senator—and my former neighbor in Chicago’s Hyde Park—Barack Obama. She was new in the office; I’d been on the job for four months. We flirted as I showed her around the capitol building.

Our first date stretched into a weekend together—strolling the DC monuments at night, wandering the National Zoo, making out while The West Wing played in the background. On Day Two of what became known, instantly and indelibly, as The Epic Date—a pivotal plot point in our origin story—I remember thinking, with an almost visceral thrill: I could build a life and have kids with this woman. We could grow old together, she and I.

That was six months before we watched our boss get sworn in as President. Our marriage ended six months after he left the White House.

Between those endpoints, our twenties unfolded; really, our entire adult lives.

We were married in 2015 by the intern coordinator who’d brought us together. The President sent a letter of congratulations. The following summer, we settled with our peculiar beagle in
Alexandria, Virginia, to start a life by the Potomac.

Then, the Obama era ended. The world started to come apart. And, almost immediately, so did we.

———

It’s a cool Friday evening in 2017 and I’m drunk as a skunk, struggling to keep the stub of a Cuban cigar lit as I stumble around the backyard, blaring music. Like everything in my mausoleum of a house, these days, the cigar is a relic of a trip we took together—to Havana, a year and a half ago, before we’d passed the point of no return. Once I’ve got it going again, it burns pleasingly, soft tendrils of smoke curling up as I watch jets on approach into National Airport, a couple of miles away.

For six or seven weeks after my ex-wife moved out, I was a TV gunshot victim: staggering through the days, dazed and stricken, reflexively trying to wring grief like blood out of my clothes. The depth of the wound was overwhelming, and the degree to which it made me come unmoored—like a stranger in my own life—was at times seriously frightening. My hands shook for five and a half months straight; my hair came out in clumps. I was forced to ground myself, as a pilot, since I was clearly in no state to fly. This meant I had to look elsewhere for coping mechanisms.

After hard alcohol and Cubans proved less than effective, I enlisted a crack team of mental health professionals—a therapist and a psychiatrist—to lead me back into the light. In a series of elegiac conversations, they helped me to bury what was dead and to let go of a future I’d once wanted badly, but now could not stand to contemplate.
They also helped me to acknowledge that what my ex-wife and I’d had was real—or completely indistinguishable from it. At least for a moment, we’d had so many good things that were “ours,” and a good many more that might’ve been.

A decade of nights out and nights in—of weekends and lazy mornings, laying around in bed with the dog. A decade of vacations and family Christmases—of funerals, like the spring day I carried her grandmother to rest. A decade of old friends and in-laws—of weddings, including our own, now tarnished but still somehow luminous. A decade of planning, of dreaming, of speculative kid-naming—of weaving our lives together.

It poured through our hands.

One night in midwinter, while staying with my parents in Chicago, I rose after midnight and wandered from room to room, brooding like Orson Welles in *Citizen Kane*. Through the ghostly upstairs light I felt my way downward, into a deep Midwestern darkness; down the stairs, too, and into the kitchen for two fingers of bourbon. Then down another flight into the basement, where I lingered before a bookcase filled with old photo albums.

Each leatherbound volume was labeled with a year that, as the aviator James Salter might say, had long since “passe[d] into pages.” I rifled through them one by one, visiting places and people that had passed into pages, too.

Here, in 1991, is my very first flight: my little brother and me, stoic as Civil War soldiers, wearing sunglasses as goggles and winter hats with earflaps down, the better to resemble flying
helmets. Side by side, we wrestle with the controls of a toddler-sized plywood “airplane” our dad had mocked up for us.

Here—a little further back, in 1987—are my parents and me at our old house in Hyde Park: the original lineup. Before my siblings came along.

Here are my mother’s parents, now 30 years older. And my dad’s parents, now more than 15 years gone.

Here—out of sequence—is a memento: my paternal grandfather’s pilot’s license, issued in 1944. Beside it is a photo of the bearer himself: a handsome 16-year-old striking a barnstormer pose, one foot on the gear strut of a gleaming Piper Cub.

Here is a photo of a different Cub augered deeply, nose-first, into a forest clearing, its propeller splintered and cockpit crumpled badly. One wing has been torn away and the heavy Lycoming engine is driven several feet into the dirt.

Finally, here is a relic: a piece of wreckage from the crash site. A flat fragment of aircraft-grade aluminum, ringed with cotter-pin bolts, into which someone has scratched the date “December 25, 1941,” along with the airplane’s tail number and the names of its occupants: my grandfather, a student pilot at the time, who would carry a limp for the rest of his life. And his instructor, a man named Lastie Hatfield, who died at 2:40 AM the next day.

People often compare divorce to death. But in my experience, it’s much more like a haunting: there are nights even now when I’ll snap awake in the small hours, eerily certain I’d roll over to find her sleeping beside me. Instead, there’s only the same absence that
shadows me while I’m awake.

We dealt with the demise of our marriage in different—and increasingly destructive—ways. I willed myself to believe that nothing could be irrevocably wrong, buried my deepening depression, drank myself to sleep most nights, and spent as much time out of the house—in the air, or at the airport—as I could get away with. She secretly went to concerts and stayed out all night with a certain male colleague, lying about after-work obligations to keep me from wondering where she’d been, or with whom.

The end, when it came, was sudden—and without a blaring alarm or reset button to keep us from augering into the dirt. The male colleague dropped her off down the block one Saturday morning, after she’d “fallen asleep on a friend’s couch” the night before. I happened to be sitting in the front room, saw them through the window, and asked her why she’d lied to me.

We didn’t raise our voices; she just retreated upstairs and said from the landing “I don’t want to be married to you anymore.” An hour later, she’d signed a lease on a new apartment a couple of blocks away.

I surprised us both by holding myself together, for the most part, until the following Wednesday—my first night alone in the half-empty house. That evening, I went downstairs for a glass of water, set it on the kitchen table, and sank to my knees, sobbing too hard to draw breath. I wept until I was physically exhausted and so dehydrated the tears wouldn’t come, lying crumpled on cold linoleum as the long night wore into morning.

It was only then, when I should have been on my way to work, that I pulled myself up to clear my head. In the feeble light
I brewed a pot of coffee, strong as I could stand it, and began to pick through the ruins of my broken life—the detritus of a failed marriage and a wasted decade, strewn around me like so much wreckage from a plane crash.

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I am writing this in February 2018, six months after my marriage ended. Four days ago marked the fifth anniversary of our engagement—outside of Reykjavik, Iceland, on a frigid night, when I got down on one knee as the Northern Lights lashed the mountains. Four days from now is another important date: when we become eligible for divorce under Virginia state law.

But I have no interest in sitting around, chewing life’s gristle and waiting for papers to sign.

Instead, as I write this, I am four thousand miles from home—plus two hours by camel outside of Merzouga, Morocco—encamped with a Berber guide in the open Sahara. Above me, the night burns not with the aurora, but with a canopy of stars unlike anything I’ve ever seen. Around me stretches an ancient landscape, lit by ancient light.

I am completely in awe—actually moved to tears by the brilliance of this vast, sheltering sky.

It’s taken this much time and distance to negotiate an uneasy peace with myself. There are still days when I miss the life we had together, the music of it. But tonight, for what feels like the first time since my marriage ended, I’m almost happy to be free. I’m grateful I didn’t let another year slip away, squandered on a loveless relationship. And underneath the lingering grief, anger,
and pain, I’m beginning to appreciate—as the aviator Antoine de Saint-Exupéry wrote—that “even our misfortunes are a part of our belongings.” Not since my hour in that 75-year-old biplane have I felt so complete.

———

On a crisp Saturday in 2015—two months after my wedding day—I packed my logbook and headset and drove to a small airport in Maryland, where I soon found myself at the controls of a Cessna 162 light-sport airplane, propeller churning at the end of a runway just wider than its 30-foot wingspan.

With two seats, a 100-horsepower engine, and an empty weight of 853 pounds, this trainer is about as far from a 65-ton 737 as any pilot can get. Its engine has been in production since 1941—the year my grandfather almost died in a similar aircraft; the year my rented biplane came off the Boeing assembly line.

I checked the fuel mixture, scanned the engine gauges, and pushed the throttle to the firewall. By the time my airspeed indicator read 50 knots, the weight of the airframe had been transferred to the wings. With a gentle pull on the stick and a little right rudder, we were flying—or, rather, I was flying. Alone for the first time: my first solo. A rite of passage every pilot remembers like his wedding day.

Not long after that milestone, I was going places for real: practicing solo cross-country flights and navigating by dead reckoning—the way Lindbergh flew the Atlantic and Lastie Hatfield taught my grandfather to fly. There is nothing in the world, I discovered, like looking down from the cockpit of a small
airplane. Below, the hard earth reels by: dun fields, fallow and crisscrossed with ribbons of black road. Little towns, exquisite in detail, etched against the plain. In the distance, the smear of Baltimore-Washington International, where so many journeys begin and contrails converge.

She’s down there somewhere, too, of course—the woman I married two months ago. The mid-air emergency, the descent, the crash: they’re all ahead of us, for now. And tonight—in the autumn of 2015—they could hardly seem more distant. Because tonight I am far from earthbound.

A few feet above me, fat clouds roll by. Below, the Chesapeake looks almost burgundy in descending twilight, breakers heaving in slow motion, thick as mead. The nearest people must be the crew of a freighter more than a mile beneath my landing gear. They are bound for the tidewater and the Atlantic; in a month, they’ll be back from the other side of the world. And I’ll be up here again—a wingtip light transiting far overhead. A traveler making my way slowly homeward—flying solo, borne by different forces, but sustained by the same sky.
This mornin I cut my hair and left my beard.  
I want you to know you’re with your man  
when your face is close to mine.

There’re times I’m not strong,  
but I’ll save that for the night.  
I want you to see my whispers rise  
like fireflies from my chest.  
A man should always be full a fireflies.

But this mornin after the sun rose,  
I was full a prayer. I stood in the steam.  
The water fallin from my shoulders, chest  
as if I’s a mountain. I thought of you  
with my hands. I said prayers out loud  
like the mornin, our kitchen table,  
our mouths holdin the sky. I thought  
the sublime, thought a you, your back, my chest
fast against your tremblin. I was tremblin.
You were a blood lily in the rain.
I was a big-leafed fern drippin on you.

There’re times when beauty takes me slowly
to my knees. You said you couldn’t stand.
You leaned into me, trusted my gristle’d hold,

trusted the fern’d reach the ground,
let the lily quake safe in the wind.

I thought a you with my hands.
My hands holdin the hands inside
you. My hands’ insides. Our knees.

A mountain. A flower. A storm bolt.
I thought a your hands on the wall,
my hands on your hands on the wall.

How we prayed at the world’s edge.
How we held on, kept prayin. Our

prayers—water fallin a thousand feet
to find the calm that comes
when water falls to itself.
I want you to know a man can fall like water. I want you to know a man with fireflies in his chest can also hold a lily in the rain. I want you to know the man you feel against your face will fall to his knees in any weather to tell you this.
Last month in Manhattan, I flipped slowly through Meredith’s criminology textbook, which shows what television, and even the internet, won’t about unnatural deaths. She’s seen it all, and is waxen at the shotgun blasts, disemboweling, overkill stabbings, but she admitted to one image she couldn’t ever un-see:

not a homicide, but an accident. An old woman, facedown in the middle of her living room, scalded so badly by a rogue water heater her body was striped like an Astropop. It did not bother me, but I had my own exception. Close-up of a homely brass-grated fireplace, and inside, a surprise apparition: a woman’s body within its small, sooty confines, compressed like a chick inside an egg before hatching. Outright cooked, reduced to scrap and gristle. She had crawled into the fire, and for her
hurting she must have hardly felt it, to keep on perching thus, arms tight around her folded knees. The choosing is what resonates, making much more sense than murder. In my life, far from the city, I have to press pause when my wife enters the room. The shows I watch for stress relief would give her nightmares even though they rarely show the bodies, and if they do, we never see a face. A foot protruding from behind the kitchen table, maybe, or a photo taken so close to the wound it makes no sense as one, becomes instead a party game of guess-the-macro. Once in a while, a flash of the deceased so quick it is subliminal, and I can’t manage, hard as I try, to pause on it. This is worse for me than seeing. These things don’t happen in places like this. They say it every episode, and a place like this is just where I am. Something is wrong with me. Sure, I check the deadbolt. But I do not dream.
MEAT
Buku Sarkar
TAWNY had the best name, a name that sounded like a lion cub or a Playboy playmate or a girl in a leopard-skin bikini who would swing from vines in a jungle. She lived one street over from me and a short block down, but we didn’t meet until fourth grade.

“You go to St. Luke’s, don’t you?” Tawny asked one day as I rode my bike down Brown Street. “My cousin went there for kindergarten and she remembers you.”

I’d always felt invisible in my neighborhood, surrounded by more old people than kids. School was a twenty-minute carpool ride away. I didn’t know the kids we passed at bus stops. I knew the names of all the dogs on my street, but not the people.

But Tawny knew everyone. She had innumerable cousins, as well as four brothers, two older, two younger. Stuck in the middle with you, Tawny sang. Nestled in her pack of boys, she was taller than I was, more athletic, with long brown arms and legs always dusted with bruises and scabs. If she was friends with other girls, I
never saw them. She ran with the pack of her brothers and cousins, and soon I was running with them too, even though sometimes their games scared me, like when we had to climb to the top of a stone wall and jump off and roll downhill when whoever was It yelled “Geronimo!”

I came home with scabby knees, feeling brave and a little proud. “Get your nose out of a book! Go outside and play once in a while,” my mother had told me, and now here was proof that I had. She washed my knees with alcohol that stung and put on Band-aids, but I ripped them off the next day, wanting to look as tough as Tawny did. Once, building a treehouse, I cut my thumb open on a piece of wood with a nail in it and had to get a tetanus shot. I didn’t cry, because I was sure Tawny wouldn’t. That night I lay awake. Under its butterfly bandage, my thumb throbbed as if a second heart was beating right there. I was afraid to tell my mother because I was sure she’d make me get another shot. So I asked for my dad instead, and he came and sat on the side of the bed and told me my body was doing exactly what it needed to do, pumping blood to my thumb so it could heal.

We didn’t always run with the boys. Sometimes Tawny came over and we played Barbies. Once, after she went home, I noticed one of my dolls was gone, and a bunch of Barbie clothes. I didn’t say anything. The next day Tawny came back and handed me a paper bag with Malibu Skipper and the clothes inside.

“I accidentally took these home,” she said. One of her cheeks was red and puffed out just under her eye. She said she got hit playing baseball. “But I still hit a home run,” she said.

She spent more and more time at my house, coloring, playing
Barbies, until she would jump up and propose that we sneak up on her brother or try to cross Mrs. DeMello’s yard without her catching us and screaming out the window that she would call the police.

Tawny ate dinner at our house so often that I asked her if we could eat at her house sometime. She made excuses about her mom working or her brother having chicken pox, but one day it finally happened. I sat at Tawny’s kitchen table, which had no tablecloth but was covered by what looked like see-through plastic contact paper. It bubbled up in places, and I kept running my fingers over the bubbles, trying to squash them down.

Then I noticed Tawny’s father watching me, and stopped. He was tall and thick-bodied and had black eyebrows that came together in the middle, making him look mad even when he wasn’t.

Or maybe he always was. It was hard to tell.

Dinner was pork roast and I tried to eat it even though I didn’t like it, cutting off all the fatty pieces I could find. Anything that looked white or sort of jellyish made my mouth feel funny, dry but ready to flood with saliva the way it did just before I threw up. I tried not to look at those pieces. I looked at the plastic bubbles in the tabletop.

Then I felt something crunch loosely between my teeth. I stopped chewing and reached for my napkin, trying to spit it out without anyone noticing.

But of course they all noticed.

“Sorry,” I said. “It was like a weird bone thing.”

Tawny’s brother whispered bone thing and shot out a laugh. Tawny’s father looked his way and he went back to eating.
“It’s just a little gristle,” Tawny’s mother said apologetically. “You can eat around it.”

“Yeah, you got the best piece,” Tawny said. “Mine’s all gristle.”

She lifted up her fork to show me but Tawny’s father reached across the table, pinning her arm down. “You got complaints about the food?” he said. “Maybe you want to go to bed now so you don’t have to eat any more.”

Tawny looked down, trying to squirm her arm out. “Ow,” she half-whispered.

His hand released her arm, only to come down on the back of her head, slamming her face into the plate. “You know how hard your mother and me work to buy you kids food?” he yelled.

Tawny didn’t move. No one moved. The room was silent except for Tawny’s muffled trying-not-to-cry noises. And I couldn’t stay. I wanted Tawny’s father to take his hand off her head. But I knew if he did I would see her face lift up slowly, hair plastered to her cheeks, matted with gravy and mashed potatoes, and I would never be able to stop seeing that.

I bolted. I pushed back my chair, ran out the door, racing through backyards, even Mrs. DeMello’s, the wobbly taste of gristle edging its way up my throat as I ran, following me all the way home.
Can never connect to WiFi at the kitchen table. I’ve swept three times, but it’s still thick with crumbs. I’m deadlifting physiology notes at 2 AM.

I brew tea in a calcified kettle. Make pasta in the same pot my roommate uses to sanitize her menstrual cup.

Once, a dish rag caught fire. It took minutes for the smoke to crescendo over the three bags of trash that nobody’s offered to take out.

Peace comes in dead-bolted seconds. I elbow room at the oligarchy’s bottom.

I’d take a thank-you made of gristle, any acknowledgement of my omega’d dishwasher servitude.
Has your vehicle become a second kitchen table, and you, driver, chewing bacon as your car gnaws on the gristle of traffic?

This street-side cafe, the fumes, bumpers, brake lights, the horns blaring, the clamor of an occasional siren interrupting a forkful.

Do you wish for no commute, the chance to roll out of bed, walk down the block to an office in a cottage with a California native garden out the door? You’d eat your organic salad with grass fed beef, a few happy bees pollinating. Not these tie-ups, these snarls of drivers dreaming of an all-electric Chevy Bolt or hybrid Prius, not like those other motorists in their ostentatious Teslas, but all of you searching for the exits and entrances.
Ginger finds the door to the guest room of their old farmhouse partially open. She leans her small body against the frame and watches Uncle Mac sleep. His khaki pants, neatly folded at the creases, are draped over the chair at the far side of the bed. When he’s up, he is burly like her father, but his belly has a more definite shape to it and stands out over his belt, and his backside seems too small for holding up his pants. He dresses and undresses methodically, she knows, from watching him put on his socks and shoes when they go to the lake. One foot resting on the opposite knee, he briskly brushes clean the sole of his foot with his hand, shakes out a sock, rolls it neatly down until it looks like a pocket, dives his toes in, rolls it up his leg the way a woman would a stocking; then he repeats the ritual with the other foot.

Right now he’s on his side, head on two pillows, his hands clutching the sheet as if he’s riding the sea. He once was a sea captain. His hair is red, like Ginger’s, but thick and unruly while
hers is thin and neat. His chest rises and falls every time he breathes, and now and then a hiss escapes his mouth. She wonders if he’d mind if he knew she was examining him. She never gets to watch her father sleep unless he’s passed out in a chair. He’s always out in the chicken barn in the mornings, except when he’s sick with a hangover, in which case he’s behind a closed door. She is filled with the want to reach out and touch her father, but always it seems as if he is around a corner somewhere.

Just as she is about to get bored with the cataloging of Uncle Mac’s sleep, he snorts, and after the snort he whimpers in a way that reminds her of Foxy, her dog, who sleeps on his back, all four paws in the air. Suddenly, his paws jerk and she knows he is on a dream chase, and when he whimpers, she knows he must have lost the squirrel up a tree or the woodchuck into a hole. Now Uncle Mac’s breath is quiet, his chest hardly moving. Is he waking up?

When they go to visit the old family home in the Poconos where Uncle Mac lives with his spinster sister Aunt Bridget, he always bolts off, before Ginger rises, to some estate he tends to. Aunt Bridget is always in the kitchen, creating a strong smell of toast that makes it feel homey, and if Ginger asks, “Where’s Uncle Mac?” Aunt Bridget says, “He runs off with the roosters before anyone can even get a look at him.” A bitterness pinches her mouth as she says it, and Ginger wonders why she doesn’t simply say he’s gone to work. Aunt Bridget sits in her housedress, little light blue flowers on a white background, gathers in the sleeves, her nervous hands resting clasped in front of her on the oilcloth covering the table. “Toast?” she’ll ask. “Cinnamon toast?” And Ginger will bob her head. The bread will be right there on the table by the old-
fashioned toaster. Aunt Bridget will deftly flip out its wings, secure a slice on each and carefully fold the wings in toward the center until one side is done, then flip the slices to toast on the other side. She’ll butter the toast with a flat silver butter knife, tap on the cinnamon. The smell of the cinnamon as it mixes with the smell of the toast seems like one of the best things in the world, and Ginger is always disappointed it doesn’t taste as special as it smells. She imagines some morning she’ll rise up early enough to ask Uncle Mac to take her along to see that estate he works on.

Now he snorts and it makes her jump. Did he blink? Maybe, but he appears totally serene again until she turns to leave and he comes out with three short snorts in a row. This makes her suspect he’s been awake and trying to fool her. She has a reputation for being easily fooled she wishes she could get rid of. Megan, eight, a year older than her, comes along, and Ginger whispers, “I think he’s awake.” His whole body jerks then as another loud snort escapes him, and Ginger nearly jumps out of her skin. Her sister, calmer about adults, simply opens her eyes wider to stare at him and laughs out loud as she pounces into the room. “I saw you look. I know you’re awake.” His eyes closed, he still feigns sleep.

Megan’s nerve amazes Ginger. She goes directly to the side of the bed and lifts one of his eyelids up. His eyeball is rolled up in his head and when she lets go, his eyelid drops back down like a curtain. She starts to back away, but he snorts wildly and his arms come out to snatch her.

“I knew it,” she screeches. “I knew you were faking.”

“I knew it too,” Ginger says, edging up to shadow Megan at the side of the bed.
He pulls them both up onto the bed, saying, “Give your old uncle a break, this is his rare day off.” He places Megan on his right side and Ginger on his left. They are laid back so his bulging arm muscles are props for their heads. “Oh, boy, look at these beautiful girls I woke up in bed with,” he jokes, as if he is in a foreign port. Ginger feels the warmth of him, even though he is under the sheet and they are on top of it. She wonders if she’s glimpsing in some small way what it would be like to marry him. She often asks her mother why Uncle Mac never married. “They are a weird lot,” her mother says with a bewildering note of triumph, “your father’s family.”

Uncle Mac tickles her and she wiggles. He teases, “I scared you, I saw you jump.” She giggles but shakes her head no, you didn’t scare me. She feels the smallness of her rib cage in his large hands. She wants to stop wiggling and trust his big size to make her safe and for him to stop tickling and just hold her against the length of his side as if she were a nesting baby bird. But he turns to Megan, who flails her arms and screeches, and next thing Ginger knows Megan’s bottom is pinned between his knees, and she is like a mermaid, arms raised up to temp him to tickle her armpits. He goes for them with stubble on his chin and she screeches higher. The sheet is pulling under Ginger. Then he rolls on his back and puts Megan up in the air, props her on his legs and raises her nearly to the light bulb on the ceiling. The sheet is getting tangled. Ginger wants them to stop. She thinks of Aunt Bridget at the table in Pennsylvania, so civilized, saying, “Cinnamon toast?” Aunt Bridget would call Uncle Mac a barbarian if she could see this.

Besides Uncle Mac being a little too wild for her, Ginger is
jealous because Megan didn’t stand in the doorway waiting a long time for Uncle Mac to wake up, yet now has taken over. But Uncle Mac is a mind reader, says, “Let’s have you both now,” and lifts Ginger up while shifting Megan over. They are each on one leg and his arms, rigid, serve as anchors for them to hold. His hands are steady like rocks while his legs take them on an airplane ride. They go up and down, they sway side to side, they make sudden drops until finally he says, “Enough,” and his legs go loose and they land to either side of him.

He squeezes them to him. He gives Ginger’s cheek a whisker burn and then he does this to Megan. “Let me just feel it,” Ginger says, running her hand lightly over the prickle of his chin, but he grabs her hand and presses it to his cheek as he opens and closes his jaw, making her feel the gristle crunch. “Ouch,” she says feebly. She wishes everything didn’t always have to be rough.

Their mother calls from the foot of the stairs. “What’s going on up there? Come down for breakfast, all of you.” Uncle Mac releases the lock of his arms and the bump his muscle was making behind her head goes flat. She stares at the chain hanging from the ceiling. She doesn’t want to have to move. Uncle Mac taps them each lightly on the head. His hands look so exactly like her father’s she thinks for a moment he must be him. But her father never touches. He only tells her to make her arms stiff, then cups her elbows in the saucers of his hands and swings her back between his legs like a door on a hinge, or throws her up in the air and catches her.

After Uncle Mac leaves they will plead with him: “Please, Daddy, put us up like airplanes the way Uncle Mac did. Bounce us on your knees, give us whisker burns.” But he won’t. He doesn’t
allow them in bed with him. He crosses the threshold to their bedroom only when something needs repairing. He doesn’t cuddle, rarely kisses. Only follows them with his eyes when they stand across from him at the grader every night while he candles the eggs and sends them to be dropped off and packed according to size, smiling with his eyes when he sends a peewee that he’s betting will be too light to drop off into anyone’s section and will likely circle all the way back to him.

A couple of years go by without Uncle Mac returning. When they go to the Poconos, Ginger asks Aunt Bridget where has he gone, what is he doing?

“A hermit and a prospector;” Aunt Bridget replies, holding back how many words she can give him.

“What does that mean?” Ginger presses.

“He’s sitting in some rocky mountain stream with a strainer, searching gold nuggets, sifting stones through his fingers. He’s homesteading. He don’t even live on a road. He eats peanut butter by the gallon and claims it’s the original health food and it’s making his heart so strong he’ll live to a hundred.”

Ginger can’t quite imagine Uncle Mac with his neatly rolled up socks sitting in a stream. And how often does the gold rush by? She wants to ask more but knows Aunt Bridget’s word allotment for attention to Uncle Mac is probably used up, given she is grudging him for leaving her. Still, she can’t help asking, “When do you think he’ll come visit us again?”

“Maybe never. He don’t even visit me, his own sister,” she says. “He’s living in the wild.”
The pantry is full of the gallon jars of peanut butter he’s been sending home for Aunt Bridget to get healthy on. Ginger has the idea she can use one to make a terrarium, but when she requests an empty one, Aunt Bridget replies, “Start eatin’,” and Ginger knows her aunt well enough to surmise she means don’t count on her to eat a lick of peanut butter, ever. These people all with the same ruddy skin, her father’s people, are simple folk in that they never venture far into the world (except for Uncle Mac, who once was a sea captain and is now far away on adventure). Her father looks like them but he branched out somewhat by having his own family and his own farm; he gets drunk but he’d never fill the pantry with peanut butter. Still, sometimes she wishes he would play like Uncle Mac.

When she arrives at that strange age of thirteen, many nights she lies in the bathtub until the water goes cold, studying the few crinkly red hairs growing at haphazard angles in her armpits and the small, soft mounds rising on her chest, and trying to believe they are hers, these breasts, nothing like her mother's, which, when out of her bra, fall and swing like pendulums at her waist. She takes to curling her shoulders slightly forward to shield them, though her mother says, “Straighten up, hold yourself erect and proud. Don’t slump. It’s bad for everything, not just your looks. It will compromise your speaking voice, your singing voice, it will injure your spine. It will make you look ashamed like your Aunt Bridget.”

One day she is in the kitchen with her family. They are saying goodbye to their neighbors, Elwin and Lilly, who stopped in to pick
up a dozen cracked eggs. Five o’clock on a sunny September day and she’s finished with her homework. Elwin and Lilly are at the door, her family on the other side of the kitchen table, her father directly behind her. This same father who never touches.

His stance wide, his shoulders broad, he seems like a tree behind her. He has washed up from afternoon chores, and the soap mixed with the autumn air he brought in with him smells good. He leans her back against his chest, and his arms come forward over her shoulders, as if he has noticed she is young and wanting for protection. It feels funny right away because she’s already passed a lifetime of thirteen and a half years wanting him to notice exactly this when he hasn’t. Still, foolishly trusting, she rests back against him. Then, unbelievably, his hands land, one on each of her breasts. A great jolt of shock rips through her and paralyzes her into a statue. Her breasts are stuck helplessly under his hands, heavy as sandbags. She doesn’t breathe or move. She thinks Elwin and Lilly must be seeing. Are they talking? They must be or they wouldn’t still be there. She can only hear the clamor inside her, as if her blood is stampeding hoofs upon her eardrums. Her face is hot, her stomach is in a loop, then his arms drop to her sides and he knocks her left on a tilt, then right. She goes stiff like a tin soldier. It’s their old way of rough-housing. She knows how to be, yet she has no balance; she could so easily topple over. Her eyes light out through the window and hold to the sky while everyone waves goodbye. She makes a little waving gesture. Then she realizes he is gone already. He is in his chair with the newspaper, his face blocked from her view.

She goes upstairs. Hers is now the room where Uncle Mac
once played with them. Her mother still calls it the guest room, but after Ginger wore her down with constant begging to have a room to herself, she let her move there. Ginger feels the distance now, how far and in the past it is down the long hall to the room she always shared with Megan, where each was supposed to clean half, only Megan would sweep the dirt from her side to under Ginger’s bed (and sometimes Ginger swept it back to under Megan’s). The narrow bed would hold her better now than this one, wide open as the sea. She lies perfectly still, as if she is asleep, except her eyes are stuck open wide, and she doesn’t know when she will ever be able to close them. Her brain is dead still, as if a truck ran over it. She stares at the rosebuds on the wallpaper. They make horizontal lines, vertical lines, and if she looks just right, they go slant and she can see diagonals. At the corner the rosebuds come too close, they nearly touch each other. This makes it seem like she is falling into the corner, and she doesn’t like this sensation of reeling. Right now she doesn’t want to feel a thing. Her body seems too transparent, as if she were an egg about to be candled, defenseless against whatever can be seen.

Every night after supper, they troop down cellar for the grading of the day’s eggs. They stand, according to age, to retrieve and crate them as they come around and drop off. Megan, Ginger, Joey—large, medium, small. Her mother does the washing. Her father puts the egg on the conveyer belt and watches to see how it looks inside as it passes under the candling light before it goes on to drop off in front of one of them. She’s never known exactly what he looks for but knows only the rare egg fails this passage.

Now she wraps her small arms around her chest and hugs and
rocks and tries to tell herself it was nothing, but the flush dashes her face and stuffs her ears, a wave of shame; it beaches her. She tries to close her eyes and rest but she sees an egg about to pass under the candler. “Stop,” she wants to shriek, “stop, stop, stop!”

Flat on her back, rigid, she stares at the overhead light. I’m wrong, she thinks, he must have landed near, not right on them. But then why did that absolute jolt of shock go through her? As strong as the first night she stayed in this room, and when she pulled the chain and the light didn’t go on, she stood on the bed in the dark to screw the bulb in tight. Only the bulb wasn’t there and her thumb went in the socket and a great shock went zzzzt right into her, hooking her thumb into the socket and pulling with its power as if it would never let go. The buzz made her arm numb, as if it was made of nothing but one thick nerve, and she fell on the bed and shook and shook her arm, the memory still gruesome all up and down it.

Her mother appeared then, saying, “Oh, God, never leave a socket empty that way. You should always leave the old bulb in until you can replace it.”

“I didn’t do it,” Ginger said weakly.

“I didn’t mean you did. I’m talking to myself. Oh my God,” she repeated, clasping a hand over her mouth.

Ginger had shaken her arm some more. “It feels so awful, like it was stuck in there and didn’t belong to me.”

“Oh my God,” her mother repeated, as if Ginger’s pain and her guilt were one and the same thing. “I’m taking a bulb from the lamp in the den right now.” She strode out then and left Ginger to whimper alone.
Ginger can’t fix on anything. Her eyes go from the light bulb to the small wooden crucifix on the wall at the end of the bed. Jesus is hanging right between two rosebuds but she’d like to take him down and hide him in a drawer. She’s never really liked him the way she knows she’s supposed to. She imagines putting him in a different drawer than the one in her night stand where she’s collected a few things to keep her from feeling small and lost in this lone room, which she once craved so strongly as an island from her sister. In her drawer there’s a special quartz stone, a tiny velvet box, pearls from her mother’s broken string, and a piece of lava Uncle Mac brought back from a volcano out west. When they were first standing in the kitchen, her father like a tree she could trust, it felt so nice. But she knows that is not what to remember, she must try to remember where exactly the heavy hands landed and how long did they stay there on top of her? But she can’t get it to come back; she can only remember the feel of his forearms on her shoulders. As if he had no hands. As if his arms ended at her shoulders. But he is famous for those hands, for the fact he can fix anything with them, for the way they are always warm, for the square, blunt fingers. She sees it then, the large pink hand, which can lift four eggs at once out of the basket. She sees it cradle them while the other hand picks out one at a time and lines them up on the conveyer belt.

She thinks of Aunt Bridget’s staunch house rules. Children should never go into bedrooms without invitation. Girls should never go in Uncle’s room, period. What might happen if they did? Did Aunt Bridget know something? Aunt Bridget would invite
her into her room and show her the things collected in her vanity drawer: Granny’s brooches, red and blue county fair ribbons, stamps from foreign countries from when Uncle Mac was a sea captain. She’d have Ginger sit on the velvet-covered vanity stool and stand behind her, stooped forward so her back was like a question mark, and her hands would rest lightly on Ginger, as if Ginger’s shoulders were roosts. Spinster Aunt Bridget who never had a boyfriend as far back as Ginger knew. Why did she collect those things so preciously in her drawer and take them out to show to Ginger, a sad, sad longing in her voice, as if they were the world?

Ginger sees that the light is changing. She hears Megan and Joey playing with the kids from next door down below, their high voices shouting as the sky grows darker. The pink tone grows deeper and deeper, and then the clouds turn gray. The room grows dark but she doesn’t turn the light on. Will she be like Aunt Bridget now? She shivers and hugs herself and feels sorry that she’s not out there racing about with them.

Then she hears the screen door flap and her mother out on the porch calls the kids in for supper. The sound of her mother’s voice makes a shiver creep up her spine. Then she’s calling up the stairs. “Ginger, come on down, supper.”

Ginger doesn’t answer.

“Ginger, did you hear me?”

She turns toward the door, squeaks toward the hallway. “Mom, I think I’m sick.”

Pause. She hears her mother’s impatience in the silence, a sigh, a shift of her weight. Then she comes up the stairs, stands in the
doorway. “What’s wrong?”

Ginger screws up her mouth. “A bad feeling in my stomach,” she says, “and I got the chills.”

Her mother puts the light on. “What are you doing in the dark? How can you tell anything?” She sits on the bed and feels Ginger’s forehead with the back of her hand. Ginger tries to imagine the words rolling out of her mouth into the open air of the room. Dad touched me wrong. She can’t imagine her mother letting them be. Like a train that drives forward, then backwards, she can see her mother putting the words on a flat car and rolling it back into her mouth, saying, “You don’t mean that,” or “That can’t possibly be.”

“I don’t think you have fever,” her mother says. She peels down Ginger’s lower eyelid to look for the redness of her blood, she squeezes her jaw narrow and looks down her throat, she presses on her glands. She doesn’t really look at her, though; she looks into her.

“Come down and try your best to eat something for supper,” she says, “and I’ll tell your father to excuse you from chores.”

That’s it, then. Ginger says okay. She feels a little better. At least she won’t have to watch the eggs passing under the light.
LISTENING TO STATIC
KB Ballentine

Like gristle between my teeth,
the speaker couldn’t be torn loose,
wouldn’t move the meeting on.
We prayed a bolt of electricity might jolt
and sizzle her into less-talk-more-action
or sputter through us so we might wake
from the meeting’s torpor – that ennui
that descends at the kitchen table after the meal
is done but lethargy stakes its claim.
Drones that rise and hover discover
waterfalls, playgrounds, traffic patterns –
but this drone was a monotone,
designed, configured to drive us senseless.
Hopeless.
We heave and sigh in our seats, but the speaker smiles
a wide, white grin, unaware
that I’m trying to pluck her out of there.
THE WAKE
Jennie MacDonal
WEDDING GUESTS
David Sullivan

for Kif Augustine-Adams

At the Bai family wedding puffed kernels of rice float to the top of proffered glasses of wine, bob against our lips when we bolt it down.

The groom’s retinue of balloon-festooned cars weaves through the cobbled streets. The men inside rehearse the groom’s answers to absurd questions:

What flavors does she like best?
What was her favorite TV cartoon?
What’s her bra size?

If he says the right answers, and if enough red moneyed envelopes are slipped beneath the door, he’ll secure her release.

But then he’ll have to seek out the missing shoe—Cinderella’s fella—ransack the house with praises for her delicate feet,
and carry her on his back back to the black snake of cars. They are playing their way toward marriage, while upstairs children

jump on their marriage bed,
aided by the elders
who clap their hands.

On the dowry kitchen table paired shoes (fidelity)
rest on stacks of clothing with bottles of baijiu
and a fly-anointed pig’s head—gristle

islanding the neck in its rice bed—and everyone sits on benches chewing the sweet,
red-bean-speckled cake while we wait

for the new couple to return
and erhu players ply fiddle-like strings
without a break (except to pray),

and cauldrons of fish and chicken mounted on concrete blocks stir and bubble over coal briquettes

as those of us old enough remember what we’ve come through, the bickerings and the blessings of marriage,
the make-shift bedding arrangements,
the in-laws nosing in, that gay uncle
who can’t get married,

the alcoholic grandfather who drank up
food money, then cried until Grandma held him . . .
so when car horns announce they’ve come
to be pelted with grains, our marriages
throng the cigarette-wreathed courtyard and spill
over into the alley to beat on the windows

of the cars, ushering them into this house
that will become her home and warn
the bride and groom about what we can’t say.
I. Opening Arguments

In a trick of jurisprudence: five defendants. The prosecutor is judge is bailiff is jury is one angry man. Was he ever not afraid? Every word is gristle, every shout a gavel. A family, temper-tossed, grips the table like a raft.

II. Dismissed for the Evening

She is a kettle, full of the Dead Sea. And while the house sleeps, she, in the dark of the kitchen, crystalizes to hard, strong stone, cleaver in one hand, Chardonnay the other. Was he ever not ashamed? She will burn to brine by morning.

III. The Verdict

Never tolerated an objection. Never lost a case. Rendered judgments, anxious eyes, father is a hanging judge. Was he ever not? Bolted on the inside, secured without a key. Ours, too, thrown away, lost in a gravy boat, in the trenches of the sea.
CAS ONE

Shara Kronmal
HE boats are letting down hooks, their fingers snatching at the mud and rock and gristle on the river’s bottom. He hopes they don’t find her, the hooks with their sharp nails and prying eyes. He hopes she’s remembered one of them caves in the hills and fallen asleep to the hypnotic drip, drip of its mouth. That she’s forgotten herself to the trees or the spring that trickles up by the back fence.

The deputy on his front stoop has a forgettable face. Just now the deputy’s mouth opens and says, “We’re going round to all the neighbors to see if they seen Allie Mills, that little girl who disappeared last week. We have reason to believe she might be in these parts. Have you seen her?”

He remembers faces. It’s a gift he’s had since he was just a small branch of a bigger thing, since he’d take up his brush early of a morning and not put it down again until evening flooded the valley and dinner grew cold on the kitchen table. Portraits was his favorite. He likes the way we’re all water—noses bobbing
on cheeks, eyes swimming with lashes, red lips on pale ponds. He don’t paint no more, lost the thirst for it the same way he sometimes misplaces neighbors' names or misses his way walking when the house hides itself in night and he wanders half way to oblivion before stumbling into the barn’s hard gray face. But he still remembers water, chins and ears.

“She’s a good girl,” he says to the river and the deputy. “It’s just sometimes that she’s unmindful. Sometimes, she’s given to bolt and run. Most days, she hugs that corner over there.” Then his finger is pointing to the television and its blue light puddling the floor, the shadows on the wall behind it. There’s dusty darkness there but no daughter. Of course he’s seen her. He’s sometimes forgetful, of course, but of course she was there just this morning. Just now and sometimes and maybe yesterday. She was there, just now, and now she’s not, and now there’s something rising deep down in the edges of his rib bones, something sand and silt. He has to build a dam to keep it from spilling out and splashing out all over the porch floor.

The deputy’s forgettable face looks like he’s wading into something half-remembered. “Are you saying the girl was here, in your house?” he says. “Are you sure you didn’t see Allie’s picture on the T.V. and misremember her for someone else?”

Of course he’s seen her picture. He knows her face, ought to well enough since he painted it so many times. She’s a good girl. He don’t know, of course, how all them news people got LaVerna’s picture. He sees her in this house. He sees her today and last month and sometimes. He sees her in the corner and in the kitchen and in the television. He sees her Wednesdays. But he ain’t seen her today.
The deputy is writing something down so he won’t forget it. Just now, the deputy’s forgetting mouth says, “Well sir, I sure do appreciate your time and information. I know all of us hope we find little Allie soon.” And just now the deputy’s feet are running down the porch steps, his goodbyes are flowing in the air, and his hand is waving from the cruiser’s window.

“Now, you can’t be going just yet,” he shouts from the doorway. “You have to find her. You know if that river took her she don’t have a chance!” It’s the way the river works around here, always keeping up its devilish trickling, growing the mountains then making them lose theirselves and wear down to knobs. That river erases all memories to the sky and turns them to rain which falls back into the river in streams of remembering and forgetting. It scrubs the paint off of canvases and garages and roofs.

“You can’t leave now!” Not now that LaVerna is with the river. Not now that the river has boats and chains.

Now that he is running toward the car, it glides from gravel to highway. Now he is flowing faster through the rain splattering his hair and seeping down his collar. There is something topping over the dam in his chest, something all slosh and torrent. A sinking feeling, just now.

LaVerna is with the river, he now knows. Now a little girl’s picture floating on the television. Now television and light splashing from it. Now she is gone, of course, the same way the tires roll down the road. The way his legs is slowing. The way stones hook his toes and knees hit ground, fingers grappling the air and the rocks and the mud.

Now he remembers he is only water with bits of color, light and
shadow floating on the surface. Now his face is washing its way down to his chest. Now he is slipping away from his current self and from the way and the way he was.
Past the sweat and stinging back, 
past daylight and all good sense, 
I lift the patina of fifty years, dirt 
and stain creviced into fine grooves 
with a piece of sandpaper folded 
so thin its grain disintegrates, 
this pine bed in need of a junkyard 
or repair. I like to think if I work 
hard enough, stay on task, 
the hatch marks of finished chores 
will let me sleep secure in the order 
of things, the outward sign of inward 
grace, the gristle of my better self.

This morning, fingers raw, I sit 
at the kitchen table, toast and coffee 
staring accusingly: unmopped floor, 
dirty dishes, unsightly mess of dust 
and tools in the garage - no hatch 
marks. Nothing done. Despite 
my best efforts, I came up short.
Maybe if I’d slathered filler in routed spindles, slapped paint over bolts holding the bed together, I’d not be held captive by such tedium.

I’d made my choice, looked at plastic laminates boasting easy assembly, measured the value of solid wood, its craft a long time in the learning, and promised to honor handwork that lasts a lifetime. This heirloom that will bear my body, its spindles the last thing I see at night, first in the morning light will say more about me than all the hatch marks on all the lists I make. I take a drink of cooling coffee, ignore the dishes languishing in the sink, and go to work.
SOUP BONES
Robyn Hunt

1.
Today we are mad for her basting the turkey.
We paint her with gravy, sculpt her with potatoes.
Coastal redwood trees bend out of doors.
Her ghost stares into the kitchen, mouthing recipes from memory,
dancing on the deck in a red feather boa.
She licks every finger clean with the truth that caught up to her after chemo gristle and coma.
The afternoon countertop is layered in Crisco, sticky flour and cinnamon fingerprints, crispy bites from the pie crust still browning. We lean into the heat. The room takes on steam. All our unspoken solos simmer on the stovetop. Meals resurrect and displace her; easier to stare into the batter, cover our hungry, hollow. We will put the leftover bones to good use.

2.
One sister paints her from memory. Hands in the paint, dressing in the drain. Catalogues the recipes, will bolt them to each limb. One pentimento
canvas
after another;
the maternal body
as tree bark and
ribbons of broth.
Dumpling moon rises,
edible family addiction;
dimples before thinning
whisked into soup and
shushed into night burl.
Her weathered feet wither
and rest under the kitchen
table. Silent ferns folding
back onto themselves
on the forest floor.

3.
We eat her body whole,
lick the bones clean
with salt lick tears,
pour her ashes into
a honeycomb jar.
for my cousin, Danielle

I’m pouring a pint. Outside, the night’s
a cool glass of black. I drink to the morning
and suddenly it’s as if I’m your mother, cradling
a baby in smoke at McDonough’s. I ash
my strag, see there’s no baby; I’m clutching
my chest for breath. The casket’s small

and closed and cheap. Off that thin lacquer,
my father, at three, glints back at me: a tiny collar,
starched and white, rests around his neck.
Shoes flap with holes and shine with spit.
He lights four candles, watches the wax
wind down then clot mid-stick: one wick

for each brother and sister gone dark.
In his knickers I kneel before their small
mouths of flame. Their flickering kindles
a different light: the fluorescence at my birth,
the doctor having pronounced me dead
before I coughed at last in my father’s arms,
the weight of gristle spit into a napkin. 
Now here, in the false light of the hospital, 
I name the echoes of your twins, one kicking 
my insides with news of the other, limp and still, 
a pocket of silence beneath this gel. I sit 
in your gown on loud paper and close my eyes.

In my kitchen I open them, head heavy, chest 
slumped on the table, legs and feet tingling 
with the nettles of sleep. Bolted to my chair 
in the heelcap of morning, I pour more 
in my glass, wait for the settling, wait for it to come 
to a head, little pockets of air gasping at the lip.
WOLFENOOT FEAST
Chris Roberts
“I’m Peter Venkman,” Shawn said, standing at his front door.

Shawn wore a tan jumpsuit with a belt that had all sorts of junk hanging from it. Tubes and wires on the belt stretched to a cardboard box strapped to his back. The box was covered in tin foil and it had an old television antenna taped to the side of it, along with some knobs and circuitry that looked like they’d been ripped off an old radio. He clutched a large water gun in his hands. To top off the ensemble, Shawn had a piece of masking tape across his chest with red capital letters that said: VENKMAN.

“This is Shawn,” Jeff said, introducing me to him.

Shawn said, “I’m Peter Venkman.” He glared at Jeff.

With Shawn already angry, my chance for a decent first impression was in tatters.

Jeff sighed, reintroducing Shawn as Peter Venkman.

Jeff lived three doors down from my house, and we had grown up the way weeds do—fast and furious and tangled together,
spending most days side-by-side. We were ten years old, but it felt like we had been friends for centuries.

Jeff had no patience for fools. He had a quick tongue and normally would have said something like, “Shawn, stop being an idiot.” But he had one goal in mind, and going along with Shawn’s bizarre antics was the best way to get it done.

Shawn’s chipmunk cheeks filled with air as he smiled, and he grabbed a gadget off his belt. It was an old egg-beater. He turned the handle, making the whisks spin. Then he said, “Hold out your arms. I’m getting some pretty strong P.K.E. readings.”

I might have dressed as a Ghostbuster two years earlier, but now it seemed ridiculous. I looked awkwardly to Jeff and then at Shawn and then back to Jeff. I didn’t have a clue what was going on, but Jeff followed Shawn’s orders so I followed Jeff’s lead. It was apparent we wouldn’t be allowed in Shawn’s house until we followed his directions. I nodded in agreement and positioned my arms liked he wanted.

“Your P.K.E. readings are off the charts,” Shawn said as he moved the egg-beater and its spinning whisks over and under and around our bodies. “Did you guys walk through a gamma field or get possessed by a spirit on your way over here?”

“P.K. what?” Jeff said stifling a laugh, arms still outstretched. We couldn’t laugh at Shawn or our plan was over. We had to laugh along with him.

Shawn touched Jeff’s shoulders with some other contraption and he did the same to me. Then he gave us the thumbs up, turned, and ran into the bungalow, down a hallway and out of sight.

Jeff had informed me of Shawn’s peculiarities—of his cheeks,
of his oddly spaced eyes. He told me Shawn was a nutjob. But he also told me Shawn had virtually no concept of the value of his massive toy collection. I had brought a backpack full of toys to trade. Now, I was uneasy about visiting Shawn’s house, I was uneasy about Jeff’s claims of Shawn’s naiveté, and I was uneasy about the kid who thought he was a Ghostbuster. I already wanted to go home, but deep down I trusted Jeff, and the possibilities of Shawn’s toys were too enticing.

We stepped inside, kicking off our shoes, and made our way down the hallway, padding down the thick green carpet, through the musty air, following after Shawn. We found him stopped at a closed door with a wild look in his eyes. He turned to us, putting a solitary index finger to his lips.

“Shhh,” he whispered. “This is my big brother Kent’s room. He’s nineteen. He owns a car. He’ll kill us if he finds out we’re even standing outside his door.”

I could tell Jeff was getting irritated.

“Then why are we standing outside his door?” Jeff whispered.

The wild look in Shawn’s eyes intensified.

“Because he’s having sex in there.” Shawn pointed at the door, grinning. “He’s having sex with Cynthia.”

My eyes widened. Panic gripped me. I had never been near sex before, let alone anyone who participated in it. I wasn’t entirely sure what sex was, but I knew it involved women and I had my suspicions it was dangerous. Curious to say the least—but more terrified than anything—I sat silently in the hallway, tightly gripping the straps of my backpack.

Shawn cupped his ear to the door. He spent a long time
listening to the sex going on behind it. I mean a really long time. Probably five minutes. Jeff was clearly getting antsy but I remained stock-still, not wanting to make the noise that interrupted Kent’s sex, alerting him to our presence.

Shawn pulled out his egg-beaters and spun them two or three times. Then he said, with a twinge of disappointment, “Aww, come on you guys. It looks like Kent’s not having sex with Cynthia today.”

“Then who’s he having sex with?” Jeff said.

“Nobody’s having sex today,” Shawn said.

“Nobody?”

“Nope. Kent’s not even in his room. I don’t know where he is.”

“Then why did you listen at the door for so long?”

Jeff’s eye twitched. His lips pursed. His brow furrowed. It was unclear if it was because he had missed out on Kent and Cynthia’s sex or if he was mad at Shawn.

Shawn replied, “I thought I heard some ghosts in there, but it’s probably Kent’s humidifier. He’s a coughing asthmatic.”

“That’s good to know,” I said, tightening my grip on my backpack. I was frightened equally by sex and ghosts.

“I should throw some ghost-traps in there, but the last time I did Kent yelled at me and broke all my stuff.”

Shawn took some more P.K.E. readings before leading us to his room. It was a chaotic mess and everything was everywhere—clothes, toys, blankets, couch cushions, and a whole lot of junk strewn about. A half-eaten bacon sandwich, gristle and everything, was mashed into the carpet. Sweat wafted in the air, pungent and sour and soiled and sweet.
Shawn flopped onto the floor and wiggled on his stomach underneath a rudimentary fort made from a few chairs draped with a bed sheet. He pulled a very full and lumpy looking pillowcase from inside the depths of his fortress, emptying it on the carpet.

Hundreds of action figures spilled from the sack.

Jeff was no liar. That filthy pillow case housed a small fortune. Shawn had the most complete collection I had ever seen—Star Wars, Transformers, G.I. Joes. He had figures that couldn’t be found in stores but had to be specially ordered through the mail using points from the backs of the toy boxes. He had Boba Fett. The bounty-hunter was the crown jewel of toys, worshipped in hushed tones on playgrounds. I would have gladly traded my entire backpack for Boba Fett.

“These are my men,” Shawn said.

“I see,” I said, appraising the treasure before me, trying to hold back my excitement.

Shawn picked up two Transformers—Optimus Prime and Megatron—and started bashing and slamming them together. I couldn’t believe he would risk breaking such priceless collectibles. It turned out he was playing with them. As Shawn continued banging and crashing his toys, Jeff and I perused the selection.

Jeff took the lead. “So how about a trade, Shawn?”

“You mean Venkman,” said Shawn.

He abruptly stopped what he was doing, snatched his pillow case from the floor, and swept all his toys back into a heap, leaving the room without a word.

My heart sank. Jeff had offended him. I thought all was lost, but Shawn bounded back into the room and said, “Are you coming?”
“Coming where?” Jeff asked.
“To the house next door.”
“Why would we go over there? We’re trading toys. What’s over there?”
“It’s full of demons and hell. Sometimes I go there and trap ghosts.”

Jeff tried again, “Why would we want to go to where demons and hell live? Shawn, I thought we were going to trade toys?”

“My name is Peter Venkman!” Shawn said. “I can’t trade anything to anybody until I sweep that house clean of ghosts. It’s not safe here.”

“Are you kidding me?” Jeff said.

Jeff’s jaw clenched, the muscles in his cheeks twitching. Our plan was falling apart. First it was Shawn, then it was sex, and now it was ghosts.

Shawn rummaged through his closet, pulling out six shoeboxes with a few feet of string attached to them.

“Ghost traps,” he said, throwing them on the floor. “Attach them to your utility belts.”

I said, “We don’t have utility belts,” but Shawn was already halfway down the hallway.

Jeff said, “Let’s just go home. I told you he was a freak.”

I reminded him, “If we follow, maybe we get something. If we leave, we get nothing.”

Shawn’s absurdity was infuriating, Kent’s specter was threatening, and ghosts were downright terrifying, but Boba Fett was worth the trouble.

Jeff rolled his eyes and gave in. “Fine.”
I put down my backpack, picked up some shoe boxes, and followed after Shawn. Jeff followed me.

The house next door was a large white two-story with a FOR SALE sign on the front lawn. The sign had a picture of a woman with big hair and an incredible amount of make-up. It said: “Karen Komba: Realty Specialist.” It all looked pretty normal—definitely not paranormal. The lawn was even freshly mowed.

Shawn marched in his jumpsuit around to the back gate. It was high and wooden and painted white like the house. Birds chirped as he pulled out his egg-beaters, spinning them a few times.

What he did next startled me: he unlatched the gate, snatched one of the shoe boxes from my hands, and tossed it deep into the backyard, screaming, “Don’t look directly into the trap!”

The box sailed through the air, landing in a lilac bush at the side of the house. Birds scattered. All the while Shawn held onto the string.

He screamed, “I’m closing the trap!”

Shawn bolted into the backyard, gathering the string as he approached, seizing the shoebox, holding it above his head. His cheeks puffed up and a smile beamed across his face.

“We’ve got a live one here,” he said.

I shut the gate quietly, not wanting to draw any more attention to Shawn’s commotion.

“What’s a live one?” I said.

“A ghost,” Shawn said.

“I didn’t see a ghost,” Jeff said. “I saw a lilac bush and some birds.”

“Trust me. I know what I’m doing. It was a full-torso
apparition.”

I had no idea what that meant. I hoped Shawn hadn’t caught a ghost. I shuddered, knowing I needed to keep it together.

“Can we see it?” Jeff asked.

“No. I can’t risk opening the trap. I would have to catch the ghost again. It’s safer this way.”

Shawn attached the shoebox to his belt and walked around behind the house. We followed him to the back door. The door’s window had been smashed with a stick or a rock or something, because it was broken right above the doorknob. Shawn reached his hand through the damaged window, taking great pains not to cut himself on the jagged glass. It was clear he had done it before. The knob wiggled a few times as he tried to get it open. It clicked. Jeff and I huddled behind Shawn, holding our shoeboxes.

It’s strange, but Shawn had gained some serious credibility in my eyes. He had broken into a house, and it didn’t faze him one bit. Shawn was no longer an awkward kid dressed in a Ghostbusters costume; he was now a criminal in a Ghostbusters costume, and I was in awe.

The back door creaked open into an empty kitchen and a thin film of dust covered the place. The electric hum of old appliances hung thick in the air. Slivers of light crept through cracks in the drawn blinds.

I ran my finger over the kitchen table and watched as it collected gray, globby powder. Shawn grabbed my arm.

“Don’t ever do that,” he said. “You need to be more careful.”

He took a cotton swab out of a pocket and took a sample off my finger; he placed the dust between two pieces of clear tape, and
pulled out his egg beaters and spun them around in the air for a few seconds.

“Seriously,” he said. “You almost got us all killed.”

“Killed?” Jeff said. “How?”

I could feel Jeff’s growing impatience.

Shawn ignored Jeff and announced, “There’s some serious paranormal activity in here. Ready the ghost traps.”

Jeff and I exchanged glances. The stillness and emptiness were unsettling—my heartbeat echoed in my eardrums—and my mind wandered towards whether the house actually had ghosts. I handed Shawn a shoebox.

“This fridge is making strange sounds,” Shawn said. The fridge purred loudly, almost rattling. It could have been a ghost. For better or worse, Shawn seemed prepared.

Jeff said, “That’s its motor running, Shawn.”

Jeff emphasized Shawn’s name. I could sense in his voice that he had given up on getting any toys.

“I’m Peter Venkman!” Shawn snapped. “You don’t know anything! It’s a ghost!”

Shawn shimmied toward the refrigerator. With one hand on the fridge and one on a shoebox, he took a deep breath and steadied himself. He opened the fridge—the interior light clicked on—and he hurled the shoebox inside, slamming the door shut.

I followed Shawn as he did the same to the oven, dishwasher, and kitchen cupboards.

I wasn’t sure if Shawn had trapped ghosts, but he was convincing.

“Stop wasting our time,” Jeff said, making his way to the door.
“Let’s get out of here.”

Jeff had lost hope. I hadn’t.

Shawn was collecting his shoeboxes when a noise rang out from upstairs.

It reverberated through the ceiling.

There was a thump and a bump and another thump, and the sounds repeated themselves rhythmically. A gentle murmuring—like children giggling—accompanied the noise.

Jeff and I stood like wax statues, listening as the noises continued, but Shawn was already slinking to the darkened staircase at the far side of the kitchen. Shawn’s Ghostbusters regalia was no longer ridiculous. It seemed sensible. Necessary even.

The noises rang out again, echoing from upstairs, as if a wounded animal was moaning out its last breaths.

Shawn kept going.

A shudder ran up and down my spine and throughout my extremities. My heart pounded through the backs of my eyes. I can’t speak for Jeff, but his eyes were wide open and he was holding his breath. Instead of leaving, he followed Shawn too.

Shawn had been right about the ghosts. He was a strange fellow to be sure, but he had clearly done this all before. Shawn had guts—ten-year-olds, like Jeff and I, admired and followed guts. As I tiptoed behind Shawn, I wished I had guts.

The barren walls of the darkened stairway only intensified the sounds. The stairs squeaked with each step as we followed single-file behind Shawn.

The racket continued—thumping and bumping.

At the top of the stairs, a long hallway sprawled with open
doorways down both sides. A solitary closed door consumed the end of the hall, and a dim light danced as shadows flickered underneath the crack at the bottom. One thing was certain: the moans and wails and groans came from behind that door.

Undaunted, Shawn tiptoed down the hallway, pulling his egg-beaters from his belt, spinning them as he approached. He put his finger to his mouth and whispered, “I need a ghost trap.”

Jeff obeyed, passing him one of the boxes.

A guttural moan sounded from behind the door, followed by some thumping and bumping and another moan. I felt an urgent and intense need to run, but I trusted Shawn.

Shawn reassured me. “I’ve been preparing for this moment my entire life.”

Raucous “Oooos” and “Ahhhs” continued from behind the door.

With a series of deft movements resembling ballet, Shawn opened the door, hurled the cardboard box inside, and ducked for cover.

He screamed, “Don’t look directly into the trap!”

I didn’t listen.

In the middle of the room on a mattress on the floor was a ghost. It looked like the ghosts from books and television, like a white floating sheet. It shifted back and forth on the floor then stopped, turning toward us.

I don’t know what I expected. Maybe a light show of some sort as the ghost was swallowed by the trap. Maybe our souls being sucked into eternity as the ghost consumed our life-forces. Whatever it was, it sure wasn’t scrambling and shuffling and
cursing before some sweaty guy pulled a bed sheet off his face, yelling, “Fuck! My eye! Jesus!”

It was Kent. It was Kent and Cynthia, and this time they were having sex. Correction, they had been having sex until Shawn hit Kent in the eye with the corner of a shoebox.

Kent stood up, stark-naked, rubbing his eye, squinting like a maniac. He had hair all over his body. Cynthia screamed bloody murder and scrambled to cover her lady parts with the bed sheet. I saw quite a bit before she managed to cover up. Her soft curves looked like something from another world I knew nothing about, and I couldn’t stop staring.

Kent soon regained his composure and said something like, “You little fuckers are dead!”

He leapt toward Jeff and me as we stared. We stood there paralyzed by the initial fear of a ghost, surprised by the two people wrestling under a sheet on the floor, entranced by Cynthia.

Kent slammed us into a wall. He was all sweaty and gross and could barely breathe he was so frenzied. I squirmed away so I wouldn’t get touched by his penis. It should have been flopping around all over the place, but it was pointing at us, which was alarming. Kent’s right eye was pink and watery.

I was more afraid of Kent in that moment than I’d ever been afraid of the possibility of a ghost, or anything for that matter. I was frightened beyond understanding.

I started blubberyng, begging for my life. Jeff did too.

But Shawn saved us. Kent caught a glimpse of Shawn in his Ghostbusters gear at the end of the hall, still holding onto the string from his ghost trap. He dropped us in a heap and took off after his
brother.

But before Kent grabbed Shawn, as Shawn went careening down the stairs, Kent slammed into someone else. A lady in a blue business suit and matching skirt stumbled back, regaining her balance in the stairway. She had a name tag that read: “Karen Komba: Realty Specialist.” It was the lady from the FOR SALE sign on the lawn, and her hair was enormous. Behind her, two nervous looking twenty-somethings stared down the hallway toward us in utter amazement.

It was a strange picture to be sure. There was Shawn, decked out in his Ghostbusters costume. There was Kent, naked as the day he was born, trying to cover himself. Jeff and I lay crumpled on the floor with a pile of shoeboxes and string. And then there was the beautiful Cynthia, wrapped in a sheet, poking her head out of the doorway at the end of the hall.

Kent and Cynthia got it the worst. They talked to Karen Komba for a long time, explaining why she shouldn’t have them arrested. Somehow Jeff and I got off unscathed. We crept away during the pandemonium and spent the next weeks dreading calls from Karen Komba or Shawn’s parents or the police. I hid under my bed every time the phone rang, but nothing ever happened.

If that wasn’t enough, Jeff and I still had to walk by Shawn’s house and the white two-story on our way to the confectionary. If we wanted candy—and we did—we had to relive the nightmare. We never talked about it, but we sped up when we saw those houses.

We heard Shawn got grounded, which was fine by me. I didn’t want to see him anyway. He had been wrong about the ghosts, but
his bravery was intimidating. I never saw any of the toys I took over to Shawn’s house again. They were never returned, and I didn’t have the guts to go back and claim them.

I didn’t want to see the white two-story either. There may not have been any ghosts in it, but that didn’t mean they didn’t exist. The house sat on the corner, empty and menacing, and we kept our distance.

It took a few years to sell.
HANDS
Linda Kennedy

for my grandmother, Mary Emma Fisher Leazer, 1896-1985

She measures nothing but the flour, eyes the rest – a splosh, a scoop, a sprinkle. She leans over the kitchen table, her hands knead the dough then grip the knobbed handles, push the seasoned cylinder. The loose gold and diamond bands clink between bolt-like joints, glister through flour motes, solemnize this ritual.

In three quick passes she finishes the crust. Her hands testify to a lifetime of chores, hands intimate with a washing board, hoe and spade, a newborn’s death, hands stretching clothes for seven through the Depression on a foot-pedal Singer while he sold cars, or worked a lumber mill, or for ten years lived and drilled water wells in a neighboring state. Deft hands knitted tears
from a gold star hung in a window, wove them into comfort for others, loving hands in spite of treason, hands that held bibles, underlined the bread of life, made notes, kept a diary in the margins, tucked scraps of her life between pages, pages worn from thumbing.

Those hands had created hundreds of pies at my age. Mine? No more than twenty. I study the memory of her wielding the rolling pin, seek her rhythm.

Our fingers interlock. Together we press hard into this flesh, flatten familial pains, press out the gristle of regret.
Elizabeth Austin is a poet, photographer, and visual artist. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Her work has appeared in the Schuylkill Valley Journal, See Spot Run, Foliate Oak, Driftwood Press, and Anti-Heroin Chic. She currently lives in Newtown, Pennsylvania with her two children.

KB Ballentine’s fifth collection, Almost Everything, Almost Nothing, was published in 2017 by Middle Creek Publishing. Published in Crab Orchard Review and Haight-Ashbury Literary Journal, among others, her work also appears in anthologies, including In Plein Air (2017) and Carrying the Branch: Poets in Search of Peace (2017).

Maureen Brady is the author of four novels, including Getaway, Ginger’s Fire, and Folly, as well as a collection of short stories, The Question She Put to Herself. She is currently at work on a new collection of short stories, several of which have been published in literary journals or anthologies.
Randall Brown is the author of the award-winning collection Mad to Live. His essay on (very) short fiction appears in The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Writing Flash Fiction, and he appears in the 2015 and 2017 Best Small Fictions, The Norton Anthology New Micro: Exceptionally Short Fiction, and The Norton Anthology of Hint Fiction. He founded and directs FlashFiction.Net and has been published and anthologized widely, both online and in print. He is also the founder and managing editor of Matter Press and its Journal of Compressed Creative Arts. He received his MFA in Fiction from Vermont College. His novella and prose poetry collection were published in 2018.

Jessica Renee Dawson lives on Vancouver Island in British Columbia and has studied poetry and English writing through North Island College. Her poetry has appeared in Rutger Hauer’s Soap Box Poets, Poetry Quarterly, INK IN THIRDS, Haiku Journal, and Wild Plum, a haiku journal. Presently, J.R. has been studying poetry under award-winning American poet Lynne Knight and Comox Valley Poet Laureate Natalie Nickerson. She finds the island a natural setting of inspiration for writing poetry, painting, and photography.

Katherine Fallon received her MFA from Sarah Lawrence College and is currently a Lecturer in the Department of Writing & Linguistics at Georgia Southern University. Her work has appeared in Oxidant Engine, Birds Piled Loosely, Snake Nation Review, Cleaver, and more. Her chapbook, The Toothmakers’ Daughters, is available through Finishing Line Press.
Robyn Hunt once ran printing presses and owned a small bookstore in the San Francisco Bay area. Today she lives with her husband in her native New Mexico, writing grants for a local non-profit. Her debut collection of poems, *The Shape of Caught Water*, published in 2013, is available through Red Mountain Press.

Christian Anton Gerard is the author of *Holdfast* (C&R Press, 2017) and *Wilmot Here, Collect for Stella* (WordTech Press, 2014). He’s received Pushcart Prize nominations and Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference scholarships. Gerard is an Assistant Professor of English, Rhetoric and Writing at the University of Arkansas-Fort Smith.

Monique Gagnon German has had poetry and fiction published in over thirty journals and anthologies, including *Rosebud, California Quarterly, Tampa Review, Off the Coast*, and *The Wayfarer*. Her flash fiction and short stories have been featured in *Kalliope, A Journal of Women’s Literature & Art, The MacGuffin*, and *Adelaide Literary Review*. In 2017, she was nominated for a Pushcart Prize for poetry.

Brad Gibault lives and works in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. He busies himself with his wonderful wife, his two daughters, reading, writing, soccer, skateboarding, and puttering in the garden. He teaches high school Philosophy, History, and English.
Anna Graziosi is a designer living and working in New York. She is a visual artist and poet whose work has been described as “dreamlike” and “surreal.” Her artwork has been featured in Vine Leaves Literary Journal, Ube Zine, Cassette Zine, and she was a frequent contributor to the student-run art and literature magazine at her college, Art & Scope Magazine. Her work has also been displayed at The New Bohemian Gallery, the In-Sight Photography Project, and the Vermont Center for Photography.

MEH is Matthew E. Henry, a Pushcart-nominated poet with works appearing or forthcoming in various publications, including Kweli Journal, Longleaf Review, Poetry East, One Sentence Poetry, Relief Journal, Rhino, and Spillway. MEH is an educator who received his MFA from Seattle Pacific University, yet continued to spend money he didn’t have pursuing a MA in theology and a PhD in education.

A.M. Kennedy is a writer, storyteller, and painter from Tampa, Florida. She has been previously published in Popshot and Burningword.

Linda Kennedy is now a musician and choir director working in the Richmond, Virginia metropolitan area. She and several others received the Lesli Shiel Scholarship for Creative Writing in 2015 from the Visual Arts Center of Richmond. Her poems have been honored by The Poetry Society of Virginia and been published in print and online publications, including Nonbinary Review, Cahoodaloodaling, and Parody Poetry Journal.
Carla Kirchner is a poet, fiction writer, and English professor who lives in the Missouri Ozarks. Her poetry chapbook, *The Physics of Love*, won the 2016 Concrete Wolf Press Chapbook Contest. Her poetry has received Best of the Net and Pushcart nominations, and her work has appeared in such places as *Literary Orphans*, *Rappahannock Review*, and *Unbroken Journal*. She is currently at work on a collection of Civil War fairy tales.

Phyllis Klein writes, lives, and works in the San Francisco Bay Area. Her work has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, including *Silver Birch Press*, *Crosswinds Poetry Journal*, *Chiron Review*, *Portside*, and *Sweet, a Literary Confection*. She believes in artistic dialogue as an intimate relationship-building process that fosters healing on many levels. And the healing power of anything as beautiful as poetry.

Shara Kronmal is a Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist in Chicago. As a photographer, she likes to find the beauty under the grime.

Kathryn Kulpa has published short and flash fiction in earlier issues of 3Elements Review and in *Monkeybicycle*, *Longleaf Review*, and *Smokelong Quarterly*.

Angela Lim is a senior Neuroscience and English student at the University of Notre Dame. Her poetry has been published in Notre Dame’s undergraduate literary and art magazine, *The Juggler*. 
Jennie MacDonald is a prizewinning writer and photographer whose photos “Cat’s Cradle” and “In a Scrape” have been previously featured in 3Elements Review. Her plays “The Hall of Mirrors: Not Another Word” and “The St. Nicholas Caper” received second and first place, respectively, in the Marion Thauer Brown 2018 and 2017 Audio Drama Scriptwriting Competition. Other publications include short stories as well as academic articles concerning 18th and 19th century Gothic literature, theatre, and visual and material culture.

Dan Murphy teaches creative writing and literature at Emmanuel College and Boston University. His poems have appeared in Sugar House Review, Panhandler Magazine, The Adirondack Review, and 3Elements Review, among others.

Janet Reed is guest editor of I-70 Review, author of Blue Exhaust (FLP, 2019), and a Pushcart Prize nominee. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Sow’s Ear Review, The Nassau Review, Tipton Poetry Journal, and others. She began writing knock-off Nancy Drew stories on wide-lined notebook paper at age 11 and now teaches writing and literature for Crowder College in Missouri.

Chris Roberts is Dead Clown Art. He is a full-time freelance artist, using mixed media and found objects to create his visual nonsense. Chris has made art for Another Sky Press, Kelp Queen Press, PS Publishing, and ChiZine Publications, as well as for authors Will Elliott, Andy Duncan, Tobias Seamon, Shimon Adaf, Seb Doubinsky, Ray Bradbury, Kaaron Warren, Ellen Klages, Claire North, and Helen Marshall. He was nominated for a 2013 World Fantasy Award in the Artist category.
Riley Roberts is a writer and speechwriter who has spent the past decade in national politics. His work on behalf of clients has appeared in books, magazines, professional journals, and outlets from The New York Times to The Washington Post, and he has written under his own byline for publications such as Politico Magazine and The Huffington Post.

Julia Rocchi holds an MA in Writing (Fiction) from Johns Hopkins University. Most recently, she won the Saturday Evening Post’s 2018 Great American Fiction Contest and was a semi-finalist for Ruminate Magazine’s 2018 William Van Dyke Short Story Prize. Her work has also appeared or is forthcoming in Mulberry Fork Review, Bourbon Penn, Ekphrastic Review, and others.

Buku Sarkar is a writer and photographer who has grown up and lived between Calcutta and New York. Her writing has appeared in N+1, Threepenny Review, Huffington Post, Conde Naste Traveller, and Mint Lounge, and her photographs have appeared in The New York Times and Documentum (a new journal edited by Stephen Shore). She completed her MA in Creative Writing from The University of East Anglia, UK where her dissertation story was shortlisted for the Curtis Brown award.

D.R. Shipp is a native of Texas who now splits his time between the US and the UK. He is an observer finally surfacing for air, a writer surfacing. His work has appeared in select anthologies and is enjoyed by a wide online following. Additional pieces are pending publication in HCE Review, Cathexis Northwest, Waxing & Waning, and Silver Needle Press.
Terry Spohn received an MFA in fiction writing from the Writers Workshop at the University of Iowa. His short stories, prose poems, and poetry have appeared in RATTLE, Serving House Journal, Gold Man Review, The Sow’s Ear Poetry Review, The North American Review, Mississippi Review, Ascent, Grub Street, Up the Staircase, San Pedro River Review, and other nice places, including a number of anthologies. He lives in Escondido, California.

David Allen Sullivan has written several books, including Strong-Armed Angels, Every Seed of the Pomegranate, Black Ice, and Bombs Have Not Breakfasted Yet, a book of co-translation with Abbas Kadhim from the Arabic of Iraqi Adnan Al-Sayegh. He won the Mary Ballard Chapbook poetry prize for Take Wing, and his book of poems about the year he spent as a Fulbright lecturer in China, Seed Shell Ash, is forthcoming from Salmon Press. He teaches at Cabrillo College, where he edits the Porter Gulch Review with his students, and lives in Santa Cruz with his family.
Submission due dates are October 31, January 31, April 30, and July 31, for issues forthcoming January 1, April 1, July 1, and October 1, respectively, unless otherwise noted on our website.

There is no minimum word count, but please keep your fiction and nonfiction submissions under 3,500 words. Poems must be under two typed pages.

It is equally important that all three elements given for the specific submission period be included within your story or poem. Artists and photographers are only required to represent one out of the three elements.

For multiple submissions, fiction is capped at no more than two stories per submission period. Poems are limited to five per submission period. In the event your material is accepted in another publication, we request that you withdraw your submission from 3Elements Review should you decide to publish your piece elsewhere.
Mikaela Shea received her MFA in Fiction Writing from Columbia College Chicago. She was a writer-in-residence at Ragdale Foundation and has published stories in *Midwestern Gothic, Copperfield Review, Chicago Literati, Hypertext Magazine*, and others. Mikaela won the Editor's Choice Award for Fiction at *Waypoints Magazine* and *Superstition Review’s* First Page Contest. Mikaela is currently looking for a home for her novel and lives in Des Moines, Iowa with her husband and three kids. @mikelaashea.

Megan Collins received an MFA in Creative Writing from Boston University. She currently teaches creative writing at the Greater Hartford Academy of the Arts. A Pushcart Prize and two-time Best of the Net nominee, her work has appeared in many journals, including *Compose, Linebreak, Off the Coast, Spillway,* and *Rattle*. Her debut novel, *The Winter Sister*, will be published in February 2019 by Atria/Simon & Schuster. Check out Megan’s work on her website, megan-collins.com.

Katherine Ann Davis's work has been published by *Passages North, Nat. Brut, The Pinch, Gigantic Sequins, Sycamore Review*, and other journals. She has an MFA in fiction from the University of Maryland and a PhD from the University of Tennessee. Recently, she completed her first novel and is now revising a collection of short stories. A small flock of cockatiels lives with her in Wisconsin. For more about her work and background, please visit: KatherineAnnDavis.com.
Sarah Wylder Deshpande has published fiction and poetry in *The Dunes Review*, *Tammy Journal*, *3Elements Review*, *Gravel Magazine*, and *Fire Tetrahedron*. She holds an MFA from the University of Maryland. She lives in Oregon with her husband, son, and border collie.

Jane Andrews has a BA in Creative Writing and a minor in Attic Greek from NC State University. Andrews teaches writing and poetry courses through Duke Continuing Education, and is currently Head Writing Coach at Central Carolina Community College. She is Nonfiction Editor at *The Main Street Rag* and *Glint Literary Journal*. In January of 2017, Andrews joined the editorial staff of *3Elements Literary Review*. She has earned awards in memoir, personal essay and poetry. Andrews’ fiction, essays, memoir and poetry have appeared in *Prime Number Magazine*, *Lunch Ticket*, *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, *Verdad Magazine*, *Kindred*, *The News and Observer*, and other publications. She is a past board member of Carolina Wren Press and the NC Poetry Society. Andrews is a freelance writing instructor, workshop facilitator, and book editor. Jane Andrews lives in Raleigh, North Carolina with her husband, four cats, a dog, and a special needs turtle named Jim. Her adult children live nearby. She enjoys striking up conversations with strangers and watching British mysteries.
Lisa Buckton grew up along the Hudson River and holds an MFA in Writing from the Vermont College of Fine Arts. Her work has most recently appeared in *Grist*, has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and received an honorable mention in the 2018 AWP Intro Journals Project. She currently lives in Vermont, where she works as a librarian.

Sionnain Buckley is a writer and visual artist based in Boston. Her fiction has appeared in or is forthcoming from *Foglifter, Wigleaf, New South, The Account,* and *Crab Fat Magazine.* Her other writing has been published by *Chronogram, Catalyst Wedding Co.,* and *Sublet Press.* She has painted murals in businesses and private residences across the country, from Oregon to Maine. When Sionnain isn’t making up strange stories, she is consuming queer media and popcorn in equal measure.

Katy Hershberger holds an MFA in Nonfiction Writing from The New School, and her work has appeared in *Catapult, TinHouse.com, The Rumpus, Bustle, The Los Angeles Review of Books,* and elsewhere. She lives in New York with her husband and their dog, Gary.

Marlon Fowler is a full-time web developer for a Fortune 100 company, while also working on *3Elements Literary Review* on the side. Marlon received his bachelor’s degree in journalism with a major in advertising from Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. Marlon enjoys all things technology, making websites “do things,” running, reading, and good movies & TV shows. He currently lives in Des Moines, IA with his wife and three children.
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