

KS

RUMBLE FISH QUARTERLY
SUMMER 2019

FICTION

Jory Post

HUNT AND GATHER - Twice a day Marshall walks up and down Soquel Drive. A brisk four-mile-per-hour pace. Crossing once at 41st Avenue. Again at Dominican Hospital. Hasn't moved outside this rectangle in 40-some years. 5

Richard Risemberg

THE ANT HOUSE - It used to be that, when ants came in the house, I would sweep, wipe, poison, and wash till they were all gone. 20

Michael Schmidt

GNATS - Birdie doesn't talk anymore, but Roscoe can still hear her. After fifty years together her voice finds him, escaping through the cracks of her fiberglass box and traveling up those feet of dirt and over the soil horizon 29

Diana Valenzuela

PARTING OF THE WAYS - Gone were the Barbie Jeeps and the purple bicycle with shimmering pink streamers on the handles. Gone were the baby animal screams of Zerena and her next-door best friends 46

POETRY

Eric Grabowski

w. Concord St. blues, 17

Disha Trivedi

learning to pray: 18

KG Newman

The Bear With An Asterisk 27

Anthony Immergluck

Suicidal in Paradise 28

Dorsía Smith Silva

Lost in Translation 42

Ana Cottle

Houseplants 45

ARTWORK

KJ Williams

Sleepless Night	COVER
Abstract Mountains	5
Stormy Seas	9
Diamond Dogs Cover	16
The Owl	19
Abstract Feelings	20
Untitled Landscape	23
Going Home	25
The Face	26
Birth Visions	29
Acacia Sunset	33
Bouquet	38
Pastel Flower	43
Self Portrait	44
Abstract 5	46
Abstract Garden	49
Portal	54
Kurt	59



Hunt and Gather

Jory Post

Twice a day Marshall walks up and down Soquel Drive. A brisk four-mile-per-hour pace. Crossing once at 41st Avenue. Again at Dominican Hospital. Hasn't moved outside this rectangle in 40-some years. Backpack strapped over fly-fishing jacket. Treasures inside zipped pockets. Swiss Army Knife. Condom Wanda gave him. He heads toward 41st. The afternoon walk. Set a record on the morning walk—37.5 minutes.

In front of Silver Spur. The squeal of tires. Splash of metal on metal. Hears artillery shells and hides under his hands. Remembers blood-spurting arteries. Knows it's a motorcycle. Ignores it. Already started the walk. Removes his belt and tosses toward the gathering crowd. Tourniquet always helps.

"Marshall!" He turns, sees Jorge, Silver Spur's cook, hanging out the restaurant door.

"Call 911!" Marshall yells back. Jorge gives him a thumbs up.

Sirens whine down the street. He runs toward Rodeo Gulch bridge.

At 41st, he punches the button. Ignores the red light. Crosses before it changes. Flashing hand pulses red. Raises his hand and salutes. "Yes, sir. I understand. Can't help it today. Call my attorney." Turns up Soquel Drive. Repeats the process at all six lights. Reaches the hospital a mile down the road. Crossing here requires more caution. Too much traffic. He obeys the light to get over to Steve's Union. No time for Mountain Dew today. Checks the watch. Picks up his pace. Running as he reaches the Flea Market sign.

Jogs up the back porch of Silver Spur. Stops in the outside bathroom, pushes the lock button twice. In front of the mirror breathes in and out deeply. A film of sweat covers his face. Shakes his head in disapproval. Sees empty belt loops. Opens a zippered

pouch. Removes a small notepad and pen. Writes “New belt.”

Inside the restaurant he sits on his swivel chair at the counter. Sally removes a Reserved sign. She rubs her hand on his shoulder. He lets her touch him. Jorge tried once. Knows better now. He likes that he never has to order here. Also likes when she knows to stay quiet and say nothing. Like now. Things outside his control.

He breathes by his schedules. Looks forward. That’s what schedules are for. Today is Thursday. Mondays through Thursdays are always the same. Except when motor-cycle bozos slide on pavement. He thinks about tomorrow. Loves Fridays and weekends. Removes a clear marble from a pocket. Brings it close to his eye. Looks at a distorted Jorge. Drops it on the plate and watches it spin.

Jorge cracks eggs on the grill. What they serve him is off the menu. A fried four-egg sandwich. Eggs over hard. Sourdough bread, mustard and horseradish. What his dad ate in the 70’s when he brought him here.

Wanda enters the front door. Marshall nods. Sally removes the second Reserved sign. Wanda slides in, picks up his marble, examines it. Rubs it through and over her fingers, removes a silver plastic ring from her pocket. Sets it on his plate.

“Crackerjacks?” he asks. She nods. Wanda picks up the ring, lifts Marshall’s left hand, slides it onto a finger. He lets Wanda touch him, too. Sally delivers their lunches. Nearly identical. Wanda doesn’t like horseradish. They don’t talk while they eat.

Sally brings a small dish holding a bill. *No charge*. Just a tip. Part of the barter. Always four dollars.

Wanda stands, wipes her lips on a napkin. “See you tomorrow,” she says as she leaves.

“Yes. Friday. New shadow box ready. Jane Seymour.” Wanda winks at him. He watches her hop into her Vixen RV. Made by BMW. 1987. Turbo diesel engine. Likes that she calls it Vicki.

Marshall crosses the street. Slips through the side door of El Chino Restaurant. Pulls a quarter from a pocket. Places it on the counter next to the Andes mints container. Removes five candies. He unwraps one and pops it in his mouth, slides it onto his tongue. Puts the other four into empty pocket over his heart. Crosses Winkle Avenue to Ray’s Storage Lot adjacent to Upper Crust Pizza. Makes his way to the far corner. His 1965 faded green and white Chevy pickup with camper. Hidden behind a rusted recreational vehicle. Ray lets him live here. Marshall keeps the place neat. Moves vehicles around when Ray needs. Another barter. Disability check’s come to Ray’s mailbox every month. More abled than most people he knows. The checks help.

He’s patient with the mint. Feels for the belt loop where the key chain is attached, remembers the missing belt. “Get new belt,” he says out loud. He shoves the expandable key chain with one of its three keys toward the door of the camper.

Inside he loosens the watch, hangs it on a hook. Stretches both arms wide—Jesus on a cross—places one hand on one wall, fingertips on the other. Like the narrow streets in Venice, Italy. Remembers touching them. Or was that a photo of someone else?

Backpack and vest placed on proper hooks. Four unwrapped candies centered on adjacent squares of a chess board. Mint on his tongue nearly gone. He swallows. Taps his tongue lightly against the roof of his mouth to extract flavor. Drops to the narrow aisle between the door and the bed. Crunches out forty push-ups, air whooshing out

with each upward pump. Flips to his back, rolls into a handstand. Holds it for sixty seconds. Flings himself to his feet. He could do this thirty years ago, does it better now.

A mancala board hangs on another hook. He unzips pockets on the vest. Removes a fistful of trinkets. Arranges them in the twelve slots on the board. Not happy with today’s collection. Thursday hunt is lighter than Friday or the weekend. He lifts and tilts the mancala board over a wicker trash basket. Sees trinkets fall, snatches a quarter mid-air, the rest tumble to the trash.

The Simms G3 Guide Fly-Fishing Vest contains 19 specialty pockets. For safety, he uses the zippers on the pockets. When quick access is needed, the magnetic buckles suffice. He empties the pockets. A loop of 16-gauge wire, a pack of original-flavored Dentyne, waxed string, a pair of scissors, a box knife, a compass. One pocket remains intact. The Trojan Ribbed Condom. Placed there by Wanda, who has the space near the bathrooms at the Flea Market. “You never know when you might need one,” she said.

Loud buzzing pops his eyes open. He jumps. Fumbles for a rifle on the floor.

Marshall piles his vest contents on the table. He examines the chess board and slides the white rook to H4. Lifts one of the four remaining mints from its D4 position, unwraps it, drops it on his tongue. Sitting on the small couch he slips off his high-top Merrell shoes. Slides his hand between the cushions until he finds his current book. Sterling-silver angel cherub on the bookmark, bow in hand, arrow pointed, marks the page. Starts at the top of the left page. On page 71 of *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid* he reads out loud, mid-sentence: “landing spots for some very small experimental aircraft or perhaps special delivery messages sent by miniature missile. Never have people looked so ridiculous and so happy at the same time.” Hears Bill Bryson in his head telling how Julia Chase set five small fires in the White House. How Swanson’s invented TV dinners in 1954. On page 103, reads “Wertham saw sex literally in every shadow.” Golden eagle feather rests between the black king and queen on the chess board. He drops the cherub bookmark into a vest pocket, slides the feather between pages 103 and 104. Closes his eyes, allows a nap to refill him.

Loud buzzing pops his eyes open. He jumps. Fumbles for a rifle on the floor. Sees the watch on its hook, flashing. The familiar buzz. He breathes, reaches over, mutes the alarm.

Watch reattached to his wrist at 8:20 pm. Vest zipped up, he walks out the door, locks the camper. The winter sky slips in. He jumps the fence behind the camper, glides through the lot at Nate Smith’s Auto. Enters the gate code at the public storage facility at 8:25 pm. His storage room is 10’ by 20’. He only comes at night, doesn’t want to be seen. He looks up at the video surveillance camera. They have to watch. At the door, he inserts the second key from his chain. Opens the lock, looks in both directions twice. Again at the video camera, before he enters, pulls the door down behind him.

He finds the workbench, turns on three lamps. Has paid the owner extra for electrical outlets. The wall is solid pegboards mounted above a twenty-foot bench, a collage

of tools hanging on pegs. Containers of treasures everywhere. Side walls are covered with shadow boxes he's built. In the middle of the bench perched on a bookstand is *Navigating the Imagination* by Joseph Cornell. First book Wanda gave him, in exchange for a hand-carved bread knife. He reads one left and one right page to the bottom. Turns the page.

Dozens of projects in progress cover the bench. He calls them projects. Wanda calls them art. He picks up a small electric screwdriver, drills two holes in the side of a box. Blows sawdust away. From a pocket he removes a small angel. Feet fit perfectly into and through the two holes. Grabs his tube of E6000 glue. Slips a mask over his nose, squirts glue around each foot, slips them into the holes. This is how he works. One piece at a time. Slow and careful pairings. Finding the right pieces for the right boxes. A theme eventually emerges. Moves to the left wall, unhooks a completed box he calls "Green." Glued to the inside panel is a photo of Jane Seymour. Wanda gave him a Vogue magazine with an article on her. Heterochromia is what she has—one brown eye, one green eye. Her photo glued to the inside of the box, the color green dominates. A Gecko mounted on top of a ceramic artichoke. The lyrics to Al Green's song "Let's Stay Together." A miniature putter, green handle rests over a photo of the 17th green at Pebble Beach golf course. A piece of green taffeta attached to the front of the box. Green pushpins he found in a box of Halloween leftovers in Frank's space at the market holding it down.

He looks at the watch on his wrist—orange. At ten years old, the color of carsick gum his mother made him chew when they drove on twisted mountain roads. At eighteen years old, the napalm at Danang and Hue. In front of a display case mounted over the bench, he unhooks Hugo from his wrist. Stares at his six by six matrix of watches hanging neatly in their assigned spots. He selects a Bradley Mickey Mouse, puts Hugo Boss in a vest pocket. It's 8:59 pm. Time to go. He locks the door, "Green" under his arm.

Marshall's eyes open. No alarm on Mickey Mouse. A good night's sleep. It's Friday. He loves Friday. Frank and the other vintage dealers are there. Wanda is there. He lowers himself from the small bed perched atop the truck's cab, looks at the calendar pinned to the wall behind the chess board and the Friday square that reads "Belt." He moves the black knight to G7, walks out the door at 3:45 am, "Green" secure in his backpack.

In front of Emerald Bay's rec room. He ignores the cluster of young men. Smoking, tossing lit matches at each other. Arrives at Silver Spur's back door, pulls key number three from the chain, slips it in the lock. The other half of the barter with Sally. He starts in one bathroom. Then the next. Crystal blue Ajax tapped on the side of porcelain bowls. Replaces toilet paper. Loads the soap dispenser. Mops the floors. Inside he vacuums carpets, swabs table tops, removes grease from grills and surrounding walls. It's 4:45 am. He locks the door, steps into the outside bathroom, pushes the lock button twice. Removes his clothes, stands bare-ass naked in front of the mirror. His 62-year-old body still looks 50 at most. Hard muscles, a few grey chest hairs, lean strong arms. From the vest he removes a plastic freezer bag holding a bar of Safeguard soap. Finds a Mission Linen hand towel in the cupboard, drenches it in hot water. His daily sponge bath,



hot water and soap applied and removed. No water or electric bills. Marshall unlocks and relocks the door before he returns to the Flea Market sign. Touches it with his left hand, spins in place, heads up Soquel Drive for the clockwise morning cycle.

He slaps the sign on the return trip. Friday morning cars lined up in both directions. Backed up from Soquel Drive to the Sutter Clinic. Up Chanticleer. All the way to the freeway. Must be a hundred already. Marshall walks up the line toward the entrance to the old Skyview Drive-in. Saw *Ride the Wild Surf* and *Jaws* here. Had his first sex here, Layla Parsons. High school sweetheart. Just before Nam.

The window of Frank's large white van cranks down. Frank stretches a closed fist to Marshall. Marshall does the same. But they don't touch.

"How's the walk this morning?"

"New record. Cut off two seconds."

"That's brilliant." Frank likes to say brilliant a lot. Born in south London, lost most of his accent, but likes to keep his culture close, right up front. "We have any business today?"

Marshall pats the pouches on his vest. "Loaded for bear." With Frank, Marshall likes to make statements like "loaded for bear", to keep his own culture close.

"Good. See you in a bit."

Inside, the spaces fill quickly. A clear sky and warm morning. Large crowd of buyers and sellers. He enjoys the confined spaces of his camper home. His storage room. The bathroom at Silver Spur. But this flea market landscape lets him breathe differently, stretch taller. A tautness, a bounce in the balls of his feet. Pulls straight through his spine, out the top of his head. He walks toward Wanda's space. She arranges old books on a card table. He steps onto her tattered Persian carpet. The one she throws down over sun-bleached asphalt. Claims this space as hers. For a few hours.

She's ready for her quiet time. Fifteen minutes in the morning, fifteen more at the end of the day. He picks a book off the card table, makes noise. Wanda sees him, nods. She walks to Vicki parked at the rear of the space, her home on wheels, climbs inside,

sits on her couch, closes her eyes.

Marshall opens the book to page 1, reads until he reaches the last word. He continues, one book at a time, until he has read the first pages of eight different books. This is how long it takes Wanda to complete her quiet time.

He reaches into his backpack and places “Green” on her chair.

Enjoys the books now. They were an excuse once. Worried punks would steal from her while she took quiet time. He rereads first pages until her eyes open. No words spoken. He pulls one from the stack whose words still rattle around his head—“William Stoner entered the University of Missouri in the year 1910 at the age of nineteen”—replaces it with one from his pack. This is the unspoken exchange, ever since the book she tried to give as a gift. Gifts don’t make sense to him. Barter does. Mutual. Shared. Wanda will sell it or gift it to someone else today or tomorrow.

She steps out of Vicki, squats and twists her joints. She looks at his book choice. “*Stoner* is a rare gem. I think you’ll like it.”

A gentle approach and light fingers. She touches the pouch with the condom, pats it gently, smiles. “Still there, I see.” Same pocket that held a small abalone shell button. No gifts. One condom for one abalone shell button. He never thinks about using it. Doesn’t think of Wanda like that. Hasn’t thought of anyone like that for almost ever. Layla Parsons.

Needs to find Frank. Wanda puts her hands on her hips, tilts her head, as Marshall walks away. “You coming back?” Marshall turns, looks at her. “I sold one of your boxes,” she says, and flashes a wad of cash. He nods. She points at a paper bag near the front wheel of the Vixen. “Got some goodies for you over there.” He points at “Green” before he heads toward Frank’s spaces.

Two spaces. Frank needs room, has lots of stuff, mostly stuff Marshall doesn’t like. He bids on and buys abandoned storage lockers. Takes his big truck and hauls everything out. Keeps the treasures for himself to barter with the likes of Marshall and other collectors. Junky stuff ends up in big cardboard boxes. People forage all weekend long.

“Show me something,” Frank says.

Marshall unzips a pouch, doesn’t remove anything, keeps two fingers tucked inside.

“Alright then.” Frank opens a small paper bag, peeks inside, glances at Marshall.

Played like a game of cards. Hidden until forced to expose, not sure how their hands will match up. They look for balance, a fair trade, something that makes them both happy. Marshall slips the fingers further into the pocket and removes a Willie McCovey trading card that he holds in front of his vest, half covered. Waits for Frank’s play before full disclosure. Frank reaches in the bag, removes a salt and pepper shaker set, pewter, two figurines, arms wrapped around each other. Marshall cocks his head.

“High blood pressure.”

“I don’t expect you’ll lick their heads. We’re talking collectibles here.”

Marshall doesn’t respond, slips in two more fingers and removes the cherub-headed silver bookmark.

Frank perks up. “That interests me.”

“Any belts?”

Frank points at a row of boxes near his van. “Excellent quality leather belts in that front one.” Frank the showman. The salesman. Can’t help himself. Warming up on him. Getting ready for real customers. Marshall pulls out a reversible belt, six inches too long, shows Frank the mismatch and tilts his head.

He smiles. “Keep it. It’s bloody ugly.” Marshall takes out the Swiss Army knife. Hacks off seven inches with the tiny saw. Opens the awl and punches six new holes, cinches it down. Opens the pocket with the angelic bookmark, hands it to Frank. Replaces it with the leather scrap from the belt. Imagines it attached to the side of a box, small treasures protruding from each hole, a jeweled dog’s collar.

“Any watches today?” Marshall asks. Frank points to a case, turns to greet a customer. Marshall examines high-end items in the locked case. Two watches. He likes the first one. Frank spells out details on small white cards, all caps: VINTAGE ULYSSES NARDIN BLACK METALLIC DIAL 33.8MM GOLD PLATED CASE DATE AUTOMATIC. Frank likes all caps. Marshall loves the black face, gold hands floating on top.

The card for the second watch reads: VINTAGE ERNEST BOREL LADIES KALEIDOSCOPE COCKTAIL WATCH SKELETON BACK BEAUTIFUL. Marshall sits in Frank’s chair, a Morris chair like Wanda’s, also not for sale. Sees him talk to the customer. Frank at work. Frank doing what he loves. He removes the Hugo Boss from a pocket. He enjoyed this watch. Too bright now. Too loud.

Marshall hears a jangle, stands, crouches, looks both ways up the aisle, scans for enemies. Frank finishes his transaction and accepts payment. Marshall sees three gangbangers on the move, pants slung low on hips, chains dangling, green teardrops dripping down sides of faces, arms hidden in ink. One of them nods toward Frank and his handful of money. Marshall jumps in front of Frank and the customer, widens his shoulders, shields them. His leg and arm muscles tighten.

They slide to the other side of the aisle. Avert their eyes, move on. He watches them disappear into the rest room next to Wanda’s space. Frank slips the bills into his pocket. “So, mate. What about those watches?”

Still staring at the closed bathroom door, Marshall holds up the Hugo Boss. “This one for those two.”

“What! You’re letting go of Hugo? I thought you loved him.”

“Tired of orange.”

“Okay. Deal.” Frank sets the Hugo Boss in his locked case. Marshall puts the two new watches in separate pockets. “Take a look at this oak showcase over here. Perfect size for one of your projects.”

Marshall follows Frank, opens the lid of the showcase box. Hears the door of the rest room slam open. Turns to see two boys, knives in hands yelling at other boys leaning against Wanda’s Vixen. More knives flash. Wanda models a Guatemalan shawl to a customer, spins, shows it off.

Marshall speeds toward the rest room. 100-yard dash. Running for cover in the jungle. Two boys with knives back away. Third boy smashes open the bathroom door. Small black gun held sideways in the boy’s hand points and fires. Fifteen feet away Marshall leaves his feet. Propels himself toward the gun hand. Smashes the punk to the ground, cracks the boy’s wrist on the pavement, removes the weapon. The boy cries in pain. Marshall pins him to the ground. Should snap his neck. Should end his miserable

life. Remembers where he is. Security guards arrive. Marshall let's go.

The groaning jolts him. Wanda. She's face down on her carpet. The customer presses the shawl into the chest wound. Marshall hurries over. She is in shock, delirious. He stops the bleeding, pressure of his palm covering the wound. "You're okay, Wanda. It's okay. It's okay." He rubs his free hand across her forehead, removes sweat and splattered spots of blood. "It's okay. We're okay." Looks like a shoulder wound. He's not sure. Lots of blood.

The EMTs remove Marshall's hand from Wanda's chest. She is conscious, knows her name when asked. Knows who is president, grumbles. They lift her to the stretcher and into the ambulance. "I'm coming along," Marshall insists.

"Are you a relative?"

"Brother," Marshall lies.

"You're not my brother," Wanda moans. "You got to watch my stuff. Take care of Vicki. Keys are in my pocket. Ah shit, this hurts. Am I dying?"

"No. You're not dying," one of the EMTs says. "We're taking you to Dominican Hospital now."

The other one reaches in Wanda's pocket and hands her keys to Marshall. "You can't come if you're not family. You'll have to get there on your own."

The siren winds up. Marshall watches them slice through rows of cars toward the exit. Lots of Sheriff cars now. Cops are busy with punks. Handcuffs, IDs, questions. He sees the blood on Wanda's shawl. On her carpet. She'll be mad. Grabs her water bottle, pours it on the blood spots. They'll make it a crime scene. He hurries. Takes a bandana out of a pocket and scrubs the stains. He looks at the items in Wanda's space. Looks at Vicki.

Cops are still busy. He loads Wanda's chair. Books and clothes next. Keeps looking over his shoulder. His boxes. "Green." There's a small red dot on Jane Seymour's forehead. He quickly rolls the carpet up and tosses it on the roof, steps inside, closes the door. First time inside Wanda's home. Nobody ever inside but Wanda. Immaculate. Thirty years old like new.

He looks in the rearview mirror, cops loading the boys into cars. Sees his vest in the reflection. Blood everywhere. A tap at his window. He stiffens. Frank. He rolls it down. "You okay, mate?"

"Yes."

"You need anything, you call me." Frank hands him a business card. Marshall doesn't have a phone. Hasn't seen a phone booth in years. Slips the card in a pocket. "I'm serious. Either of you need somewhere to stay, I've got a big place."

"Got to go." He hasn't driven in years, turns the key. It rushes back. '67 Camaro. Army Jeeps. He drives out slowly, slices through the rows like the ambulance. Turns left illegally on Soquel Drive so he can get to the hospital faster. Never been inside. Has walked by thousands of times, but never in. His palms push tight against the wheel at the stop light. Legs stiff. Sweaty arms. Turns right and follows the signs to Emergency.

At the desk he taps his knuckles, asks the clerk, "Wanda? Where's Wanda?"

"Excuse me?" she says. "Who are you?"

"Marshall. Wanda got shot."

One EMT is at the counter. He tells the clerk, "The woman with the gunshot

wound. Wanda. This is...her brother."

Marshall looks at him, nods.

The clerk says, "She's in surgery. There's a waiting room down the hall through that door."

Marshall runs. Down the hall, through the door. Finds the waiting room and sits. Clerk comes over and asks, "Who are you here for?"

"Wanda."

"And what is Wanda's last name?"

He shakes his head. "Don't know."

She reaches for his arm. He steps away. "That's okay. I'll figure it out. I'll let you know when I hear something."

Newsweek. People. Good Housekeeping. Golf Weekly. He flips through every magazine. Looks at Mickey Mouse too many times. Paces. To the gift shop and back. Wants to buy her something. No. That's not it. Two hours so far. No word. Waiting room is now empty. He falls to the floor. Thirty pushups. Stands on his hands. From his upside down view he sees the clerk's shoes. Blue Nike's. He pops up.

"They'll be done soon. About an hour. I'll let you know when I have a room number."

"Thank you. Thank you." He sits down, takes *Stoner* out of his backpack, rereads page 1 and continues. On page 11 she returns.

"Wanda is in room 2323. Upstairs."

He runs, follows signs to the elevator, walks into her room. Two sheriff's deputies stand next to the bed, turn to him when he enters. A woman with clipboard, blue folder, waits.

"You must be Marshall. Come in. She's a little groggy, but good. They got the bullet out and she's all sewn up."

"Hey," Wanda says weakly.

"You drove away with half our crime scene. We need to talk to you."

"Hey."

A deputy says, "You drove away with half our crime scene. We need to talk to you."

Marshall nods. "In a minute?"

"Okay. We'll be in the hall."

Clipboard woman steps forward. "Wanda, is this your husband?" Wanda chuckles. Marshall shakes his head. "Okay, then. You were a little out of it when they checked you into ER. Is it true you have no insurance?"

"True. Don't believe in it. Never had any. Never will."

"I see. We'll need to discuss a payment plan. We'll talk later when you're feeling better."

Marshall sees the hospital band on Wanda's wrist and reads it. "Willis," he says. "Wanda Willis. Never knew that."

“Yeah. Need-to know-basis.”

Marshall removes the lady’s watch from its zippered pocket. He lifts Wanda’s wrist and clasps it over the hospital band.

“What’s this?”

He shrugs. “Ernest Borel. Kaleidoscope cocktail watch.”

“Wow! Never had one of these. We going steady now?” She touches the watch.

“A loan.”

“Where’s Vicki?”

“Parking lot. I’ll put her in Ray’s place tonight.”

“Ray’s place?”

Marshall forgets she doesn’t know about Ray’s place. “A safe place.”

She reaches her free hand to his vest. Touches the condom pocket. “Now you’ve been inside Vicki.” He nods. “When’s my turn?” she asks as her eyes close.

Marshall feels his face go warm. Glad she fell asleep. Glad he doesn’t have to answer.

A nurse comes in holding a tray.

“Hi. I’m Liza, the night nurse. I need to give Wanda her meds.”

Marshall stands, talks to deputies, leaves.

He finds the elevator. Finds Vicki in the parking lot, sees Frank’s big white van next to it. Frank jumps out. “How’s Wanda, mate? She hanging in there?”

Marshall nods. “Good. Sleeping now.”

“Ah, that’s brilliant, mate. They hauled those bloody hoodlums off.”

Marshall nods at the van. “The showcase?”

“What?”

“Still have it?”

“Oh, the showcase.” He opens up the rear doors of the van, pushes a few boxes aside, hands Marshall the box.

Marshall reaches for his money pocket. Frank waves him off. “Get away, man! Take it.”

“Thank you. Need a favor.”

“You name it. It’s yours.”

“Need to show you something?”

Marshall gets in Vicki. Frank follows him to Ray’s lot where Marshall opens the gate, parks next to his truck and camper.

“This where you live, mate?” Marshall nods. “It’s brilliant.”

“There’s more.” He walks Frank to the storage facility, showcase under his arm, slides the door up, turns on the lamps. Frank doesn’t speak. His eyes wide examining every box. The tools on the wall. The matrix of watches. He shakes his head.

“You are a fucking genius, my friend.”

Marshall leans forward. “How much?”

“What do you mean?”

“Wanda needs hospital money. How much for everything?”

Frank walks in a circle around the room, looks at Marshall. He holds two fists toward Marshall. “Let’s talk about this.”

When Frank leaves, Marshall jogs over to Silver Spur. Sally sees him come through the back door.

She looks at the wall clock. “What’s this? You’re supposed to be on your afternoon walk.”

“Things change.”

“Not for you they don’t.”

“Wanda got hurt. She’s in hospital. I need a burger and fries. To go.”

“What?”

“I know. Got to hurry.”

Sally writes his order down, hands it to Jorge who moves Marshall’s tag in front of the others hanging on hooks.

Marshall fills Sally in. She hugs him. She grabs his dangling arms, says, “Put these things around my shoulders and hug me, damn it!”

He tries. Puts his arms on her shoulders.

“Now squeeze. Come on. You can do it.”

He could hurt her. He has squeezed people to death. Blocked their flow of oxygen. Did it quietly. Stealthily. In the black of night. He won’t hurt Sally, pats her on the shoulders, steps back.

“You’re a goof.” She kisses him on the cheek.

Sally hands him the bag and he opens it. Looks at her.

“Two burgers. Two fries. Chocolate milk shakes. Now get out of here.”

“Can’t clean tomorrow. Busy all night.”

“I understand.”

In the storage room, Marshall bites into the second burger. Eats lukewarm fries. Paces. Stares at the showcase box. Needs to be perfect. Sucks on the straw. He pulls out a box of treasures and hunts. Pulls out every box, hunting and gathering materials. He runs to Vicki, more hunting and gathering. Puts a handful of treasures in zippered pockets. Runs to the storage room. Opens the glass top of the showcase. Goes to work. Has to be the best box ever.

He’s there all night.

In the morning, he emerges. Finished box under his arm. Walks straight to the hospital, takes the elevator to room 2323. Wanda is awake, remote in hand, staring at the TV.

“Hey! You know how long it’s been since I watched one of these things?”

He sits in the chair closest to the bed. “Me, too.” They both stare at the screen.

She turns the sound down.

Marshall sets the box on the bed. Wanda puts on glasses, holds it on her chest.

“A new one? Wow! Totally amazing. Hey! That’s my buddha! This is all my stuff.”

“It’s for you.”

“What? You don’t believe in gifts.”

“Owe me then.”



w. Concord St. blues,

Eric Grabowski

The brick homes, it was the brick
walkways, I wrote this on
Bolano's back, while garbage men
sensed the beauty in everything,
The nurse, the jogger both sensed it
Too,

The colorful dress, the shady oaks,
were raw with it,
the expensive suit – he sensed it too,
and folded in it,

The Ivy and vines impenetrable
like the wrought iron fence of
lamp post, sidewalks blue sky
morning.

I was lost in it, and loved it all,
the faces the footsteps, the puzzlement
at me and my long lost bench – someday,
The eyes seeing the eyes and knowing,
next to the leaf which floats that is
the same as the floating river that has no
beginning and no clear end in sight,

I died, and I was reborn that day, if
only for a day – among the brick
and green of the Southend park bench
laughter at my love for life.

learning to pray:

Disha Trivedi

I think there is a God.
He hangs, lanky, in the lines
of an old white New England church.
The lone spire on the skyline. He

holds himself like a thundercloud
looking from a lighthouse tower.
Learning to read is a misadventure
I remember: my mother, prayer

book in hand. Telling me the sound
that came with the letter *S*
snaking, sybilline, python
curled around the Oracle. I think

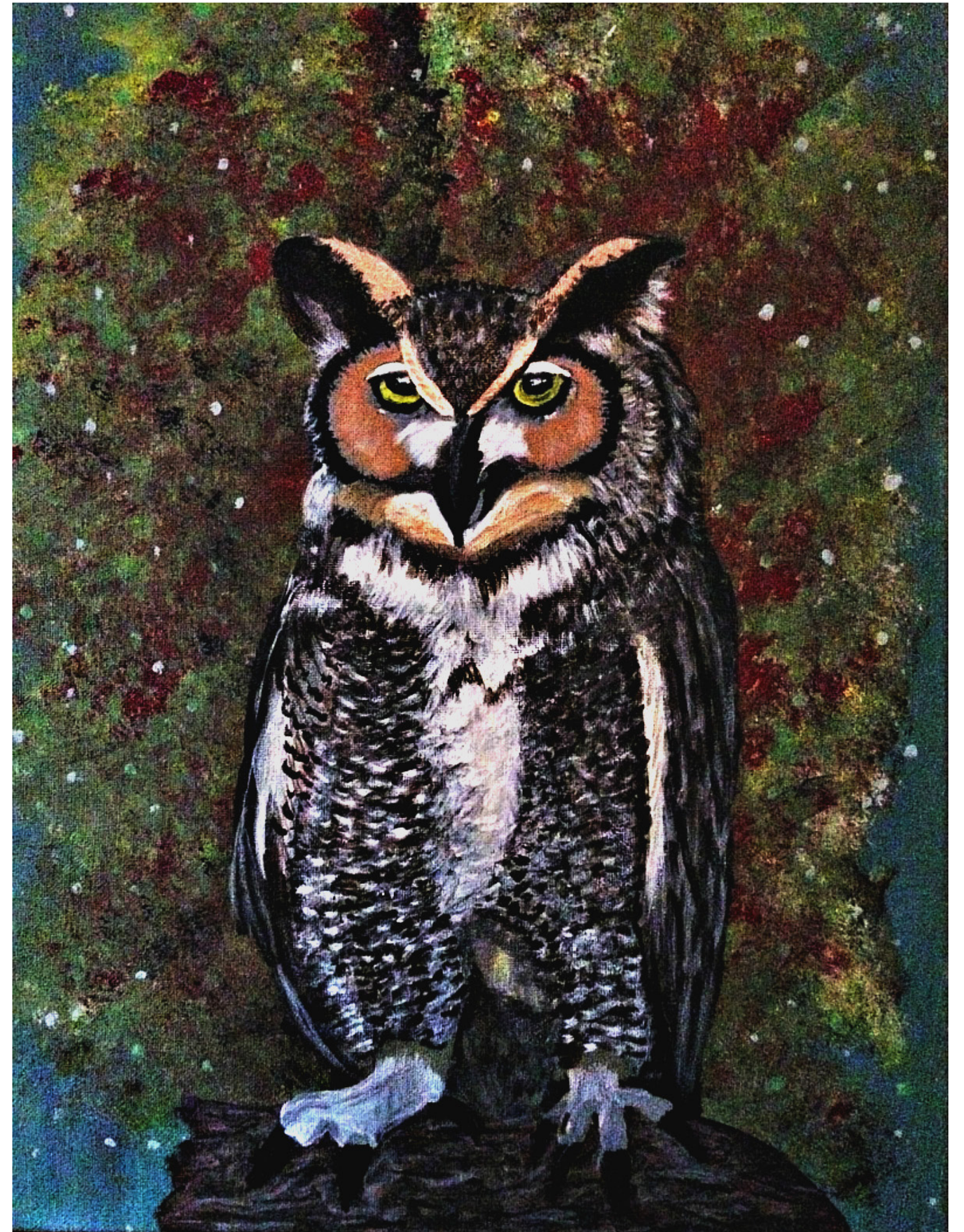
if God knows everything there
is to know, He must know
how deeply to give us feeling
in this one small and precious

life? Of how the cranes hug
the sides of ponds in the opening
up of nature to the first calling
cries of warmer days? Of rocks,

shaped for skipping, flat as the
palm of your hand. Covered with
fate lines, life lines, made for tying
ropes thick as knitted knuckles.

I think God must hang like a bat
in the belfry. I think holy places
are made for the simplest
form of peace: a silence into

Which we crept, waiting for someone
—something!—to speak.





The Ant House

Richard Risemberg

It used to be that, when ants came in the house, I would sweep, wipe, poison, and wash till they were all gone. Then I would spray more poison along whatever cracks and crevices I suspected gave them entry, to repel subsequent invasions. I was quite the good soldier in the battle against their diligent swarms, but after a while I decided not to care. I granted them freedom of the house, to go where they would, at the risk of being trodden upon by the clumsy human whose domain they shared. And of being wiped off the counters when I prepped my meals. I suppose I could have eaten ants, in many cultures folks do, but I chose not to. It was enough that I let them live in my house; I didn't feel compelled to integrate them with my corporeal substance. Let them eat spilled sugar or dry skin flakes or whatever it is they sought from me. Their shifting lines amused me as they marched across ceilings or walls. We seemed to have reached an equilibrium: their population surged to a certain level but had not grown for months.

It's not that I felt the battle was hopeless, because I was clearly winning: invasions occurred only two or three times a year, in the dry months when, I suppose, they felt thirsty. My house is small, in an old part of town with bad soil. If I had watered more often they would probably have left me alone. I should have been paying more attention to the garden anyhow. I know it's funny, considering the sadly ragged state of my little front yard, but the fact is that I worked for a landscaper, squatting in other people's gardens all day long, digging up bushes and trees, planting new ones, and more or less invading the ants' turf. All day long insects lived around me, barely taking notice of the hulking shadow that blundered among them. Complacent bees, businesslike wasps, clumsy beetles, slithery earwigs, and hurrying spiders of all sorts, including deadly

ones—and I was never bitten or stung. We were all just taking care of business. I was hoping the feeling would carry on into my house if I let the ants have their way. They were little bitty things, not the kind that attack, so why not experiment? I could play the benevolent god for a while, then flood them out when I got tired of it.

I never invited folks over to the house anyway, so there would be no one to shock. It was a shabby little place, one I'd inherited from an uncle who had let it sit untenanted for around ten years, maybe more. The he graciously died and left it to me because I drove him to the doctor now and then. Where Uncle Billy had gotten it, I don't know; he had another house that was almost as shabby, where he lived and drank when he wasn't tending bar on the drearier side of downtown, and I don't think he did much with my house except store old furniture there, and drag me over to sweep the ants out now and then. So the ants and me had a history. Now we'd worked out a sort of peace.

I did set the legs of my bed and my kitchen table in little cans of water that I dribbled a bit of motor oil into. I'm peculiar but not stupid, you might say. And they did, naturally, find their way onto the kitchen counter to retrieve whatever crumbs I left from sandwich-making, but I worked around them, and they worked around me, and if they were in the way when I wiped down the counter now and then, worse luck for them. They'd probably eat off me when I was dead and buried anyhow, right? Life is funny that way—and so is death, if you let yourself think about it. What goes around comes around, and all that, and it's enough to make you dizzy. Guess that's why folks drink. I don't drink, not in that way, but I kept ants for a while. Which is worse?

I was the man with seven million pets, at least in my own mind.

Anyway, things changed when I got the cat. Or when the cat got me, I guess. I was sitting in my back yard having a beer when she showed up. My back yard is not some bucolic garden, or even a garden at all: it's entirely paved in brick, and not very large anyway. The brick is old and chipped, badly laid, and kind of dusty, though I do hose it off now and then. It's about twenty feet from my back door to the garage, which opens onto an alley in back. The garage wall facing the yard is blank plaster, with cracks and bulges here and there, and one wooden door near the corner. The door is covered in peeling white paint. It's all kind of pathetic, but I don't have the time, money, or ambition to fix it right now. Every time I sit in my chair beside the kitchen door and have my beer, I look at it and make plans I don't even pretend I will stick to. I don't make much money, and I'll have to find a better job one of these days, but for now I give all my energy to making other people's yards look better. I supposed that if someone paid me to work on my own yard, the front yard where the dead plants live, I would do it, but no one ever will. So I was sitting there listing all the work I wasn't going to do in my head, where it could be safely forgotten, when the cat walked up. Walked up to me like I'd had her since she was a kitten, rubbed on my legs for a while, then jumped on my lap. I scratched her head, she purred for a bit, then she curled up and sat, looking across the brick backyard at my procrastinated life with me. I don't know much about cats, but she looked healthy enough, nice fur, solid-feeling, with a scar at the tip of one ear, and not too many fleas. When I got up, she followed me inside, looked up, and emitted a single meow. I poured some milk into a bowl for her and tore up some ham to put in another bowl next to it. She's been here since.

Of course I had no idea where she came from. Maybe somebody had moved out

of the neighborhood and left her behind. People do that sort of thing, which makes me kind of angry. Anyway, I took a picture of her on my phone and went to the library to use their printer and make a “Found Cat” poster. I put it up on three telephone poles around the block, but nobody ever called. So the cat was mine. It was nice to have some company in the shabby little house. In the evening we would sit out in my brick backyard, me on the chair and her on my lap. When I went inside to read or watch the tube, she would usually follow me and sit in the window of whatever room I was in, looking out at the world passing by, what there was of it. Ours was a quiet neighborhood, except on summer Saturdays, which were barbecue days around there...car doors slamming, cheap speakers blasting music, lots of voices around. It was good to hear it nearby and smell the smoke drifting over the fences. I’d get invited and sometimes I’d go, but I’m pretty much a loner and get all the human company I need at work, with my crew, even though there’s only four of us counting the boss. The cat was a fine companion for the house. I had to name her something, so I named her “Slim.” She wasn’t particularly skinny, and Slim is more of a guy name, but it came into my head, and we both got used to it. I could call her, and she’d usually come and jump up into my lap or follow me outside. It was pretty nice. I’m glad that cats can’t talk; I get tired of talk too fast for my own good. Makes it hard to keep friends when I don’t really want to hear the stories of their lives, which are usually no more interesting than my own. What can you do.

That’s how it is, though; people or cats, we’re all peculiar in some way. Slim ate ants. I lived with them.

The ants, though: I started to notice that there weren’t quite so many of them after a while. This got me worried, not that I actually wanted more ants in the house, but I had to wonder what was wrong. Maybe there was something bad in the house or the soil and it might get to me and Slim. But it turned out it was Slim that was doing it, believe it or not. I saw her licking the floor one day, which got me really worried, like I wasn’t feeding her right and she’d got some sort of deficiency. I’d read about those women in Mississippi that eat river mud for iron or vitamins or something. But what vitamins could a cat get off an old wooden floor? It wasn’t all that dirty, even if it wasn’t really clean. So one time I saw her doing it and walked over real gentle, so as not to startle her, and damn, she was eating ants! Just licking them up like they were ice cream, I couldn’t believe it. She worked her way down the line of march till she got to the wall where they were coming in through the baseboard and lurked there to get a few more licks in, then I guess she was full and wandered off to sit down and lick her jowls a bit. Then she looked up at me and meowed the way she does when she wants lap time. So I went outside and sat in my chair overlooking the brick backyard, and she jumped up on my lap. Sat there purring like nothing was the least bit peculiar about a cat that ate ants. Now, I know cats will eat bugs, usually moths and things; I’d read about it in a cat book I checked out of the library after Slim showed up. But it seemed to me an awful lot of hard work to eat little bitty ants, and all that licking must have been hard on her tongue. It was the damndest thing. That’s how it is, though; people or cats, we’re all peculiar in some way.



Slim ate ants. I lived with them.

But not for too long, as it turned out. Slim really loved ants and didn’t moderate her appetite in any way. You would have thought she had a mission to eat them all, but I don’t think cats have missions except maybe to keep their kittens safe if they’ve got any. She ate her way across the living room, through the kitchen, and even round the bathroom. In six months she pretty nearly wiped out the ants. Sure, they still got in, but in twos or threes, not streaming hordes. My days as an ant man were over. Guess I was a cat man now.

I guess I should be thankful. Now I could invite people over if I ever wanted to. I figured I should get ready to in case I became more sociable. Keeping company with Slim was good practice. Also, she was friendly; I’d seen her walk up to people on the sidewalk in front and get them to pet her. Old ladies, young woman, even stocky young tough guys, the kind who hate to look sentimental even when they are. If she liked company, I ought to get her some. And if I was going to do that, I ought to clean up the house. So I did, a bit at a time. Even got in a carpet one of my boss’s clients needed to get rid of, and paid us to take to the dump. It was still in good shape, so I asked for it, and the boss was happy to oblige, as it saved us from paying the dump fee. The place looked pretty good on the inside. But the front yard was still a mess. Considering my line of work, that would be pretty embarrassing.

So, I became my own boss for a while. I allowed myself two hours a day, four days a week, to work on my own garden. It felt funny to dig in the dirt for free; I had never

played in gardens much before, though my dad made me and my brother help him with yard work when we were kids. We both hated it. But now it was different: I understood what I was doing a little bit, and I liked the odors of plants and clean dirt. I told the boss what I was doing, and he gave me extra plants from our jobs when we had any. I took out the dead plants, which was most of them, and spent an entire week weeding what used to be the lawn, then put in some nice-smelling stuff: sage, verbena, even some roses, though I had to buy those myself and one of them died right away. They do that sometimes. Some nice ground cover for the former dead lawn instead of grass. Grass is for cows, and I didn't have a cow, I had a cat. I even bought a lemon tree and put it by the front gate. Star jasmine in a row across the front of the house, on both sides of the door. Things that would smell nice when they bloomed or if you crushed a leaf or two. Slim loved it when I dug, and she was ecstatic when I moved an old broken flowerpot that had been sitting on the ground so long that the ants had made it a sort of portal to their realm. They went nuts, scurrying in every direction, and Slim came right over and started licking them off the little decorative boulders I'd been lining up by the walk. She wouldn't lick them off the dirt; she was a smart cat. So, anyway, I ended up with a garden. The house still needed paint on the outside, but if I invited folks over at night they maybe wouldn't notice that.

And thanks to Slim I had someone to invite besides the work crew. Her habit of greeting people who passed by on the sidewalk naturally led to them asking me about her as I worked in the garden, and eventually about the garden, and more eventually about life in general. It turned out that I had been an object of curiosity in the neighborhood, the quiet fellow in Billy's old house, was I related, and so forth and so on. I mean, the neighbors on either side knew me, but they were quiet sorts too; we made a sort of silent enclave in an otherwise rambunctious block. Slim changed that, just by looking people in the eye and purring. So I ended up inviting twelve people over, including my next-neighbors. I borrowed a barbecue from Hector down the block—his wife Alicia was one of the first neighbors Slim accosted—and made an expensive trip to the market to get ready. Expensive for me, at least. But I decided to do things right for a change. They all seemed like good folks. I'm not sure why I hadn't talked with anybody, except my next-neighbors, in a couple of years. Anyway, thanks to Slim, I had friends instead of ants. There's something to that. I still don't quite get it, but I'm letting Slim take the lead.

It was a little cold on the afternoon of the party, so, except for the barbecuing and the obligatory admiration of the garden, which was no great shakes but was still the second-best one on the block, we stayed inside. After making her rounds, Slim jumped up on the fake mantelpiece where she could survey everyone. Well, it's a real mantelpiece, but there's no fireplace under it and no chimney; it was that kind of a house. Anyway, she sat up there at eye-level to humans, where she could get more attention, and she did. More than I did. But that's only fair: it was kind of her party. I never have figured that out. Cats are supposed to be loners, and so was I, but I guess it doesn't always work that way. What can you do.





The Bear With An Asterisk

KG Newman

The day Denver traded all
its outdoor advertising
for subliminal graffiti,
I found my leftover bucket
of red house paint
sitting cobwebbed in the garage
and I made a brush:
a stick from our old oak
for the handle, my wife's
scattered hair as the bristles.
Then I took to bus sides
and climbed high
atop the billboards,
painting symbols
of all the memories
I feared I'd lose.
An asterisk for my father.
A bear for my son.
Lonely underscores
for everyone else.

Suicidal in Paradise

Anthony Immergluck

When I see driftwood, I think *shipwreck*.
And I don't think I'm alone. Here –
in the company of a hundred sunburnt shoulders.
I'm a freak among this fitness.

An animal is at its most vulnerable
when its belly is prone, so I button up
my bowling shirt and wave away a pisco sour.

(Seagulls have been circling
my stress-sweat for hours.)

I scour the beach for horseshoe crab shells
fragrant with roe, for valuable shrapnel,
for neglected SOS's of pebbles and pearls
and for the skeletons that laid them.

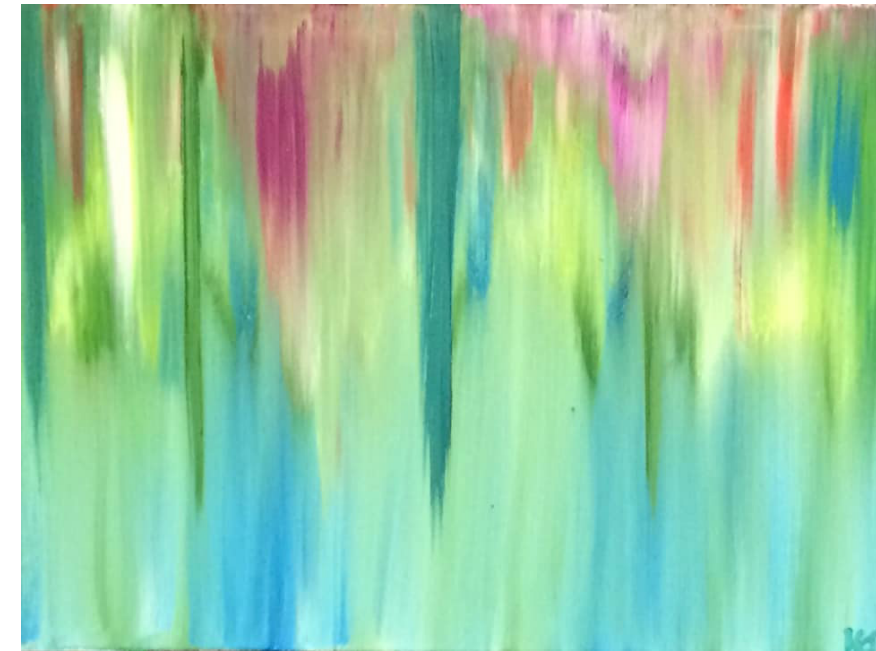
Haven't these people noticed those overhead coconuts
and the measly feathered hooks on which they sway?

Haven't they heard that you can't drink seawater?
That we'll have to survive by sucking on fisheyes?

Anyway, an island is a prone place,
surrounded on all sides, inescapable.
And I don't know how to love
a thing I didn't pay or suffer for –
it's a virtue where I come from.

There are parasols here for sky-born cancers,
blankets to stay the hurricane breeze.
They make repellants for repellant things
and undertows to punish the reckless.

It's night now, no lifeguard on duty.
The blackness is spattered with galaxies.
And what bats at those tombstone buoys?
What awaits me in that brackish underbelly?



Gnats

Michael Schmidt

I.

Birdie doesn't talk anymore, but Roscoe can still hear her. After fifty years together her voice finds him, escaping through the cracks of her fiberglass box and traveling up those feet of dirt and over the soil horizon to whisper advice and recollections and perturbed admonishments into the white-tufted privacy of his cochlea. It echoes through the plumbing pipes of West Chester County to scold him for his abandonment of dental floss or the disinterested way he's come to wipe his ass. It snakes through the telephone wires to interfere with the nine-hundred-line girls, reminding him he's become an old pig. Freed of bodily restrictions, her voice swims through the chemistry of his blood and up his brainstem to chide him for his excess levels of alcohol or trans-fatty acids.

God knows that voice can bitch. But today it offers congratulations.

"It's all over now, Birdie," Roscoe says. "I made it to the end. Thirty-seven years." He beams at the simple line between her dates of birth and death, the chiseled stroke of time that holds all the life he had with her.

A black ant scurries across the ledge of her granite marker, intent to keep some unknown schedule. Roscoe feels pride in his newly-won repose. "You know," he says with the smile of a man recalling life's bygone hardship, "I said to Shauna at my party— Shauna's the one that took over Inside Sales when Frank...well, when he came here to join you, Birdie." He looks over his shoulder, fearful Frank's spirit has come up behind him, fittingly angry that between them Roscoe alone made it out alive. "Anyway, I said to

Shauna that when I found out you faxed my resume to Coppertech I was so mad I could have buried you in the backyard. ‘Buried you in the backyard,’ that’s what I told her.” Roscoe snickers. “When Wallace called me for the interview and you admitted it—woo-boy, was I hot about it. Can you believe that was thirty-seven years ago? That we made it work for thirty-seven years?” He listens to her response, then says, “Thank you, Birdie. But you were right. You were always right. Even when I didn’t see it at the time.”

There’s a twinkle in the left periphery of his vision and Roscoe looks to see a car nosing along the crest of the cemetery hill, up amongst the plots for souls richer than his and Birdie’s, a seventies Cordoba he thinks, though his eyes aren’t what they once were. He squints for a moment in admiration: the gold rectangular shark, long as a tanker ship, its vintage seeming not so strange to him here in this resting place of long-ago things.

The driver projects through the open door, stiff and narrow-bodied and at an angle

“Oh,” he says suddenly, prompted by Birdie’s cough for attention, “I brought you something.” He fidgets with a low pocket in his cargo shorts, pulling at its Velcro flap, fishing for something inside. Roscoe produces what he believes to be a kumquat and presents it for her inspection to the ground between his knees. “It’s from the big basket they gave me. I guess they don’t do watches anymore. It’s fruit baskets now. Just as well, I guess. What do I need with a watch now that I’ve got nothing to be on time for?” He places the fruit on top of her marker and it rolls and falls and comes to rest on the ground by the toe of his sandal. “Don’t get grabby, now, Birdie,” he says. “No one’s going to take it from you.” He lifts and dusts the fruit on his t-shirt, then says, “I wanted you to have the first piece out of the basket. There’re some strange-looking critters in there. It’ll take me two weeks to finish it all off.” He replaces the fruit on the marker, this time slow to remove his hand until it’s precisely balanced.

While she inspects her gift, Roscoe looks to find the Cordoba up the hill amongst the privileged dead, watching it break and stop, its frontend angled down on the steep cemetery road. The big driver’s door pushes open with a groan of ancient hinges that echoes down the hill and sends a sympathetic ache into Roscoe’s knees when the wave of sound passes through them. A foot emerges from the door. Birdie speaks now but it doesn’t register. At this same moment the Cordoba begins to roll down the hill, door open, its driver’s leg still pushed out, shoe bottom stuttering on the blacktop. The car gains speed as it descends, arcing shallowly to the left but traveling a great enough distance for that angle to lead it deep into the cemetery grass. The driver projects through the open door, stiff and narrow-bodied and at an angle that causes Roscoe’s mind, primed as it is for a day of remembrance, to make a flash association to childhood winks and squidgers. The driver lands in the grass as the Cordoba’s front bumper slaps the ass of the marble angel that stops it. The angel shivers but is staid.

Roscoe rises with a forgotten agility, his rusty joints seeming lubricated by the excitement, toppling his folding chair. Across the cemetery road, all is now still: the Cordo-

ba; the colorful bands of clothing in the grass, which are all he can see of the driver; the staid angel.

He’s unsure what to do.

Birdie offers a suggestion, but Roscoe rejoins her with an irritation born of his own embarrassment: “Well, obviously, Birdie, but I didn’t bring my phone, did I? How could I have known I’d need it?” She whips up a little wind at his feet to shoo him, and he takes a single step toward the road then pauses, looks behind him, notices his up-turned chair and rights it. “You wait here,” he says to hear himself in charge before continuing in hesitant steps toward the scene.

On the blacktop, Roscoe’s sandals make a shuffling sound. The sturdy Cordoba looks unharmed, butted against the marble angel, ready for anything. “Hey, there,” Roscoe calls to the thin, motionless figure in the grass. “Hey, there, are you okay?” He’s not yet close enough to tell which direction the body is laying, concealed as it is by a foreground of small markers and urns and a bouquet of dying flowers. But he’s chosen an end to which he directs his inquiry and is startled when a head rises from what he’s decided are feet, turning one way then the other. A pretty, old lady head, made up like Sunday morning, a leaf caught in her hair.

“Hank?” the head chirps. “What did you say?”

II.

Roscoe takes his lunch standing at the kitchen counter. The wicker fruit basket is painted a distressed green. As he rummages through it, he wonders if it might be repurposed as a receptacle for his balled socks, something he could tuck below the arm of his recliner to keep from having to fiddle so much with the dresser drawers. Of the exotic fruits whose names he doesn’t know, the translucent human eyeballs in the spikey sea urchin husks are so far his favorite. There are six of those empty husks piled on the counter beside fragments of a blood orange rind and a picked-over apple core. Birdie speaks and Roscoe wipes eyeball juice from his chin then swallows and says, “Well, what would you have me do? There’s so much, and only me to eat it.” Something quietly accusing in this. “So,” he says, welcoming his fate, “if they give me the runs, Birdie, then I guess they just give me the runs.” Still, he stops eating, collecting the discarded leavings from the counter in two sticky fistfuls and dropping them into the open lid of the kitchen wastebasket. At the upset this causes, a single gnat rises from the wastebasket’s mouth, zagging and getting lost to Roscoe’s aging eyes.

In the bathroom off the kitchen, he washes the sticky residue from his fingers, urinates without first drying his hands, favors not to wash them again, ignores the protests she levels against this decision.

Back in the kitchen, he wipes wet, long-fingered prints on the front of his pants. His eyes find the gnat hovering above the hilly terrain of the basket’s fruit before alighting onto the conspicuous purple knob of the lone pomegranate. Roscoe stops, watching the gnat’s perfect stillness, then raises a flat palm and smacks it dead. He lifts the pomegranate, heavy as a croquette ball, and flicks the black speck from its rind. The fruit’s calyx scrapes the skin of his palm and Roscoe examines it briefly, the shape of it recalling, he thinks, a distended anus. A disturbing association, but not so much so that it stops

him from inserting a brief, probing finger into it to give its stamen cluster a curious push.

Replacing the fruit, he says of the gnat, "I just sent you a friend, Birdie. He was trying to steal from my basket." He rubs his palms together to shed the pest's invisible remainders. "Hmm? Why shouldn't I have done it?" He hears her out, rolling his eyes at the broken record she's become. "I've told you before, Birdie: at my age a man doesn't need companions, not the way he once did. It's nature's way, to account for how thinned-out the peer group's gotten. The nicest folks always die first, you know that. So, reason stands that the older the age group the greater its concentrate of assholes, demographically-speaking. It's scientific fact. And besides, no robbing little fruit fly is any friend of mine."

By the kitchen clock, Roscoe sees that it's past eleven, and he realizes the mailman hasn't put the letters through the door slot. Ed, their man for years, would push them through promptly at ten o'clock, rain, snow, sleet, and all the rest. But it's a young guy now, no consistency, earbuds in as he tramples the neighborhood grass. The unreliability of his arrival—nine fifteen, eleven forty-five, ten twenty—has been ruining Roscoe's Saturday mornings for the better part of a year. Retirement, it now occurs to him, will mean dealing with this aggravation daily.

He ambles through the living room and peeks through the window in the front door. "It's a route," he says, exasperated, "the same every day. It makes no sense, this kind of variance." With the little half curtain pulled back, he stares for a time in each direction, his nose smooshed against the glass by the required angles. "Yes, yes" he says, confirming Birdie's observation, "an old man waiting on the mail to come. Har, har." Stubbornly, he stays at it. Fogging exhalations, defogging inhalations. An ambulance passes in front of the house, slow, no lights or sirens, the community safe and well.

It brings to Roscoe's mind this morning's excitement at the cemetery.

Birdie explores this.

"What?" he says to her. "Why would I do that? Why would I even want to, that kooky old gal? And why would she want to see me? Knock that stuff off, would you, Birdie? I'm in the middle of something." He checks the time on the cable box's big digital display, thinking of the hell he'll give the mail boy when he sets foot on this porch.

Birdie goes silent. Then the fruit gurgles in Roscoe's gut and the bathroom becomes an emergency.

III.

"Who are you again?" says the kooky old gal—Charlotte, by the band on her arm and the chart at her feet. The head of her hospital bed is angled up. Her hair is messier than when he last saw her, though the leaf has been removed.

"I'm the guy that called for the squad," Roscoe reminds her. "From the caretaker shack there at the cemetery. You kept calling me Hank."

"Oh," she says. "Yes, that was a mistake: you aren't Hank." She relays this as one might bad news, her tone sympathetic to lessen his disappointment. She stares for a long time at her clasped hands, praying, perhaps, or overcome by some hospital-grade pain.



Roscoe looks away, considers the room: unoccupied second bed, bed trays, visitor chair, clothes locker, curtains, plastic cups, water pitcher, tubes, lights, hums, beeps. As out of place as he feels at the feet of this stranger, the hospital itself is surprisingly welcoming, as if making him aware for the first time of a gentle, constant dread he feels outside of this space where at any time his body might be repossessed in a place unequipped for the occasion. What becomes of a man who drops dead at the Piggly Wiggly? Is there supermarket protocol? Are the hiring standards for store managers sufficient that he can entrust his own hereafter to their decision-making upon finding him cold and dead beside his shopping basket? The hospital, by contrast, with its basement cabinets of refrigerated trays built just to his size, inspires his heart to ping with a refreshing weightlessness.

When he glances back at Charlotte, he's surprised to find her eyes on him. Big, unfamiliar eyes that make him feel...what? Something distantly remembered. An awareness of being seen, possibly, for more than the stoop and bulges and folds of his age. "You know," she says, "don't you?"

In response, Roscoe does the thing with his mouth where it hangs open that used to drive Birdie mad.

"Your wife has passed," she clarifies, "but not fully. Right?"

Birdie tugs at his collar.

"Right," he says obediently. "She's the one that told me to come visit you."

Charlotte's smile is pure pleasure at her successful prediction. "Whew," she says. "Hank told me that. Do you know what that means? It means we started this day with him trying to honest-to-god murder me, and now here we are—what? Four hours later—and in good faith he's pointing you out as one of the few who can appreciate my situation. We're rare, you and I. Did you know that? Common is a thing we are not."

"Murder?" Roscoe says.

"Oh yeah, with the car today. Total Hank, the bastard." She looks off to her side and winks. "Thank you for calling the ambulance, by the way. I was positively hysterical at the time, so I apologize for not recognizing you now. That's why I made them keep me, my hysteria. They wanted to let me go, said nothing was wrong with me." At this, she tuts. "But Hank donated handsomely to this facility's cardiology wing, so when I demand admittance, you know, they listen."

Roscoe's mind is lingering down an abandoned corridor of this conversation, supernatural murder seeming a more significant topic than this exploration of her social clout. But there's a shove at his back, and he pushes on: "Hank, that's your husband?"

"Is, was—that's a distinction I'll leave to you and your god of choice. We were married for forty-two years until he passed. We met when he was in the navy, and we ended our earthly partnership in this very room."

Roscoe shutters.

Birdie pushes.

"Navy man, eh?" he says.

"A navy man, then a textiles man, then an angina man. And, for eight months now, a dead man. And also, I guess, for those same months, something like my spiritual guide." Her eyes dart unexpectedly as if watching a nuisance fly.

It occurs to Roscoe that Charlotte might be a lunatic. But, one widowed soul to another, he says to her, genuinely, "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Don't be. He'll get over it. So, listen: you came to my rescue and we're two haunted peas in this pod anyway, so let me tell you what we owe each other: you owe me nothing, and I owe you a reading."

"A reading?" Roscoe says. "I don't think I follow. You're what, like, a psychic?"

Charlotte laughs. "Isn't that the question of the hour: am I like a psychic? Yes, I think so. Hank? Eh, he says it's all him. I have no abilities, he says. Says I have a husband dead of a bad heart who sticks around and tells me things. Did I have these gifts before his passing? No. But trauma releases psychic potential, so chew on that, Hank. To develop my skills as a medium, I enroll in online classes, get my certificate, and Hank says, 'You have no skills. You know only what I choose to tell you.' Pish. So, he tries to prove it by giving me bad information. And did I give some bad readings? Yes, I did. Correlation? Causation? Who knows, we all have off days. I ignore him, persist in my studies, so he decides to kill me in the car today. But here we are back on good terms. So, where does that leave me vis-à-vis my abilities? You decide."

"Um."

"But to you," she continues, "someone who's admittedly visited, I think I'm a person you want to know. Tell me this: does your wife tell you things? Beyond complaints, I mean, and memories. She knows a lot, where she is, I can assure you. But she keeps it to herself, doesn't she? She does, if what I'm being told is correct."

Roscoe has, without realizing it, taken several steps toward the door. But Charlotte's eyes are on him again, and he goes no farther. In that quiet way he's learned, using only his mind, he asks for guidance in how to proceed. "Birdie?" he says. But he finds her silent, giving him instead a light squeeze on his heart muscle that momentarily takes his breath. Her meaning is unclear.

"No," he hears himself saying, his words feeling like an infidelity, "Birdie doesn't tell me much. Not, like, life's great mysteries, I mean. JFK, that's a conundrum I'd like to know more about. I don't know for sure that she knows about that, but, you know, probably? But, Birdie, she's always just: vitamins and prostate pills and remember Mammoth Cave? I love her to death—or longer, I suppose, obviously—but keeping things from me? It's just like her. It's the way she's always been with me."

"Oh god," she says with a smile, "it'll blow your mind."

Charlotte remains quiet. Building tension, Roscoe realizes, when she finally leans forward and says, "Hank, on the other hand, tells me everything. Write down your address. I'll be out of here in a day or two."

"JFK?"

"Oh god," she says with a smile, "it'll blow your mind."

IV.

At the Piggly Wiggly, Roscoe hurries. A crate of Old Milwaukee and a tin of potted ham.

His front door rustles over letters in the entryway.

On the kitchen counter, he lines the letters, beer, and ham tin beside the fruit basket: the focuses of his evening each waiting to be unpacked. The thought of eating causes his hands to crawl with hospital germs and supermarket germs and whatever careless, preventable Gen Y germs the mail boy's left on the letters. He runs the kitchen faucet and puts his hands under and a platoon of gnats—six, seven, eight, he counts—rise and scatter from the basin drain. His hands rise and clap, pivoting, clapping, spraying droplets of water on the cabinets and backsplash until his hunting eyes see no more of them. He checks his palms: three bodies. Maybe he got the others and they fell to floor, he thinks. But, in the stillness that follows, he feels them somewhere, watching. Aware now that he's their enemy.

Roscoe moves the ham tin, three cans of Old Milwaukee, and a variety of fruits to the television tray beside his recliner. The kitchen is too upsetting, being watched there by the thieving eyes of those invaders.

Two cans down, the food is gone. Roscoe feels sticky and full and numb and satisfied. He looks around him, then broaches the subject: "Birdie? You've sure been quiet this evening."

So she remains.

"You aren't jealous, not of that kooky Charlotte?"

He listens, but hears only the first of the can he's opening.

"Something's occurred to me," he says in a tone that's pensive and delicate. "I'm going to ask you—and if I'm being dumb, well, I guess you've never been shy about letting me know." He clears his throat, then says, "Do you worry after me, Birdie? Is that it? Did you send me to that hospital today because you want me and her, Charlotte, to, you know, get together? Because you think she'll take care of me better than I'm doing on my own?"

Deep in his ear he hears her response: a laugh, warm and genuine. A laugh like Dick Smothers gave her in her parent's living room when they were dating. Like when he fell and split his pants that time they hiked the Black Mountains. A laugh of pleasure, he knows. His guess was correct. He smiles. "I thought that might be it. I don't know that I see in her what you do. But I trust you. I'll give her a shot." He listens, but Birdie's speechless, apparently overcome with love for her sloppy, helpless husband. Tears come into his eyes. "You're a sweet old girl, Delberta," he manages. "A sweet old girl."

He awakes sometime later, his bladder screaming. He places a hand on the television tray to aid his careful rise from the recliner. Rinds and cores and one rattling can topple and fall to the floor and cause gnats to scatter. He's only vaguely aware, so focused is he on rising and moving with the cautious swiftness needed to keep from pissing himself, that the pests have expanded their foothold and discovered where he sleeps.

He waits, counting the living black specks on the ceiling, those pests that think they can evade him by resting here.

V.

The black bodies are everywhere: mangled and stuck to the kitchen cabinets, crushed against the backsplash, littering the kitchen counter and the floor where they sometimes fall when he smacks them, flattened against the bathroom mirror and shower tile, wrecked and resting in the basin of every sink.

The fruit basket was a Trojan horse. Coppertech screwing him over one last time. It's only now that he's eaten two-thirds of its fruit—what's left of it beginning to pit and pucker and lend a corner of the kitchen the sweet tang of rot—that Roscoe finally dumps the remainder in the outdoor bin. A viscous gunk has stained its wicker bottom, so he stores the basket in the garage to allow it time to dry-out and detoxify. From the garage, he pulls a dust buster from a storage container then plugs it into the outlet below the kitchen bar. He waits, counting the living black specks on the ceiling, those pests that think they can evade him by resting here.

When the vacuum's charging light changes green, Roscoe unplugs it and hovers them alive from the ceiling into the device's clear plastic tank, its nozzle giving him the extra reach he needs. Some dodge the suck of the vacuum, alert now to his baleful power, but still succumbing to it when Roscoe finds them again, ever smarter in the way he angles his nozzle, sucking them into purgatory.

He stuffs napkins into the open spout to prevent them from walking up the nozzle to freedom then watches them in their terrarium prison, walking the walls or despairing on the conical filter. Roscoe plugs in the dust buster to recharge then leaves them like god forsaking the damned.

VI.

With the gentlest wipe of a dampened rag, the dead release from the surfaces where he's smashed them. A whitewashing of the genocide takes only minutes. Then Roscoe begins the Tuna Helper. When he spots more living pests, he returns to the vacuum. Again and again, their numbers always seeming to restore however thoroughly he hunts them.

Soon, he hears the Cordoba in the driveway and there's a knock at his door. "Well, Birdie," he says, "this is it."

Seated at his table some minutes later, Charlotte complains of a suspected fish allergy she's acquired since Hank's death, a grief response to no longer having him walk in Saturday afternoons with fresh-caught tilapia to clean and fry. But, given time, she eats all that he's piled on her plate and then accepts his offer of seconds.

She's brought a canvas tote bag that's leaning against the leg of her chair. Roscoe sits across from her chewing and nodding and offering polite smiles, looking up for fear of gnats silhouetted against the dining room chandelier, looking down to wonder about the bag.

On she goes. About textiles and widowhood and how she dated Stacey Keach when they were young, back in their shared hometown of Savannah, before he was famous and still known locally as Walt.

It's while she's on this subject, saying something about the actor's famous moustache, that Roscoe spies a gnat, loping and lackadaisical, in the space between the chandelier and the table. His eyes shift from the pest to Charlotte, self-conscious that she's noticed it too, that it may alert her to the façade of his surface-level cleaning, done on her behalf. But she remains lost in her oral history, seeing nothing but the mental movie of the stories she's narrating, punctuating that narrative's pauses with forkfuls of tuna.

The gnat descends to the back of an empty chair between them. Roscoe watches it warily, his heart skipping when it rises again, hovering low around Charlotte's plate then settling onto her pile of noodles and fish. She stabs at the pile, having moved on now to some quip about Hank and the failed Reagan/Schweiker campaign of 1976. She takes the bite with a dainty propriety.

Roscoe wheezes. Charlotte's face rumples, holding the food in her mouth, her eyes cycling, gauging some internal bodily problem. He pictures the gnat zipping madly about her mouth, wings tickling its roof and the backs of her lip, struggling for escape, then descending finally through the hatch of her throat.

Charlotte swallows and breaths heavily.

"Is everything okay?" Roscoe says.

"I think," she says, "I need your bathroom. I haven't eaten this poorly in decades. Maybe I should—yup, yup, crisis affirmed! Hold that thought." She rises, the feet of her chair moaning against the wooden floor. She finds the kitchen bathroom without being



directed and locks herself inside. “Maybe you should play some music,” she calls, a put-on lightness in her voice.

Roscoe uses this opportunity to retrieve the dust buster from where he’s secreted it in the dining room hutch. In its clear belly, his captives roil and reshuffle. He removes the napkins that plug its spout and leans over Charlotte’s plate. It takes seconds to focus his eyes to identify what is pepper, and which is his gnat. He finds it glued to the sticky sauce, struggling, its free wing gesticulating in his direction. He turns on the vacuum. At the sound, two other invaders scatter, one from the rim of the chandelier, another from the ceiling above him, as if from a remembered trauma with the device or from some gnat mythology of the old monster with the hungry hand. Roscoe holds the spout an inch away from the plate, then a half an inch, then less, but the suction isn’t great enough.

“What’s that sound?” Charlotte calls, and Roscoe startles and plunges the nozzle into the tuna mound. It takes down the gnat and a portion of noodles with a sickening suck. He doesn’t answer, instead removing the dust buster from her plate, cleaning its nozzle with his napkin, and setting about finding the other two pests. He gets one on the trim beside the back door. The other, after some searching, he finds returned to the chandelier.

The toilet flushes sooner than he’d expected, given the emergency she’d suggested. He panics and stashes the dust buster in the seat of an empty chair at the table. His appraisal of the room reads clear, so he takes his seat.

When Charlotte returns, her expression is troubled. “Your bathroom,” she says, “is crawling with fruit flies.”

“Oh,” Roscoe says, considering if there’s a lie that might help him here. None comes to him, so he settles on the truth: “Sorry for that. It was this fruit basket they gave me for my retirement party. I guess I kept it around too long and attracted the damn things, and now I can’t get rid of them.”

“I don’t think that’s it,” Charlotte says.

Roscoe considers this. “So then, I mean, what is it? You think I’m just a filthy old stag? I mean I’m not the tidiest man, I’ll grant you, but I’ve never been infested before.”

“No,” she says, reclaiming her place at the table, her face sobered in anticipation of delivering bad news. “In my courses we learned that spirits who are aggrieved, often times they manifest that upset as a plague of insects. We don’t know why they trouble the living with insects rather than, say, mice or smallpox or whatever. But that’s how they tend to signal.”

“You think Birdie did this?”

“I think Birdie is a troubled spirit.” She softens this news with a protracted gaze, miles of sorrow and sympathy in her eyes, then suddenly she claps her hands and gets down to it. “But why trust my hunch,” she says, reaching for her tote bag and bringing it into her lap, “when I brought tools?” She produces a velvet pouch and from it, three polished stones. She lines the stones in front of her on the table, closes her eyes, and allows her shaky hands to hover in the space above them. “Quiet!” she spits, addressing the command to the empty space beside her, leading Roscoe to suspect that Hank is heckling the absurdity of this gesture.

As he watches her, Roscoe’s thoughts are on the bathroom. He’d like an idea about the number of gnats she saw in there to gauge how mortified he should feel. But it seems rude to walk out on a woman who’s undertaking a trance, or whatever, on his behalf. So he watches her: body trembling as she tries to hold it still, the way she rolls her head forward and back, so deeply invested in her task that it’s like her very presence in the room has faded, like he’s watching a show on television, a kind of abandoned voyeurism that allows him to inspect the wisp of hair on her upper lip, the painted hollows of her cheeks, the prominent vein at her temple without the feeling of being rude or the potential of being caught. So, when her eyes open and catch him—a stern glower right into his eyes—Roscoe feels a guilty blush bloom in his chest and pull over his face and scalp. It holds, hot and incriminating, for the long seconds before she speaks.

“Roscoe,” Charlotte says, “this is Birdie.”

This leaves him momentarily speechless. In a thin voice he finally says, “Birdie?”

Charlotte nods slowly, then a look of frustration comes over her face and she shouts, “Goddamn-it, Hank! Would you knock it off?” To Roscoe, she says, “Sorry, no, it’s still just me. Nothing was happening with the stones, so I thought if I showed Birdie the gist of what I was going for she might jump in and start talking through me. Might have worked too, but for the peanut gallery.”

Roscoe loves his dead wife, but still he’s relieved she hasn’t commandeered the living body of his dinner companion.

“So, the stones are a bust,” Charlotte says, pushing them away from her. “Online, it said they were good for opening the channel to the other side, but whatever. I’ll give

them a negative review. No worries, though, we still have the Ouija board and a pack of tarot cards. You look upset. Don't worry, we'll get this done."

Roscoe begins to say that he's skeptical. That Birdie's been unusually tight-lipped lately. He wants to say how he thinks she's hanging back to allow something to blossom between the two old souls at this table, each of them abandoned by their life's partner when that partner succumbed to death. Before he can, though, Charlotte says, "Oh, shut up, Hank!"

As quickly as it had occurred to him, the opportunity passed, and he's sad to have missed it. "What's he saying?" he asks, moving on.

"Oh, Hank says this is all just mumbo-jumbo. But, if that's what Hank thinks," she continues, calling out to the dead man himself, "maybe he could do a gal a favor and start telling her what's what."

In the silence that follows, a pronounced dejection hangs in the dining room, a vibration of mingled sadness born of the two widowed people sitting knee to knee at a table where there was once the chaos of children and life and marital squabble, bill payment and tax preparation and holiday meals, birthday cakes and gifts in festive paper and special occasion pizzas, and later the casseroles and flower arrangements of friend's condolences for Roscoe's loss. That's his sense of the room's vibration, anyway, lasting only a second before the table begins to violently shake.

"Geez-o-Pete!" Roscoe cries at the upset.

Their paper plates slap against the table top.

"Hank, is that you?" Charlotte's voice sounds frightened. "You know I was only kidding, right hon?"

The physical violence of the shaking rattles the dust buster to the edge of its chair and then over its side, and it slams to the floor at Roscoe's feet, the holding tank breaking free and skittering across the room. A cloud of gnats arise, a momentary plague at which he swats and tightens his eyes and his lips and covers his head like the air raid drills of his boyhood.

He waits this way, face between his elbows until Charlotte says, "They're gone." He blinks and finds that she's right, the whole bunch of them disappeared somewhere. The table is at rest. The dining room, quiet.

"Where?" Roscoe says, his eyes searching the walls and ceiling. "I mean, what happened to them all?" He looks to Charlotte for answers, but sees her gaze is focused somewhere beyond this room. Her face, still basically a stranger's, is close to tears maybe. "Hey, there," he says, taking charge. "I know it was scary, but look—they're gone now. We're all right."

"Can I ask you something?" Charlotte says. "Birdie—did she have red hair and kind of a big rack?"

"That sounds like her," Roscoe says. "The rack, anyway. Her hair was red at the end, but dyed."

"So obviously dyed," Charlotte agrees, her voice measured and emotionless. A tear arcs into the hollow of her gaunt cheek. "I saw her. I saw her and Hank. Right when the gnats came, and I closed my eyes. At first, he was standing beside me, and she walked right up to him and she did this sort of lewd gesture with her hand and her tongue poking into her cheek. He knew what she meant. Hank was always kind of a

pussy hound. But, Birdie, she took him by the hand and then they passed over through a channel I must have opened with my stones. Off they went together into the light."

"No," Roscoe scoffs.

"That day at the graveyard, that's when she first saw him. She saw him, and she wanted him, and so she set all this up. Hank didn't tell me that. Birdie did. And now they're gone, both of them."

To Roscoe—who this morning soaped up his finger to finally wiggle off his wedding ring, believing it to be his wife's plan that he have a living companion to share his final good years—this sounds unlikely. "Birdie?" he calls. "You're still with me, right?"

Charlotte watches him closely, seeming hopeful he'll receive an answer in spite of what she knows. "Hank?" she says, following his lead even as she shakes her head at the futility.

Both listen for an answer, staring past one another at the dining room table, silent and alone.

Lost in Translation

Dorsía Smith Silva

In the Pueblo supermarket,
you drift from aisle to aisle
like a runaway echo
looking for rice—
folded tightly in a bright yellow bag with a red seal.
You didn't know that it would be a treasure hunt.
There's yellow rice, brown rice, wild rice:
jasmine rice in aisle 6,
Cajun rice with ground sassafras root too.
"Necesita ayuda?"
"Sí," you answer in your best Spanish. "Necesito arroz blanco."
Your flat double r gives you away as a foreigner,
but you are led to aisle 9 to view
the stacks of rice bags looking like gold bars.
"Buen día."
"Muchas gracias. Buen día a usted." You press to say more,
but your lingual frenulum betrays you.
It leaves you with sucking sounds on the tips of your tongue,
something indecipherable
like going from visitor to resident.





Houseplants

Ana Cottle

Badly drawn female characters trying to do away with death

watch the
needle dance

At the end I stumbled as evidence of exhaustion, tumbled

swirling steamed
blaring ruffling

refracting through

a fast-paced

metaphysical arena

based solely on

the biology and history of whales

wild vindictiveness self-declared

(of course)

endures over the unlearning of

the dutiful inflection

of a culturally endowed

tragedy



Parting of the Ways

Diana Valenzuela

Gone were the Barbie Jeeps and the purple bicycle with shimmering pink streamers on the handles. Gone were the baby animal screams of Zerena and her next-door best friends leaping under the lawn sprinklers at 11 AM on Saturdays and Sundays between May and September. Gone was the gritty Lamb Chop doll she dragged by its head with her each day to preschool first, then morning kindergarten later. Gone were the early June manifestations of pink and yellow balloons tied to the spindly black railing of the Zambonis' front steps with a poster board sign that screamed "Birthday Party Here!!!!" taped to the front door.

Long gone were the Zambonis themselves on the afternoon when I visited my best hiding spot in Malachi's salty-smelling basement room. The spot was under a loose floorboard in his closet. His closet was like a black hole, big and wide and happy to consume all light. I was feeling around for a subtle notch in the right board, my arms plunged up to my elbows in the musty depths.

But, as I dug through the fluttering piles of porno magazines and the flattened, dirt-caked layers of basketball shorts that had the dusty look of relics pulled from an archaeological dig, I suddenly felt something new. I felt a softness.

Malachi never had softness in his life, this was fact. Our mother homeschooled us, which meant I knew every jagged edge of Malachi's bad side, which was as complex and hard as a cliff face. Technically, homeschooling was supposed to teach us the many shapes of God and Jesus. But in the shadows—while shoved out the way of whatever church it was at the time—we learned what Malachi could do to kittens. And to baby birds.

I gripped the softness: it was lumpy, well loved, and pilling.

When I visited my hiding spot that day, I only wanted to check on my hidden copy of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (I'd stolen it from the library, the result of a carefully constructed three week plan). I didn't mean to get involved. I should have ignored it. But when I palmed that plush handful of mystery wedged beneath the trash, I pulled.

*

I was Mary Magdalene Trejo Perkins-Tabernacle, aged 11. I didn't have a birth certificate and I'd never spent a day in school. I'd never had an intellectual equal besides Nazareth, but he was my brother and I didn't think that counted. Still, even I knew that nobody watched Lamb Chop anymore. It was the year 2000. We'd left Lamb Chop behind in the 90's.

We'd left Zerena Zamboni behind in the 90's too. Or, she had left us.

Zerena Zamboni was 6 when she disappeared. By the time I found Lamb Chop in Malachi's closet she was supposed to be 10 but we all knew she probably didn't have a real age anymore because her life was over. Even our mother said as much and didn't often obsess over it, which both Nazareth and I were pleased about. But that was probably sad for Zerena: after all, if the Perkins-Tabernacle household didn't harbor delusions about your potential for miraculous and angelic survival, then nobody did.

*

On the first anniversary of Zerena's disappearance, the Zamboni's hadn't yet fled back to Houston. They stayed in their little ranch house across the street and peppered the town with flyers, with press conferences, with accusations. There was a school bus driver who had a shabby alibi and Mr. and Mrs. Zamboni were busy circling around him like a pair of sharks.

That day, mother wore a greying yellow apron in our kitchen. She smoked a Newport as she piled fresh biscuits into a massive tupperware for Brother Zacharias, who was her obsession at the time. Me and my younger siblings sat at the table. We nibbled microwaved popcorn for breakfast, all of us eating from a single beige bowl.

Our mother said, "What we're seeing here is the result of a society. That's what Zacharias' CD talks all about, and I want you all to have your reports on that by Friday, remember. Now, everyone knows what a society does. Even Mary Magdalene and Lamb know. A better society would be no society. A better society is, you see now, more about a loose cooperative conglomerate around one man. But, you see now, we're getting far from the matter at hand. The matter at hand is a loose society losing its way, getting looser. So when a little girl gets mutilated and murdered because our society—"

"How do you know she was mutilated?" Malachi called out from the doorway behind us. None of us had heard him emerge from the basement. Me, Nazareth, and the twins—Lamb and Galilee—froze, like rabbits. Our eyes darted back and forth between each other's.

Malachi shoved me aside with the bony jut of his hip as he sauntered towards our

mother. He bent slightly to her height, and looked her in the eye, waiting.

“I’m teaching them a lesson about where we’re living,” our mother mumbled, shaking her head, pushing her frazzled bangs off her face, ashing her Newport into a seashell half-hanging off the counter. “Now, there’s a lot to learn from these situations. You all know I’m still thinking of New Hampshire. I’m still meditating on that, now.”

His face remained placid and as still as rock. He reached into her Tupperware, grabbed a biscuit, and shoved one in his mouth. Crumbs tumbled from his skinny, red lips to the brick print linoleum floor.

Our mother narrowed her eyes and hissed, “Those are for some people who’re coming to visit Brother Zacharias this afternoon. They may write about him and tell his story.”

Malachi turned around and—still chewing—slapped her softly, quietly in the face. If his hand had moved through space differently he could have been brushing something off of her cheek. He didn’t always need to hit you hard to be violent.

The twins gasped, without much noise, just these wispy little inhales. Nazareth and I each swayed into one of the twins, very gently, so that the fuzz on our arms melded into theirs. He’d never hit our mother before. This was the first time.

Our mother lifted a shaking hand, very slowly and placed it on her cheek.

“We’re not moving to New Hampshire,” he said, “because I don’t believe in God.”

He took another bite of biscuit and meandered out the back door.

Our mother stubbed out her Newport in the crusty ashtray shell and said, “Man is the center of a household. As God’s the center of the universe. Remember that Mary Magdalene, Lamb. Start your science.”

We skittered to the living room.

This can’t be bad. Classic Trolley Problem issue. Maybe she’ll stop thinking of New Hampshire. At least life with M. in hellish suburbia is not the wilds of the mountains, Nazareth wrote in squiggle code in my science workbook. Something tells me M. is a much lesser evil than being alone with mom, Malachi, and Z’s little cult on some farm.

Correct. Z’s ugly Death Eaters, I responded, would certainly eat us alive. We must remember (and remind the twins): this is not New Hampshire. This is the Dursleys, which we can all survive.

Then we huddled down to our fake science, which means we spent yet another hour responding to short answer questions about the meaning of creation.

*

Our mother switched religions the way other people’s mothers worked their ways through boyfriends.

Like many of those mothers, you could say our mother had a type. The religions were all harshly Christian, often with some crime deemed necessary. We did a few of the more popular ones: we were Pentecostal for my first birthday, we were Mormon when I dug my first hiding places under the house (for a thing of Pop Rocks and a copy of *Winnie the Pooh*). We were Christian Scientists the year Malachi broke Naz’s nose against the fridge and that’s why he never got it set and of course it healed crooked. We were



Jehovah’s Witnesses the June before Zerena disappeared and that’s why I grit my teeth and stared damn hard at “Birthday Party Here!”

We also spent a lot of time around little prophets like Zacharias who rented space in strip malls or preached in veiled womens’ kitchens. These prophets collected gutter punks and abused, underaged girls. These prophets organized religion around themselves and their pleasure almost transparently. I mean, come on: why did Zacharias need to spiritually marry every woman in the congregation? What was the point in that?

But that wasn’t why we hated Zacharias and would rather silently tiptoe around the greedy, hormonal whims of Malachi than abscond to the wilds of New Hampshire. No, it’s just a question I still have.

*

Before, when Malachi was still technically a kid like us, our mom led us through ever-changing worlds, worlds than blended together with common themes: babies, salvation, witchcraft, the meaning of life.

Malachi picketed Planned Parenthoods with the rest of us, he sat through one practice mass suicide event when we traveled with this false Messiah’s summer caravan to Tennessee. Malachi shoplifted *Maxim* magazines from gas stations and blackmailed me and Naz when he noticed us stealing from libraries and bookshops. I took *Harry*

Potter books (which our mother sometimes found and burned) and Nazareth obsessed over series of books called *Thought Problems for Kids!* That's where he found out about the Trolley Problem, which was his obsession and guide to everything.

“God chose to give you babies we could use,” Brother Zacharias said to our mother in front of us

But by the time I found Lamb Chop, Malachi was nineteen and therefore the man of the house, and according to our mother, the center of our universe. He no longer got dragged anywhere. Our mom took me, Naz, and the twins along to meetings, to long church services (where I read from a copy of *The Prisoner of Azkaban* that I'd removed the binding from then glued into the skin of a Bible), to Zacharias' little basement meetings where he debated whether or not he should strap bombs to me and Nazareth and send us into a predominantly black or brown church (where Nazareth sat shaking as Zacharias strapped a maybe-fake bomb to him as an example).

“God chose to give you babies we could use,” Brother Zacharias said to our mother in front of us, not even bothering to whisper. “Tools, is what these babies are. They can do the Lord's work. They can change the world. ...If only I can figure out how to make these goshdarn things explode.”

But Malachi didn't have to go to these meetings anymore. He didn't have to go to church. He spent his time at a construction job and with a buck-toothed girlfriend named Jenni.

He bought malt liquor and drank it in the middle of the day. He slapped me and my little siblings around, but almost as an afterthought. He seemed more excited to slap Jenni and our mother, which he did often. He sometimes took Jenni's car and left for days, probably to experiment with slapping people we did not know.

This is all to say that even though we lived in ignorance and fear in a beige little house in the middle of Slidell, Louisiana, even though Naz and I had to constantly remind the twins of the rules, even though we cowered like tame little rabbits, we were safe. We were comfortable.

Malachi demanded we stay in Slidell, where he could nab money from Jenni, where he knew the neighborhood streets, where he could buy his malt liquor on Sundays thanks to Louisiana liquor laws.

Malachi kept taunting our mother with “I don't believe in God.” It turned her bright red and saved us from the New Hampshire dreams and the many potential acts of hate against people who resembled me and Naz, the half-brown Perkins-Tabernacle's whose beige skin marked us like Harry's lightning scar, except worse because we couldn't cover it by brushing messy hair down across our foreheads.

*

The day I found Lamb Chop, Brother Zacharias had driven my mom, Lamb, Galilee, and a few prim veiled women to New Orleans for a protest. In the past couple

of years, our mom had drifted away from Zacharias towards a Christian crystal healer named Kimmee, then back to Mormonism, then back to Zacharias, who now liked to call himself a revolutionary of Christian white identity.

Malachi was at work or maybe just off hunting, fishing, drinking, fighting, following lone women with his eyes and sometimes shoving them into corners just to see them react to his size, his presence, his pointy, rat eyed, red lipped face.

I ran upstairs, to Nazareth's room, with Zerena's beloved Lamb Chop in my fist. Lamb Chop wore red mittens and a little corduroy coat. She had been shades of white and brown once but time and Zerena's love turned it a deep grey, with crispy black and brown smudges at the tips of its ears.

Naz was reading on the lower bunk of our bunk beds. He snapped his book shut as soon as he saw my face.

“What's wrong?” he squeaked.

“I found it in Malachi's closet.” I shoved Lamb Chop in his face. “Near my Harry Potter hiding spot.”

Naz frowned. “Zerena's beloved. Logically, if you found it amongst Malachi's other things—”

I shook my head.

His reply came out so soft he sounded like one of the twins. “He harmed her.”

We didn't know enough about the world to understand how to treat evidence. We didn't have a TV, we hadn't seen many movies, neither of us had read true crime. We hugged the Lamb Chop and cuddled it between us, smearing our DNA over everything.

“Well perhaps it proves exactly nothing.” I sighed. I had an odd impulse to chew on Lamb Chop's ear. “He could have found it in the road.”

“He lacks the necessary tenderness to save such a thing.”

I shuddered and squeezed Lamb Chop closer. “Yes, of course. But oddly, it reminds me of Professor Snape in the first book. All evidence points towards him—”

“They didn't find physical evidence,” Naz scoffed. “And besides, you're merely in denial. I understand: if we find someone to tell about this, then we might sacrifice the heap of incidental good Malachi grants us.”

“As in not becoming suicide bombers for Zacharias?”

“Precisely.”

“But what do you think he did to her?” I regretted asking this as soon as I say it. I didn't know what to imagine. I felt a sensation of great, withering fear, starting in my throat, my chest. It spread to my stomach.

I remembered a moment of Malachi's cruelty, when he was still a boy: he had shrieked with horsey laughter as he snipped a stray dog's tail. His spit flew into my face, the dog had cried, he'd used these wire cutters, we all ran, we all screamed. What had happened to the dog? None of the adults had found out, right? I couldn't remember and still can't. Thinking of the look on that dog's face feels like pressing my fingers to a white-hot piece of metal.

Naz squeezed Lamb Chop close and said, “If mom is serious about New Hampshire this time, it might hurt us quite a bit if we tell on Malachi. We'd likely be harmed. Plus, if they made us place bombs in public...why, dozens of strangers could die! Zerena is likely dead. We can't bring her back to life. Should we endanger ourselves for the sake

of her family?”

“Trolley Problem?”

“Precisely.”

I held my chin in my hand and said, “It would harm fewer people if we kept quiet, but—”

Our mom’s minivan sputtered into the driveway. We rushed downstairs to finish our history worksheets.

We reached a decision without actually saying anything. You know we didn’t tell.

*

Maybe Malachi sensed a change. He probably smelled it on us, a cough medicine-sweet odor of compliance. Or maybe he knew no logic, and just acted at random.

Either way, he began to hunger.

He shoved my face in a bowl of cereal and held me down like he planned to drown me. He crushed my nose into the bottom of the bowl like a pinned sea creature.

He took Galilee on a ride and left him in a Piggly Wiggly parking lot in Madisonville. Then Malachi came home and drank in the driveway, telling the story to Jenni over and over again.

Malachi hit Nazareth until a cloud of mottled bruises bloomed down his sides. A cluster of freckles poking through the purple yellow blue splotches reminded me of the night sky.

Malachi’s girlfriend Jenni blended in with one of us: silent and prone to flipping through the few books left in the house. Her eyes always sprung straight to Malachi whenever he moved across a room. She was kind of brown, too, with long black hair. If we’d been different people then, maybe one of us—me or Naz—could have pushed aside our math worksheets and stopped everything. We could have said, “Our brother hurts you. Let’s stop that. Let’s protect one another.”

Because he did hurt Jenni, often in front of us, often in front of our mother, but always in the cool, dingy confines of our beige house with the spiky black fence and the concrete in place of a front yard and the “no solicitors” sign: the neat, anonymous disguise for our hellscape.

One afternoon, Malachi pinned Jenni to the wall. She hadn’t done his laundry. He pushed her across the room so that she stumbled over Lamb’s legs and ended up in a heap at our feet.

“Apologize for touching my goddamn brothers and sisters,” Malachi cackled. “If you had any idea how to act you’d be pouring perfume on your hair and cleaning their feet with it.”

My mother poked her head around the corner of the kitchen then pulled herself back so fast that she was nothing more than a blurry, white oval looming around the outskirts of the scene. If any of us had uttered the word “goddamn” in front of her she would have skinned us alive. But that’s what it meant to have religion, she insisted. To give yourself over to a man.

Jenni’s face gushed blood. She began to mutter, “Sorry” around small gulps of the blood.

Malachi shook his head. “They don’t accept that. Try again. Tell her, fuckers.”

We looked at each other. We pressed our lips into tight lines. Malachi quickly smacked Galilee on the side of the head.

So we acted as his little underlings and all told Jenni, “Try again.”

Even the twins, their voices soft as drizzle went, “Try again.”

This is what we’ll never come back from. This is what I mean whenever I tell people that I’m inherently not a good person. When I was alone with Naz and the twins, we’d call the twins Gryffindors. Me and Naz were Ravenclaws. We pretended to slay dragons.

But here, in real life, we rotted in all our cowardly ugliness, we let our brother eat us alive.

*

It all ended as I read the Cedric Diggory death scene to Lamb on a hot August morning. Lamb was curled up on my legs. Galilee, who always fled during a death scene, was hiding in the backyard. But Lamb liked to stare the world in the face.

At least that’s how I remember her. She had an unflinching gaze and hair so light it looked like corn silk. Her eyelashes were practically invisible.

Aloud, I read, “Kill the spare.”

He’d said we were smart, which was the only compliment my older brother had ever given me.

Lamb shivered against me, looked up, and smiled.

Before I could say the next line, Malachi slammed the door open. Jenni stood behind him.

“You took some of my shit, didn’t you?” His shoulders were hunched up to his ears.

Lamb and I didn’t speak. We shook our heads so hard I thought they would fall off.

Wordlessly, Jenni turned to my dresser and started opening the drawers. She pawed through my socks, through my navy blue sack dresses, my long sleeve navy blue t-shirts, a few random veils.

“They’re not gonna hide *shit* in sock drawers,” Malachi hissed at her. “They like to think they’re smart, don’t they? They’re just so *smart*.”

Jenni scurried to the closet and began to move things around in there.

He turned back to me. “I want that Lamb Chop,” he said. “I like it. Give it back.”

Immediately, my face flushed with blood. First, and this is the worst of it, I felt a little gurgle of pride burst up from within me. He’d said we were smart, which was the only compliment my older brother had ever given me. Second, and this is just as bad, I was happy that he knew I took it. Like out of all of us who were not stupid enough to hide secrets in sock drawers, perhaps I was the least stupid. The center of my universe



thought me least stupid.

This is all to say that when I replied, “I destroyed it,” I wasn’t thinking of the Trolley Problem. I wasn’t thinking of *The Goblet of Fire* and whatever kindnesses Harry Potter would have performed in my place. I wasn’t thinking of Lamb and what might happen to her. I wasn’t thinking that I should find a way to consult brainy Nazareth with his little philosophy books.

I was proud.

I was also lying. I hadn’t destroyed anything, I’d placed the Lamb Chop in a hiding spot that usually held hard candy. It was under the house, in a well disguised hole.

“It was the intelligent thing to do,” I continued. “I’m very sorry, but I know it’s true.”

He looked me in the eye and nodded once. He said, “Good looking out.”

Then he grabbed my little sister by the hair and whipped her out of the room.

*

At dusk, Naz and I were writing reports on the *Left Behind* series when he asked, “Where has Lamb gone off to?”

“I don’t know.” I pretended to proofread. I pretended so hard that I pressed the tip of my nose into my paper.

Our mother went to a meeting that night and left us alone with half a bag of frozen meatballs. Normally, the twins liked dinner with just the four of us. They would clamor for more food and speak wildly with their hands. They would draw with crayons at the table and do goofy dragon imitations.

Naz popped the meatballs in the microwave. “Is Lamb with mom?”

Galilee shook his head, then rubbed his forehead with both of his palms. I wondered if he knew something through twin magic.

I pet his head and muttered, “I saw her with Malachi earlier.”

“What?” This came from Naz as he plucked a cylinder of juice concentrate from the fridge. “Do you think he left her at the Piggly Wiggly?”

I breathed deeply, once. I exhaled, “He asked about Lamb Chop. He knows I took it.”

My brother dropped the can of concentrate and slammed the freezer shut.

Galilee began to cry. He always cried with just tears. No noise.

Naz picked up the can. His hands shook. “Why didn’t you tell me this?”

“I think I convinced him that I had his best interest in mind. Even he must realize that he has use for logic. I told him that I was protecting him from being caught. I said I destroyed it, which is nearly true.”

“Was he mad?” Naz smacked himself on the head with his fingers. “That’s a stupid question, of course he was mad.”

“No! He wasn’t! He seemed to think it a smart choice, more or less.”

Naz sighed. “Perhaps it won’t be too detrimental to us. If we could be of some use to him we could minimize the amount of harm he does overall. You swear he wasn’t mad?”

Galilee whispered, “Lamb.”

I crouched down to speak to Galilee face to face.

“Don’t worry so much Gal. I’d bet anything that Malachi left her at the Piggly Wiggly, too. She’ll be home in no time. It won’t be a great experience for her, but we’re doing this so she won’t experience worse. Naz and I have worked it all out. We can do the least amount of harm this way. If Malachi gets in trouble, then we’ll likely end up going out to the woods. Then Brother Zacharias won’t let you see me and Nazareth again. Would you like that to happen?”

He shook his head no.

You think we’re stupid. Well, we were stupid. We were too stupid to know how stupid we were. So no, we didn’t speak up when he took our sister. And we thought ourselves very smart for that, and did not hold back on congratulating ourselves internally, silently, beneath the slimy veneer of toxic wisdom.

*

Hours passed, dripping past us until our eyes sunk closed. Our mother was organizing a group trip to a local Confederate monument, which she called her “lifeblood.” When she came home, she felt something. I don’t know what that means. I’m assuming quite a lot. But by the next evening, she had two black suitcases packed. We never saw her packing. I think she saw something on our sleeping faces: a slight change in expres-

sion, a tic or two. I think she knew. My tia tells me now, still—when I ask her what she thinks my mom was thinking—she says, “a mother knows.”

*

But then again, maybe she did not know anything at all. Maybe the suitcases had been packed for months, because of some devious idea Zacharias had planted in her head. *Always have an escape route.* It could be true.

At least I know the next morning that she did not seem stressed. She sat in her fuzzy grey armchair and ate frozen orange juice concentrate with a spoon. She watched us read through *Revelations* again, she mumbled to herself. She said nothing of Lamb.

Malachi still was not home. We had no television. It was a knock on the door that did it. Three sharp raps. Me, Galilee, and Nazareth all jumped up straight, like we were watching a scary movie. No one had knocked on our door since the Zambonis had come around with their first batch of flyers.

Instead of opening the door, our mother grabbed a pack of Newport from her hiding place inside the armchair hustled down to the basement. Did this mean she knew?

I asked Nazareth that question recently and he told me, “Dude, just shut the fuck up about it.” Because apparently moving on is a choice? I doubt it. I still feel like a rabbit caught in a hawk’s claws; it’s the debacle’s decision in regards to whether or not I am attached to it anymore. When it chooses to let me go, I’ll be happy. But until then, I’m bleeding in it’s grip.

That morning though, instead of cursing at me or deigning to call me “dude,” Naz turned to me and asked, “Would it be prudent to answer?”

“Of course not,” I whispered.

The knocks came again.

Wildly, stupidly, but with my whole self I clutched the hems of Naz’s and Galilee’s t-shirts and said, “Malachi won’t like it if we open the door, right?”

“Perhaps we musn’t,” Naz murmured. “Remember when we opened the door for the Zambonis when they were passing out flyers? He threw me across the room after. He tore up my copy of *Plato for Dummies* and clogged the toilet with the pages. I don’t even want to think of my mental state during that time.”

“Perhaps it would be best if we go see what our mother has to say?”

Naz replied with more bullshit. I shot some back. As we wandered around in these stupid ass theoretical circles, Galilee stood up. He slowly paced towards the door, then opened it. We didn’t notice. Even as humidity suddenly bloomed into the sterile, dry, overly air conditioned front room, my brother and I’s discourse grew as a bubble around us and shielded us—for one last second—from the fact that we’d all been caught.

*

A homeless man found Malachi with our sister’s body behind the Piggly Wiggly. So we didn’t really lie to Gal. Technically, he took her there.

The homeless man was brown and his name was Jesus, which made Naz laugh

when he heard. Jesus saw my brother crouched like a vampire over a pile of someone. He ran into a nearby Pepboys and made them call the cops. No one wanted to listen to him at first. But he made them care, because he knew how much his presence mattered.

The police said they found crude tools in my brother’s truck: zip ties, rope, a ski mask, gloves, a crowbar, a Walther P22.

We didn’t process the tools right away, or the exact circumstances. The day the police came, we just fretted over the loss of our Lamb. My little sister with her white hair and sharp gaze had gone to the same exact place as Zerena Zamboni. I imagined them together, in some dark place, strung together by the unshreddable rope of Malachi’s devilish work.

Late that night, our mother took us down into the basement to sit on Malachi’s bed. His room was sprinkled with dandruff, sweaty neon orange and green work shirts, athlete’s foot-cursed greying socks, tacked up centerfolds featuring the glossy flanks of tanning bed-burnt women, loose Camel cigarettes, half empty bottles of booze, and a bunch of other little knick knacks that me and any of my other siblings would be flayed for keeping out in the open.

“Lamb is in a holy place,” our mother cooed, her hands spread on Malachi’s grimy green pillows. “He delivered her.”

“He’s in custody, mother,” Nazareth replied, through thick tears. “And Lamb is gone.”

She ignored that. But she didn’t slap him or call him stupid. He was technically the oldest boy. Even if he was half brown, Naz was the man of the house.

Or maybe she had some other reason not to slap him. I don’t know. Her hair hung lank out of her ponytail. Last year, in art class, I saw a Dorthea Lang photograph of a migrant mother. This mother’s whole face was etched with loss and pride. The photo reminded me of my mother perched on that bed. The many lines in her face looked like smooth grooves worn into stone.

“We’re gonna make some changes, y’all.” She pet Galilee’s little head. I wasn’t sure if he understood what was happening. He’d cried a lot. But as usual, he didn’t say much about how he felt.

“We’re gonna make all the right changes.” She reached for Naz’s head too, but he flinched away. She turned and laid a kiss upon Galilee, and maybe the decision was as simple as that.

*

The next morning, Naz and I awoke at noon.

It was long after our mother had left with Galilee. Apparently she drove off to Zacharias’ with the two black suitcases. We know about the suitcases because she took a Polaroid of Galilee sitting on top of them before they left, with the words “Behold your savior” written in sharpie beneath. In the photo, his shoulders curl in on themselves like wet corners of paper.

She left this photo on the basement bed, nestled in the wrinkled imprint that her body had left in the bedspread while she slept.

We didn’t know it, but it was our last morning in the Slidell house that Malachi’s

very white and long dead father had left behind. It was our last morning in this sterile world where we knew nothing of slang, middle school, TRL, or Britney Spears.

Naz thumbed the edge of the Polaroid. He said, "What shall we do, then?"

I shrugged, then dug beneath the couch for *The Goblet of Fire*. I flung myself across the bed and said, "I'm just gonna read for a while."

"What about our Gal? We should call the police. Call...someone?"

I shook my head. "I'm almost done. This chapter is called 'The Parting of the Ways.' Want me to read aloud?"

He rolled his eyes, sighed, sat up, and slumped against the headboard. I told of the devastation of the Wizarding World.

*

Short story long, Naz and I ended up shuffled into the life of our Tia Roo. She was our dad's half sister. She kept saying she'd met us before, but we didn't remember her. We didn't remember our dad either, so this didn't feel so bad.

She lived in a bright blue shotgun house in New Orleans.

A crazy loud family who also came from El Salvador lived on the other side of the house. Our tia and them chattered in Spanish. The men donned rubber shoes and striped pants at five in the morning and took the green streetcar to the downtown hotels where they peeled crawfish tails in kitchens that paid them \$8 an hour. My tia and the lady neighbors cleaned rooms at a shit motel whose owner also owned the blue shotgun. Naz called them indentured servants to their faces, which was one of the first big mistakes he made (besides refusing to eat pupusas, besides throwing a milk glass at a mirror and shattering them both as fine hail, besides not letting me sit with him at lunch).

I made lots of mistakes, too. I wore long sleeved t-shirts in the thick, sodden heat of our un-air conditioned house. I said embarrassing things in the loose Spanish I started to slowly pick up. I repeated my mother's saintly trash to people: I once told a girl who was trying to be my friend, "Did you know in New York state that if a married couple wants to kill their baby right after it's born then that's a legal abortion up there? Now, I think that's just murder."

When Naz heard about this, he confronted me after we got off the school bus. He shoved me in the shoulder and said, "You're a fucking idiot, Mary."

Quickly, I slapped him. It felt as smooth and natural as reflex.

We stood under the broiling Louisiana sun, on a wide, hot street named for Jefferson Davis. Any passersby wouldn't see two would be suicide bombers who saved unknown legions of people from being killed alongside us. Any passerby would see two brown middle schoolers with black hair dressed in Catholic school collars and plaid, their backpacks weighed down with real schoolwork that they only half knew how to do. Any passerby would see two kids bickering next to the site of an eviscerated monument that had once commemorated a Confederate hero who would have spat on their ignorant little heads.

Immediately, Naz raised his arm to hit me right back.



Contributors

Ana Cottle currently serves as the Poetry Editor for Carve Magazine. She has appeared in Hobart, Ofi Press, Queen Mob's Tea House, Mojave Heart Review, and FIVE:2:ONE among others. Her chapbook, "City of Fury," is forthcoming from Bone & Ink Press.

Eric Grabowski is a poet and writer who currently resides in the metro Boston area. This is his first publication after many years of writing poetry and short fiction. He is currently working on a Novel based loosely on his experiences with drugs, love and homelessness on the seedier side of Boston's Southend. He wrote this poem - W. Concord st. Blues - while sitting on a bench in Boston's Southend among the Bittersweet and Ivy vines of that beautiful neighborhood.

Anthony Immergluck is a writer, critic, editor, musician, and publishing professional with an MFA in Creative Writing

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Richard Risemberg was dragged to Los Angeles as a child, and has been working there in a number of vernacular occupations since his teens, while writing poetry, articles, essays, and fiction, editing online ‘zines, and making a general nuisance of himself. He’s survived long enough to become either a respected elder or a tedious old fart, depending on your point of view, and is still at it. It hasn’t been easy for any of us.

Michael Schmidt holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Miami University. He is the author of two novels. His recent short fiction has been published by Litro, Every Day Fiction, Dime Show Review and Book Smuggler’s Den. He has work forthcoming from Abstract Magazine and Cleaning Up Glitter.

Dorsía Smith Silva is a Professor of English at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras. Her poetry has been published in several journals and magazines in the United States and the Caribbean, including New Reader Magazine, Portland Review, Rock & Sling, Heartwood Literary Review, Stoneboat, Misfit Magazine, Nassau Review, Shot Glass, Moko Magazine, and POUI: Cave Hill Journal of Creative Writing. She is also the editor of *Latina/Chicana Mothering* and the co-editor of six books.

Disha Trivedi currently divides her time

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Diana Valenzuela is an Oakland-born, New Orleans-based author. She cares about red eye shadow, the Fast & the Furious franchise, Lifetime Original movies, and vacation. Her work has appeared in *The Millions* and *The New Orleans Review*.

KJ Williams is an abstract expressionist. She has studied art at Newbury College and The Art Institute of Boston before moving to New Hampshire. Through her work, KJ has expressed her physical pain from an accident in 1993 to the depression and frustration of trying to work while in pain. She has been compared to Frida Kahlo in that respect. In the past few years, her paintings have leaned more towards abstract representation of her thoughts, causes, and passions. ‘My work represents my life. It’s who I am. It’s my passion. If I could not express myself through my art, I would not exist.’ Her paintings, and drawings range from animals and people to abstract and self portraits. A piece can be dream orientated or a cause that she feels passionate about. Her strong use of earth tone colors capture a somewhat dark feel. She has sold many of her works. She is one of the artists featured in *The Pain Exhibit*. Her work can also be seen at Deviant Art, and Artmajeur. <http://kjjwills.daportfolio.com>