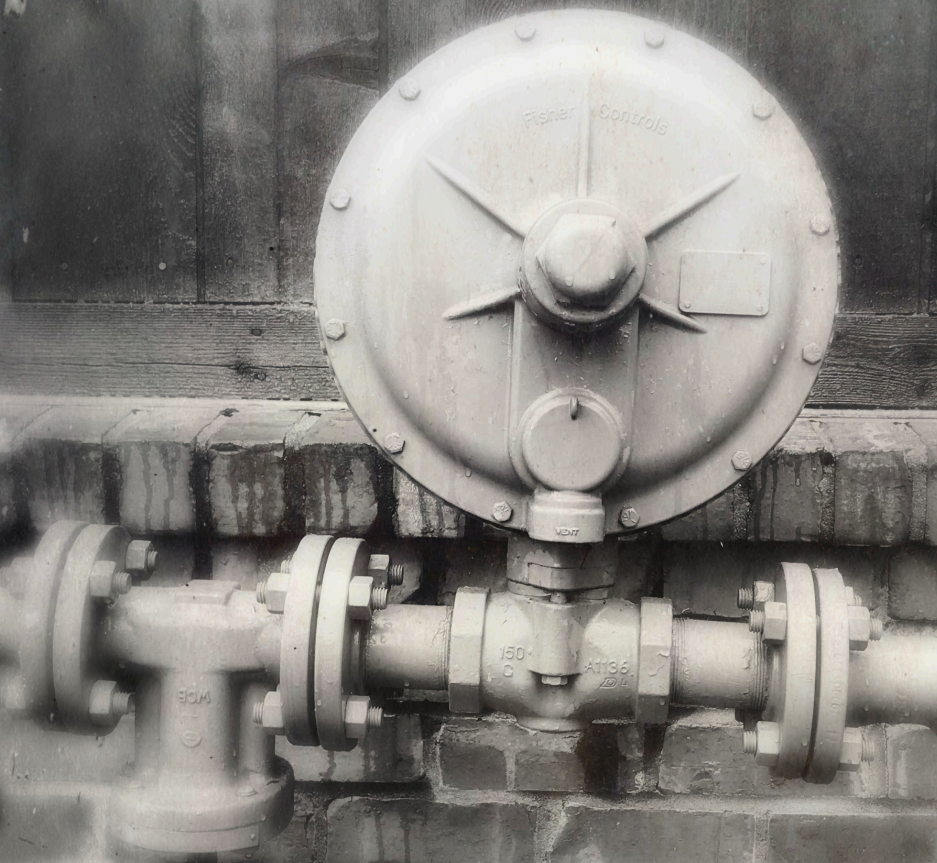


# Rumble Fish Quarterly



Winter 2020



## Editor's Note

One of the conundrums of writing about writing is that you can describe something, whether it be a poem or a paragraph or even a sentence, in a way that is both perfect and useless. To that extent, what is there to do with a poem like "Dear Cassandra" by Charlotte Hughes? The first time I read it, I found it mysterious. The next time, harrowing. The time after that, wry. It's a shapeshifting, multi-dimensional achievement, and it's our contest winner.

I predict you'll have a similar experience, and given the mythological backdrop, I hope you don't believe me. Cassandra was cursed by Apollo to utter accurate prophesies and never be believed. The poem's speaker is fascinated by this in a way that is spooky, witty, spiritual, damning and just irresistibly fresh. It's an electric work, and one we're immensely proud to house.

As always, thanks for reading, following, and supporting Rumble Fish Quarterly. Three years ago, if someone had told me we'd be featuring works of the quality found in these pages today, well, I would have treated them like Cassandra.

Katie Sions  
Editor-in-Chief

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# Dear Cassandra

Charlotte Hughes

I do believe that an arrow unsung still does its own kind of singing  
by singing I mean *sorrow* and by *sorrow* I mean the kind of perdition

& limbo you saw from the temple walls, the kind that knocks outside

your brass & teakwood door saying *love-lost, honor-country, duty-glory*, and when  
you open the door it wedges its foot in the crack & won't be

on its way until you're on your knees speaking Aeolic to the marble &

I'm on my Persian carpet furiously solving SAT math problems  
to keep from crying. One part of me would look at the lot of us, the crying

groundlings, wouldn't even think of pity—no that's you who

cannot hear the sound of a plastic bag whipped in the interstate wind, who  
cannot switch the channel to the news with a dry face—you are yourself

& the reason not even your mother & father will believe when you prophesize

that the Trojan Horse whispers in Attic & when a wooden panel is screwed  
loose there will be an outline of an eye in the belly of the horse.

The other part of me would be absolutely wretched.

I would consider myself ungraspable like the wind, I would throw  
my shoes in a heap in one corner of the temple,

run with Cassandra on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea until the sand  
caught my feet & I came down headfirst on charred sand,

& at 2 AM on the shore I would drop my chiton run

into the sea like Aphrodite except this time I wouldn't be carried  
out of the water on a conch-shell pedestal but would lurch out howling &

baying with Cassandra. & I would leave apples & oranges & a tub  
of water outside the temple for anyone and call that resistance.

Look, I care imperfectly & Cassandra would care imperfectly

but still I carve my fingers clean & make a silly girl out of

myself at family gatherings, just like when Cassandra told Troy to stop  
with it already & her family thought they'd better take

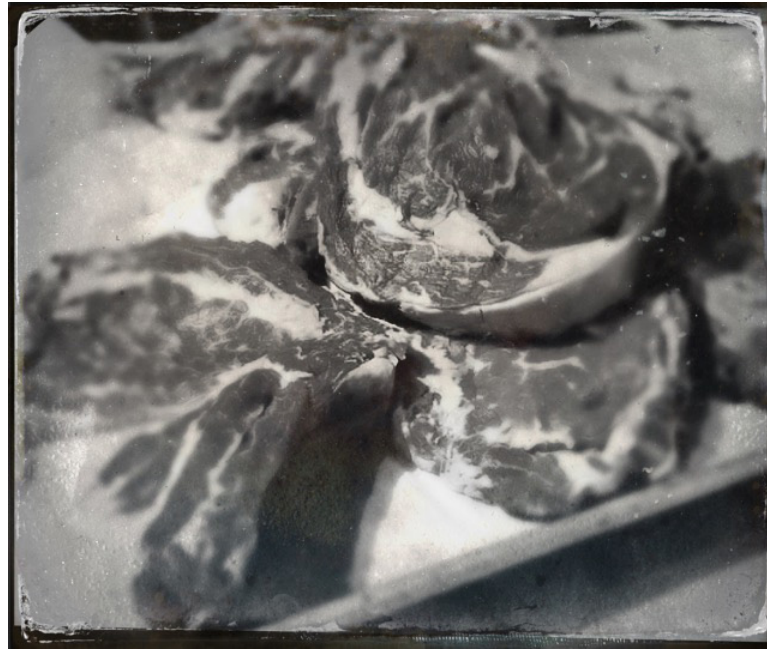
the mulled wine away. I even make little sacrifices out of my USAA card &

the time I have left. I stay up far past a girl's bedtime. But speaking of  
sacrifices, I keep circling back to this one: Cassandra snoring on the persimmon

mosaic of the temple. Myrrh. Anise. Anti-shadows of snakes

stretching around Cassandra's earlobes, lacing through locks of apricot hair,  
flicking tongues in her ears while whispering that she'll have prophecies

no one will believe. She tried to wake up from the dream  
but her eyes were already open.



# Threshold

Mark Jacobs

Not yet thirty, Perk had failed pretty spectacularly at love. Failure taught him things which he refused to consider lessons. They were body blows, nothing more, and if he clenched his gut he could take the hits. Loyalty and constancy did not count. That was the main thing he took away from the marathon fiasco with Glynda. She was pregnant now. Her third. None of the kids was Perk's. It was September on Capitol Hill, warmer than it was back home in Troy where Glynda was hoping, this time, for a boy. Many homeowners had made gardens of their small yards, and on a mild afternoon, shellacked in sunlight, the gardens looked like offerings to gods that would never stop hurling their spears at human hearts.

Tara May Withers was southern and well-mannered. She lived in a rowhouse on Kentucky. The other day she had briefed Representative Cowper on a micro-loan program for felons. Maddie Cowper was a sucker for anything small and hopeless, anything with a tiny budget and progressive aspirations. That was why Perk worked for her, why if she lost her seat he would take the first bus out of Washington back home to a state with meaningful winter. *A few people are coming over for a drink on Friday after work*, Tara May said to Perk as he escorted her out of Ford House. *Why don't you stop by?*

Because he admired the courtesy with which she surrendered her ID badge to the guard, real as fried chicken on Sunday afternoon, he said he would.

Walking from the Metro stop, Perk knew Tara May would have a garden, and it would be weedless, with prosperous blossoms. She answered his knock as though she'd been waiting for him. More southern courtesy, straight out of Macon County.

"Nice garden," he said.

"My late husband would say you meant the backwards of what you just said. Come on in."

"I am not a charming person," he told her, wanting to be clear.

"Understood. But you'll help me deflect a cultural attaché."

Ansel Bonner was an assistant cultural attaché, it turned out. From the Belgian embassy, and he wanted to talk about his pilgrimage to the Mississippi Delta almost as much as he wanted to hit on Tara May. He had been to the crossroads in Clarksdale where Robert Johnson sold his soul to the Devil. He had paper skin and intelligent eyes and figured out soon enough why Tara May had planted Congresswoman Cowper's staffer next to him.

It was the kind of Washington party Perk avoided, people pretending to be casual but really on the make or already made. He watched Tara May smoothly work her little crowd, soft jazz playing softly. She was his opposite. Perk was all sprawl, with a belly to boot. He was always spilling something. Tara May, on the other hand, was contained, composed; no bigger than she had to be and perfectly shaped. A pixie, he would say except that sounded sexist. He could not remember another woman with such violet eyes. The scar on the inside of her left forearm added to her perfection. The thousand times and ways Glynda had made him cry were with him like birds in the woods, up in the trees even if they weren't singing.

All Tara May's guests left at the same time, responding to a signal Perk missed. He was eager to go with them, out of her dangerous orbit, but she put a hand on his arm. Her palm was cool.

"Stick around?"

Yes was the right answer but Perk said, "How come?"

"I need a little more help."

He shrugged, meaning whatever.

They sat at opposite ends of a sofa that was probably stylish; he had no eye for that sort of thing. The whole house was fashionable, mirrors and dried flower arrangements and exotic vases in just the right places, sort-of-abstract paintings on the candy-colored walls, all that. As soon as Tara May sat down she jumped up to turn off the music, which was sounding like wallpaper for the ear.

"A glass of wine?"

"No thanks."

She told him, "The other night, it was Wednesday, you were in a dream I had. Don't worry, nothing untoward happened."

"Untoward?"

"No sex. But it made me think you might be a person of consequence. In my life, that is."

"I'm no good at being a foil for beautiful women."

"I don't need a foil, I need a date. Next Friday. We're pitching the Parsifal Foundation for a big grant. The money could keep us alive. It's dinner, on them, at a nice place in Virginia. Don't say no yet."

Perk thought no but said nothing.

"Sorry," she said, sinking back against the sofa cushion. "My late husband said I

came across as pushy.”

“When you say that, it makes me think of a woman in a Forties movie. She’s wearing a hat with one of those little veils. She’s intense, but you never see her eyes.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “Jeb. He was an Army Ranger. The Taliban killed him outside a village I can’t say the name of.”

Perk didn’t know what to say. His “I’m sorry” came out like a greeting card.

“I don’t like talking about it. So here’s my thought. Tomorrow we go see the orchids. That way next Friday won’t be awkward.”

The orchids lived at the amazing botanic garden near the Mall. The Saturday sun was coming through the glass walls like an ad for ease of heart, and Tara May took Perk’s arm in an old-fashioned manner that made him think mint julep, a drink he had never tasted. The flowers stared back at them flaunting their intense showy beauty.

“My late husband.”

“Jeb.”

“Jeb. Yes. He said I ask too many questions.”

“What do you want to ask me?”

“Who broke your heart.”

“It’s that obvious?”

“To me it is.”

He did not much want to give it up, but she worked him as expertly as she’d worked her party guests, and he admitted to himself for the first time that along with heartbreak came rage. As though it followed, he surrendered facts. Glynda was three years older than he was. She lived on an uphill street in Troy, New York, and had not slept with him since he was a high school senior and she introduced him to pleasure. Her daughters Brandy and Tamara had different deadbeat dads, neither of whom was a factor in their life.

“So you send her money.”

“I’m stopping that.”

“And the new guy?”

“A sperm donor.”

Perk was embarrassed by the raggedness of his emotional life and believed the ease with which Tara May took it in stride was due to her southern manners. After orchids they walked in the sun until it felt like a stroll, and she bought him coffee from an Ethiopian woman’s cart. It was like being in a chick flick.

He fell asleep that night wondering if foreboding was something you inherited. Something after two the phone jangled him. That time of night, Glynda would be desperate.

“Perk?”

“I’m here.”

“That son of a bitch Murphy showed up drunk on his ass and stinking of reefer. Tonight, I’m talking about. Like he owned the place. Like he owned me. I only just now got rid of him. He was after cash, which I didn’t have any in the house. Not that I was giving him a penny anyway. He knocked me around some.”

“Why are you telling me this, Glynda?”

He had never not taken her call, and the grief that came with it, so it was not

surprising she had a hard time understanding the question. The long-distance sexual stirring he felt was sad, and quite possibly pathetic.

“I’m worried he killed my son, Perk, knocking me around like that.”

She waited for him to ask why she was so sure it was a boy.

“Goodnight, Glynda.”

He hung up. He turned off his phone. Which came first, tears or rage?

\*

Tara May called on Sunday morning before he was functional.

“Glynda called, didn’t she?”

He attributed her uncanny instinct to tact and the southern heritage. There were pockets of shade in her voice, pockets of sunlight with cats sleeping in them.

“I hung up on her,” he admitted.

“I thought if you weren’t busy I’d come by and say hey.”

He looked around his apartment, the basement of an Arlington rambler built in 1961. It was shabby. The belongings he kept in it were shabby. The rubber gasket around the wall unit air conditioner hung limp from the frame. His ukulele had a broken neck. The calendar on the fridge was last year’s.

“Another time, maybe.”

“My late husband and I had this little tradition on Sunday mornings. Coffee, the paper, croissants with butter. Not that I’m trying to replace him, it’s not that.”

“Then what are you trying to do?”

“Eat a croissant.”

There was a flash of anger as she said it, obliterated in an instant. The prerogative of a beautiful woman on top of the world.

Against his better judgment he allowed her to persuade him to go to her place. She met him at the door in jeans and bare feet and a T-shirt that said *Eschew Adjectives*. She made coffee in a French press, and they sat on the back porch taking turns with sections of the *Times*. There were croissants. She buttered one for each of them. He was terrified of her power to hurt him, confirmed in the dry scurry of dead leaves across flagstones.

“I don’t own this place,” she said, “if that’s what is bothering you.”

“None of my business.”

“Eleanor Pearl – she started the felons project – it belongs to her. Do you believe me?”

“Your late husband.”

“Jeb.”

“Was he career Army?”

“That’s the way it was starting to look when... You’re trying to get at my social class, aren’t you?”

“Maybe.”

“Why do you care?”

“I’m not sure I do.”

When he was ready to leave she reached up to cup his face in her hands. He felt

enormous, and clumsy standing still. If she wanted to, she could make wild beasts lie at her feet and lick her toes.

“Why won’t you let me make you feel better, Perk?”

He shook his head. “How did you get the scar?”

“It was a car accident. Jeb was driving. He felt horrible.”

“I’ll see you on Friday.”

“Okay.”

But on Monday evening as he was making stew for the week she knocked. He had dribbled beef juice on his shirt. She pretended not to notice the stain, same as she pretended not to notice the slovenly surroundings. She handed him flowers. Flowers? That must be part of her proper southern training. You never called on an acquaintance empty handed.

She followed him to the kitchen and snipped the ends of her daisies, put them in a glass of water because he had no vase.

“That’s a lot of stew for one man.”

“I grew up in a big family. This will last me a while.”

He was aware of her scar, and of her breasts. He was aware of the faintly licorice smell she gave off. He was aware in a tired, matter-of-fact way of being Glynda’s victim.

“What you don’t see,” said Tara May.

“Is what?”

“Our need is equal. Not the same, but equal.”

He did not believe that. He expected disaster. His soul, his cells, his fully awake and vulnerable mind expected disaster. And after all the years of being trashed by Glynda he felt a kind of guilt that fit him like old clothes. But he let Tara May lead him to his unmade bed where he swept away a pile of prospective laundry and they made love. It was an act of remembering fused with an act of discovery. It justified his terror.

“I’ll leave you alone until Friday,” she promised, getting dressed.

It had been a long time since he’d watched the practiced ease with which a woman made wings of her arms, fastening her bra. A metamorphosis. He had nothing to say.

She did not call and she did not show up in Arlington, but she did send texts. Every time one appeared on the screen Perk was sure it was the last, it was the announcement of her defection. They kept coming, though. Some were chatty. An undercurrent he did not know what to make of tugged at some of them.

*I ate the last croissant, she texted. It was stale.*

*I dreamed about Macon, she texted. There was a cemetery. My eyelids hurt.*

*Over the last two days I’ve heard 7 people drop the F-bomb. Why does that offend me so?*

*There’s a kind of owl in Georgia woods always asking the same question – Who cooks for you? I never knew how to answer.*

On Friday she picked him up in a blue Miata.

“It belongs to Eleanor Pearl.”

He wasn’t sure he believed her. He was wearing a jacket and tie. He had a sense of being set up.

The restaurant was on a cul-de-sac off Chain Bridge Road in the godawful suburban sprawl of Fairfax County. They had a private room with wood walls around which



quiet waiters circulated offering entrées with pedigrees. There was no sign of Eleanor Pearl. It was hard to tell the foundation people from the non-profit people. Everybody looked sleek. Everybody was progressive and identically outraged by the assaults of the right on American democracy. It was Representative Cowper's kind of crowd, inhabitants of a world Perk inhabited as an alien with visitation rights.

None of that mattered. He could not take his eyes off Tara May. She was shining. She was entertaining. And she was absolutely convincing, making her pitch to the Parsifal people. It was not that she used her charm to manipulate them. Rather, the charm, the beauty, was a window through which she allowed them a glimpse of the lavish person within.

In the parking lot, when it was over, she slumped against the side of the car and handed him the keys. Perk felt like a fraud behind the wheel of a sports car but followed the terse directions she muttered in his direction. The performance had exhausted her, and he was giving her time to recharge.

Eventually she pointed. "Pull in there."

It was a park. From the corner of his eye he had an impression of dark playing fields and darker woods. Beyond them, possibly, a body of water. He slowed but did not stop.

"I think it's closed," he said.

In one swift motion she unhooked her seat belt, sat up and turned in his direction and hit him, clocking him in the chest with a stone fist. He thought it was a joke until she screamed at him, "Did I fucking say turn in here or not?"

He turned in. He parked. They got out, and she went off on him.

"You stinking piece a crap, you think you're better than all those people at the restaurant, don't you? You don't know shit. You'll never know shit, Perk, you'll never be anything. You know what you are? You're a big fat pathetic loser."

Perk said nothing because he had nothing to say. As Tara May raved at him, rabbit punching him in the gut with surprising strength, old bleak certainties came tumbling down on him like boulders dislodged; bad things he knew, bad things he should have known. This was the way the world worked, for him, anyway.

Lacking options, he followed her on an invisible path through the woods – she seemed to know where she was going and moved quickly – and they came out on the rocky edge of what seemed to be a small lake.

"Screw you, Perk."

He said nothing.

"If I tried to drown myself you'd just stand there looking, wouldn't you."

"I wouldn't let you drown, Tara May."

But she did not believe him. Already she was wading in, tripping and falling in the blind heat of her staggering anger. She came up spitting dirty water, swinging cocked fists at the empty air, and he went after her. She was strong but he was big, and he wrapped his arms around and dragged her out of the water, her heels resisting. He stood her on shore. She shivered, though not from cold. She slumped. She cursed him repetitively, pulling filthy words from an invisible hat. After a while she cocked her head to one side and stared up at him. She had the shoulders of a teenage angel.

"I thought you were different," she said.

"Guess I'm not."

"Damn it, gimme the car key."

He gave it to her, and she took off running back through the woods. She moved fast. He could not keep up, and by the time he reached the parking lot she was gone.

His shoes were soggy. His spirit was flattened. His mind was disarranged. He had forgotten his phone so could not call an Uber. He walked squishing in his soggy shoes, stopping whenever a car came by, sticking his thumb out, but no one was going to stop for a hulking wet man in the equivocal dark. When he finally got to his apartment he refused to look at a clock. His defeat was absolute and wrapped its brutal arms around his exhausted body.

\*

Glynda quit calling. That surprised Perk. They were each other's old bad habit, a tender tooth they could not help testing with their tongue. Not surprising at all, on the other hand, was Tara May's radio silence. What was he? A blip on her shiny screen. Her meltdown at the dark lake mystified him, but so did a lot of things. For instance, why Glynda was drawn to deadbeats. Why some men liked wearing a tuxedo. Why he could look at the face of a stranger on the Metro and divine a life, from the ravages of his or her past to the accommodations of the future. Anyway he was relieved to be left alone.

No one visited him in the basement of the rambler. He never invited anybody, so he heard destiny in the knock on his door, which he opened to find Tara May. With her were two suitcases, a backpack, a gym bag with sneakers tied to the handle, and her computer in a swanky leather case.

"Leaving town?"

She shook her head and moved in. What happened at the dark lake was just one of many things they did not talk about. They both preferred it that way. History was not relevant to the moment they chose to inhabit, and the future was a lion. It lay on a boulder in the sun, dead to the world. They made love every day, and Perk's dry anxieties drowned in a lake of feeling. They learned to lie side by side without moving until their breathing was in sync. They learned to tell the anecdotes of the day with their hands. Perk cooked in big pots, and they ate in bowls. She taught him cribbage. He taught her war. When they walked in the neighborhood, she took his arm. They could walk an hour without a word.

It was not obliteration they were hungry for. It was not a suspension, or relief, or an end to anticipation. What they did want, Perk approached by analogy. It was a place, and a moment in the place. It was the split instant you were stepping through a door and were neither here nor there. The challenge wasn't getting there, it was staying there.

One night, ten days into the moment, Tara May got out of bed. She switched on a light, sat in the third-hand upholstered chair a friend had foisted on Perk. Her still, naked beauty seemed to guarantee the quality of her intentions.

"My whole life I've been stuck in places. What I want is to be someplace but not stuck there."

Perk was afraid anything he said would come out like rhetoric so said nothing.

Two nights later Glynda called. He let it go to voicemail. Tara May asked him if he



wanted to listen to her message. He told her he didn't.

But then did, the next morning, while they were getting ready for work. He listened, deleted the message, and went back into the bedroom. He thought his suitcase might be under the bed. It was. He opened it and started throwing clothes in.

Tara May came in and said, "You ever hear of folding?"

He shook his head.

"What did she tell you?"

"That guy who got her pregnant came back and beat her up. She's in the hospital. Broken ribs. The left lung is punctured. Social Services says they're taking the kids unless she comes up with a place for them to stay."

"Doesn't she have a mother? A friend?"

"Glynda's mother hasn't gotten out of bed before noon in twenty years. Her friends are derelicts."

"So it's up to you to go rescue the kids."

He looked at her. Was she being sarcastic? No.

She said, "Can I ask you a question?"

"Yes."

"And you'll listen to a story before I ask it."

"Okay."

"My husband's name isn't Jeb, it's Sonny. And he's not dead. He's in the federal penitentiary in Atlanta."

"What did he do?"

"A bunch of things. He killed the guy he was buying crystal meth from, for one. There was also an explosion. I knew the dealer. He was a lowlife lizard cooking meth in a double-wide out in the country. They couldn't lay the explosion at Sonny's door. Meth labs blow up all the time, don't they, and the murder was separate. But Sonny swore to me he was going to take out the trailer."

"I guess he gave you that scar on your arm."

She sat in his chair, stood, sat down again. She fingered the scar.

"Yes, he did. He surely did. I'd say it was a misunderstanding except it wasn't. Anyway I met Eleanor Pearl through her NGO for felons. She cleaned me up, and I'm grateful, but I am most heartily tired of being her project."

Perk said, "You were doing a good job."

"At what?"

"Looking balanced, together. You were perfect."

She frowned. "Being perfect is a disease. I'm cured."

"Is Tara May Withers your real name?"

"It is. I figured you knew all along."

"Knew what?"

"My whole thing, that it was an act."

"No, I didn't know."

"I'm going to ask my question now."

"Okay."

"What's your plan?"

There he stood, holding a tie. It was a somber blue with dark red stripes, a con-

servative piece of neckwear. It was the kind of thing you wore to a funeral, or divorce court. He threw it down and sat on the bed next to the half-packed suitcase.

"Social Services isn't going to give me Glynda's kids."

"No."

"So it's a gesture, isn't it? Proving my loyalty to her."

"Is that what you want to do?"

He considered the question. He picked up the funereal tie and folded it in half. He laid it in the suitcase. Took it out.

"Last year, Glynda saw me on CNN. I was standing next to the Congresswoman at a press gaggle. She thinks I'm rich and powerful. I can send her a few bucks."

"Do you have any money?"

"I don't mind missing a car payment."

"Is that what she wants, money?"

"What she really wants is the blood in my veins."

Tara May could have taken advantage of that but didn't. She said, "You have a car, right?"

"It's old. A Focus. It's sort of orange."

"Let's take a ride."

"Where?"

She shook her head. "You'll have to take some time off work."

He could do that. Not that Maddie Cowper made it easy for her staff to get away, but he'd figure something out. South. He knew that was the direction Tara May would point him and was not surprised when she would not let him go near Interstate 95. Route One was slower, which was fine with Perk and easier on the Focus. The car shivered at high speeds.

In North Carolina they stopped for barbecue at The Sticky Pig. They ate from big green platters at a picnic table in a weedy side yard under locust trees in which insects buzzed like the summer's afterthought. Perk thought the sweet southern tea she ordered for him was foul. The temperature was the same as it had been in Washington, but the air felt different. It was Dixie air.

"Where we're going," he said.

"You like the barbecue?"

"It has something to do with Sonny, doesn't it."

She visored her eyes with a hand and studied an African American family of eight descending from a van into the parking lot. The grandmother rode a motorized red wheelchair, and everyone was solicitous.

"Yes," said Tara May. "It has to do with Sonny. I have something I want to give him."

Perk knew better than to ask what. Really, he didn't much care to know. Glynda had started leaving her irate messages on his phone again, so he turned it off and put it in the trunk, wrapped in a greasy blue rag. He was nowhere, which at any given moment just might feel like the perfect location.

In Georgia, Tara May needed no directions to get to Stonefield Penitentiary. It was way out in the countryside, which made a hostile hum in Perk's northern ears. He was on guard, expecting Confederates. Friends of Sonny's. They'd sneak up on him.

From the prison parking lot, a prudent distance across an asphalt highway, the enormous complex of concrete structures hulked like the hell it surely was.

“You want me to go with you?” he asked her.

“No. This part I need to do on my own. You okay with waiting?”

He was. She reached into the back seat for her purse. A large envelope was folded there. She was giving off waves of anxiety and did not say *See you later*.

Perk did not watch the clock. When she disappeared from view, swallowed by an entrance gate, he got out of the Focus and walked to the back of the lot. A weeping willow there reminded him of Glynda, who wore her tribulations like drooping green branches. It took Tara May forever to come back out through the gate that had swallowed her. Her face was red, but her eyes were dry.

“That envelope?”

“What about it?”

“Divorce papers. I wanted to hand them to Sonny myself. The lawyer comes later.”

“Was he surprised?”

She nodded. “He had this image of me waiting for him in a black dress, waiting as long as it took. That’s Sonny. I don’t want to talk about him any more.”

“Are we going back to Washington?”

“Not yet.”

She told him, turn by turn, where she wished to be driven. It was only ten miles from Stonefield, and also in the country. There was a trailer in a stand of high grass with nodding purple heads. In the field behind it, hay had been cut. The stuff lay in perfectly straight lines, drying yellow. Tara May saw him staring, trying to figure it out.

“They do that with a disc mower. Then they come along with a baler. The farmer who owns that field is eighty. He bales with old machines. The hay comes out in rectangles.”

“This is where you used to live,” said Perk.

“I own it. It’s in my name, not Sonny’s.”

The driveway was rutted dirt. It was a tin box of a trailer, with unadorned aluminum sides and a porch of rough wood steps rising to the door. A gray cat napped in the shade underneath the trailer as though waiting for its mistress to get home. The place was about as far from Capitol Hill as a person could get.

Perk asked her, “What do you want to do with the place?”

“Get away from it.”

“I thought you already did that.”

“Think again.”

He had an idea. “Go inside a minute.”

“I don’t want to.”

“I think you should.”

She glared at him but took the key from the pocket of her jeans and unlocked the door. “You want to come in?”

“I’m going to take a drive. Be back in a few minutes.”

She said, “Suit yourself, Perk,” but he had the sense she was getting his idea.

He took the Focus up the road a couple of miles, past more hayfields – in some,

the hay had already been baled – and woods that looked nothing like the woods of upstate New York. He felt a kind of contentment, in this alien landscape, that he might come to trust, as though he’d done something to earn it. He turned around and drove slowly back to Tara May’s trailer. Turning into the drive, he honked the horn. He got out of the car.

Tara May came to the door. She stood on the threshold, one hand on the jamb.

Both of them looked up to see a lone Canada goose that had separated from its south-flying flock. It rowed the steel blue sky of Georgia honking rhythmically, winging it. For a moment, it was the moment.

“You ready to leave, Tara May?”

She nodded. “I guess I’m ready.”

“Don’t forget to lock the door.”

He watched her lock it and pocket the key. He watched her come down the wood steps and across the grass toward the short, rutted drive in his direction. Her smile was illegible. That was okay. Inside the moment was all the time in the world.



# Time Line

Peter Leight

In the time line we're standing close together, letting our shoulders touch, as if we need to feel each other—the most important thing is to be ready when the time comes. The most important thing is to spend the time getting ready. It doesn't even matter which way we're facing: some of us are having a good time, while others are thinking about a time that's better, it's more comforting than it needs to be. We're not even sure if we're moving toward something or if it's one of those exchanges where what's close to you is further away than what's far away. We often say *this time*, or *next time*, like a kind of tuning or fine-tuning—we're keeping our hands in front of us, keeping an eye on things, rolling up the cuffs of our trousers to keep them from getting caught. Trying on some new things we've never tried before, we've never even thought of, as if everything is an attempt. It takes longer than we expected, I mean there's more time than we thought—the most important thing is to be comfortable while you're waiting. The most important thing is to wait until you're comfortable. When we're tired we lean on somebody else, to find someone to lean on you just start leaning, it's the easiest way, like a current that goes one way or the other. The most important thing is to hold on when you need to. The most important thing is to hold onto somebody who needs you. We're standing close to each other, letting our shoulders touch, not even thinking about leaving—evacuation is almost never the answer.

# A Refining

Casey Knott

I would have thought there'd be more—  
bloom and fruiting,  
heirloom varieties pinned  
to the bed, feeding and dying  
in turn in all customs of sky—  
undulating as a universe,

but every season  
is a harbinger of failures—  
whatever the deer can't reach  
the beetles and aphids flourish in.  
The nitrates are off,  
the Ph all wrong and I'll spend long  
hours exhuming weeds  
all to harvest a few handfuls  
of things. 3 feet of space  
for 3 ears of wormy corn  
and the pumpkin vines took out  
a fence with the weight of its lone  
fruit—orphaned by thoughtless  
squirrels.

So every year I plant less  
and less again—  
a culling of sorts,  
to see what's worth it.  
Like you, I'm learning what takes root  
Is the thinnest thing.

Even the clouds that spill across this bit  
of blue have a mind of their own,  
as if whatever you heard about art  
imitating life is wrong.

To grow is to retreat,  
as home is the sharp tip

of an arrow welcoming its arc.  
The story ends and you, no worse  
for wear.

When you get to this breach  
it's with a tuned hand narrowing,  
starved blind as first love,  
and this practice of failing—  
what can you do but grow  
the best one thing you can?



## Magnetic Dogs

Bruce Meyer

This is a story of two dogs.  
One is black. The other is white.  
One is called Ink and the other Paper.  
They are supposed to belong together because they have magnets attached to their feet.  
The magnets help them stand up, and when they are turned over on their sides the magnets stick to each other and won't let go.  
If they are placed on a table-top, one behind the other, they chase each other around. If Ink chases the white one through plates and cutlery while waiting for a coke to arrive, Paper will spin around suddenly and face Ink, because that's the way magnets work, especially with magnetic dogs.  
They are made of plastic, but they supposedly came from the same litter of Scottie dogs. That's a story that was made up about them.  
They are short and hairy. Their ears are pricked for listening, and their faces have beards like sages.  
Litter is an odd word. It implies something that isn't wanted and is tossed away. It is a word that says a person is breaking the law by littering, by throwing something away. Anything. People litter because they stop wanting something. Sometimes they stop loving something or someone. That's litter, too.  
Once you have something you have to keep wanting it. That's the idea behind having something. You need to keep it. If you don't want something you at least have to have forgiveness – both the kind you use to forgive others and the kind you use to for-

give yourself.

There was a woman who was my mother and she could not forgive my father. That's what she said.  
She went away and took my sister with her when I was seven. I have forgiven her, but I know she hasn't found forgiveness because she hasn't found me.  
That is where the magnetic dogs come into the story.  
They are always ready to forgive each other.  
One is always ready to turn around and see what has been left behind.  
That is why I have to find my sister. She has Ink and I have Paper. We have a story we need to finish.

When I was young, my family lived in our car. My Dad was looking for work and couldn't find any, or at least he couldn't find what he wanted.  
We drove when we could. We sang songs together. Sometimes we sang "Row, Row, Row Your Boat," and Mom would throw in an extra line at the end by saying, "Marilyn Munroe." Other days the round was "The Blue Bells of Scotland." That one was about history.

If we ran out of gas, Dad would have to work. People didn't want to employ him because he had long hair and a beard. Long hair and beards were considered bad back then.

Sometimes people threw rocks at us as we drove away. They'd scream about how we were ruining society, and that my sister and I should be taken away because Hippies weren't fit parents.

Mom would have to work too. For a while she made beds in a hotel we couldn't afford to stay in. It was the kind of hotel where you could park your car in front of your room's door and watch it in case anyone tried any funny business. Mom would keep the door open as she was working and my sister and I slipped in and had baths.

One day, my family stopped long enough to stretch their legs and feel the evening cool on the New York Thruway.

When we stopped the car on a pull over, I loved to hear the trucks pass. They cried all the way to their destinations. As they drove farther and farther away, the cry turned into a sad, trailing song that always ended the same way.

We had enough money for gas the evening we pulled into the Savarin to use the washrooms. In the yellow-tiled washroom, the stink of men in the cubicles made me sick to my stomach, but not wanting to lose the last meal of the day and go hungry yet another night, I sucked in my gut like my father told me and just held it down. Some men spat gum or hork into the urinals. That was gross. They'd look down and hit the rubber mat in the urinal – I could barely reach it when I stood on my tip-toes – and gob an assortment of cigarette butts, pink mangled bodies of chewing gum, and hork.

I usually had to pee upwards. I felt grown up when I stood with all the other men, some of them looking down and some looking up as if they were searching for the answer to something important on the ceiling above them. There was a strange attraction about peeing with men, a kind of magnetism that wasn't love but more a sense of belonging, more a sense of being one of them.

One day an old, fat man stood to the right of me for a long time, fumbling in his pants for his dick and when he found it, he sighed loudly as if he had just found para-

dise, but his thing wasn't pointing the right way and his pee shot out sideways and hit the man to his right. I stood there laughing until the man who got wet and the fat man told me they'd bugger me if I didn't get the hell out. They were going to settle things "man to man," and that made me feel kiddy and menial again. I didn't know the word bugger, but I had the feeling it was one of the things I'd been warned about when I went into the washroom on my own. My mother had told me not to linger because there might be men in such places that would make off with me. These must have been the guys she had in mind.

After that day, I tried not to dream of them at night. My fear was the men would look in the car window and snatch me or my sister as we slept.

I wanted to protect my sister even though we had to share the same backseat day and night.

In every town we stopped at, her one treat was a dime – his last dime father always told her – to buy a daily paper, and she would read it out loud to us about the horrors of the world.

Sometimes we played churches and cemeteries on highways that featured only fences, trees, and the occasional industrial building. My sister was two years older and always beat me at the game. She tore out the comic sections and kept them in an empty Kleenex box under the seat. That was her special area. 'Peanuts' was her favorite.

We would come along-side a convoy of army guys in green trucks. The trucks were full of soldiers, but the closer we looked the more they seemed to have the faces of boys. We'd flash the peace sign at them, and if their sergeant or lieutenant wasn't following behind in a Jeep they'd flash the peace sign back. My Dad would shake his head and recite some song lyrics about going to Viet Nam and "Oh me, oh my, we're going to die."

I had seen boys their age hanging around the edges of gas stations in the small towns where we stopped to see if my dad could find work. They'd be leaning against the gas station's plate glass window or white stucco walls and they were all chewing gum and squinting at us if we drove in out of the sun. Sometimes one of them would lean in the window and tell my Dad they didn't pump Hippies at that station, and my Dad would say nothing and drive away. If the boys had long hair, they'd saunter up when we drove over the pneumatic bell and say things like "Peace, brother," and slap my Dad's palm which was called "laying some skin."

One gang of boys who Mom called hoodlums peered in the car window when we lay sleeping in the parking lot of a K-Mart or a Bradlees'. My sister woke and screamed. Then the boys saw my father roll over from one thigh to the other in the front seat and he rolled the window down just enough to tell them to fuck off and that he had a gun in the glove compartment, which he didn't have but threatened to use to scare off problem people.

One of the kids yelled "Let's scam."

But those army guys or boys like them were dressed in green fatigues and ammo belts and held rifles between their knees. Mom said they were fated. My father said they'd be fine. There were palm trees where they were going, and that was what I thought heaven might be like when I was young. A warm place to die with palm trees.

I loved palm trees, even little ones. There was one just inside the door of every Sa-

varin on the New York Thruway. The Savarins had exotic Arabic style script fastened to the stone towers that served no other purpose than to rise above the thruway and create a landmark and give drivers the idea of an oasis.

When a person entered, there was a gift shop on the left, a sit-down restaurant with pies my mother said were fly bait in a glass case, and the washrooms were straight ahead, women on the right where my Mom and sister disappeared and men on the left.

I was never permitted to buy anything in the gift shop or the restaurant. What I wanted more than anything was in a coin-operated vending machine – a pair of magnetic Scottie dogs. Every Savarin had a machine and in every machine were cellophane packages with two dogs locked feet to feet. I'd seen a girl playing with a pair at a rest stop where there were only picnic tables, but as she got up to leave she slipped the dogs in her pocket and skipped back to her car.

Near Rochester we stopped because my Dad was taking a long time in the washroom, I wandered into the gift shop to "browse," as I told the clerk on my way in. Someone had put money in the machine and then forgotten to turn the handle. I turned the handle. The coins fell inside the machine and chished against the others. I pressed the button for the dogs to see what would happen. The lady behind the counter looked over at me. I picked up the cellophane envelope with the dogs, held it up, and beamed at her. She nodded in approval.

All the way back to the car I worried about what I would tell my parents.

They were having an argument again.

My mother said she was tired of constantly driving from town to town and looking for work. She screamed at my dad that she was going back to Charlesburgh, a little town in the south where my grandparents still lived. My dad shouted back "Fine," and "Go ahead." Then they didn't speak. The night was falling, and we had to find a place to park where the cops wouldn't hassle us.

Syracuse. My parents didn't want to go into the center of the city. They were afraid the police might chase them off if they lingered around the suburbs, and the downtown was dangerous. We'd been robbed there once. They took the ten dollars my dad needed for gas and food.

I woke up first.

The car in the morning always smelled as if something had died in it early in the night. We had to sleep with the windows almost up, and four people breathing the same air can make a small space pretty awful.

Dew had formed on the windshield.

My sister was curled on the floor of the backseat.

I took the cellophane wrapper out of my jeans pocket and bit through the package.

The dogs rolled into my hand. They were held together at their feet, and I pulled them apart and set them on the shelf of the rear window. I drew the white one close to the black one, and the black one spun around. As I lifted whitey, the other Scottie jumped up and snapped itself to the base.

My sister woke and looked at me.

"What are you doing?"

"I found these dogs at the Savarin."

“Did you steal them?”

“No, they were in the machine. Someone had paid for them and left them behind. I don’t steal.”

“I want one.”

“They’re a pair,” I said. “You can’t split them up.”

“What are their names?” she asked.

“Dunno. What’s black and white and goes together forever?”

We thought for a moment. My sister looked out the window. “Dunno,” she said.

“I do. Ink and Paper.”

We spent an hour as the sun came up over a field of black-eyed susans, playing with the dogs. We had to be careful when we said woof because we didn’t want to wake our folks. I put the black one in my pants pocket and my sister tucked the white one in her box of comics.

Mom opened a carton of crackers for breakfast and the last tin of apple juice.

Dad said we’d be going into Syracuse because he heard there might be a job there for Mom.

We parked in a back alley, and Mom took my sister with her because, she said “If they see the kid they might hire me.” My sister had the Kleenex box under her arm and waved to me with her free hand before Mom grabbed it tightly.

Dad went away to see what he could scrounge. I waited in the car by myself. The front windows were partially down, but as the morning wore on the interior grew hotter and hotter.

That was the last I saw of my mother and sister.

Dad returned later in the afternoon.

He smelled of beer. I didn’t know where he had found the money.

As the sun went down, it was clear my mother and sister weren’t coming back.

Dad sighed. “Get in the front with me. I don’t think your mom and sister are riding anymore.”

“Where did they go?”

He turned and looked out the window, not wanting to look at me in the front seat.

“Buddy, I think we’re going to head home to Canada. Your mom flashed some bills at me last night and said she and Frannie were going to catch the first bus south.”

“What about me? What about you?”

“She said we should go our own way. I don’t think she wants us anymore.”

I didn’t know what to say.

Tears rolled down my cheeks.

We headed north up the ninety-five.

There are no Savarins on that highway.

We came to the border. The man in a uniform asked how long we had been gone.

My dad said he didn’t know, but he couldn’t find work in the States and he was heading north, back to the mine. The border guard asked who I was and my birth date. I told him, and he waved us through. If he had asked if I had anything to declare I would have told him that my mother didn’t love me enough to take me with her.

This story should have a different ending. In a typical story, my mother or perhaps my sister would find me. My sister would appear at the airport. She would throw



her arms around me and realize how much we were alike while acknowledging how much we had changed over the years.

I would tell her that I am a businessman with a small company in the near north, that I am doing well, that my wife and children are looking forward to meeting her.

We would walk together to the car in the airport garage, me carrying her bag, she rooting around in her purse for Paper, the white magnetic dog while I held Ink in my hand to show her.

Before the drive north, before I would tell her about Dad's last years and how he never remarried because he always thought Mom might be out there waiting to reconnect with him.

I'd tell her how he stopped wandering, how he settled down and made a life for me that she should have been part of.

She would hold out the white dog, place it in the palm of my hand, and see if they would connect again as if they had never been separated, though they were worlds, poles, apart. But Ink has never found its Paper, and this story without a proper end awaits a resolution that will never come. The world is made of stories, and most of them are imperfect, unfinished business.

Mom?

I often think about her but only in an abstract way. I can't remember her face. She had a nice smile, but that's what people have told me. I don't know what became of her.

Charlesburghs appear in five southern states. They are like the Fayettevilles that proliferate on maps of twenty-eight states in the labyrinth that is America.

In the States, people are restless. They move from town to town and city to city, unlike people on this side of the border who settle in one place and refuse to budge from their homes unless they get the bug to go looking for something, which isn't often. They dig into the rock and look for what will feed them. When a place can no longer sustain a population, or when there is no one to pass on a home to after a long, hard life, people simply walk away and leave their pasts to the hands of nature. That is the legacy of my father's north. I have nowhere to go back to now, and if my Mom or my sister sought us out, there would be no one there to find.

Dad often said that it was Mom's idea to go in search of America. She'd read the restless writings of Steinbeck and Kerouac, the literature of perpetual motion. She used to turn from the front seat and tell us she was a living compass, that she always knew what direction we were headed in even if our father didn't. My father knew where north was. It was where he belonged, and he pointed the car there with me and him in it and stayed true to it. He was the real compass.

For me, the magnetic dogs were not merely a childhood novelty; they were symbols of a past I wanted to cling to. In some ways, they repelled and chased each other. In other ways they clung to each other tenaciously.

I will never know if the magnetic dogs had more power to attract than repel. I only have one, and when I spin it, the black dog's nose always points north.

The rocks and trees and small gnarled lakes that were familiar to my father bored my mother. She was the one who had to keep moving. She was like a sheet of loose paper that gets blown by the wind. Maybe my sister was paper, too.

When we were a family together, Mom often asked my Dad why Northern Ontario was a magnet for him.

He didn't know.

I often find nickels stuck to Ink when I carry him in my pocket.

Maybe the earth is magnetic in the place father called home.

The ore he dug certainly was. He never wore a wristwatch.

"Magnets," he said, "stop time in its tracks." He grew more and more quiet as we moved from town to town through the years of hard work, and he died a peaceful man with nothing to say, perhaps because of the throat cancer or because he didn't have anything more to say, a man alone with his silences, and so many questions unanswered.

I don't want to be litter. I keep asking the questions though I never get any answers.

Maybe my Mother didn't have enough money. For months after we had gone our separate ways, I kept hoping she would call or write. I thought my sister would look at her magnetic dog and remember it was called paper and that would jog her mind to send me a letter or a postcard.

Perhaps she would find me in the rented rooms of Sudbury or the small hard rock, hard luck towns where my father went down into the bedrock each day and emerged tired and stinking from his shift in the underworld. He worked in hell, both literally and figuratively, lived in purgatory, and dreamed of heaven, but he told me one night after we'd had a few beers at the kitchen table that he always looked over his shoulder as he emerged from the underworld just in case Mom was following him to the surface. The poet in him kept me inspired, and the practical man kept me fed and clothed and in school.

I kept the black dog beside my bed each night knowing that its mate is living somewhere called Charlesburgh. The black dog would stick to a metal lamp or a door-knob, but Paper will probably never be found. You need ink and paper to make a story.

My pen is ready but there is nothing to write on, and there isn't anything more to say.

The magnetic black dog is beside me as I type my thoughts on an imaginary white page of my computer screen and wonder how I will forgive my mother. The page is a kind of blindness, but I see what I am saying, and I can't. The past, once it is set down, remains the past. Ink has dried.



# TTC

Sara Femenella

Once you were a body.  
A witness. And with every  
red bloom *ex opere operato*  
you took another sacramental  
bow to grace. Dear body, hated  
for years. Once you were  
an assassin and the body killed  
back. It was the doctor for whom  
you parted your legs, the doctor  
to whom you pleaded, please,  
I will be so good. Just give me  
this one small future. In your womb  
a universe of cannibals. The universe  
of your womb with teeth. The doctor  
who showed you your numbers  
on a chart, numbers that were  
your body slipping off the bell curve,  
the body sliding down into  
the doctor's hands. One day,  
he said. Once your husband  
needle in hand, you were  
a body vibrating.  
You were supplication.  
Once your body stripped down  
to the bald pink of its goodness,  
your body fused open.  
You were the womb. You were  
the doctor. You were the husband  
waiting. You were the two hands  
holding your wide-open body,  
the hands lifting your body from its  
own body-hole in a grip that almost  
makes it all seem OK.





## My father reckoned his name was Kyle

Joanna Suzanne Lee

The morning of the night  
my father saw the coyote  
as we talked on the phone i saw  
a lost boxspring lie lonely  
on the bridge, wondering  
amid all the deaths countless as stars  
what the message is here is it  
one of hope is it dry  
as yesterday's august forecast,  
is it common & crystal, like a raindrop is it quiet?

boxsprings like poems have to say  
something

is it like me does it want to become the ocean is it still  
as a glass window on a summer afternoon, the cat behind dreaming

does it breathe in higher altitudes or shake hands and make eyes at every pretty thing to cross  
its path hold a truth in the grubbiness of its palms any truth maybe not mine maybe one that only  
exists in the salt of memory something you can put your finger on and press til raw something that  
stings something that howls?



## A Plurality of Burglars

Paul Ewing

The whole thing with my breaking into Beth's house was strange. Even for me, Garret Miller, cat burglar of Stillwood, Pennsylvania. I noticed the house a month, maybe two months before I broke into it. It wasn't like me to rush into anything.

I was strolling down Spring Street wearing a jacket and tie I bought at the Salvation Army store, clutching a *Bible*. I was watching the people come and go, waiting for an opportunity that seemed both easy and safe. I was the guy who would ring the bell, and if you were lucky enough to be home, would ask, "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?" It's amazing how people just shoo you off of their porch when you ask them about God. It's quick and it's final, and it's almost always angry. If you weren't home, and I saw an easy in, something like an open window on the porch or the fire escape, I would let myself in. Thank you very much.

Stillwood is a small town, relatively speaking, and it seemed like I was seriously starting to press the odds. Tempt the fates. Push my luck. However you want to say it. And I knew it was only a matter of time before I found myself rummaging through the home of an old classmate. The house of an ex-coworker. Or more than likely, the apartment of somebody I knew just casually. Somebody I'd seen around town. Somebody I waited on. Somebody who drank across from me at another bar. But I never imagined I would find myself crawling through Beth's window.

This life can be stranger than shit sometimes, and this it seemed, was one of those stranger times. Beth and I had been a couple off and on, but mostly on, since high school. And until she left me and married Brian, I, like everybody else we knew, assumed she'd be marrying me. Stranger still, if I could have blamed anybody not named

Beth for getting me into this life of petty crime, it would be the young police officer who came to take my statement the second time I was robbed. Maybe I should have been blaming the guy who actually robbed me that second time too. But the son of a bitch had no face. No name. No place tangible to hang the blame.

The first time I was robbed I rationalized it. There was no reason why I should be immune to crime. It was a societal problem, nothing personal. The only things I could be accused of were stupidity, and a basic trust of my fellow man. I left an easily accessible window on my fire escape not only unlocked, but open. And I lived in an area of town known to be at risk for such things.

I considered the first time a lesson. One of those things I needed to learn, but couldn't learn until it happened. I bought a newspaper and cut out my incident report from the "Police Log," hanging it on the refrigerator like I'd won an award. And all things considered, on a global sort of life and death scale, it wasn't that big of a deal. He took a small portable stereo I didn't actually use all that much anymore, and fifty dollars from the previous night's tips I left sitting on the kitchen counter like somebody who didn't know better.

I got over it. No big deal. I replaced the sliced screen, started not only closing, but actually locking the windows when I left, and it was enough to finally make me replace the burned out light bulb on the balcony.

It happened at night that first time. Beth and I came home around three in the morning. I headed for the bathroom. Beth hit the kitchen for a couple of Advil.

"Hey Garret," she yelled; "did you leave the back door open?"

I didn't know if it was drunkenness or surprise, but it took a few, almost elastic seconds for it to register. When I came back in from the balcony, Beth locked the door behind me. I didn't know what the expectations and responsibilities were for the drunk man who came home to find his apartment had been robbed.

"You should call the police," Beth said.

So I called 911, annoying the operator because I didn't have an actual emergency, and she put me through to the police. And somewhere out there, documented and filed away, is the tape of my shaky voice telling this woman, "I think I've been robbed."

Beth and I sat on the front stoop sharing a glass of water, silently looking at meaningless stuff on our phones, waiting an hour or so for the police officer. He was a nice enough man, around my parents' age, which seemed right somehow.

We took the policeman upstairs and showed him the sliced screen.

"This is where they entered," he said.

He always referred to the criminal element in the plural. It made no difference it was obviously the work of one man. Although much like the policeman's plurality of burglars, I assumed the burglar was a man.

"Do you have renters insurance?" the policeman asked.

"Renters insurance?" The idea seemed as exotic as my having a pet monkey.

"If you don't have insurance, do you at least have the serial number of the stereo?"

I shook my head and looked at Beth in a silent plea for help. I didn't know the stereo had a serial number. Christ, I didn't even know what brand it was. Beth probably

had renters insurance and a long list of appliance serial numbers and owner's manuals safely hidden in a fire proof drawer she didn't tell me about.

"You really should write those things down," he said. "Make a list. Keep it someplace safe. Some people even keep pictures of their valuables on their phone."

As Beth and I were walking the policeman out, he gave me his card.

"Call me if anything turns up," he said. Like he was sorry there was nothing he could do.

"Thanks," I said. Letting him know I didn't blame him.

Beth and I went back upstairs, but decided without discussing it to go to her place. I'd been hoping she'd move in with me, but was happy that night she hadn't. And later that morning, at Beth's apartment, the story I would tell my friends and regulars came into focus.

"I didn't know cops had cards," Beth said.

"Was it just me, or were you a little bummed he didn't dust for fingerprints or wake the neighbors to see if they saw anything suspicious. He didn't even have a partner. I mean who does he crack jokes with all day?"

"I know," Beth said. "It wasn't anything like it is on TV."

The second time I was robbed was much more difficult. The anxiety. The feeling of violation. The sleeping on the couch with the television on instead of sleeping in the quiet darkness. All of the rationalization I used the first time was meaningless. The sense of some sort of universal fairness. The randomness. Even the humor was gone. Maybe it had something to do with Beth being gone.

A year and a half, maybe two years had passed. Beth was living in a different town, with a different man. A husband no less. Brian had been her friend from work, and I never suspected a thing. They came into my bar together many times. Sometimes Brian even brought dates, beards, or place holders I guess. I was where I was supposed to be, so it never occurred to me Beth could have wanted something else.

By the second time I was robbed, I was living in a different, much smaller, much darker apartment, and that period of my breaking things, and indulging in both alcohol and women had passed. I was alone. Sober for the most part, and for the rest, somewhat boring and sad.

The second time I was robbed he took the seldom used small portable stereo that replaced the seldom used small portable stereo that had been stolen the first time I was robbed, an old smart TV, and an assortment of outdated phones I hadn't figured out how to recycle. The worst thing about the second time I was robbed was the method. The second burglar, and I'm only assuming I wasn't robbed by the same man twice, stood on my balcony and hammered on the panels of the wooden door. Not only did he have the balls to smash in my door, he did it during the middle of the day.

Again, I called 911, and again, the man lectured me on the nature of a true emergency. The file on me was growing.

I didn't know what to do during the waiting. The living room had been soiled. The whole apartment made dirty by the burglar. I was running the vacuum cleaner when the police officer arrived.

He had to pound on the door for me to hear him.

As with the first time I was robbed, the police officer was very polite.

When I showed him the smashed door, he said, "That's really something."

He was a younger man, probably in his early thirties, and I thought it strange somebody I could have gone to high school with would want to be a cop. I couldn't imagine a job I'd want less, and I knew a guy who actually vacuumed out Port-A-Potties forty five hours a week. I guess it takes all kinds. And it certainly seemed to reason we needed people to drive from the scene of the crime to the scene of the next crime, gathering serial numbers and estimated times of break-ins.

Both of which I readily gave him.

I was so prepared; he must have thought I was trying to rip off the insurance company. He didn't need to worry. As it turned out, the old TV, the small portable stereo, and the assortment of outdated phones, didn't meet my deductible, so reporting the break-in to my insurance company was nothing but a horribly frustrating waste of time.

When we were finished with the official formalities, I walked the young police man to his car, like he was a visiting friend. Like nothing criminal had taken place.

"If I were you, I'd buy a gun," he said.

"That's not going to work for me."

"It was just a thought," he said, handing me a pamphlet on my rights as a victim. I never read it. I meant to, I just couldn't remember where I put it. "I'll be in touch if anything turns up."

"Okay."

"You should do the same. You'd be surprised how often it turns out to be somebody you know."

"I can't imagine anybody I know doing this," I said. He had no doubt been trained in these matters, so he knew I was lying. He knew everybody I'd ever met had suddenly become suspect.

"Well, you know your friends better than I do," he said. "Maybe it was just random. Maybe somebody saw you leaving and decided to make a move."

After the second time I was robbed I never knew if I was going to walk in on somebody robbing me yet again. Every time I opened the door it was waiting. Out of this fear grew the unshakable belief everybody passing me on the street, everybody sitting in the car next to mine, everybody coming into my bar, was guilty. I saw them carrying my television down the stairs and through the alley. Saw them sitting around with their friends watching the shows from my Hulu watch history: *Project Runway*, *Lost*, *The OC*. Shows I started watching with Beth, but still watched alone sometimes, and judging me because of them.

To speed along the healing process, I took long walks where I knew there'd be crowds of people. I would submit myself to my fellow man until my suspicions faded. I worked nights mostly, so if nothing else, these walks got me out of my apartment and into the light.

During one of those afternoon walks I saw a woman leaving an apartment above the barbershop on James Street. And talk about random, I only noticed her because she had a great ass. As I watched her walk away, deciding I wouldn't be able to keep pace without running, I saw the window at the end of her fire escape was open without even a

screen.

I wanted to do the neighborly thing I wished somebody had done for me. I rang the bell. I wanted to tell her equally hot and totally imaginary roommate that we had to make it tougher on the criminals.

I knocked. I knocked again. Harder the second time.

The only thing that seemed to make any sense was leaving her a note. I would tell her I wasn't some sort of criminal or freak, just a concerned citizen like herself, but if I was some sort of criminal or freak, she had left me some pretty easy pickings. I felt good about my plan until I realized I had no pen, no paper.

I climbed the fire escape without hesitating. It was easier than the policeman said it would be. I slid through the window, locking it behind me. A good deed. I thought I'd put my phone number on the note. She might want to thank me. With an ass like that, why not take the chance?

She must have left in a hurry. There were clothes on the floor. Makeup spread across the dresser. I saw how she lived like we were lovers.

I stretched myself across her bed. It wasn't made. There was a Rothko print on one wall, the Paris skyline on another. She smelled good. A combination of perfume and scented lotion and last night. I thought about masturbating. I checked out the pictures she had arranged on the mirror instead. They seemed important. There was one with her and another woman at the beach. They were wearing bikinis. I put the picture in my pocket and left the room.

I sat on the couch and turned on the television. She had been watching MSNBC. I surfed through the channels like I was at home. I watched a *Big Bang Theory* rerun until I remembered it. I finished the half empty glass of orange juice she left on the table near the couch. I kept the television on and hid the remote control under the couch cushions.

When it was time, I walked casually out her front door like I was leaving my own house. Like I fit. Like everything was copacetic.

I never did leave her that note.

Once outside, I picked up the pace. Before I knew it, I was running.

That was my start.

My first time.

But like everything else in this life, it quickly fell into a routine. A routine of spotting somebody leaving. Of noticing an easily accessible window. Of ringing the bell. Of pounding on the door. Of breaking in. Of helping myself to their things. I don't remember when traveling with the suit and *Bible* began, but I thought it was a stroke of inspired genius.

It was like a little vacation every afternoon I went stealing. Even the smallest and dirtiest apartments were exotic. Exciting. Energizing. Usually I'd make myself some sort of lunch. What can I say? Breaking and entering made me hungry. I'd rearrange their pictures. I'd move their furniture around. I'd wash their dishes. Most of the time, I took something small as a souvenir. A magazine. A glass. A collector's spoon from Montpelier, Vermont, ruining a meticulously collected and displayed set of state capitol spoons. It seemed right. Nobody should have all fifty spoons.



The routine of my afternoon walks kept leading me past that white brick house on Spring Street. I didn't know it was Beth's house. Had I known, I probably would have just pissed in the yard and been on my way.

I was trying not to repeat my route. People generally ignored the religious zealot, but I didn't need them seeing me two or three days in a row. I didn't need them noticing me. I didn't need them becoming suspicious and warning each other about me on their Nextdoor Neighbor apps.

I noticed the first time I passed the house a window in the side of the yard was open with just a screen. It was one of those little plastic and mesh screens unattached to the frame, propping the window open. Teasing me. Being on the side of the house, hidden in the yard, the window was an almost perfect spot for a break-in.

You can never look at anything in the break-in business as being perfect. That's just stupid. Arrogant even. But this window was about as perfect as I could imagine. It was far enough inside the yard you had to be looking for it to see it, and it was low enough to the ground I was pretty sure I'd be able to pull myself up and through it. But I kept walking past that open window. There was no need to take bigger risks. Stealing wasn't my source of income. I was doing it for the fun. The thrill. The rush.

But eventually, as I knew it would, the pull of the house overwhelmed me.

I rang the bell. I knocked. I knocked again. I pounded as hard as I could pound. Nothing stirred.

I left the porch, opened the gate, and walked casually to the window without looking behind me.

It was harder pulling myself up than I imagined, but I did it. I lifted the window all the way up and pushed the screen onto the floor.

I've never been one of those people with a lot of faith. Never thought things happened for a reason. I never much cared for the concept of destiny, be it manifest, or just the normal kind. And you don't want to get me started on some sort of divine plan, but if any of that nonsense is to be believed, then my breaking into Beth's house should be considered part of that plan. I was going to get the chance to search their home for any small imperfection I could find. I was going to prove to myself they weren't the golden couple I'd been hearing about, that they weren't the picture perfect people I was trying to avoid on Instagram.

I flipped a wedding picture on its face. The two of them looked way too happy. Their smiles way too bright. Way too wide. Like they were models or actors and not the all too real people who ruined my life. Like theirs was the actual love story, and I was that character the audience couldn't believe she was with, an obstacle she needed to overcome, somebody all but forgotten by the final act. I spent that day in a half dozen bars, probably not smiling once. Not even by impulse. Not even by mistake. I sat back on their couch, strangely satisfied. I put my feet up on the table so I could kick over a pile of magazines. It felt right. Who piled magazines on a table? Who, besides doctor's offices and hairdressers even bought magazines anymore? I stretched my arms up around me like this was my house. Like things turned out right. Like Beth hadn't left. I was smiling now.

I went upstairs. I knew Beth, so I knew they had sex, but I didn't think I could handle seeing their bed. Their bedroom was to the right. I turned to the left.

There was a smaller room with a desk, a computer, two bookcases, and a handful of unpacked boxes. I recognized most of the books. They used to be mine. The house was meticulously staged. Everything perfectly in its place. According to the small town grapevine and the Facebook timeline, Beth and Brian had been back in town for six months, maybe even a year, hoping to start a family. These boxes were the oddity I sought. I went to the stack and opened the third box down. It was like Beth was trying to hide it from me. And after I moved the owner's manuals for the washer and dryer and the brand new Roku TV, I knew why. I didn't have to read those letters. I remembered writing every word. I never imagined she kept them. She had them in chronological order from the notes we passed in geometry class, to the letters I'd written her when we were in separate colleges seeing other people, and emails and text messages didn't seem substantial enough, to the cards I'd leave her for any occasion when we were back together, to my words pleading for her to love me again, to the hurtful threatening rants I sent her when I knew that wasn't going to happen. I didn't like her having all that proof.

I had the envelopes out of the box, and the letters out of the envelopes. All the beauty and mess of our relationship crazy scattered around me on the floor. Even when I imagined her regretting her decision, which I did pretty much nonstop for the better part of a year, I never thought she kept my letters. I didn't know what it meant. Probably it didn't mean anything. Probably she read them to Brian and they laughed at me. It felt as if I'd fallen through a time portal on some shitty television show. Nothing was real to me in the same way it had been real to me before I opened that box.

But when I heard the front door open, that sudden jolt of fear charging through me was about as real as it gets.

Beth was talking. "Yeah Mom, they had plenty left."

There was no Brian. But still, I was scared.

I hadn't seen Beth since that day, weeks before her wedding, when I arranged to accidentally run into her, and she said goodbye to me. Like it was that easy.

I stepped slowly into the hallway.

My heart was beating faster than I imagined possible. Like it was going to explode, shooting blood and tendons and pieces of vein throughout my chest cavity.

"I'll talk to you later. Love you always." I should have known Beth was still using the "love you always." I wondered if her mom knew Beth didn't mean it. I wondered if her mom knew what kind of monster she had raised. If she knew Beth's definition of always wasn't the same as everybody else's. If she knew that for Beth, always had an endpoint.

I grabbed the banister to steady myself. I was afraid she'd hear my breathing. But I couldn't help it. I needed to see her. And even if that desire wasn't enough, at some point, I was going to have to leave.

There she was, sitting on the couch. She hadn't noticed the screen was on the floor and the window behind her was closed. She was busy playing on her phone. Turning the television on with it. Picking the magazines up off of the floor.

My God, she was still the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. I was hoping time would have changed her. Beaten her down. Broken her just a little bit like it had broken me.

I grasped firm my *Bible*, holding those letters written so long ago, but it didn't

seem to help.

She was so beautiful, I knew there was no place else in this whole twisted world I fit. And somehow forgetting I'd broken into her home, I walked casually down the steps, into her living room.





# Diagnosis

Glover Davis

Brass keys mingling with other keys might rest  
forever in a kitchen cabinet.  
But in our rooms of flesh and blood we may  
have stored disjecta of our memories,  
tattered and blurred, slipped into consciousness  
with no obvious movement of the will,  
no effort to expunge the spots a robe  
of conscience bears like ink spilled or blood shed,  
deeply worked into the imagined fibers  
skilled craftsmen might have weaved into new bolts  
of wool, soft on the skin as a silk shirt.  
The doctor did not say, "your brain can be  
its own place ruled by nothing anyone  
else says or does." There may be tiny rooms  
membranes would have sealed like the doors we locked.  
But if these portals somehow could be pierced  
the graven world might blossom then against  
the leaves of memory or a struck brain  
and one might haul into the light again  
moments throbbing like tarpons on lodged hooks.



# Balloon

Leon Fedolfi

Diana - her name welled in the deep mind as  
the mermaid of Autumn laughter and grit,  
whose colors burnished the calling wood.

Eric, found in Winter, was Nothing if not asleep -  
whose yellow sunrise upon his cheek  
gathers one more day of what troubles it.

Slave conduits in the shape of think,  
words into caravans and crates.  
A count of difference advanced to the border -  
arm yourself hands!

Bathos nothings into cognition,  
but a monster grows in emotion.

Opiates, now the opiate of the people,  
and Words, in their leash-y seizure,  
simile upon the acres of Eric's wreathed -

who was never meant to be there,  
in the wooded arm he hung from,  
while the brail bark grieves,

and signs balloon in his mouth  
- a Mouthful.



# Suicide as Survival Instinct

Hannah Huff

Birds and men croak every day  
but I couldn't quite understand  
until I held the slack-necked body  
in-hand, carrying it gingerly  
between two phlegm yellow cloths  
outside to see if it really died –  
whether it would fly when the wind  
finally skimmed its wings again  
after two days of window battering –  
delicate ram of feathers, beak, and hollow  
bone, colliding with a mirror of its home.  
Sparrow born in the library foyer roofing,  
sparrow who finally plummeted, plunked  
down among the books, beak open,  
acquiescence spoken, sparrow, light  
and leaden, astral stone, placed beneath a bush  
just beyond the doors, a sweet first fresh air  
burial – I know birds, like men, croak every day,  
but only once have I cradled one dying  
and felt in the release what it means to lose sky  
beyond reach to the curious coops men build.





## The Captain's Roses

Lawrence Heron

Everyone called him “The Captain.” Retired US Army, Marines, whatever. Some sort of military guy. Anyway, every time a car passed his house he would salute. A military salute. Stand tall. Crisp. Like he was inspecting his troops. Kind of creepy, if you ask me. Made me feel like I’d joined the Marines, the last thing I’d ever want to do, as you’ll hear later on.

But he was an old guy, and old guys do weird things, that “Well I’m retired now, I can act however I want” attitude; they get strange and stranger. I think that sometimes they just start to lose their marbles. All their old guy friends are busy looking for their own marbles, which have rolled under the furniture or across the carpet and out the door, so nobody notices for a while. Or, after a lifelong straight-laced career, they end up like a jack in the box kept compressed too long. Crank that handle, listen to that tune about the monkey chasing the weasel, and out suddenly he springs, free, loony and irritatingly gleeful.

It’s funny how people keep their lives on hold. Events constrain them to be one person, but they ache, scarcely aware, to be another. Then, if they’re lucky, and manage to live long enough, they get to retire. It makes you wonder. By the time they get to their “bucket list” they’re also ready to measure out their hole three wide and six deep. Like this guy, I’d heard he was a real asshole when he first moved here. Hard to get along with, full of himself. Got mad at the neighbors when they had a party. Glared at you if he thought you’d cut him off at the intersection downtown. Reported you if he

thought you were smoking pot. That sort of thing. Who wants a neighbor like that? Tell you about my run-in later.

About the time we showed up on the same road, he was in his lovey-dovey phase. Walking around town asking everybody, “Has anyone told you ‘I love you’ today?” He’d be ready to let you know too. Yeah, right. Like I want to hear “I love you” from some old crazy guy who doesn’t even know me. Whenever he asked, I’d look down and say, “Yep, yep,” and walk away – quickly. Embarrassing, if you ask me. And this from a guy who could’ve killed hundreds in his good old days.

These ex-military guys get on my nerves. Not necessarily the guys from ‘Nam, but some of them too. Want all kinds of privileges, as though retiring at fifty with a pension and free medical care weren’t enough. Add in some disability and Viagra for life and you’ve got it made. Then they want monuments everywhere to prove they killed people in faraway villages, special license plates, parking privileges, and getting on airplanes before the old ladies in wheel chairs. Warriors.

I admit I don’t understand the whole ex-military thing. Not my world, you probably guessed. Some are in the VFA hall hanging out and getting drunk while being otherwise upright pillars of the community, and the rest seem to crawl around unshaven, dealing with their flashbacks and drug habits.

OK. OK. I have a chip on my shoulder.

I love the American flag. I even shed a few tears when I hear The Star Spangled Banner – that is, if it’s sung right. Although I might be wishing they were singing “God Bless America” instead. “Rockets red glare,” who needs it? Wave the flag; kill more people; get your guns out; rah, rah, rah. So there he is with his battered flag, looking like it’s been in seven wars, hanging high on a pole in his front yard; now he loves everybody – except me I think.

No, I didn’t serve. I turned 18 during the Vietnam War. The fun national game at that time was the draft lottery. The little blue capsule with my birthdate came up early, so I found religion and became “a conscientious objector.” Mostly I was conscientiously objecting to getting shot at, or, maybe worse, being ordered around by some moron one rank higher. So I was busy being a good Quaker and looking at real estate in Canada.

I know I don’t look it with my crappy old truck and trailer, and ornery disposition, but I really was, and sort of still am, a Quaker. The ideals are there, it just doesn’t show. Back then, I was just as stubborn. I considered myself a patriot, doing my duty for my country. Alternative service, they called it. But, as you can imagine, no one built me or my kind any monuments.

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We'd moved up the hill from the Captain, so Harry and I'd bump up and down the dirt road in our truck on up to our place, passing his rehabbed farmhouse at the end of the pavement. Anne, his wife, was retired military too, but seemed to be able to get by without saluting every passing car from the front yard. Locally, they were sort of minor celebrities; it was hard not to know all about them, with all the sucking up the local paper does to these military types. Can't open that rag without some mention of their parades, awards, and reunions.

But I have to admit the old guy and his lady had done a nice job with their place. Farmhouses here were dirt-cheap years ago, when they arrived, and most had been abandoned, were run down, and needed serious repairs. The Captain and his Anne salvaged theirs, and it looks great. You'd never know it'd been ready to collapse. Most people would have torn it down, but they didn't; I respect that. And their roses, their roses are beautiful; that's how the whole thing got started.

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That was the source of the conflict. The roses. The Captain's roses. Surpassingly lovely, climbing to twelve feet, in a profusion of small, lilac to pink to red blossoms. Savagely, delicately, they erupted in summer-long havoc, daring us to approach, to smell, even to embrace; enticing in aggressive beauty. Despite growing on a trellis at the Captain's front door, Harry and I admired the roses, boldly, without reserve, slowing, even stopping the car, inhaling and gazing shamelessly.

Defiant, in thorny recklessness, the roses challenged the rigid laws of the yard – right angles, clean edges, clear limits – established by the Captain; laws enforced without quarter in a trail of noise, the scent gasoline, exhaust, and the screaming of the weedwhacker. Despite this, the roses grew with arrogant abandon. Like willful children, they thrived, even exulted, somehow fertilized by his indifference.

The secret to the roses' existence may have been Anne. Each time Harry and I drove slowly by, as the Captain delivered his military salute, Anne would give us a small, friendly wave. There seemed to be a message hidden in her smile – a shyness – that invited us to share a quiet joke, a private laugh – perhaps at the expense of her husband. I had the sense, not justified except in the conjectures about other people I habitually make, that Anne understood us; our contrary impulses – instinctively shrinking back from the Captain even as we desired to draw ever nearer to his roses. But maybe I had it all wrong from the beginning. Perhaps the roses were not the Captain's after all; it could be that Anne, like a subterranean stream, deep and full of power, was the hidden source of the roses' wild invincibility.

\*

I figure people look at me and think, "That guy isn't a total loser, but he's definitely had it rough." I know how I look. Too heavy. Unshaven. Dirty overalls. Driving my old truck

back and forth to my plumbing jobs and on up to my trailer at the end of the dirt road. Smoking pot all the time, it seems. Sometimes it's hard to figure what makes a life. You just keep doing whatever it is you're doing; things happen to you, around you, and that's it.

Harry died a few years back. That was a hard time. If I could turn the clock back. By the time he died, we were both grateful. Three years of treatments, medications, in and out of hospitals, pain, discomfort, and just plain annoyance. Maybe if we'd had someone to blame – but there was no one. God? The Universe? Some elusive chemical in the air, in our food? No, it was just a random getting screwed by the remorseless fact of existence. There was no cause, no agency; just bad news that started out like a back page article of passing interest, which gradually evolved into headlines, with their daily updates, horrors, and disasters. Content, Harry and I had occupied ourselves with the thousand daily tasks and routines that constitute a "life" – oblivious; but an evil hovered, unseen, unsuspected. Then it came. Slam! That life was over, crushed by the flat open hand of some faceless, soulless entity. Like a dead fly on the countertop. OK, I'm being dramatic – but that's how it felt.

We loved each other, but what a shitty way to find out how much. I feel an absurd gratitude for that discovery. A love unnoted, as the days, months, and years had passed – except for those occasional moments of quiet celebration, like after making love, or in the shared solitude of reading on the steps on a late summer's afternoon, when it was at once tangible and unconscious.

We both knew he was leaving. Neither of us became reconciled to his coming death, but as a fact we accepted it; and we had long since reconciled with each other – our imperfections had become too much a part of who we were, of what we loved, to expect or perhaps even to desire change. We were able to say goodbye; like a long exhaled breath, after a lifetime of short hurried ones. Even so, sometimes, on a Saturday morning, it's as though he's not really gone forever; but only downstairs making coffee, waiting for me to get up and join him for breakfast, and later go down to work in the garden.

Down in the garden, I think that's where Harry and I felt most together, moving, weaving in and around each other, like silent dancers, rarely needing to speak a word; each laboring independently, instinctively helping each other; a garden choreography. We'd finish, dirty, tired, sharing secret satisfied smiles.

I could, and probably should, look around, mix with people more, maybe try to find a boyfriend, but that part of my life has passed. Pushing myself out the door, opening up to a new person, allowing myself to glimpse my silent, consuming hollowness; I can't. The thought repels me. I refuse to explain myself, to tell my tired story, to allow a stranger to pry into the intimacies of my ragged dysfunction.

I'm more content to continue the routines of my life in willful forgetfulness. I still go down to the garden, imagining, knowing, he is just behind me, perhaps kneeling in the

soil, just out of sight, mulching, weeding, or transplanting perennials.

\*

I'm a law-abiding person. I believe in the community, cooperation, civic duty – all that stuff. So I have no excuse. I was stealing – sort of – I wasn't taking the whole thing, just separating a clump to plant near where I'd spread Harry's ashes. You see, I'd been in the habit of "collecting" plants wherever I went: a daylily from the roadside, a cutting from a creeping phlox in a neighbor's rock garden, a tamarack sapling that grew along a railroad grade to plant behind the pond, hollyhock seeds from a town park. What at first seemed vaguely wrong gradually became completely natural, virtuous and justifiable, perhaps even a contribution to the public good. The roses were crowded; they needed room to expand and a new place to thrive, free to spread, free from the ominous threat of the Captain's weed whacker.

That chilly November morning, I dressed in my boots, old jeans, wool hat, and dark jacket; shovel in hand, my coffee and conscience left cooling off back at the house, I descended through the woods and brush toward the Captain's. In the light of the waning moon, a thin crescent, and the mere suggestion of the coming sunrise on the horizon below, I cautiously crept toward the darkened silhouette of the house. A mist, rising in the faint moonlight, came up the road and reached its damp fingers across the lawn, where it settled, as if deciding to be a ghostly witness to my ignoble pursuit.

The air was still; the night quiet. My heart beat. Just short of the back corner, I stopped, took a deliberately calming breath, and wondered belatedly which room might be the bedroom. Far off, echoing off the hillsides and across the valley, I heard coyotes yipping; I hoped it was neither a portent nor a warning.

In the darkness of the frame of the house, its windows rippling in the soft glow emanating from the nightlights inside, I sensed a stirring, a pulse, a life within; perhaps its occupants turning in their sleep, restless, their dreams exhaled through its walls and timbers, beyond me, through me, and into the black emptiness of the night; or rather, it might have been the home itself, awakening to my presence, sighing, shifting, disquieted by the nocturnal stranger.

I rounded the corner to the front door and saw the roses. There they waited, expectantly; tall stalks bare and trembling in the night air, seeming to observe me, watchful, lips pursed, their emotions held close, contained, as I readied the shovel. I set the blade at their base, took a step back, put a foot onto the shovel and pushed deeply into the soil. The soft earth yielded. I felt roots crunch under my foot as the blade descended. The task, so familiar – digging and transplanting – was reassuring. I began to work in a small circle to dig out a small section of the plant. The stems shook as I dug, their small, sharp thorns scratching red tracks across my arms and wrists. No matter, the circle of deep cuts was almost complete.



Afterwards, I could trim the stems, put the root ball into a bag, and disappear into the woods. Uneasy suddenly, I paused in my work, stopped, and looked around. The empty road and the stark houses, colorless in the twilight, seemed to accuse: “Why are you digging here alone in the night?” I wondered. I remembered. Harry, dead now these few years, his ashes spread over our garden. How often we had slowed, even stopped, the car to gaze at the roses. Harry. The roses. The garden. I leaned on the handle of the shovel, lost, far removed from this moment, carried to what had been, consumed with an overpowering remorse – what might have been – what should have been.

Awakening, I saw my foot on the shovel. I looked around like a man who wakes in a strange bed in a strange city; an alien, dazed, disoriented, unsure of why or how he got there. My thoughts collapsed in confusion. This can’t be me. I don’t belong here. It was time to go. Now.

Just then, a movement, and the slightest hint of sound, made me look up. Suddenly there he was. Even in my imagined scenarios of a failed expedition I hadn’t conjured a vision so terrible. Like an Old Testament prophet, with a rifle instead of a rod in hand, grizzled face in exalted and uncontained fury, eyes glowing, fierce and unnatural, bathrobe flowing outward as if blown by a storm sent by an angry god, he stood in the halo of the porch light.

Hesitating only to gasp, I spun and ran blindly across the wet lawn and into the obscurity of the woods, tripping on roots, stones, and fallen tree trunks like the crazy, desperate man I was. I didn’t look back. Soon I was stumbling up my driveway, exhausted; my forsaken-looking home before me. Dirty, wet, bruised, and empty-handed, I stood at my front door, my eyes welling with tears, unwilling to confront the void that awaited. My shadow grew against the door; I turned to face the light; the first rays struck my eyes as the sun rose, serene, timeless, its warmth offering a gentle caress of hope. But Harry was gone; he would not return.

\*

After Harry died, everything changed; everything remained the same. I still drove out on my jobs. I worked, ate, slept; spent time in the garden: planting, weeding, harvesting – remembering. As I’d always done before, I slowed the truck ever so slightly to view the roses; still they climbed with unbridled vanity, filling me with both joy and anguish.

The Captain and Anne often sat in the shade of the front enjoying the afternoon warmth. He still saluted as I passed – but now, it seemed, with movements that were stiff, grim, and with an air of reprimand – although I admit my perceptions were probably tainted by my conscience. Anne seemed unchanged, just as friendly; in fact I thought I saw recognition, a new warmth in her fleeting smile. I rarely spoke to the Captain and Anne; polite greetings and brief pleasantries about the weather, at the local market or at the post office, were all we shared. Trash day changed all that.

Trash day, a bright Saturday morning in late spring, driving past their house, perverse chance drew me closer to the Captain and his wife. Already in a hurry – the dump, the hardware store, a job to check in on – all still to do. I lumbered down the hill, total washboard after the recent rains, bouncing and grinding in my beater truck, which was stuffed full and crammed with trash, and hit a bad bump. Everything went flying. Ugly plastic garbage bags leapt out of the bed, bounced, tumbled, spewed open, and vomited my most personal disgusting and corrupted leavings all over the front of their perfectly coffered lawn and yard.

Out of the corner of my eye, in the rearview mirror, I saw the debris flying. Shreds of black plastic, like a flock of crazed ravens, sailed, hovered, and fluttered across their lawn. Filthy empty cans, cracked buckets, rusted and twisted bundles of chicken wire, containers full of dirty motor oil, grimy old T-shirts and greasy jockey shorts used as rags, discards from file cabinets, dumped and hastily bagged; my effluent scattered like a jumbled timeline of my life.

I know that everyone has shameful or embarrassing aspects to their lives. Being alive and human isn’t always pretty. We have our moments of pride and beauty – nice clothes, good haircut, maybe even once, for an instant, we were attractive, and happy for the world to see us in all our glory; but the more common, humble, usually private, condition is the intimate ugliness of our daily existence: bowel movements, urine stains, blood, vomit, our aging bodies naked in the mirror, the thousand corruptions that we fruitlessly attempt to tidy up – to hide the blatant and obvious from ourselves and all the world – like a demented housekeeper furiously sweeping the dust and dirt into the air before the imminent arrival of some exalted guest.

However, I could hide nothing. I pulled over, beyond their lawn, taking care not to put my wheels in the ditch, sighed, put on my brave and “how regrettable this unforeseen event is” face, and climbed out of the truck, slamming the door. (Not necessarily an act of resignation or frustration – slamming it was the only way to get it to shut.)

The Captain stood staring, alternately at me and what had moments ago been his perfect yard, with amazement and thinly disguised polite disgust. Anne retained that amused expression I’d often seen, and although she seemed to be attempting to summon an amount of shock commensurate with the event, I could sense, just behind her eyes, a flicker of a message that said, “Don’t worry about it. This is the most interesting thing that has happened in days.”

The Captain surveyed his front yard, slowly turning his head to gaze at the sorry spectacle, from the upper end all the way down to my truck, and then back to me. I approached with an apologetic air, stopped, shook my head, and put my hands on my hips, as if to say ruefully, “Isn’t it crazy what things can happen in life.” Even as I was engaged in this pantomime, I felt conscious of my shabby, torn, and paint-stained work clothes, and couldn’t help but feel he figured my disreputable appearance, the bungled job of packing the truck, and my undoubted lack of any sense of responsibility were all

just another unwelcome part of the disgraceful disarray spread across his yard. I felt like part of the trash myself.

“Sorry. What a mess!” I said, waving my arm in an attempt to encompass my contribution to the neighborhood aesthetic. “I’ll get this cleaned up right away.”

The Captain made a second grim survey of his front yard; the strewn trash, carried by the spring gusts, seemed to have a life of its own, and playfully leapt, skipped, and skidded in all directions. I wondered to myself, “Which will it be? Is he going to punch me in the face or ask me if anyone has told me they loved me today?” I tried to hide my smile that threatened to cross my face.

Suddenly defeated and helpless, his body slumped, losing his well-known military posture; he waved his hand vaguely to indicate the mess, but remained momentarily speechless. I couldn’t help but think about how he would have dealt with a subordinate in a situation like this during his military years. This crime seemed to surpass the limits of his imagination or ability to respond. The Captain opened his mouth, worked it soundlessly a few times up and down.

Anne took his hand and put an arm around his shoulder in an attitude of surprising tenderness and understanding. She replied to me simply, “Thank you, we’d appreciate that.” To the Captain she said, “Let’s go inside for a while, and let him clean up.” She began to turn and gently guided the Captain, towards the doorway.

“Really, I’m sorry,” I repeated. “I was in such a hurry this morning, I ...”

“Don’t worry,” Anne interrupted, “we all have those days, don’t we?” and continued to the door adding, “I’ll bring a few garbage bags out, it looks like you’ll need them.” This she said with her graceful smile, but not without the lightest touch of humor and irony.

I began the unhappy task of picking up the trash, hoping to get most of it up before the wind spread it, and my most disreputable effects, any further up and down the road. Neighbors, coming and going in their Saturday morning routines – the farmer’s market, breakfast in town, sports events, shopping, the hardware store ... even the dump! – slowed with typical barely disguised curiosity; a few, recognizing the situation, briefly stopped and called out friendly deprecatory remarks from their rolled down car windows.

One “friend” yelled, “Hey, I guess the plumbing gig isn’t working out, new job huh?”

Another, more clever, called, “Ain’t enough to spread trash in your own yard, you got to do it in someone else’s?”

You can see that my friends come from the high-brow echelons of society. Who knows what they might have come up with if they were sober or hadn’t gotten high that

morning? I tried to take it in stride with a rueful smile and kept working, stuffing an already ripped trash bag with scrap after scrap after scrap. I felt like one of those convicts working on the highway – there in full public display – all I lacked were the striped clothes.

I was rapidly working my way across the yard, bending over and or even crawling at full speed – difficult to do and still retain the some measure of dignity – to catch up with the blowing of the more evasive and elusive pieces, when Anne appeared in the doorway. She looked as though she might have been watching me for some short while; she stood, box of trash bags in hand, a sad smile on her face, her eyes thoughtful. The rosebush, now profuse with tiny blush buds, lithe, greening, and arcing its tall thorned stems to the sky, seemed to want to reach out as if to comfort her, to embrace, to share with her its strength and vigor.

I looked at her, paused a moment in my task, feeling suddenly inadequate. “Uh, is the Captain OK? He seemed a little bit, uh, ...”

Anne stepped towards me, carefully, it seemed. “Oh, he’s fine. Just a little overwrought. He gets that way sometimes. You know, at his age.” She smiled at me, as if to say, “I know, I’m no younger than he is.”

Though troubled, Anne projected a serene strength. She was not a person to feel sorry for; nevertheless, I felt tempted to take her hand. She extended her arm with the box of trash bags. “Thought you could use these.”

“Thanks. I’d better get busy before it all blows away.”

Anne nodded and walked back to the doorway. At the door she turned towards me. “Or at least try to be done before the Captain wakes up.” This she said lightly, as if amused. But I knew it was not a joke.

I finished picking up the yard and loading up my truck – more carefully this time – aware that any schedule I might have had for the morning was all shot to hell. I could still make it to the dump and the hardware store anyway. I went to the front door carrying the box of unused trash bags and knocked gently. No answer. I knocked again, a little harder. Still no answer. Unsure, I rounded the corner of the house – the same corner I’d crept around that ill-fated dawn years ago – and found Anne sitting on the small porch on the rear of the house. A book and a teapot sat on the small table. Two cups were set out, one filled with tea. She looked up expectantly.

I drew closer. “Um, there are some trash bags left in the box, I wasn’t sure what ...” I held the box up to indicate my subject matter, feeling both a fool and an intruder. Why hadn’t I just left the box at the front door?

“Oh, thanks, just set them there by the steps.” She pointed.



I put the box down and said, “Well, I’d better get going. Sorry about all the trouble.”

Anne looked at table with the tea and the cups and then up at me. “Would you like a cup of tea? I just made a fresh pot.” She managed a bright smile.

“Oh no, thanks, I couldn’t. Don’t go to the trouble. Besides, I see you’re waiting for the Captain ...”

“Oh no,” she laughed, interrupting, “I put that cup out for you. I was expecting you.”

“But I ...”

“No, really, please sit down. Besides, the Captain is lying down for a bit, and I wouldn’t mind some company.”

I was in a pickle. I owed her one. But I felt uneasy, uncomfortable in my dirty clothes and guilty conscience. Had the Captain seen my face that night? If he did, what had he said to Anne, or did she guess at the truth – that it was me who had skulked around their yard and had tried to dig up her roses? I couldn’t tell. Escape; just get on with my chores, that was all I wanted. But her presence drew me in – she was gracious in an old-fashioned way – but it was more than that; her clear grey eyes, lit with flashes of green, conveyed both humor and seriousness, and seemed to say, “We are alike.”

I pulled the chair out and sat down, saying, “Sure, OK, thanks.”

She poured tea into my cup. “I hope you like English Breakfast.”

I nodded, “Oh yes, that would be great.” Actually I hated black tea – all tea, in fact – coffee was my drink. I couldn’t help but smile, though. English Breakfast had been Harry’s favorite. I recalled how we’d mock each other over our preferences – our pretensions at some sort of superiority or sophistication in our choice of beverages – as though it was something that really mattered; that we did have our differences after all.

“Is the Captain OK?” I asked.

“Oh, he’s fine. He just seems to get stressed out easily these days; I don’t know what it is, just the years going by, I suppose. He’s gone through a lot.”

I didn’t comment. I was hoping that I wasn’t one of the “things he’d gone through;” but I knew he was a vet. Who knows what he’d seen or had to do? What eyes did he see the world with? I had my share of terrors and regrets; no doubt he did too. I suppose as you get older, and have time to turn things over in your mind, maybe you wonder, maybe it gnaws at you, wearing you down, wearing you out. It’s harder to be cynical about the military, at least those who actually served, when you’re sitting on their porch having a



cup of tea with them.

After sipping tea and talking about all the mostly meaningless topics that bind us as neighbors – how much snow there had been or hadn't been, how muddy or rutted the road was or wasn't and if the road crew did or didn't do an outstanding job this year, what flowers and vegetables we were or weren't going to plant, other neighbors, who went away, who stayed, whose kids were doing well or up to no good. I got up to go, excusing myself by mentioning the errands I still had to run, and the hour; the dump would close soon, and I didn't want to be driving around three more days with trash in the back of my truck. "Who knows what might happen?" I joked.

She laughed, and we walked around the yard admiring the bulbs – tulips, crocus, and daffodils budding or in full bloom along the sides of the house. Nearing the front door, as I readied to leave, we turned to admire the roses; they also deserved a farewell. Anne looked at me and then at the roses with the most subtle conspiratorial smile imaginable, as I restrained a gasp; there, leaning against the wall, like an old farm implement on display, as though in nostalgia or whimsy, metal rusted, handle peeling, patient, expectant, and waiting, was my old shovel. I struggled to restrain my hand from reaching out, if only to touch it.

I muttered my goodbye, my thanks for the tea, and somewhat confused and embarrassed, drove off belatedly to the dump.

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The ceremony had been simple – what is called nowadays "a celebration of life." Friends, neighbors, military buddies from years ago, all came; each took turns telling a story, a joke, a reminiscence. I admit to being unexpectedly moved. Anne was not the frail, grieving widow; rather she stood straight-backed, reflective, and characteristically wry, as if finding a private humor in her awareness of life, death, and the long days of loneliness certain to follow.

As the reception wound down and I was headed towards the door, ready to leave, Anne separated herself, with murmured thanks, brief hugs, and handshakes from the sympathetically upbeat cluster that had engulfed her, and made her way through the guests – clearly seeking me out.

She looked at me directly, clasped my hand, as though I were the one being comforted, and said quietly, firmly, almost as a command, "You will come to see me – soon."

I nodded, blinking back tears, "Yes, of course," and turned quickly to leave, almost stumbling out the door.

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I didn't keep my promise to Anne. From the intimacy of that crowded room, death present, life celebrated, I retreated to a numb distance. The cadence of routine – cooking, eating, cleaning, shaving, working, paying bills – framed my existence; their pitiless demands filled my days, muffled my rage, restrained the ravages of my darkest thoughts, and became my salvation.

I roamed dully from room to room through the empty house. What had been shared, familiar, and loved: the old couch, covered with a patterned sheet, the recycled farmhouse sinks, the used rugs given us by his parents, even the photos of Harry and me tacked to the walls; all now seemed worn and shabby; useless. Apathy – spent, tired, and strung out – was all that prevented me from tossing everything out the door and into the dirty snow of the yard and then waiting until spring to haul it all to the dump.

Spring did arrive. Cold rains, melting snow, and the splatter of freezing and thawing mud slowly gave way to a strengthening sun. Boots, heavy coats, wool hats and gloves yielded to the unspeakable delights of bare heads, bare hands and unbuttoned jackets. The chill fogs that had lain low over the crusts of frozen ground now lifted, thrilling all with their moist warmth as they rose up through the leafless woods, along the stubble of cornfields, and then swirled and vanished into the clear blue sky; their farewell unlamented, forgotten; replaced by a yearning; by the fingers of sunlight, their warm caress, sorrowful and forgiving, gently reaching out to touch the upturned faces.

I gradually awakened. The pull of the longer days, the memory of the soil; its black earth beckoned me, jostled me, as though I were a child, heavy with troubled dreams, from the deepest slumber. The ferment of the rotting hay and wet soil, ancient and intoxicating, a mysterious alchemy, cast its spell; I began to feel: to despair, to hope.

The garden and its demands – weeding, mulching, pounding stakes, wheel barrowing and spreading manure – consumed me. With my long-handled garden fork I tilled; then I raked the beds smooth, preparing to plant lettuce, peas, carrots and onion sets. Every lift of the shovel, turn of the fork, sweep of the rake; each motion was both a welcoming embrace and a farewell kiss, as I mixed, spread, and buried Harry's ashes more profoundly into the earth of the garden.

The late spring mornings found me kneeling in the damp mulch of the garden walkway, the knees of my old jeans soaked and dirty; bent close to the earth, my warm breath exhaled and drifting across the raised beds; examining the planted rows, waiting for the first green shoots – confident that they would, just as they had for the many years that Harry and I had watched and waited together, emerge from the cold soil and explode into growth.

I'd heard Anne wasn't well. Remembering her words just after the Captain's death, I felt lousy; I really ought to have visited her earlier, and now I was ashamed to knock on her door. I hadn't seen her sitting out in the yard, as she and the Captain had so often done in the past. Perhaps the pleasure of warming yourself in the dooryard sun on a cool



afternoon just didn't feel the same when you sat alone.

Late one morning, I parked my truck on the side of the road, just where I had on the day I'd spread trash all over their yard. The roses, their coral-pink buds nodding, held their breath as I knocked on the door. I waited. I felt I could almost see their buds swell, constrained, only by the ancestral wisdom of their species, from bursting open into blossom as they so clearly desired.

I figured Anne had heard or seen my truck pull up, so I paused before knocking again, a little more forcefully. The door opened slowly. Anne appeared, grasping the door, leaning slightly forward out of the shadows, paler, vulnerable, her features drawn, sharpened, exposed by the cold, spring sunlight. Her smile was the same – broad, clearly pleased, and mildly reproaching.

"So you've come to see me, now that I'm on my deathbed?" she said, in a curious mix of the playful and serious. I opened my mouth to speak, though, in fact, I was speechless, my ready-made apologies and excuses abandoned, forgotten.

Regretful, perhaps, at my evident distress, Anne gave me a crooked smile and waved me in. "Sorry, you needn't take an old woman's self-pity so seriously."

I smiled back, relieved, and stepped into the dim light of the mudroom. Anne retreated ahead of me into the interior of the house, walking with a cane. She turned, gave me a brief warm hug, and said, "I am glad you've come to visit, it gets pretty quiet around here."

We went into the kitchen. I sat at a small table, while she busied herself making tea. I mumbled some excuse about being busy with work, my house, and the garden, that I had meant to come by sooner ... and so on. She accepted my comments as I'd offered them, but her smile, her eyes, alight with friendship and concern, told me she understood me better than I understood myself. We drank tea and talked. That visit was the first of many.

I began to stop by every so often. Sometimes we'd stroll in the yard, Anne using her walker or cane, or we'd sit out on the porch or yard when the weather was fine. Like old friends, we were comfortable with the silences; aware of, and unwilling to disturb, the unspoken expanse of all we shared; instead we wrapped ourselves in the comfort of small-town conversation – the weather, gardens, the condition of the roads, the neighbors. The mysteries of life, death, aging, friendship, and love, implicit in our bond, had we exposed them to the dry winds of our clumsy words, would have desiccated and become lost, blown across the deserts of our souls.

We never failed to admire the roses; my old shovel had now settled into rustic familiarity; it was now part of the landscape, no longer mine, but rather like an old friend who has retired and moved away to more comfortable and amenable circumstances, but who

continues to feel a certain nostalgia for his old life. I felt it call to me, even as it rested against the wall, so long had it been since my hands had grasped its worn and peeling handle; it called, not to remonstrate, but to remember.

Anne died early that fall. Summer's clamorous growth had given way to sedate repose; all slowed as the days cooled; leaves had begun to drop, buds for next year's foliage and blossoms had already formed; grasses revealed yellow through their green, their seed heads stirring with the breeze; last blossoms faded on dying stalks; all this, and the memory of a thousand winters presaged the long snow-covered months that lay ahead.

I continued to drive by, to slow, as I passed the home Anne and the Captain had shared – already it looked barren and uncared for – its weathered clapboards, once sweet and comforting, now seemed only neglected; the lawn and yard, though still maintained, were forlorn, aware of their abandonment. The empty house, devoid of the life it had known, absent those who had loved, lived, and died there, was lost, adrift amidst the scattered dead leaves of autumn. But the roses! The roses, their final fall blossoms, heedless, continued to bloom in full glory. My old shovel, too, remained, silent, watchful, at peace.

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Weeks later I received a call from the lawyer for Anne and the Captain's estate. She seemed puzzled, but was determined to carry out their wishes. I was to receive a certain "shovel last known to be leaning against the west wall of the house." In addition I was given permission to dig up "whole or in part" the roses growing by the front door for "purposes of transplanting" in "gratitude for the friendship of a neighbor."

I had to smile. I thanked the lawyer; but as I hung up the phone I knew that both I and the roses were already right where we belonged; we didn't need to have our roots disturbed – growing conditions were just fine where we were. And as for that old shovel – I suppose the roses could use some company.



## Contributors

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**Paul Ewing** graduated from Allegheny College. His stories have appeared, among other places, in *The Baltimore Review*, *Pennsylvania English*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *Umbrella Factory Magazine*, and *Word Riot*. He lives in central Pennsylvania with his wife and their three children.

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**Mark Jacobs** has published five books and more than 140 stories in magazines including The Atlantic, Playboy, The Baffler, The Iowa Review, Evergreen Review, and The Hudson Review. A full list of his publications including books can be found at [markjacobsauthor.com](http://markjacobsauthor.com).

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**Bruce Meyer** is author or editor of 64 books of poetry, short fiction, flash fiction, and non-fiction. He was 2019 winner of the Anton Chekhov Prize for Fiction and a finalist in the Thomas Morton Fiction Prize, the Carter V. Cooper Fiction Prize, the Bath Short Story Prize, and the Tom Gallon Trust Fiction Prize. His most recent book of short fiction is *A Feast of Brief Hopes* (Guernica Editions, 2018). He lives in Barrie, Ontario.