

LOVE



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This issue on love—in all its painful and joyous diversity—is dedicated to *Nancy Bourne* whose loss (on March 11, 2021) we who will always love her mourn.

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FICTION

Submerge

Louise Blalock

The wind came toward her, surprisingly, as she turned to cross the river in her Alden rowing shell. She pushed forward using the strength of her back and feet, the long oars angled, widening, transmitting her energy. She was a machine, as she pointed the bow of the Alden into the current. "Strong-on-the-left, strong-on-the-left," she chanted, coaching, to hold the wind. The water had turned choppy, churning, was surpassing her stroke. She knew not to tense, to keep her hands relaxed, elbows up on the recovery, energy flowing up, riding the seat's slide, squaring the blade at the finish. She was stroking hard trying to get out from under the sudden cast of the wind, over to the east side of the river. She repeated her mantra "on-the-left, on-the-left," her weight steady, all she could will, down on the drive, caught in a cross-tide and alone on the river.

She might be pushed back to the railroad bridge, might hit against the rocks, might be turned, might spin helplessly. Early in the spring she had lost control rowing up river through the first arch when the river was high and squirrely. She resisted being frightened now, held the oars out firm, blade just above the water, flat for stability, pushing the sliding seat back, fully extending her legs; she would let the current take her. At first the Alden raced toward the river's center, then went down river, not far, unsteady, tippy, but purposeful, on what seemed a course, then abruptly, like an intervention, the current calmed.

A heron on the riverbank flew up behind her. She felt the stir, turned to catch a glimpse of its flight. The golden trees, white ash, formed a bright crescent on the river's east side. The sun was brilliant; she pulled her cap low over her forehead to shield her eyes, and took up her stroke again. She was nearing the far end of a small river island or isthmus, adjacent to an old landfill. She was out of the wind here, the water calmed, fallen leaves floated

openly on the surface, each stroke was like a child's run through autumn leaves, a moment's happiness.

When she could see the bottom of the river she stopped rowing, rested the oars and lifted herself off the sliding seat, swung her right leg into the water, leveraged her butt and her left leg after it until she was standing thigh-deep in the river on her bare feet. The river bottom was sandy here, yielding and warmish. She pushed the Alden through the water then dragged it up onto the narrow beach. The rowing shell looked startlingly white. She pushed it part way under some scrub brush. The other rowers were well up the river by now, crossing some invisible state line, going under the Bissell Bridge in doubles and eights. She never had their speed or made their distance and would not be missed. Some shore birds scattered, rose up, regrouped, flew northeast, a fine cloud.

When he was dying, those last days, she had administered the morphine drops. The room was silent and still. She sat near him. He was no longer in their shared bed, but in the hospital bed she and the beautiful dark nurse had set up for him. He groaned when he was turned. He ate very little, then none at all. She talked to him of their trips together, gave him sips of ginger ale through a bent straw. She did not know what else to do. They had taken long walks in Wales and Scotland; these he remembered and gave her something of a smile. He all but laughed, an attempt, when she recounted the fiasco of the White Mountains. They had gone with a guide, stayed in the huts. It rained every day, and the trail was brutal, long and rocky. She only told the funny side of this story. He had taken it hard that they hadn't kept up with the others. He had berated her for being slow. She talked to him of the train trip through Austria, asked if he remembered how they lost their way coming down from the hills near Kahlberg, stumbled across the Italian cafe in a somber, rain soaked town, seeing the green and pink neon lights of the cafe. "We were so utterly dripping wet, so utterly turned around." He had smiled, a bit of a smile.

She thought of how it had been, the choosing of pastries from the lighted glass cases, their wet jackets hung on chair backs to dry. She saw them well pleased with themselves, merry, hands around a hot teapot. She had been all smiles and love, pouring tea into glass cups. Who was he? Who had he been? And she? Her memory was split in two; the sense of her own past had been invaded by this other new reality. It was terrible work to try to put it together.

She caught sight of her right ankle looking bruised, a nascent purple, which might swell. She had banged it beaching the Alden. "Damn," she said to nobody. In the hold of the rowing shell were his papers — notes and photos — rolled up together and dressed with an indigo bandana. She thought her rough-made doll looked like a poppet, as if made for sorcery and witchcraft. She had stashed the poppet in the compartment that might have held a picnic lunch in happier days in the semi-darkness of the boathouse before her shell had been carried down to the dock. She took it out. Some water had seeped into the hold around the rubberized liner, the papers were dampish at the ends, but the bandana was dry. She transferred a big Zippo lighter from her life jacket to the pocket of her khaki shorts before stowing the life jacket in the rowing shell. She was one of the few rowers who wore a life jacket, felt self-conscious about it, but she had promised him to always wear it. She scouted out the strip of beach for some pathway to take across. It was a child's island, or a vagrant's. A cluster of oak and maple trees centered the island, the brush growing dense beneath them.

The affairs, had they been brief? She tried not to make a history and geography of his assignations, dating his encounters, but his infidelities had taken a place in what had been their life together. She had never looked at the file again after that first opening and the shock of discovery after his death. His too delicious secrets in a stiff office file marked private! personal! like a schoolboy with a Sharpie pen.

She thought about the question he had posed to her about her sexual life.

“But aren’t you curious about other people’s sexuality, don’t you wonder what they might be like?” he had asked her.

“I don’t really,” she had told him.

“No curiosity, none at all?”

How had she answered him? She was sitting on the sofa, had set her wine glass down on the Noguchi table. She had heard that question, or one similar before, his voice with something of an edge on. She told him about her lovers, the ones before him. And that her curiosity had been satisfied. Why had she not asked him about his curiosity? Not probed? It was a Friday night, back when they had Friday nights set aside, just for themselves, talked openly or she thought they had.

His explorations, records, every scrap of it, would burn, as she intended, in the old landfill. Now.

She had rowed past this island, if that’s what it was, many times. It seemed less benign now, less innocent, unknown and might surprise her. Perhaps it would not be so easy to cross, to ford the brackish water, to reach the dump, a wasteland — it smoldered in her imagination. She would burn the whole thing and have her revenge, if that’s what it was. Or, was it sorrow and betrayal she thought to turn to ash?

His body had been cremated. She had gone at dusk to scatter the ashes in the churchyard, secret and solitary, sowing them into the garden beds that had been turned for spring. The ashes fell like shell and bone from her hands. At last there was only dust, dust to dust, and she threw the dust into the wind, watching as it traveled from west to east. The dust glittered like rain. She had done this in the days before she had learned of the betrayals, in those days in which she had so much tenderness for him. Still, she could not have done otherwise. There are long shadows over life and death.

She was surprised by the boy coming along the river path. He was slight and dark, startling, all but soundless. His hair rose in a pouf like an oversized beret, looked coppery in the light. She stopped breathing for a moment. Squatters. She had seen a tent

or makeshift shelter or two hidden in the woods as she rowed up river from time to time.

She startled him too. They stood stopped, an older woman and a very young man, regarding one another. His face was lovely, nearly angelic, the eyes an awesome gray, but there was bright red blood flowing alarmingly from his forearm.

Her seventh grade first aid book with the soft blue cover opened in her mind, a manila page, a tourniquet drawn there, near the elbow, the gush of blood. She used the indigo bandana; loosening it easily to press against the wound. The rolled up pages, the poppet’s innards, fell. The ground was spongy; she braced herself, feet firm.

He didn’t speak, neither did she. The sun came down on them through the canopy of leaves, elm and oak, the amber light encircling. She placed her fingers above his elbow on the arm’s tender inside, finding the groove between the muscle and pressed gently in. The bleeding, bright red, not dark, not life-threatening, less severe than she first thought, slowed. But the gash, whatever the cause, she didn’t ask, was deep.

“You need to go to the ER.” It was only a twenty-minute walk through the woods to the boathouse, to the riverfront park rangers.

He shook his head.

“It’s essential. Get stitched up. Make sure there’s no infection.”

He only looked at her.

“I’ll take you. My car’s parked at the boathouse.” He might have been one of the kids she’d worked with in the summer. She moved, motioning him to go down the path.

“No, police, no hospital,” he said, turned from her and then back. “I have my little brother.”

“Shelter? Water?” she asked. Might he have been in the group being protected in the North Street Church? Endlessly waiting, wearying, needing to break out?

“My brother is alone. I need to get back to him.”

She wanted to explain this was a sanctuary city. But she wasn’t sure what that really meant, not in the long run, for two brothers, one underage, on the lam.

He took her hand. It was such a brief moment, a flutter, wings. It might not have happened at all, but it has. He bent his head toward her, raised her hand to his lips, an old world gesture, the kiss. She felt embraced, the bodily warmth of the other.

She handed him the Zippo lighter that she intended to use to burn the papers. It was an instinct. He slid it into a pocket, nodded, and acknowledged the transaction. He kept the blue indigo bandana, moving the wrapping lower over the wound. She watched him go, up the path, a limp string bag on his back, heading to a tent or lean-to somewhere in that no man's land of woods along the Connecticut River. She sometimes walked here, at least this far, in winter, when the trees were bare. The path wasn't marked, and it wasn't well used from this point, so far up from the boat-house. She had never gone further. Not into the scrubby interior, not alone. She was scared off by the thought of some homeless camper, someone rough, not of her world, startling her. She had not imagined this slight and appealing young man. Had she helped him? Over reacted? The bleeding would clot. It was enough.

The unbound papers and photos lay on the ground. She gathered them up in an awkward way, as if not caring, and dumped them into the scummy backwater. They lay somewhat on the surface, not weighty enough to sink, so she stepped on them with her foot, and watched the broad scrawl of his clumsy comments wash out and submerge into the backwater. The photos of those unknown others, she watched them blur too, and, more slowly, go under. She saw the one she did know, the one who had sent her a pert note after his death, alluding to a flirtation, riding to work on the back of his Harley-Davidson. She saw her fuzzy hair and foxy little teeth, a studio portrait with a studio smile, that too, at the last, she watched, let it submerge, and went back to claim the Alden.

The surface of the water looked purposely dimpled like the surface of that odd sculpture in the museum. She and her friend had been exiting the Great Court last winter when they saw the new installation in the marble lobby, massive; it's intent to startle. They struggled in their responses, staggered.

"I don't know what to make of this."

"Nor do I. Should we?"

They had walked around it slowly. The surface seemed impervious to the change of light from the clearstory windows, was stolid, even ugly, dared they say this?

"It's amusing," her friend finally said. She leaned over to read the plate. "It's not a permanent acquisition."

They walked around it again, going in opposite directions.

"I'll have to think about it."

"Perhaps not think about it," her friend said.

They went on to the American modernists, secure, forms, colors, the genius that had once disconcerted but were now familiar expressions, and into the cafe. It was afternoon. The light from the courtyard was entering the cafe, turning it sunny. She could see a large square of sky, a circle of doves, each a mark, like leaves in a wreath, rise over the courtyard and disappear. They ordered the crab cake, a glass of Pinot Grigio. They always ordered the same.

Her friend was telling her how she'd seen the charge on the AMEX account, the receipt from Bloomingdales left in a jacket pocket, she'd emptied it in front of the dry cleaner. The receipt was for two pairs of women's leather tights, one a size eight, one a size six. Her friend was wearing the eight's. She looked fabulous. The sleek leather, a bulky white sweater, the elongated silver earrings shimmering.

"The six's were for his current liaison."

"Are you sure?"

"Same gift. He doesn't lack for imagination, but he's too lazy for two."

"You don't care?"

"Not much. Monogamy's dull." Her friend regarded her. "Are you frightened?"

"I would be devastated." It would be only months until her husband would so unexpectedly die, only months until she discovered the secret record of his infidelities. She would feel a disbelieving howl rise inward and implode her heart.

“I do resent the too frequent charges for Spiff-for-Men.”

“Spiff-for-Men?”

“It’s the go-to grooming club in mid-town. I pay the credit card. He was always fastidious, more so on the prowl.”

“What will you do?”

“Nothing.”

“Suffer in silence?”

“I don’t suffer. One can’t love only one person. That’s so unimaginative.”

“No,” she said, thinking it through, “but flings, one night stands, being on the prowl, as you put it, demeans you.”

“It’s not about me.”

She had wanted to reach out, touch her friend’s hand, but knew it was not wanted. Her friend was cool, almost as if she were telling a joke on herself, marriage, sex, Spiff-for-Men.

She had not been unfaithful. She had thought faithfulness an ideal. Was it easier for women? Or was her renunciation a kind of magic charm over her husband that she’d believed he would feel compelled to match?

With her right leg in the dimpled water, she pushed off from the island, took her oars up, marked her course, squinting into the sun, headed toward the second arch under the railroad bridge, looking back every fifth stroke to keep its stone abutments in sight. In her forward view were the tall trees at the island’s center and she used them as a guide. The tide was with her now. She was one with the rowing, felt joy now, her body a machine. Just past the boathouse she turned to come in and a young rower she did not know took the starboard oar as she came in and held the boat while she slid from the seat, lifting over the rim of the dock butt first, unorthodox, lacking the agility required for the graceful step out.

“Good row?” The young rower asked. His hair was haloed in the light. She thought of the young man she had encountered in the woods.

“It was great. The water’s wonderful.” She was grateful as always to have been on the river. Grateful too, to be safely in. She

hoped for the young man on the lam, she hoped he would come safely in.

The dock was busy. The other singles were coming in too.

“Athletes,” the coaches were calling, “take your boats up.”

The singles went into the slings, were first scrubbed, the river could be scummy at this time of year, then hosed down. Her Alden looked clean. It was precious to her.

Athletes, they were all athletes. That’s what the coaches called them. She was an independent rower, did not think of herself as an athlete, too bookish. She hadn’t started to row until middle age and now wore a silver oar for twenty-five years of rowing, but athlete she had never been. She might reconsider. She might reconsider the course of the betrayals, see them in a longer light, the elusive dusk perhaps, that hour, not yet gone, but in dissolve, as in film.

The photographs, the adolescent notes, they embarrassed her, even his handwriting had looked like the scrawl of a schoolboy. She’d thought to destroy the lot of them by fire, a ceremony in the wasteland to grieve the past and punish the dead. But submerging them in a backwater seemed right. She didn’t feel anger or sorrow now. She felt strong, her true self, the body informing the mind. She washed down the Alden, put her oars in the cage, spun the lock. She wasn’t over, whatever she was, there were still possibilities, life at a turn, a river, tidal.

There would be light in the sky for another good hour or so. She could drive up into the hills, go to Woodland Farms, get apples from the barn on the honor system, catch the sunset.

Pomegranate

Margaret Emma Brandl

Kennedy Blake wakes, late afternoon, in a third-floor apartment on 15th Street. There is always more studying Kennedy can do, an evening lab exam, but the weak light coming in the curtains of the bedroom gives her a false sense of security in the amount of time stretching out ahead of her, the silly hope of Brett in the next room making eggs in the disaster of his apartment kitchen. They've been back together now for two weeks but this is her first time in over a month waking up in his bed, the room around her strewn with clothes and a few Solo cups. Soft kitchen-sounds: she envisions the packed refrigerator, the counter full of dirty dishes, crowded with produce. They had purchased bananas to make banana bread, zucchini for its own bread incarnation, pomegranates on a whim. They cracked one open in the early post-studying hours of the morning and plunged it into water—the best way to extract the round red seeds, Brett insisted; their hands bumped as they separated the pulp, laughing, dripping fingers scooping away at treasure like rubies, the fruit. They stained their lips with red juice and left the groceries forgotten, a project to take off the stress of finals, dissolved into mouth on mouth and skin on skin and a tempest outside.

Judging by the light, the sky outside is still gray, and Kennedy is tamping down that part inside herself that warns *danger*. She tries to reframe the way she played possum when Brett woke her moving around in the bed, when the glow had worn off, when she remembered in the pit of her stomach all the times she'd thought maybe she shouldn't have begged him back—how she struggled to keep her breath even as he pushed himself up against her, snaked his arm over her back and down the plane of her stomach, lower—how she twitched just then, as if she was asleep, moved away with her eyes closed. She tells herself she was just tired. She tells herself not to listen to *empty* anxiety, giving it that deliberate label: empty. She tastes pomegranate juice on her tongue.

Endings

Margaret Emma Brandl

She danced to a song on a Great Lake beach when she didn't like the beach—too much sunlight, too much sunscreen-smell—because that's how she thought things worked. His hand went down her front and pawed at a breast and she giggled, excited. There was a nuclear power plant just south of them; they could see across the shore. They barely touched the water (cold) and picked up rocks. He walked her to the bathroom down the shore because he said he was worried about her; she indulged the stupid songs he loved on the radio. He pledged his love to her from his dorm room bed but she wouldn't let his hands do what they wanted to do.

She wished it had ended like a story, with something mutated or contaminated washing up on the shore of the beach, something from the nuclear waste putting a damper on their forever—a fish with two heads, a piece of kelp with eyes, a bobby pin that glowed in the dark and leeched deadly particles into her hair. If only it could have ended before it began, trudging awkwardly through Warren Dunes in tennis shoes—she would've taken that. Calling a friend from the barren parking lot, abandoning the boy half a mile down in his “secret” spot, standing miserable in direct sunlight.

But the story was much more ordinary. She stopped his hands on the zipper to her jeans; she wouldn't let him into the shower. She still wasn't ready, but he thought he'd waited more than long enough. He'd finally agreed to meet her again, but only after weeks of trying to get out of it. Something about money—something not *just* about money. She didn't know it then but their last kiss was in Boston Logan Airport; he rode the tram in with her and she cried without tears. He hadn't been the same.

And for months her dreams were the beach on rewind, the beach in revision, so unrelenting that she began to believe the mutations were real—a Coke can with gills; an orange squid with a giant black beak; a gull growing out of its foot a single,

cartoon-sized human tooth. The gull blinked up at her from the sand, shaking its foot in a way not unlike the way dogs walk in snow boots. “You should meet me in Boston,” her dream-self told the gull. It cocked its head at her, shook the toothed foot once more for good measure, and flew away.

Owl Boy

Ed Davis

Marina stared out the window into the garden at her withered cosmos, coneflowers, and milkweed. If there ever would be a time to shut down whatever operation Aspen had going on in his room, it was now. He’d gobbled the PB & J she’d made him, flung a goodbye over his shoulder and taken off for work washing dishes at Curt’s Southern Cuisine, driving the old Subaru Outback his father gave him after buying his Lexus. Now the crow in the box elder a hundred yards away turned its head and glared at her. *Get moving.*

Still she sat, listening to the growl of the neighbor’s chainsaw—a recurring sound out here. A restored farmhouse on five acres outside Louisville had been Sam’s idea two decades ago. Now he’d gone to the city to live in a condo with The Slut. The lure of living on the land had sounded so romantic twenty years ago, and it had been, at least till she’d gotten pregnant. Then it began to feel like exile.

The crow tore out of the tree screaming. *Go now.*

Rising on creaky knees, she made her way to her son’s door and stopped. After Sam left a year ago, it remained as off limits to her as it had been before he’d begun to keep the door unlocked. Trapped in her own trauma over Sam’s affair, then divorce, she’d surrendered her lost boy to cyberspace. Aspen was in fourth grade when he became “Quaking Aspen” to the bullies on his bus. When he’d slunk home bloody, Marina lost it. Within a week, she’d quit her librarian’s job to become a full-time mother. She’d wanted to enroll Aspen in a private school immediately, but Sam wouldn’t hear of it. What was good enough for him was good enough for his son. Now Aspen was a twenty-year-old friendless, nearly mute dishwasher.

“The boy just needs discipline,” Sam used to say. Did food preparation count?

Once a month or so, usually on Sunday, Aspen cooked, using recipes and techniques he’d picked up at the restaurant. He’d answer

yes and no to her careful questions, leave her food on the stove, and carry his to his room. Still, she prized those minutes watching her boy hovering over the stove.

Marina heard distant cries: hawks no doubt circling, contending with the songbirds, though there seemed plenty of territory to go around. *Was that an owl?* Aspen had sought out the spookily silent raptors, camping out every night for a week the summer he was six in order to see as many as possible as they hunted in the dark. She'd listened to him talk till her ears bled about the scream of the barred owl.

By seventh grade, he refused to let her drive him to school or pick him up afterward. If he were still being bullied, he no longer told her about it. He rode the bus, came home, closed and locked his door. When he was absent, and the door was unlocked, it became a game between them: *enter and pay the price*. She'd done it once, when he was in high school. He'd come home smelling strange and she'd suspected he was smoking pot. But she'd found nothing, and when he found out, it earned her total silence with zero eye contact for a week, a cost she could not bear. Since the divorce, at least he asked her to pass the Captain Crunch and usually said goodbye. But maybe it was more complicated, now he was older. Maybe he was daring her: *enter and see what happens*.

Coming to with a jolt, Marina realized she'd leaned forward and rested her head against the door's smooth wood. When she once waxed nostalgic in Aspen's presence about owls, he laughed so harshly she nearly cried and never mentioned them again. She struck her head against the wood, gently then increasingly harder.

But wasn't he a good boy, really? He worked his minimum wage job, didn't drink, smoke, or use drugs, hadn't impregnated any females. She was sure her son, with zero interest in developing social skills, was as celibate as she'd been since her two disastrous post-divorce dates. Now she liked celibacy. The bookshop required all her time anyway.

She turned the knob and the door creaked open, though she never heard a sound when the boy opened it—of course she was

seldom present when he did it, their schedules were so mutually exclusive. She waited thirty seconds before pushing her son's door wide, realizing with dread that she hadn't seen his room since before the divorce, when he let her clean it once a month, waiting nervously in the living room like an ICU patient stripped of life support.

What the hell did he do in here all those hours? Pornography? With pounding pulse, she was about to find out.

The room was dim, the curtains closed. Turning on the overhead light, she saw that his mattress lay on the floor near the window, his computer gear at the head. Beside it was spread an old plastic shower curtain. The twin bed they'd carefully chosen for him was shoved against the left wall. *He computed in bed?* Of course he did. The monitor was on, the screen-saver a huge target, alternating red and black circles with an arrow protruding from the center. She stood frozen. What or whom was he targeting? She struck her chest to make her heart stay rooted right here in the room.

A blade gleamed ominously from the plastic sheet. *Oh dear Jesus, he's a cutter!* Tempted to flee, she steeled herself and eased forward. Yes, it was a blade, but it had handles and when she stooped to get a closer look, she saw curly shavings. Scooping up a handful, she held them to her nose. Bittersweet, as when Sam trimmed trees around the house and brought branches onto the deck to season for kindling.

Lowering her knees to the mattress, she leaned forward and found the keyboard. Surely he'd changed the password they'd made up when they'd let him get the machine, back when they thought they were in control. It was worth a try. *Bingo*. Barredowlboy1234 worked. Within moments, she was searching his recent Internet history, finding none of the expected sex or game sites. Instead: Flemish twist strings. She continued scrolling. A man's name appeared over and over: Tom McManix, Bowyer. She recalled the screen-saver, the arrow and target. It brought back the memory of reading her little boy *Robin Hood*; Aspen had loved the outlaw's exploits, she the antique language.

She laid herself out on the mattress, imagining she could feel the imprint of the lithe body that had lain looking at this screen for hours, learning from You Tube and Tom McManix how to make a bow, for that's obviously what he'd been carving with the knife. She could not have been more shocked if she'd found a pipe bomb in progress. And you thought your boy was just another videogame addict. Here's what he does with his hands. (*Take that, Sam.*)

Lifting herself back onto her knees, she leaned toward the keyboard again and signed out. Scooting off the mattress, she smoothed the blanket, then wrinkled it a little, trying to leave it exactly as she'd found it. Then she stood and brushed herself off.

"He's going to be all right," she whispered to the walls. She was almost to the door when she halted. *Where was the bow?*

Turning, she let her eyes rove over the floor, up the walls and back down before she saw what she'd missed. Against the edge of the mattress lay two long staves, unseen due to her interest in the blade. Again on her knees, she reached out and touched the closest one, yellowish with a smooth, satiny finish. The one behind it, though, was raw, green wood—maybe from one of their own trees. She stroked the more finished one, squinted to see the grain. Lifting it to her face as if it might shatter, she brought it close and smelled oil, linseed maybe, or the Tung oil she'd used to refinish a desk long ago. She imagined her son sitting on the back deck, shoulders hunched, muscles rippling, as he applied the oil outdoors where the scent wouldn't attract attention. Maybe he'd even gone into the woods. She smiled at the image of her boy in their old owl grove making a bow. His baby, his secret.

She carefully replaced the staves, replicating the order in which they'd been lying. Her hand was drawing the door closed when the chainsaw started up again outside. Glancing out the window, she saw her neighbor Randy behind the ten-foot fence he'd erected to protect his vegetable garden from deer.

An image of a buck, many-antlered and springing forward, whanged into consciousness like a just-struck bull's-eye. *Was Owl Boy making a bow in order to kill the beautiful creatures that shared*

these woods with them? Even redneck Randy just built a fence, so as not to harm a hoof. Her discovery suddenly seemed worse than violent videogames *or* porn. Two decades ago—Aspen's lifetime—a man and a woman had come here to Eden to be at peace with all creatures. Did her son now want to use the beautiful bow he'd made to kill those same creatures? Did he want to eat them? A vegetarian (mostly), Marina shuddered. But maybe her boy just wanted to practice archery, a legitimate sport. Then why so secretive? Because he knew she wouldn't approve. Tomorrow was Sunday. She'd find out.

But Aspen never emerged, though Marina baked her legendary mac and cheese and opened a window to waft waves of tasty tendrils beneath his door. He never appeared, though she waited and waited. Eventually she put on jeans and raked leaves for an hour, leaving the dish to cool on the counter, never casting an eye toward his window. He knew she'd been in his room looking through his files—never mind how. Probably had to do with the technology she barely understood. He was in there hating her.

She flung down the rake and sat under the box elder. Sure, his door was unlocked, but if she stormed in and confronted him, she'd lose. He'd just stare at her blankly, telegraphing *I didn't ask to be born. You two wanted a puppy to come running when you call, to sit up and do tricks. Deal with it.*

She raked her wild hair with trembling fingers. She needed to know what he was going to do with the bows. Might her silent son be contemplating stalking something even more sentient than a deer? Did he still have bullies in his life? *Crazy!* She walked inside and devoured comfort food as if she were starving.

When he came out to go to work on Monday, she'd be waiting.

Rain was falling in thick streams off the roof, thunder grumbling, when she heard the click. Sitting at the table, half-heartedly

reading the new Kingsolver novel, she felt his eyes on her. Her neck warmed. There was no stare like the silent stare of your own flesh and blood.

“You didn’t go to work,” he said in the same uninflected voice he’d used to answer his cell phone, before he became text-only, the better to keep parents at bay.

“Emily can handle things.”

Marina kept her eyes on the page, words blurring.

“You’ve been waiting for me.”

She yearned to hear Randy’s chainsaw, anything other than this razory silence, but her neighbor was at work. She finally turned to look at her son. She’d been so seeing that little owl boy in her imagination all morning. Now she was once again taken aback by how tall he was, taller than his dad, and more solid. It surprised her to realize he was more eagle than owl. He’d folded his arms, just like Sam used to during their arguments.

“You were in my room.”

Closing the book, she turned fully toward him. Her upper lip tic-ed once, twice. Better speak while she still could.

“What have you been doing in there?” she enunciated carefully.

“You know.”

“But why?”

“There has to be a reason?”

“For constructing a weapon? Yes, I’d say so.”

He shuffled his feet a little and glanced around the room. Then he lifted his chin and locked eyes with her. She thought about cornered animals, what they did to escape.

“I’m learning to hunt.”

She laughed and instantly wished she hadn’t. “In your room?”

“NO. In the woods.”

“Have you thought that completely through?”

He just leveled his gaze. She stood, her legs held stronger than she’d expected. When she spoke, she found her voice mostly steady.

“My father—the grandfather you never knew—hunted. I heard all his stories. If you don’t shoot it in the heart, the deer

takes off and you have to follow the blood trail for hours. If you don’t find the deer, it dies horribly, alone, and takes a long time. If you do find it, then you have to shoot it *again* and skin it. Do you know what all that entails?”

“On You Tube—”

“*That’s not real life.* You shoot something, there are consequences, Aspen.”

Unclasping his arms, he stood up straight, hands clenched at his sides. “Thinking doesn’t save you, Mom. Acting does.”

He’d probably heard that from Tom McManix, bowyer.

“Oh, yeah, *acting*: going off half-cocked and doing anything you want to do, *that’s* real mature.”

Half-cocked—had she actually said that? She was panting a little; why didn’t he look madder? Because he’d wanted her to discover his secret “hobby.” But why?

“All hunters,” he said, “say there’s no feeling like knowing you can feed your family.”

She stared. Could he not hear how ridiculous that sounded coming from a kid who spent all of his non-dishwashing hours in his room staring at a screen (okay, and whittling)? Even more absurd: did he think his family required extra food killed in the wild? But he looked so deadly earnest that she held her tongue. Her silence must’ve encouraged him.

“Randy will be able to take down his fence, Mom.”

She couldn’t help wagging her head. Was he going to kill the entire herd that, aided and abetted by their benevolence, had thrived? But she liked the note of pride in his voice. Since Owl Boy had expired, she’d never detected that much confidence in her son, not even when he cooked killer mushroom, cheese and chili pepper omelets, not since that day, at ten, he’d pointed out to an entire group of adult birdwatchers the great horned owl staring straight at them across the bog.

“Is your father going to join you in hunting the local deer?”

Headshake, lips tight.

“But there are two bows. Who—”

“Alexandra has been helping me. She’ll take me when I’m ready.”

Marina felt her face turn fiery red. The Slut’s real name had never been uttered within these walls since Sam’s abandonment. The name of the woman who’d stolen her husband—never mind that she didn’t much want the bastard by then; that wasn’t the issue.

“*Alexandra* is teaching you to hunt?”

He didn’t even look sorry he’d broken the cardinal rule. He looked determined.

“Alex’s dad took her hunting as soon as she could hold a .22. But she hated hunting with a gun—too much technology between you and the animal, like buying hamburger in Kroger and never seeing the cow it came from. The kill must come from your own hands.”

Was he quoting The Slut? Before she could reply, Marina recalled the finished bow’s silky slickness. In her mind, she heard her grandfather say that killing, if you did it skillfully and humbly, connected you (to *what?* He hadn’t said). But the image of her son’s step-mom wielding the object he’d crafted with his hands drowned out Grandpa’s voice.

“Then why don’t you just stab the deer instead?”

When he frowned and shook his head, she was tempted to apologize. But if she didn’t release him, he’d be late for work. Marina took a step backward.

“Go to work,” she said. “We can discuss this when—”

“They fired me yesterday.”

“*What?*”

“I’m not fast enough. To do a good job washing dishes takes a lot longer than they think. But they didn’t believe me. They’ll see.”

This time her cheeks didn’t flame. Compared to his earlier revelation—that he was making his step-mom a bow—the job loss was not only bearable but could even be the opening she’d been hoping for. His father would not see it this way. Alexandra and all Robin’s merry men would not save him from Dad’s wrath.

“Do you think you could make *me* a bow?”

She couldn’t believe she’d said it or the unbidden grin teasing her lips. She let it stay, waiting for him to recover from his astonishment. *There* was the owl-boy, innocent and eager, who’d trusted her to be his woods companion. Together, they’d seen so much, nearly all there was to see on their five acres. There was a lot more land to be conquered elsewhere, with other guides. Eyes closed, she saw Aspen striding soundlessly through the understory of some unknown forest, bow at his side. And he was not alone. His voice brought her back.

“You gonna take a shot at Bambi, Mom?”

Was that a grin or a smirk? She assumed the latter and allowed herself the wide smile from which he usually fled. She folded her arms; if the gesture helped the men of this family stand their ground, why not the women?

“I can think of other targets.”

“I’ll bet you can.”

When he laughed, she joined him, wondering whether he’d somehow read her mind and seen Alexandra with an arrow in her butt. Probably not, yet it was a with-you not at-you laugh. *Was this a real conversation?* If so, it was the first since the divorce. Since Aspen had spoken Alexandra’s name, the room’s climate had changed. Is that what he’d wanted all along, consciously or not: to force some sort of reckoning by leaving the evidence in clear sight, figuring she’d eventually succumb to temptation? Had she sold her son short, too often considering him a narcissistic loser who occasionally made good meals, when he’d been dreaming about connecting his two families in order to give himself a coherent life? Then what could she do about it?

With the windows and roof being battered by sideways rain, the house felt to Marina like a cave: snug, intimate, allowing forbidden thoughts, such as: *Why not quit hating her son’s step-mother when it was really Sam who’d betrayed her?* That thought triggered another, even scarier: how about forgiving Sam, the man she’d stopped loving a long time before he asked for the divorce? *Too much.* It was grist for another day’s milling. There was something

she could do right now with this new son in front of her. Since he didn't have to go to work today, she could cook for him. Or maybe they could make something together; she'd make sides to go with his entrée. If she could have him in the kitchen, she'd let his step-mom have him in the woods.

She still shuddered at the thought of killing. She'd Google Tom McManix, though the name sounded like a villain cowboy or a rogue detective. Maybe the bowyer would turn out to be a kind, competent hunter like Gramps, like—she swallowed hard—Alexandra. She could not imagine Owl Boy shooting a deer. But that was *her* problem.

“Have you told your father you were fired?”

He jammed his hands in his pockets and slumped.

“Then don't. You can work for me at the shop until you decide what to do next.”

“Okay.”

She'd expected his expression to read *torture*, but he looked almost eager.

“As for tonight . . .”

Before she could make her co-cooking proposal, he stepped backward and half-turned. *Oh no, he was returning to his room!*

“Come on, Mom,” he flung behind him, “I want to show you something. You may not like it, but since you've seen the other stuff, you might as well know everything.”

For a moment he'd looked like Owl Boy again, begging her to sleep outside for just one more night when she was sick to death of being eaten alive by mosquitoes, chiggers and flies. But even before the visual was half-formed, she hit delete and it was gone: an illusion not to be confused with the present reality. She thought she'd never say yes to another man inviting her into his bedroom, but today she'd make an exception. She might be ready to see what she could not ever truly know.

Dare

Stefan Kiesbye

The art history teacher's house had burned down. On the day the campus reopened, she stood in front of the class and asked who else might have lost their home. White ashes lay scattered on the desks, and students wore masks on their way to class. A girl Lucas had not paid much attention to in the first weeks of school started to raise her hand, then let it fall away. After that she kept her eyes on the textbook in front of her. Two other students raised their hands and talked about the night of the fire, what they had lost, and where they were staying now. One of them cried and couldn't continue. The teacher said she wouldn't take attendance anymore. For the rest of the semester, if students needed time off or needed to help friends and family, they could choose to do so. “It's not that it's not important what we're doing here. It is, but sometimes you need to take care of other things first.” The class ended after half an hour. They didn't talk about abstract expressionism, Rothko, or de Kooning.

The girl's name was April. She wore combat boots, black jeans, and a black sleeveless top. She was overweight, with messy black hair and tattoos on her shoulders and arms. They were small tattoos, all done in black ink, and seemed to have been randomly placed. One was the Hyrule Crest from *The Legend of Zelda*, another a pentagram. Several other symbols Lucas couldn't identify. He walked down the hallway behind April and caught up on the stairs. “You raised your hand,” he said. It came out accusatory, though he hadn't intended that. “I mean . . .” He wasn't sure what he meant and fell silent. His face felt splotchy and hot.

“Yeah, I didn't want to get into it. It's not like I owned a house or something.”

“Huh,” he said. “What happened?”

“My apartment burned down. In Santa Rosa.”

“That sucks,” Lucas said. “I'm sorry.”

“Yeah, I didn’t have insurance either, so I can’t buy new stuff right now. But I still have all my schoolbooks, because they were in the car.” She screwed up her eyes.

“Where are you living now?” he asked.

“Friends. Couch-surfing.”

“Yeah.”

They walked together through the sliding doors. Lucas had nothing more to say; it had cost him a lot to start the conversation. He was faintly aware that he would not have spoken to April if she hadn’t raised her hand for that split second. His family lived only a mile away from campus and hadn’t even evacuated during the fires. Lucas had the granny unit for himself, his own kitchen and bath; nobody spied on him. He was better off than the girl. It felt safer to talk to a girl when you knew she was a fire victim.

“I got to go.” April nodded and walked away from Lucas. It was still hot, and his shirt clung to his back. He waited a few moments, breathed in the smoke and fished for his mask. His hands were wet.

During next week’s class, Lucas didn’t talk to April. She arrived late, and even though there was an empty seat next to his, she didn’t take it. After opening her textbook she chewed on a pen. Half the students were missing. The teacher talked about trying to find a permanent place to stay; she’d been moved into a hotel by her insurance and she wore the same outfit as the week before. April, too, wore the same black jeans and t-shirt. He waited for her to lift her gaze and notice him.

After class he walked behind her toward the parking lot near the music center. April did not turn around once, she was listening to music; Lucas could see the white ear buds. She walked past the first rows of cars toward an old brown Accord and pulled open the door. That’s when she spotted him, and he raised his hand and waved.

She didn’t wait for him to get close enough to say hi. Lucas’s own car stood in a different lot, but he pretended otherwise and marched

on. April started her engine and pulled out and away. Her Honda seemed stuffed with things; maybe she had been able to save some of her belongings before she had evacuated. Maybe she was a hoarder. A Legend of Zelda sticker took up most of the upper windshield.

That’s how he identified the car two days later. Instead of going straight to class, he cruised through the parking lot searching for April’s Honda. Once he found it, he pulled into a spot two rows away, got out and walked over to the brown Accord. Even from twenty yards away he could see how crowded it was inside. The windows weren’t tinted, and soon he could distinguish pieces of clothing, books, and random things like a Kleenex box, a tape measure, Taco Bell bags and cups. When Lucas reached the passenger side of the car, he stooped to get a closer look, lifting a hand over his eyes against the glare. “Fuck off,” April screamed from inside, and he stumbled backwards. A second later she had thrown open the driver’s door and glared at him from across the roof. “Are you fucking spying on me? Fucking creep.”

He should have apologized then. He should have assured her it was just a coincidence, but Lucas was too panicked and embarrassed. “Are you sleeping in your car?” he said and winced at his own words.

“What if I am?”

“Nothing. I was...I thought...you want to have coffee?”

“With you? You’re stalking me. I don’t know you.”

“I’m in your class,” he said.

“But I don’t know your name. I’m in class with a lot of people.” She said this slowly. He noticed how she always talked slowly, as though everything had been pondered for a long while. At the same time, everything sounded like a question.

“I’m not a stalker,” he said firmly, and noticed that he really believed that.

“O-kay,” she said. “So what are you doing here?”

“Asking you out for coffee?”

She sneered and got back in her car. Then she honked, and the sudden sound made him jump and hurry off to class.

“We can have coffee now,” she said in November. He hadn’t attended Art History 347 “From Abstract Expressionism to Pop” anymore. He didn’t want to seem like a creep and didn’t want to be reminded of April’s red face when she’d flung that word at him.

“Oh?” he said. She’d appeared behind him in the hallway of the Social Sciences building. He was pleased that very first second, as though she had forgiven him and removed the ‘creep’ label. The next moment he became suspicious. “You out of money?” His skin grew bumpy.

She sighed loudly and without a word trudged passed him.

“Hey, I’m sorry.” He was suddenly afraid to not see her again. “Let’s go. We can take my car. I was a dick, I’m sorry.”

Lucas paid for their iced lattes at the Starbucks down the road. She said, “Thank you,” and sank into one of the two leather chairs at the end of the room.

“How are you?” he asked.

She shrugged.

“Still living in your car?”

“So?”

“What about your family?”

“What about them?”

“Where are they?”

April didn’t answer right away. She sucked the coffee through the straw and looked very busy doing so. Finally she said, “I have grandparents near Los Angeles. They don’t have any money, they’re already paying for most of my tuition. My mom...I don’t know. Nobody knows where she is right now.” She sucked more coffee, and when it was gone and only ice was left in her cup, Lucas thought he might love to watch April light a cigarette.

“You smoke?” he asked.

“Sometimes,” she said. “Not now.”

“You can sleep at my place,” he said.

“Why would I do that?”

“Because it’s not your car.”

“I’m not some homeless person. I just don’t have an apartment right now.” Water from her cup had dropped onto her shirt and pants.

“I have the granny unit. My parents don’t check on me.”

She put her cup on the small wooden table between them. “You need to earn that. I still don’t know who you are. I’m not going home with some random dude just because I sleep in a car.”

“We’re in the same class.”

“You haven’t been coming.”

“I was busy.”

“Doing what?”

“So how do I earn that?” Lucas didn’t feel he deserved to be questioned or tested. At the same time, he was strangely excited by her request. It added something romantic to their mid-afternoon talk, he thought. “What do I need to do?”

She looked around. Her eyes fell on something off to the side. “Don’t turn around,” she said. “On the shelf to your left sits a San Francisco mug. I want that. But you can’t buy it for me. You need to steal it. If you do it, I’ll have a look at your place.”

“I can’t do that,” he said. “I don’t want to get into trouble.”

The glimmer in her eyes disappeared, and she got to her feet and reached for the backpack. “I’ll wait outside. If you don’t show in five minutes, I’ll walk back to campus. Don’t even think about giving me a ride.”

“They really don’t ever come to say hello?”

“Well, they do. But they always knock or holler. They don’t just come in. And they don’t care. I think they’d be...” He bit his tongue.

“They’d be happy if you had a really nice girlfriend?” She’d put down her backpack by the door, was still holding on to the Starbucks mug. Her armpits were wet, he could see. He wondered how they would taste.

“Maybe.”

“But I’m not a nice girlfriend.” She smiled at him, and it looked like a real smile, and he smiled too. No, his parents wouldn’t find her pretty; he was certain of that. April was too big, her clothes too masculine. His mom met with her friends every morning to run three miles along the train tracks. She never ate dinner and told every new acquaintance immediately how old she was waiting visibly for a reaction.

“Do you have a boyfriend?” he asked.

“Would I be here if I had one?”

He shrugged. “Maybe. It’s not like…”

“We broke up.” She heaved a sigh, then added, “He broke up with me. Sort of. I can’t stay with him.” She didn’t look at Lucas while she said this; for once, she spoke very rapidly, and he took the cue and kept quiet about the boyfriend.

“Are you hungry?” he said.

“Did you pick this stuff?” The living and sleeping area contained a foldout sofa and a white wicker chair. A gold-framed picture of a flowerbed hung on one wall, and a painting of the Arc de Triomphe on another. The carpet was speckled brown-and-beige, the windows framed by beige curtains.

“When my grandparents visit, they sleep here,” he admitted. “As long as they are alive, I’m not supposed to change anything.”

“How often do they visit?”

“Just twice a year. They live in Virginia.”

April sank onto the sofa and put her feet on the wooden steel-and-glass coffee table. He wanted to warn her not to break the top — it wasn’t as sturdy as it seemed — but he closed his mouth in time. She had watched his face and smiled again, and it wasn’t a pretty smile. “You sure you want me to stay?”

“I earned it,” he said.

“You earned my visit. Not my staying over.”

“Oh boy,” he said.

Her smile vanished. “You want me to stay or not?”

“Sure, yes. I want you to stay. What do you want me to do?”

“What part of a woman’s body do you not like?” She relaxed, sinking back into the cushions.

“What do I not like?”

“Yes. Something must gross you out.”

“Feet,” he confessed after thinking about it. “I could live with people having no feet. I like shoes, but feet are gross.”

She took off her boots and socks. “Kiss them,” she said.

He couldn’t get her to wake up. He banged around in the small kitchen, hummed in the shower, noisily packed his books; she didn’t stir. She hadn’t even taken off her clothes, was still wearing black jeans and t-shirt. Lucas had not really slept at all; the presence of another body in his apartment had filled him with excitement and dread. Yes, he’d wanted April to stay, but what if he fell asleep and snored? What if she stole something? What if she got a knife and stabbed him? Maybe she didn’t like him at all.

He locked the door behind him and left for school, but he couldn’t concentrate on the history of the Punic wars and during a short break, he left and drove home. April was gone; nothing seemed to be missing. She hadn’t tidied up the couch, and a dirty coffee cup still stood on the table. He threw his bag onto the wicker chair and shouted, “Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.” He wasn’t quite sure what he was angry about, but he avoided windows and mirrors for the rest of the day. He cleaned the apartment and even the toilet. He carried the two paintings into his parents’ garage. He took the wicker chair and stored it in the garage as well. There was no space left to park a car inside anyway. Then he went to Target and bought a framed picture of Brooklyn Bridge, and a *Star Wars* poster of Kylo Ren and Rey fighting. He bought vanilla-scented candles and tea lights, two large lighters that made hissing noises and whose flames were entirely blue.

She reappeared after dark. He opened after the second knock. “Can I come in?”

“What will you do for me?” he asked.

“Oh shit.” Her face fell and looked ugly.

“Alright, just come in.”

“No, no. What should I do for you?” As though her head weighed a great deal, she lifted it to meet his eyes. He was too stunned to have any idea what she should do. He’d never even thought about it before April’s return. “What?” she asked. “You want to see my boobs?”

He shook his head, even though he would have loved to see them, but it was too obvious. “Blow smoke into my mouth,” he said.

“I’m not going to kiss you, and I’m not going to smoke. No way.”

“Choke me instead,” he said.

“Why?”

“You don’t get to ask. Are you going to do it or not?”

He lay down on the sofa, and she climbed on top of him. She smelled salty, her face was red. She wore the same clothes she’d worn the day before. “How much?” she asked, then put both hands around his neck.

“If I raise my hand, stop.” He closed his eyes but opened them when he could no longer breathe. He watched her watching his face, a question mark painted on it. Her eyes were narrowed, focused, maybe scared. Still, she kept pressing down and he could finally relax. He felt it like heat, like a high fever burning and weakening his limbs. He was at peace, his whole body was able to give up. “You have a boner,” she said.

The pillow below him was wet. Her hands on his face were wet too. She was kneeling next to the sofa. A glass with the rest of the water stood on the coffee table. “Fuck you,” she said. “Fuck you. Why didn’t you raise your stupid hand?” Then, “I’m going to take a shower. I earned it, too.” With that, she took off her shirt, and he could see her bra and white belly below.

“Yes,” he wanted to say, but nothing came. Then he listened to the sound of water and after a few minutes watched steam waft

through the half-open door. When she returned she had one of his towels slung around her body. “Do you have anything I can borrow?”

She helped him up, but he got woozy anyway and nearly fell onto the steel-and-glass table. She refused to wear any of his polos but liked a plaid flannel. Only his sweatpants fit her, though she could pull them up to her armpits. She declined his offer of fresh boxers. “I don’t like you *that* much,” she said.

“How much do you like me?”

She shrugged. “How much do you like *me*?”

“I don’t know.” It was as close to the truth as he could make it. “But I like you being here.”

She gave a short, resigned laugh. “How many women have stayed here?”

“None.” Two had visited but not stayed. They had neither called again nor answered his messages. He hadn’t found out yet how to make someone stay.

“Guys?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“I don’t like guys much myself,” she said.

“You had a boyfriend.”

“Case in point.”

“Girls?”

“Not that much either.”

“I’m a guy.”

“Yeah, I don’t like you one bit.”

He went to a drawer in the kitchen and came up with four tea lights and a lighter. He sat the tea lights down on the coffee table.

“Don’t,” she said.

He looked her way. She sat with her legs drawn up on the sofa; her face was clenched. “What?”

“Fucking candles,” she said.

“Oh,” he said, but lit the first anyway. With thumb and middle finger he picked it up and held it out to her. She retreated into the cushions, closing her eyes. Lucas crept closer, the candle in front of his face now. “I’m right here.”

April put her hands over her face. After a while she stopped wailing.

She asked him if she could stay the weekend, and he demanded to see where her house had stood. “That’s your price?” she asked. “Of all the things you could ask for?” She seemed disappointed and annoyed.

They took his car, an old Acura coupe that had belonged to his uncle. The suspension clattered and the seats squeaked every time they hit a bump. “You need to give me directions,” he said once they were on the 101.

“Why do you want to go?”

He thought about her question. “I haven’t seen any of it. Just the smoke. Nobody I know lost a house. Except for you.”

“Nobody else?”

“I don’t have a lot of friends. And you probably don’t either, otherwise you wouldn’t be staying with me.” He hadn’t wanted to say that last part, hadn’t even known it was coming. “When this is over, you’ll probably never even call again.” He glanced quickly sideways to see if she was going to protest but not a muscle in her face was moving.

“You have a high opinion of yourself,” she said at last.

“But I’m right, right?”

“Take Bicentennial and then hang a left.”

The National Guard had blocked off the area and only recently started to admit tenants and homeowners back for short visits. Every car had to stop at a checkpoint where an officer demanded to see Lucas’s and April’s licenses. She gave the officer her address, and about a hundred feet further on, another officer handed them bags with heavy-duty gloves, masks, protective glasses, and several bottles of water. Trucks hauling debris went in and out of the area. To the right, the emptiness he was looking at had been a K-Mart, she explained. The McDonald’s near the on-ramp was gone too. The storage units had miraculously survived, but her apartment

complex beyond them had not. The driveway had been blocked off, so they parked along Hopper.

“Fuck,” Lucas said. The air still smelled of soot, and in front of him was nothing but an empty expanse interrupted by a few charred trees. It took him a few moments before he remembered April, and when he did, she was still sitting in the car, staring straight ahead. He opened the door, said, “Show me.”

She pointed to her right, away from the street. “You go. I’ll wait for you.”

“We made a deal,” he said.

Without another word she exited the car and entered the premises of the apartment complex, walked past a mostly empty rectangle to another mostly empty rectangle to her right. If he hadn’t known better, he wouldn’t have suspected that buildings had stood in these spots. They were separated by a broken driveway littered with the remains of bikes, barbecue grills, shelves and things Lucas failed to identify. Several cars had burnt out, two were lying on their roofs. A small RV, blackened and missing its windows, lay on its side.

He joined her in front of what he suspected had been the entrance to her building. She raised a finger and pointed. “There. Second floor. One of only four studio apartments they had. Happy now?”

An older woman wearing glasses, mask, and gloves was sifting through the ashes to their left. “You think you could find anything?” Lucas asked April.

She shrugged. “I didn’t have much. My computer is toast for sure.”

Together they stepped over what was left of the foundation and into the rubble. Lucas spotted something, bent down, and pulled it from the ashes. It was an iron colander. “Yours?” he asked, but she shook her head, creasing her forehead and squinting as though he was holding a dead rat by its tail.

The layer of debris was soft and thick, a gray beach; he tried not to sink in too deep, pondered every step. “Here,” she said and stopped. “That was my kitchen. But now there are two kitchens

in one. Though my stuff should be on top. Maybe my downstairs neighbor already searched for her things.” She got into a crouch, pulled a glove from the bag the officer had handed her and fished through the mess. She picked up half a porcelain plate, stared at it for a minute, then dropped it again. A kitchen sink had survived, and when April cleared the ashes away, she said, “Look.” A mug appeared in her hand and only the handle was missing. “You’re Awesome, Keep That Shit Up” was printed on its side. “From my grandparents.” She dropped it back into the sink. “I’m not even sure I want anything. It wouldn’t mean the same.” She was moving on to her living area, she said, and after few minutes picked something from the gray and white mess and held it out to him. It was a metal box, big enough to hold markers, letters, or a paperback or two. “Open it,” she said. “Open it, open it.”

He did as he was told. She was pinching her eyes shut and said in a tiny, squeaky voice, “Is anything in there?”

“No,” he said. “Just a bit of ash.”

“What?” She opened her eyes and took the box from his hands. “Fuck,” she said. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.” She grabbed the box and looked for herself. At first it appeared as though she would throw it away, but then she knelt and filled it with debris and shut the lid.

“What was inside?” he asked.

“Never mind.”

“Come on. What was it?”

“Forget it. It wasn’t important. I didn’t want to come anyway. You made me.”

She walked away from him still shaking her head. She looked very heavy, her shoulders very rounded, her back slumped. If he hadn’t known it was April he would never have approached that person shuffling through the ashes. He picked up the colander and carried it to the car.

“Do you want me to jerk you off?” she asked that evening. He’d ordered pizza and the empty carton still lay on the coffee

table between them. She’d taken off her boots and socks again, and he’d been trying not to look at her feet on his carpet. The colander was drying in his sink. It was black and brown, soot baked onto it. He thought it pretty and was looking for a place to hang it. Now he inspected her face to see if she was serious. Or was it a trap? A bad joke?

“Here’s what you have to do.”

He listened her out. His heart was beating furiously, but he wouldn’t let on. “Sure,” he said after she had finished. “Just that?”

He got up from the couch, not able to figure out what to do next. Whenever he tried something new, this white space appeared in his head. It wasn’t fog, but neither was it solid, and his thoughts couldn’t navigate that space. It had appeared too, whenever he’d invited someone over to his place. The girls had entered, and after that, he’d been unable to make sense of the situation as though someone had kidnapped Lucas and dropped him off in a vast, snowy expanse without proper clothing and no way to orient himself. Every step was the wrong one. He could hear April saying, “You’re shaking. Stop shaking, for crying out loud.”

The first time they walked past the house on Pacific Avenue, the windows on the first floor were lit. Two cars, a Mercedes and a Subaru, stood parked in the driveway. April grabbed Lucas’s hand, and stared over his shoulder at the kitchen. “There’s someone moving around,” she said and made herself small.

“What if he sees you?” Lucas asked.

“He’ll only see your back. And it’s not like he is expecting me.”

“How long were you guys together?”

“Shut up.”

“How long?”

“I don’t want you to talk about him.”

“Then why did you make me do this?”

“It was a mistake. Let’s move.”

They walked east for two blocks, then returned on the other side of the road. “It’s pretty big,” he said. “What do you want from him?”

She shrugged. “I want him to know he can’t get rid of me like that.”

“Did you guys...did you have sex?”

April looked up at Lucas. It was too dark to clearly see her expression, but even so he understood in that moment that he shouldn’t have asked. He couldn’t explain it to himself, but the longer she kept quiet, the uglier he seemed to become. His ridiculously long, spidery toes, his knobby knees, his sallow skin — on good days he could fool himself into believing that he looked nice, almost attractive, but April’s stare said otherwise.

“He’s married, isn’t he?” he said. “That’s why you couldn’t stay with him.”

“Shut up.”

“Does he have kids?”

“Shut up or I’ll leave. You can forget about the handjob.”

“Does he? How many?”

“Goodbye, Lucas. Have a nice life.” She walked away from him towards Mendocino Avenue. He wanted to chase after her, but his legs wouldn’t budge. Instead they steered him back to the house and up the front steps.

It was the wife who opened the door. She was maybe in her forties, with short dark hair and glasses. She looked as intimidating as a math teacher or a hospital doctor; she looked nothing like April. For the first few seconds he just fidgeted, couldn’t squeeze out a single word. Then he apologized for ringing the bell. “Is your husband home?” he asked.

“He can’t come to the door right now,” she said very deliberately before taking a step or two backwards as though preparing herself to slam the door shut.

“That’s too bad,” Lucas said. “I got something for him.” He raised the shopping bag that held April’s metal box.

“You can leave it with me.” She extended her arm.

“I’d like to see your husband.” Lucas’s throat was very dry and he could feel his left leg twitch nervously, yet the words came out perfectly this time. “It’s for him.”

“Then you’ll have to come back another time or go see him at his office.” The woman started to close the door.

“Maybe I have the wrong address.” He grew afraid she was able to see his twitching leg.

“Yes, maybe you do. What is this?” she asked, pointing at the bag.

“I can’t say. It’s confidential.”

“Then it might be better you see my husband at his office. If it’s not the wrong address.” Her tone became more confident; Lucas was certain she could see him shake. “And what is this about? Who are you?”

The last question was spoken sharply. Without thinking, Lucas sat the bag down at the woman’s feet and ran. He didn’t stop running until he reached his car. Bending over the hood, he broke out in shrill laughter that turned to sobs; he hammered on the roof of the car until his hands hurt.

Back at his place he gathered the few things April had left behind, stuffed them into her backpack and left it on the front step. Then he locked the door and switched off his lights. He stayed awake to listen for the sound of April opening the gate to the garden, but at some point he must have dozed off. In the morning her things were gone.

Four days later she was back, and he didn’t even ask her where she’d been and he didn’t make any demands either. It was only seven o’clock in the evening and dark already, and she lay down on his couch and fell asleep within minutes. He kept watch while studying for a history test, drinking a 40 of Miller Light and eating a pint of Chunky Monkey. Next week his family would celebrate Thanksgiving and he would have to give up his apartment for four days. He would have to take down Brooklyn Bridge and *Star*

Wars and retrieve the wicker chair from the garage. He would have to clean as well.

April woke before midnight and said, “Hold me.” He sat down next to her, tipsy and full of ice-cream and benevolent thoughts. “Don’t be a doofus. I’m not some precious doll.” He squeezed harder, and she made herself small and curled up in his lap.

“What happened?” he said.

“Stroke my hair.”

He complied, and after a few minutes repeated his question.

April shook her head, and he didn’t ask a third time. He woke around five in the morning with his pant leg wet from her drool. Carefully he got up and switched off the lights. Tomorrow he’d buy a pack of cigarettes and light them for April and watch the smoke curl from her lips. He would show her how to stub them out. Maybe then he would introduce her to his parents and they all would have Thanksgiving together. His parents couldn’t refuse a fire victim.

Without waking April, he resumed his position on the couch. He would have loved to brush his teeth and use the blue mouth-wash, but he didn’t have the heart.

The High Life

Nick Sweeney

Whatever I’d planned for the evening I met Faria, I dropped it as soon as I saw her board the train at White Plains, in a yellow dress with a yellow pattern in it. It was a pleasing idea to me, of things hidden, yet on show. She was carrying a case for a small musical instrument.

At Fordham, announcements overlapped, from the driver and on the track, the sense of it all being: *stuck at Fordham for the unimaginable future*. Did it really say that? I imagined my future. Faria was in it, but only if I said the right thing.

“Commuter blues,” I nearly said. Faria could have pointed out that, as a white twenty first century American, my claim on the blues was questionable. But my life was stilted and lonely; the blues suited me, no matter my time, my place, or my race. I just raised eyebrows at her.

“It’s a pain.” She ran the words together, said them without looking at me.

“It is.” It wasn’t; I’d been waiting for a moment like this not just since White Plains, but all my life. I banished the ghastly people-pleasing expression that often hijacked my face.

“Subway right there.” Faria nodded toward a sign.

“Yeah.” I stopped myself saying that inane *awesome*, whose absurdity I only noticed when said by others.

We walked. She said, “Do I look weird?”

“No.” The question in my voice could have been mistaken for doubt.

“No, really, but do I look weird, though?”

“No, really, you don’t. Why?”

“People keep looking at me.”

Beautiful brown girl in bright yellow — why wouldn’t they?

“Just tonight?” I wondered. “Or — you know — always?”

“Just tonight. But — you know — sometimes it’s always.”

I knew what she meant. “They’ll stop now,” I said. What I was thinking was that we were in New York — not in some... *back-water*, like White Plains — and it was exhausting for New Yorkers to remark on every passer-by, because everybody there was remarkable.

We had the subway’s ticket hall to ourselves, apart from a guy banging and swearing at a ticket machine; it was kind of a Bronx thing to do. He paused to wish us a good evening. I thanked him, and turned to Faria, and her face told me that we were about to have one.

Sometimes Faria did look weird. Something odd invaded her eyes when, I fancied, she was on the point of blurting out a secret. Her secrets weren’t those of a gossip, I sensed, or an attention-seeker. They were true secrets, never to see the light of day. I was getting only a version of Faria, but you only ever have the right to know as much of people as they want, even if you love them.

She was vague about her work, said she didn’t like to talk about something so mundane. She reminded me of those people who lose their jobs but can’t let on, so leave the house each day, kill time, then bring home generic day-at-the-office stories.

In her background were India and Iran. She mentioned an uncle who’d made a fortune in cargo, a cousin who’d made one in foodstuffs, all lost to floods, earthquakes, corrupt officials, the mercenary troops of warlords or the boy soldiers of rebel armies. There was an array of cousins, uncles, aunts and in-laws, who may or may not have been actual relatives.

I think the blatant nature of Faria’s evasions was deliberate. It was her way of telling me that they hurt nobody, and that I shouldn’t fear them; I should, rather, collude in them to make her happy.

I was always prepared to do that.

My mother refused to use the stores near her, because they were run by Asians, whom she didn’t trust, from years of knee-jerk prejudices. Seismic changes would have to shake her world before I could introduce her to Faria. The thought troubled me all the way to the Saturday before Christmas. I thought I might take advantage of the season to descend on her with Faria, but my mother had a talent for frosting politeness into a weapon, and to hell with the occasion.

“She’ll feel let down,” Faria understood. “And it’ll screw up your relationship with her.”

“Sure.” I hugged her in gratitude. I knew I couldn’t put off introducing her to my mother forever — we lived in a multi-racial society, blah blah, for Christ’s sake. I felt ashamed of Faria’s absence when I described my life to my mother.

I said, “My mom’s life is kind of... empty.” My mother was unhappy, partly from choice: not to marry again after my father died, or to get out and *engage* with the world and to ignore relatives and old friends for no good reason. “It’s... grim.”

“Nah.” Faria laughed heartily, puzzling me. “Grim is... *different*, Shakespeare.”

Faria called me that because I was a writer, of sorts. I wrote for charities: funding bids, media adverts, the leaflets that agencies’ doorsteppers swapped with their victims in return for account details, even the scripts those annoying pledge-seekers followed. It was as far away from poetry as you could get, and tragically lacking in comedy.

“Nah.” Faria’s laugh vanished. “I will *show* you grim.”

“Where?” I was alarmed.

“I’ll show you joy first.” She pulled her top off, undid her skirt, let it drop. “But later, Shakes, I’ll be the Ghost of Christmas Present’s ghost.”

I met Faria’s father that same afternoon. He lived above some ramshackle stores in the South Bronx Hub. The junk around his apartment suggested trade: flattened cardboard, plastic pistols,

boats and whistles in cellophane, disposable toothbrushes and razors, boiled candies turning white, pralines that became dust on opening, torches that worked for an hour, Halloween make-up; variety-store crap.

He sent Faria out, urging her, “Buy Christmas stuff — those terrible pie-things they eat.” He meant mincemeat pies, and me. “I’ll make coffee. Or you want a beer?” It was afternoon, though, and it wasn’t summer. I was kind of picky about the whens and wheres of beer. Faria’s old man looked like the kind of guy who drank four-for-three-dollars room-temperature beer out of cans. In the event, he forgot both beer and coffee. He waved me into a lumpy armchair facing his TV. He sat down in its companion and spun out a tale about a guy he’d met on a Woodlawn Line train who’d promised him a Christmas hamper for nothing — his original wish, I assumed — or at cost, the mention of which was surely the guy’s way of getting rid of him.

He told me to call him Dav. He was sixtyish, though his face was nearly unlined. He had the unmanageable gray mane of a man not used to grooming. He was dressed smart-casual, but in clothes he’d worn too long.

Faria came back. She relieved her irritation at having to wash cups and brew coffee by making faces behind her dad as he recounted his ailments — diabetes, arrhythmia, and “bad feet.” “And chronic mentalism,” she added.

“You’re ridiculous,” he called back. He grinned at me as he turned to his TV.

This mutual disapproval set the tone for most of our visits to Dav. Their rambling conversations, always in English, ended up in merry bickering, with much repetition of “You’re *ridiculous, ji*, I tell you.” The word had a melodious poetry that made it both censorious and affectionate.

Dav necked a lot of his warm beer. The aluminum evidence often showed his progress round the apartment. Faria disapproved of his kind of drinking. “No wonder you have no friends,” she said to him sometimes. She added once, “And no wife.”

That shut him down. He sank into his chair, repeated, “No wife.” He looked combative for a moment, but raised a palm, said, “You’re right.” He pleaded tiredness, and — a first — bade us to go home.

Dav brought up his wife not long after that visit. Faria was out shopping with Dav’s tattered money-off coupons, and complicated instructions about which two-for-one deals to get, and which storekeepers to seek out or avoid. She usually ignored them, and worked out a way of giving him the change he thought he was due.

“Listen, Shakespeare.” He searched my eyes anxiously with his own. “Faria’s mother. Tell me God’s honest. She’s not here, is she? In New York?”

Faria rarely mentioned her mother, and when she did she stuck to terms that could have described anybody’s mother. I said, “Not as far as I know.”

“Now.” He stared me out, wagged a finger.

“No. Really.”

“Toxic woman,” he stated. “Uppish bitch. Listen.” He took a furtive look around. “I want to talk to you.”

“Sure,” I said. “What?”

“Shakespeare, you like Faria, right?” Again, those theatrical, searching eyes. It was irksome. “You like my daughter?”

“Sure I do.” I gave him some eye-language in return, a well-work-it-out-Einstein look.

“You married? No Mrs. Shakespeare? What was her name? Juliet?”

“Anne Hathaway.”

“I knew it.” He looked both pleased and disappointed — he often did, as if each pleasant thought was immediately countered by a negative one. “Cottage, isn’t it. I’ve seen it a few years ago. Trip to England. Or maybe the TV. No, be serious with me, now. Are you legally married?”

“Of course not. Nor illegally.” I thought I’d better rescue the conversation from its Shakespearean confusion. “Why?”

“Why don’t you marry Faria? You like her, you said.”

“I like... giraffes, too.” I didn’t, particularly. “But I don’t want to marry one.”

In truth, though, I’d have loved to marry Faria. By then, we were comfortable together. We liked and laughed at a lot of the same things, were happy with talk or silence, enjoyed the usual distractions of movies and bars and walks. In our apartments we junked the TV for books. Faria always had several on the go, and could concentrate despite the interference of the radio. She liked my few friends. Our arguments were infrequent, and soon made up. Sure, I could have married Faria, but it was a little too soon for me to have thought about it.

“Listen.” I could see that Dav was wary of Faria’s return. I knew it was serious when he killed the sound on the TV. “If Faria doesn’t get married here, her mother will marry her off.”

“Eh?” I wondered if he’d just watched a televised run of Jane Austens. “Who to?”

“Ah, Shakespeare. You think it’s all happy endings.” Dav ranted with such enjoyment that I sometimes questioned his actual annoyance. “All *Romeo and Juliet*. Nah. That woman has a different ending planned for Faria.”

He said Faria’s mother was from Zahidan, in Iran. Their marriage had been part of an alliance between Parsi families there and in India. I’d never heard of Parsis, and knew next to nothing about either Iran or India. Dav rolled out a tale of trading dynasties, business and family friendships, feuds and factions, agreements made and broken, and vanishing money. I gathered that Dav and his wife had been separated for some years, for reasons to do with any combination of what he called the ‘troubles’. The qualities he’d attributed to her couldn’t have helped.

The essence of it was that Dav’s wife’s family was mortally in need of cash. She’d run out of options, it seemed: her only recourse was to persuade Faria to marry somebody from a rich family. “And she’ll do it.” Dav worked those eyes. “She is a wilful, evil... *jinx* of a woman, and she’ll do it, Shakespeare — prostitute her daughter

to some uppish... *clown* — unless you make a proposal, and keep Faria here.”

“You have to be kidding, Dav,” I said. “Dav?”

I followed his gaze. The TV was showing a re-run of some old show. For a minute, we watched a middle-aged couple in comic thrall to a man who, despite being in a hospital bed, was wearing a leather jacket. I nudged Dav. He turned, explained, “I like Fonzie.”

I’d been mesmerised by Dav’s tale. My first reaction was that it was plausible. He was ignoring one factor, though: Faria didn’t fit the profile of those girls who surfaced in the press, wide-eyed and victimised, manipulated into arranged marriages.

Her feet sounded less than dainty as they propelled her up the stairs. She burst into the apartment, weighed down with bags. She said, “I will *swing* for you.” She held up a bunch of receipts, walked over to Dav and scattered them in his lap with as much violence as the throwing of scraps of paper allowed. “Three-month grocery store bill,” she recited. “Eighty five dollars in the liquor store. Twenty owed at the newsstand. And, because none of them take *cards* in their grubby little tax-dodge economy, and because there are no banks in this sink-hole, I had to walk a *mile* to an ATM.” She set a chair wobbling when she grabbed her coat from it. She shoved herself into it, beckoning me into mine. “We’d stay for dinner, Dad,” she called back into the room. “Only, you can’t afford it.”

Faria didn’t really mind shelling out for her dad’s debts, but was sore at being duped into it. She’d also felt stung by the mockery in the eyes of those vendors of out-of-date cookies and overripe fruit, peddlers of alcohol to people they despised for drinking it. I didn’t dare bring up Dav’s tale with her.

I didn’t see her for a few days. The single phone call we shared was light-hearted, and I didn’t want to break its mood. By the time we met, the drama had gone out of Dav’s story, and with it the alarm it had sparked in me. All the same, I preambled by gabbling

about my mother, with whom I'd spent the previous evening. I finished with the question: "What about *your* mom?"

"What *about* her?"

"Well, I mean, where *is* she?" What I meant, of course, was, who *is she*, and *is she really the scheming witch your father warned me about?*

"Mumbai, I think." Faria looked at me, alert. "Where are we, what, end of April? Yeah, she could be in Mumbai by now. Why?"

"Has she ever come here to see you?"

"No." Faria snorted. She had the expressive snort of a scornful little boy.

"What, she wouldn't want to?"

"She'd *want* to. But do you know how much it costs to get here? And stay? And no way she'd get a visa."

"Why not?"

"I don't remember. Something... irregular in her passport, last I heard. Why? Do you want to meet her, as well as my dad?"

"Oh, I'd love to. She sounds charming." I knew I'd rung an alarm. Maybe I wanted to be caught out, in the interests of advancing the conversation. Faria knew that anything I could say about her mother could only have come from Dav, so I recounted nearly all he had told me, leaving out his assertion that his wife would try to get Faria married.

"They had an arranged marriage." It was like she was reading my mind. "I don't think they saw each other till their wedding day. And neither of them was impressed. How old is your mom?"

The question took me by surprise. "Fifty... eight?" I had to think. "No, fifty seven. Why?"

"Mine is nearly forty."

Faria was twenty four.

"Men who marry children get what they deserve," she said. "They get a *child*. A generation before, maybe, those children would've been poor enough and grateful enough to at least pretend they liked it. Not now, though. So don't listen to the beating

of bad blood, Shakespeare. Specially my dad's, with his irregular heartbeat." She rolled her eyes, a hand to her heart. "All that stuff about the missing money is possibly true, but, you know, they all *love* a bit of tale-telling — you get me? I keep out of it."

"Faria."

"What?"

"You wouldn't get into an arranged marriage, would you?"

"Shakey." Faria offered me a conspirator's smile, or so I imagined. "You arrange one, and I'll see what I can do."

Mid-May, no answer from Faria's phone, and no response to texts or e-mails. I didn't need to go to her apartment to check that she was gone. I went, anyhow. I searched every closet, each drawer, the garbage, even the icebox, for any clues to her disappearance. There were none. My anxiety gave way to anger, and then to a shocking vacuum in my chest, my body conjuring up the manifestation of a broken heart.

Dav's pleasure in having been right faded quickly from his face. He sat still, said nothing. A game show blared, its host and contestants jabbering like gibbons, hailed by audience laughter. I rummaged in the gap between Dav's thigh and the arm of his chair, found the remote and switched the TV off.

"I still can't believe it." It was a banal thing for me to say. Dav didn't mind. "I can't believe she'd go along with such a thing."

"What thing?" It took him five minutes to come up with that; he was fully occupied in missing Faria. "The marriage? Yes. I *told* you."

"But she's not like that."

"Like what?"

"So easy to... *manipulate*." I could have believed that Faria would leave for any number of reasons: she'd tired of me, met some high-flyer, got pissed off with her dad, had it up to the neck

with White Plains — I didn't know — anything. "Bullied into marriage — I mean, that's just *crazy*, Dav."

"Faria won't be bullied." Dav looked at me properly for the first time.

"Yeah, but... she's not going to agree to it just because your wife wants money. Is she?"

"Ah." Dav became bright-eyed. "Listen, Shakespeare *ji*, and let me tell you what went on with Faria the year she was... nineteen. She was at college here, living with my sister. Long story, but my sister got sick, went home. I don't know all this, okay — I'm away, I'm working, I'm sending every penny home. Two years, maybe. I detour here — *big* detour, let me tell you. Where's my sister? Where's my daughter? Phone calls. I go to Bhiwandi." He saw the question in my face, said, "Near Mumbai, Shakespeare — Bombay. Family place. I say, where's my wife? Where's my daughter? People telling me lies. More bloody phone calls. Those... *jackals* laughing at me everywhere I went. I track my wife down in Tehran. I tell her to get over to Bhiwandi and stop fooling around. She has money problems, family problems, medical, she's waiting for this, for that — yah, of course. Many many blah blahs. So I go to Tehran. That poisonous bitch has the lap of luxury, has a servant drop dates in her painted mouth. Where's my Faria? That woman has sent her away to college, she tells me. But it wasn't college."

Dav had sunk into his chair. I noticed then that we were almost in darkness. Perhaps we wanted to be hidden, we deserted men, so as not to have to look at each other's shamed faces.

"What, then?" I asked. "Where was she?"

"Escorting. In bloody Qatar. Making cocktails, dancing in her bikini, playing her clarinet, entertaining bastard Americans and emirs while they traded the oil they stole in Iraq."

"Clarinet? Faria plays the clarinet?"

"Of course." Dav shone out a touch of pride. "Like *concert* clarinet."

"Really?"

"Yes, yes."

"She doesn't — she... didn't have one."

Then I remembered our first night out, and the instrument case Faria had carried. She'd opened it to reveal books, an mp3 player, Kleenex, pens, a notebook, lip balm, pantyliners, painkillers and all the junk usually found in handbags.

"No. It broke, or she sold it." He acknowledged the look I gave him, admitting, "Well, in fact, *I* sold it. But anyhow, forget that. In Qatar, Faria learned the high life, Shakespeare. I stopped my wife's high life right then. I sent her back to India, fourth class — hanging off the side of the train with the coolies, she was. Hah! I got Faria back here when her contract ran out in Qatar. But she had a taste of the high life." He raised a finger. "Remember that."

"The high life?" Faria had lived in a low-rent apartment, and had been at ease in drab bars, content to eat add-water meals and drink that four-for-three-dollars beer. And one of the things I'd loved was her lack of snobbery and her ability and willingness to talk to anybody and be at ease with them. "That's not her at all, Dav."

"Fellow, I'll tell you a thing you don't understand about the high life, and it is this. People get exposed to it, nah? You see it every day in the papers. One guy gambles. Another takes his secretary to a top-notch hotel. Some other idiot thinks he's a — what is it? — a *gourmet*, goes to tip-top restaurants. They get a taste, you see? Then it's skim a little from the joint account. Then it's shake some out of the cashbox in the office. Then it's work the expenses. Next is embezzling the clients. Faria's mother was like that, a little taste — yes? — then more money, and more trouble. Faria was not like that, but... people change."

I reminded myself that I'd known only a version of Faria; I'd coincided with her in transition.

"Faria will do this marriage thing," Dav said. "But she'll escape — of course. Smart girl. Five years, max, she lives with some... *nincompoop*. But then?" He finger-and-thumbed a money gesture. "*Big* settlement. Penthouse. Swimming pool. The works."

"In Iran, though?" I associated Iran with pious revolutionaries, and women in purdah, not with the trappings of luxury.

Dav said, “These people have as little to do with Iran as possible, Shakespeare. They live in Paris, Milan, maybe London. For many Parsis, Iran is the mother country, even though they haven’t lived there for centuries. They like to say they belong somewhere. Just on the slim chance somebody might give a damn. Then they forget all that.” He laughed harshly. “And mix cocktails. Discuss the bloody tennis.”

I joined him in his laugh, or at least made a noise. I’d lost a version of Faria, but Dav had lost the whole blueprint. And for the second time.

We sat in the dark. I heard Dav’s breathing, wondered if he’d fallen asleep.

You married a kid, I remembered, a shocking, ugly thing to do. You shouldn’t have. It’s your culture and all that — I know. But you still shouldn’t have. You married a kid. Ugly, shocking.

“Faria was waiting,” Dav said softly. “It’s like sometimes when you wait at the train station? And the train doesn’t come? And you get talking to the other person there? You share something from their world. Isn’t it? Might be ten minutes. Then the train arrives, and you have nothing anymore together. And you forget them.”

It was like Dav had held up a distorting mirror to my face, deflected a prism of searchlight into my memory. The train for Grand Central had indeed arrived, and I thought I’d been on it with Faria. Maybe I’d imagined it. But then how had I got there, sitting in the reek of unwashed clothes, and of stale beer and takeaways, in the pokey apartment of a man who’d done a shocking, ugly deed? I got up. I couldn’t stay a second longer with such a man, but all the same I only went as far as Dav’s kitchen. I popped open two cans of beer, came back, and handed him one.

MEMOIR

The Climb

Jane Boch

I bend my knees against the ascending switchbacks, chipping away at the five-thousand-foot change in elevation between the parking lot at the fifth station and the summit of Mount Fuji. I gaze up into the gray sky and pray that the rain continues to hold off. I can't see the peak through the fog. I approach the wall of boulders, barely angled, forming a nearly vertical wall. My hiking boot slips on loose pebbles and I stumble, catching myself but landing ungracefully back on the trail. I take a deep breath as I clutch my climbing stick more tightly, find a better footing, and attempt to scale the wall a second time.

Jonathan nurses through the nights, his latch a knife to my breast. There is a story about a stranded mother who pierced her nipple to feed her starving baby with her own blood, once the milk had stopped flowing. Like that mother, I pour my identity, my future, my lifeblood out through ravaged flesh. A layer of clouds has descended on my mind, while the knife twists its blade into vulnerable tissue. As Jonathan's gums squeeze, I lose my breath and clench my eyes shut against the pain. I stagger through the hours between feedings, our typhoon shutters blocking out both sun and moon, so that day and night no longer matter.

I prepare to nurse Jonathan after dinner, bracing my body against the glider's wooden frame, adjusting the breastfeeding pillow, hoping to find a position that yields a comfortable latch. After the first excruciating moments, the pain subsides, throbbing to a dull ache. I exhale the temporary relief, settling into the cushions that are now molded to my form. While I cradle Jonathan, I succumb to sleep's oblivion, so that my mind floats along the clouds of semi-consciousness.

An internal timer blares, jolting me awake. My chest tightens, the first awareness of fear and loss. My eight weeks of maternity leave are about to expire.

The past two years have been filled with change. Moving across the United States—the second time in as many years—back to the East Coast, following my husband's orders with the USS Alaska. Completing graduate school, followed by job hunting—always hunting, never snaring an offer, despite being named a valedictorian among my class of counseling students. Receiving surprise orders to Yokosuka, Japan, the pee stick held in my sweaty palm, blazing the pink lines of pregnancy. Moving overseas at three months and occupying a room in the Navy Lodge. Beginning, with unexpected ease, a job as a government contractor on base, and in my field.

Here, we are foreigners—*gaijin*. We are strangers to the landscape protected by the mystical and formidable Mount Fuji, whose name in its original characters is said to mean *peerless, immortal, or inexhaustible mountain*. Neon signs blaze in *kanji*, illuminating my inability to communicate in Japanese, while unfamiliar sounds, words, overwhelm my ears. The smell of fish, unyielding, rolls my delicate stomach like waves in Tokyo Bay. My family is seven thousand miles and fourteen time zones away. At work, though, I am in my element. I belong.

My office is a haven of journal articles and quiet research. A deep satisfaction greater than the whole of those fragmented unsuccessful job applications fills me at my core, casting my previous failures into the irrelevant past. I'm looking ahead, planning to work toward my counseling license. Despite moving around as a Navy spouse, I've finished graduate school and am contributing to my profession. Pride and fulfillment—these are mine on a daily basis, and I have hope for my future career.

Or I did, before I had Jonathan. Now I'm a zombie, stumbling through the days with minimal brain activity, and my Stateside supervisor won't consider approving me to work from home. It's 2008, when women can conquer the world and have it all, but

I'm facing the same choice as too many others have before me. My career or staying home with my baby: which do I choose?

The chest tightening gives way to sobs—ugly blubbling with shaking and snot. Still, I hold onto Jonathan, willing my emotional burst not to wake him up. He will rouse in forty-five minutes anyway, for another feeding, the next in an endless cycle of nourishment through my own physical agony. I am a washed-out shadow of my former self, a shade. How can I return to work?

I caress Jonathan's cheek, but bitterness poisons my touch. My heart yearns for an easiness in giving and receiving, for the joy I should find in his cheeks and gums, the soft skin that has only known the world for a short while. When I go to him, I want my instinct to be a smile. Instead, I cringe when I pick him up, knowing that I will have to offer him a breast that screams at the touch of his mouth as he takes what he needs.

My inner voice infiltrates, my chest tightening even more against the secret words. *Do I love him?*

New tears mingle with the old. If I could go back to being myself, the *me* before I had *him*, would I? My thoughts repulse me, sending me into a steeper spiral of guilt and disappointment. I cling to the pain—the same pain I curse on an hourly basis. Pain is my witness. Withstanding it is proof that I love my infant son. So also is the sacrifice I know I must make. I've already made the decision. It rattles inside me, in my emptiness, against my bones. I have to quit my job.

The acknowledgment settles like a stone in my stomach, the sobs come even more strongly. I control my breathing—the way I taught clients to do during my counseling internship—now morphing into Lamaze techniques. The sobs give way to a pang of insight: I gave birth without anesthesia, but here I sit, beaten by the pain of breastfeeding, a maternal act that has linked women from generation to generation since the first woman gave birth to the first child. The blurriness of my vision clears, my focus coming to rest on the boxes of baby clothes and other gear that sit in the dark in the corner of the nursery, unopened, untouched.

I lay Jonathan in the portable crib, waiting until I'm sure he's asleep. Downstairs, my husband holds me before I dial the number for my supervisor. I force my voice through the lump in my throat. One minute I am on maternity leave, and the next, I have resigned my position. I am that label I've dreaded: a stay-at-home mom with her degrees gathering dust like the closeted-away vacuum cleaner. The years of motherhood stretch ahead of me in an endless stream of exhaustion, days blended into nights. My brain is numb and my breasts are on fire. I have one goal: survival.

I push through the next month, coaxing myself out of bed at six-thirty every morning to the sound of Jonathan's cries, withstanding the pain that punctuates the hours. I watch episodes of CSI while nursing in the middle of the night and daydream about sleep and pre-motherhood life: studying, shopping, working, having coffee with friends; all of these without the breast shields that have become part of my wardrobe.

One indistinguishable morning, I pull Jonathan to me half-heartedly, bracing for the knife blade. I hesitate, pausing before offering myself. He latches on, and still I wait, poised to flinch. My fatigued mind takes a moment to register the change—the surprise—the cautious joy. The unwelcome guest is a no-show. The pain doesn't come.

Maybe he isn't nursing after all. I stare down at his peaceful face. I see his jaw muscles moving. Still, I'm skeptical. There is no sharpness, only the gentle suckling as he takes in milk, his downy head bobbing in rhythm. I stroke his crown, then his arms and legs. I let my body unclench, easing deeper into the cushions of the glider. Then it comes—the long-awaited, coveted moment of endorphins rushing through my nervous system, tingling into my muscles and tissues—the letdown. Though used in other contexts to mean a disappointment, for me, as a nursing mother, it is completeness. I surrender to whole-body relaxation. Peace.

The world stops moving.

Jonathan snuggles against me, more contentedly, perhaps sensing I'm no longer pulling away. Tears course down my cheeks, anointing this change in our relationship. My chest opens, my breath comes more easily, the moment expanding even as my world collapses in on itself to include only me with my baby. Before, the darkness of the nursery was suffocating, shrinking my world and reducing it to endless hours of pain and sleeplessness. Now, the dimness is soothing, lulling me back to sleep as I cradle him.

So, I think, *this is what it means to live in the moment*. In the now, I am cocooned with Jonathan in warmth and love and relief. As I nourish him, he nourishes me, and we thrive off of each other. I give a full confession of my hopes and disappointments, my whole being pouring into him, my love flowing along with the milk. I stroke his cheek and fall asleep.

The fog thins. Despite the continued sleep-deprivation, I have banished the pain of nursing for good, leaving me with gratitude for the hours I don't spend in clenched anguish and self-loathing, despising all the mothers for their ability to nurse with ease as well as myself for not being among them. I open the typhoon shutters and throw aside the curtains, allowing the sun's warmth and affection to pierce the darkness, sending dust motes awhirl in the new rays. I wander outside our skinny two-story house, buckling Jonathan into the jogging stroller for an early morning walk. We explore the winding streets of our neighborhood that caps a steep hill. New life surges through me, the satisfaction of walking, exploring, and caring for Jonathan filling the cavern left by giving up my job.

I take deep breaths of fresh air, my gaze far away on the glittering sapphire waters of Tokyo Bay. I wheel the stroller into the neighborhood grocery store, then heft it up the steps into the homeyness of the bakery, warm and alive with the yeasty scent of fresh bread. We greet our local baker, who offers a smile. I smile back, more broadly than in recent months. She stuffs an extra

cream-cheese-filled pastry into our bag. Every walk gifts me with something new to see and Jonathan something new to reach for. With all the nursing and exercise, my appetite has grown ravenous, my palate inquisitive, hungry for new tastes. At dinner time, we walk the neighborhood again and my mouth waters at the aromas of curry and grilled fish imbuing the air, building on the fragrance of rosemary bushes that line the streets in hedgerows.

Our world enlarges. Our horizon expands. While Jonathan stretches his limbs first to crawl, then to cruise around downstairs, I find my own footing in the choir at the military chapel. He starts eating solid foods; I acquire a taste for sushi. During our walks, I brave more of our hill. My endurance increases and my muscles strengthen, as has my stability in this new mode of existing—this life as a mother.

I shed the baby weight, pushing the jogging stroller down and back up the unforgiving incline that leads from the Seaside Road to our neighborhood. At the right hour of sunset, I glimpse the outline of Mount Fuji, the revered mountain keeping watch over our progress. I imagine its rocks and crags, which, with the weather clear and the clouds sparse, seem close enough to touch. Many people, including Navy personnel and family members, climb it each year, a “must-do” while stationed in Yokosuka. Until now, I thought it was impossible. *Maybe I can do it*, I think, sipping water and staring into the blue sky above the mountain. *Maybe I can climb Mount Fuji*. The hill becomes my practice mountain, my personal Fujisan. When the weather shifts from blustery spring to the balminess of Jonathan’s second summer, I no longer walk the hill—I run it.

I outstrip the fog bank and hike through the cloud ceiling, emerging into an azure sky. Below me is an ocean of gray, while the trail above is bathed in August sunlight. I watch my footing with every switchback, made treacherous with loose rocks and soil. At last, I reach a set of uneven stone stairs, flanked by *komainu*—lion

statues with watchful gazes, guardians of the steps that lead to the ninth station. I climb the stairs, my eyes on the final torii gate that is the mark of a Shinto shrine. I am approaching something holy.

My breath comes in gasps at the top, my blood pulsating, joy overflowing in giddiness. Wisps escape my hat and blow about my face, which I tilt toward the sun. I am part of the landscape, another wildflower growing toward the sunlight. Adrenaline rushes down the neural pathways. My fingers tingle as though they had burned the brand into my hiking stick: *Top, Mount Fuji, Alt. 12395 feet*. The tears flow, but their stream down my cheeks carries more than the morning’s five-hour exertion.

The peak is crowded with pilgrims and tourist-climbers, but I take this moment for myself, to celebrate. I absorb the sun’s rays, soak in the fullness of the wind, not wanting to miss—or worse, forget—anything about this moment. The sky is a new blue, created just for me. Nothing has ever looked so clear.

I explore the peak, at its center an ashy depression. I chat with other hikers, whose grins mirror my own, including a Japanese man who spent the night on the mountain so that he could watch the sunrise this morning. I make my way to a rocky path that skirts a cliff and ends at a post office over two miles above sea level. Like the crater, the scenery here is primordial, a setting for volcanoes and warm shallow seas of the ancient past. Gazing backward into eons, I sense my place in the universe, in the timeline. I belong. I am whole.

Back at the top of the trail lies the village, where I duck inside one of the hut-like restaurants and dive into a much-deserved bowl of ramen whose salty pork flavors burst in my mouth. How far I’ve come since first arriving in Japan, when my noodles slid off their chopsticks, splashing back into the broth, taunting me with my ineptness. I slurp the last noodle and drain my bowl with a contented sigh. It’s time to leave this sacred place, but I serve as a vessel. I carry its essence, a feeling of sacredness in the daily grind, the belief that I am grounded in my motherhood, even as I am twelve thousand feet above sea level. Joy-seeking, adventuring,

persevering—all these words can now be added to the lexicon of my budding identity. I have clawed my way out of the valley and up the mountain, unearthing buried parts of myself and claiming new ones that had to be earned. I have climbed Mount Fuji. I can be a loving mother. Once again, I look to the future with hope.

I depart the sanctuary of the village in search of the descending trail, which follows a different path. I close my eyes, meditating for a moment on the lesson—there is no backtracking. Like the trail, I have changed. When I return to the fifth station, I will be different—subtly, perhaps, in my soul. I turn for one last view of the summit, picturing myself above the clouds, my body recalling the euphoria that is already fading. I wipe my moist cheeks and tuck my hair underneath my hat, firmly grasping my climbing stick with its burnt symbols and elevation markers. Filling my lungs with air from the summit, I start the hike back down.

Together Forever

Ruth Askew Brelsford

He always claimed to be a “war casualty.” With that sly grin and a slight wink, Daddy said that, after spending all those weeks, months, years in the South Pacific, our Mama was the prettiest thing he had ever seen. That night in the cafe on Main Street, he spied her in the corner booth drinking a Coca-Cola with her girlfriends. She noticed him, too, but pretended she didn’t. The tiny diner was crowded and noisy with all the boys returning from the war and the local girls trying to attract their attention. The jukebox sang and the kids moved the center tables so they could “jitterbug.” Daddy watched as the shy beauty headed for the door.

“Who’s that?” he asked a buddy.

“Carmelita Sides, you remember her. You’ve probably fox hunted with her brother Darrell. He got shot up pretty bad over in France, but he made it home.”

Paul Askew was glad her brother made it home, glad that all of them in that cafe that night had made it home. He was just so very glad to be home. Home in his beloved mountains, home eating his favorite feast, his mama’s fried potatoes, pork ‘n beans, steak and gravy. Home with his coon dogs. Home to help his daddy in the gas station that was a new addition to the family’s finances. Home to find a pretty girl, get married, and never leave again.

He didn’t remember Carmelita Ruth Sides, for lots of reasons. He was a “town boy” and she was a “country kid.” There was a clear demarcation back in the 1940’s in their small rural town. The kids who lived in town were chosen for leadership positions at school. They got to participate in after-school activities while country kids had to take the bus home and do chores. The town girls arrived at school looking pretty, with their hair still curled and their skirts still starched and pressed. Mama said that she pressed all three of the dresses she owned twice, when they were dry and she took them off the clothes line and, again, right before she wore

them. Mama told us that she would rise at 4 a.m. to do her chores in the dark, and then skip breakfast to curl her hair and iron what she planned to wear to school that day, before she trekked over to the bus stop, which was half a mile to two miles away, depending on where her sharecropper papa was currently raising his family by farming on the shares.

By the time she got to school, Carmelita's curls were drooping, her skirt was wrinkled, her smile was gone, and she was jealous of the town girls who chattered and laughed up at the front of the room where everybody could see just how perfect they were.

Another reason our Daddy didn't recognize this pretty girl was that, though she was only seven months younger than he was, she had been held back one year in elementary school because she had whooping cough. Daddy started school at four years old. His mother was a teacher and she didn't have a babysitter because her own mother was "working herself to death," as Grandma always mourned, doing laundry for the more well-to-do families in town. Carmelita graduated two years later than Paul from Red Oak High School.

The real reason that this pretty girl, who had the bluest eyes he had ever seen, grabbed our Daddy's attention was that he was looking. Paul was ready. When Mama left the cafe and started her walk home to the house on the hill a couple of miles east of town, Daddy paid for his coffee and borrowed his brother's truck. When he caught up with her, he slowed down, opened the passenger door, and asked her if she needed a ride home. I asked Mama many times why she accepted that ride because our mother was not in the habit of getting into strange vehicles with strange men. She never answered that question; she just smiled. Carmelita must have been ready, too.

That short ride home inaugurated a whirlwind courtship. They saw each other every night until, one night, Carmelita told Paul that she didn't want to see him the next. She wanted to stay home, wash her hair, and spend time with her mama. "By 10 p.m. that old truck was bouncing over the hill with Paul Askew, good

Baptist boy, drunk as a skunk inside." He begged her to marry him that night. And she said yes.

The local Baptist preacher, who had baptized Carmelita just a few years before, pronounced them man and wife in his living room on Christmas Eve, 1946. Uncle James and Aunt Vera were the witnesses. Then they all got into Papa's car and drove to nearby Wilburton, the county seat and site of stores still open on Christmas Eve, to walk up and down Main Street while Uncle James and Papa Allie haggled with Mr. Thomas and, eventually, paid too much, they said, for a record player they bought Grandma Jewell for Christmas.

Mother, in her darker moods, told me that she should have known she was marrying into a closed society when she spent her wedding night clomping up and down Main Street and, eventually, getting a cup of coffee and a piece of pie at the Green Frog, the most popular diner in town, for her wedding supper. "Them four and no more!" is how she described the close-knit Askew family to her daughters years later.

Carmelita always felt like an outsider. She felt like an outsider in her own family where she was the seventh of ten kids. They accused her of being lazy when she dragged behind the others while picking cotton as a child; they tattled that she was a cheat when she put rocks in her tote sack to make it weigh enough so she could quit picking because she had "made weight"; they laughed when she jumped at a stick on the ground thinking it was a snake; they punished her when she said there were no eggs because the hen was still on the nest, when in fact she didn't want to reach her hand under the hen, afraid she would get pecked or, worse, grab hold of an old chicken snake; they derided her ambition to finish high school; they labeled her prissy when she spent hours in front of the mirror; they claimed she was disloyal when she announced that she was going to marry Paul Askew, a town boy.

She felt like an outsider at school where she was timid and self-conscious of her flour sack dresses and cornbread lunches. She felt like an outsider in the Askew family because she believed

they thought she wasn't good enough for Paul. She felt like an outsider at church because she was convinced that everyone liked her husband more than they liked her. She felt like an outsider in the neighborhood where she rarely had time to sit down and have a cup of coffee with the neighbor ladies because she had to keep her home and her children perfect and spotless. She felt like an outsider at the local school because she felt her education was inferior and she had no time to volunteer to make cupcakes or host holiday parties. She even felt like an outsider with her three daughters because she sensed that they adored their father and preferred him to her. "You girls and your precious Daddy!" she would moan when she thought we were ganging up on her.

Though he didn't want to leave his small town, our daddy moved his growing family to an oil town where he could make a living. He worked two jobs so that she wouldn't have to work and could be home for their children. He continued to hunt and fish with a passion, often getting off the graveyard shift and heading either to the squirrel woods or the local creeks to try a little fly-fishing, before coming home to sleep and prepare for the next night's work. He took on even more responsibilities at the local Baptist church they helped to start, finally being ordained a Deacon.

I believe there was some discussion about whether Paul had control of his wife and her "tongue" because Carmelita had quite a reputation, not as a gossip, but as a woman who spoke her mind. Though those discussions were private, I believe Daddy clarified that he was the head of his household while remaining loyal to his wife. It was the 1950's and he, in fact all of us, believed that the woman was to submit to her husband. Carmelita might have believed it, but she had a very hard time doing it. And she never could "remain quiet."

Carmelita felt left out of Paul's life. She felt like an outsider in her own home. Her reaction was to criticize, belittle, cry, curse, suspect, accuse, diet, clean, pick fights, spend money, and take pills. And still, he loved her. The fights could be ferocious because

Mother could curse and cut with the best of them. I remember one time when Daddy threw a cup of coffee up against the wall in frustration, shattering the china cup and splashing coffee all over Mother's waxed linoleum tile. Then he left. Usually, he just left. I don't know whether he went hunting or just drove around or found a place where a Baptist deacon could nurse a beer in private. He always came back.

I remember my greatest fear was that someday he wouldn't come back. Mother's too, I'm sure. My sisters and I secretly hoped he would divorce her, move out, and take us with him. He never did that. "Why?" I asked him, years later. "It would be too cruel," he said. "Your mother would baffle a whole team of psychiatrists. But I believe she just never got enough of what she needed. In that house full of ten kids she was always last to the trough, as they say. There just wasn't enough left over for her. And now she just can't get enough even when we are doing the best we can."

It went on like that for almost 69 years. When Daddy retired, they moved back "home" to his precious mountains. They built a house on the 150 acres his dad had owned since the 1940's. My husband and I joined them a few years later, building a log cabin across the pond from their place. My husband took over the cow/calf operation and I taught at the local community college.

As they aged, they fought less. She was still critical, but, luckily, Daddy lost his hearing, and he didn't hear many of the cruel things she would say. Sometimes, he would look at me and ask, "What did she say?"

"Oh, nothing, Daddy, nothing." And we would both grin.

He loved her. And she loved him. He knew her. She thought she knew him.

I would peek in their bedroom sometimes and see them sitting up in bed, holding hands, talking. I would sit on my deck and hear their soft voices from across the pond, sitting in the porch swing and making plans. Plans they would never fulfill. He still called on me to buy gifts for her—for Christmas, for her birthday, and for their anniversary. She never did like what I bought, but

we continued the tradition. And he bought her beautiful cards that he picked out himself. Beautiful, sentimental, romantic cards that he paid too much for. She always chided him, but she kept every one. After her death, we found them all. They began, “To my beloved wife...” They ended, “...Your loving husband, Paul.”

They decided sometime in their early 80’s to pay for their funerals. Always trying to save the daughters trouble, they picked out their caskets, paid for the embalming, selected their tombstone, and had it engraved. Midway between their names and the dates of their births, with the death dates to be inscribed later, they chose two wedding rings intertwined and the words “Together Forever” surrounded by roses. I’m sure that Mother made that choice and Daddy agreed. As he always did.

Daddy would often joke, “We always hoped to go together, but since the girls won’t let me drive anymore, I guess it would have to be a murder/suicide so I guess that ain’t gonna happen.” He would smile and Mother would scold, “Oh, Paul!” To Mother, it was no joking matter. Mother could not understand, indeed, none of us could understand, that as Daddy neared his 90th birthday, he was ready to die. He was tired; he was sick; his mind was not processing like it always had and he knew it. Paul Askew was ready, but none of his family, especially his wife, was ready to let him go.

The day came. The day we had all dreaded. Daddy, our rock, our anchor, our foundation, died. People came from far and wide to pay homage to this good, humble man. Friends and neighbors and relatives brought food, and Mother sat and smiled and talked and then would disappear, and I would find her in their bedroom, crying.

“It doesn’t seem right for us to be in there talking as if nothing has happened.”

“I know, Mom, but it’s what people do.”

“I know but he should be here.”

“I know, Mama, I know.”

The day passed, the family went home, we ate all the food and wrote all the thank you notes. I spent every night with her.

My sisters came on weekends. She spent most of her time in her bedroom, sleeping.

The family gathered again two weeks later for Thanksgiving, our first holiday without our patriarch. After dinner, she laid down for a nap, and we all meandered over to my house to visit and let the kids play outside. An hour later, Mother walked in my back door and said, “Girls, you’ve got to help me go find Daddy. He’s been gone a long time and I’m sure worried.” We looked at each other and then one of us, I don’t know who, said, “Mama, Daddy’s dead.” I believe it was my sister Rilla who said, “Come on, let’s go out to the cemetery.” And we piled into the car she had driven to my house, she who had not driven a car in years; we drove the long, gravel road to the cemetery. Then she said, “He’s dead, isn’t he? And he died in my arms. He looked up at me and breathed his last and died in my arms.” It wasn’t exactly how it happened, but we agreed to her version and thought it was settled. That she had just awakened from a particularly realistic dream. Until it happened again. And again.

All that winter, we relived the painful night of his death. All that winter, we drove out to the cemetery to see the tombstone that now had a date of death inscribed on it. “I wish I was right down there with him,” she said. “When I die, you make sure they bury me just as close to him as they can get me.”

All that winter, she heard him coming in the basement door. All that winter, she heard him in the shower downstairs. When he didn’t come up the stairs, she would start to look for him. She became convinced that he had left with another woman. One day she put on her hat and coat and waited for him in her car for hours. Another day she threw all his clothes, the ones she could find, out on the sidewalk in front of the house: “Just so he will know he didn’t leave me; I threw him out!” Many days she sat on the sofa, looking out the storm door, waiting for him. Over and over, I would drive her around while she looked for “that woman’s” car because, she explained, “Daddy’s truck isn’t here so he doesn’t have any way to get anywhere. She comes and gets him and brings

him home.” After driving around the country roads, she would give up, and I would say, “Now, do you want me to take you where he is?” In silence, we would drive back to the cemetery. “He’s dead, isn’t he? I wish I was right down there with him. When I die, you make sure they bury me just as close to him as they can get me!”

She didn’t eat. I couldn’t get her to shower or get her hair cut. She had no interest in television or her crossword puzzles. She wouldn’t go to church or talk to any of her friends on the telephone. She slept. I took walks while she was sleeping and talked to my sisters, trying to puzzle out what we should do.

When I returned and checked in on her, she would say, “You just missed Daddy.” Sometimes, I would say nothing; sometimes, I would say, “No, Mom, he’s gone, remember?” And then we would relive the night of his death again. Her imagined version, “He died in my arms, didn’t he? He looked up at me and then died in my arms. I wish I could crawl right down there with him. When I die, you make sure they bury me...”

One night she thought she heard him in the basement, she started down the stairs in the dark. I was in bed in the other room. I called to her and received no response. I got up and saw her at the top of the steep stairs. I lunged at her and pulled her back. We ended up wrestling on the floor. She screamed.

“I want him here.”

“Mama, he’s dead!”

“I don’t care. I want him here!”

In frustration, I yelled, “Mama, you usually get what you want in this family, but even you can’t insist, threaten, cry, or plead and get him back. He’s dead. Only Jesus came back from the dead.”

She stared at me for a moment and then started to laugh. We sat in the floor laughing with tears streaming down our faces.

We took her to a psychiatrist who specializes in elders. He asked us if our Daddy had lots of affairs. We said, “No, but she was always afraid of that. It was her greatest fear. She always felt like she wasn’t good enough for him, not pretty enough, not slim enough. She was jealous of all the ladies

at church. She was jealous of the neighbors. His cousin. But, as far as we know, even though some might have thought it would have been justified back when they were younger and she was such a shrew, Daddy always loved her. Daddy was always true to her.”

The doctor said, “Adultery isn’t your mother’s greatest fear. Life without him is her greatest fear.”

The diagnosis was psychotic delusion. Her memory was fine. Her mind was sharp. She just couldn’t accept Daddy’s death. We were told not to argue with her. Not to tell her that Daddy was dead. But then he said that we shouldn’t agree with her either. That it was dangerous to collude with a delusion.

“How do we walk that tightrope?” I asked.

“Perhaps she should move out of that house that they lived in together for so many years?” he suggested.

And so we moved her to a facility where she told everyone that they were in separate hospitals.

I would push open the door to her room, and she would tell me, “Oh, you just missed Daddy.”

I returned her to her room after a visit with her cardiologist, and she said, “Tell Daddy that I had a good report and I hope he did, too. I’m settled in here for the night. Tell him I love him.”

A few weeks later, she died peacefully in her sleep. She finally went to meet Daddy. He hadn’t left her after all. He had just gone on ahead. I told the guys at the County Barn, “Dig that grave just as close as you can get it.”

Whisper to a Scream

Laura Foxworthy

The first time I visited the ocean I screamed. Not a scream of excitement, or one of delight, but more the blood-curdling-psycho-killer-come-to-take-my-life kind of scream. At least that's how my mother tells it. I don't remember it that way. But memory is a trickster.

It all started with a car ride. Just the two of us, making up songs about our destination. That day it was "To the beach, to the beach, to the ba-ba-beach," and a re-write of the ladybugs picnic that took place on the shore. "Watch your munch, there's sand in your lunch...ladybug." Rhyming silly things into a tune was a mom-and-me specialty.

Whenever we took a trip that required more than fifteen minutes on the road, we'd stop to buy an ice-cold Coke, which we shared between us. A "just us" treat that would continue for a few years after. That glass bottle with the syrup-sugary liquid inside, the carbonation tickling my nose and top lip, and the way my mother's hand felt when she would pass it over to me. It felt like I belonged in her world.

I took a sip as we turned a sharp corner, splashing a little onto my lap. We veered off the main drag, passing the sign directing traffic to the Balboa Ferry. There were a few bumps in the road that required slowing down, and a ticket booth we stopped at where a boy my mother probably flirted with was taking money for beach parking. Once we passed the guard rail, the search for an open space began. That bit I remember too. Pretty clearly.

My mom talked to the cars we passed as if they were people, suggesting they "find their way anywhere but here," reminding them of forgotten errands or uncluttered garages waiting for them to rest within. She had a way of giving the inanimate life, and of making even the smallest objects significant.

Old Maggie, our pale blue Oldsmobile, rattled as the engine

shut off. Mom ran her hand gently across the dash, cooing love words to *Good Ol' Maggie*. "Take a breather, old girl. Enjoy the ocean air," she said.

As soon as we parked, I jumped out of the car, flip-flops half-off each foot, the pale-yellow ones with plastic daisies at the toes — *my favorite that summer* — I remember them so well.

I ran with arms outstretched, nearly soaring off the asphalt and onto the sidewalk. Mom slammed the door haphazardly behind her as she ran to catch up with me. The sand flew up behind me like a desert windstorm, shoes flapping, then flying off completely, and me, not noticing as I raced toward the ebbing waves. Mom thought I would dive right in, mistaking it for my grandparents' backyard pool, and swim out into the dangerous deep.

"I thought you would disappear forever. Or drown," she says. Sometimes she tells this part with an air of wistful sadness, sometimes with a bright wit to her words. It all depends on who the audience is.

At the water's edge I stopped dead in my tracks, halted as if someone had grabbed a hard hold of me, or like I'd smacked right into a pane of glass. I stood there and screamed. Mom says she'd never heard anything like it come out of me. She didn't recognize me in that startling scream.

People ran toward me, coming from different directions. They asked what happened. They asked if I was okay. They asked if I was hers.

Mom caught hold of me and wrapped her arms around me. She held me close, suffocating my face with her polyester-blended-too-tight-blouse and escaping breasts.

She smelled of cigarettes and *Anais Anais* perfume. Two signature scents from my childhood.

She always pens herself the heroine in the story, scooping me up and rushing me home. Saving the day.

But I know that mom let go of me as soon as we were at the car. She resented holding my hand if there was no one around to see.

We drove home in silence, a Marlboro Light in her left hand,

flicking ash out the open window. Her right hand sat steady on the steering wheel. No more sing-a-longs or shared pop. *This part is never in her version.*

Mom has so many stories she likes to tell. This one, the screaming at the sea one, out of all her stories, has always struck me as odd, inconsistent with my own feelings and memories. The ocean has always felt like home to me. A source of peace and understanding. Standing on the beach, with my feet wet and the Pacific cold on my skin, I've found reasons to stay alive. The sea is an integral part of who I am. I've personified it. I've made it a substitute-mother. I've thrown pain in her waves, asked for answers on her shores, and received them by simply listening to the come-and-go of her tides. The ocean is a constant in my life. A calming force.

I still kick off my shoes and run down the sand.

I still throw my arms out as if to embrace the sea.

But I never scream.

—————

There was this boy. A not quite a boyfriend, not really a lover kind of boy. We worked together at Tower Records. Some afternoons, when we both had the day off, we'd go to a deserted patch of beach in Newport and pass a bottle of premade "Sunrises" back and forth. He used to like to lift my skirt slightly and slip his fingers underneath my underwear, watch me shudder as he turned circles inside me.

On a less sober day, after I chased three lines of speed with the salty air and sugar-sweetened tequila, I told him the screaming story. His hands were on my skin as I spoke, pausing only to grab the cigarette held loose between my lips, stealing a drag.

His touch distracted me, but I persisted with the story.

He pulled my hair back roughly as my voice trailed off, just enough to get my attention as he said solemnly, "Maybe you saw the rest of your life that day."

He was dark that way, full of razor wire words and a cloudy, rainy soul that broadcasted a gaping need too deep to fill. He left

a touch of pain in everything he came near, and in all he laid his hands on. Including me.

I rolled my eyes and pulled away, just enough to feel his tug on my hair again, imagining I was sinking into the sand, wishing I'd wash out into the ocean, or that I'd shake him off and run down the coast, not looking back.

What would he have thought then?

I stayed though, lost in the momentary silence.

We made our way back to the car. We climbed inside and squeezed ourselves into his small hatchback. He kissed me hurriedly, one hand pulling at my skirt, and the other making quick work of the button and zipper on his jeans. I started to crawl to the backseat but he stopped me somewhere in between the seats and spread my legs painfully apart, pushing my underwear to one side, and slipping himself into me. He groaned my name into the back of my hair as he moved in-and-out. I stayed quiet, withholding my breath as long as I could, then inhaled frantically. I breathed in all the words I wanted to say but swallowed instead.

I wish I could scream so loud it would break all the windows. So loud I'd finally wake up.

No one would have heard me though, only the ocean or some uninterested passerby. We walk by so much in life and just turn our heads, turn up the music, avert our gaze.

That boy, he knew if we were near the ocean he could take things further than I'd allow in my bed, or his. Afterwards, we sat awkwardly together and confessed things. My legs were sticky from him, and I could feel the spots on my hips where his rough hands had been. Spots that would leave bruises. They stung a little as I spoke in an almost-whisper.

He told me about a girl who used to babysit him when he was twelve years old. Told me how she'd paint her toenails bright green, and practice giving blow jobs on him, ones she'd later gift her guitarist boyfriend who had a mohawk that matched her nails.

She smelled of Love's Baby Soft and Bubblicious gum, he told me, and had bleached blonde hair with one long strand dyed pink.

It would flip back and forth while she was on her knees, practicing, that rogue pink streak of hair.

He traded that tale for my screaming at the ocean one.

Those exchanges of stories, with our bodies spent and sore, they were the closest we ever came to being in love.

“If I could just go back to that spot by the water. Recapture it all, then maybe I’d know what I was screaming about. Maybe I’d find some missing part of me there.”

He grabbed the tequila bottle from the backseat in response, shaking it. “C’mon. Let’s go back.”

We walked across the parking lot and back onto the sand. We made our way closer to the abandoned lifeguard station and took the rickety ladder up to the top. We sat down there, side-by-side, legs dangling and eyes affixed to the horizon. The sun cast its goodbyes over the waves. He brushed a strand of salt-sticky hair out of my face, touching my cheek with his thumb, tracing it around my eye and across my forehead, stopping on the scar that slashes crookedly into my hairline. His gentleness unnerved me.

“What’s this from?” he asked, softly.

“Which version do you want to hear?”

He turned my face toward him and looked at me for a long moment, cocking his head to the side. “I don’t know. Both?”

I began to recite what I call *the five stitches story*.

I’d been spinning in circles and lost my balance. Clumsy and careless, as my mother always called me. It was a crack on the corner of our coffee table that did it. She’d held me in her lap all the way to the emergency room, crying along with me.

“That’s the one I was told until last year.”

The truth, or something like it, came out at the Black Angus. In the bar. It was one of those rare nights, with me just barely drinking age, and mom in the middle of another post-adolescence-in-her-forties stage, when we’d put aside our prescribed roles, and long list of differences, to toss a few back.

The scar story changed that night.

She was in a car with her best friend, Connie. I was in the backseat.

The two of them had been drinking, and those were the days before mandatory seat belts or child car seats. The brakes were hit hard, an accident avoided, and everyone made it through unscathed.

Everyone, except for me.

I’d been sleeping in the backseat, footed pajamas and “Doll Baby” in my arms. I had flown momentarily.

“You didn’t even scream when you hit the gear shift,” she claimed.

And it was Connie, not my mother, who’d held me in her arms and cried, all the way to the E.R.

But me, I’d been silent, and the story had been edited for content. Hidden first from my long-gone-now father, then my grandmother, and later, from me.

“So, if even my scar is a lie, then the screaming at the ocean... maybe that’s a lie, too.” I half-whispered, taking a shaky breath, trying to hold back what felt like tears.

“One day you’ll give it up and admit that you like it that way,” he said, smiling crookedly at me, taking my hand. I turned away, looking back out at the water.

I wondered what he meant.

The not knowing?

The uncomfortable backseat sex?

Or the way the ocean reminded me I’m just a bunch of stories, some true, and some false?

We stayed in that spot while the sun disappeared. In silence. His fingers traced small circles up my sand-and-sex-sticky leg, and I thought about the girl with the pink streak in her hair. I tried to imagine what she looked like on her knees. I wondered if she made him feel things I never would. I wondered what he would be like if it had never happened.

I wondered if he ever screamed.

Crossing Continental Divide(s)

Carmela Delia Lanza

I am driving around a parking lot with an espresso pot full of coffee and two Italian espresso cups sitting on the front seat of my car. I am going very slowly, taking the corners as gently as I can, worried about spilling. There are no cars around because this campus is always semi-deserted. It is morning and I am on my way to surprise the campus librarian. He told me he likes espresso so I decided to make him some. In that moment I don't question what I am doing; I don't ask myself, "What the hell?" I don't wonder how I ended up here in Crownpoint, New Mexico, over the Continental Divide, on the Navajo reservation. I just want to surprise this guy who I like, who I am hoping will start to like me. I never consider the fact that love has a difficult time growing in this landscape of wind and rock. It is a place for hiding, for giving up, for losing one's way, not a place for kissing, for offering a poem to a stranger, not a place for a beginning.

I lived there with ghosts. Some of them shouted at me when I walked around this small campus that looked more like a prison than a school. I packed up my life and my son, and moved out there to teach because I had student loans and my teaching assistantship at the University of New Mexico was coming to an end. No more extensions. I was expected to finally complete my doctoral dissertation and get on with it. Find a tenure-track job somewhere. Become an academic who wrote about post-feminist theory or something like that. So I moved to Crownpoint to teach developmental English to adult students who were trying to become plumbers, nursing assistants, electricians, construction workers. I was trying to survive, piecing my writing as a poet to my attempts at joining academia.

Crownpoint had one post office, one supermarket, one video store and lots of starving, homeless dogs that often ran in packs

and ate most of the cats. I was told I would not see any feral cats around, and I only saw one the entire time I lived there. The dogs would hang out in front of Basha's, the only grocery store, sniffing around, waiting, and sometimes a person would come out with a box of crackers or potato chips and feed them. The dogs died of neglect--starvation, lack of care. They would live short, brutal lives--sick, starving. Often dying from trying to cross the road and getting hit by a car, a car flying by on its way to Farmington (north) or Albuquerque (south). Dead dogs marked the spot. You don't want to turn off the road here. You don't want to go into that town. Just keep driving.

I had a large, walk-in closet in my portable classroom and that was where I found piles and piles of books--novels like Leslie Silko's *Ceremony* and James Welch's *Winter in the Blood*. I found out from the other English instructors, the teacher who used to have that portable, the one who died, had used those books with his students. How did he do it? Did he read to them every day? Did he stop and tell them a joke? Did they like hearing his stories about his hiking trips? He was an outsider from Upstate New York, and probably was attracted to the idea of living on a reservation, teaching Navajo students. He died falling off a mountain, somewhere in Colorado. I don't know if his parents transported his body back to New York. My colleagues said his expectations weren't realistic or even sensible. But they all missed him. I felt it every time they talked about him. They had pictures of him with his parents, pictures of his childhood home, pictures of him as a child. The students loved him. He died two years before I was hired. I wrote poems about him, poems about him being my ghost lover, my soul mate:

*the dark covers our skin in uninvented lives, it is our cocoon
we stitch together with every word of every story.
I tell you about the woman in the Chinese take-out place in
Albuquerque
who used to complain about her feet.*

*You made me dinner and we laughed about how lucky we were
to find each other here, where nothing grows and all people can do
is talk of loss, hearing their ancestors' voices at night,
skin walkers throwing dirt in your face.
But here we are, we found love!*

— Carmela Delia Lanza, “Memento (Crownpoint, New Mexico)”

I drove to Albuquerque to get away from living on the edge of the world. First I had to drive south from Crownpoint to Thoreau, New Mexico to meet I-40, heading east to Albuquerque. It took two hours. When I first moved to Crownpoint, I wrote in my journal that when I drove to Albuquerque, I felt like I was leaving a small, Italian village and arriving in Rome: that was hope, the belief that something wonderful was going to happen to me in Crownpoint.

I tried not to remember what one of my friends said when we first drove out there, when I was considering interviewing for the job. We looked at the parking lot with three cars, and she said, “You are never going to get laid out here.” A prophecy. But it wasn’t only that I did not get laid. I was also living on the margins of a tribe, facing the loss of my own tribe, facing the cold fact that even if I loved someone, that someone was not going to give me the future I so desperately wanted.

After a few more trips to Albuquerque, the drive felt longer than two hours, and I would find myself crying on my drives back to Crownpoint. I was going back to a small apartment—my son sitting in the back, staring at me from the car seat with his almost black eyes, binky in mouth. He was judging me along with everyone else. I knew it. “Mom, why are we living here?” he wanted to say, but instead he would throw his head back and cry or vomit in the car. I had become that woman alone raising a child, alone, driving on an interstate, going where?

Sometimes I drove past Thoreau to Grants, New Mexico, a

larger town about an hour from Albuquerque, and I would meet my son’s father there. He would usually have one of his boyfriends in the car waiting, and I would hand my son over for a weekend visitation. We would meet in the Burger King parking lot or in front of a Chinese restaurant. I usually cried all the way back to Crownpoint, driving alone, hoping to see a skin walker, going into the small apartment alone, telling myself I would spend a lot of time that weekend writing my dissertation.

That was why I was there. I was going to finish my dissertation. And I needed a place like Crownpoint to complete that last piece, that piece that would say to the world that I was no longer an outsider; that I belonged in that privileged group of people with advanced degrees and parents who had personal accountants and who hosted dinner parties.

But even after I defended my dissertation, I did not change. I was still the child of an Italian immigrant family with a mother who had three years of education and who somehow survived the bombings of her small village in Italy, and a father who was a high school drop-out and who worked as a mechanic until he was able to retire. I worried about my grammar and my lack of intellectual polish and shine. Dirt under my fingernails, I spent too much time cleaning my kitchen or balancing my checkbook. I usually cooked chicken wings and chicken thighs, and I would always bring the *body* into all of my academic writing. Reading Gloria Anzaldúa saved my life. She was not writing about the Italian American woman, but it was comforting enough for me: “Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them . . .” (Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*)

At the end of a semester, one of my students came to class drunk. I was not shocked or upset. I only felt annoyed; his alcohol addiction was just an inconvenience for me. No colleague ever informed me I would start to feel that way. I wanted to tell him to take his problem someplace else, like the side of a road or on top of some mesa. In other words I wanted to say, “Who the hell

cares about your problems? Your wife decided to leave you and your mother-in-law kicked you out, blah, blah, blah.” I thought I had learned years ago to just keep walking and not make any eye contact.

However, he lingered after class, wanting to talk to me, and I walked into my tiny office, mumbling about having things to do. Then he said, “You’re my teacher, you should care about what I’m doing.” I asked him what he wanted from me, and he wanted me to go to the school’s drug and alcohol counselor with him. So I did. I sat in the counselor’s office and listened to him go on about how unloved he was, how alone he was. How his wife and children had left him, and they were living in another state. How no one at the school cared about him. How no one cared if he lived or died.

As he mumbled on, I thought about how I had spent the weekend feeling unloved. Later that evening, another teacher said that student would probably be dead by spring, would probably end up dead in Gallup, New Mexico, probably in an alley or out in a deserted lot. One student’s body was found near a convenience store. The teacher knew all about it because she spent time going through the obituaries in the *Gallup Independent*. That was how she learned about students who did not make it through the winter. They were usually the older men who had been kicked out of their homes because they were drinking or cheating. They really had no place to go. They did not even have a car to sleep in.

That student wanted me to listen to his story. I was being asked to accommodate, to shift my perceptions of the world, and I felt uncomfortable, even anxious in that shifting. As the daughter of immigrants, I know I have asked others to accommodate my perceptions of the world, and that has often made others feel uncomfortable or disconnected from me. Often with that asking, compassion is not there. Most people did not offer me compassion; they just wanted to get on with whatever they were doing, begging to just be left alone. That day I failed to meet the student with any compassion. I was too involved with my own pain, my own day-to-day negotiation of making the sacrifices of living on

a reservation, knowing I would never make a home there. The times I tried were small disasters as I sabotaged the small world I created there. Hiding the wooden snake creature, an artifact that gave me the courage I needed to face my life alone with my son, whenever a maintenance guy entered my apartment. Hiding my candles and my goddess statues. Not allowing anyone to see who I prayed to and how I sent my prayers to the wind around me. Feeling trapped at the top of a mesa. My voice would only join all the other voices that I heard at night. Waking up in the middle of the night in Chaco Canyon—the voices were too loud, surrounding me in that small tent. I was being consumed.

I walk into the library, hoping I will be able to have at least one interesting conversation with the librarian. I plant myself at the computer and immediately start complaining about the lousy Internet connection. I can’t get any connection at all, and he just smiles and tells me to be patient. The connection is there but when I go to check my email, the Internet is gone. I start to click harder on the keys and go on about this stupid place. I am hoping that my behavior will draw him in, but it does not seem to be working.

I tell him about the student who came to see me because he wanted someone’s Social Security number and he thought I would know how to do that. The student told me he had seen *The Godfather* movies and he thought my family was “connected.” I had to say, “My family is not in the Mafia” several times before he left the portable classroom.

The librarian finds the story funny, but I only get a slight smile from him. We are not laughing together as two people who share intimacy. He observes me as if I am some kind of insect that flew in the window and will soon die with the first frost. I am shouting at him across a canyon. Words are swallowed and only sounds can be heard, like a tambourine pounding. I would ask him to dance but no dancing is allowed in the library. That is a rule of this place, and everyone is quiet or whispering. My laugh is too loud. He

turns away from me and answers his cell phone. I hear him softly laughing. He is making plans for his weekend in Farmington.

I came back from a business trip in Chicago and I told the librarian, “I want my students to learn about the world,” He gave me a frown, and yet I go on, “I don’t mean the natural world, I mean other cultures. They’re so isolated out here. They would never survive in a place like Chicago. I mean if they wanted to leave this place.”

“Why would they want to?” he asked, “To do what?”

To do what. I could have talked about the pages of music announcements, the museums, the films. I could have tried to describe the energy of being in an urban place. There was this kind of pulse I felt walking around a city. Maybe it was only feeling that I was living in some kind of fantasy, that life could have this instant possibility to it, this kind of intoxicating risk to it; you would breathe in the drug as you walked along a city street, feeling you were part of some dynamic plan even if you were just going to buy some new underwear.

The day after I returned from Chicago, I almost ran to my classroom, a little nervous because I had been away, and then we had spring break. Only one student showed up for my first class that afternoon. He asked me politely if we were still going to have class. I had all this energy and thought, “Dammit, we sure are going to have class. And I am giving a bunch of quizzes this week and if people miss class, they will fail.” The pedagogy was getting a little murky; I sounded more like the dictator of some insignificant country, my classroom; it was all slipping between the cracks of what I should have learned in some of those graduate courses on composition theories. I was never taught that someday I would be an angry educator.

Before I left for that Chicago trip, one of the maintenance guys gave me cedar to burn. He told me to burn it in all four directions so that I would be blessed while I wandered around that big city,

Chicago. The city was so cold that I walked about a half-block from my hotel and stood near an alleyway and lit the cedar. I didn’t feel blessed or purified. I was freezing and wondered where will I eat that night. I watched the people in their business clothes enter the hotel elevator and I felt myself slipping away from that reality. There was no place to go but back to New Mexico, back to the Navajo Reservation, not exactly home but also not this place with all the white people laughing on an elevator.

The Crownpoint dogs are barking and I am lying in my bed wondering who is having sex tonight. Women surround me in this apartment complex—a math teacher who is a nun, another older woman who has only mentioned to me that in another life she lived in Washington, D.C. This is a place where we all can hide.

I knew one of the instructors had been having an affair with a married community member. She came over to my apartment one night and asked me to do a Tarot reading for her, but she would not tell me her question. She said her concern was about work, but all the cards pointed to love and relationship. Cup cards that had to do with sorrow, abandonment, and loss. The Tower. The Four of Cups. She kept insisting it was about work, but I could not help her.

She finally told me she was thinking about a man while she was shuffling the cards, and that she had found out he was sleeping around with other women, including his wife. She told me she would wake up early in the morning, take a shower, and wait for him. And usually he did not show up. Days and days of waiting and then he would be there one time, and she forgave him while she cried after he left.

I wanted her to leave my apartment, to take her passionate love story and get the hell away from me. She brought his photography book and showed it to me. She let me borrow it and I kept it even after she packed up and left the reservation. I secretly prayed that she would not find love in that place because I wanted to be the one who

did. And I knew this place held on to love in a tight fist, rarely allowing fingers to touch. It was a mean and stingy place; when someone found another, someone else was left alone night after night.

I wanted to be the one who found my soul mate, and we would tell our children that I had to travel to edge of the world to find him. And we would travel to Italy together, and I would learn Navajo, and he would learn Italian. And we would listen to Billie Holiday or Van Morrison while we cooked dinner. And the poems, the poems would be a testimony to our lives. My son would learn how to be a gentle, patient man instead of spending time with a father who called me a “bitch.” My son would learn to love and respect horses and hunting. No need for me to head for that interstate. I would belong *here*:

*The snow fell like whispers on your black hair,
and your face was familiar,
like me, you were a child who translated
between sorrow and knowing,
hybrid souls with two languages . . .*

— “Memento (Crownpoint, New Mexico)”

Instead, I am standing in the Burger King parking lot screaming at my son’s father’s latest boyfriend, yelling at this young, gay man who tells me he is becoming my child’s mother. I am the woman screaming at her ex-lover’s new boyfriend in the middle of the street. My son’s father just stands there, watching us fight. He doesn’t step in until his boyfriend looks like he is going to hit me in the face, while our son sits in his car seat, in the back of my car, asking for me and looking at his runaway father.

On Sunday afternoons, I would look for the librarian’s truck to see if he had returned to campus, but I did not go to his apartment and knock on his door. We did not have that kind of friendship. But then one night we went to a concert together in Albuquerque,

and we kissed and danced. After that night I did go to his apartment, and I had knocked on his door because I wanted to know what was next. I knocked on the door with a light heart, knowing Italian food was his favorite, and that he liked Van Morrison. I knocked feeling that everything I had gone through—the late nights waiting for my son’s father to come home, the fight in the living room, when he threw a full bottle of red wine into the air, where it splattered on the ceiling like drops of blood, the bonfire I made of all the crap he left behind after he left to start a new life with his boyfriend—all of that brought me there, to this door, for him. Then he told me, “It’s not going to work out.”

“Why? Is it because I have a son?”

“No, that’s not it. I want to marry a Navajo woman. I need that in my life. I want the mother of my children to be Navajo.”

I left his apartment and cried. But I also understood the need to stay in the tribe. I had left mine years ago, and that meant with every loss, with every brutal moment I had no one to turn to. I wanted one of my relatives—a brother or an uncle?—to show up at my ex-lover’s apartment, the place he was making a home with his new boyfriend (hardwood floors, new furniture, art work), and threaten him, “If you don’t stop with all your bullying and your lies, I am going to break your legs.” Like Tony Soprano would have done. But no one was there telling me to wait in the car. I had ex-communicated myself years ago. I was left to get out of the car and pound on the door, with empty threats about calling the police. The librarian knew better. He did not want to lose everything:

*we have become the stunted people, bent to a side,
we long to stay upright for another day.*

— “Memento (Crownpoint, New Mexico)”

I was in Crownpoint, in my portable classroom, writing a poem when my mother died. Now I don’t remember what poem

I was working on, but were bones in it? Was the sharp line of the horizon as we cross Robert Moses Bridge to get to the ocean in the poem? Seeing that fragile strip of land, feeling like we were about to fall off the edge of the world? Was all that in the poem? Was I that embryonic whale, swimming in my mother language, going back, going way back? I have no idea.

I was sitting alone in that small office, and I did not know I was about to drown in so much sorrow, that it would take me years to reach the surface and breathe again. In that moment I lost my baby language; the umbilical cord was finally cut.

When my sister called, I was in that tiny, dark apartment with my tiny son, and I fell to the floor crying. What was I going to do? My son had no idea why I was crying. I had to figure it all out alone, on a desert mesa, at the Continental Divide. Both parents dead, and no one to call who would arrive at my door and hold me. No one was there to wipe my face and make me stand up. I went to my neighbor's apartment, the math teacher who was also a nun, and I told her my mother had died.

I want your ghost to appear some night and talk to me. I don't think I would be afraid if you called out my name. Perhaps we could have a long conversation about the students, about feeling that we are chipping away at some iceberg. I could tell you how much I have failed as a teacher. That I cannot get my students to really believe that writing can save your life. But then I have one student who has been meeting with me every week and we write together. I could tell you about her. That her loneliness brings me comfort because sometimes late at night I know she is alone in her dorm room, and I am alone, and we are both hearing that wind over us like a heavy beast inhaling and exhaling all night. Sometimes, before dawn, I know she is also watching, waiting, listening. And no one is there to brush her hair or hold her. And no one is here to touch my hair or hold me.

Maybe you will laugh and remind me you were alone on the side of that mountain; that your family was so far away and

you died alone. And my mother might be there, and she will tell me that despite all the people in her life (her children, her step-children, her grandchildren, her sisters and brothers), she died alone in a hospital with strangers there, watching her take her last breath. You would say and my mother would say, "*our prayers go through the walls, through the stones around us, to all those who are alone tonight, who are hungry tonight, who do not believe they will see another day. Our words go into the earth we are sitting on, the air we are breathing, the fire in front of us, and the water on our skin. Just sing and breathe all night.*"

But there are days I forget to breathe. There are days I want to scream at anyone (if I can find anyone) that there is a world out there. I stand outside my tiny, teacher apartment and I remember that I wanted a daughter and I think, "Now that will never happen. She will never be here for me." There are Sunday evenings after I have unpacked the car and put my son to bed (after another long trip to Albuquerque), I hear the drum beating the chanting going on from another apartment, and I am not welcomed there. It is a drum circle for students and invited faculty. I watch another episode of "Law & Order" and go to bed.

When I was packing up, getting ready to leave that tiny apartment, taking my son to Albuquerque, finally accepting my place, the librarian did not come around to say good-bye. Even though only a year earlier he had named me the "woman who leads the raids," he did not come around to say, "See ya." Even though we had joked about having "Wopajo" children (half-Italian and half-Navajo), he did not come over and give me a hug, and say, "Remember you are strong." I don't remember the last words I said to him before I left. I don't remember where we were. I do remember the locked up apartments, the silence, and the empty, deserted campus. I had imagined him walking up the hill to say good-bye, but that did not happen. He had vanished and that was probably for the best. His tribe was silently watching, noticing who was talking to me and who was not.

POETRY AND PROSE POEMS

When I finally left Crownpoint, the librarian was no longer paying any attention to me, and my mother was dead. A friend of a friend was there with a truck and helped my son and me move back to Albuquerque. I had no place to go and no job. My son's father had served me papers so I was spending a lot of time in court.

As I sat in the truck passing the small, deserted library on that campus, I thought about that weekend in Farmington. That weekend when he asked me to house-sit, to care for his plants, while he went to a conference. I wandered around that house and imagined him there, caring for the lawn, cleaning out the refrigerator. I thought at the time his request meant that possibly he really did love me, and that he would tell me after that weekend. But that, of course, did not happen.

Or the time he invited me to take a drive to Gallup, and I left the campus, left my son at the daycare and spent the day with him, laughing, running around in the city. As we walked crossed Coal Street, I wondered what it would be like to spend every day with him, making him espresso in our sunlit kitchen.

A few years later the nun from Crownpoint visited me in Albuquerque and reported the latest news from there. In the middle of her story, she mentioned that the librarian had fallen in love with a young, Navajo woman, and they were living together. She asked me if I remembered him.

*in this slippery, falling world,
perhaps now you have a wife and a few children
and all of you speak three languages,
perhaps you sip on peyote or you carry a bible
and maybe you have finally cut your hair;
I lay in the dark with my aching right hip
and I remember the cold rain of Long Island
against the cracked window and
how my small circle of breath appeared and disappeared.*

— “Memento (Crownpoint, New Mexico)”

The Younger Brother

Leonore Hildebrandt

My mother loved her younger brother, but I feared him. His rules. His threats. Even though I never witnessed it, I believed in the power of his “green stick” to instill order. The children had to finish their plates of unsweetened porridge. They were expected not to speak at the table. Once—on a whim—he told me to repeat in front of people a phrase in a foreign language. He tried and tried, but he could not make me do it. And I could not hold in my tears. No one intervened. Later I would have words for his affliction.

My mother loved her younger brother. On visits, they’d smoke together—she cigarettes, he cigars. She praised his sense of humor. His success. His generosity. He had me join his large family in places my parents could not afford. I’d be put on a train along with instructions: behave and be grateful. As a child, he had been sent to a boarding school far away. He would write to my mother, homesick and sad. Both of them knew that sons were expected to expand their father’s lifework.

My mother loved her younger brother even when he was demented and feeble. They put him into a modest nursing home right in the small town he had come from. His children, who had moved far away by then, set up his large mahogany desk in the room. It still had all its trappings. He would shuffle around with a walker carrying his executive’s briefcase. To prevent injuries, the nurse put a helmet on him.

My mother loved her younger brother. She felt guilty in her old age when she could not travel to see him. One day in winter she asked me to drive her up. There he was—crestfallen, talking nonsense—and I thought I could forgive him. His mind and body were too small to house my hurt. He seemed to recognize

me, so I smiled. My mother and I sang children's songs, and he remembered some of the words.

Once he had me waiting for what seemed like a very long time. I stood in the snow in a small Alpine town. People were passing by. Do children learn by doing to be left on their own? When he swooped in—finally—he was in a great mood, pleased with himself, hungry for admiration. He used to quote Goethe's *Faust*: "In the beginning was the deed!" My mother would object, saying that Dr. Faust was deliberately mistranslating "logos" which means "reasoned discourse" or "living word." Still, she loved her younger brother. But his son, the sweet little boy who grew up to inherit their childhood home, was quick to chop down the grand trees in the yard.

Be My Friend

Robert Murray

I don't recall precisely where you said it,
which rolling or roiling Orange County beach,

whether the weather was perfect or breeze
blowing like the dickens or the 'divil'

when out it popped like a dolphin head.
"Special unconscious blunder," as Freud would have it,

and maybe Jung too, but I would have it as divine treasure
from the underwater underworld, the place where

Be my guest was transformed into *Be my friend*
in a momentary lapse of tripped-up surf-dare

that soaked us both to the ass in a frothing high tide,
one that Dom Perignon's crème de la cream couldn't hold

a searchlight to. And chuckle and chortle we did,
like an overserved couple of belly-busting one-legged pirates

sans sea legs, except it was 9 a.m. on less than a half cup
of french roast with half and half. And still I celebrate

the lusty onshore breeze of our billowing friendship,
which I never imagined could compare with us as lovers

but does. Freud wanted it all to be about sex,
and most men would agree, but this man right now loves

what I'm learning from you, Angel, about closeness
and closer-ness and feeling and saying. And since

we both know I have so much more to learn,
and you have so much more to give—please,

my love, keep teaching, feeling
and saying, *Be my friend!*

Monkey Business

Robert Murray

I wouldn't call it that exactly—no willful tomfoolery,
certainly not on the part of my daughter. Yet
the malaprop mischief in me was surely at play that day
her pre-school word flub snickered the air between us
and hung around, like an unacknowledged kid fart.
Because the elementary school *monkey bars*
had just become the *wonky bars*, in much the same
way her *Grampy* became *Bumpy* and *dizzy* became *busy*.
Bumpy all but peed himself laughing when told—*wonky*,
after all, one of his favorite words, Sam no doubt
picked it up from him the day she toddled
through his living room, heard that strange sound,
turned and crooked her nose up at him before he leapt
and tickled her all the way to the kitchen cookie jar—
arms flapping, two wild geese honking *wonky, wonky,*
wonky. Okay, so I'm not sure that's exactly how
she'd remember it, or, whether that even matches
my own memory, exactly. Could be just my mind
playing tricks again as I take a break
from the grunt work of making sure
the condo roof is winterized, kick my feet up
on the couch. But if home movie memories
get a well-deserved schmaltz pass
with a based-on-a-true-story caveat,
then the one I'm watching right now
and trusting as true
shows my ever-impish father
spinning my toddler daughter
around and around a faded and cracked
linoleum kitchen floor with her squealing
louder and louder—*Wonky, Wonky,*
Wonky, I'm busy!

Blue Aegean

Jacalyn Shelley

This is not about a woman
climbing the volcanic wall of Santorini
where life clings to the hollow of its circular
edge. Or about how they lived in a white-

washed house, their windows
shuttered from the sun as he read mysteries to her,
his voice caressing her ears. Which could mean
all they desired was the warm glow of Amstel

beer, the smell of tomatoes,
black olives and goat cheese. Maybe this is
the part where he could only hear the chains
ringing from a priest's incense burner. Hot

with embers, smoke seething
from its closed lid. The part about her disbelief
when he said he didn't hear the tinkling of bells
that tattled she was coming, which means

all she knew was hunger.
This might also be about how she dreamed of
Manet's *Olympia* sitting on ruffled white satin
cushions wearing only gold earrings and a bracelet.

About wearing an oval bauble
dangling from the black ribbon tied in a bow
at the front of her neck. The part about the look
in his dark almond-shaped eyes attracting

the blue light of her eyes.
But not about how they yawned and stretched
then strolled, each on their own, until his voice
no longer touched her ears. This might be about

her yielding of lips. About how
she once thought her shoulder could only fit
in his shoulder's hollow.

The History of Kisses

Jacalyn Shelley

One

The Moon's milk spoons over men and women, some entangled under brambleberry bushes, some supine on golden Egyptian sheets. Around your mouth, a fine lace of wrinkles, the traces of gladness. Before you spindle off into an inky sleep, this is the time of the good night kiss. These are dark hours for me to write,

claw back the curvature of time to the moment my teenage grandfather thought *I like the look of her*, smelled her brown hair, and when she made no objection, the ripple they created was heard only by the earth's ear, the sound of a bird chirping. Later, she nestled my father in a wicker basket, pinned the tag *Milton* to his blanket, and left him on his grandparents' oak table. Holding the door with her fingers, she softened its blow.

Two

Dressed in extravagant robes, lovers bend together as if they are sound waves of music. They kneel in the fragrant meadow of violets, sundrops, and larkspur in Klimt's *The Kiss*. His hands hold the sweet bones of her head as the ridge of his brow, his blunt cheekbone press against her impassive face, her eyelids closed in a gold leaf dream.

Perhaps not unlike my maternal grandmother, who wanted to believe if she could play the piano at Carnegie Hall, my grandfather would crave her splayed fingers caressing the bones of his spine. But her hair wasn't flaxen, her cheekbones too high, and he, with an unanchored heart, moved between his second

wife and her, his part-time home. Until, he died. Then, she banged *Rhapsody in Blue* on her upright piano, vowed not to tell their young children she was his mistress.

Three

In the first photograph of my parents, my father's right arm braces my mother, his student, as she stands on ice skates. His head leans towards her and he smiles, but at eighteen her gaze is off-camera. She knows a kiss could ruin a life.

For them, a rice shower, a tiara of white roses in her chestnut hair. He takes her hand; holds open the door of his black Chevrolet coupe. What a comfort he must have been to her on that first night, after she discovered her parents never married, his parents too. Their bodies fused together as if carved from a block of cream-colored limestone, their arms and hands almost flattened to fit around each other, strands of their hair united into a single arc of time that stretches taut — the exquisite and the undeserved moments —

relaxes back into the mousy brown tendrils of my hair that you love. Time for me to slide under the soft flap of sheet, inhale the scent I love when you're wearing nothing else, how you touch the tip of my spine, how I lean in to kiss your marmalade mouth.

About the Authors

Louise Blalock

Louise Blalock is a student at The Writers Studio New York and has recently completed a novella. She has kept a journal for decades, but only began to write poems and stories after a long, lively, and challenging career as a public librarian. She likes to hike, bike, row, bake bread, and reread great novels. “Submerge” is Louise’s first publication.

Jane Boch

Jane Laube Boch holds degrees from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Seton Hall University. She won the Press 53 story contest in June 2015, and her writing has appeared on Silver Birch Press. Her novel-length manuscript placed third in the 2020 James River Writers Best Unpublished Novel Contest.

Margaret Emma Brandl

Margaret Emma Brandl’s writing has appeared in journals such as *Gulf Coast*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Yalobusha Review*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Cartridge Lit*, and *CHEAP POP*. She earned her PhD at Texas Tech University and her MFA at Notre Dame, and she currently teaches at Austin College. More details at: <http://margaretemmabrandl.tumblr.com>

Ruth Askew Brelsford

Ruth Askew Brelsford retired after forty years in community and educational theatre in 2017. She lives in a log cabin in southeastern Oklahoma with her husband, three dogs, four cats, three hens, one rooster, and a neighbor’s goat she befriends daily. PreCovid, the retired Ruth was a CASA volunteer, mediator in both Small Claims and Child Placement court cases, president and founder

of the local arts council, and creative writing teacher in the local minimum security correctional facility. Now she hikes through the woods, pondering the meaning of life, and makes soup, reads novels, and writes short essays about her family and friends.

Ed Davis

Ed Davis has immersed himself in writing and contemplative practices since retiring from college teaching. *Time of the Light*, a poetry collection, was released by Main Street Rag Press in 2013. His latest novel, *The Psalms of Israel Jones* (West Virginia University Press 2014), won the Hackney Award for an unpublished novel in 2010. Many of his stories, essays and poems have appeared in anthologies and journals such as *Leaping Clear*, *Metafore*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, and *Bacopa Literary Review*. He lives with his wife in the bucolic village of Yellow Springs, Ohio, where he bikes, hikes, meditates and reads religiously.

Laura Foxworthy

Laura Foxworthy works in advertising and is earning an MFA in Creative Writing. She is currently writing a novel set in the desert, as well as a series of short memoir pieces, all with song names as titles. She has authored and published the Music Blog lyriquediscorde.com for nine years and helped create the literary magazine, *The Battered Suitcase*. Laura has been a part of writing workshops with Francesca Lia Block. A third-generation Southern California, she lives in a Los Angeles suburb with her three children and her partner. She is currently working from home and writing her way through this pandemic. “Whisper to a Scream” is Laura’s first publication.

Leonore Hildebrandt

Leonore Hildebrandt is the author of the poetry collections *Where You Happen to Be*, *The Work at Hand*, and *The Next Unknown*. Her poems and translations have appeared in the *Cimarron Review*, *Harpur Palate*, *Poetry Daily*, *RHINO*, and the *Sugar House Review*, among other journals. We published two of her poems in our 2017 *Pushing Boundaries* anthology. She was nominated several times for a Pushcart Prize. A native of Germany, Leonore lives “off the grid” in Harrington, Maine, and spends the winter in Silver City, New Mexico. LeonoreHildebrandt.com

Stefan Kiesbye

Stefan Kiesbye is the author of six books of fiction, among them the novel *Your House Is on Fire*, *Your Children All Gone*. He lives with his wife in the North Bay Area and teaches creative writing at Sonoma State University.

Carmela Delia Lanza

Carmela Della Lanza is an associate professor of English at the University of New Mexico-Gallup branch, and as well as a writer. She has two published chapbooks of poetry, *Long Island Girl* (published by Malafemmina Press) and *So Rough A Messenger* (published by Finishing Line Press). Her writing has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies including *Comparative Woman*, *Chantwood Magazine*, *Voices in Italian Americana*, *Southwestern Women: New Voices*, and *Bloodroot Literary Magazine*.

Robert Murray

Canadian-born Robert Murray earned an MFA in Writing from Vermont College in 1994. A longtime singer-songwriter, four albums with his all-original tunes are available in the world of contemporary acoustic music. In 2010, North of Eden Press published

a collection of his personal essays entitled *A Chicken Hawk Comes Home*. A recent poem, “The Voice of Someone Other,” was a finalist in the *Lascaux Review* Poetry Prize for 2018 and was published in the *Lascaux Prize* anthology, Vol. 6. He and his wife recently moved to Taos, New Mexico from Montpelier, Vermont.

Jacalyn Shelley

Jacalyn Shelley has been published in several journals including *Sugar House Review*, *Dunes Review*, *DASH*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Barely South*, *Shot Glass Journal*, and *Pilgrimage’s* Injustice and Protest Issue. In 2018 and 2019 she was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. We published two of her poems in our 2016 *Devices* anthology. To read more of her poems go to JacalynShelley.com.

Nick Sweeney

Nick Sweeney’s stories are scattered around the web and in print. *Laikonik Express*, his Poland-set novel, came out with Unthank Books. His novella *A Blue Coast Mystery*, about the swingin’ sixties and genocide, was published last November by Histria Books. He is a freelance writer and musician, and lives on the English coast. More than any sane person could want to know about him can be found at www.nicksweeneywriting.com