

EDITORS' FOREWORD

You hold in your hands *Euphony's* Winter 2015 issue. Each piece has been carefully selected: we've solemnly trekked through rain and snow (and who knows what else, to be honest) only to find ourselves in a myriad of grueling debates. Our only source of comfort: Oreos...plenty of Oreos. We'll take you through worlds populated by nicotine-fueled infants and golden outlanders, into poems that "can't start like this"; we'll weave you through temporal dissonances and into the midst of a family in crisis. Authors are listed alphabetically: but do not feel obligated to follow this order. We encourage you to linger wherever your eye may fall. Find the gems organically. Whatever catches your attention.

We also hope that you will visit our newly-designed webpage: **euphonyjournal.org**. Pieces selected for online publication will be featured weekly. Here, you will also find submission guidelines, information about our staff, as well as several of our past issues. Make sure to follow us on Twitter [[@euphonyjournal](https://twitter.com/euphonyjournal)] and on Facebook.

Any further questions or comments can be directed to
euphonyjournal@gmail.com.

We hope you delight in reading these pieces.

— The Editors

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Euphony is a non-profit literary journal produced biannually at the University of Chicago. We are dedicated to publishing the finest work by writers and artists both accomplished and aspiring. We publish a variety of works including poetry, fiction, drama, essays, criticism, and translations.

Visit our website, www.euphonyjournal.org, for more information.

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can't change the color of the sea
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R. A. ALLEN

SOU'MEMPHIS 2

This was a suburb
it ain't one now.
This was a neighborhood
it ain't one now.
The new family
they moved in
last weekend.
Tonight the man
is face down
in the driveway.
Underneath him
the concrete is stained.
Is it blood
or crankcase oil?
Is he shot
or passed out?
We didn't want
to get too close.
We took some
phone pics.
We looked around for
the cops
the TV truck
the ambulance.
We didn't know
what the deal was.

KEVIN CASEY

SEPTEMBER SEA GLASS

Both the light and the wind roll in from the horizon,
and the clear waves ponder over blocks of granite,
to be lost searching through the smaller stones
and the blistered mats of rockweed.

On this warm fall morning, while the tide lies sulking
with the barnacles, my three children stalk sea glass
among the shingles, backs arched like limpets,
their paths between the wrack interweaving.

Here are three small seeds of cloudy green,
shared then planted in one child's pocket;
and here a flake of china — the tale of a foundered ship
or a sea hermit's storm-wrecked shack written

in its scant, royal-blue scrimshaw.
The oldest finds a shard of blurred turquoise
the size of a mermaid's scale — a hazy chip of frost.
And through that stained glass pane I see

the crush and the roil of the winter surf
that soothed its clear serrations reeling back again,
to break upon September's seawall, and grind
the luster and the sharpness from the autumn sky.

CHARLIE CORBETT

BASTARD

Otto stood out front, Baby tucked into his jacket, the both of them as pretty as a picture, from a distance. All around was snow — three inches tall on the branches, six feet deep in the drifts. The little house was also white, but dirty and smudged, like bare hands had rubbed it over and over again. Number one darkest thing against the snow was Otto's hair. Numbers two and three were Baby's eyes, and fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh were the footprints connecting Otto to the front door. Rest of the world was blank. Since Valentine's Day they had been holed up there, in Sawbill, ND, (pop. 847) — just Otto, house and Baby.

Otto was a rat, a scrubby shrimp-man with gray skin and pointy teeth. On Feb. 13th, haute-drunk on peppermint schnapps, Otto had picked a fight with Thaddeus. Thaddeus was a tall, reasonable man who taught at the university. Otto might have gotten off with a broken rib, but he had felt so inclined to sink his teeth into Thaddeus' biceps and to chomp until he tasted blood. For that Otto lost his ears and most his nose to Thaddeus' knife. Well, brother, I believe your point's been made, Otto said. Then, chin up, he drove through the snow to the emergency room.

They wouldn't touch him there. It wasn't because he was uninsured, bloodied up and disfigured on top of ugly. They refused him because he was belligerent in his demands for what he called "qualitative care."

Oka-a-ay, ladies, what about Tylenol III? It's practically harmless. Sir, you there? Would you hook a Christian brother up with Tylenol III?

The orderly placed a roll of gauze into Otto's paw and nudged him through the emergency room's automatic doors, nudged him across the driveway and into a snow drift. Then the orderly went back inside, brushing snow off his palms as he went. Alone, Otto got up and made as if he were leaving, but only to double-back behind the hospital, unobserved. Pain and booze-addled, he figured that he'd find a door open, and from there, the hospital pharmacy. Otto walked the length of the building and tried every door. The whole building however was as calm as a lamb in a jam. So he tried the windows. There was a little one ajar — 2 feet wide by 1 tall — that he could just barely reach by standing tippy-toed on a dumpster. He squeezed his head through, then his shoulders, and heaved himself in, shattering something heavy and cold on his way down. It was a ladies washroom, and it reeked. Moments ago perhaps a nurse had issued forth a toxic dump and had left the window open to air things out. Otto picked a shard from his hair and held it to the light — the sink. Too drunk to be scared (and even the smell faded quickly), he wiped the fresh mess from his shirt and carried on.

Otto meandered through the white hallways. His sneakers squeaked on the linoleum floor. No one was in; the bowels of the hospital

were asleep. He started trying doors — linen closets, utility rooms, other bathrooms. One door led him to observation room of the maternity ward. The baby tank was on the other side of a long glass window. Eight babies were fast asleep, wrapped up in hospital-issue blanket-burritos, and sleeping too was the nurse assigned to watch them. She was a tender sight; a strand of hair hung over her face and quivered with each of her slow, peaceful exhales. Next to her head was a bowl filled with chocolate hearts, of which Otto pocketed twenty, in case he came along a dog later.

The baby tank's door was unlocked. In the first bassinet lay a little cute brown baby. Otto, bewitched, felt love scurry in his rat shrimp heart. He dipped his knotty hands into the crib, scooped her out gently. Baby's tiny claw reached out and grasped tight to one of the strings of his jacket hood. She was stirring. To keep her quiet, he lullabied:

Flyg Fula Flug, Flyg!
Ond den fula fulgan flög.

It seemed to have worked. Her mouth opened, but she didn't cry. Otto poked his fingers into her mouth and explored. A little toothless, gummy miracle, she was, a tiny seed from which anything could grow. Otto walked out with her, past the sleeping nurse and back down the hallway, making his exit through an emergency stairwell. Outside, to keep her warm, he opened his jacket and put her to his chest. He felt his heartbeat on her. Now what? Baby's hand still held fast to his pull string. They had chosen each other. He couldn't just walk away from something like that. It was fated. It was weird.

He drove with his high beams on so he could watch the flurries splatter on his windshield. Reflected in the brights the flurries made it look like he was driving through deep space, when the star points stretch out into everlasting streaks of light.

Now and then he'd open the window and toss out the tinfoil from a chocolate heart. He would have saved them for a dog, but he liked to have something in his mouth when he drove and there were no cigarettes.

He and Baby crossed into Dakota around midnight.

* * *

Baby John-John's lilac golf shirt just covered the belly which hung over his belt and buffed the stovetop as he cooked. So that's what a rich man looks like, Otto thought, frying his buttered noodles just so. Baby John-John's Indian oma (Otto's great-oma) had left him a large tract of useless prairie. Turned out there was shale sitting under that grass, and over the protests of the Settlement, John-John had sold.

Otto had been lucky to call when he had. Baby John-John and Jaime left for California that very morning, a new house had already been picked out and paid for, a proper McMansion high up in the hills, with plenty of trails for four-wheeling, plus a sun room for Jaime's dolls. There was little time to interrogate Otto or his story:

Big hipped Mexican chick — Lady I met out in the Mini Apple, last spring — shows up at my apartment one night — Last night — and

drops this girl baby into my arms – after she’s had her way with me with a kitchen knife. And she vanished.

Uh-huh, Baby John-John said. They all lapsed into silence, Baby John-John frying, and Otto, Baby and Jaime at the table. All of Baby John-John’s children were grown and gone, except Jaime, an adult woman with an 8-year-old’s mind. She wore a lilac golf shirt, like her Papa.

Hey Ugly, Jaime said, what’s your baby’s name?

None of your beeswax Jay.

Doesn’t look like a girl. Doesn’t look like a girl baby to me.

Then what kind of baby you think it is.

It’s a lady-killer. Like its Papa. And ugly. Kills the ladies he’s so ugly.

Calm down, Otto, Baby John-John said. He turned with the skillet and split the noodles between their three paper plates. They dug in, breathing heavily through their noses. Otto ate despite his belly being upset from all the chocolate hearts. It would’ve been rude not to.

Baby John-John looked up: Oh, for heaven’s sake, Otto. Go change your bandages.

Who’ll mind Baby?

Jaime will hold your baby.

Jaime’s gummy hands wrapped around Baby and removed her from with surprising force. Otto went to the bathroom, defeated. His uncle had been right — the bandages were a mess. He changed them with the gauze the orderly had given him, humming to himself, his eyes scrupulously avoiding the places where his ears or nose had been. He retook his seat a minute later, looking crisper than a freshly buried mummy. Meanwhile Baby John-John cleaned his plate and had gotten up to finish packing.

OK, Jaime, Otto said, you’ve had your turn. Give me the Baby.

Lady Killer likes me more. You’re too ugly.

Give it, lady.

Jaime. We gotta get goin, Baby John-John said. Set her down, Jaime. She put Baby on the ground and got her coat. Otto snatched Baby back up and soothed her crying.

Flyga Fula Flug, Flyg!

Ond den fula fulgan flög.

Three weeks until the oil company calls, Baby John-John warned, three sausage fingers held out. Jaime and the bags were already in the car, he had run back in for his hat. You and that baby better be gone. Three weeks — I promised them an empty house.

Sure thing John-John. Hey Jaime, he shouted, enjoy California!

Don’t look at her, he said. You’re a freaky thing. Then he looked at Baby. Oh, for Heaven’s sake, he said.

The door slammed. A minute later, except for the tire treads and the paper plates and the dirty skillet, it was like Baby John-John and Jaime had never existed at all.

Otto set up a routine. Whenever the day started, he'd have black tea with a squirt of lemon juice, nibble on dry noodles from the pantry, and try to give Baby some milk, which she'd demurely refuse. Then they'd watch *The View* together.

After, Baby would nap and Otto would change his bandages and do some solo sitting in the wicker chair, maybe read a book. He had found a Norton literature anthology and tore through it page by page. Its thin, flimsy paper reminded him of the Bible. He would have preferred the Bible, but Baby John-John didn't own one, and this paper was almost as good for cigarette rolling, basically the same thing.

The wicker chair in Baby's room was almost perfect for sitting in and smoking all day, a good place to not think about Baby not eating. All the chair needed was a throw pillow to support his back. The only one he found, though, was a hateful thing with spiral velvet fringe that warbled through his fingers like cilia. One side of the throw was a cinnamon-red carnival of cherry blossoms, the other was a patch of black faux-fur, short and coarse, like one would find on a tropical spider. While he would smoke he'd rub his hands across the unpleasant hair, whispering I hate you, I hate you, I hate you, I hate you. If Baby woke up from this muttering, Otto would sing her back to sleep.

Fluga flyga fula flögen
Ond den fula fulgan flög

For the baby's sake, he got better at ignoring the pillow. Or so he thought. One hand would drift through the Norton anthology, looking for interesting pages to smoke, the other would drift behind his back, silently engaged in its malignant petting — I hate you, I hate you, I hate you.

Baby would usually wake when petting and smoking time was done. Otto would then change his bandages and her diaper, despite her diaper being bone dry, and afterwards they'd sit together in the wicker chair. The smoke from the day would dissipate, the snowmobiles would howl across the plain outside, right outside Baby's window.

After sunset was the worst time for him. He liked how the house filled with the sunset itself, but then it would get darker and he would delay putting on the lights, until he couldn't see anything except the wicked chair he sat in, and the tips of Baby's ears and nose. It made him nostalgic for his own facial protrusions. At least the holes were healing up nicely, he'd think. Then it'd be bedtime.

Astounding, how fast things fell apart. A real ball kicker, Baby John-John would've called it, at least the Baby John-John that lived inside Otto's head.

Less than a week into their routine, of black tea and lemon squirts and *The View* and the icky throw pillow, it all went to shit. Otto looked out every window and saw snow. He knew it was ridiculous — he grew up across the state line, meaning the snow there wasn't any different from the snow here. But alone in the house with Baby, it was.

The howling of the snowmobiles underscored this. They carved dark, parallel lines right behind the house, through the upper crust of ice.

He thought maybe going out into the snow would help. He grabbed Baby and walked outside. He counted four steps and stopped, surrounded by white. There was nothing for them out here, just cold. Go back inside and try to get Baby to eat, he said. Try to get Baby to burp. If not eat or burp, then sleep. Baby looked at him with her dark eyes. In them Otto saw a fatal weakness of mind, ferocity that he thought was animal, or nothingness — all of her humanity condensed to one wallop. It didn't matter to Baby, that he had seen this. To Baby it was all the same, and she continued to look up.

* * *

Otto should have taken her to the clinic long ago. She had had nothing to drink or eat in days, no significant b.m. to speak of. But he couldn't think what to tell the doctors, with no birth certificate or money and his face in the shape that it was.

The matter resolved itself. While he'd debated his options, Baby had died. She was still warm, but Otto felt no pulse or breath. He peeled the blanket back, unbuttoned her jammies and put his hand on her tiny chest — nix. He tucked her back in, sat down in the wicker chair. He sat there for a day, almost, it felt.

Snowmobiles jogged him from his reverie. SIDS, he said, out of the blue. Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. It was a medicalized, official C.O.D. It could happen to anyone, he said, anybody's baby.

Baby was going to be buried on the premises. At first light Otto got a shovel and dug around the snow bordering of the house. He found a spot he liked, right under the window to Baby's room. He melted the snow and softened the ground with boiling water. It took a bunch of trips with a large stockpot, back and forth: dump the water on the ground, pick up the shovel, dig out a few scoops until he couldn't anymore, go back in and boil more water. He watched it boil in the pot, the air bubbles rising like spider eyes. If that nasty throw pillow with the cilia fringe had eyes, these would have been they. It made him shudder.

He woke up in his gray bed, tears running down his face. Right next to him, Baby was screaming. Bewildered, he turned her over, unbuttoned her jammies and put his hand flat down on her chest. She had a heartbeat. He took Baby into his arms and ran to the kitchen. Standing at the fridge he fed her milk off his fingers. She sucked greedily.

You're still alive, Otto said, and as if to confirm this, Baby's mouth popped open. You gotta cigarette, Baby asked. Otto almost dropped her.

Did I stutter, queer, Baby said. Give me a cigarette. Otto went to the bedroom and tore out a fresh page from the Norton book, rolled a cig and stuck it in her mouth.

Are you going to light it, Baby said. Right, Otto said. Sorry, Otto said. Otto lit, and pulled it away so Baby could exhale.

That tastes like shit, Baby said. Give me another puff.
He obliged her.

Otto, we got to get out of here, she said. Only a matter of time

before the cops show up. I need vaccines too. Hepatitis B, plus meds for the others, when I'm big enough. What are you staring at, chowder-fuck? There's a clinic up at the Indian Settlement, Otto said, as if from a trance. But how am I gonna get there? The roads are too snowy to drive.

I don't know. I'm a baby, Baby said. They finished the cigarette together, both absorbed in their thoughts.

Hold on just a sec, Baby, I got an idea.

Don't leave me.

I got to Baby. I can't do what I need to do with you hanging on. Baby had started to cry, inconsolable. Otto went back over and sang her lullaby again.

Fluga flyga fula flögen

Och den fula fulgan flög

Baby calm now, he went outside, stepping daintily through the snow to the detached garage. On Baby John-John's tool rack Otto found an enormous spool of galvanized metal wire, for clotheslining in the summer. Otto grabbed it along with a pair of garden shears and walked back outside, blinking in the sunshine. He tied one end to the spigot, walked the wire twice around the house, crossed the snowmobile tracks and secured the other end to the trunk of a lone chokecherry. He snipped off the excess with the shears, and went back inside. He picked Baby up and sat down in the wicker chair, and waited, feeding Baby with spoiled milk and hand-rolled cigarettes. Around sunset came the snowmobiles, and then, the sweet twang of the wire.

* * *

Code Pink didn't get called until near sunrise after Baby was stolen. The maternity ward nurse had slept right through the end of her shift. The sheriff got further delayed by snow, and a hair-brained scheme of using bloodhounds to trail the chocolate heart wrappers littered down I-94. After a few days Federal Agent Jackie Blue got smart and contacted the NSA, who got back to her 138 minutes later with Otto's cellphone records and Baby John-John's home address. It was too late, though. By the time Agent Jackie Blue showed up with a fleet of police cruisers and cable news vans, Otto and Baby were gone, any tracks they might have left buried in a fresh foot of snow. This fly had flown.

CRAIG COTTER

.....
A POEM CAN'T START LIKE
THIS

I had a 9 hook-up today for a half hour
could've been a 10 but had a barn-burner of a headache.
That didn't end until the second hour of a foot rub
by Wan Ming Yang.
He is a 10.
3-day-old hickey on his neck.

If I didn't have that headache we could've gone an hour.
The poppers he used made my headache worse
(contact buzz).

*

Lovely Wan Ming Yang.
His slender fingers
rubbing my skull above my eyes
in the groove there.
The headache started to disappear the minute his slender fingers got in
there.

*

Wan Ming Yang's ass goes on forever.
His waist is 29 inches.
You know when some guys are very young
their bubble asses are lifted—
the round part up by his back
then a steep rounding into the V as his crack disappears into his legs.
You just wanna get your hand in there.
Your tongue.

When he leans down I look in his t-shirt—
not a hair.
Flat stomach ripples as he bends.

*

I think Wan Ming Yang is lying on his side in bed lonely right now.
I think Alex is getting up to pee in New York at 4:16 a.m.

*

I thought in doing this
I'd remember two people.

Now, not only do I know nothing about them,
I can't remember them.

*

On the three wish dream
I usually want to know all the languages in the world.
Then unlimited money and eternal life.

*

You're a smart fucker reading this poem.
Of all the things you could be doing
glad you chose this.
Do you wonder what I was like?
Are you pissed that you didn't choose something else?
Do you feel you have to keep reading to see how it ends?

*

These great eternal questions. They really aren't questions. We hate the
one answer
so we make giant buildings we don't let the homeless sleep in.

DAVID CRAVENS

THE SECOND WAVE

for you mighty king
cause you understand these things—

the general of the 5th Mech:
—go back

thirty minutes
bunkers
trenches

plink and flashes in the bush
—go back

no
yes

(a chess-game for lifers)

king I shall return
bearing my shield—
not upon it

had death come at Kent State
things would have been different

the king therefore being much moved went up to the high chamber over
the gate and wept – and as he went he spoke in this manner: My son
Absalom Absalom my son – would to God that I might die for thee
Absalom my son'

that was half
the other – screaming tires blood hair and glass
two tours there

Milan: Do you have the book at home?

Monsieur Manesquier: the one with the poem? probably – I don't know where

Milan: it doesn't matter – actually I prefer that – it's good not to know all a poem²

but I was given my own Yasnaya Polyana

I never saw lips of coral
was written in one draft of *Childhood*
but I've seen them the color of brick—
nor turquoise eyes
yet I've seen them the color of laundry bluing³

to look at a black-and-white picture of an infant and smile
the smile of a legless man in Accra walking on his hands
begging
the deep happy smile of a new father

is [to me] lips of coral

a barter for a shirt woven with vine
smooth worn shells
like glass did they shine
soft deep sand
like snow to my knees
crashing waves
smell of the sea

slamming windows as spirits flee

1 The Holy Bible. Douay-Rheims Version. 2 Samuel 18:33

2 *Man on the Train*. Prod Philippe Carcassonne. Dir Patrice Leconte. Perf Jean Rochefort and Johnny Hallyday. DVD. Pathé Distribution. 2002

3 Troyat Henri. *Tolstoy: A Biography*. New York. Doubleday and Company Inc. 1967: 98-99

ghosts hover shrouded in mist
over forbidden lagoons

Eliot: you-see-um-Bruni?

Me: no

Eliot: akpeteshi – Bruni – more akpeteshi

his English name sounded proper
in his new Ralph Lauren

the social embodiment
of Boyle's Law
(or lack thereof)
has disintegrated the institution of marriage
like paint on old wooden boats
(or perhaps liberated it)
as a plastic bottle of African shine
unshackles the mind
but is such liberation equal
to a ring on a finger
so swollen with age
that a child can't pull it off?
near a green canvas bag
from the second wave—
now full of shells
worn smooth with time – yet ever more beautiful

—Havelange Belgium (because in London you were gone)

where I woke
from under a tarp
by a lake
with the same canvas bag
now full of stolen apples
and a worn copy of *Les Misérables*—
an old fisherman pointed to the bag
and spoke

but I know so little French

—It was in this village that I bought your Valentine

a rundown side-street
an empty house with a bit of wreath on the door
six or eight chairs circling a bed
white sheets and a young girl
(she looked like you)
white hands clasped to her breast
entwined with a rosary
no flowers
for at that time
there were no hothouses in Belgium

seeing a corpse didn't bother me
there was a time when it would
such things have changed—
in the snows of last month I saw Germans lying thick
like fallen logs—
I set my helmet in a corner
dipped my finger in cold water
made the sign of the cross on her forehead
then
kneeling on a chair
recited the rosary
Joe in French
I in English
for I am not so good
that I can pray in French⁴

4 from someone else's letter

KRISTA CREEL

MR. NOBODY

They were all just waiting for him to die. In between slugs of coffee and sealed deals, cheap shots and upsells, like housewives watching cakes char in passive plots against cheating husbands, they waited for him to die.

Because there was no doubt, the man was dying, and not in the philosophical sense as in we are all slowly dying. No, he was 83 and surely dying, having spent sums of Medicare and his personal fortune on injections, lubrications, and radioactive pastes and pills for lymphoma and emphysema and dementia and who knows what else.

Yesterday, he lost his balance on the showroom floor and blamed it on the water cooler.

He was surely dying, but he was resolute in his defiance of it.

And everyone was just waiting.

Harlon was occupied often by the thought, his affect already like that of a funeral director's soft-spoken and light-footed, his words consoling and deliberate. The son of a Southern Baptist preacher, he had absorbed many of his father's mannerisms as if, while he estimated the value of your trade-in, he also considered the potential of your heart and the condition of your soul.

He sold Cadillacs—Burt Orphington's Cadillacs—and it was Burt who was dying, and sales were slipping, and Harlon was out of hair paste.

It was 8:32, and he was two minutes late for leading the daily sales meeting—a basic responsibility as the general sales manager. But he had lost his way in an old hymn and a cream cheese bagel, and he despised the lunchroom where the meetings were held. It smelled of old bananas and burnt sausage and bleach, smells that leached into his suits, along with the perfumes of old women, and his cleaners had failed him again.

Harlon was always two or more minutes late for the sales meetings, and for Burt, this was a problem. Being late meant being unmotivated. Being unmotivated meant being an idler. Idlers were dead weight and pitched out, and Harlon had already been pitched once. So, Harlon set Burt's watch back over a year ago. According to Burt's watch, it was only 8:25, as two salesmen next to him at the table quietly discussed a goose.

"It just fell from the sky," Mark said. "I think it hit a cable or something."

"Where is it now?" Barney asked.

"Out front between the sewage grate and the crepe myrtle."

"Is it alive?"

"Barely."

"My wife loves goose."

"Well, you can't eat it. It's against the law."

“Who would know?”

“You can’t eat the goose, Barney. Pearl’s already called animal control.”

“What a waste. I hit a turkey once in the Escalade and took it home. We ate on it for days.”

“Turkeys aren’t protected; geese are.”

“But she’s mad at me. If I brought a goose home, it’d sure make her happy.”

“No one here has a happy wife, Barney, only happy ex-wives.”

Harlon picked a poppy seed out of his teeth, said a prayer, and walked in. There was a new smell in the lunchroom: urine.

He locked the door.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” he greeted.

The men murmured. Burt checked his watch.

“I said good morning,” he tried again, rising on his toes to meet his inflection. “Frank?”

“I said good morning, Harlon,” Frank, the used car sales manager, grumbled.

“Yes, thank you. You’re up for the positive thought of the day.”

“Oh,” he sighed.

Digging into his pocket, he pulled out a scrap piece of paper and stood, slump shouldered and grim.

“One door closes, two open up,” he read through his teeth. “Helen Keller.”

“Thank you, Frank. I think you used that one last week, and it’s just as inspiring today.”

Harlon glanced around the room at the ties of his peers and felt reassured none were as classy as his with the yellow and blue diamonds. He bought it off a street vendor for five dollars.

There was a woman at the table. He glanced at her breasts.

“Now, the Burt Orphington Creed. Let’s stand, altogether.”

And they all stood, except for Burt, who was confined to a new wheelchair, which everyone knew not to acknowledge.

They recited: “One hundred percent floor activity control. One hundred percent meet and greet. One hundred percent demo. One hundred percent T.O. One hundred percent switch. Feed our minds daily with positive thoughts. All keys in keytrack. All trades to the back fence. Complete Autobase tool. Give perfect, gold-key presentation.”

This creed was copyrighted.

(If you had read Burt Orphington’s self-published autobiography, which hit the floor last Christmas, you would’ve learned that he claimed to have invented the concept of the team meeting, inspired by a round of man-to-man with his twin brother, Butch, a basketball legend in Tishomingo County. To his dismay, a person of no relation, obviously simmering in the same pot as he, published the concept first, prompting Burt to copyright every original thought he had thereafter. It’s rumored he has a large, expandable file of copyrighted thoughts in a safe deposit box at the First American.)

“Mike, name the Five Tenets,” Harlon continued.

“Self-control, abominable spirit—“

“Indomitable,” Harlon corrected.

“Right, abominable spirit, perseverance, courtesy, and integrity.”

This, too, was copyrighted.

“Thank you, take your seats.”

He was grateful, himself, to sit, his feet always aching. Always tramping the lot. For twenty years, he had been tramping the lot. He needed Tina. He had gone too long between pedicures.

“Harlon!” Burt yelled, before he had reached his seat. “What do we got in new cars?”

“Our goal is 15 new and 7 ups, Mr. Orphington. We got ten new and three ups. We’re behind.”

“Goddamit! We’re not going to be able to make it! We gotta sell more cars. My sinus infection is cleared up and I hit 90 golf balls. I can turn my shoulders all the way around now and when I do that you can see my belly button. I point my belly button right towards that ball and I haven’t done that in years. I’m back! I’m gonna get some plastic containers to get all my different medicines in, you know the ones that Raymond and Rainbow get. Ain’t that right, George?”

“I don’t know what kind of medicines you get, Dad,” George answered.

Something rustled Harlon’s pants leg under the table.

“Well I’m tired of people thinking I’m an old man, ‘cause I’m back! Now I’m gonna get with my comptroller and he’s gonna figure out why our expenses are too high. If you make more gross, your commission should go down, right Kyle?”

One end of the table heaved up and from under it sprung Kyle, like a startled gopher—a shoe in one hand and a black eye.

“Right, Granddaddy!” he yipped, as George’s coffee spilled to the other end of the table, landing in Mike’s lap. “Sorry, Uncle George.”

Harlon eyed Kyle’s tie. It was a Joseph A. Banks, a classy tie.

He sighed.

“Kyle, what do you got to say?” Burt asked.

“Oh, I’m just glad to have you back, Granddaddy. That’s all. Glad to have you back. I’m a handsome man. I haven’t done shit this week. I’m just glad to be part owner of this place. Harlon said it all, Granddaddy. He’s the man. I’m tellin’ you, he’s the man. Harlon, tell ‘em what you got.”

“15 new, 7 ups,” he repeated.

“Service!” Burt blurted, the force of which threw his head back. “Brent, what do you got in service?”

Everyone looked around for Brent.

“Brent’s not here, Mr. Orphington,” Harlon answered. “He’s out sick.”

“Sick! I just got outta the ICU. I’ve been taking three or four Exlax a day and I’ve been shittin’ all over myself. That’s sick! I’m a survivor of lymphoma, and I’m a survivor of the worst sinus infection in the world. It was in my skull. My skull! I’m getting back up to 600 calories a day. I’m back!

George, do I take one Annavert or four valiums or four Annaverts and one valium?”

“I don’t know what medicines you take, Dad.”

“Goddamit! I’m getting my keys back and I’m gonna drive my car. I just had a massage. They just bent me over a chair and I feel so much better. Kyle, what do you got for this group?”

“15 new. 7 ups?”

“We’re not gonna make it with that! Goddamit, I’m back! You’re all gonna be fired if you don’t get off your asses and make some deals!”

Burt considered himself quite the motivational speaker. He said so on page 12 of his self-published autobiography.

“When this lawsuit’s over —“

“Dad, we’re not supposed to talk about that.”

“And we don’t have to pay 2.4 million dollars and—“

“Dad, positive thought, Dad. Positive thought!” George, red-faced, interceded.

And Burt looked at his son like a horrified stranger and his face would’ve contorted if his nerves functioned properly, but he was a proud man and frequenter of Cindy’s Skin Clinic. So his body had to make up for the range of motion that his face lacked, and he shook in his wheelchair, cussing and carrying on in all kinds of unidentifiable ways. His voice, like that of a balloon losing air, blatted about the walls of the room until he collapsed into his chair, his eyes shut and mouth wide and fists gripping the armrests in a type of frozen cardiac arrest.

And the room went silent as everyone assumed the same thing—Burt was dead. It finally happened. They had all witnessed it.

Kyle’s mouth dropped and eyes welled. A string of spittle vibrated from his lips. Harlon bowed his head and thanked God. Frank texted his new wife.

George seemed to be the only one who could hear his father’s chest rattle on like his own tenuous sense of self-worth. He knew his father wasn’t dead, just an old fainting goat. Then, he twitched to prove it.

“Hallelujah, Amen!” the only woman in the room hollered.

“I got him! I got him!” Kyle heaved over the desk. “I’ll wheel him to his office. Don’t touch him. I got him. I always got him!”

Harlon put his hand on Kyle’s shoulder.

“No disrespect, Kyle, but you need to take him out the back way,” he said.

“Yeah, least time he woke up kickin’ like a mule deer,” Frank added.

“It’s the medicine,” Kyle huffed.

“Well, it scares the customers,” Gary said. “Get Rainbow to help. If he wakes up kicking, he’ll listen to Rainbow. Meeting’s over.”

* * *

The dealership resembled a futuristic antebellum home—Scarlett O’Hara meets George Jetson—with towering front porch columns reaching

up to a white ceiling curved like the buttress of a UFO. The walls behind were glass and the floors a reflective black granite with silver starbursts. Accommodations included the plush, leather seating of unlocked Cadillacs, roller chairs, and the used luxury of the service area. Two great oaks shaded the strip of lawn between the five-lane avenue and the azaleas, under which now lay a dead goose.

Peach, the finance manager, followed Harlon through the showroom floor and back to his office. His real name was Dave, but everyone called him Peach on account of his orange hair and pink skin.

Harlon thought he looked more like a nectarine. He had a concerning lack of facial hair.

"Did you hear that Burt called Rainbow from his cell phone in the bathroom stall the other day? Yeah, said he needed help."

"That's awful."

"I know. He called Maria first, but she refused to help him. Said she had done it once already."

"Well, she's the janitor, not the nurse."

"She cuts his toenails, so it's not a jump to assume she'd help in the stall. I finally got it on my phone. He has her put superglue in the cracks of his toes. Want to see?"

"No, I don't ever want to see that, Peach. And to think when Burt dies, George and Kyle get it all."

"Kyle's is gonna blow it. What happened to his eye, anyway?"

"No idea."

"8.2 million, and that's just the life insurance policy."

"Well, you know what they say—one door closes, two open up."

* * *

"He won't die," Kyle complained, leaning back in his chair as he inspected his eye in a small, gold compact. "The old man just won't die."

"That's your granddad. You shouldn't talk about him like that," Harlon said, having been called to his office.

"Aw, he's mean. Everybody knows it. Everybody's just waiting for him to die. And now he's crazy, I mean, touched in the head crazy, valium crazy. He should be home, not on the floor everyday. Did you know that he came up here on Thanksgiving and just sat here? He sat in his office from eight until five and then had Rainbow drive him home. We invited him over, but he didn't come. Can you believe that? It's crazy. Sabine made cupcakes—Hello Kitty."

"I'll tell you what's crazy. He told me yesterday that if I don't sell 25 more cars, I'm fired."

"No, Harlon, that's the truth."

"I'm eighth in the nation!"

"No one ever won a race coming in eighth. You come in first, and I'll have my daughter make you cupcakes."

Harlon's girls were 13 and 16. They had never made him cupcakes.

They lived in California with their mother. She had aspirations. He found another man's engagement ring in the trunk of her car.

"You left me alone," she said. That was her reason.

She was Miss Arkansas runner up, 1992. She was Church of Christ. She collected teapots. She had all the qualities of someone true. He bought her a custom-made bra for that pageant. Saved his money as a bellhop. Then, she got aspirations.

He looked at the picture of Kyle's wife on his desk in the sand dunes with their daughter. He couldn't remember his last vacation or why you take one.

"There's only seven days left in the month, Kyle. We're in a recession. I can't make the numbers."

"Can't never did. That's what Granddaddy always says, and look at him now. He's my role model. He wrote a book."

"You just said—"

"Everybody's talking about it. He was on Good Morning Jackson."

Harlon paused. Kyle's mind was like a gnat you couldn't catch—quick and random.

"Did I tell you I bought a cockapoo?" Kyle asked.

"I thought you just bought one of those mini shepherds, the ones with the blue eyes."

"I did, I did, but my wife said he needed a friend, so I got him a friend. I got him a cockapoo."

"McQuinn told me once that he got a white German shepherd just so he could beat it every day."

"That's racist. That's why he's at Mercedes now. Do you have any concealer?"

"Makeup?"

"Yeah, for my eye."

"No, Kyle."

But he could've used it. His eye looked like the membranous innards of a plumcot.

"Listen, I paid \$1200 for this cockapoo. I'm picking it up tonight in my Rubicon."

Rubicon. Harlon had a Rubicon, but it was in California.

"Do you know what Rubicon means?" Harlon asked.

"Sure, it's like a puzzle, like a Rubik's Cube or like, uh, like Jenga."

He was continuously awed by Kyle's disproportionate lack of auto knowledge in relation to his paycheck.

"No. It's a point of no return, like a moment of truth."

"That's it. You're the man. How'd you know?"

"I used to sell Jeeps."

"Oh yeah, yeah, that's you."

"What do you mean?"

"You always know what to say. That's you. You're like the Lone Ranger, or like Mr. Nobody. Yeah, Mr. Nobody."

"That was a long time ago."

“People still remember those commercials. I was too young, but other people remember you. They come and they say, ‘Hey,’ that’s Mr. Nobody.’ And I say, ‘Yes it is! He’s Mr. Nobody.’”

Mr. Nobody wore a black cowboy hat when he was on camera; otherwise, he was without it. He preferred not to mess his hair.

“When other dealers say, ‘Nobody beats our prices,’ I’m the Nobody they’re talking about,” he had said in his commercials.

And they were effective. But that was a different dealership and a different time. Those were good days.

He knew he had a gift in sales when he was six and had conned a cashier out of an extra pack of Big Chew. By 19 he was selling wine coolers to high school kids out of the trunk of his Prelude behind the Big Star. He felt important having access to inaccessible things. He felt accomplished.

The phone rang. Kyle hit the speaker button.

“Kyle!” Burt yelled through the phone.

“Yes, Granddaddy. How you feeling?”

“I’m back, I told you! Where’s Harlon?”

“He’s here with me.”

“Harlon!”

“Yes, Mr. Orphington.”

“Come to my office. Now!”

Harlon’s heart raced and skin flushed. He had been slipping gas in his car under dealership tickets while Burt was hospitalized. And he knew this was it. He was found out.

He walked to his office. His feet sure ached, but he concealed it. The men could sniff out weakness like a new car smell.

He checked his reflection in the nameplate of Burt’s door. He had invested in a tanning bed long ago to conceal the constant worry expressed through his rouged his cheeks. The salesman thought he was just vain. He looked into the next office. It was empty, except there was a new nameplate the door. Sabine Orphington. She was six.

He opened Burt’s door and stepped halfway in. If he’s fired again, as he was four years ago on New Years Eve, he’ll just go to Little Rock, he thought. They liked him in Little Rock.

“Harlon!” Burt yelled.

“Yes, Mr. Orphington.”

“What’s that thing we get down the street?”

He was busted.

“Uh gas?”

“Gas? No, not gas, you idiot! I’m talking about that thing we eat! Down the street!”

But Harlon just stood there, relieved and stupefied.

“The sandwich! What’s the name of the Goddamn sandwich?”

“You mean the chicken wrap with ice cream shake you get every Saturday?”

“That’s it! What’s the name of it?”

“Chicken Caesar?”

“Chicken Caesar! That’s it!”

He pulled the phone receiver off his lap, and yelled into it, “Get me the Chicken Caesar!”

Harlon smoothed his hair. It had always reminded him of burnt, black Christmas tinsel, but he didn’t know what else to do with it.

Burt rubbed a smudge off his desk with his elbow.

“Well what are you standing around for?” he asked. “Go sell some cars!”

* * *

Harlon stood in the middle of the showroom watching a man in a red jumpsuit pick up the goose and put it in a trashbag. He assumed the man was from animal control but couldn’t be certain.

He had read once that when a goose is injured, its mate flies down and stays with it. He scanned the parking lot, but this one was alone. Figures.

“Pete’s back, Mr. Dickson,” Pearl, the receptionist, said.

She was the only person in the dealership who called him by his last name. She was a classy lady.

Harlon approached Pete, who was eating a donut in one hand and holding open his right eye with the other.

“Good morning, Pete.”

“Morning, Mr. Harlon,” he smiled through a powdered-sugar moustache.

“Cold out there today, isn’t it?”

“Yes sir, it sure is. Don’t mind if I have a donut, do you?”

“No, but I told you to ask me before you come in here and eat.”

“Yes sir, but I couldn’t find you. I ain’t harming nobody.”

“I know, Pete, but you got to go. You can get some coffee, but then you got to go. If Burt catches you, he’ll call the police.”

“He’s dying, ain’t he? I can smell death, and it’s on him and he’s doing it fast. He’s competitive. He thinks he’s better than us.”

“He bought that donut.”

“And he’d take it away, a fifty-cent breakfast from a homeless man. Don’t these folks know they can’t store up no treasures here on earth?”

“No, Pete, I don’t believe they do.”

Barney was approaching fast. Harlon could tell he had a deal to work from the smirk on his face and his hop-step, which he called his success march. He was Harlon’s least favorite salesman—a former “treeologist.” And he had worked in the oil fields. And he had been a carpenter, a real hammer slinger, apparently, but now his neck didn’t move—his vertebrae fused—and he was a hydrocodone addict and compulsive liar.

He was the highest grossing earner they had.

“Nice tie, Harlon,” he said. “Hi, Pete.”

“Hi, Mr. Barney.”

“Say, Pete, you could get off the streets you know. You could work

here. Just fix that eye. Droops when you let it go, doesn't it?"

Pete nodded and sucked on his donut as if some type of invisible nectar filling lay within the hole.

"You could shower up at Harlon's house. He's got no one there. Big house too. He makes a lot of money. Don't let him fool you. We had a one-fingered salesman once who broke records. Hell, I can't move my neck."

"I'm happy where I'm at, Mr. Barney."

"And where is that, exactly?"

"Exactly," he answered.

Pete clearly distrusted Barney and with good reason. He had once taken the last cup of coffee, leaving Pete no option but to steal the grains and drain them through his sock.

"You got a deal, Barney?" Harlon asked.

"Yeah, a good one. He's retired. Rich old man wants to buy his sister a CSV, gold ice, fully loaded. She lives in Florida. She doesn't want it, but he's gonna buy it. Hey, is that man taking the goose?"

He jumped like a rusty spring, tossed Harlon his sales folder, and ran outside, while his customer sat staring at the blank wall in his office, his foot tapping to the Flock of Seagulls.

"Ok, go on and get, now, Pete. I've got work to do," Harlan nudged.

Pete shrugged and got his cup of coffee and an extra donut. Needing both hands, his right eye dropped shut.

"We're all dying, you know that, don't you Mr. Harlon?" he said.

"Yeah, I know."

"Some are just better at it than others."

The front doors slid open automatically for Pete as he took his leave. A blast of cold air swept the donut from his hand, but he picked it up, stuffed it in his mouth, and disappeared behind a car.

Harlon walked back to his office and sat down. His feet ached. He turned on the fan under his desk and opened the folder. No trade in. That was good. He didn't have to work with Frank. He looked at the numbers and ran the incentives through his head—noted competitor pricing. He grabbed his pen.

Nobody beats our prices, he said to himself, nobody.

KYLE ELLINGSON

GENDERS & MOTIFS

They were a male hodgepodge of A- and B-students with no exemplary academic habits and no firmly shared traits beyond a receptivity to each other's humor, some of which was observational and the best of which was hypothetical or involved a small cast of invented characters.

The group never mistook itself for a gang or fantasized about its potential to pursue gang-specific lifestyles such as running around-the-clock intimidation campaigns against other male friend groups who were generally vitalized by the notion of ganghood and who, by their posture and style of eye contact with the public, tirelessly advertised their desire to locate other teenage gangs against which to raise a climactic series of intimidation campaigns.

They were a group of 11 friends, eloquent but sleepy, who, like milk cows, lounged, ate, and stood around more comfortably together than alone. This was indeed not a gang, not a chronically unrelaxed group that required every passing scene of school and afterschool life to feature the victimization of somebody's ego. If one of the 11 ever did turn surly and individual and jeopardize another's ego with a heckling put-down or derogatory frown, the collective peace imploded, and for several moments the group felt irreversibly scattered out from the heart of itself, until the tolerance and passivity of herd life prevailed and the 11 backtracked wordlessly toward their last memorable mood of lite hilarity.

The demographics of the group happened to mirror those of its graduating class: four white, seven Hispanic. If the group were to double in size, they could expect, statistically, to pick up a black or Asian friend, since black and Asian students represented just over 4% of the student body. "But," one of the friends interjected upon his own rambling, "what are the chances of there being a single, lone black or Asian kid floating around here groupless or unsatisfied with the group he's in, but who would only feel compelled to join our group if there were exactly ten more of us? And compelled by what? The subliminal influence of statistical ratios?"

It was a day of small, detailed complaints.

"Maybe the ten more will be women," another suggested, herein somewhat inconsiderately and unconstructively calling to mind a collective hardship.

Three of the Hispanics were 1st generation Mexican immigrants and spoke English according to much better grammar than was present in the Spanish spoken by their families at home. The other four hispanics were 2nd or 3rd generation and did not speak Spanish well or with interest. They spoke English with crisper accents and less obstructed tongues than the 1st generationers but were, like the four whites, mostly ignorant to the grammar

at work in their English. The four whites, enrolling in a language course each semester of high school, had achieved a stuttered fluency in Spanish and each sheepishly awaited the day when any of the three 1st-generation friends invited them to speak—though the three, unspokenly, were already set on never doing this, as if the approach of the Spanish language toward an English conversation were the approach of an unforgettably private photo or video clip. Whenever a white friend did, with a hopeful and alienating smile, commit to asking a native speaker, *Que paso? Tienes planes para este fin de semana?*, he was immediately placed under such an impatient and weirdly unforgiving critique of grammar and diction that he immediately lost sight of what kind of fun he was trying to have.

Leaving childhoods of arid, cashless summers in San Pedro Sula, Senaloa, and Veracruz, the three 1st-generationers had carried to the northern U.S. a certain relationship to water they had a tough time phasing out. Verdant, irrigated American lawns—no parched and thatchy spots or bald dusty expanses of ant territory—struck the three as being the lawns of aggressively vain and rich people, so that they were, when startled by the popping up of a dozen sprinkler heads from a square of turf, frustratingly by a reminder of the modesty and poverty of their own situations (lawnless apartment-living, doubling up on toilet flushes, mass transit). But it hadn't taken them many years to dismiss their frustration as uninformed and reductive, after befriending two or three American families whose sprinkler systems were only made feasible by the low cost and local surplus of water, or by the addition of small monthly fees to the household debt.

Two of the white friends lived on the north suburban fringe of the school district, each at an opposite end of a newly developed network of suburban cul-de-sacs, the acreage of which had been bought and landscaped as a single parcel by a developer, who had planned and built all 4 dozen homes as a single job, so that the age of all the sapling trees, home siding, concrete stoops, front porch shrubbery, road and walkpath asphalt, and short and long grasses for that mile and a half was, to trippy effect, identical. The two friends, bussed home from out of the clustered signage and mismatched architecture of the downtown arts district in which the historic school was nooked, perceived the cul-de-sacs as the simplified plasticscape of a human zoo exhibit— whose residents felt at all hours either unparalleled rest or restlessness, a tourist's fondness for effortless peace or an inmate's urge to energetically disturb it. The runoff from four-dozen identical backyard sprinkler layouts all drained into one ornately weedy artificial creek which bisected the neighborhood lengthwise and was encircled by a sealcoated walk path painted with white arrows urging walkers and joggers in a clockwise loop that bridged the creek to the extreme north and south. Few pedestrians in daylight, the two friends observed, were ever seen disobeying the direction of the arrows, even when the walking circuit was empty. This was on account, the two decided, of the elaborately reflective panoramic bay windows overlooking the path from the backsides of all four dozen homes, windows in which it was impossible for a jogger or walker to discern whether anyone stood gazing down, but

from which there seemed anyway to radiate neighborly disapproval of any petty revolt against the direction of the white painted arrows, or, as well, of incompletely bagging up your dog's poop.

One day at school the members of a student gang were dismissed from a week of curriculum after a foiled initiation routine came very near to looking like an interrupted group rape. All that week, other gang-like or aggression-type male cliques in the school were generally more noticed and pondered as a social phenomenon.

"Look how everyone touches that one kid," one of the 11 friends said, pointing to a gang lounging at a table an inaudible distance across the cafeteria.

"Everyone's touching him?"

"Well, everyone he knows."

The evidently touchable kid was small, bigheaded, and skeletal in a newborn bird way, sheeted in a large red tank top and dealing a new hand of cards around the gang table every minute or two. Satellite members or acquaintances of the gang circulated in from surrounding tables to pause over the card game and check the score: each patted, hugged, noogied, rubbed, or otherwise petted the dealer. In the half-hour span of the lunch period, the friends counted almost two dozen people fondly or absentmindedly laying hands on the dealer's head, like it was a baptismal font at the window of the card game. Even when untouched, the dealer's little body twitched and bobbed almost unceasingly in humorous or thoughtless giggles, as if invisibly tickled or pinched in the belly and nipples—and so his precise reaction to his crew's various touchings was, if there at all, hard for any of the 11 friends to catalogue from across the cafeteria. Though girls had mingled themselves among the group, they performed a dryly ornamental function, and the dealer's touchers (or *handlers*, as one of the 11 friends called them) were all male.

Gang rape was on the 11 friends' theoretical palette all week.

"So, with each other standing around like that, how does anyone become erect? Or do they ask each other to look away? Or would they just know to? Do they fear eye contact with each other, or is eye contact like part of the point?" Questions that would have been fleeting rhetorical jabs at the animalism of angrier, more decisive guys became, that week, vivid and sincerely anthropological.

One friend, perceiving an arrangement of themes in the living picture of the gang, had composed a lecture in his head:

"My dad says there are two main types of dude. One kind get fundamentally jittery and dissatisfied when they're barely out of middle school, get feeling very, like, *immediate* about everything and try to surround themselves very immediately with money, respect, and women. But the money they find is typically shady money, the respect is typically fear-based and animosity-backed, and the women are typically hedonistic, grudge-holding, incurious egomaniacs.

"The other kind of guy waits, holds himself very emotionally still, resisting every last, like, piratical impulse to seize some shady money, some

brutal respect, or an excitable woman. He prolongs his boyhood, remaining moneyless, voiceless, womanless, cop-worshipping, until sometime in his twenties—at which point, because he’s got a record of doing nothing shady or illegal and has proven his self-restraint by saving his money, taking on loans, and reacting nonviolently to passing violent circumstances, he’s eligible to earn a clean income, attract a calm woman, look unparanoiacally at cops, and secure the kind regards of levelheaded people or people who seriously plan later in life to become levelheaded.

“My dad says this cleanliness and non-shadiness of life is the reward you get for suffering the belittlement and boredom of being a moneyless, timid, womanless, very legal guy in high school.”

“Your dad’s the fucking dude—saying all that.”

The friend affirmatively shrugged. Really he had lately begun attributing his most optimistic speeches to his father, an uncle, or a grandfather, who, being old, sounded credible.

DAN ENCARNACION

THRENODY

... but will not, oh, will not, not now, not
ever, but will not ever tell me who I am.
- James Agee, A Death in the Family

beyond the billboards aboard the buildings slinks shrinking the sun through
sundered haze— below, cowed coiled motors drone dithering desire to bolt
beneath the cardiating metronomes of slothic pile drivers that beat my need
to turn to phrase—I am

the city and the city is me—it feeds my flight; saturating lungs—all of our lungs
steep swelling under tongues of concrete urgency and eyes—all blooming
eyes, all—know me— leers seeded with, tiered by expellant expectancy

statued statues crack within the mass of extinguished passengers pressing out

those vertebral knaves spining those exhaustive carbuncled commuting
catholic leviathan transmigratory sardine soul liners that surface and sloosh
through kaleidoscopically-crowned waves to burrow down dense dark
dampened horse-collaring clefts from this roost where I spy the bronzing fall—
you all

so small—where you coo and cluck beneath my knees, where I broadcast
white your slung stale staves of life— unnoted, unheard; the sky is mute—
mine to slice, mine to taste with singular beak, down singular throat to
congest a crop that will brace my clutch

DEAN JOLLAY

THE SILENT WOMAN CAFÉ

Sitting in a booth near the door of the Silent Woman Café, the only spot remaining when they'd arrived, Al and Robert caught blasts of chilly air as customers came and went. Snow dragged in from shoes and boots melted on the tile floor. Al let his navy bean soup cool while he thumbed through a coffee table book, *Golf Links of Ireland*, a Christmas present from wife Rose.

"We've been telling people we're going to Ireland for so long it's embarrassing," Al said. "We talk and talk."

"We have lives," Robert said. "Responsibilities." His friend Al had always been a dreamer. For years Al fantasized about restoring an old trawler and sailing it around the world. The man lived in Ohio, a hundred miles inland from Lake Erie, practically landlocked. What did he know about seamanship?

Al returned to pages filled with ocean-side golf links beside blue, white-capped waters. Mounded fairways dotted with pot bunkers zigzagged along rocky coastlines. Thickets of gorse bloomed. Skies were cloudless. No, it never rained in Ireland. Not on these links. Courses had names like Ballybunion, Lahinch, and Tralee. For years Al and Robert had planned their trip. Nothing held them back. Nothing except a vague sense that the actual journey might disappoint.

Al lifted his head and sighed. "Golf is life, Bobby."

Al and Robert had played many rounds together. They belonged to different country clubs, but teamed up in each other's member/guest tournaments—Robert's the third weekend in June, Al's always the second weekend after the Fourth of July. Double-digit handicappers, they were grouped in the last flights with the other less talented players. In almost three decades as teammates, they'd never won. Twice they'd led until their final match, only to choke playing the last few holes. Whenever they reminisced about these close calls, lamenting this or that bad shot, Robert would deliver the final words: "We folded like a cheap suit, my brother."

Steam rose from Al's bean soup. He handed the picture book across the table to his friend, then crumbled a handful of crackers into the bowl. "Have a look. I've stuck Post-it Notes on the courses we should play." He brushed the flakes off his hands and lifted his spoon.

To Robert, it seemed there were more yellow sticky notes than pages in the book. "That's a lot of golf. With my bad back and bursitis? We have to walk, right? No golf carts over there?"

"Your back won't hurt when you're dead," Al said.

In pressed chinos, a starched, plum-colored shirt, and polished tasseled loafers, Robert reminded Al of his prissy high school geometry teacher, a man who, when not in class, could be found in the lavatory

washing his hands. Robert, too, had a thing about hygiene. Like a tour pro, he toweled his golf grip before each shot and scrubbed the clubface afterward, removing every spec of dirt from the grooves.

"Look at these ruins," Robert said. He flashed Al a photo of a castle crumbling on its promontory, stones tumbling down a cliff into the ocean below. "Remember, I need my own shower and toilet. I'm not sharing a bathroom with six other people."

"You act like we're going to a third-world country," Al said.

"They don't have the same conveniences."

"How would you know?" Al said. "You've never been to Ireland. If you don't want to go, just say so."

"No, no, I'm in. But don't book us into some sleazebag hotel because it's cheap."

"You make the arrangements then." Al set down his spoon and folded his arms. "Knock yourself out." He was the one who organized their adventures, and he was tired of it. Tired of begging his friend to go.

Robert extended his palms. "I'm just saying."

"Do the work—you can call the shots," Al said. "Otherwise..." Al glanced about the room. Every table was filled, every seat at the counter, taken. "Gertie ruined this place when she remodeled. It's too perfect." Gertie, the owner, had recently given the Silent Woman a facelift—fresh wallpaper, new booths, tables, chairs, hip modern lighting, and stainless steel everywhere. Robert and Al had been coming here for twenty-nine years, since January 26, 1983 (the restaurant had been called "Gertie's" then), seven days after Robert's youngest son had been born, the day Al hired Robert to do the legal work for Al's purchase of the local Ford dealership.

"Yup, she messed it up," Al said. He shoved his empty soup bowl aside, picked up his BLT on wheat, and gave it an admiring look. "Like that stupid glass pyramid in front of the Louvre. People should respect tradition—realize when to leave well enough alone."

Robert poked at his cobb salad. "Actually, I like it. Progress, you know?"

"Which? Gertie's or the Louvre?"

"Both."

In Al's opinion, Gertie's restaurant was as important to the town of Hailey as the Louvre was to Paris. More than just a restaurant, the Silent Woman Café sat atop a hill overlooking the Ashton River, a muddy leftover from the canal era. Its waters ribboned through Hailey from north to south, dividing it roughly in half. Both Robert's law firm and Al's car dealership were located on Gertie's side of the levy, the good side, the side that still bustled with commerce. Downtown Hailey, practically dead and buried, lay across the viaduct.

Robert's finger stabbed at the cover of *Golf Links of Ireland*.

"Don't want to leave from New York," he said.

Al shrugged. He was pretty sure Robert had never flown out of Kennedy, but he didn't want to give his buddy another excuse not to go. "Then we'll leave from Philly or Baltimore."

"Find us a good connection," Robert said. "No point sitting for

hours, waiting for the next flight.”

“We could take the Concorde, except it’s been retired,” Al said. “Or Scotty could beam us to Ireland.” For a guy who seldom left Ohio, Robert had a lot of opinions about travel.

“Pretend I’m one of your customers,” Robert said. “What is it you always say in your commercials?”

“We treat you like family.”

Al’s TV spots were a bit of a joke around town. His brown hair had an odd, unnatural, Just for Men hue. Polo shirts with the dealership logo stretched tightly over his potbelly. His belt rode well below his waist. He punctuated his sales pitches with awkward stabbing gestures like karate chops. Robert often told Al to hire a professional spokesperson, but Al refused to spend the money.

“Suggestions, that’s all,” Robert said. “No need to get all defensive, huh? At our ages, we should make this as easy as possible.” Something was bothering Al, something beyond his normal cantankerousness.

“Anything else?” Al said. “Anything at all?”

“Let me think.” Robert had barely touched his salad. He drained his coffee, wiped his mouth, and refolded the napkin on his lap.

Flo swooped by and refilled Robert’s cup. From the back of her order pad, she read off the list of Gertie’s home-baked pies, the main reason they came here. In the new millennium, more than a decade after 9/11, making a decent piecrust was a dying art. Like typewriter repairmen and switchboard operators, milkmen and shade tree car mechanics, pie bakers—good ones who could roll out a thin, buttery crust—were an endangered lot. No banana cream today, so Robert ordered the five-berry, Gertie’s specialty. Al chose the lemon meringue.

“What’s up?” Robert asked. “Tell me.”

Al pulled and twisted the brushed chrome links of his watchband. “I’m leaving Rose. I love her, I do. But I can’t stand her going off on me any longer. Every minute spent wondering when her next tirade will be. So I’ve decided. And I’m selling the dealership too. My accountant says the time is right. The economy has recovered. Cars are hot again. Interest rates low. My dealership will fetch a good price.”

Robert folded his arms and leaned back. He’d heard this speech before, but never the determination in Al’s voice. Al had been unhappy in his marriage for years, but who was completely satisfied? Marriage was all about compromises, picking your battles. “The hell, you say. You’ll be writing a big, fat check. You know that, right?”

“Giving Rose half my money doesn’t bother me, not really. Compared with the alternative—growing old together. Living with me...well, maybe she’s earned it. I’m selling the business in May. My attorney says I should wait a few months after the sale to let the dust settle. That makes it November or December. Of course, the holidays are no good. The kids would hate me if I filed then. So we’re into next January or February at the earliest.”

“Slow down,” Robert said. “You’re depressed. It’ll pass. At sixteen I was as unhappy as you. Every week an eternity. I hated my life—parents,

school, not making varsity, not getting laid. Hell, I didn't have a girlfriend until college. Lonely...I was lonely, wishing I were eighteen, out of the house, far away at college. I survived. You will too."

Al stared across the table. "Always have to one-up me, don't you?" For a change, for one frigging damn second, he needed Robert to listen.

"So when was the last time you and Rose made love?"

"Harry Truman was president," Al said.

"No, I'm serious." Robert caught Flo's eye and motioned for another refill. "The last time for me was...let's see...in the summer, our trip to Yellowstone and the Tetons. First night in the lodge, I believe. Mary was gaga over the scenery, had a couple glasses of wine with dinner, which she never does."

"Can't remember," Al said wearily. "Anyway, sex isn't in the equation. Not for me. I wake up three or four times a night to piss. Don't even get a good night's sleep."

"Ravages of coffee, vodka, and time." Robert nodded his head wisely, thinking he'd just delivered the definitive pronouncement on Al's urological misfortune.

"I feel like an old jalopy," Al said. "All my parts falling off. My doctors run down the road after me picking them up. The reattachment—that's the problem."

Flo came by with their pie and dropped their bills on the table. Al liked that Gertie's establishment was cash-only. Cash was king. Five people stood by the register waiting for her to ring them up. With admiration, Al watched the proprietress. She was efficient, adding their checks on her calculator, pointing at the totals she wrote on each chit, making change with solemn efficiency, as if each transaction was special. Gertie couldn't speak. Cancer had claimed her vocal chords twenty years ago. She'd refused to learn to talk through a hole in her throat. After recovering, she'd renamed her restaurant the Silent Woman Café. Al supposed the rechristening was a fuck you to the disease. The restaurant's sign featured the frontal silhouette of a woman with a body and a head, but no neck, a crude image Gertie herself had painted.

Al's fork caressed the flaky crust. "I've been doing some math, figuring out how much longer I have on the planet. My mother died at seventy-four, my father at seventy-eight, but both were smokers. It averages out to seventy-six. I added five years because I've never smoked. So with luck, I'm good for eighty-one, give or take."

"That's it?"

"You have to be realistic."

The winter sun had shifted so it was now in Robert's face. He covered his eyes and slid down the bench seat, taking refuge in the shaded corner.

"Fifteen more years...max," Al repeated, "that's what I've got left. I deserve to enjoy that time. Right? A year from now when I file, I'll be down to fourteen years. Fourteen, Bobby."

Robert lifted his cup. "Deserve? Depends who you ask. Some

might say marriage vows are more important than your happiness. Not me, of course.”

“Working sixty hours a week, trying to keep peace on the home front...it’s worn me out.”

“Even an extended warranty expires,” Robert said. “Caveat emptor.”

“Hate that lawyer mumbo jumbo,” Al said. “...So what about Ireland next year in late spring? Does it work for you?”

“We’ve got our Alaska cruise next August,” Robert said. “Our niece gets married in September. Mary’s birthday is in November. This is our year to spend Christmas with Rachel and Bill and the kids out in LA. Yeah, May works for me. Let’s do it.” He handed the book back.

Al clutched the tome to his chest. “The euro and pound are in the toilet. With any luck, by the time we head over there, our trip will be a bargain.”

“You’ll need one.”

“I counted them up. There are forty golf courses we have to play.” He wrote the number on the placemat and circled it.

“Jesus, that’s a helluva trip,” Robert said. “I’m not sure I can be away that long.”

“Time is short, Bobby. I’ve been trying to tell you. Keep it up and we’ll never get there.”

* * *

“I’ve never smoked,” Al said. “That’s the thing.” He and Robert sat at the counter of the Silent Woman Café having breakfast. Eight months had passed. It was October. Fall was Al’s favorite time of year. A warmer than normal autumn had kept the leaves on the trees from turning early. Now they were in high color—deep reds, yellows, and oranges. Summer and early fall had been dry. The river ran low between its banks, exposing rocks, tree limbs, discarded tires, and mud-crusting debris.

Al would miss autumn afternoons on the golf course with Robert, a season when you could invoke the “leaf rule” if you lost a golf ball on the fairway. Put a new ball into play without penalty, to hell with the United States Golf Association and their stuffy regulations. He liked holding his face to the sun, feeling its warmth on his skin, even as a cool breeze rustled the trees. He coughed and glanced left and right, wondering if this would be their last meal together.

“Secondhand smoke,” Robert said. “What difference does it make anyway?” Robert studied his friend. Except for the dark circles around his eyes, his shortness of breath, the occasional cough, and the ashen pallor of his skin, Al seemed none the worse for his late-stage lung cancer.

“No difference,” Al said. “But it really pisses me off.”

Robert shook his head. “Sorry about our trip to Ireland.”

“I’m still planning to go. My surgery is Thursday. Radiation after that. Chemo for six weeks. A few weeks to get my strength back. I’m

thinking mid-June—a month or two after we'd planned to go. Before the tourists show up in force."

"What does Rose think?" Robert said. He didn't know much about the disease, but he knew enough not to step on Al's self-delusion.

"It was her idea in the first place. 'If you're well enough,' she said, 'why mope around the house?' And my employees sure as hell don't want me hanging around the dealership."

Rose. For all the years they'd been friends, Robert had seldom been inside Al's home. By an unspoken compact, they'd agreed Robert should be spared Rose's wrath. He knew all too well she was a total pain in the ass, a relentlessly angry woman. But when Al had gotten sick, she'd risen to the occasion—searching the Web for the best specialists in the country, scheduling doctor visits, taking him to New York and Rochester for second and third opinions. She'd started a website called Never Ever Smoked where patients like Al could exchange information. And it was Rose who had found Al's doctors at MD Anderson. Al and Rose were flying to Houston on Wednesday for his surgery and follow-up treatment. She'd rented a condominium close to the hospital where they'd stay until he completed his therapy.

"We're still going to Ireland together, right?" Robert said.

"If you really want to go," Al said. "I've never been certain you do."

In her pink and gray uniform, pepper-gray hair in a net, Gertie held up a glass coffeepot and pointed.

Al nodded and mouthed, Just a half cup. Gertie had guts. Looking at her, he wondered if he'd get by half as well as she on whatever the doctors let him keep of his lungs and other body parts.

Gertie poured the coffee with a steady grip. She smiled and patted his hand. Her fingers were rough but gentle. He tried to read her lips. "You'll be okay," he thought she said. His bad news had apparently made the rounds. He was a regular here, known in town on account of the dealership and his commercials. By e-mail, text, or tweet, his troubles had made it to a woman who couldn't speak.

Al laid his hand on hers and mouthed, "Thank you."

Robert considered how Al's fifteen-year projection of his mortality had been blown all to hell. Last winter, a decade and a half had seemed like a conservative guess. So much had changed since then. First, Al had decided he couldn't part with the dealership—his life's work for God's sake, his identity. The money he'd get selling out wasn't that important, he'd told Robert. Not compared with the satisfaction of going to work every day. Then came Al's cancer diagnosis—stage four. His planned divorce had disappeared in the hurly-burly of doctor appointments and tests. Truthfully, how much time could Al have left? A year at most? And at least half of that year spent in Houston. Robert wished Al had chosen treatment locally. The doctors here were as good as anywhere else.

He despaired of losing Al. Men of a certain age had trouble making new friends. With Al gone, Robert would be alone, and he didn't do alone very well. Of course there was Mary, but she had her own life lunches,

shopping, volunteer work, the grandchildren. When Mary left town to visit the kids, Robert wandered the house talking to himself. Often he woke up at four in the morning and never got back to sleep. And what if something happened to Mary? He'd read that men who lived by themselves were eleven times more likely to die prematurely. Dying scared the shit out of him.

"If I can get away, I'll come to visit you," Robert said.

"It's only a three-hour flight. Half the distance to Ireland. After my first round of radiation and chemo might be best. Rose can pick you up at the airport." His friend's timidity made Al angry. Robert was becoming an old fart. And he'd been getting worse. Now he was afraid to drive at night, though his eyesight was plenty good enough.

The thought of fifty minutes in a car alone with Rose made Robert cringe. "I can take a cab."

"Suit yourself. We have a spare bedroom at the condo."

"Will I have my own bathroom?"

"Oh, for Christ's sake!"

"I was making a joke."

Gertie brought a white cardboard box, tied with a string, and set it on the counter next to Al. She gave him a thumbs-up.

"What's this?" Al asked.

"A strawberry rhubarb pie for the road. For Houston," Robert said. "They don't have pies like Gertie's down in Texas."

Arm in arm, they walked to the door. Outside, gray clouds had made their way up the river valley. The chilly air smelled of football, apple cider, and homemade donuts. State was having an undefeated football season. The Hailey Comets had beaten their high school football rivals in the 100th playing of the big game. All was well in the world, or would have been, were it not for Al's cancer.

"Let's walk around the block," Al said when they were almost to their cars. While Robert waited, Al left the pie on the front seat of his Explorer and removed Golf Links of Ireland. "Keep this until I come back." Al handed the book to Robert. "Make a few calls, get us some tee times. Book the hotels. No reason I should have to do all the work."

Robert chewed his lip and nodded. "I'm on it." He put the book in his Lincoln Navigator. Then he remembered. Al's birthday was two weeks away, October 31, Halloween. "What do you want for your birthday?"

They started down the sidewalk, cracked and heaved by freeze and thaw and the roots of tall oaks lining the street. "I grew up three blocks from here," Al said. Turning the corner, they passed modest brick homes, built to last by sons and daughters of immigrants who, like Al's father, had worked in the foundry. Lots were small, grass well-tended, shrubbery trimmed and mulched. Jack-o'-lanterns sat on porches and stoops. Cardboard skeletons and witches hung on front doors.

"So?" Robert repeated. "Your birthday."

"A new putter to take on our trip?" Al said. "Or a set of those noise-reducing headphones for on the plane?"

They were halfway around the block when Al stopped and grabbed

Robert's shoulders. He turned his friend toward him, but Robert dropped his chin and looked away. Robert's arms hung limply at his sides. The words Al wanted to speak wouldn't come. Instead he said, "In January, we'll have known each other for thirty years. Almost half our lifetimes. Imagine."

Robert couldn't meet Al's gaze. Didn't know where to put his hands. When he looked up, Al's eyes were moist.

Al thumbed his tears and hugged Robert. Their gray stubbled cheeks brushed. Al pounded Robert's back with his fist.

"I'm looking forward to our golf trip," Al said as they separated. "Promise me you'll make the arrangements."

"I said I'd handle it."

"You know how you are. Don't procrastinate."

They finished their walk and lingered in the parking lot. Al couldn't summon the will to pull the Explorer's door handle. He looked up at Gertie's sign. The silent woman's feet were spread apart, fists set firmly on her hips. He'd never noticed those fists before.

Arms folded, Robert leaned back against the Navigator's front fender. "Actually, you don't look sick. Lost some weight maybe, but that's long overdue. Sure you're not making up this cancer thing? For the attention?"

Al's head snapped back. He wasn't in the mood for Robert's humor. "Asshole."

Robert smiled. "You've gone to a hell of a lot of trouble, I'll give you that. I almost fell for it."

Al shook his head. "When you show up in Houston, if you do, you'd damn well better have our Ireland itinerary all typed up and ready to go."

"Admit it." Robert's voice quavered. "You're really going to that fancy golf academy down in Houston. The new one that got written up in this month's Golf Digest. It's not your lungs. Your golf swing is getting fixed. If you'd just listened to my advice, you could've saved all that money."

Al pointed at the white pastry box on his passenger seat. "And while you're at it, make yourself useful. Bring me another one of these."

Robert stood and took an imaginary golf swing. Then another. "You stand too far away from the ball. Simple as that. Any pro will tell you I'm right. No need for a trip to Houston."

"So you say," Al said. He slipped into the SUV and started the engine. He paused before he shoved the gearshift into drive. His foot seemed stuck on the brake pedal. Enough. He had to leave, stop by the dealership to check on things one last time. Glancing sideways, he caught Robert taking a mighty swing. As if attempting to drive a ball in Al's direction, Robert nearly fell down. Al was amazed. Bobby never let it loose like that. Not on a real golf course. "Tempo," Robert had told Al time and again. "Stay within yourself." What had gotten into him? Shaking his head, Al took a deep breath. His lungs fought for air.

Nearby, Robert righted himself, jogged to the door of the Silent Woman, and disappeared inside. Al nudged his SUV out onto the street,

but coughed so hard he nearly lost his grip on the steering wheel. A black, oncoming Mercedes sounded its horn and skidded to a stop a few feet from the Explorer. Belatedly, Al hit the brakes and threw the Explorer into reverse, backing the car to the safety of Gert's parking lot entrance. As he passed by, Mercedes man shook his head and fist. Sweat trickled from Al's armpit. Dropping his forehead onto the steering wheel, he waited until his spasm let up. Thank God Bobby didn't see this, Al told himself. If he had, Al would never have heard the end of it. Not in Houston, not in Ireland, not ever.

CHRISTOPHER KUHL

TROY, CITY OF SORROW

I

This is the outlander:
Clap-jawed whipsong in the fatted light,
The barren clatter of teeth sown in the barren earth.
This is the outlander's voice:
Headbone smoking in the sweated night.

This is the outlander shrilling his song:
Whoreson of the jackstraw earth,
Pie-faced sorrow of this aged land,
This bloody land reeling in the pike-strewn night.
This is the outlander upright among dead men.

II

Where were the people?
Who gathered at the sea's edge, eyeless in the eyeless night?
Who sang at the sea's edge timbered in the death-drawn light?

The women gathered at the sea's dark edge.
There was no sound. No sound at all.

III

This is what I remember:

The heart flayed footing the horn-dried skin,
Shadows weaned and bled by fire—

And reason crammed in the madding bed,
Rage by rage in rage consumed. The savaging
Of mother's flesh insatiate in the bolted night:
The hunter's dream, cracked bed of rue.

IV

Ours was once a larkswept land:
Ours the angled stones gleaming in the lightstruck waters;
Our sons rose long and golden-limbed,
Glistening lords of the gold-rimmed earth.

This is my dream for these clappered nights:
These nights of no music, no sleep.

V

Speak to your children; our tongues are stilled.

“Lost shall be the name on the land,
all gone, perished. Troy, city of sorrow,
is there no longer.”

The outlanders came,
Spears shining in the hooded night,
While we slept.

In the city,
The outlanders spilled our seed;
The rocks cried out
And our sons went slipping down into darkness.

Now,

We sing our sorrow:
The shining water, the bloodied earth—

The outlanders watching in the flickering light.

AMY LERMAN

TIME OUT

No one forgets the crunch, the gooeyness left on the Spanish tile or in the air, the collision when nightly stroll meets a flip flop's bottom, deconstructed circle, smeared, snail's entrails scooped into a paper towel. This is a hazard living humid, where children's fingers, like rockets shedding fiery parts, capture lizard tails that keep moving long after torsos scurry, and roaches cuddle in dishwasher dispensers until the heating element whirls, and detergent intoxicates. No matter how many gnats seep through the screening holes or refilled water dishes line the yard, there is no denying this legacy, its evolutionary seeping into protoplasm, inertia as heavy as days soaked in skunk and overripe citrus, souring stomachs, the air, any chance to move away.

SHAUN MCMICHAEL

LONG BEACH

When asked about my father, I think of Long Beach. I see him walking quickly with those big strides across the vacant parking lot of the inn we stayed at that February. We'd traveled there for our mid-winter break, but also so our father could attend a nearby conference on the state of the snowy plover. There, he would be joining a panel of experts suggesting strategies to intervene in the plover's decline. Some vacation, our mother sighed to herself, but we heard. We'd been thinking that too.

The drive from Seattle had been long and I remember being eager to get out of the car. Frost had already coated the black top of the parking lot but this didn't stop my old man from powering ahead over the thin sheet of ice. My older sister, Amber, and I followed. We watched our father open the entry doors and step into the lobby with his arms held out as if he were being received by a room full of admirers.

"We're here," he proclaimed to the two desk girls. His voice—bright and clean—had the effect of a high beam light. The girls stalled and stared at him with their marble eyes and mouths slightly ajar, one still holding a murmuring phone at her lips.

"Where's the champagne?" he asked them.

The girls smiled thinly back. They must have noticed my father's face alight beneath his felt, forest-green hiking fedora, his espresso brown eyes oscillating absurdly, mouth half open and smiling.

Amber and I edged far enough into the lobby to be out of the cold but far enough away from him to not be associated. We distracted ourselves with some sherbet colored bikes leaning on the reception room floor.

I wondered what champagne tasted like, wondering how it was different than Martinelli's and why adults got to carry this special knowledge of everything. I always felt a little helpless and brushed to the side by my father's humor. Like a baby in a life jacket lost in the wake of a big touring boat.

My father approached the welcome desk and leaned his elbows on its roughhewn, driftwood plank. He rapped his fingers once in sequence and eyed one of the girls—the prettiest one—and said, "Reservation under Birchman."

He told them briefly about how excited he was about birding season. And confessed his hope to see some snowy plovers—if there were any left.

I watched blankly as he interacted with the seventeen-year-old girls, who, to me at thirteen, resembled enormous, hazel-eyed swans. They tilted their necks languidly upon reference to the plover but my father kept talking about it. Had they seen any? Those beautiful, delicate birds?

I got fidgety suddenly and wondered how mom was doing. I looked to Amber. But she'd relocated herself to the inn's collection of free movies and seemed content murmuring about their poor selection.

"Two copies of *Weekend at Bernie's*?"

A blonde haired guy wearing a polo walked out from the back. He told my father the room was ready and gave him two sets of keys.

"Great. And the big folks' room has that special something all ready?" my father asked.

The desk guy blinked, "Uhhh. I'm not sure what you mean."

My father turned his head to make sure that we were occupied. He caught my eye, but started talking anyway, either concluding my disinterest or deciding the information was harmless enough for me to hear. "I ordered a little night cap for my wife and I. Would you mind checking the reservation?"

"Oh. Yeah, here it is. It should be there."

"Would you mind having someone check before we enter the room?"

"Uh, it's there man. If it was ordered, it'll be there."

One of the girls whispered something to the other and she laughed.

My father looked at the guy and smiled his disingenuous, full lipped smile— his crows feet appearing as they tended to do when he was under strain. "If you wouldn't mind, could you walkie someone? Maybe a cleaning fellow. It's our anniversary you see and you wouldn't want to put this old guy in the dog house, would you?"

The guy tapped one of the girls on the shoulder and they went to the back.

My father was left alone with the first desk girl. While flipping one of the room keys on its ring, he raised his eyebrows at her, "How late do they make you gals work?"

"Eleven."

As I'd continued watching my father with the girl, my fidget grew into a hot, crawling anxiety. I walked over to stand at my father's elbow.

"Oh, eleven? That's not bad," my father replied. "Still probably some fun left to be had."

"Not really," the girl said.

"Not much of a night life out here, huh?"

She shrugged and something of mild interest seemed to appear on her computer screen. "I'm sure you guys get creative."

"If our parents are out," she said out of the corner of her mouth.

"Dad, shouldn't we check on mom?" I asked him.

He gave me a stare. Like I'd just brought up a bodily function at a dinner party he'd been having. "She's fine, Scott," he said and rolled his eyes. "I've got a whole hotel scrambling around to make sure of that."

The others came back and replied, curtly, that the bottle was indeed waiting for them.

"Perfect," my father purred. "Allright kids, let's go!" he barked and

was out of the lobby in a flourish. Counting on our sluggishness, he stood there holding the door open for us so we'd hurry along. We strolled slowly, but obediently, out as he warned us to hurry. We were letting in the chill.

It was not their anniversary.

And the bottle of wine came with the deal my mother had gotten with the room.

My father had called a few days earlier and successfully bartered for an item he'd already paid for.

As he led her up the stairs, he made sure to tell her everything was "ship shape" and how he'd been sure to have them check. My mother was quiet and still recovering from becoming violently car sick on the windy 101.

He opened the room and flicked on the light, "Ta-dah!"

My mother excused herself to the bathroom.

He took up a chair by the little bistro table standing near the window. The bottle of shiraz was nestled in a loosely woven basket made out of dried dune grass. The basket sat on the bed, surrounded by towels shaped like swans kissing. All surrounded by petals. He rapped his fingers on the table, bit his lower lip and flashed his eyebrows at us as if to get us ready for something.

Then our mother started retching.

Several heaves later, she came out. She was green faced and looking ready for bed.

My father, looking crestfallen, held up the bottle. "Surprise." He said it softly, with his mouth frowning in sympathy. Sympathy for our mother. But also for himself.

"What surprise dear? Is it a merlot?" She took off her purple wind breaker and lay down on the bed in her jeans. "I thought I ordered a cab."

Amber, not caring enough to stick around for the dramatic conclusion of this night's episode of family life, grabbed the keys to our room and left out the door. I pretended to be interested in a black and white photo of a beach front hanging over the television.

My father blinked and looked at the bottle. "Well, it's a shiraz. And, what do you mean you ordered it? I ordered it."

"Oh, Art. Don't you remember? I said the room came with a bottle."

"Really? Huh," my father sighed. "And I gave those bimbos back at the lobby such hell."

"I bet you did dear," my mother said with her eyes closed.

"Thanks mom," came the dull sound of my sister's voice from the other room.

"What's wrong with her now?" my father asked.

"Their room came with some soda," my mother said, coughing mid-sentence.

"Mom, are you okay?" I asked.

"Yeah. I'm fine, Scott. Once it's out, it's out. I just need to lay here. Why don't you bring me one of your sodas? To settle my stomach."

I came into our room. Saw my sister sitting on the windowsill looking out at the night and sipping from a can. She loved soda—anything with a bite.

Her hair was dyed a bruise-colored purple. And her round, doughy cheeks seemed to make ideal breeding grounds for cystic acne. The constellations of petulant red blotches cast her teenage face in a kind of perennial suffering that made it difficult to look at her directly.

I tore a soda from the six pack and saw that they were Dr. Pepper, which I hated.

“Gross.”

“They’re good,” she said. Her eyes were a pale blue. Almost teal. “And don’t talk to me,” she said.

I went back into my mother’s room but she was asleep.

My father was pacing and eyed my concern, “She’ll be alright.”

I kept staring at her sleeping form.

He suggested we go out for a walk to get our minds on something else.

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t feel like going outside again. In addition to being worried about mom, I was groggy from the car ride of sitting mind-numbed for four hours looking at the uniform pines of Weyerhaeuser plantations, stretches of estuary, then darkness. But I also felt that the rare attention I received from my father wasn’t to be refused carelessly.

So I followed him out back into the crisp, black air. We walked out onto the beach and looked at the stars. I got so lost in them I almost fell over. It made my dad laugh. The cold of the sand worked its way through our shoes and we shivered.

We looked beyond the breakers—flashing out in white smiles from the darkness—and saw a fire hovering silently over the sea.

“A fishing trawler,” my father said. “It’ll be out all night.”

I wondered how he knew so much.

“Feel good to be out of school for a week?”

“I guess.”

With him being a science teacher, at my school no less, I viewed any questions he asked me about school to be conspiratorial. I was always careful about what I revealed to him about any discontentment I had with my classes or the friends I was making.

We listened to the bodies of the waves slapping against the sand.

He asked me if I was excited to see some plovers. Some terns and other birds I didn’t know or care about. And I said yes. I said it facing the waves and, in a way, I felt I was saying yes to them and their continual force.

My father then said that knowledge was like a key and that the more you knew, the more doors you could open.

“I thought the girl back at the hotel was kind of cute,” I said.

“Oh?” he replied. “Well you sure seemed to want to clear out of there fast.”

I’d never talked to my father about girls before. Several months prior he’d given me a good harangue after I’d gotten a C+ on a test in Ms.

Hathaway's class. This felt much the same.

"What did you think about her?" I fished.

"The desk girl?" he asked.

"Stupid question," I blushed.

He shrugged. "If you like a girl, Scott, you've got to be confident," he said. "You can't act like you got somewhere else to be getting back to. Particularly to your mother—or else they'll think you're bored with them. Of course, you can't act too interested either."

I wondered if he'd tried that tactic with my mother. I remarked how the girl in the lobby was much older than me.

"Age doesn't matter," he said.

We walked back and I saw my mother looking down at us from the window.

At best, she was smart-looking. If she'd been a bird, she would have been a gadwall. She never said anything more to people than what was required. Because of this, I think people thought her to be prideful or at least aloof and no one ever gave her a second look. Little did they know.

She saved her choicest jewels like her smile, her sweetness, for those closest to her and she never let up. As far as the rest of the world was concerned, she only ever wanted what was fair. Which was another reason she and father were destined to conflict.

Back in our room, my sister asked if she could sleep in the bed with me, saying she felt some weird energy over on her side. And, that if I could not be a pervert, she would appreciate it.

She had taken up strange hobbies requiring her to keep raven feathers, mummified mice, and cards with medieval looking clowns and knights on them—all about which I never asked. Talk about energies and spirits followed and I wondered what was next.

I didn't say anything and merely rolled to the other side, giving her a wide berth. I knew full well of my sister's swings between closeness and cruelty and I was too tired to defend against either.

She asked me if I was alright.

I asked her if she thought dad loved mom.

"Why do you ask?"

I told her about the reception girl.

"He flirts with everybody."

"Everybody but mom."

"He's bored of her, Scott. That's what marriage is like. Don't have a cow okay."

I was quiet and thought of the waves smiling at me.

"You've got to stop thinking he's the whole world. It'll get easier after that," she told me.

And that night I tried. I tried to stop listening to the silence humming from my parents' room, interrupted occasionally by the staccato clearing of a throat. But for me, unlike my sister, there was no other world to know yet. And I was left sleepless, wondering when my world would

implode.

That morning I was awoken to my mother and father arguing.
Something about a key.

I got up and pressed my ear against the wall.

“What do you mean they put an extra key under the mat?”

“I called them this morning. While you were asleep. I asked them to put another key outside.”

“Why?”

“So we’d have an extra key. In case we lost ours.”

I heard the doorknob rattle and the coppery zip of the key notches sliding into the lock. Then the unsatisfied clicking as my mother tried it to no avail.

His voice: “They must have got the wrong key, darling. You know how these people can be.”

“I’ll take it back to them then.”

“No, honey. I can.”

“Why can’t I do it?”

“I’m trying my best to take care of us. Can you at least let me finish what I’ve started?”

“I don’t know what you’ve started, Arthur.”

“There’s utterly no basis for insinuating anything. Don’t be surprised if the front desk person doesn’t have a clue what you’re talking about.”

That particular key, in retrospect, may have belonged to some local woman—a waitress, a fellow conservationist, or a bored housewife-turned-barfly—with which my dad had had some clandestine communiqué. Or it may have been the hotel staff snafu he claimed it was. Either way, it would be the first of several mysterious keys belonging to unknown locks. And the argument, the first of many arguments to come about such keys and numbers on the back of cocktail napkins found at the bottom of his coat pockets, and unnamed, female voices calling in the middle of the night.

Being new to these kinds of arguments, my mom fled. She came to our door and asked frantically if we’d like to go explore the beach. My sister—still asleep—refused with a snore. I put on my shoes.

I asked if Dad was coming and she said he had some calls to make to confirm his meeting times later in the week.

The day was brilliantly clear. The sun illuminated everything without care and it gave no warmth or cover against the southwestern wind. My mother and I noticed frozen mud puddles living inside the potholes of the access road to the sands. We approached one. It looked like a porthole into a world of ice. I saw the toe of my mother’s tennis shoe tap on the surface of this world. She looked at me mischievously. Her unpainted eyes seemed eager in spite of the red lines of pain beginning to trace her eyelids.

She cracked the surface of the frozen mud. There was the splitting sound of the ice then the water beneath licking at her heel. We started stomping on the rest of them until there were none left.

I remembered a time when I'd done this very thing by myself. It'd been several years prior and just the three of us. My sister had been sent away for her first bout of many troubles. My parents pushed me out to adventure by myself while they spent some time together, alone, in that special mom and dad way. The brief banishment came with a lonely excitement and an austere sense of duty. This, for mysterious reasons, was what lone children did for their parents and I had been happy to do it.

Walking along the frozen foredune, my mother and I saw the land stippled by grass shoots, stricken still by the lingering chill of winter. The sun made the mica in the sand wink and glisten.

"My God, it's beautiful out here," my mother said. And threw the key into the ocean.

I looked away as she wept.

"I just want to get us all in my arms and keep us tight," she said after a while.

I stood in the sand.

"But I guess you're a little too old for that, huh?" she sniffed. "My arms are too small."

My mother had a wonderful face—roundish and soft, except for her eyes—the sincerest blue there was, except for the ocean's. But of course, her blue was milder and more welcoming than the churning sea with its unyielding cold. If I would have known that was the last season I'd see her healthy, I would have looked at that face more—memorized its subtle shape. Tried to mimic its expressions in mine so I'd have something in each mirror to remember her by after she'd gone.

While she walked off her sadness, I noticed the contrast between the dark Washington sands and the bright yellow, European beach grass. I already knew a little bit about their problematic relationship, but that week I'd come to learn more

Later that afternoon, my family gathered itself and went on a bike ride.

We were lucky in this: a cloudless sky in late February. It was unheard of. Renting the inn's beach cruiser bicycles, we rode in the sun along the waves and my father named for us the conflict inherent in what we were seeing—pleasant, rolling dunes and slate grey sand peppered by black, iron magnesium.

He rode fast and talked quickly and after a quarter mile, I alone was keeping up.

According to my father, the northwest beach hadn't always looked so bucolic. With only a few hardy shrubs, the sands were blown at the will of the wind and the dunes emerged and fell away constantly, leaving wide stretches of beach where the snowy plover and other shorebirds could lay their eggs right in the sand—in sand scratches where their spackled, shell-colored eggs were camouflaged from predators.

Developers planted foreign beach grass to stabilize the dunes so they could build houses and hotels near the beach without the sands swallowing them.

The little seeds of their idea shot out roots high and low and over the decades, the beach grass erected dunes forty-five feet high, shrinking the beach and drawing in coyotes, fox and ravens.

The snowy plovers had less beach and the beach they did have, they now shared with the aforementioned prowlers—along with the dogs, bikers and night riders that those quaint houses brought.

“They should bulldoze the bastards,” my father said to me as we rode.

“Really?” I asked looking out at the waving sea of grass.

“Really. But they’ll never go for it. Too much to lose.”

My mother and sister rode behind, swaying leisurely on their course, my sister riding closer to the water, kicking up cold sprays of salt.

Since the bikes were single-speeds, you needed a lot of leg muscle to work the balloon tires over the sands. I was tired after two miles. The fact that my cruiser was a humiliating baby blue didn’t help matters.

“What’ll you do?” I asked, wondering if he was noticing my panting or mom and Amber getting smaller behind us.

“I’m going to recommend they pick out three to four, but be adamant about two, restricted areas of beach that be bulldozed and off limits to public use. Then set up snipers to kill the crows and coyotes.”

“Snipers?” I asked.

“Unless they want to be responsible for the death of a species. Yes.”

He explained how plovers are genetically wired to nest along certain beaches in their migration to Alaska. And that Long Beach was one of them. They’d either have to reset the way they viewed their beach, reset the birds’ brains, or, the more likely option, reset nature.

He turned around to view the lagging half of the family and called out, “Be careful not to go too far towards the dunes.”

“What?” my mother shouted.

Instead of slowing down, my father just shouted his orders louder. “The plover eggs, dear.”

“Give it a rest, Art,” my mother returned.

To this, my father just started pedaling faster ahead.

I kept a moderate pace between his clip and their meander. So that strangers could, with a wavering, but unbroken line, connect the dots the four of us formed as we made our way.

I looked for strangers combing the beach who might be watching us. Or for the prowlers he spoke of in the dunes. But saw nothing. And heard nothing except for the chattering of savannah sparrows in the brush.

He led us off the beach through a dirt trail leading into the hinterland. Stout Shore pines started crowding around us. Soon they were replaced by towering trees of the coastal forests. They were Sitka spruce—ancient looking and silent. More brachiosaur necks than tree trunks, the scaly armor of their bark bristled purple and, coming into their shade, we seemed to enter a foreground of perpetual dusk where the temperature dropped considerably. We passed through an opening between two cliffs and the dirt path continued along a marsh where my father stopped.

“Shouldn’t we stop to eat lunch in the sun?” Amber asked. She was wearing shorts and against the brown canvass of her hiking boots, her pale skin looked blue.

“Lunch?” My father asked as if hearing the word for the first time. He looked at his watch. “Gosh, it’s two! Well, you could eat now if you want. Or we can wait until we get to the lighthouse.”

My father said this last sentence through the corner of his mouth as he stared into the reeds through a pair of binoculars.

“How far are we from the lighthouse?”

My father shrugged.

My sister fumed while my mother spoke to her and the two opened up their lunch packs.

My father spied a pair of canvassbacks trolling around the brackish waters. He gave me the binoculars but I never saw them. He told me about spartina—an invasive marsh weed springing up along the coast, converting mudflats to marshland. By the time I was his age, he said, the area would be mainly tall, green swamp grass.

As he traipsed closer to the water, I asked what was wrong with marshland.

Marshlands made a clogged morass of a normally swift flowing river, creating barriers for salmon. The steep sided, narrow channels also meant a loss of ground for shellfish to lay their progeny. Not to mention that spartina pushed out Pacific reed grass and other native grasses.

“He’s been on some grasses alright,” Amber said loudly to my mother.

“A prophet is never known in his own home,” my father said, shaking his head. He said this often and good naturedly in the face of any jibing.

Like so many other things, I didn’t know what that meant and wouldn’t until I enrolled in a private Christian school for my undergrad where I was subjugated to a Basic Scriptures class. But it would take a decade longer, while I was working on my doctorate in Forestry at the same school, to learn that my father had been right about spartina and most everything else ecologically and that, as fate would have it, few people listened. My sister being the least.

“Your father is on to a lot of things,” my mother told her. “Should I tell them about Napoleon?”

He shrugged again, “I don’t see how it’s relevant.”

My mother extended her lower jaw in his direction, as if holding in some expression of frustration.

“But it’s a good story,” he admitted. “Tell away.”

She told us the story of how, when they were newly married and vacationing out here, that they were birding. He was birding and she was sun bathing. She laughed.

They’d been out on the beach for hours without seeing anything of significance. Winged shadows passing over the sands and white flecks of plumage would reveal themselves as mere mew gulls, gyring birds of prey

in the distance—vultures. Then, around sunset, they heard a flutter close by them. They sat up and saw a black faced gull staring at them from only a yard away.

“Is that normal? I asked your dad.”

“She was totally wiggled out,” he laughed.

The winged intruder, with its black face about like an executioner’s hood, took several more steps towards them. My mother had edged back and behind my father. It was a Bonaparte Gull. My father told her this. She whispered if they were dangerous. The gull took another step.

“It fell over dead,” my father said.

“No,” my sister said incredulously.

“Stone dead,” my mother replied.

“Ewhhhh.”

“We had to report it to park rangers. Not that they gave a care,” my father relayed.

“I had never heard of anything like that.”

“Nor had I. Or have I in all my studies since.”

“So, what?” my sister asked.

“So,” my mother began. “So, any time you step outside, you never know what nature is going to set at your feet.”

“So you have to go out looking for it,” my father put in.

But my mother didn’t take her eyes off my sister, “Sometimes, you might not see anything. Other times, you might get a great story.”

“I don’t want some creepy bird dying next to me,” my sister said.

“Neither did I. But we don’t get to choose.” My mom reached behind my sister’s ear and gave it a tug. “All we can do is tell.”

Amber huffed up, “Okay, I get it.”

The trail turned into a road and the road reared uphill, continuing on for half a mile.

The cruisers’ heavy frames and tires labored. The Sitkas towered effortlessly overhead, some of them bearing hard, cancerous looking burls.

At the top of the hill was a cliffside scrubbed with fescue and yarrow. None of the paintbrush or sea rocket in bloom yet. And ragwort aplenty—which my father was happy to deplore. Breezes blew through the wind-contorted pine trees and their fanning layers of dark foliage.

The lighthouse—which the sun, wind and salt spray had yellowed into the color of a dog’s tooth—stood abandoned.

“This is it?” my sister asked.

“This isn’t the main lighthouse,” my father said quietly. He stood with his hat brim pulled down near his eyes and his posture bent keenly towards the sheer hills stretching towards Oregon. He looked like a pointer certain of prey in a thicket.

“Art,” my mother tried.

“The main lighthouse is that way,” my father said, pointing to a trail head.

It read: Cape Disappointment/ Shorebird Sanctuary—8 miles.

“Eight miles!” my sister said.

“We’ve already gone ten. If not more,” my father said. “What’s a few more?”

I looked at my mother. She was throwing up her hands as if asking the sky for relief. But the clouds distended high above and gave nothing.

“That’s sixteen more miles, plus another ten more to get back. No way.”

“The Cape is really spectacular, Amber. You can see Oregon.”

“Am I supposed to look forward to a place called Disappointment?” she asked.

“It’s just a name, sweetie.”

“Don’t call me that.” The green tint in her eyes fled and a white, rageful glow took over.

“There are old military bunkers there,” my dad said, scuffing at the beige earth with the toe of his Doc Martins.

“So?”

“Well,” he shrugged. “You can explore.”

“Why would I want to do that? They’re old. They’re military. They’re bunkers! I’m not G.I. Jane. I’m TIRED.”

“Amber,” my father interrupted. “It’s supposed to be neat.”

“Neat? You guys don’t get it. Neat to me, means stupid. And boring and tiring and I don’t want to go anywhere else.”

“Amber. Wait. It’s okay,” my mom said.

“Susan. Are you really going to placate her like this?”

“Art, I think it’s safe to say I am at this point,” my mother replied.

My father’s face darkened and he turned away. I heard him say how he knew it. He knew he shouldn’t have depended on others’ functionality. He knew it.

“Scott, you’re welcome to go with him if you want. I’m going after Amber.”

My sister with her purple pony-tailed hair lashing at the air behind her, was already halfway down the hill. My mother, in pursuit, starting to jog until she reached her bike. I saw their two figures disappearing. I saw my father’s figure at the trailhead—his pointer’s stance replaced by a slumped shouldered posture of self-pity.

I stood as a point between the separating pieces of my family—me and my stupid baby blue beach bike.

My father turned suddenly to me. His graying tufts of hair blew in the wind, furling out behind his ears like plumage. “Well kid, you up for a second sally?”

“No,” I said. “You’re not the whole world.”

He closed his eyes and breathed out while nodding. The kind of expression a teacher gives as he resigns to his pupil’s interminable dullness. “She told you that, didn’t she?”

“No. No one told me that.”

He pushed passed me, got on his bike and disappeared down the hill.

“She didn’t tell me that,” I said to his back.

I watched his legs rush the pedals angrily. As he passed my mom, I heard him shout, “She doesn’t know where she’s going.”

I hurried after.

I passed my mom near the marsh where we’d had lunch and saw my father near the tree break.

My sister, it seemed, had a second wind—a sirocco in fact. She’d reached the beach nearly a quarter mile ahead of my father. Hitting the sand, she turned north so sharply the bike slid out from under her. She lifted it and tried to get going again, but the chain had derailed itself. Rather than bend down and redo the chain, she ditched the bike and ran up by the dunes, along the beach grass looking for a fox trail she could follow into the deflation plains and out of sight.

She felt something crush beneath her feet.

The something had the feel of soft fruit on her shoes. A peach. Except without the core hardness. Rather an intricate lattice work of little, broken bones.

My sister slowed when she was unable to shake the stickiness from her sole and turned to look. It was the same moment father had come tearing around the corner. He too looked. And at the same time, they both saw the story nature had for us that day.

Two ruptured eggs the grey shade of cigarette ash. And the darkened shapes of stilled hope lying beneath.

My father just stood over the ruined eggs.

I wished my sister had handled it half as well. In piercing, half coherent shrieks, she began cursing my father for chasing her. As well as for being boring and lame and taking us out there in the first place.

“That’s enough, Amber,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

He gathered the limp, wet vicissitudes of the dead chicks, as well as their shells and crossed over into the dunes and disappeared for a time.

I found my sister weeping at the plover sand scratch.

My mother came along and seemed to understand immediately. She didn’t say anything but started working at Amber’s cruiser. With her nimble little fingers, she quietly re-tracked the chain.

When he came out of the reedgrass, my father set his hat down over the nest. Without regarding my mother or sister or me, he got on his bike and left us there. I watched him get ahead of us. Watched him glide himself along the wavelines in the carefree way of a widower, musing and indulging in the solitude he finds of the waves’ expunging of themselves upon the abandoned beach.

When he was far enough away to not notice, I went after him. The coastal sunset light yellowed and intensified even as fog began to gather and obscure the flat beachfront. Out from this, the shapes of cabins, beach front hotels, our inn—rose like ships in a bay.

My father had said that knowledge was like a key and that the more you knew the more doors you could open.

As a boy, I wondered what door you could want to open other than

the door to home.

My mother died at home. Like that gull, death arrived at her feet and she went like a breath of air, taking it as a final gift. I think I anticipated this subconsciously and found myself unafraid for her.

But I think even then I knew my father was fated for a more fearful undergoing. A takeover, really. He could see invasives taking over the land, but not his own mind. His death started that week in my opinion and appeared to him as a series of portals leading to a fuller life. A death of this kind is far longer and disfiguring and by the time my father was done many years later, I barely recognized him.

I rolled up slowly to our hotel on that winter beach and found my father leaning over the handle bars of his bicycle talking to the front desk girl, also leaning on a pair of handle bars—but leaning away.

I watch him lean in.

I watched her balk at something and wave him away. She took off towards the beach, towards me, on her white bike—eyes half open and her blonde hair streaming behind her. She looked so weightless, I half expected her to float into the air like the unnamable nymph of mystery she was. She passed right by. Never saw me. Never needed to. Was herself without me or the rebuffed, middle aged man standing alone in the potholed parking lot with his thinning grey hair loose in the wind.

My father looked at me. I saw no shame in his face. Nor recognition. He looked through me as if I belonged to another world of which he'd already taken his leave.

SAMUEL MOCK

THE BLUEFISH

Across the cutting board, beside the pan gleaming
of canola oil and butter, the bluefish

splays her small, sequin scales
like a model, her nude body bent

in the pose of a shoehorn.

Mother submits, strokes her
fingers down the back before the slow

drag along the belly
the pull of ribbon, red velour

that follows
her hand, her magicians touch,

then lays the pink assemblage
on the linoleum counter,

wet and unadorned.

Now you try
she says through the vernal smell.

She brings the blade to her apron, cleans
its small, boyish face.

SIMON PERCHIK

“NIGHT AFTER NIGHT
A PAPER CUP”

Night after night a paper cup
filled with hillside
and the makeshift thirst

that won't move an inch
keeps damp in an invisible mouth
where oceans are buried

—there's no place to want
—there's only take-out and the lid
is already closed

though it leaves some room
to lift the shoreline to your lips
—this coffee is flowing

from a darkness suddenly homesick
though you don't hear the mourners
or the grass splash over one hand

and with the other you open the cup
just to see what's inside
as if black still counts for something.

OLIVER RICE

TO SOMEONE SEVEN
CENTURIES HENCE

This is about a person standing today
in the Giotto chapel in Padua,

thinking of you standing exactly there

somehow thinking of her standing there,
both of you smiling, exhilarated.

ROGER SOFFER

SOMEWHERE

I thicken the air, not at all
the carnation breeze of our impromptu wedding,
and yes, the canyon of lavender gave forth,
and mint and tarragon and thyme,
and now it's the neighbor's liquor, it must be six,
you're salting beef in the kitchen,
you're stirring the bone marrow stew,
and my hands grow large because
they must have something to hold,
not just scrape brown butter from the bottom of the pot,
metal against metal and the water burning hot,
and when the china breaks, you turn on me, you,
backed against the eggshells and rotten kale,
you, a wren, feral wings striking the plastered wall
and I would put nails in your scapula, I would choke your voice
the bones of my fingers would snap your vanes,

and my eyes are covered with their own feathers, white, stiff,
I cannot see your head turn from one pain to another,
I cannot see myself one week ago,
the lap pool torchlit, the buffet spread large,
when everyone became strange,
the crows diving in and out of the pines,
their bristles flashing, my breath a maze,
fingers twisting in the fence,
and the breath of my parents cut through the immaculate sky
and spilled into my chest, and I am still gasping, and

these are not the blossoms I promised,
this is not our apple love,
somewhere there must be lilies, who toil not, and
how small I've become in my largeness, and
how little you want, other than
the cut grass of my lawn.

DAVID STARKEY

THE LAMENTATION

The three crosses are empty, the crowd dispersed.
Now that the show's over

only the steadfast remain:

Mary Magdalene weeps in a huddle with the Virgin's sisters,
two more Marys without a man.

The Madonna herself has succumbed to a faint
of grief.

John cradles her like a boy
surreptitiously holding a doll.

Joseph of Arimathea grasps the dead man's shoulders;
Nicodemus holds his legs.

They lay him out on a winding sheet,
carefully, as though he were a porcelain angel
being wrapped for Christmastime.

Sprawled across the ground—the iron pincers
with which they have removed the iron nails,
a jar of embalming ointment,
the crown of thorns.

Wind whispers in a nearby almond tree,
where a few buds are blossoming,
white and pink.

It's spring, after all.

ERIC STOODLEY

CANDLES

Months before, mothers
sawed the wood

and drowned the jetty,
kneeling.

The boats docked East,
but the white crest

still rose to carry
the boys, wet their chests

in the moon's mirror.
And silenced their bodies,

the ever-present slicking
of splinters to skin.

Now lies each, a flame
tiding the shore.

FRED WHITE

.....
WILD WEST, GODDAMN!

Ol' ranch hand, spitter
of great chaw gobs,
cocks his Stetson, frowns
a deep territorial frown:

“This here’s open-scrub, boy; y’all
need to know a thing or two about
what makes a man a man,
like hackin’ off steer balls.

“Hiss of branding iron’s bliss, son;
deer’s to hunt and skin;
nothin’ quite as mouth wat’rin’
as freshly gutted venison—

“*That’s* the poetry I do,
and this AR-17 with hundred-round magazine, too.
The Hummer’s for them backwoods roads;
keeps the country safe and under God.

“So git yer faggot compact off my land”;
spits a thick brown wad. “We’re done
yappin’, kid”; he turns away and shakes
a fist: “Wild west, goddamn!”

ELIZABETH WYLDER

I'M KEEPING YOUR LEGS IN OUR DIVORCE

We were the pyramids, forever
doomed and connected,
the lowest as to the highest,
an avalanche of big, explosive garbage,
expectations of disaster, and boots;
an isolated cottage industry like
sorcery themed birthday parties
or one of the girls who wanted
Punky Brewster to try drugs; a spot-on
historical reenactment, heavy-with-child,
war scraping softly over wisdom
and promising cures beneath the rubble;
a comic actor gone serious
in thrift store slacks and ankle socks;
crooked games more ancient
than sail-spines or breast-teeth;
a tonic sprung up through the floorboards,
tantamount to retirement,
crueler in effect than intent;
a silly high school yearbook quote.

CONTRIBUTORS

R. A. Allen's poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in the *New York Quarterly*, *The Recusant (UK)*, *Pear Noir*, *RHINO*, *Gargoyle*, *JAMA*, and elsewhere. His work was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He lives in Memphis. More at <http://poets.nyq.org/poet/raallen>.

Kevin Casey is a graduate of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and received his graduate degree at the University of Connecticut. His work has been accepted by *Grasslimb*, *Frostwriting*, *Words Dance*, *Turtle Island Review*, *decomp*, and others. He currently teaches literature at a small university in Maine, where he enjoys fishing, snowshoeing and hiking.

Charles Corbett is 23 and from the Chicago area. 'The Bastard' is his first story about straight people. You may send him anything at charles.r.corbett@gmail.com.

Craig Cotter was born in 1960 in New York and has lived in California since 1986. New poems have appeared in *Hawai'i Review*, *POEMS-FOR-ALL*, *Poetry New Zealand*, *Assaracus*, *Court Green*, *Eleven Eleven*, *Euphony*, *the Bicycle Review*, *Calibanonline & Otoliths*. His poetry is featured in the anthology *Between from Chelsea Station Editions*, and he has a story in *Foolish Hearts*, a new anthology from Cleis Press. His fourth book of poems, *After Lunch with Frank O'Hara*, is currently available from Chelsea Station Editions (New York). www.craigcotter.com

David Cravens received his undergraduate in philosophy at MU, and his master's in English at Southeast Missouri State. He won the 2008 Saint Petersburg Review Prize in Poetry, and the 2011 Bedford Poetry Prize. His work continues to appear in a wide range of literary journals throughout the U.S. and abroad. He teaches composition and literature at Mineral Area College.

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Kyle Ellingson lives in Saint Paul, MN. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Madison Review*, *Sou'wester*, *Pacifica Review Online*, *Kansas City Voices*, and elsewhere.

Dan Encarnacion earned an MFA in Writing at the California College of Arts and lives in Portland, Oregon where he co-curates *the Verse In Person* poetry series. The bleak of Bela Tarr, the spare of Supersilent, and the spike of quad-lattes will palpitate his palpus. Dan has recently been published in *Eleven Eleven*, *Upstairs at Duroc*, *Atlas Review*, and forthcoming in *Assaracus*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Whiskey Island*, *The Blue Mesa Review* and and/or. He was the featured artist for *Reconnaissance Magazine's* 2013 issue.

Dean Jollay earned his MA from the University of Chicago. His law degree from Capital University propelled him into a career that has ranged from legislative aide and researcher to lobbyist and CFO of a manufacturing company. Currently, he is working on receiving his MFA in creative writing from Queens University. His creative writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Aethlon*, *Amarillo Bay*, *Helix*, *The New Plains Review*, and *The Write Room*.

Christopher Kuhl has been published in *Prairie Schooner*, *The Anglican Digest*, *Ensemble Jourine*, *Kane County Chronicle*, *Mississippi Literary Review*, *Piedmont Literary Review*, *Zzbaggins Poetry Victims*, *Schuylkill Valley Journal Of The Arts*, *Tulane Review*, *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, *Alabama Literary Review*, and *The Griffin*. In 2014, five of his poems were selected to be published as an individual chapbook by Red Ochre Press. His self-published book was awarded an honorable mention in the poetry category in the Writer's Digest 15th Annual International Self-Published Book Awards, and he came in 10th in the Writer's Digest Poetry Awards. He also placed first for his poem, "Agon," in the Mississippi Poetry Society competition.

Amy Lerman has had poems published in *The Gila River Review*, *ABZ: A New Magazine of Poetry*, and *Generations: A Journal of Ideas and Images*.

Maria Logven was born in St. Petersburg, Russia, and now lives in New York. Her work has appeared in *A Gathering of the Tribes*, *Diner*, *Rosebud*, and *Sofa Ink Quarterly*. Passionate about art and literature, she is a regular at art openings and fiction readings. (translator)

Marc Gauchax lives in Charleroi, Belgium, and teaches anthropology at a local University. "Phillip's Bride" belongs to a collection of twelve short stories titled *Faerie*. Another story from his collection was published in *Denver Quarterly*. (author)

Shaun Anthony McMichael lives in Seattle with his wife. He works in a public high school as a teacher's assistant to youth with emotional and behavioral disorders. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Litro*, *Petrichor Machine*, *Existere*, *The Milo Review*, *Night Train* and *Carrier Pigeon*, among others. He is currently studying for his Masters in Teaching at Seattle Pacific University.

Samuel Mock has a BA in English from the University of Virginia and an MFA from the University of Michigan. Some of his work has previously been published in *Crab Creek Review* and *Saranac Review*. Currently, he lives and works in Chicago as an Upper School English teacher at Francis Parker.

Simon Perchik is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *The Nation*, *Poetry*, *The New Yorker*, and elsewhere. His most recent collection is *Almost Rain*, published by River Otter Press (2013). For more information, free e-books and his essay titled “Magic, Illusion and Other Realities” please visit his website at www.simonperchik.com.

Oliver Rice’s poems appear widely in journals and anthologies in the United States and abroad. Creekwalker released an interview with him in January 2010. His book of poems, *On Consenting to Be a Man*, is published by Cyberwit and is available on Amazon. His online chapbook, *Afterthoughts, Siestas, and his recording of his Institute for Higher Study*, appeared in Mudlark in December 2010.

Roger Soffer is a working screenwriter on miniseries and feature films for Disney/ABC, Warner Brothers, Fox, and Paramount, with credits including *Merlin’s Apprentice*, *Star Trek: DS9*, *Kazaam*, and *Category 7*. As fun as that can be, poetry has been (and is!) his antidote. His poem “Rivers” has been nominated for a Pushcart, and he has had poetry published in a variety of journals, including *Paintbrush*, *Southern Poetry Review*, the *Briar Cliff Review*, *Mangrove*, *New Laurel Review* and *Yellow Silk*. He has recently been published in *Spillway* and has writing forthcoming in *Forge*.

David Starkey served as Santa Barbara’s 2009-2010 Poet Laureate and is Director of the Creative Writing Program at Santa Barbara City College. He has published seven full-length collections of poetry, most recently *Circus Maximus* (Biblioasis, 2013) and *It Must Be Like the World* (Pecan Grove, 2011). In addition, over the past twenty years he has published more than 400 poems in literary journals such as *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *American Scholar*, *Antioch Review*, *Barrow Street*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Georgia Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Poetry East*, *Southern Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and *Southern Poetry Review*. *Creative Writing: Four Genres in Brief* (Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2012) is in its second edition and is currently one of the best-selling creative writing textbooks in the country.

Erin Stoodley is a student residing in Southern California. Recently, she received first place in Ventura County’s 2014 Art Tales Contest for short fiction and was named a runner-up and finalist in Hollins University’s 2013 Nancy Thorp Poetry Contest. She has also been recognized by such organizations as the Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth as well as the National YoungArts Foundation. Her poetry is published or is forthcoming in the *Adroit Journal*, *Belleville Park Pages*, and *Cargoes*, among others.

Fred White has had poetry appear in *The Cape Rock, Rattle, South Carolina Review, Visions International*, etc. He lives near Sacramento, CA.

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