

EDITORS' FOREWORD

First, we at Euphony would like to thank you for picking up our Winter 2016 issue. You hold in your hands an alternately heart-warming and mind-bending collection of poetry and fiction. It can also serve as fuel for a small fire or an extremely inefficient source of calories if you haven't sufficiently prepared for our Chicago winter. Within you'll find poetry and prose on subjects spanning time and circumstance, with a surprisingly high representation of a variety of sports, including the story of a jockey with a quarter inch racehorse who just needs to be given a chance, clarification regarding the complex mechanics of baseball's rarely seen Infield Why, and a view into the mind of a young boy whose father may or may not be orchestrating the actions of every child on his soccer team. Though the issue is organized alphabetically, feel free to skip around randomly, read through in reverse order, or follow whatever other pattern catches your fancy.

Please drop by our redesigned website, euphonyjournal.org, where we post new pieces that do not appear in our print issues. There you will also find submission guidelines, information about our staff, and past issues back to 2008. Don't forget to like us on Facebook and follow us on Twitter [[@euphonyjournal](https://twitter.com/euphonyjournal)].

Questions, comments, and intricate theories about exactly what is going on in "Wending Ember and Ash" can be sent to euphonyjournal@gmail.com.

We hope enjoy reading this collection; we certainly enjoyed compiling it.

—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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CORBIN ALLARDICE

LAUNDERAMA, DAWNRISE.

Tooth-hard milkdrinkers sloop moonwards
praying sunmarks with asthmatic
hymnals. Breath like galoshes, centrifugal
supplication to spendthrift lassitudes
and marrowbone entropy. Pneumatic whorl
of laundromat moons, tiptoe minuet
to the tip-tapping baseline of gearchurn
spirituals. Oil-stained clapbook in her cleavage.

Milkdrinkers toast vodka tonics and scrub on sunmarks
in roast honey and thyme supplication
to the lassitudes.

ROSALEEN BERTOLINO

EGGS

The winter that year was balmy and dry, very dry, the driest, in fact, in over 100 years, and although Milla found the soft January sun pleasurable, she also fretted about the drought, in the mild way one frets about things over which one has no control, and whose consequences are as yet not entirely clear. Already, the gray hills were a tinderbox, and no mushrooms sprouted in the thirsty woods, and deer anxiously nosed the empty streambeds.

Milla's lover, Evan, seemed to be drying up as well. When he visited, he scarcely spoke, as though talking depleted him. He had a parched smell, too, and his skin was dry. He held her tightly and his lovemaking was quick and urgent. Often he fell asleep soon afterward, and was gone before she woke so that at times she wondered if she had only imagined that he'd come the night before. Something was bothering him, but she knew better than to force a confession out of him—their arrangement had been going on for such a long time that it was almost as if they were in an old marriage, although Evan was, in fact, married to someone else, Dulcie, who was in the late stages of MS, and confined to her bed.

Milla no longer hoped that Evan would leave Dulcie, although this had once been her obsession, an obsession resulting in tears, bleak arguments, brief separations. This had been years ago when her passion for him was so strong that she once climaxed simply as he gazed at her across a room. Dulcie had known about Milla for some time now, and had granted permission for the relationship to continue as long as Evan didn't divorce her, as long as no children were born.

Uneasy with the wife's control of her lover, Milla had never wanted to meet her, and made sure never to visit the town across the bay where they lived. Milla preferred to know as little as possible about this woman who wasn't exactly her rival but was instead more like a spell that kept Evan from belonging to Milla completely. What she did know was that Dulcie was five years older than Evan, who was ten years older than Milla, that Dulcie was often difficult and demanding, and that he could not leave her because she was dying. Dulcie had been dying for a very long time, for years and years and years.

Instead of the children that she'd hoped to have, Milla, now fifty, kept a small flock of chickens, hens only because her neighbors would not tolerate the noise of a rooster, and thus the hens, too, were childless. For the most part, Milla's speckled hens were not bothered in the slightest by their lack of offspring. They laid their sterile, delicious brown eggs, scratched the dirt for worms and grubs, took happy dust baths in sandy corners of the yard. Every once in a while, however, a hen went broody, sitting relentlessly

on a clutch of infertile eggs in hopes of hatching them. You had to break her of it, a cruel process that involved a soaking in a basin of cold water, or solitary confinement in a wire-bottomed cage, because if you didn't, the hen might sit on the eggs until she died.

Milla tried to learn from their example and to live her life without waiting for things that she wanted to happen, but because she was a person and not a chicken, she found this impossible. During the week, which was when Evan most often stayed with her because his law firm was on Milla's side of the bay, she also was busy teaching math at the local community college. But on the long weekends and especially holidays when Evan must for one reason or another stay the whole time with his wife, she fought doubt and loneliness by forcing herself into activities—she went hiking with friends and took cooking classes and practiced yoga.

When the affair started, Milla's friends thought it was a mistake. Milla, auburn-haired, beautiful, with the pale freckled skin that did not age well, giving herself up to an older married man. They had met at a fundraiser for the Sierra Club, his green eyes under thick black eyebrows jolting her instantly. From the very beginning Evan had been clear about his wife, but Milla had never felt with anyone the way she felt with Evan, as though they'd known one another for lifetimes, and wasn't that worth hanging onto? And in the beginning, she hadn't cared about commitment, it was just a fling, and when she'd fallen in love and come to want him all for herself, she'd been certain that her youth and desire would triumph. Instead, she'd learned patience, she'd learned to share. She knew that he never had sex with his wife. In this one way, he was all hers. In this way, almost twenty years had gone by.

In December, Milla's hens molted, their feathers falling out in untidy clumps, leaving behind bare patches of bumpy chicken skin. A normal event, although it seemed strange that nature should make poultry so vulnerable on the coldest, shortest days of the year. The hens looked ruffled and miserable, and all stopped laying, producing not one egg the entire month of January and none in February either, as if they were in exact alignment with the drought.

Milla worried about wildfires and saved water from the shower for her potted plants. In late February, Evan twice failed to return her phone calls. In March, he did not visit once. He sent an email saying that his wife had taken a turn for the worse and that he was thinking of her and missed her. "Is there anything I can do?" Milla emailed back, signing it "Love," and he wrote back no, that he did not want to upset Dulcie.

The last week of March, it rained. At first an ineffectual drizzle. A few days later, thick fertile clouds swept up the coast from Mexico, and spread their skirts and let the fat, warm raindrops fall like billions upon billions of eggs. Almost immediately, a shy haze of fresh green grass appeared on the hills. The hens, glossy in their new feathers, began laying again. Two eggs a day, five, then six, then nine, and one astonishing April morning twelve, three more eggs than there were hens, which should have been impossible. Milla counted them twice.

Then one of the hens went broody. She was uninterested in food or water, occupied completely with protecting and warming the eggs under her soft, downy breast. When Milla approached, the hen reared up and pecked viciously. Milla knew that the longer a broody hen sits, the harder it is to break her of it, but distracted by thoughts of her own future, which was, she knew, about to change completely, she put the unpleasant task off.

Spring was the time of year when everyone was distracted. The kids in her classes twitched in their seats and the girls displayed long smooth legs and enraptured boys forgot to look at the blackboard. In Milla's backyard, the cherry tree lit up with blossoms; green shoots of feverfew spilled from the damp, dark soil; and clouds of bouncing gnats echoed the fizzy hopeful feeling in Milla's chest. She wished Dulcie peace, a quick and painless death. She prayed that Evan wasn't suffering.

At the end of April, Evan arrived for dinner with a bouquet of lilacs and a bottle of merlot. He looked thin but handsome, and was full of nervous energy, insisting that Milla sit while he arranged the flowers in a mason jar. He uncorked the wine, and served it to her with a bow. Milla herself was nervous with anticipation. She wore a new dress that hugged her curves, grown more generous as she'd grown older. She'd sprayed his favorite cologne between her breasts. What she'd desired all these years was at last almost here. Most certainly they would marry. He had promised her that more than once. She did her best to appear calm, however, knowing what he had just been through, and the tang of wine in her mouth was a comfort. In the oven, the moussaka she'd prepared bubbled fragrantly. His favorite dish.

He sat across from her, drained his glass, and at last words tendrilled from his mouth and wove themselves around her like vines.

Dulcie had died in early March. He was sorry not to tell her sooner, but it had been a dark period of morphine, and nurses, and Dulcie's relatives coming on top of the long dry winter, and the holidays, and work. Milla took his hand, but he withdrew it rapidly. She tried not to take it personally. Anyone could see that he was too wound up to be touched.

"We need to discuss the future," he said. His voice, usually so well-modulated, was a cracked whisper.

"We have time, don't we?" said Milla. "Sit, eat, relax." She poured more wine.

"Yes," Evan said. "You've always been so good, so understanding."

As Milla washed lettuce for a salad, Evan began talking about the helpfulness of Dulcie's relatives, in particular a half-sister, many years younger, from her father's second marriage. For years she and Dulcie had been estranged, complicated reasons to do with who was favored by the father and who wasn't, but that was long over, the sister had arrived just when she was needed, her name was Lisbet.

"She wants to start a family," he said.

"That's nice," Milla said, before it occurred to her how strange it was that he was telling her this. She turned and looked at him, and he looked at the table.

“This is my chance to begin my life,” he said.

Had he really said that?

“What do you mean?” she said. This had to be a mistake. He was tired and not thinking well.

“Lisbet wants to get married,” he said.

“What’s this got to do with me?” she said, although her heart, pounding wickedly, already knew. She would forever come second to Dulcie, even dead.

“You’ll always be special to me,” he said, joy peeking out brutally behind the concerned expression on his face.

She stood, tipping over her chair.

“Get out,” she said.

He backed away, his hands lifted, his eyes wide. She had not seen him afraid of her in years. She threw her glass at him, the wine spattering his shirt and pants, the crystal shattering at his feet. His eyes filled with tears. “You have no idea how hard this is,” he said.

“No, you don’t,” she said.

She finished the bottle of wine outside on the rickety bench next to the chicken coop, where she could hear the hens cooing and rustling themselves into sleep. The broody one was still in her nest box, sound asleep, drooped over her un-hatchable eggs. Milla lifted her out. It never failed to shock her how docile and helpless they became in the dark of night. She returned to the rickety bench, the broody one warm in her lap.

She and Evan had broken up before and he had come back. He might this time, too. Those were her first thoughts before it got dark and began raining again, and still Milla sat, letting the rain soak through her hair and her new dress and the limp hen on her lap, praying that the rain would cure them both.

RIT BOTTORF

THE SPORT OF KINGS

I swam through my unconscious, battling fleeting dreams as they tried to pull me back under, back into the sanctuary of their arms, all their wonder and hope, until I fought free and met my hangover head on. The track was still waking up. I could tell from the stirring of thoroughbreds, these gorgeous beasts with bodies like Trojan horses, sleek and sure-footed. I rose and dusted the hay from my pants, head still cloudy from the night before. I'd gone out drinking with a jockey named Juan. There wasn't much more to remember than that. I tapped a Winston out of the soft pack, sparked the end with a Zippo I'd won during a game of rummy, and relieved myself on the side of a stable, tipping my hat at Liza as her mud boots clomped across the gravel lot.

"Good night?" Liza said, searching her purse for a smoke.

"Can you pick me up a grilled cheese from Sal's?" I said.

"You still owe me fifty bucks," she said before ducking inside a stall.

I'd known Liza since my first day at the track. She had the same black curls and bright doe eyes that she had back then. At one time she told me that she wanted to be a veterinarian, but then things changed like they always did for people like us. Now Liza worked as an outrider, helping keep the horses in line during the post parade.

The racing director wanted to talk to me, so I made my way across the paddock, last night's liquor still heavy on my breath, and knocked on the door of his trailer, a rusty aluminum box that looked like it had been kicked across the track by a giant.

"Jimmy," he said, "come in."

"My name's Alan," I said.

"That's what I said," he said.

The racing director was a short, freckled man with steel-blue eyes. He mostly kept to himself, wandering about in the shadows of the track, overseeing the day-to-day operations just as his grandfather did before him.

"Remember that thing we talked about?" he said, stuffing a pinch of chaw into his lower lip.

I did not.

"Yes," I said.

"I got you a real beaut. But she's gonna cost your check for the month."

"What are you talking about?" I said.

"The mare."

I had asked the racing director if he could help me purchase a mare. I'd been an official, a clocker, an identifier, and even a groomer, but

all I'd ever wanted was to race my own thoroughbred.

We walked past the jockey's room and to the stables, which inclined toward me as if I was part of their magnetic field. The racing director took his time opening the lock, trying to build suspense, and then with an outstretched hand, pale and beaded with sweat, he snapped his fingers, presenting what could only be described as an empty stall. "Here she is," he said.

I stood at the window, looking inside. "I don't get it," I said.

The racing director pointed at a bale of hay. "Right there," he said.

I looked again. "There's nothing there," I said.

The racing director flared his nostrils and handed me a magnifying glass. "Go on," he said, nudging me forth.

I unlatched the door and stepped inside. There were no water or feed buckets. There was nothing at all except the lone bale of hay. "Where exactly am I going?" I said.

"You're a real pain in the ass," he said, snatching the magnifying glass from my hand. He knelt in front of the hay and raised the glass to his eye. "Right here," he said.

I lay on my stomach and looked through the glass. It took me a minute, but I eventually saw it. I lowered the magnifying glass, and then looked again. The mare was a quarter inch tall. She had a chestnut mane with a white star on her muzzle.

"What the fuck is this?" I said.

The racing director blotted his forehead with a handkerchief. "You have any idea how much you make a year?" he said.

There was a time when I kept track of stuff like that, back when I balanced my checkbook and had an apartment of my own, but I had fallen on hard times, drank and gambled most of my money away. Out of what I could only imagine was pity, the racing director had agreed to let me stay in one of the stables, temporarily, until I got back on my feet.

"I don't understand," I said, looking around the barren stall.

"What's there to understand?" he said. "It's a thoroughbred, albeit a very small one. It's got good bloodlines. Its father won two races at Saratoga."

"I want a refund," I said.

"This isn't Kmart," he said. "You can't return a horse."

* * *

When I was growing up in Potter, New York, a town so forgotten that one time I tried to point it out to Liza on a map and it wasn't there, I remember thinking that I would never end up like everyone else around me—drunk and poor and hopeless. I was smart enough to know that these people once had dreams, that they wanted more than what their lives had become, but that they had given up on those goals as soon as they realized how difficult they were to achieve. It's easy to think that way when you're a child and you have your whole life ahead of you, but the real reason I

thought that way was because I was a friend of Michael Albright, and Michael Albright was going places.

Michael moved to our school in the tenth grade. His father had a big job at the hospital, and I still remember how it felt like I was walking into a hotel every time I stayed over at his place—the beds were always made, the towels were neatly folded, and each room had those little hand soaps that smelled like lavender and cherry blossom. Michael's mother died when she was young, and since his dad was always working, Michael had free rein to do whatever he wanted. We'd skip class to drive around in his Range Rover and smoke cigarettes we'd stolen from the convenience store. We'd break into his father's liquor cabinet and chug bottles of Captain Morgan, and then go to the school dances drunk. We didn't have many friends, but we had each other, and we had the illusion that we were untouchable, that our actions could live without consequence.

One night, Michael's sister—a junior at Oswego University—sold us a bag of ecstasy. We spent weeks planning exactly when we'd do it, the fun we'd have, the girls we wanted to be around, the music we'd listen to, but in the end we decided to take the pills on a cold Tuesday night in the empty parking lot of a rundown bowling alley. We had unknowingly left the headlights on; that, and the fact that our car was idling outside a business that had been closed for six months, was enough to catch the attention of a state trooper passing by. The officer found the bag in the center console, and we were arrested and charged with felony possession of a narcotic with intent to traffic. I knew at that moment that my life was over, but when I looked at Michael in the backseat of the police car, it was if nothing had happened, it was if he didn't have a care in the world.

Michael's father called a college friend—a lawyer in New York City—and Michael, based on some discrepancy in the paperwork, had his charges dropped, while I found myself in court accepting a guilty plea, because my lawyer—a court appointed attorney that I never once saw before sentencing—was too busy with her other cases to notice the error that Michael's lawyer had. That was when I understood why Michael was so unfazed by the arrest—he knew all along that he would get off, not because of any sort of work ethic he had, or because he thought karma was going to repay him for some good deed he'd done, but because he knew that his father would get him the best lawyer money could buy.

* * *

Juan knocked on my door and peered inside the stable. "I no see?" he said, his graying hair a mess in the morning light. Behind him were a dozen other guys from the track, outcasts some would say, men who had lived hard lives—the track was rife with drugs and alcohol, and paychecks rarely lasted until the end of the month—but they were more of a family than I'd ever had, a community linked by flaws and the constant belief that at any moment our luck might change.

"Now's not a good time," I said, but Juan stepped inside anyway.

He was a thin man with cheekbones big as clementines. He had immigrated to the U.S. two years ago, having left his family behind in the Dominican Republic. He talked about them a lot, about how hard it is to love someone you never see, how you forget things about them because they're not there, little things like the sound of their laugh and the way they hold your hand, but that when you do see them, whether it's in a photograph or a dream, how real they once again become.

I handed him the magnifying glass and he bent down to take a look. He spent several minutes examining my mare, paying close attention to her hind legs, to where the majority of her speed comes from, and then he turned to me, nonchalantly, like it was something he had seen a thousand times before, maybe not the size of the horse, but the impossibility of success in a world built to keep people like us out.

"Is real?" he said.

"I think so," I said. "It's breathing."

Juan did the sign of the cross, and I wondered if he was praying for me, or praying for a world where miniature horses didn't exist. A moment later, he leaned against the stable and lit a cigarette. "They ask me to ride Goodnight Falls," he said.

Goodnight Falls was the most celebrated horse the sport of racing had seen in years, and Juan, based on his recent winning streak, had the honor of riding her for the annual Van Brooker Grocery Invitational—a race with a first place prize of \$25,000. If he won, he'd be given twenty percent of the purse, enough, he said, to move his entire family to America.

"You don't sound happy," I said, shielding my eyes from the sunlight.

"Is a lot of pressure," he said.

"You'll do fine," I said, and I meant it. Juan was the most talented jockey I'd ever seen.

"You should throw a big party once your family gets here. What's that thing you always used to eat?"

"Tostones and chimichurris," he said, picturing the feasts his wife prepared around the holidays.

"Yeah, that's it," I said. "Cook a whole pot of it. Make 'em feel at home."

* * *

I started calling her "Bullet" despite it taking my mare over twelve hours to finish one lap. That night, when I got back from the bar, I rang Liza. It took me three tries, but I was finally able to hide my slurring long enough to make sense. Bullet had come down with a fever, at least that was my best guess. She wasn't moving much, and she wouldn't touch her food—a single kernel of popcorn that I had pocketed at the Post Time bar.

"Where is she?" Liza said, stepping inside the stable in curlers and a nightgown—a long flowery sheet of fabric that looked better suited for a woman twice her age.

“Over there,” I said before realizing that I couldn’t remember which corner of the stall my mare was in.

Liza had gone to veterinary school at Finger Lakes Community College, but dropped out when she learned about the final exam, the part where she would have to euthanize a sick calf. While she always said that she didn’t regret her decision, I never believed her. Once I saw her try to hide re-enrollment papers in the glove box of her car.

Liza crawled across the splintered floorboards with a stethoscope in hand, tossing empty bottles of liquor and food wrappers aside, until she found Bullet lying on a thin cotton swab.

“It’s bigger than she is,” Liza said, holding the chrome diaphragm in front of my mare. “I can’t tell what sounds are coming from her heart, or her digestive track.” Liza pried Bullet’s lips open with a pair of tweezers, and then with the delicate balance of a surgeon, raised the magnifying glass as she picked at my mare’s mouth. “Gums don’t look good,” she said. “And gums say a lot about a horse’s general health.”

“What’s the matter with her?” I said, wiping the glow of liquor from my lips.

“It’s hard to know for sure,” Liza said. “We didn’t learn about horses this small in school.” She thought for a moment. “Maybe you should talk to her previous owner.”

I navigated my way through the maze of horse trailers and grooming harrows until I arrived at the track cafeteria—a small brick building with daily offerings that were a far cry from the food served in the luxury boxes. The racing director was eating a liverwurst sandwich on two slices of rye. This was a routine he never broke. I spotted him from across the room, blinking hard and mumbling to himself, and I wondered if this was because he’d had too much coffee, or the more dire reason that nobody ever wanted to talk about—the fact that the track had recently posted its worst attendance record in years, and what had once been one of the most popular spectator sports in the world had begun a backward slide into oblivion.

“I need to know where you got her,” I said, placing a Styrofoam cup on the table.

“Got who?” he said.

“Bullet,” I said.

“Who’s that?” he said.

I removed the plastic lid from the cup and my mare trotted out.

“Oh, right,” he said. “I’m not supposed to say.”

As if playing my best card, I leaned in closer. “But I paid good money for her.”

The racing director smiled, dabbing the corners of his mouth with a soiled napkin. “The money you paid wasn’t for the cost of the horse,” he said. “It was so I wouldn’t tell you about the man selling the horse.”

“So it’s a man?” I said.

“Or a woman,” he said. “He paid me to keep it a secret.”

“You said ‘he,’” I said, and then I realized what I had to do, and I

hated it because it would put me in a bad situation, but all I'd ever wanted was a thoroughbred in this sport of kings where the royal families sipped mint juleps and paraded about in fancy hats, men and women with such wealth that these mares were merely a hobby, a Sunday event, a summer fling, but for me it was my life, and she was all I had, and if I wanted Bullet to survive, if I wanted her to compete, I had no choice but to hand over two months of my salary for a single address.

"I don't accept bribes," the racing director said, tapping his finger on the table to a song in his head.

"What if you circle his name in the phone book and I happen to find it?"

He thought for a moment, and then spit a slug of tobacco by his feet.

"Make it three months," he said.

* * *

I flipped through over four hundred pages in the phone book, eyes tracing each line for what three months of my pay had just gone toward, until I found an address circled on the very last page, around the very last name—Andre Zzachariah.

The ranch was an hour's drive from the track in a Mennonite town. I asked Liza for a ride, and after an extended detour, and having to stop twice for a cigarette break—Liza never smoked in her truck, she said it decreased the resale value—we finally came across a sprawling white fence that surrounded three acres of perfectly manicured grass. Within it, white and black thoroughbreds galloped through the velvet dusk. Liza parked next to a decorative wheelbarrow overflowing with lush marigolds, and we approached the freshly-painted house, thick black shutters waving in the evening breeze.

I slammed the iron door knocker four times, which was appropriately shaped like a horseshoe, and I was raising it for a fifth when a man who stood a solid 6'8" with wire framed spectacles and long silver hair pulled into a ponytail answered.

"I'm sorry to just show up like this," I said, rubbing my left eye with the palm of my hand, "but I was hoping we could talk."

"How do you know I speak English?" he said.

"Because you are right now?" I said.

"But what if these are the only words I know?" he said.

Andre Zzachariah was a peculiar man. He led us through his house, of which nearly every inch of wall space was covered with framed photographs of championship horses; most I believed to have been bred on this very farm.

"I know why you came," he said as we exited a screen door and made our way toward a large white barn. On its roof, an iron weather vane swung to the east.

The barn was empty, save for a miniature replica of his farm, which

sat in a display case on top of a metal table. It reminded me of the type of diorama you'd see in an architect's office or some type of government building, one that detailed the wonder of what you were lucky enough to be standing within.

Andre opened a drawer beneath the table, and I tried to look inside, but his movements were quick, like the hands of a puppeteer, and all I could make out were two small piles of what I believed to be minced oats and hay, and a small well of water from which he drew a single drop with an eyedropper.

Liza huddled around the diorama and watched, her mouth agape, as Andre lowered a jeweler's magnifying glass over his eye and squeezed the rubber nub of the eyedropper into a series of miniature buckets attached to the fence.

"Let me guess," Andre said without looking up, "now that you have her, you don't know what to do with her?"

"Can I trade her for something else?" I said.

"You cannot," he said.

"But she's sick," I said.

"You're sick," he said.

"This is bullshit," I said.

"No," Andre said, using a miniature shovel to scoop the perimeter of the fence, "it's horse shit." He tapped the pellets into a wastebasket, and then lowered the glass case on top of the diorama.

At this point I realized that I hadn't heard Liza speak since she entered the barn. She stood with her face pressed against the glass, watching a dozen miniature thoroughbreds gallop within the white fence.

"I don't normally do this," Andre said, "but I just received a copy from the printer this morning and I could use a proofreader."

Andre Zzachariah handed me a small book that was the size of a wallet and just as thick. On the cover there was a line drawing of a horse standing next to a matchstick. Beneath it, in large black letters it read: INSTRUCTION MANUAL.

I looked up at the tower of a man as he polished his glasses on his flannel shirt.

"Why do you breed such small horses?" I said.

Andre paused for a moment and then spoke as if it was a question he'd been asked all of his life. "Because they make me look taller," he said.

* * *

As the lights of the track came into view, I asked Liza to stop at a liquor store so I could buy some vodka, enough to make me forget about Andre Zzachariah and his miniature ranch inside a ranch.

"I reenrolled at FLCC," Liza said as I raised the bottle to my lips. "They said my credits were still good."

"Do you have to quit the track?" I said.

"I'm gonna start with night classes," she said. "I'm hoping the

racing vet will let me shadow her. You know, like a work study.”

“I don’t see why not,” I said. The track vet was a frail woman who always dressed in denim—denim shirts, denim pants, even denim sneakers—and constantly complained about her arthritic wrists. My guess was she’d welcome the help.

“I’m going to major in miniaturization,” Liza said just as I thought the conversation had ended.

“I didn’t know there was such a thing,” I said.

“I did some research,” she said. “You wouldn’t believe how many types of small animals there are. Maybe not as small and rare as your horse, but close. The speckled padloper tortoise, the pygmy marmoset, the bumblebee bat.” She then turned to me with the biggest smile I’d ever seen. “There’s even one called the royal antelope.”

Liza dropped me off at the track and I proceeded to stay up through the night, polishing off the bottle of vodka while trying to comprehend the first chapter of the instruction manual, which was exhaustingly titled: “Principle Fundamentals of Inhabitation for a Miniature Equine Species in a Maximized World.” It gave me a headache, but I was at least able to understand enough of it to know that the first thing I had to do was build Bullet her own stable. The one we were staying in, which served better as a shelter for me than it did for her, was too big to keep my mare safe.

Juan came over to help with the structural design. Before he became a jockey, Juan did demolition in the Dominican Republic, working on the all-inclusive resorts that dotted their shores. He said that the best way to learn how to build something is to disassemble it first, and I wondered if such a theory worked on humans, or if it was saved for anatomies of wood and concrete.

We built the miniature stable out of paper clips, and when the roof was finished, I lined the floorboards with five strands of hay. Bullet was already showing signs of improvement. Her fever had gone down, and she was eating more, which I should thank the manual for, because under the “Essential Nutritional Properties for a Prolonged and Productive Miniature Equine Existence” section it recommended that I sprinkle a single oat with a few grains of sugar to help balance her glucose levels.

I passed out shortly after Juan left. I thought the liquor would be enough to keep me under, but I woke in the early hours covered in sweat, having dreamt that I rolled over my mare and killed her in my sleep. I sparked my lighter and raised the magnifying glass to my eye. Bullet was still alive. She looked at me and whinnied before lowering her head into the bottle cap that I was using as her feed bucket.

I started working her out in the mornings, and when her times improved, I asked the racing director if he would let me enter my mare in a race. He immediately dismissed the idea, saying that she was too much of a liability, and that the odds would be so bad that no one in their right mind would ever bet on her. And if people weren’t placing bets, then the track wasn’t making money, which we all knew it desperately needed to do. We got into it after that, one of those heated arguments that people on

the street stop to watch, as if the fury of man is some spectacle to behold. All I wanted was a chance, and he wouldn't give me that, he wouldn't even consider it.

The next day, I watched Juan ride Goodnight Falls around the track. It was the place to be. All the guys were there. I even caught sight of the racing director peering out of his trailer as Goodnight Falls hugged the rail and accelerated toward the finish line.

She was the type of horse an owner dreams of, standing like a giant alongside the other thoroughbreds, her hinds legs thicker than most of their torsos. Goodnight Falls had never lost a race in her career, and her owner, Sebastian LeFranc, a retired investment banker with a large birthmark on his forehead in the shape of a crescent moon, had already been contacted by the governor of the Preakness Stakes about entering her in this year's Triple Crown.

Another minute and I would have seen it, but I had bent down to retie my shoe when I heard the sound. When you've been around racing as long as I have, you know it when you hear it. Not a crunch, but an explosion. All the hours, all the money and talent, lost as the bone itself.

The vet shuffled onto the track in a denim jumpsuit, and I almost couldn't watch as Liza followed in her wake, a duffle bag slung over her shoulder. The vet had agreed to let Liza shadow her, and I knew as well as she did that what was about to happen next was exactly the reason Liza had dropped out of school all those years ago. The vet felt around Goodnight Falls' leg, which hung like a rubber band between two sycamore trees, and after her diagnosis was confirmed, Liza held up a black blanket for privacy as the vet administered a gulping syringe of pentobarbital.

And like that it was over. All of it. When you're in the moment, you can't fully comprehend the impact of tragedy, you're too consumed by the shock and chaos of the event, but when it all slows down and the fog clears, you begin to see the profound affect that one man's loss has on those around him—a ripple with many rings.

* * *

It was twelve years to the day when I saw Michael Albright again. His father had taken him out of our school after the arrest, and sent him to a private academy where everyone wore blue suit jackets and plaid ties. Michael had stopped by the track on his way through town with several of his coworkers. He was a lawyer now. He said that the events of that day had changed his life for the better, that it made him realize the importance of the law and our responsibility to do what is right and just. But I didn't believe him for a second—he kept getting nosebleeds, and it wasn't from the altitude.

Michael had requested one of the luxury boxes seated above the track. He didn't recognize me at first. I hadn't aged well. I had put on some weight and lost the majority of my hair. Despite my animosity for what had happened, I decided to go up and see him, holding on to the same glimmer

of hope that I once had, the one where Michael Albright lifted me out of my slum and took me to wherever he was lucky enough to be going. And while we talked for a while, catching up on lost time, we soon ran out of things to say, like strangers do. It was clear to the both of us that whatever friendship we once had, whatever connection we shared, had long passed. Michael had moved on. He had a new life now, one that was set for him before he took his first breath.

* * *

I spent weeks trying to raise Juan's spirits. I taped pictures of palm trees and the city of Santo Domingo to his locker. For lunch I convinced the cooks to prepare a meal of tostones and chimichurris. I found an old Juan Luis Guerra record and played it in the cafeteria. It wouldn't fix what had happened, but at least it was something, at least it made him smile.

The next thing I knew the Van Brooker Invitational was here and I was being told that the entries needed extended workout hours, which meant that Bullet could no longer use the track. "There's something else," the racing director said, appearing outside my stable, a lump of tobacco in his bottom lip.

"And Jimmy, I hate to do this to you—"

"Alan," I said.

"What's that?"

"My name's Alan," I said.

"What'd I call you?"

"Jimmy," I said.

"Listen, Jimmy. I'm gonna need the stall back. We're running low on 'em with the race and all."

I was being kicked out of my home, which wasn't the first time, and certainly wouldn't be the last. Fortunately, the great thing about the track is that the day never really ends. There's always a race happening somewhere, and for that reason, the simulcasting room will always be open, always have the TVs on, yellow-eyed men seated about, betting every last nickel of their paychecks, addicted not to the wins or the losses, but to the rush of predicting a future in a world where they had lost all control.

I took a seat at one of the booths that overlooked the track and removed the Styrofoam cup from my bag. I opened the plastic lid, letting Bullet trot out onto the countertop. She scuffed her hoofs on the table, kicking a few grains of pepper behind her as if it was dirt on the raceway. I wondered if she understood the severity of the recent events—the fact that we no longer had a place to live, and that without a paycheck, it would be increasingly difficult to care for her.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the silhouette of a man with his head in his hands. "You all right?" I said to Juan, moving across from him. But he didn't answer; the sobbing overtook him like a natural force, snot stringing from his nose. He wiped the mess on his sleeve like a child, and that only made him cry harder, because it reminded him of his daughters

back home.

“I fucked up, mano,” he said.

“It wasn’t your fault,” I said.

“She going to leave me,” he said. And maybe he was right. Maybe his wife would leave him for another man, or maybe she already had, and for all these years she’d just been stringing Juan along, holding two ends of the rope, hoping that one would lead her toward a better life. It was impossible to know for sure, but over the years I’d learned that the best thing to do in situations like this is to lie. Not for reasons of malice, but out of kindness. To give him that false sense of hope that he so desperately needed, to tell him not to worry, to tell him the magic words:

“Everything’s going to be all right.”

* * *

I woke up with my head on the table in the simulcasting room. The cashier had let me stay the night. I wanted to leave him a couple bucks as a thank you, but after checking my pockets, I realized that I didn’t have a dollar to my name.

I stepped outside and took a sip from my flask, inhaling the autumn air. It was a quarter to nine. The race would be starting any moment now, and I wondered where Liza was, and if she was preparing herself for what another day could bring.

The turnout was poor. Without a horse like Goodnight Falls—the closest thing to a celebrity this track had ever seen—there wasn’t much reason to attend. I didn’t know if I would have a job next season, or if the raceway would shutter and be turned into a casino like the state politicians were always threatening to do.

Clouds hung in place as if spread across the clothing line of a god. I took a seat in the stands and let the sun warm my face. Ticket holders were studying their racing sheets, measuring the black and white stats against the colored stripes of the riders and the horses they waved upon. Fathers held their children over the railings, binoculars skimming the ground, unsure of where to look, afraid of what they would miss if they looked away. I held the Styrofoam cup in my hands and imagined a world where the impossible exists, where guys like us have a fair chance, and then when it was time, when the horses were loaded in the post and the starter pistol sounded, I opened the lid, and just like everyone else, I watched.

GARY JOSEPH COHEN

“MIMOSA”

There is but one true love and her explosion
of moons wilting in the aftermath,

a ripped backdrop of woods unrolled behind,
a flimsy scrap of sky stapled to her soft limb.

She is my one true shade, our blooms
constellating out of spite, out of pity for the bills

trilling in the bushes, out of misery
and out of pleasure this matrimony, our knotty

toes dug into the damp earth for the riot,
our rattles shaking in the dry air for surrender.

JIM DAVIS

THE BARBER SHAVES HIS OWN FACE

Bonded now to strong-arm collection
in the backseat of a red Volkswagen,
an aging pug presses the bridge
of his nose as the edge of a curling
bandage clings to his oily skin.
Mishka, Russian Bear, High & Tight,
Clout & Hammer, they called him
before the ditch digger took his three best
dancing toes. He went to Rudy for five
bucks & Rudy trimmed around the scar
dividing his brow in two like the Volga
escaping the Caspian—he can't remember
but his babushka took him there to bathe
& a white stork landed gently in the reeds.

LARA DOLPHIN

“INFIELD WHY”

An **INFIELD WHY** is a fairish ball (not including a ball hit while the batter quotes Nixon’s undelivered moon address)

that can be caught by an infielder in the course of avoiding a beer-soaked dwile, when the first and second or first, second

and third bases are occupied by a player chewing whatever. (let’s go with “gum.”)

The pitcher, catcher and any outfielder who stations himself in the infield shall be considered to have his own hashtag for the duration of the play.

When it seems a ball will be an **INFIELD WHY**, the umpire shall immediately echo a great American poet by declaring, “Hit me, baby, one more time.”

The ball is alive, and runners may advance their personal celebrity causes at the risk of a Twitter backlash.

If an **INFIELD WHY** falls untouched to the ground and bounces foul before passing first or third base,

it is a foul ball and players who are married but looking may begin digging for the Swing Club Geocoin in centerfield.

As time reversal symmetry begins to take hold, players may engage in Yogic Toe Lock, change into Seattle Mariners uniforms

and debate about The International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor until such time as the Jumbotron flashes [Error: __#30245 NOT FOUND].

CARLEY GOMEZ

COPS AND COYOTES

I don't think I'm dumb. Every day in second grade reading class Matt Hernandez calls me a dumb turd but I don't think it's true. Sometimes, when Mrs. Brooks (she's Mexican too but she married a gringo) isn't looking, Matt steals my notebook and writes it on top of one of my practice exercises. He laughs at me when I try to erase it because sometimes he uses a pen. If Mrs. Brooks is gone for too long, Matt keeps talking. He says that he bets I can't even read what he wrote. I lie and say that I can. I don't care, but if my father sees the words, he'll think I wrote them and I'll get in trouble.

Today I'm extra nervous because my mom is meeting with Mrs. Brooks. Mrs. Brooks said she had something to tell my mom. She said everything was fine but I don't think that's true. She kept me in during our break to tell me, and even though she said I was a good boy, she didn't look so happy. I hope Mrs. Brooks doesn't think I'm dumb too. She has pretty, long black hair and her clothes always smell like the lemon soap my mom uses in the kitchen.

* * *

My mom tells me to play outside while she's talking to the teacher but there isn't much to do. Sometimes we make forts in the playground. We tear down small branches under mesquite trees to make room under the shade and the girls use brooms made of bushes to sweep out the sharper rocks so that we can sit down. When the big kids are still inside, I like playing. We play Cops and Coyotes. The coyotes hide in the forts and run for the fences at the edge of the school and the cops try to get the coyotes before they get to the fence. I don't like being the hiding coyote.

But today, it's late in the day and the big kids are out on their lunch break. I volunteer to be a coyote with Donny because he wants to be a coyote today. We go to a fort far away from where the big kids eat. Some of them are not so bad but Jorge's older sister, Vicky, and her friends always try to take my stuff. She says very bad things about my mom because my mom doesn't speak spanish. Then she takes my lunch money because she says that whores have enough to spread it around some. I don't know what that means but I know it's bad because when Donny hears it he gets really mad. I can't hit her like I want to because her friends hold me down. I never cry, even when it hurts real bad. I will not cry in front of a girl. Once my mom had to sew up my elbow because they held me down too hard. I made my mom promise not to tell my father. It was too embarrassing.

This time Donny and I hide from Vicky the whole time my mom is inside with the teacher. I watch the trailer door while she's in there. I know it's

a long time because I really have to go to the bathroom and pressing my legs together isn't helping much. Donny and I pick apart bean pods that the girls didn't sweep out and he tells me about his nana while we wait. Donny talks a lot but I like to hear about his nana since I don't have one.

He tells me that sometimes she makes special coffee for him when she's babysitting even though his parents don't let him have any. She puts a whole spoonful of condensed milk in it and it tastes so sweet that he doesn't even have to ask for more. And she gives the best hugs because she's squishy all over. I think Mrs. Brooks' hugs are the best even though she's hard in a lot of places, but I don't argue. If I argue he stops talking and we haven't even gotten to the part about how she plays board games with him. I like that part. I like to pretend that I have a nana to play games with while my parents are at work.

* * *

I see my mom coming out of the school trailer and I tell Donny that I have to go. I run to her even though lunch break is over and the big kids are all inside now. She doesn't look very happy and it makes me sad. I hope that Mrs. Brooks doesn't think I'm dumb. I try really hard. Even though I write the letters really slow and keep switching my hands by accident, I always say I'm sorry. My father says that I'm lazy but I don't think I'm lazy. I write for so long sometimes that the letters even seem to be moving. I told him that once but I don't do that anymore.

My mom sends me to the bathroom before we leave. After I'm done, she holds my hand and we walk to the bus stop. It's right by the school so we don't have to go very far. The closest stop to our house is a mile away though. Sometimes in the summer I wish I had a bike or a scooter because it gets so hot that my skin feels like it's baking. It's October now though.

I ask my mom what Mrs. Brooks said. She says that Mrs. Brooks thinks that I'm very special and smart. I feel a little better, but my mom doesn't smile when she tells me this. I say ok and then my mom keeps talking. She says that Mrs. Brooks wants to put me in a special class so that I can learn better. I nod but I don't understand. I tell my mom that if I'm smart how come I can't stay with my friends? She says I just can't.

* * *

My mom tells my father about what Mrs. Brooks said after dinner. I'm already in bed, but I can still hear them. My mom asked me once if I can hear them at night but I told her no. I didn't want her to think that I had been listening for a long time. Tonight I pull my blanket and pillow over my head. It just makes their voices sound blurry. I can hear my dad's voice get louder and louder.

After my dad says that I'm just lazy and there's nothing I need besides a lot of discipline and perspective in life, he starts talking about when he was a kid. I hear a lot about when he was a kid late at night. He talks about the blisters he had on his feet from walking. He talks about how his stomach felt

at night when he had to go to bed without eating. Tonight my mom doesn't let him keep saying these things. She says that I have some kind of disorder. I don't know what disorder it is but I think it must be really bad because my father is quiet. There isn't even any smashing sounds or anything. This makes me nervous so I hope they will start talking more.

I start to get tired and my head hurts from holding my eyes open. I hear my mom say that they might be able to make me better and then I don't remember anything else.

* * *

The new class is not very fun. It starts during break and lasts the rest of the day except for lunch. I don't think I'm like anyone in the class. One of them is a mean girl that pokes my head and takes my pencil a lot. When I try to take the pencil back she cries and says that I stole it. The new teacher, Mr. Robles, takes her side and makes me give her the pencil. I have to take it back when she goes to the bathroom since I only have one pencil. But it's ok because she doesn't notice. When she comes back she pokes someone else and says that it's her brother Tod's birthday. She also says that he has a penis.

On the third day I have this class, Matt finds out. He calls me a dumbfuck. He says he heard his dad saying it to one of his workers, but I heard from Stacy that Matt's dad doesn't have any people working for him, and that someone said it to Matt's dad.

When break starts I stay inside and go to Mrs. Brooks. I hate the class so much that I ask her to let me stay with my friends in this class. That I don't like it with the other kids. But she says no and that the other class is good for me. I want to cry but other kids are still in the room. I tell her that I will work ten times harder and that I will learn to be smart, and to please not send me to Mr. Robles' class. She bends down and puts her hand on my head. She tells me that it's only for a little while and says that I have to go or I'll be late.

I go to the new class and there is a new boy in there. He's bigger than me and looks a little scary because he has a scar that goes from his forehead to his chin on the left side of his face. He's sitting by my seat though so I say hello when I sit down. He asks if I am bad too. I tell him that I don't think so but is that who this class is for, bad kids? And I want to cry again because I try very hard to be a good kid. He says that he's here because he's bad, but that it's for stupid kids too. I tell him I'm not that either. He says I have to be one or the other so I'd better pick one fast. I don't know what to pick but then the teacher walks in so I don't have to answer.

* * *

The new kid's name is Lenny. He's in regular class with me too. I try to be friends with him, but he isn't nice to Mrs. Brooks. He throws gum wrappers at her and says bad words, but he hits Matt when Matt tries to take my workbook. When we have lunch break he sits with Donny and me in our fort. Some days he likes the fort and helps us add on but other days he is angry and

breaks things. Yesterday he broke the door that Donny made out of branches and some string he brought from art class. I was mad, but I didn't want to upset Lenny. Lenny and Donny got in a big fight and now they won't talk to each other. It makes break hard because it's Friday and we talk about the weekend on Fridays.

Lenny says that it's stupid to talk about the weekend, but I tell him it's fun because you can make stuff up. I ask Lenny if he'll spend time with his parents this weekend and he says no. Lenny says that his mom and him live at his aunt's home now because his dad left.

I want to know why his dad left but I don't ask because my mom says that sometimes dads just do. Donny asks though and Lenny says that a bad man threatened to stick his dad's head in a cooler like those gringos pretended the drug people already do. Lenny says that he didn't know what his dad did to make them mad, but that his little brother peed himself on the new couch when it happened. And that the bad people had guns and hit their dad with one. Then his dad went away and his mom said it wasn't safe to stay there, so they had to go to his aunt's house.

Lenny smiles and puts his hands on his hips like it's cool but I think it sounds scary. Donny's eyes are bigger than I've ever seen them. I ask Lenny if he misses his dad. He says no and spits on the ground making bubbles on the dirt.

* * *

My father calls me lazy a lot now, even when my notebook doesn't have bad words in it. I wish he wouldn't because I'm doing so much extra work. My mom says that I'm working hard though. Every Friday when she gets home from work she doesn't do anything until she gets my progress report. She doesn't even go pee or take off her jacket first. She comes straight to my room and opens the closed envelope I hand her. Then she kisses me on the cheek for each star I get. She calls them motivation and I say that I like that motivation. I told Mrs. Brooks that kisses are motivation for my gold stars and she kissed her fingers and put them on my cheek. I really liked it, but Donny and Lenny were watching so I laughed and wiped it off and ran away.

My mom shows my father the gold stars and he asks me if I'm out of the retard class yet. I tell him that I'm not and he says that I need to work harder, unless I want to stand out in the heat for ten hours a day. He says he didn't bring me and my mom to this nice neighborhood so that I could be dumb and lazy and not try for life, because life is worth trying for. I tell him that I'll try harder and he pulls back his chair and pats his leg for me to go sit on his lap. I sit down on his leg and grab the hem of his work shirt. It smells like swimming pools, the good kind, like the one at Donny's house, not like the one with all those strangers and the 'no jumping' signs.

* * *

In my special class there's a boy that's a lot smaller than I am. His name is Juan. He has arms that look like the bean pods that Donny and I take apart. They're even kind of green. He wears a funny helmet all the time. Lenny says that it looks like a wrestling helmet but I don't think so. His helmet is purple. Lenny decides to ask Juan if his helmet is a wrestling helmet while Mr. Robles is out of the classroom. Juan says it's not. Lenny asks why he wears it then. Juan says it's because sometimes he falls down. Lenny says that's stupid. But I feel bad for Juan. He scratches all up and down his bean pod arms and I think they must be from falling.

After Mr. Robles comes back into the classroom, he checks to make sure that Martha is still in her chair because sometimes she has seizures and falls over. Then he tells everyone to start their independent exercises. I copy words in my workbook and Lenny whispers to me that he hates Juan. I ask why because I think Juan seems nice. He says that weenies like that make him sick. I don't think Juan's a weenie but I don't say anything.

While I wait in the lunch line I look to see where Juan is sitting and I see that he's alone in the back of the room. I tell Donny and Lenny that I'm going to ask him to sit with us. Lenny says that he's not going to eat with us. I don't see Lenny again for the rest of the day.

When I get home from school my father is already home. He doesn't smell like swimming pools today; he smells like milk that's gone bad. He looks mad when I open the door and I get scared but I walk inside anyway. He asks if I'm still retarded and I don't answer because I don't know. I try to act normal and put away my jacket and my backpack, but when I walk past him, he grabs my arm and says that if I don't do better he'll teach me a lesson that's real easy to learn. He says what the fuck is he doing all day if I don't even give a fuck. I get real scared and don't move and don't say anything because I don't know the answer. He lets go of me and tells me to go to my room.

* * *

I go to the bathroom on the way to lunch. Lenny and Juan are with me, but I tell them to go without me and that I'll meet them in line. When I walk outside there are not very many people around, just a bunch of cacti. I hurry to the lunchroom hoping that all the good food isn't gone. When I walk inside, there are lot of students already sitting down. I see Vicky and her friends and Vicky sees me. I try to keep the tables between us, but she grabs the back of my shirt. She says my mom is a bitch and pushes me against a wall. I try to push back but her friends grab me. One is a guy and he's really strong. She tells me to give her my money but her friend is holding my hands so I can't, even if I wanted to. She slaps me and I feel my eyes burning. She raises her hand again, but before she can swing, I see Lenny tackling her.

Vicky's head cracks against the floor and Lenny sits on top of her stomach. Her friends are so surprised and they don't do anything. Lenny calls her a fucking cunt and slaps her. And then he slaps her again. Juan and Donny run over and Lenny punches her in the mouth. I hear Vicky moan and blood bubbles out from between her teeth. Lenny hits her again and tells her not to

touch his friends. I yell and tell Lenny to stop, but he brings his fist against her ear. I grab his arm and pull him away from Vicky. He stands up.

There's blood on my hands and I don't know how it got on me. I feel nauseas and rub the red off with my shirt and step back from Lenny. Donny is yelling for a teacher and Lenny tells him to shut his mouth. Juan is crying. I tell Lenny that he shouldn't have done that. He says that men take care of things and that he is a man. I tell him that I hate him and that I don't want to talk to him again. Lenny runs away before a teacher comes and none of us tell on him.

* * *

Lenny and I don't talk for a long time. Even in our class, I only talk to Juan. I miss hanging out with Lenny, but I don't know what to say. Then on Friday, Mrs. Brooks pulls me aside before my special class. She says that I've really improved and that I'll be staying here today. I'm really happy, but I like having class with Juan and even Lenny. I ask her if they can stay in this class too and she says no. I get sad but I know I will see them at lunch so I say ok and sit back down in my regular class seat. Matt sticks his tongue out at me.

By lunchtime, I wish I was back in class with Lenny and Juan. I even miss the girl that steals my pencil. I meet them outside of the special class and Lenny says oh, he's not too cool for us after all. I'm really glad that Lenny has said something and I say no, I want to hang out with him. Lenny tries to look mad but I can see that he's smiling. We go to get lunch and Lenny says that he didn't mean to hurt that girl so bad. She wears a cast on her arm now. The teachers never found out Lenny did it. I think Vicky and her friends are scared of him.

None of us has anything to say so we find a table and wait for Donny to come sit with us. Donny brings his lunchbox to the table and asks Lenny how he got that scar. I tell Donny that it's rude to ask about his face like that, but Lenny says it's a cool story. He says that one of the bad men was having problems with his dad and wanted to send his dad a message. So when Lenny was on his way home from his bus stop a couple years ago, a green car pulled up next to him and a man with a face tattoo got out. The man pulled out a knife and slashed him in the face saying that Lenny's dad was a bastard. Lenny says it happened so fast he didn't even feel it until the man drove away. Then he says it felt like his face was on fire and he couldn't remember how to walk.

* * *

The next day at school, Lenny isn't there. Mrs. Brooks keeps me in class again and tells me that I won't have to go to that special class at all anymore. She says that I passed the workbook exercises and that if I keep working hard my reading level will be the same as the other students. She says I should be really happy but I'm sad that I won't be with Lenny and Juan anymore. Donny and I work together during class. I eat lunch with Juan and Donny in our fort but it isn't very fun.

Mrs. Brooks sends me home with a note and I give it to my mom after school. She opens it in the kitchen and she starts to cry. I say don't be sad, mom, I'll do better, I promise. And she says that I've done very well. She sets me on a stool and brings me a piece of chocolate. She leans over the sink and keeps crying. I ask her what's wrong. She says that Lenny won't be coming to school anymore. I ask if he got in trouble and she says no. I tell her that I don't understand and she says that there is a lot of stuff that no one understands and that I have to be a good boy, ok? I tell her I will, but I still don't understand why my friend won't be at school anymore.

* * *

Kids all talk about where Lenny is the next day. Vicky's brother, Jorge, says that he was hauled off to juvi. But I don't think that's true. I ask Mrs. Brooks and she says she can't say. But he was one of my best friends and I want to know so I ask her again. Mrs. Brooks gets mad and tells me to mind my own business.

At lunch time, I go to the special classroom with Donny and wait for Juan. Another teacher is talking to Mr. Robles outside of the classroom. I hear them say Lenny's name and I tell Donny to be quiet and to hide. I hear Mr. Robles say that they found Lenny's mom and that they attacked her. Mr. Robles says that Lenny is hurt, but that the police took him away. Mr. Robles says that Lenny tried to stop the attackers and they knocked him out with the side of a gun. I hear the other teacher start to cry. Donny is shaking and I want to find out more. I want to know what will happen to Lenny and if he'll come back to school and if he'll be ok. I'm angry at these people that hurt Lenny. I start to walk to Mr. Robles to find out more, but Donny grabs my shirt and pulls me back. I ask him what he's doing. He says that I'll get in trouble. I tell him that I don't care, that Lenny is my friend. I pull my shirt out of Donny's hand and run to Mr. Robles.

I tell Mr. Robles to tell me what happened to Lenny. He bends forward and asks if I've been eavesdropping. I tell him that he was being loud and that I could hear him and then I tell him to tell me what happened to Lenny again. He ignores me and turns back to the other teacher. The other teacher looks at me but then ignores me too. They start to talk about their next classes.

I'm so angry and I just want to know if my friend is ok. I don't know why they won't just tell me that he's ok. Donny walks up behind me and I start yelling at Mr. Robles to tell me if Lenny's ok and that he's my best friend and that I need to know where he is so I can help him. And then I can't help it, I start to cry. I'm so embarrassed and so angry that I hit Mr. Robles in the thigh. Donny pulls at my shirt and I sit down on the ground. I yell that I need to know where Lenny is so that I can go to him, so that I can be a man and help him.

Mr. Robles says something to Donny that I can't hear and Donny walks away. Mr. Robles turns to me and says that he's going to treat me like an adult but that I have to act like one. I stand up and Mr. Robles leads me to his classroom. The room's walls are covered in colored construction paper. He tells me to sit at a desk and he walks to the front of the classroom. He pulls

out a pack of cookies from his desk and hands them to me. I don't unwrap the cookies. I ask him where Lenny is.

Mr. Robles sits on the edge of a desk and he tells me that he doesn't know where Lenny is. He tells me that sometimes when parents can't protect their kids, the kids have to be sent somewhere else. He says that Lenny is ok but that we won't know where he is for his and his mom's protection. I don't really understand why that would happen. I don't really know what to say either. Mr. Robles tells me to eat a cookie and that I can stay here as long as I want. I sit there for a long time and Mr. Robles stays with me. I take a bite of the cookie, but it doesn't really taste like anything. After I eat a cookie, I ask him if there is anything I can do to help Lenny, even without knowing where he is. Mr. Robles asks me what my religion is. I tell him that I'm Catholic. He says we can pray together. We ask God to watch over Lenny.

After school ends, Mrs. Brooks gives me another note for my mom. I really want to open it and get Donny to help me read it, but I know my mom will tell my father if I do. I run home from the bus stop and hand my mom the envelope and she opens it right away. She looks at it fast and then smiles and leans down to hug me. I ask her what it says. She says that I had all gold stars and that they're putting me back into regular class permanently. She gives me two pieces of chocolate and says wait until your father hears.

I ask her if the note says anything else about Lenny and she shakes her head and goes back into the kitchen. She says that my father will be very proud but I don't know why. All I did were my workbook exercises.

CASEY HAMPTON

WENDING EMBER AND ASH

He woke early, preemptively disengaging the brass striker from the double-bell alarm clock snicking on the pine nightstand. A dense fog glowed the windows snow-bright. His movements were quiet and measured. He slipper-stepped the heavy bedroom rug, and dressed in silence. Thick grey wool socks, dark green trousers, a checkered red and black wool shirt, grey suspenders, and a flat cap his wife had knitted. The bedroom door swung on oiled hinges as he slipped into the stubby hall that was crowded by cabinets and cupboards. He carried his shoes into the kitchen, and struck a fire in the iron stove. As the fire took, and the cedar started snapping, he pushed his shoes on, snugging the laces until the cold stiff leather gripped feet and ankles.

The six mice were first. Their dark eyes curiously glinted in the dawn light. The sturdy key was as long as wrist to elbow, and gleamed silver. Their sleek fur was downy and warm, and their tails twitched with each turn of the key. Seven perfect turns to mirror the moon cycle, and the silent clockwork gears began unwinding another lunation. One after the other, the six mice scurried into a small knothole behind the iron stove.

He'd crafted the thick-timbered barn using a keen eye, precise measuring, wood pegs, and a crosscut saw. He walked inside, climbed the twenty-eight pine steps, and picked up the first cat. Seven turns, and they were off, their calico coats glossy in the dim light as they slid like shadows round the loose emerald banks of hay. Seven turns each for the brindle hunting hounds, the sorrel and cream splotched cows, the ash grey geese, the vermilion feathered chickens, the chocolate sow and her twelve piglets, and the family of wood ducks near the reed-speared pond.

"Good morning," his wife said as he reentered the kitchen.

"Morning, my dear."

"Your lunch," she said, hoisting a black leather strap fastened to a wood box.

"Thank you," he said.

"Be careful?"

"I will." He shouldered the leather strap, and kissed his wife.

The day was sweaty in the sun, and cool in the spruce shade near a grassy bourn where he ate his lunch of apples, bread, cheese, and butter. He'd found the three poles he needed for braces early on, and spent the day falling, limbing, and peeling the straight-grained alder that held the lingering heat of day. The splintered ruby sun glazed the sky, and his breath smoked in the brittle autumn air as he trekked homeward.

Opening the kitchen door, he smelled cooling bread, baked apples, and cooked ham. He unslung the leather strap and set the wood

box on a chair. He checked the iron stove, added a length of dry maple, and walked to the deep porcelain kitchen sink. The pheasant green water pump handle was smooth and cool. He lathered his hands with soap; the scent of lavender and stone gentling his mind.

Curious, he moved into the hall and looked into the main room where a fire burned low. His wife sat sleeping in a chair with a sock draped over a leg, her sewing basket at her feet. He smiled, and stepped through the door. Four neat strides, and he stood behind the chair. Her hair glowed the firelight as he parted it at the back, and inserted the silver key into a hidden opening. Seven perfect turns to mirror the moon cycle, he loved her too much to ever tell.

She yawned. "My, you startled me. I drifted off."

"I love you," he said.

She smiled, "And I love you."

They ate in the warm kitchen. Slabs of dark-crustured buttered bread, tender ham, and baked apples splashed with rich cream. The iron stove pressed back the night chill as husband and wife shared their day.

He fell asleep watching the fire. His snores were quiet and regular. His wife waited. When his snores stopped, and his breathing stilled, she removed a shiny gold key from her sewing bag. She sighed as she stood, and walked behind him. She slipped the key into a hidden opening, turning seven times. She loved him too much to ever tell.

EILEEN HENNESSY

THOSE THAT ONCE

Under the covers of night, we sleep in our usual places, our dreams unheard by the speeding clouds. During the day we walk among things that soon will cross the road between here and not-here and never be heard from or seen again. *Here* is no longer the place where things that could be seen and heard now happen. A lot of our walkways, once long and uncovered so that everything could come to us freely, are now gone beyond the metes and bounds of the thundering earth, barred to us who stand quietly here, breathing in whatever is left to us to breathe.

CHELSEA KERWIN

ROUGH-TONGUED LOVE, LOVE
PINK & 60 LBS

No man could mourn browner or more tuck-eared,
or stretch his paws so straight and droop his neck for her
while she sleeps and evil blue dreams trick the lock.

To hear her mutter frantic nonsense and sweat-soak her sheets,
it takes his strut from him, it takes his cold-nosed delight.
When will she wake and leave the three spikes in her eye

behind, when will they walk together on the narrow path
past bakery and hospital smells and the chained black lab
at the top of the hill. When will he meet strange men in the street

and assault them with his huddling love, his lick and nip love,
his stranger-love most of all—astonishing, to her,
to see strange men twinkling at the click of him,

how his pink tongue sluices all hostile thoughts from the world.
Theirs is the un-nouned, un-verbed love that weeps off him
in tufts, like his shed hair floating through the air, dive-bombed

by finches and fat cardinals who want such softness
for their nests. The cramped hot nests of bodies
built with twigs, leaves, wrappers, pine needles, and his love.

RICHARD KROHN

POLLOS ENTEROS

Not because everything is wrong—
grateless blaze inches from sidewalk innocents,
row of coals more angrily orange than the birds
of paradise everywhere weed-wild among brush
and basura, the motor, cannibalized from some
ceiling fan, whirring an alternator belt that rotates
five spits with seven chickens on each, the mortar-
slapped, fat-charred blocks that wall it all;

not because ten feet beneath, a grey-green
stream plumbs the bowels of this Panama barrio
ringing with its bulla of jumpy children and thump-
accordion radio, the barren waiting room where
we behold the purgatory of the soon-to-be cooked,
already plucked and gutted, the fresh-sliced plantains
hand-scooped from scarred table and plunged
into deep fat, dried, smashed, then plunged again,
emerging as herds of paw-shaped patacónes,
flesh of potato, soul of banana;

not because Rodrigo, the chicken-man
himself, forever shirt-soaked, apron that can't
remember what white was, baseball cap cocked
backward to keep hair and bill from fire,
pokes and feeds the flames of split leña blanca,
his claim to fame and flavor, the morality play
of the birds turning in their non-graves, and he
the sole judge when each can be released;

no, only this: after agonies of slapstick
traffic, our car for once reeking more of sabor
than exhaust, the damp bag sitting in back
like a patient dignitary, after we get home,
carry it in and open the bag, each chicken piece
we pluck, every one of those golden patacónes
just tastes so damned good.

ANDREW NICKERSON

WHAT YOU SEE

The whole house hums. The door from the garage opens with a smack and Dad's shiny black work shoes click on the marble of the front hallway. My little sister Ginny yells out hello to him from the coffee table in the living room where she does her homework. He asks what his girl is up to and she explains how many sides different shapes have. She's smart for a first grader, but she doesn't understand how to play the game. It's probably better that she doesn't understand because when Dad comes home he's usually tired and doesn't have the energy to play with both of us. She sticks herself right out in front of him and runs up to hug him first thing, so he can move onto mom, and then me. He tells her to keep up the great work. Mom calls out hello to him from the kitchen, where she's tending the pork loin in the oven and looking over the mail at her desk.

I'm upstairs hiding in Mom and Dad's closet, behind Mom's dresses that hang to the floor like a curtain. Dad's work pants hang down black and blue from the opposite wall. I would never hide over there because I might wrinkle them by accident. Dad and I like to play a secret game that's only between us, and hiding is part of it. The closet is big enough to do jumping jacks in, so I can draw Dad in before he finds me, so that for a moment we're both in the same place, alone.

A banister looks down from the upstairs hallway into the family room like a balcony. I always crawl past the banister because Ginny's always down in the family room, and I know that if she sees me, she'll tell Dad and then there'll be no reason for him to come find me. Mom asks Dad how his day was and he says "Good" like always. Mom's dresses have a clean smell, and I like to run my hands over them because they're so soft.

Ginny laughs the way she does when Dad tickles her. She does it again and yells at him to stop. He says, "Ok, ok," but then she laughs and yells again and Mom says, "Ok Dad." He plays the game with Ginny too, but she doesn't get it. If she knew how to play, he wouldn't tickle her after she says stop. But I can't tell her to help her out. Dad didn't tell me. You just have to learn how to play.

His shoes click on the marble of the front hallway again. He stops quick and I grab the dress in front of me to hold it tight. I try to hold my breath to hear better but my heart's beating too fast and it thumps in my ears. The toilet off the front hallway flushes and then I hear Dad's shoes again. The stairs creak. He's on the carpeted hallway upstairs, coming to find me. He gets closer and closer but I can't hear because of the carpet. The dress shakes in my hands like a flag in the wind.

He's here! In the closet with me. I bite my teeth and stay as still as I can. He sits down on Mom's sweater chest and takes off his shoes. His

socked feet pool on the floor, hot and moldy and black. “Bren,” he says, and I jump in my skin. His voice booms flat and high on the other side of Mom’s dresses. “Your mother wants you to go set the table.”

“Ok Dad,” I say. I crawl out from under the dresses and stand next to him to make sure we’re in sync. To make sure that he knows I’m up in the game. I caught him. He looks at the wall behind me. No smile. Defeat. I make the same face back to him. Celebrating would open me up to being knocked down again. It’s like our secret code. I hide and he finds me and then we move on to dinner, which is always his.

* * *

The next night when Dad comes home from work, he shouts from the kitchen for me to come downstairs. I think he is being really smart, trying to trick me to come out, but I’m smart too. Smarter than Ginny or even Mom. So I stay right here where I am. He yells for me again. Then Mom yells my name, Ginny too. Like parrots. “Very tricky Dad,” I whisper. “Damn it Bren, if I have to come up there,” he yells. I grip the dress in front of me in excitement. Everyone is quiet and his shoes click-click-click hard on the marble floor. I hear my heart in my ears. The closet lights up. Dad’s long arm reaches into Mom’s dresses like a snake. I scream and shake all over. He’s trying harder than ever before. I giggle and move from side-to-side. I scream so loud as Dad yells my name. His knuckles shoot through the blue skirt my Mom wore to parent-teacher night. I lean out of their way and hit my chin hard against the wall. the carpet burns up my back as Dad drags me out from behind the dresses. I can barely see and have a headache. Mom is there too.

She drops down and pinches my face in her hands. Dad tells her about what happened. Through a sore and bloody lip, I say that my dad broke the rules.

“What rules?” he asks.

“No roughhousing,” Mom says and Dad turns bright red.

Mom cleans me up and then we go downstairs. Ginny holds up a shiny new soccer ball, still in its box, and says, “Surprise!” with a big know-nothing smile on her face. Mom says that she signed me up with the town soccer league, so that I could spend more time with other boys and make new friends.

* * *

My first soccer practice is Tuesday night. Dad drives me across town to the soccer fields and the whole time he and I are locked in the game. I’m not sure who is up because I had to wait for him in the family room with my uniform on, but then he yelled at me to get into the car because I had to go to the bathroom first. The best thing I can do is act like I’m up. Dad is still wearing his nice suit and tie. He listens to the news on the radio while I watch the trees pass by outside. Keeping in the game takes all of my atten-

tion because my stomach keeping biting into itself. I get the same feeling in school when Mrs. Haggins calls on me, which she does even though I never raise my hand.

We pull into the parking lot and the lights are already on over the fields. My stomach twists and I consider running back to the car. Dad walks me to the field where my team is practicing. For a second I think that he has messed up, walking me over instead of just dropping me off, but he is still in his nice suit, dressed better than the other parents dropping their kids off, and dressed better than the rumpled man who coaches the team in a sweatshirt and jeans. The rumpled man has his hands on his hips and shouts at the boys on the field: "Sherman, nice dribble! Michelson, hustle! Dupree, go for it! Don't look back. Focus on what you see!" I know the boys from school. They run around the field shouting and laughing as they kick the balls back and forth and at the goal. Right away I can tell that the better a kid is at soccer, the worse he is at the game. I make myself look away from them. I stay on the outside of the field line so that no one mistakes what game I'm playing. I almost grab for Dad's hand but make a fist just in time.

Dad and the rumpled man shake hands. "This must be Brendan," the rumpled man says. Dad chuckles and pats my back so hard that I almost fall over. The rumpled man leans in a bit toward me. "Whaddaya say there Bren? My boy Jeffrey tells me you're both in Mrs. Haggins' class." The rumpled man calls out for his son and a stocky boy with close-cut hair runs in from the field. Dad thanks the rumpled man for letting me play, since the league is already two weeks into the season. Most of these boys have played together since kindergarten. The rumpled man smiles at me with fat gummy teeth and says that I'll be a part of the team in no time. I don't like that he mentions Mrs. Haggins because that means they must know each other somehow.

During the first week of school, I was testing Mrs. Haggins for the game when she suddenly stopped teaching at the board, spun around, and pointed at me in front of all the other kids. "Ok Brendan, I've got my eye on you," she said. Somehow she got the whole class to glare with her. My face burned and I was mad at Dad for not teaching me how to handle her. That night I waited until he came home from work to tell him that I needed his help with Mrs. Haggins, but when he stepped in the door I knew that asking him would only put me down. Whenever I ask him anything, Dad smirks and leans back in his chair and talks way over my head. If I get nervous or try to leave, he looks down at me and says, "Do you want my help or not?"

Jeffrey rushes over with one of the practice balls between his legs. "Hey Bren," he says. "You know how to play?"

I look over at Dad. I've never played soccer before but he just got me a brand new ball, so I could have played with it. "Yes," I say. "Ok, I'll kick the ball around with you a little before we join in." I glance back at Dad, who kicks the toe of his work shoe into the grass and nods as the rumpled man spreads his arms wide and laughs. I follow Jeffrey out to the field where the other boys run and shout. When I look back, expecting to meet Dad's stare, I only see the rumpled man standing alone. A huge relief lifts me up as Dad's

car pulls out of the parking lot and fades off down the road.

* * *

The rumpled man drives me home after practice. He yells at Jeffrey and me to make sure that we don't get mud all over the backseat. Jeffrey holds his pointer finger up to me, then runs it underneath the bottom of his cleat. When he holds it up again, a glob of dirt hangs off of it like a dog turd. He traces the finger along the bottom of the seat and we both giggle. I look straight up at the rumpled man. He taps the steering wheel and watches the road. I let myself laugh out loud and Jeffrey rolls into me and laughs too. "There's that energy," the rumpled man says. "Bren, think of that energy when you're on the field." I push off of Jeffrey and sit up straight. Of course, I think, the rumpled man plays the game too, secretly like Dad does sometimes. Talking to me but only to tell me to do something that is over my head. When Jeffrey took me out on the field, Dad was making sure that the rumpled man knew how to play the game.

We drive for a long time. The rumpled man turns onto Old Stone Road and asks me which house is mine. None of them. Another part of the game. He says, "Bren, as much as I like driving you around, Jeffrey and I gotta get back home." Jeffrey plays with a toy man who bends over and pulls his pants down when you push a button. He calls him "Moon Man." Jeffrey laughs when I push the button, and then both of us put our mouths between our hands and make fart noises. The rumpled man is testing me but I can't figure out how. I don't know how to answer him. Jeffrey makes another fart noise and I hit him and he hits me back. "Quit," the rumpled man says.

"Bren?" He waits for me in the rearview mirror. I hear Dad in his voice. The car slows and stops against the curb. The rumpled man turns around to face me. Jeffrey looks at me like I just crawled out of the mud. The way a few of the boys on the soccer team look at me all the time.

I search the window, just to make sure. The rumpled man coughs and shakes his head. He's down now and I'm up, so I can talk. "None of them," I say.

The rumpled man shakes his head again. It's like he's not even trying to be up. But that's a move in the game too. "What do you mean 'none of them'?"

"I don't live on Old Stone Road. I live on Stone Road."

The rumpled man squints at me and then looks out the window. A car pulls into the driveway just a ways down the curb. "I could've sworn your Dad said Old Stone." I feel ten times bigger. Dad gave him the wrong address. He only talked to the rumpled man to size him up and to show me how bad he is at the game.

The rest of the ride home, Jeffrey and I play with Moon Man and talk about video games and Mrs. Haggins' class. We both crack up when Jeffrey farts for real and the whole car smells like cheese. When we get to my house, Dad is organizing the tool shelves in the garage. I ask Jeffrey if he wants to come over on Thursday, after the team's next practice. Jeffrey

asks the rumpled man and the rumpled man says sure. The rumpled man is still down and he doesn't understand the game, so he'll do what I want. Dad walks over to the car as I get out. I tell him about Jeffrey coming over on Thursday and he frowns and says, "Ask your mother." He reminds me to keep my head in the game, but I'm too happy to care that he put me down or that he'll get me back later. Jeffrey shouts, "Bye Bren!" as the rumpled man backs out of the driveway and I run up into the house.

* * *

Dinner on Thursday is roasted chicken with mashed potatoes. Jeffrey sits next to me at the table, then Mom sits next to him, then Ginny, and then Dad on my other side. Mom helps Ginny cut her food and reminds her to eat it. Ginny swings her feet in the chair like a baby as she puffs air in and out of her cheeks. Jeffrey puffs air in and out of his cheeks and both he and Ginny laugh. I stiffen like a tree, then turn to Dad. He snorts as he chews on a chicken leg. I laugh, still looking right at him. He shoots a glance at me and I shoot it right back, almost without thinking. I'm up at dinner, which almost never happens.

Jeffrey starts talking. Just like that, he starts talking at the dinner table in front of everyone. He said that Mrs. Haggins gave too much homework again. Scott Michelson kept dogging passes. "Jaime Dupree got the new Call of Duty video game. It's so cool! I have to play it at his house because Dad won't let me have it."

Words just keep coming out of his mouth, one after another. The way Ginny talks. I feel sad for Jeffrey because no one must listen to him. Is he talking to me or the whole table? I start to feel very nervous. Mom smiles and sneaks glances at Ginny to make sure she's eating. Dad listens with a lizard grin on his face and leans in as Jeffrey describes the explosions in Call of Duty. I say that I saw the explosions in an ad for Call of Duty on TV. Nobody seems to notice. But I keep going. "It looks so cool!" I say. Jeffrey says, "I know! You should come over Jaime's and play it." Jaime is a star on the soccer team. He tries to hide his uneven ears with a shaggy haircut.

"Did you see all the Gail Dupree signs at the end of the street?" Dad says. He glares at me. His eyes strain like they might fall out of his head. His trap snaps down. I was selfish and got too excited. If I try to lift it off of me, he will only push it down harder.

"I saw signs," I say, but he isn't looking at me anymore. He looks at Mom and shakes his head.

"I swear she took down the Robert Baker signs that were up there. She or her people. If she thinks that kind of negative campaigning is going to win her votes in a few weeks, she's mistaken." He flashes another look at me, but I'm ready for it now. Jeffrey asks why Jaime's Mom has signs up. He has no idea that the game is going on like a hurricane all around him. Dad turns to him and swallows him whole. He talks to Jeffrey about the town council race as though Jeffrey's an adult and already knows who's running and who should win. I watch Jeffrey glance around and shift in his chair un-

til finally his eyes grow as wide as Dad's and he doesn't look away until Dad is done.

"The signs are on the Del Roy's property," Mom says. "They support Gail."

"They could've called Robert and asked him to take the signs down," Dad says. "Right Jeffrey?"

Jeffrey shrugs, then laughs and looks at his plate.

"They called him," Mom says. "Nobody came by after a couple of days, so they took the signs down themselves."

Dad smiles at Jeffrey. I try not to smile much because that smile just makes me want to look away, and I'm afraid that I smile like that too. "Well, Robert's probably out working all day. Who has the time to keep his hand on every little thing going on in the neighborhood?" Jeffrey blinks and scratches at the side of his neck.

"So, are you boys ready for the big game on Saturday?" Dad asks. An in. He has Jeffrey under his thumb, but I'm still playing and I know how to spot an in. "Yeah!" I say, as big as I can.

Dad twists in his chair. He wants me to say that I'm not ready for the game, or that I'm nervous, so he can talk over my head and be up. "What, you don't like your mother's chicken?" he asks.

"I can't wait!" Jeffrey says. I feel good. I can play the game well enough to take a hit for him, so that he can come back to himself. "We're gonna kick ass," he says.

Ginny gasps and points at Jeffrey. "Swear," she says.

Dad sniffs and sits up higher in his chair. "That's the winning attitude, right Bren? Remember good sportsmanship." He leans back like he has just scored a goal himself. To hide that he's down. I don't say anything. There are no goals or points in the game. There is only up and down. One way to be up is to act up. Another way to be up is to show Dad that I know he's down. I have to climb up, up, up, far away from myself, until I'm up there with him, looking down at everything. "Good sportsmanship," I say, and fold my arms over my chest the way he does. His face shines red and his hand trembles as he grips his drumstick and tears off a piece of skin with his teeth. I kick Jeffrey under the table and he kicks me back. Ginny sings a shapes song she learned in school to the chicken bones in the middle of the table.

* * *

When the rumpled man comes to pick Jeffrey up, Dad goes outside to say hi. I decide not to invite Jeffrey over again. He doesn't understand the game and I'm exhausted taking care of both of us. He gets pushed and pulled by Dad's eyes, talks loud with his mouth full, gulps milk and jumps up and down in his chair without seeing anything that's going on. Jeffrey tried to get me to talk more at the table but I couldn't. I always have to keep one eye on Dad.

I play with my action figures in my room and think of what Dad

must have said to the rumpled man when he went outside to say hi. I think back to Old Stone Road and wonder if Dad is working the rumpled man against me, or trying to teach me how to use the rumpled man against him. Suddenly I feel terrible for Jeffrey. Jeffrey who doesn't know what the game is, Jeffrey who will do whatever Dad or the rumpled man tells him to do.

* * *

We win our game on Saturday and go out for pizza. Scott Michelson tries to drink a whole pitcher of Coke by himself and throws up all over the floor. It even comes out of his nose and he yells that his face is burning off from the inside. Some of the puke gets on my pizza and Jeffrey and Jaime dare me to eat it. I tell Jaime that I'll eat it if he takes all his Mom's signs down and he doesn't talk to me after that. Jeffrey laughs and says, "Ouch."

After the rumpled man drops me off at home, Mom calls me into the TV room and asks how the game went. I say that we won and she claps her hands and says that's great. I start to smile, but instead I look over at Dad. He sits in his chair watching golf. He looks my way and nods the way he does after he reads something out loud from the paper. The look and the nod is one of his best moves. I have to fight hard to keep myself from smiling, which would put me down, so I nod back to him. He looks away and his face goes still. Mom rubs his shoulder and asks, "So when are we gonna see Jeffrey again?" I bite my teeth together and hate Dad as hard as I can. He doesn't stop. Keeping up with him takes everything I've got. He's using Mom somehow. I know she's not playing the game on her own because I tested her and she goes down almost every time. "I don't know," I say to him. If he's using Mom then he's probably using Jeffrey too, and if Jeffrey can't even see what's going on then he definitely can't protect himself.

I tell Mom that I'm going upstairs to play in my room. She says, "Ok, honey," in a sad, soft way that Dad must've taught her. He gets up from his chair and says that he's going to rake the lawn. He's out the door before I'm upstairs. He used to wait after he said he was going to go do something, like he wanted me to go with him, but I learned that the waiting was part of the game too. If I ran and cheered after him, he would meet me with the game. So I waited back at him. I don't follow him anymore because I realized that he never asked me to go in the first place. And he never will.

* * *

There's a home video of me when I was four or five, before I figured out the game. I stand outside in the backyard with a little rake while Dad uses his big rake to show me how to shape the leaves into a pile. He laughs and claps while I try to rake like him. He makes a big pile and then tosses me into it. I run back to him and he tosses me in again, and again, and he's laughing and I'm laughing and Mom is laughing behind the camera. He stops and I stand beside him and tell him to throw me in again. He looks at the pile and says that I should pick up my rake. I say "No!" to picking up the

rake and tell him to pick me up and throw me again. He grabs my arm and Mom turns off the camera. I was grabbed a lot before I learned how to play the game.

* * *

After school on Monday, Mom comes into my room and tells me that Jeffrey is on the phone. "I'm busy," I say. My action figures sit on my bed and plan how to make a bunker. Batman suggests that they try to escape instead, but the other heroes tell him that there is nowhere to go, that all the bad guys will find them. But Batman doesn't give up on his idea for an escape, so the other heroes push him off the edge of the bed. Mom almost steps on him as she walks toward me.

"He's on the phone right now Bren," she says. I glare at her and imagine my eyes getting as red as Dad's. "How dare she," I think, but I remember that she doesn't know what she's doing. Her voice is flat, like Dad's, not happy like it usually is. I keep glaring. If someone isn't playing, then they look away. But if someone is playing, then they either pretend they don't see you at all or they keep looking right at you. They look at you until everything else freezes and your jaw hurts.

She doesn't turn away. My stomach sinks and I feel like crying, like running to her and hugging her the way Ginny does, but instead I grab Batman and squeeze him to keep myself up.

"Bren!" she says. "He's on the phone right now!" "I'm busy," I say, and the whole world falls apart around me. The walls of my room crack and turn to blackness. I don't look away. I can't.

* * *

"Bren!" she says again. I decide that I'm not going to talk to her again until either she realizes that Dad is using her, or she goes and hunts him down and brings him out from where he hides behind her. "Brendan, I'm talking to you!" The flatness in her voice breaks like glass. She looks from side-to-side like Jeffrey does at the dinner table. She doesn't know that Dad is using her. I remind myself that I can't tell her anything. She has to understand for herself. I used to run around and shout and cry like she is now. I'm helping her as much as I can, to get her to see what I see, to see what Dad is doing to her.

Mom starts to look all around me, behind me, like there are monsters snarling and ready to attack. But she doesn't run away. She kneels in front of me and hugs me so hard that my whole body shivers. "Brendan," she whispers. She holds me out in front of her, her hands shaking on my shoulders, and yells my name. "What is wrong? Tell me!" She pushes and pulls at me. This can't be real, I think. I look straight ahead and smile just a little. I'm up.

* * *

When Dad comes home that night, I'm not waiting for him in the closet. Being so up over Mom changed things. From inside my room, I hear him walk into the house and hear Ginny run to him. Mom asks him to come into the kitchen for a minute before going upstairs. I don't hear anything else for a while. Then Dad yells, "How am I supposed to know what it's about?" I hold Batman tight in my hand. "He's pouting. He has a chip on his shoulder." Mom says something else to him, then Dad says, "Ok, geez. Can't even walk in the door." His shoes click-click-click in the front hallway. The stairs creak. I slam the door to my room. He will call for me and reach between Mom's dresses but I won't be there. I try to play with my action figures but I can't concentrate. I forget that Batman is dead and he helps the other heroes plan the bunker.

After seventeen minutes pass on my alarm clock radio, Dad knocks on my door. I'm breathing like I just ran the mile in gym class. I wait by my bed. I want to rush up and throw open the door and scream that I hate him. But I know that I have to be even more careful than usual, and more quiet, and more slow. Any kind of fast move or outburst and I will bring myself back down.

The hallway behind him is dark except for the faraway light that pushes through the open banister from the family room downstairs. He looks at me and I look back at him with the same flat face. "Your Mom wants you to come downstairs for dinner," he says. "Ok," I say. "I'll be down in a minute." He sucks on his lower lip. "Ok," he says. He turns away and I shut my door again. Safe in my room, I let out a huge breath. I've never felt up like this. I hold Batman out in front of me, then pull him close and kiss him and gnaw on his head. I jump up and down and swing my arms like a monkey. I pump my fists and whisper, "Yes yes yes!" the way Jeffrey does when he scores a goal in soccer practice. I grab my pillow in front of my face and scream into it. Dad came to me! It is the best possible up in the game.

* * *

The next day in Mrs. Haggins' class, Jeffrey starts playing the game too. When I turn toward his desk, he looks my way, but then freezes like he means to look at something behind me. He turns back to his work and whispers something to one of the other kids sitting near him. I look at him and count to three, to see if he'll look up again. When he doesn't, I turn away.

At practice I notice other boys starting to play the game too. Some of them don't say anything to me unless I say something to them, and some of them don't even talk to me then. Every time I have the ball I keep my eyes on Jeffrey and everyone else I can. The rumpled man yells "Focus!" and "Man on!" to me over and over as other boys come up from behind and steal the ball, over and over. Dad must be using them all.

* * *

In my driveway after practice, the rumpled man says, “Bren, I was giving you a hard time tonight because I know you can move quicker than you are. But I think I was going about it the wrong way. I’m not sure you see where you’re open. If you’re too afraid that another guy’s on you, you work twice as hard to get half as far.” I try to look like I’m paying attention. “You know what I mean?” he asks. “Yes,” I say. I have to get out of the car quick so that I remember everything he says. Otherwise, I won’t be able to find Dad’s hidden message, to prepare me for the real game on Saturday, when he uses everyone like pawns while they think they’re just playing soccer.

* * *

My whole family comes to the game. Dad drives and Mom talks about how she can’t wait for all the campaign signs to come down. She says that the wind caught a Robert Baker sign and threw it onto the windshield of a passing car. “The woman driving turned into a lamppost and cracked her jaw on the steering wheel!” she says.

“Could’ve been worse,” Dad says. He stretches in his seat and adds, “What a beautiful fall day.”

A few leaves still hold onto their branches but most cover the ground in wet, heavy piles. I don’t feel too well so I try not to look outside. All night I dreamt that I was turning around in a circle, trying to see what was in front of me, but the more I tried, the blurrier everything got.

Mom asks Ginny to choose two books to bring to the field. Ginny’s been singing the whole ride and picking through books doesn’t stop her. I try to stare a hole through the back of Dad’s seat. I feel sweaty and tired so I know something new is happening. The hole will burn through the seat, then through him, then through the front of the car. He thinks he’s up but he doesn’t know that I can do this. I just know that somehow, that’s what the dream was trying to tell me.

Dad yells at me to stop kicking the seat. He burns eyes at me in the rearview mirror and I burn back and stomp my feet from his seat to the floor. I’m up because he has to look at the road. He stretches one arm out toward Mom. “What am I supposed to do?” he asks her. She turns to me and I get that feeling like she sees me crawling out of mud. “We’re almost there Bren,” she says. She’s flat again, under his control. She’ll make me go out there with all those kids.

Deep down I know Dad just wants to make me better. And I am better at the game than anyone else on my team, but they’re learning fast, and there are so many of them and none of them seem to play it with each other, only with me. With each other they just laugh and run and play soccer. Everyone’s trying to help me be better and stronger, but it’s too hard for me all at once.

Dad parks the car and I just sit there raking my cleats against the back of his seat, staring ahead. I’ll just wait a minute, just as long as I can

wait, until he yells at me to get out. Then I'll be up, and it will be easier to start the game with the boys on the field if I'm already up. I picture myself running out of the car and slamming the door, then kicking dirt as I run away. Dad turns back in his seat and smacks my cleat with his palm. My face burns. He starts to say something, then just looks at me in this sneaky soft new way that isn't like him at all. I want to scream at him for changing the rules. "Remember what your coach said Bren. Don't worry so much about who's coming up on you. Focus on what you see."

I almost choke. There it is. From Dad's mouth to the rumpled man's and back to his. He's trying to fool me. He wants me to be friends with Jeffrey so that the rumpled man can find some new angle to push me down. He wants to use Jeffrey to remind me how I was when I was little, running and laughing and jumping in leaves. Stupid and just waiting to be put down.

Dad sighs at Mom to signal to her that it's her move. She says that I'd better go so I'm not late. I grip the seat under me with my fingertips and dig my cleats into the floor. I'm ready.

"Did you hear your mother?" Dad asks. He waits for me in the rearview mirror. Ginny stops singing and tugs at her bangs. I settle into my new move. It's still very hard, but every move is hard at first. I still need to practice flattening my face in the mirror to make sure I get it right. Every move builds off of that one. Dad knows that I'm smart like him, smarter than everyone else, which is why he only plays this game with me. And I'll keep getting smarter and better. That's why he keeps taking the game somewhere new. That's why he gets out of the car and opens my door. He shouts at me to get out right now, to stop pouting, and to stop being so selfish. To think of my team. He wants me to be ready for them. He grabs my arm and I scream and kick the seat as hard as I can, over and over. Ginny starts crying and Mom says, "That's enough! He doesn't want to."

But Dad can't hear her, he can't even see her, because he and I are playing the game and I'm so good at it that all he can see is me.

DANNY EARL SIMMONS

CHORIZO AND EGGS

The spicy air of chorizo crackling
in a hot iron skillet only this much
more black than the slate-gray
November dawn—

this is the knowing
that all you will ever love exists
in rolling from bed, blinking hard
into each blank morning, squinting
against the dim kitchen light

where she stands
in loose-fitting pajamas and satisfaction
humming, pouring whipped-up eggs
into the sizzling red effervescence
as a dozen corn tortillas, yellow and cold,
wait to be warmed.

MOLLIE SWAYNE

THOUGHTS ON THE UNABOMBER

there is an appreciation a recognition that he kept it safe
and secret all these years his childhood intact
grown into something smooth and hard and blackshinybeautiful
a whole pureness of uncompromise

more common is fear and pretendfear
excitement there is danger somewhere you pretend you think
could happen to you though really
such a thing is impossible it is a show these bombs
and the blown up people are words

in the facefear trotted out worries
secret flicker of disappointment at the smallness of the number three
there is the identical slick shellack protecting something wet and deep and hard
slowbreathing and immortal we pretend not to see

COREY THRASHER

HONEY BEE

Sting itself must have festered my brother,
Outspreading his cheek days after the rake

He pulled from our tool shed troubled a nest
And the stinger boiled away in his blood—

Because he had it in for them, watched
Workers circle air as vibrating smoke

And when one clipped onto a mum
He closed her in an empty butter tub

And shook and shook it so that she
Pattered the plastic, now and again spying

Down to watch her wriggle on her back,
Forelegs crumpled as if in prayer,

Onion paper wings torn, sputtering.
Sidling the border of his play-space, I

Questioned his mind, his unwavering
Stare into tiny circles she crawled.

He ignored my tug to let her go, tapped her
Awake for hours until she didn't move.

Her compound eyes had so many of him
In them: buckled, black, and very small.

HELEN WICKES

MELVILLIAN

Almost my favorite lines
during the whole Melvillian winter of hearing him,

not him exactly, but some guy reading him aloud,
mile after mile, and he really did Ishmael justice,
on our long drives home from the valley,

where my favorite lines came at the end
of that interminable chapter on cetological systems,
the nomenclature of whale conformation,

every corner and cranny delved most thoroughly,
as we drove home day after day, the voice instructing

through the long sea voyage, while we lived
through a nearly biblical drought, the air outside yellow,
the winter hills brown when they should have blazed forth
in tourmaline, the sun a sullen, muted lump.

We wondered about him, our guide, not just our reader,
but Ishmael, our faithful teacher, winding down
from the sperms, the killers, the humpbacks,

the tail fin, the baleen, the quality of oils, and he saying,
God keep me from completing anything. And then he saying—
or what we heard him say,

that long drive home from the valley—was that this is a draft
of a draft. But once home and delving the pages, I see
it's spelled draught of a draught, before flipping
the pages to learn it's a variant of draft. And so then,

apprised of the tenuous nature of language, I've inhaled
the flavor, taken in the draught, the whole measure,
the full scent of his words.

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Corbin Allardice is a second year at the University of Chicago who will likely be majoring in something. This is his first publication, but only probably his last.

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Helen Wickes has had four books of her poetry published: *World as You Left It* (Sixteen Rivers Press, 2015), *Moon over Zabriskie* (Glass Lyre Press, 2014), *Dowser's Apprentice* (Glass Lyre Press, 2014), and *In Search of Landscape* (Sixteen Rivers Press, 2007). She lives in Oakland, California and worked for many years as a psychotherapist. She received an MFA from the Bennington Writing Seminars in 2002. Her poems published by online journals can be read at her author's page, <http://www.sixteenrivers.org/authors/helen-wickes>, and additional poems can be read and heard online at From The Fishhouse. Helen's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Agni*, *Atlanta Review*, *Boulevard*, *Confrontation*, *Delmarva Review*, *Sagarana*, *Soundings East*, *South Dakota Review*, *Spillway*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Westview*, *Willow Review*, *Zone 3*, and *ZYZZYVA*, among many others.

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