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Raleigh Review founded as Rig Poetry
Robert Ian Greene
February 21, 2010
EDITOR’S NOTE

After five years, we’ve opted for a new look for our next five. This issue is a little bigger—half an inch all the way around and a few pages thicker. We hope those who are fascinated by crows and the Apsáalooke tribe can appreciate the care that went into this issue’s cover. The stunning “Crow Chief” collage work by Geri DiGiorno really gets this issue off the ground.

Our talented staff have described this issue as one of “menace,” “danger,” and “the outsider’s perspective.” If you have international families or friends, read the story “Sad & American” first. If you have lost loved ones to violence, I recommend reading the poem “Ballad (American, 21st Century)” by Wayne Miller and then making your way through this entire issue.

We really aim for a better understanding of our fellow humans, and we’d much rather produce a magazine that puts empathy over being either too safe or even being an extreme provocateur. Yes, our writers demonstrate the ability to show respect and understanding of our fellow humans while still challenging and entertaining them.

*Raleigh Review* is a national magazine with a global scope, and this issue illustrates the redemptive qualities that all great art explores. Our main criterion for works published in *Raleigh Review* is excellence—in fiction, poetry, visual art, and book reviews. We hope you enjoy these as much as we enjoy them.

—Rob Greene, editor & publisher
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Then we were all in the cab of the snowplow
pushing across that expanse
where the city had thinned to highway.

Our headlights drew the swarm
from inside itself—not flakes, but a unified
precipitate of silence. Behind us
the city was flooded by the same
roaring body of snow. Highway
given back to the fields, traceable
by the guardrail’s enclosure.
We drew ourselves along it.

Where the blade scraped the road
sparks scattered into the accumulation
that would put them out.
RICHARD SCHEMM | Winterkeeper, 2013
36 x 24 inches | Oil on aluminum
Sad and American

I remember how we would go places, and my brother would tell me about the correct sad and American way to look around. That’s what he called these places, sad and American. I was just a kid, and he was six years older.

Once my family was driving back from Mount Rainier, and we stopped at a Dairy Queen.

“This place,” he said, “is truly sad and American, Leila. There is as much to see here as there was at Mount Rainier. It is called Dairy Queen. It has great meaning for the people of this town. They say, ‘Let’s meet at the Dairy Queen after the football game.’ Things like that. The faces they see here are known faces. They might be dreaming of leaving the town. That is one of the most sad and American things.”

As he was talking, we didn’t notice a woman come up behind us in line. We turned around and saw that she had a furious look on her face.

“Where are you from?” she said.

“Seattle.”

“No. Where are you from?” she said.

“Iran.”

“Well, maybe I should make up some stories about Iran.”

“I don’t mind if you make up stories about Iran,” my brother said. “As long as they’re nice.”

The woman’s face became even angrier. “You don’t know about this town. You don’t know if we say, ‘Let’s meet at the Dairy Queen.’”

“You’re right. But how am I not supposed to imagine? It’s beautiful.”

“Beautiful?” the woman said.
She went to the front counter, and we watched her tell the manager that my brother had said the town was beautiful. The manager looked at us. He looked very tired, like there was something in what the woman was saying that he knew and understood from his life in the town but that he was tired of having to think about.

“Maybe we should go,” I said.

“We haven’t done anything,” my brother said. “All we did was wonder about this place.”

The woman came back and stood in line behind us. She didn’t say a word.

When we got to the counter, my brother made an order for us and for my mother and father waiting in the car.

The manager came toward us. “Excuse me,” he said. “Did you say this town is beautiful?”

“Yes,” my brother said.

“Why did you say that?”

“Because it is. And because I’ve read the books of Jack Kerouac.”

“I don’t know who that is,” the manager said. “Did you also say it’s sad and American?”

“I said that the Dairy Queen is sad and American. In a beautiful way.”

“I’ve lived here all my life. I raise exotic birds. I have peacocks and toucans. I have an African gray parrot. So I know about beauty. You can’t go around calling things sad and American like that.”

“Why not?” my brother said. “There are American writers who do that.”

“I don’t know who these American writers are. But I know that Americans don’t like to be told by somebody else that something is sad and American.”

“What if it is out of love?”

“Doesn’t matter. Look, it doesn’t matter much to me. My concern is with birds. But I thought I should tell you.”

The woman who was in line behind us nodded.

“Well,” my brother said, “I’m sorry. I think things are still going to hit me that way. We just went to Mount Rainier, and there were things along the way that were sad and American. I liked all of them. I liked
them a lot. Sometimes I feel like I can do something with how much I like them.”

“I don’t advise that,” the manager said. “I don’t know these American writers you’re talking about. If they called things sad and American, well, I guess they got away with it because they were American. I’m just telling you that Americans don’t like to hear it from anybody else.”

“When you come to this country, you’re supposed to go along,” the woman said.

“I am going along,” my brother said. “Sometimes I can’t believe how much I’m going along.”

“Well,” the manager said, “that’s not the way to do it. Don’t call things sad and American. How old are you anyway?”

“Sixteen.”

“You’ve got a few years. I just wanted to let you know. I’m trying to help you out. This isn’t the way to do it.”

My brother looked at the woman. “You really think I’m saying something bad about this place?”

She didn’t say anything.

“Here’s your order,” the manager said.

I looked at him. I had never heard of somebody raising peacocks before. I would’ve liked to see them.

My brother took the bag and we went out to the car. My brother was quiet. We drove to a rest stop and got out to eat at a picnic table.

“I still think I’m right,” my brother said. “Look at this place.”

I looked. It was a pretty nice rest stop. I liked the blackberry bushes at the edge of the grass.

“Maybe if you just said American,” I said. “That’s true after all.”

“Nope. It’s both. It’s sad and American. It’s not my fault. I didn’t make it this way. But I’m not saying it to be mean. Why the heck would she think I was saying it to be mean?”

My brother looked very sad.

“Why would she think I’ve never thought about a Dairy Queen before? Why would she think I haven’t thought about all the Dairy Queens before?”
It was funny and nice how my brother would forget that sometimes people didn’t think about all the Dairy Queens. Sometimes they just went to one Dairy Queen to get a hamburger. My brother wasn’t like that. He went there to think.

“I still think I can do it,” my brother said.

“Do what?”

“Prove that the Dairy Queen was sad and American.”

“How are you going to do that?”

“I don’t know.”

It was exciting to hear my brother talk like that, but I thought of how the Dairy Queen manager had warned him. When he said it, when he called things sad and American, it made sense to me, but I didn’t know if maybe I was the only one.

After we finished, my brother and I walked over to the blackberry bushes and picked some berries and ate them.

“I don’t mean everything that’s American is sad,” my brother said.

“I know,” I said. “Maybe you should talk about it in Farsi next time you’re at a Dairy Queen.”

He laughed. “OK. I guess that means you’re the only person I can tell.”

That’s how it was anyway, but I didn’t say it. We both already knew.
Spring Letter from the South

Mother, it’s like summer here. I miss
the way the mountains get cold at night,
draw their shoulders up. In the evenings

we walk through the old neighborhoods,
past the frayed houses where magnolias
collapse their heavy bosoms against

roofs like pitched elbows. Everything
the baby does—proclaiming song-words
to the birds, commanding trees

to hold still or spill their guts—
is magic I haven’t given up on yet.
That pollen-rot smell is starting again:

one year later and it’s like a year
hasn’t passed. When she sleeps pressed against
me, we still feel so young—all of us.

Even the cemetery is beautiful
this time of year. Do you remember
when you were here? It’s like that.
This time of year

derel spill
    along this side of the road
with the life
    knocked out of them,
open pockets
    of themselves.

Their bodies sing out
    when I pass by,
my hands grasp the wheel
    with the gentle ache
to answer them.

This time I’ve come here
    searching for clues,
what makes them
    come here to be with me,
what makes their flesh
    exposed
only a little more flushed than my own.

As I drive on
    another approaches,
my swift cousin,
    stunned at his desire
to have this point
    of light
in the pit
    of his stomach.
We meet briefly
    and not yet dead he
stumbles
    to greet the others,
while I, breathless,
    linger
to watch his steps growing heavy.

I hear them later
    against the stillness
of my street as I approach
    after it has been laid to rest.
Soldier’s Creek Trail

She moves her hands along the trail
as if they are waves of birds
without knowing that down at the edge
where water meets sand, darkness
peeks out from behind roots.
She often wonders if she matters, but not here
where walking each day
her fingers find traces
of seed in her pockets.

She knows there is pollen on the ground.
She knows the flowers coming from the dead trunk up ahead
will soon form on her forehead.
She must look into the palm of her hand
or into this branch
which appears far away from the path,
and now she’s kissing the ground and waiting
to speak, but perhaps she won’t even remember
the creek, the bending cypress that sings.
I have come this far, she reminds herself,
even if it doesn’t seem so.

The woods offer her a log
across the creek where she could watch children,
if they were present, contradict the silence
among oaks and pines and palms. Time crosses the creek
and, just as she turns to face the ferns, she slips and becomes
a penny tossed into the water, her wrist shattered,
and she thought it couldn’t hurt—
this walking all the way back,
even though she couldn’t see where
she was going—a mirror of what had come
before appeared as though others
were on the trail with her—away from the light and the ferns.
Instead of this tree, it’s as if
she is lifted across the creek—not the fingers
of her right hand folded into these roots
along the bank: a sling carving out her name.
MATT WIMBERLEY

Silent Woods

The metal can is quiet now, full enough with ashes to be the moon over crossroads where the country is an afterthought

beside the highway. Some cinder floats up, escaping orbit, the last rubble left over from creation. There,

the upturned bodies of moths decorate the windowsills like cases of instruments closed for good. Quiet now.

All along the night kept watch over your shoulders—the field lasted and outlasted hoof and hurricane, the crouched hunters

making targets of beating hearts. See how the snow upholsters the trees in the morning where more ash flickers upward to finish

the blueprints of constellations—the eye of a bull, the webbed swan’s foot. Can’t you hear the screen door tapping its loneliness? Or, the loose dog

chain squawking in front of a row of singlewides where a man looks on and becomes a detail—part of the background—dressed in clichés.

Imagine him standing there, always, taciturn and watching the snow and the steam from the rock quarry machinery erase the earth.

Imagine him long enough and you’ll have to go and see what’s behind the blank guesswork of crushed stones,

standing in the cold while your feet go numb, until the air feels like knives whipping past your face

in a carnival sideshow—the thrower blindfolded, unshaved, sipping from a Listerine bottle buried inside his jacket. That air
is a new country just beyond your skin. The thin hairs
on the backs of your hands are slash marks etched to keep
track of time, and your bright scars, with you always, are the bars
on the doors of eternity. Quiet now. For as long as I can remember
I’ve loved the hour just before darkness. The washed sky, the glow of taillights
disappearing around a bend. I’ve been out there, walked until my lungs
ached like a footstep in an empty room. Because someone must clean
the woodstove, I’ve been taking my time and looking out into what’s left
of today. It doesn’t even matter. The cars going by, the waitress across the
street refilling
an off-white salt shaker in the diner, the slow boy riding his bike through
slush
at the heart of town. Not this county, where the borders act as a barrier
between time, or this
country. Nothing complex. The internal combustion engine, heart surgery,
politics,
or money. Not the skull of a deer overgrown with moss and trillium, or
the streams
following gravity down from the mountains. Not theories of human decency,
or dark matter.
It can all turn to ash. Even skin and blood are accelerant. This is all I know
of living. The simple work with a maul, the heave of metal into poplar,
the lifting
of wood, the strike of a match, and the fire curling, the bark quiet now.
Quiet now. There is the word you were looking for all along
smoldering in your mouth, burning your tongue until you open it and say
goodbye.
SUSAN DOWNING-WHITE | Riverbank I, 2015
12 x 16 inches | Oil on canvas
Vanishing Spell

Cut the heart from the next dead bird
the cat drops at the back door.
Chop the slick giblet into a stew.
Then catch a bus to New York at midnight,
when meth devils guard the station door.
Drop silver coins into their paper cups
to ward off their garbled curses.

On the way, talk to no one.
Sink into your seat. Turn your sweater
into a pillow, but don’t fall asleep
until you’ve threaded your feet
through the straps of your bag
and said seven incantations
to dream of flying. As for the small,
heartless thing you carry with you,
keep it tucked away somewhere close.

When you arrive in New York, buy a knife
to clean the tiny bones. In the meantime,
speed down the road from consciousness to sleep
until you gain enough momentum
to lift off from your body.
Then trouble the clouds until you come to know
what the warbler has always known:
confide your secrets to a winter sky
and secrets turn to snow.
It will fall when you wake in Chinatown.
First, find a knife. Call your lover later,
after you’ve called your husband or wife
to say, “I made it to the city. Soup’s in the fridge.”
Disappear in an alleyway or under a bridge
and dissect the culled body

to feel the hollowness inside the bones:
the anatomy of flight
so light in your upturned palm.
LINDSAY WILSON

Blood Sausage

First, she says, put a shine to the knife’s edge,
find your eyes along the gut hook’s
sharp reflection,
find the wheelbarrow
beside the rock pile, find the path to the back
knuckled pasture, where we keep the kids feral,
letting them say goat all day. Before you aim
through the horns and down

so that the bullet unhinges the maw
into its broken-toothed wound,

make sure to stake the hounds to leash.

Before you slit the throat
above the draining bucket,

rope the hind legs in their last kicks
from the limbs of the budding cottonwood,

and then prepare yourself for how much blood
will leave the kid.

Do not waste it.

To keep it smooth, untroubled, stir in a long
throat full of burgundy. The dogs will taste
the spiced-blood air then bay
and pull on hunger’s leashes.

From where you stand, knife in hand
dripping from a throat,
    the loud hounds will look

like red flecks against spring’s young, green grasses.
Search
For Papi

The van pulls off the highway and into the town, where the golden light of the evening sun settles over a deliberate stillness—shuttered windows, empty streets. In a swirl of children and bags, the family piles into the lobby of a small hotel. An older lady behind a desk writes out their details in elegant script in her ledger and hands them their keys. Behind her, a television replays the news clip they saw this morning. Sports fans, in a frenzy of evangelical zeal after game three of the tournament, smashing shop windows, throwing rocks and plastic chairs, flipping cars, and setting fires in the streets of a nearby town. This town will host game four tomorrow. The fans will come in a hurricane of wild devotion, and the people here have taken no chances. They have drawn the curtains, lowered the gates, bolted the doors. They wait, hushed, for the invaders.

The family is here for the game, too. Father, mother, four children. They pose no threat, but how are the townspeople to know that? The family arrived in the country five days ago, all four children remarkably well-behaved as eight hours of air travel swelled into eleven hours of delays and missing luggage. They remained cheerful as they tramped across the country in the blimp of a van they rented to catch up with the tournament. Even now, freshly released from their seat belts and without dinner, the children chatter sunnily to one another, discuss a card game, laugh at the hilarious thing one of them said to another hours earlier.

The luggage is sorted between their two rooms, and the younger boy says he is hungry. Surely something must be open somewhere, the mother says, taking his hand. The two of them set off in search of
provisions. We’ll be back soon, she says, and the boy waves solemnly to his siblings.

The father stays with the other three. He asks them to get ready for bed. But we don’t have to brush our teeth yet! they say, gleeful to break their routine.

No, he agrees, you don’t.

His wife has been gone for twenty minutes. He lets the kids turn on the television. They cannot understand the language of this country, but they’re not allowed to watch TV at home, and now they take command of the remote with relish. A soap opera, a game show, a sports match. They finally settle on a favorite movie of theirs, the familiar words dubbed over. They giggle at the mismatched lip movements and sound. He watches them with the vague surprise of a father who often returns from work after they are asleep, who has finally caught on to their interests of last year only to find that the field has changed, that they are evolving. A few comprehensible words ring from the television, and now the movie has his attention. He lacks his wife’s gift for language, but he has a competitive streak and thinks he can pick up some new vocabulary if he focuses.

Forty minutes. He goes down to the front desk to blunder his way through a question to the night attendant. See, wife, boy, leave, search, food?

The slender, dispassionate man responds in accented but perfect English from the depths of a cavernous hooded sweatshirt: Yes, I saw them leave as I arrived, but I did not see where they went. Everything is closed, you know, the vandals. I would have told them if they had asked.

The father peers out the lobby doors, expects to see them walking up. Fancy meeting you here, his wife would say. A pleasure, madam, he would reply in his exaggerated approximation of a British accent. No one materializes out of the shadows at the edge of the awning. He goes back upstairs.

An hour. An hour and ten. An hour and fifteen. The kids discover a vending machine, eat crackers and chips in front of the television, though by now their attention has shifted to a card game for which their father has not yet learned the rules. The youngest falls asleep. The older two giggle behind their hands at her soft snore. Where is his wife? His
other son? The town seemed so small when they drove in. They should have been able to do laps around it by now. He peers out the window, looking for movement, turns away for as long as he can bear it (eighty seconds), looks out again. He wants to go back to the front desk and demand that the man tell him more. Like a detective in a crime drama, he will press and the hotel attendant will divulge key details. He should not have let them go alone. A woman, a young boy, into this suspicious town, its air tense with fearful anticipation. He cannot betray his agitation to the children. They are oblivious. Let them be.

He asks the older two to keep an eye on the younger one, to be nice to her. I’ll be right back, he tells them. I’m just going to pop out and look for Mom and your brother.

I think they got lost, says the older boy, his remaining son. No. Terrible thought.

Outside, he glances back at the hotel. A reassuring blue glow comes from the room where a portion of his family is safe, accounted for. He starts walking, and before long, the road deposits him onto a little square. From behind their metal gates, the shopfronts hint at small town bustle. A cheese shop, a bakery, dry goods, candy, toys, a butcher. Together the family explored many similar streets in similar towns the past few days. The children were impressed that each category of food had its own store, that foods they thought they understood were different here. Why are the cups of yogurt so small and creamy? Where is the sliced bread? they asked. His wife consulted her guidebook and led them from one cultural attraction to another, but the kids mostly wanted to stare in wonder at the milk sold in boxes from a shelf, the unrefrigerated eggs.

Two roads veer off from the other end of the square. Which of these stone streets would have drawn his wife? He imagines her admiring the brick buildings, the ground level of each a series of archways into which the shops are nestled. She would point at the pie-shaped stone at the top and tell the children, Those are keystones. The tall, second-story windows are flanked by wooden shutters, and elegant wrought iron Juliet balconies hug their bases. Both of the little avenues he has to choose from are deserted. The people of the town have overreacted, he
thinks, then reconsiders, wonders if perhaps they know something he
does not. He selects the better lit of the roads and continues.

A paper bag shrugs its way across the sidewalk. The rectangular
metal signs above each shop strain against their hinges and creak in the
night breeze. On the airplane, he perused the phrasebook they bought
before their trip, and now he recognizes some basic words. His wife, her
last language class more than a decade behind her, has confidently
navigated the foreign streets, ordered food, checked them into hotels,
read and translated plaques on historical sites. You can’t really lose it,
she said of the language. You just have to search for the words once it’s
been a while. Her eyes shone with the thrill of the intellectual challenge.
She has been delighted, enlivened by the language, the food, the art, the
history. He is glad; this trip is for her after all. No, that isn’t true. She has
always wanted to come here, but this trip was his idea. He wanted to see
the tournament, and he easily convinced her it would be worth the effort
and the expense.

At home, they have shoeboxes filled with pictures of their previous
adventures, but his wife curates a single album, a photo or two from each
event, labeled neatly with a date and place. We’ll look back at this and
see the narrative of our life in pictures, she says. A wedding photo, their
first house, a pregnancy, a baby, repeat, and repeat, and repeat, camping,
a trip to the capital. When they return, she will select from the dozens of
pictures of the six of them and add to the official record. He carries with
him a copy of the last, no, the latest, album entry: two children smile,
one scowls, one looks away, he has blinked. His wife thinks she looks
terrible as usual, but he says she is beautiful. They stand on the deck of a
decommissioned battleship, where the kids leaned over the railing to
marvel at the water far below.

Stay back from the edge! his wife cried.

Oh, they’re fine. He squeezed her shoulders, the easygoing father to
her nervous mother.

A gust of wind whips one of the signs into a metal pipe running up
the building, and the clanging noise startles him. He looks around,
extpects her to appear to tease him. You see, I’m not the only one who
gets jumpy over nothing! He wishes it weren’t nothing. He wants an
adversary, a conflict. He wants to yell a challenge into the night. Show
yourself! he would demand of the shadows. Return what you have taken. The bare nothingness, the soundless, bodiless streets, unnerve him.

He tries to occupy himself with mental notes—she would like this area. We should return in the morning. He tries to plan an average tomorrow even as the buildings seem to lean toward him with predatory menace, and the road, persistently, unnaturally empty, slithers, unending, into the night. Something leaps, swift, across his path, and he stumbles off the curb and into the street. A cat, he thinks. At worst, a rat. The shadows exaggerate size and distort shape. The movement draws his attention to the slender crevices between buildings, which he had not noticed before, wide enough for a person to pass, just. He dares himself to peer down the little alley. Nothing is back there, he reasons, keeps looking, no nothing, backs away.

Three years ago they made a will. They were travelling, just the two of them, for the first time since the children were born. They had to make arrangements, leave clear instructions. They returned from the lawyer’s office, put the kids to bed, and sat wordlessly on their back porch together. She rested her head against his shoulder, and he held her hand in his, thinking of all that they were and had together. Nothing frightened him about his own mortality because it was not his alone but theirs together. He quickens his pace down the street. Time pulses through the night with ruthless disinterest, and his search begins to feel more urgent, frantic, as it becomes clearer with every passing moment that they are not one being but two. Separate, singular, transient, alone.

The well-maintained facades and little shops fade into weary-looking buildings of unclear purpose. The avenue collapses into a slender road. It finally gives up completely, trickling into nothing more than a dirt path, which ends at a canal. Tall trees line the canal, their branches fanning out across the sky, casting shadows like a dark net over the water. He steps between the trunks and onto the footpath that hugs the bank. He walks. The breeze that tunneled through the streets has evaporated into stillness. The weak yellow of distant streetlights filters through the trees. He looks for the reflection on the canal, but the warm night has coaxed up a fine mist that hovers over the water and swallows up the light. As his eyes strain fecklessly in the dark, he listens for the trill of a toad or the hum of a cricket, but everything is wrapped in the same lifeless
silence. He hears only the scrape of his shoes against the path. The smack of the heel, the drag of the foot. He plods with bleak inertia. Eventually, another sound grows out of the darkness, a soft slosh of water that suggests an object, unseen, clinging to the edge of the canal. He approaches, forces himself to look, imagines a body, hair waving like algae on the tide, arm stretched hopelessly toward the path, blue fingers grasping for dirt, too late. He teeters a little, sick, and turns away from the water and the gnarled tree branch wedged against the bank.

The path begins to descend toward a stone overpass. He considers the unyielding blackness beneath the bridge, the metal railing that guards the narrow walkway from the edge, and decides to make his way through the trees and back toward the streets of the town. A group of women mingle in a loose clump around the pole of a flickering streetlight. They call out to him. They nod approvingly as he reaches a hand into his pocket, frown a little when his hand comes out empty. He realizes he doesn’t have his wallet with the family photo inside. With gestures and the few words he can produce, he explains. Woman, wife, boy, search, nothing. From behind their garish makeup, they look at him with pity. One woman holds up her hands. Wait, say the rough palms and chipped nail polish. She yells a question over her shoulder into the dark, and another woman emerges from a nearby alley and walks toward the group. The new arrival shakes her head as she adjusts the thin strap of her dress, wipes a smear of lipstick from the side of her mouth with the back of her hand. She fixes him with her shadowed eyes and slowly reports that she has seen no woman, no little boy. They point him toward another street and release him to his morbid task as they return to tasks of their own.

He will walk all night, he thinks, trying to persuade himself that all he needs is more time, that he can win over the Fates with his persistence. He looks back, hoping for a reassuring glimpse of the band of women, the sole sign of life in this place, but sees only ghostly shadows cast by the sputtering streetlight. They have dissipated like whispers in the dark. He shivers, presses onward. Suddenly, a shrill scream echoes through the streets, the sound unimpeded until it reaches him, the lone witness. A cat, surely, its voice so human, yowling into the night. He braces himself for the next cry, a second cat, the lover or the
enemy of the first, but the town sinks back into such perfect quiet that he wonders at tricks of the mind. Did he hear anything at all?

He looks at his wrist. No watch, he does not know how long he has been searching. He almost expects to see the soft rays of sunrise, but the tenuous threads of reason tell him he can’t have been out for more than an hour. Time does not flow but pools around him. Memories lap at his feet. The future, rising quickly to his neck, pours into his unsuspecting lungs. He chokes on nothing, on the unthinkable. He ought to check on the kids, he directs himself, his three safe pajama-clad children, and allows his innate sense of direction to guide him back toward the hotel. He hopes they are asleep, so he can switch off the television, tuck the sheets around them, kiss their little foreheads without speaking, without being asked to dredge the lake of his loss for coherent human sounds. He does not stop to mourn each vacant shadow, each dead end, and so his return to the hotel is quick.

From the hallway he hears voices. He opens the door and sees all of them—his wife, four children, all holding partially eaten sandwiches wrapped in wax paper. Darling! she says with a smile.

His blood leaps inside him, his every cell twitching in confusion and joy. I went looking for you. He feels his lips form around the words but does not hear his voice.

We got so lost, and everything, I mean everything is closed, she continues. We finally found a gas station near the highway that sells these fantastic sandwiches. Can you believe it? A gas station with decent bread, good cheese? It’s so civilized here. He says nothing. He cannot speak. He sits on the floor behind her, wraps his arms around her waist, kisses the top of her head as she rests against him.

Actually, his younger son interjects, I think this place is creepy. The father nods. Yes.
RICHARD SCHEMM | The Angel and the Wine Merchant, 2011
16 x 8 inches | Oil and graphite on canvas
LANAI. GHANNAM

There is a stillness after you

*Inna lillahi wa inna ilaihi raji‘oon.*

(To Him we belong and to Him we shall return.)

—*Surah Al-Baqara 2:156*

as if the moon stopped the pull of waves
to shore—the sand slips, the air asleep.

In this life, you were the core, the pit
of heat that kept us warm, where ashes

flicked in us deep, that morning our brothers
and sisters prayed to the east with sweets

and pastries awaiting their mouths. Their fasts
were fasted and *duaa* demanded as your stillness

spread over us like a fog. Our bodies, the carriers
of old worlds, and eyes could only hold the sky.

Your stillness filled our pores with chants
and blessings—*kul sana wa inta salem:*

may every year now find you in new peace.
It’s the elder soul you lifted to angels

before the world could close its large doors,
slipped like a whisper from your fingertips

with words that sang to home—
*ahlan wa sahlan, ahlān wa sahlan—*

as your open arms calmed our shaken bodies,
“you are most welcome, you are most welcome.”
Hide and Seek

As I nod off from the junk
    there’s a pulse in my head
throbbling like the night I found that pocket
black enough for the dead to march through

I once watched J grasp the dead too:
    his stringy vomit / a pale pink face /
    an ambulance arriving
    with two magicians / I watch J
    lying atop the couch
    thinking he’ll hover / weightless / soon

One of the magicians holds J down
    The other feeds a catheter
    through his nose
    down the esophagus / into the stomach

J shakes as the poison pumps out of his stomach

    The magicians make the poison disappear
and just like that the trick finishes
    and they cart J out the front door
    like a prop they’ve handled
    a thousand times

As I nod off from the junk
    there’s a pulse in my head
throbbling like the night I found that pocket
black enough for the dead to march through
Bodies blossomed
from a glittering break
in the nighttime

The neighborhood trees were never trees
but home bases / for the swarm of kids
fizzling from their front doors dashed
from backyard
to backyard
to find that perfect sunless cavity

That night the dead found my body
stiff in the darkness
and the marching stopped

All of them milky / filled with pink
light behind my neighbor’s shed

A man came toward me without moving his feet
He leaned his weightless head against mine

It felt far away

This feels far away
FRED DALE

Meteors over Hurricane Ridge

When we were not looking, the blue was blown into the glass sky above us, behind the clouds, the ones that scatter lightly at the mantle, not wind drift sands, or the scales of some enormous fish, but scratches from stars that leaned in last night, as they always do, checking on us in our shuttered sleep, the darkness rushing around us to put them out, leaving the etches that look like clouds from where we rest on this morning trail.

It’s no wonder our eyes are dragged to the bright mobile above, where we wait on this wistful day for the steady procession of night and themultitudinous rocks to shatter through to us, through the thin air that is kind of a tune werejoin with our southern part in it, singing to ourselves, the sky is a skull imagined into place by a worried earth, a wagging finger to discourage the clouds from moseying off to places that would be lucky to have them.

Meteors will find us tonight through the cracks in the fog, in the bone atmosphere that bounces away the debris of our birth. They’ll tap the corner of what we see, hinting imprints of their great solo dashes, so that we’ll never quite know them, and never the same peppering iron at the same time.
Each meteor was made for one eye alone, yet we’ll ask the other, “Did you see that?” and we’ll lie a streak across the sky.
Higher Education

I eat bad tomatoes  
we are in another state  
I professionally develop  
we hold hands if we are close 

his mother discontinues treatment  
flat  
far  
he won’t watch the scary movie  
to the University

my friend calls  
asks  
Is this a bad time

his mother has a fever  
everywhere  
my friend calls

says  
I can’t fix it  
anything  
I need  
help

I study to become a teacher  
a friend  
a useful  
hand

his mother becomes a fact  
we are  
far

I learn where the free food is  
he learns to say  
She was

we learn to say  
I’m fine  
to shout  
You don’t know  
you just don’t

we refuse  
to learn leaving  
we hold

& hold each other’s sleep  
we dream

& dream  
the tallest  
the leafiest  


tree
Instructions for an Elegy to Ginger, the Chicken

The hawk ate today, at least.
Tell your son this when you put him to bed.

Tell him this is the way of a world
that—in spite of his drawn-out attempts
and sleepless nights spent staring out
at the stars or, like tonight, at the low
pink clouds that portend snow and feel
like thick blankets—is something
of which he can never, never make sense.

Tell him a hawk will now survive
the black and pink night, will roost
warm and full, the way we all hope
to go to bed when it is cold.

Tell him, gently, like a mother,
that the white pile of feathers
that two mornings ago was a chicken
is now an altar to both loss
and buying time, to staving-off
and persistence and the bloody
life we cannot see for want
of a night’s sleep, even as it drifts
across the back yard, the wind
carrying it away, the wind
for no reason beyond itself.

Tell him this and say good night, love;
good night my little hungry beast.
Heavy with the sin my mother spoke about, 
from time to time I felt a pig following me 
around the house. I’d get brave, swear, 
turn my music loud, or take a long look at the neighbor

as she watered her plants, and hear the animal’s slop-breath 
in rhythm with mine. I never saw him. Even when I tried my mother’s 
bra on at a mirror, and jumped out of the way, my stamping heart 
muffled his hooves stamping off. Now, putting down the phone

after a man growls: Stay away from my wife— 
or hearing myself say: I’ve got a lot of growing up to do, 
after the woman whose bed I’m in reminds me 
I have a girlfriend waiting up for me—each dark

turn in the mud of the man I am is confirmed 
in the dull clomp of the animal who tramps alongside me. 
He grunts with me at being asked: So what are you— 
South American, or something—

like it’s that easy to know just what you are 
when what you are is everywhere and nowhere, 
is the sound of a chuckle and snort you can’t place, 
a shorted breath you feel others can hear,

why else the looks of mistrust, of being out of place, 
the sound so much, I have grown quiet, 
only to hear myself not know 
how to avoid becoming more
like the animal that has me cursing under my breath in two tongues, ripping pages out of Bibles, always for the same lines: *And I gave my heart to know wisdom,*

*and to know madness and folly,*
words I repeat to myself
downing another beer,
having nothing else to offer.
Comfort Zone

The day the old man showed up, the thermometer was already topping eighty degrees by mid-morning, and the trips carrying grocery bags from the trunk of the Buick Century to the front steps of the bungalow left Ada’s light green shift saturated at the armpits. She regrouped, catching her breath and readjusting the strap of her pocketbook, which kept slipping from her shoulder. The checkers at Food Lion didn’t know how to pack anything properly, insisting on putting the cans and milk in one bag, even when she told them not to. Then they’d ask, “You need some help?” You gonna come home with me? she wanted to snap, but she was too polite to do that.

With sweat tickling her breasts and plastering her white bob to her forehead, Ada eased her bones onto the bottom step of her porch with a whoosh of a sigh. And that was when she saw him standing on the sidewalk not ten feet away, staring at her, round-mouthed and dim-looking in his “Property of Steelers” T-shirt. North Carolina had its fair share of Yankee transplants, and she didn’t mind them, but this one looked odd. His elevator doesn’t go all the way to the top floor, Ada thought. He had a few years on her, but the strength still visible in his forearms suggested he’d known a life of manual labor. What kind of man, especially one her own age who was still fit, would let a woman tussle with all those bags and never offer to carry even one?

“What’re you looking at?” Ada knew better. She hadn’t been raised like that, but still she couldn’t help it. Words just popped out of her mouth before she could stuff them back in, as if her age gave her permission to forgo the manners she learned as a girl.
He brushed his hair out of his eyes, which were a shade of blue that reminded Ada of the water off Folly Beach, where she and Cam had rented a cottage until they retired in the nineties and could no longer afford the rising costs. “Do you know me?” the old man asked.

“Don’t recollect so,” Ada replied, thinking it was the oddest question anyone had asked her since she was a Central Junior High librarian. She’d heard it all from those kids, who were brutally uncensored.

“Oh,” he said, his chest sinking in a little.

She waited for him to say something else or to finally come to his senses and offer help getting the bags inside. But then, her niece Junie had cautioned her against letting anyone into the house after reading a story about scammers who targeted the elderly by claiming to be financial planners with the inside scoop on some great new mutual funds. “They’re mutually funding folks right out of their savings!” was how Junie put it.

This old man, though, didn’t look like he had anything wicked in mind. On the other side of eighty, he surely didn’t mean to rape or murder her or even steal her pocketbook. His clothes were clean and pressed, like someone was taking care of him—a wife, Ada guessed, judging by the thin gold band on his left hand. But he looked a little jumpy, the way he kept drifting from one foot to the other as he stared her down. Maybe he’d misplaced something important, like his keys or wallet or even his dog. People’s dogs and cats were always going loose in the neighborhood and having to be rounded up. Somebody’s orange tabby practically lived in her backyard.

“You lose something?” Ada decided to ask.

He looked up and down the street twice, three times, then back at Ada. “This your house?”

“Free and clear,” Ada said. Her daddy, Clayton Shook Senior, had left it to her for being his caretaker in his final years. Ada had never lived anywhere else, although she’d spent plenty of nights with Cam. The four-room house with a screened back porch was still a bone of contention with her two older brothers. They begrudged her the creaking bungalow even though they had sprawling suburban ranches of their own. The oldest, Clay Junior, still wouldn’t talk to her twenty years later and only communicated through his daughter, Junie.
“It’s nice,” the old man said. “Needs some work, though.”

Ada took silent offense even though what he said was true. Cam had been handy and had kept the place up for her, but she’d been gone a dozen years. The exterior hadn’t been painted in over a decade, and a couple of floorboards on the front porch had rotted away like bad teeth. Some of the screens were so frayed she might as well have put out a welcome mat for mosquitoes. More worrisome were the furnace and hot water heater. Her daddy had installed them so long ago the date had slipped from her memory, and Ada prayed they would make it through another year. With repairs, the place would be worth some money now. Newcomers were snapping up old cotton-mill houses all over the neighborhood. Two doors down, Mr. Barlow’s sons fixed up his tumbledown shotgun after he died and then turned around and sold it for more than a quarter of a million dollars—more money than Ada could even imagine.

But there was no time to chitchat with the old man about improvements to her house. At another time, she might have engaged, but in this heat, Ada had to get her perishables inside. “I got to go,” she said to the Steelers fan and hauled herself up by the wrought iron banister, which she noticed with alarm was starting to come loose from the cement steps.

“You know my daughter?” the old guy continued. “Mimi Finn?”

“Can’t say I do.”

“She’s from Pittsburgh like me,” he went on. “I live with her and her…” He broke off. “I live with her. Right around here.” He glanced around again, giving Ada the impression he was not quite clear on where “here” was. She wondered if she should help him out, but how long would that take? Sometimes when you tried to assist people, be a good neighbor, you ended up taking on more than you bargained for, and Ada had concerns of her own. Getting old was no Sunday afternoon picnic, and she had the creaking joints and shrinking bank account to prove it. Luckily, she still had all her faculties.

“Family’s what’s important,” she said just to say something and have the exchange be over and done with. “You have a nice day.” She adjusted her pocketbook again and mounted the steps with one of the heavier
grocery bags in tow. At this rate, her frozen chicken pot pies would thaw before she got through the front door.

“You want a hand?” the old guy asked.

Ada remembered Junie’s warning, but then maybe her niece didn’t have to know. Junie didn’t check in more than once a week, so maybe it wasn’t even any of her business. She was quick to tell Ada what not to do but not so fast when it came to coming around for a glass of sweet tea or sending her son Jack to mow the lawn. Now Ada had an offer of help precisely when she needed it. “I’d be much obliged,” she replied.

“I’m Harry. Harry Finn.”

“Ada,” she said. “What’s your shirt mean?”

Harry looked down at it, as if he’d forgotten what he was wearing. “It means I’m from Pittsburgh,” he said.

“Then shouldn’t it say ‘I’m from Pittsburgh?’”

Harry’s mouth fell into that rounded O again.

“It’s a joke,” Ada explained, and he laughed like kids do when they don’t want to seem foolish. “Here,” she said, pointing to the heaviest two bags, the ones with canned beans and a bottle of Crisco oil. She worried those might crack her spine like a piece of dry wood. “Bring those two inside. Please.”

“Glad you added the please,” Harry said as he scooped up the bags and hauled them across the threshold. “I was wondering about that Southern hospitality I hear about.” It was the longest thing he’d said to her in the five minutes of their acquaintance, and it was surprisingly clear as spring water.

She watched his eyes scan the genteel tatters of her living room. Ada kept it neat, but the wallpaper her mama had hung was faded to grays and beiges and curling at the match lines. The sofa looked like you might sink through to China if you sat on it. “It’s not much,” she said, seeing it through a stranger’s eyes. “Kitchen’s right through here.”

“Nice you got your own place.”

She switched on the kitchen overhead, and the fluorescent bulb flickered before going on full force. Ada placed her grocery bag on the table, set with a single placemat and chair, and motioned for Harry to do the same. He returned to the porch for the rest of the bags, his second trip taking a little longer than the first. The least she could do, she
thought, was offer him some sweet tea, show him she was hospitable after all.

“Don’t mind if I do,” Harry replied.

“Sit yourself down in the other room. Take a load off.”

She put away the frozen foods, milk, and eggs, and poured him a tall glass on ice. As an afterthought, she pinched a sprig of mint from her windowsill herb garden and stuck it in his glass, where it stood up like a soldier at attention.

“What’s that?” Harry asked, staring at the mint like it was a foreign object you’d never find in a sweet tea—a pencil, maybe, or a turd.

“You never saw mint before?”

“Not like that,” he replied.

“How else would you see mint?” There was her ornery side again. She didn’t mean to sound so clipped, but the guy was mighty peculiar.

“I like them York Peppermint Patties. My wife used to stick one in my lunch pail every so often.”

He was sitting on the sofa, on the middle cushion, which was sturdier than the other two and made him rise up like a dignitary. Ada sat down across from him in her TV chair, the La-Z-Boy that had been her daddy’s. Her shift made her descent more of a plop than a sit because she worried that her hemline might hike up. She resisted the urge to make the chair recline, which would have added to the problem, even though she could feel her ankles swelling from all the standing she’d done while shopping. She would have to soak them in Epsom salt later.

“You and your wife live with your daughter?” she said, finding it pleasant to have a guest, even one who didn’t get her jokes.

Harry sipped the tea. “No, just me. Sharon died.” It was startling the way he came out with it, just like that; hard to get used to the matter-of-fact talk Yankees had. Ada still couldn’t refer to Cam’s passing, when she spoke of it at all, as anything but that—a temporary crossing until they met again on the other side.

“I am truly sorry to hear that,” she replied. “What was it that got her?”

“Stroke. Doctor said she didn’t feel a thing.”

“Well, that’s a blessing,” Ada said. Cam’s ovarian cancer had been ruthless, sticking around for years, and then for a whole nine months
they breathed easy. “Takes more than a little cancer to defeat me!” was the giddy way Cam put it when she got the clean bill of health. But then it came back, an alien beast that’d been gestating inside her, waiting for the crudest moment to show up, just when they had begun to live like regular folks again.

The images still haunted her—the chemo room drip, the sick bucket, the sight of Cam curled up under an afghan on the couch all day, reduced to a slip of a thing weighing no more than a girl. She’d been an imposing woman, six feet tall in her stockings with the long legs of an athlete. She’d coached girls’ basketball in addition to teaching English. Ada tried to banish the sickroom Cam quickly, so she didn’t take root and keep her awake at night.

“Nice place you got here,” the old guy said, as if their conversation had never taken place. “You own it?”

What could she say to that? At the senior center, which she went to a few afternoons a month for the free movies, there were plenty of folks like this man, their marbles slipping away one by one. She never knew what to say to them either, when they hopped on the same train of conversation they’d dropped out of not minutes earlier. Ada was glad to still have her wits about her, but it was a lonely state of affairs, too.

Luckily, she didn’t have to struggle with re-answering the old man’s question. Just like the folks at the East Charlotte Senior Center, Harry’s attention span seemed to be no longer than about five seconds. “Your husband dead?” he asked.

“No husband,” she said. “Never saw the need. I had a…friend, but she’s gone…twelve years now.”

Her eyes darted to a grouping of photos of Cam, given prime place on her mother’s étagère. When Junie came to visit, Ada put the pictures away, replacing them with knick-knacks she stashed in a drawer for that purpose. But she hadn’t been expecting company. It was daring to have the photographs out, right in the open like that, but she hoped the old man’s eyesight was as malfunctioning as his brain. Maybe he wouldn’t notice that in one of them, a young Ada and Cam were sitting on the beach with their bare shoulders boldly touching, as if daring the world to see their intimacy. Their good friend Auggie, a sissy man who had died many years back, had snapped the picture and framed it, given it to Ada
for Christmas as a memento of what he called a “très gay” weekend, probably back in fifty-nine or sixty. The year may have slipped from memory, but she would never forget the thrilling press of Cam’s freckled skin against her own.

Harry’s eyes followed her own to the shelves. “That her?” he said, taking a long swig of his sweet tea. “The friend?”

She dodged the question, even though a dim bulb like him would probably never put two and two together. “You got good eyesight, seeing that from where you’re sitting. I’m useless without my glasses.”

“I seen it when I was waiting for the tea,” he commented. “Nice-looking woman. My wife would’ve called her a big girl.”

Silence dropped between them again. If someone commented on the looks of your husband or child, you might say thank you, but what did you say about a nice-looking friend, a woman whose only connection to you now was memories? Ada shifted in her chair. She was ready for him to leave, but he went on.

“My daughter’s got a friend. A woman. She gets mad if I use that word, ‘friend.’ She says ‘wife.’ I didn’t think it was right when she first told us, but times change and at least they take care of each other.” The rattle of his ice cubes as he drank more tea echoed in Ada’s ears. “You know my daughter, Mimi?”

This time it was Ada’s mouth that dropped open. She had definitely had enough of the Steelers fan, coming out of nowhere and upending her day, acting like he knew something about her and Cam. She would put the photo of the beach away as soon as he left; their life together was nobody’s business. They had been private folks—had to be, a librarian and a teacher at the same junior high, way back when. They didn’t discuss their relationship with anyone, hardly even with each other. They never even lived together, shuffling instead between separate houses just blocks apart. Shoot, she would have sooner told a stranger about her bowel movements than admit to having a special woman “friend” or, heavens, a “wife.”

Bile rose in Ada’s throat like it did when she ate too fast. Would Harry Finn start running off at the mouth about meeting an old dyke in the neighborhood? He was just crazy enough to, not even realizing what he was doing, and she wouldn’t want any hooligans finding out about
her living on her own and deciding to bother her. She yanked herself out of the chair and came toward him, taking the glass from his hand. He relinquished it without protest, the tinkle of the unmelted ice like a chime ending his stay.

“I told you before, I don’t know her,” she said. “And fact is, I got chores to do now.” It was a lame excuse when there was nothing whatsoever to do until supper, and then she would just zap a pot pie in the microwave.

She knew she should have detained him, tried to figure out where his daughter lived. But some nasty version of Ada Shook whispered in her ear like the devil himself. She would have to pray on it later, ask God and Cam to forgive her.

At the front door, Harry looked up and down the street as if the terrain were Jupiter and not a quiet urban neighborhood. She had heard of North Carolina’s silver alerts, like the Amber alerts for missing kids but for old folks, poor demented souls who couldn’t find their way home even if they were just a street or two away. On the porch, as the screen door slapped behind him, the man turned back toward her and reached into his pants pocket. His eyes were dark and hooded, and she flinched, wondering if he was someone to fear after all. Why hadn’t she noticed the bulge in his pocket?

But what he pulled out was a flip phone, the kind that you could order from Parade magazine. She had one, too, with numbers as big as her thumbnail and an old-fashioned ring like the phone that still hung on her kitchen wall. Junie had bought the thing for her, and she had used it only once, when she came out of the senior center to a flat tire. The old man held his phone out to her. “Does this thing tell you where I live?” he asked with an embarrassed laugh, more of a snort. “Darned if I can figure it out.”

She took it from him and stabbed the button for “Contacts.” There was just one—“Mimi”—but no address accompanied the phone number. The street might have been there somewhere, but Ada didn’t know how to find it. She should have pressed the number and called Mimi Finn herself, but instead she handed the phone back to him like it was a dead mouse.

“No address I can see.”
“Oh,” he said. “Well, thanks anyway.” Then he turned, looked both ways on the street again, and stepped off the porch without a goodbye.

§

“I never saw him before. That’s the truth,” she told the two young officers, one man and one woman, who showed up in the middle of her supper explaining that one of the neighbors had seen the old man go into her house. Now the police said he was missing. *Who was the busybody who told the police he’d been to my house?* she wondered.

They showed her a phone, which looked pretty much like the one she’d checked for him, to see if it held a clue to where the old guy lived. “Could be his,” she admitted. “I only saw it for a second or two. He wasn’t here but a short time.” The male cop pressed her on what a “short time” was—was it as much as a half-hour? An hour?

“I don’t know,” she said, which was the truth. “It was…short.”

The exchange made her ears warm to the touch. The police took notes, thanked her politely for the information, calling her “Mrs. Shook,” and she didn’t correct them. When they left, Ada threw out the rest of her chicken pot pie, which had gone cold, and turned on the TV.

In the close discomfort of the living room, she adjusted the big box fan, aiming it so it blew the hem of her shift and sent a chill up her bare legs. *The People’s Court* helped take her mind off the cops until she dozed off in her chair.

But her nap was fitful and far from refreshing. She dreamed that she found the old man collapsed on her couch, his glass of sweet tea spilled and soaking into the cushions, his skin chill to the touch as she bent over him, asking over and over, “Are you dead?” She was just inches from his face when his eyes popped open, and then she screamed and woke up.

§

By morning, Ada had almost backed the old man into a far corner of her mind. She didn’t think about him while she was getting dressed and putting on a pot of coffee or even when she set out her Cheerios with a sliced banana. But when she went out on the porch to get her newspaper, she was jolted back to the memory of him standing on the sidewalk, staring at her with those arresting eyes.
She pulled the paper from its plastic sleeve, but the front-page headlines held no clues about an old man’s disappearance from the neighborhood. He’d surely been found by now, she thought. How far could he go? It’s true, there was an old lady who wandered off last year and tumbled into Little Sugar Creek, hitting her head on a rock and drowning before anyone could locate her. But she was a fragile thing, hunched and bird-like. Ada had seen the photo in the paper. Harry Finn looked like he would survive a fall.

From the porch, Ada noticed that someone had posted a sign on her utility pole, and she stepped down to investigate. Her stomach did a belly dive as the old man’s photo stared back at her from the pole. He was seated in front of a birthday cake, poised to blow out the candles. HAVE YOU SEEN MY FATHER? was printed in bold letters across the top. ANSWERS TO HARRY. CAN’T TAKE CARE OF HIMSELF. PLEASE CALL 704-343-9002. Ada touched her finger to the flier, which she noticed was on poles and trees all down the block. If she had eaten her breakfast already, she most certainly would have tossed it back up.

Ada was dripping wet by the time she got back inside her living room. She closed and locked the front door and leaned her weight against it, her forehead leaving a slick mark on the wood. “Cam,” she said aloud. “Oh, Cam darlin’, I’ve done something wicked.”

It wasn’t like Cam answered her or that Ada expected her to. But sometimes the quiet in the house felt like a pillow coming down over her face, and she needed to talk to someone.

Ada couldn’t think of touching her cereal, so she covered it and put it aside. As she was struggling with the sheet of Saran Wrap, she noticed through the back window that the door to her daddy’s chicken coop was wide open again. He’d kept a few laying hens and a rooster when Ada and her brothers were young until a hawk attack decimated the flock. “I should turn it into a craft coop,” Cam used to say. In their retirement, they both liked to tinker with artsy projects—Cam had taken up woodworking, and Ada tried pottery. But Cam never got around to the restoration, and after she passed, Ada had just let the coop stand in the yard, rotting.

These days, the orange tabby that slinked freely through the neighborhood had a habit of swatting the coop door open. She’d actually
watched it do that, like something out of *America’s Funniest Home Videos*. She sometimes found the cat inside, purring and cleaning itself like it owned the place. He had no collar that she could see, so Ada wasn’t sure who he belonged to, but he was well fed and purred when she got near him.

“Jack could put a lock on that thing for you,” Junie offered, “or better yet, tear it down. You could get a nice new vinyl shed from Lowe’s. They last forever.” But Ada didn’t need something to last forever, and she actually didn’t mind the cat. She called it Auggie after her gay friend, although she had no idea if it was male or female. Ada kept a few cans of cat food around just in case the cat showed up, and now she opened one and carried it out to the coop.

At the door of the shed, though, she cried out and almost dropped the can. Harry Finn was curled up on the shed floor in the same clothes he’d been in yesterday, trying in vain to sleep off a bad case of dementia.

Ada remembered the dream in which she’d shaken Harry over and over, asking if he was dead, but she didn’t need to do that. His snoring sounded like a chainsaw or some other piece of machinery.

“Mr. Finn!” she said, nudging him with her index finger until his eyes opened. “This just isn’t safe. You can’t sleep in my chicken coop!”

Harry sat up, wiping away the thin line of drool that had escaped his lips. “Sorry,” he muttered. “The door was wide open, and I couldn’t find…” But his memory failed him again.

“Come on,” she said, tugging at his arm to urge him up. “Your folks are looking for you.”

Harry drew his arm back, flinching at the word “folks.” He seemed to be rooted, and she couldn’t drag him up onto his feet.

“What if I don’t want to go back?” he said, clear as a school bell. “Could you… If I gave you some money, would you help me get a bus ticket to Pittsburgh?”

“Is someone mistreating you?”

“No, no, no!” he said, frowning. “I just… I don’t know what I’m supposed to be doing. I want to go home!”

She heard similar complaints every time she went to the senior center—the pining for homes that had been sold years before, the confusion over what to do with the remainder of lives that had gone on a
bit too long. “This is the worst cruise I’ve ever been on,” one woman said to Ada last Christmas as they watched a marathon showing of It’s a Wonderful Life while sipping cranberry juice cocktail and snacking on sugar cookies. In a way, the end of life was a terrible cruise. Days that had once been full of students and learning, of quiet suppers with Cam and trips to the beach were now just extended naps with meals in between. At least she had her home, and she knew where it was. Lord willing, someday she’d die there, in her bed, Cam coming to her in a dazzling white light to lead the way.

“I understand, Mr. Finn,” she said to Harry, holding out her hand to him. “I surely do. I wish I could help you. But right now, all I can do is reunite you with your daughter. She is sick with worry, just sick. Nobody deserves that, now do they?”

Inside, he slurped down the bowl of Cheerios that she hadn’t been able to eat while Ada dialed the number on the flier. “My name is Ada Shook,” she said to the agitated voice that answered the phone. “I live on Herrin? Mr. Harry Finn is in my kitchen right now eating some cereal. He’s fine, looks like.”

§

Mimi Finn was probably in her late forties or early fifties, with freshly trimmed salt and pepper hair and crisp, preppy-style clothes like Cam used to wear—pressed khakis and a yellow polo shirt. She had inherited her father’s sapphire eyes. Ada found herself trying to stand taller and straighter and patting her hair into place like a young woman, like she was someone Mimi Finn would actually notice. “Vanity, thy name is Ada,” Cam used to tease when she was too long in front of the mirror.

Mimi grabbed her father and hugged him to her like he was a life vest. “I will never let you out of my sight again! Oh my God, Dad, I was absolutely terrified!” When she released him, he ran a hand through his hair in what seemed like a nervous habit. “I don’t know how to begin to thank you, Mrs. Shook.”

“Miss Shook,” Ada corrected.

Before she even realized she was hatching an idea, Ada added, “I was thinking, if you’d consider letting him out of your sight, maybe he could accompany me to the senior center. They show movies most afternoons
on a nice big television, but I don’t fancy going alone. It’s free, and it’s a
way to pass the time. You like movies, Mr. Finn?”

“Some, I guess,” he said.

“He doesn’t know his way around here. He’s only been with us a few
months. And he doesn’t have a driver’s license anymore.”

“I still drive everywhere,” Ada said. “How about I see what’s showing
tomorrow?”

Harry smiled, but by tomorrow he probably wouldn’t remember the
invitation—he might not even recall Ada’s face or name when she came
to fetch him. She wasn’t sure it really mattered.

When father and daughter left, Ada heard her stomach grumbling,
and she made herself a fried egg and a slice of toast. As she was mopping
up the last smear of yolk, a blur of orange caught her eye through the
kitchen screen door. The tabby was back and had settled on a sunny
patch of grass, where he was cleaning his paws one by one with luxurious
slowness.

Ada stared at him through the screen door until he became aware of
her too and stopped his business mid-lick. Then she retrieved the can of
food she’d opened for him earlier and emptied it into a bowl. The hinges
moaned as she threw the door open. “Here, Auggie,” she beckoned.
“There’s a good boy.”
SUSAN DOWNING-WHITE | Almost an Island, 2008
28 x 38 inches | Oil on canvas
EMILY PAIGE WILSON

My Great-Grandmother’s Ghost Is a Kleptomaniac

Once I lost a pair of garnets,  
a graduation gift. Pomegranate  
seeds fashioned into earrings,  
facets cut to hold light in deep

fuchsia folds. Whenever trinkets go  
missing, we know to blame Gladys.  
Her spirit, really, that shows itself  
by hiding things. Bobby pins,

buttons, rings. Should it surprise  
us, the way jewelry attracts these  
haunttings? Pieces made to showcase  
the body. How earrings cast shadows

on exposed shoulders, how tiny a wrist  
seems when slipped into a bracelet’s  
obliging mouth. A necklace resting  
in the slender curves of a clavicle. Isn’t this

what spirits are after: a reminder  
of the shapes of the bodies they’ve  
misplaced? To enter or rest  
on skin without causing harm, to stay

comfortably afloat? I dreamt,  
weeks after I lost my earrings,  
that they had fallen from a shelf.  
And there they were in the morning,

waiting on the carpet underneath.  
Bright red and ready to be worn.
Dumped in swampy ground, axles up,

the rusted-out truck is beginning to sink in,
like how old age starts to grip. My mother doesn’t like
to drive at night; she clutches the wheel and talks about
close calls. After my son’s graduation, he drives off.

We, too, go our separate ways, wanting to be home
before dark. I stop at the park. There are barriers now.
Kids don’t sneak up here anymore to light fires,
and kiss, and melt car parts and beer bottles,

and you can’t just drive your wreck off
the Sprain Brook Parkway and abandon it in the forest
to founder beside open-mouthed washing machines.

Birds flit in and out of shadows and old stone walls
wander off into the trees. After it was junked, the truck
still must have taken years to morph into this—

its cooling fan has burgeoned into a burnt sunflower,
its scrunched front end makes a cubist face,

while out of the Chevy’s guts, something like
a T-rex rears its rusty head—a ferocious reminder

of all the undoing to be done, even of the wrecked.
Ballad (American, 21st Century)

That spring, the shooter was everywhere—
    shot from our minds into the hedgerows,
the pickup beds and second-floor windows,
    the hillocks and tentacled live oaks. And sometimes

he was tracking us with the dilated
    pupil at the tip of his rifle. His bullets spun
into the theater’s stop-sign faces, the tessellated
    car lots beyond the exits; they tore holes

in our restaurants and vinyl siding, those fiberglass
    teacups we clamored into at the county fair.
Though you don’t remember it, Little Bear,
    a bullet crossed right in front of your car seat—

then window glass covered you like bits
    of clouded ice, and the rain came pouring in
as I raced for shelter at the Wendy’s off Exit 10.
    Every night we kept our curtains drawn,

and while your mother slept I sat alone
    in the bathroom dark watching the news surface
into the ice-cut window of my cell phone.
    They said the shooter was in Saint Louis

shooting up a middle school gym, then
    he’d gone to the beach, where he killed a girl
pouring sand from a cup into a sandwich tin.
    (Nevertheless, I pictured his face as a cloud
of insects hovering in the blackest corner
    of the empty lot across the street.) At work
they walked us through scenarios—what to throw
    if he came through my classroom door,

how to arm the students (desks!)
    for counterattack. And when he came—
and when those next four people were erased—
    they trapped him in a high-speed chase
toward the touchless carwash, where the cops
    encircled him and, rather than relent,
he put his rifle barrel to his mouth like the mouth
    of a test tube from some childhood experiment.
Any Other Sun

Long seconds your leaving sews
in my skin: a daughter’s gasp, trapped
in the space between bodies. The map unfurls

and I keep running. What is it I hope to find? A war
breaks out in this borrowed home
as I recline in the Gulf’s clean palm, adrift

under the sun. Tell me I’m not
a disappointment. The struggle
to get to this country. You couldn’t even read.

I wish I could carry you now, as your mother did,
show you this world. This world,
a churning river. In the morning, a child can be

almost grown. How would it have been
inside your skin, your language
lapping the shores of these shallow bones? I saw snow

crowning silver sills. I saw you disappear
like the sun. Here, my hands belong
to someone. Thin, like my mother’s

blood. I’m ready to be powerless against
the night. To leave behind skin
pinned beneath my palms like sheets
on a line, swaying in a southern wind.
SUSAN DOWNING-WHITE | Marsh off Weeks Bay, 2012
38 x 55 inches | Oil on canvas
Mysterious Waters

We are gliding, today, my son’s first birthday, down a river in a boat whose motor wakes the fish at the springs where we were married. He’s having trouble sitting still and wants to crawl again, as he was doing just before this in the playground tunnel, going between dark and light. The ranger tells us that alligators grow thousands of teeth in a lifetime. I wonder if each one hurts as much as the twenty our son must work on, or whether, with so much practice, the losing hurts less and the pain becomes as distant as things that happen before we are born. Bulrush grows on the bank beside the hundreds-year-old tree wrapped in vines that both hold it in and help it stand. Moses floated off toward safety in a vessel made of bulrush, in a vessel whose word in Hebrew is the same as Noah’s arc. Maybe now I can finish that love poem to the sky. To the space that opens to us when we are outside of what we knew the world to be, when we are upside down or flying, newly rescued from the dark. How much longer might the three of us have been stuck that Sunday last July, in the hot tiny confines of a broken elevator, if the couple down the hall hadn’t happened to hear the soft alarm, decided not to turn on their TV? Soon sirens sounded down the city street—for us!—and we felt the air running toward us again, saw a light like a piece of open sky. Our infant son was lifted from the dark where we were latched… his reddened cheeks, toes curling onto air like talons grasping at their branch. When were you last carried
from the dark? Or finally arrived at silence after so much motion and, like a toddler learning the ground by moving back and forth, putting every pebble to his lips, you waited to remember yourself, the space, the seed, the wild and small of it.
Flight

I feel them everywhere
whittling me, bone-cured
with ivory palms.

In the dark, a man sings
to his guitar, one note
that cuts ragged

from his throat. Earlier,
we touched each pebble
on the path. Our faces

filled up like ticks. Our hair
grew coarse as batwings.
We flew with our treasures

into caves and sorted
through them there—
rusted pull-tabs, yellowed

straws, a cigarette
butt marked by a perfect
kiss, and bits

of glass so fine
I thought they’d turn
to powder in our hands.

All this, and still we picked
at bugs we could not
see. We came
 undone like rolls
 of parchment. Someone
 had untied our string.

 What is home? We soon
 made a suffering from it.
 When we left, we didn’t

 miss our couches.
 When we left, we didn’t
 mourn the phone.

 We left it flatlining
 on the floor, and no one
 stopped to lock the door.
RICHARD SCHEMM | Wise Old Lake, 2015
59 x 48 inches | Ink transfer on metallic paper mounted on anodized aluminum under Lucite
Dove and Ellie

Ellie’s mother, Dove, believed in family, even though hers had let her down. She never saw her sister, who had moved to a different state without telling anyone, and her brother was dead. “I don’t know them anymore, and they don’t know me,” she said to Ellie.

Ellie was sometimes resentful about this lack of relationships. No grandmother with white permed hair, no grandfather with a fishing hat. No aunts and uncles, no family reunion picnics with baked beans and Jell-O salad. All they had for a family was Rudy, Dove’s cousin once removed, although no one could explain to Ellie what he was removed from.

Ellie sat with her mother in the front room, her face to the yellow sun that poured out of the summer air. Her mother was in the rocking chair, leaning forward to hold Ellie by the shoulders.

“There are bad people in the world,” she said to Ellie.

“Who?” Ellie asked.

“Nobody in particular.” Her mother paused to consider. “Most people are good. But there are some bad ones, too.”

“So?” Ellie was bored. The sun was coming in hard through the window, lighting up the lampshade as if the lamp were turned on. The bars of light burst through the back of the rocking chair, striping the side of her mother’s face.

“Listen to me, will you? You’re eight years old. You’re going to a new school in the fall.” Ellie’s mother raised her hands and let them fall back into her lap. “There are people around who’d hurt you if they could.”
Ellie believed that her mother was talking about Ellie’s father, who had hurt Dove many years ago, shortly after Ellie was born. All that Ellie knew about him was that he could whistle “The Star Spangled Banner” and that his eyes were silver.

This was something that her mother argued about with her cousin Rudy, Rudy insisting that they were only gray, a plain gray.

“If he comes around, I won’t talk to him,” Ellie assured her mother.
“If who comes around?”
“Whoever,” Ellie said. She was tired of kneeling and she twisted in her mother’s hands. “Can I go outside?”

§

Dove was making a pie for dinner, which she did whenever Rudy came over. Rudy sat and watched her thumbs and forefingers crimp the pie crust together around the edge, a pinching motion she made over and over, each pinch a perfect scallop. “Remember when Grandma made pie?” she said.

Rudy followed her fingers with his eyes, feeling a little dreamy, pleasantly disconnected. “No,” he said.

“Don’t you remember coming here to play? Her garden with the wooden tomato cages? The cat that slept in the bathroom?” Dove lived in her grandmother’s house, left to her, the favorite grandchild.

“I don’t remember nothing of a cat.”
“Her name was Mitzi,” Dove said, her fingers pinching, pinching.
Rudy shook his head. “Where’s Ellie?”
“She’s next door, watching TV with Mrs. Knapik.”
Rudy shook his head again, this time in disbelief. “What for?”
“They like to watch the soaps together.”

Rudy smacked the table as if he were going to say something mean, and Dove looked at him nervously. Instead, he got up and poured himself a glass of milk from the fridge. “I’m starting a new job tomorrow. Night shift. Electronics.”

Dove nodded, spooning pie filling into the crust. “Ellie will miss you,” she said. The filling, custardy and sweet, filled the pie perfectly, lapping at the scalloped edge.
“Can’t be helped.” Rudy put the glass down on the drainboard with a clink.


Next door, Ellie and Mrs. Knapik sat on her sofa bed with the afghan over their knees. On the TV screen a woman was standing in front of a big painting that looked just like her except in old-fashioned clothes. “Who are you?” the woman said to the picture.

“It’s her, isn’t it?” Ellie asked.

“Sshh,” Mrs. Knapik said.

“It’s like her evil twin, right? Her evil, old-fashioned twin.”

“Maybe so,” Mrs. Knapik said.

The woman on the screen turned as someone came into the room. “What are you doing here?” she said.

Mrs. Knapik put her hands over Ellie’s ears so that she could hear only blurs of sound, bleats coming from first one, then the other’s lips. “She’s having his baby, right?” Ellie said. “But he doesn’t know it.”

“Smarty-pants.” The commercial came on, and Mrs. Knapik took her hands away. “Hand me a Snickers Miniature, will you, sweetie?”

Mrs. Knapik was an invalid. She spent all day on the sofa bed and then at night she went upstairs to her regular bed. She wasn’t supposed to eat candy because she had sugar in her blood, but she and Ellie had a pact about this as well as Ellie’s secret dog, which she fed and played with in Mrs. Knapik’s garage.

“You’d think she’d be smarter than to go for him all over again, wouldn’t you?” Mrs. Knapik said. The show was back on, and the woman was looking in a meaningful way at a different man, with thicker eyebrows and ears that stuck out a little.

Ellie considered this. Was this man one of the bad people? Should she be looking out for someone like him? She knew they were all actors, really, although sometimes when she was talking to Mrs. Knapik, she forgot. His eyebrows were a little scary, she thought. She watched as the woman stepped forward, and they kissed in a sloppy way. Ellie knew, in spite of Mrs. Knapik’s censoring hands, that this meant that they were going to have sex. If not right now, then soon. If she was lucky, she’d get a peek at it.
Rudy sat in the driveway for a minute, looking in the window at Dove washing the dishes. Her head was tipped back a little, her sandy hair falling away from her face, and her lips were moving. She was singing along with the radio. Half the pie lay beside him on the seat, wrapped in plastic. He could see the light in Ellie’s room upstairs, and her shadow against the curtains, jumping like a monkey. Mrs. Knapik’s house was lit up, too. She liked to have the lights on at night, he knew from Ellie, even after she’d gone up to sleep. Rudy drummed his fingers on the wheel as he watched the bluish light of Mrs. Knapik’s TV flare and die back again as the picture changed from one thing to another. He had once been a burglar. He had been in jail for this, years ago, before Ellie was born. It wasn’t something he planned on doing again, but sometimes the desire came back. Not for the cash so much or the small electronics, so easy to sell, but for the step over the threshold or through the window, the step that took him from one world to another. His fingers itched to slide into a drawer, feeling among the silks and cottons for what was hidden there, a coin collection, an expensive pair of earrings, a watch. Even when the things he found were useless, he loved the finding of them, the deck of cards decorated with naked women, the dried-up rose pressed in a sleeve of waxed paper. Once he had found a nest of small rocks in a woman’s sock drawer—five black rocks, cool, oval, and smooth. He still carried one of them in his pocket all this time later. Watching Mrs. Knapik’s TV light shift like the aurora, he wondered what was in her drawers, so long a widow, so generous with store cookies and quarters for Ellie. He breathed out quickly, a loud harrumph, and started up the car.

Downstairs, Dove washed the dishes slowly, thinking of her mother and her grandmother, both dead. Her mother’s hair had been silvery blonde, a few shades lighter than Dove’s. The most beautiful woman in the world, her father had said to her when Dove was eighteen, her mother dead for more than ten years. She was grateful for this memory, for how his face had changed when he said it, his mouth working a little, his eyes narrowing as if to shut out some great light, the light of her mother’s past loveliness. You’ll never be the beauty your mother was, he’d said to
Dove, who had only resented this a little at the time. Her hands moved gracefully in the dishwasher, washing each dish, rinsing it, setting it carefully to dry as if it were china, painted with flowers and rimmed with gold. The dishes, mismatched, cracked and stained, gleamed with water until they dried.

§

Late in the night, Mrs. Knapik rose from her upstairs bed and walked across the bedroom floor, her nightgown sweeping behind her, her hair long and white around her face. Her eyes were half open as if she hardly needed to see, as if the dark were full of light. At the door to the hall, she paused, touching the doorjamb, running her hand down the wood as if looking for cracks, and then she went out into the hall and down the stairs, searching for each step with her bare foot, her hand sliding down the banister. In the front room, where she had left the light on earlier, she stood as if she were looking out the window, but there was only the white expanse of the blind. Still, she stood there and looked at it, her eyes wide and blank. Sometimes she stood until morning, until the thump of the paper against her door, but this time she stayed downstairs only for a little more than an hour before she went back to bed.

§

“The dresses were gold,” Dove told Ellie. “There were three bridesmaids, one blonde, one dark-haired, one with reddish hair.”

Ellie nodded, satisfied by this variety. “What was the groom wearing?”

“They always wear the same thing.” Dove had been to play the organ for a wedding, one of her jobs, and now she was hemming Ellie’s uniform before she went to run the cash register at the corner store, another job. Ellie stood on a chair while Dove shortened her skirt with silver pins.

“That’s what I’ll be doing,” Ellie said. “Wearing the same thing as everyone else. But it’s OK,” she said when Dove looked worried. “Did they all cry?”

“The mothers cried, and one of the bridesmaids cried.”

“Not the other two?”
“No,” Dove said, tweaking the skirt to make the pleats lie flat.

“Maybe they’re the wicked bridesmaids. Like wicked stepsisters. Maybe one of them is having a baby with the groom.”

“Don’t be silly,” Dove said.

“No one would know,” Ellie assured her. “Not unless they get the DNA.”

Dove felt that Ellie was getting away from her. She felt if Rudy were around more this wouldn’t be happening. “Rudy’s going on the night shift,” she said to Ellie.

“I know,” Ellie said. She stood while her mother took the skirt off her, and then she started to dance on the chair, swiveling her hips in their pale blue underpants.

“Stop that, will you,” Dove said.

“I’ve got to boogie,” Ellie said. “Don’t you know.”

§

Outside, summer had gotten sticky and wet. Ellie lay under the bridal wreath bush and waited for the sweat to drip off her nose. She had positioned herself above an ant, waiting to strike it with the monsoon Ellie. Too soon, the ant stopped fussing around with a breadcrumb and scurried off. Ellie flopped over. From here, she could see the back of her house, like a cliff or a wave about to roll over on her. She closed her eyes and then opened them quickly, as if surprised by the house-wave. It gave her a dizzy feeling in her stomach, like a ride at the fair, and she did it several more times, until it wore off. It was almost time to go to Mrs. Knapik’s, but she didn’t move. She could see into the backyard of the people behind them. They had a swing set and two girls and a boy—all new since last year. A week ago she had spied on them through the fence while they played on the swings and in the attached sandbox. The biggest of them was short compared to Ellie, only up to her shoulder. They were babies. She wasn’t sorry she was going to a new school. The kids at her old school were all babies. On her hands and knees, she crawled out from under the bush, and then across the yard, feeling the soft grass under her hands, and then the gravel of the driveway, and then Mrs. Knapik’s grass and her slate sidewalk. She crawled up the steps and knocked on the screen door without getting up. When Mrs. Knapik came and said “Who
is it?” she jumped up. Mrs. Knapik shrieked and put her hand on her heart, but then she laughed. “You’ll give me an attack. And then who would you watch TV with?”

Ellie couldn’t imagine.

Inside, they settled on the sofa, Mrs. Knapik with her afghan over her knees. She was often chilly, even in the summer because, she had told Ellie, her blood was thin. Ellie picked up Mrs. Knapik’s hand to look at her rings. “The engagement ring, the wedding ring, the first anniversary ring,” she said, naming them. “The ring when you went to New Orleans, the ring when you had the big fight.” Five in all, four more than Dove. On TV a woman was sitting on a couch, her legs crossed, drinking something dark from a glass. “Todd must never know,” she said and pursed her lips together.

“Dove told me about the bad people,” Ellie said to Mrs. Knapik, who shook her head sadly. Ellie waited to see if Mrs. Knapik would say something, but she kept her eyes on the TV, where the woman was looking through pictures in an album while another woman spied on her from the hall. Ellie couldn’t understand why she didn’t just turn around and catch her watching. “Do you know any bad people?” she asked.

Mrs. Knapik shook her head some more, wagging it like the dog Rudy had once had in the back window of his car. “I don’t like that kind of talk,” she said to Ellie. “I don’t know what your mother is thinking.” She paused, considering. “She knows best though, remember that. Your mother knows best.”

“It’s because of going to a new school. I’m going to have to walk farther. I’ll have to wear a uniform, and we’ll have religion class.”

“Blessed Sacrament,” Mrs. Knapik said, nodding now. The woman had put aside the album and was now talking on the phone. “Todd,” she said, “I have to see you.”

“Most people are good,” Mrs. Knapik said, turning down the sound as the commercial came on. She sat, her fingers tapping the buttons on the remote. “Did I ever tell you about when I had my purse stolen on the bus?”

“Mmhmm,” Ellie said. “He slid it out from under your hand.”

“As smooth as butter. Oh my.” Mrs. Knapik put her hand out, feeling for the bowl with the Snickers Miniatures bars.
“I don’t have a purse,” Ellie observed. “But I might get one when I go to the new school, don’t you think?”
“You might. A red one, maybe?”
“Red,” Ellie said, agreeing. She laid her head against Mrs. Knapik’s shoulder even though it was too hot and watched as the woman, back now after the commercial, opened the door for Todd. Before she could say anything, he put his arms around her and kissed her. Ellie sat up, in case this led to anything exciting.

§

Just then, Dove was letting herself into the back door of their house. Her arms were trembling from the weight of the grocery bags she was carrying. She’d been going to take the bus, but a woman she didn’t know had offered her a ride, and she had accepted because she had bought so many things in cans. In the car, Dove had told the woman how her mother had died just that morning. “I haven’t even told my little girl,” she said, and the woman made sympathetic noises. “Or her brother either.” Dove had imagined this boy as younger than Ellie, no more than a baby really. “It was her heart,” she said to the woman. She couldn’t seem to stop herself. “A hemorrhage, the doctor said.”

“Isn’t there a test for that?” the woman had asked.

“She didn’t have any symptoms,” Dove said.

“You poor, poor thing.”

“My husband always hated her,” Dove said. “He said he won’t even go to the funeral, just the wake.”

The woman shook her head in sympathy.

Now Dove took the cans out of the bags and lined them up on the table, thinking spaghetti tonight, beef stew tomorrow, leftovers on Thursday. Ellie wouldn’t eat the beef in stew, but she would get the good of the juices. Dove could pick some lettuce for a salad, some cucumbers, a tomato. Rudy had started on the night shift, but he might stop by late. Dove put on the radio and danced around the kitchen, putting things away, swinging her hips, and singing in her golden voice. When she sang in the choir, her voice sounded holy, she knew. Like an angel, people in the church said. But when she sang along with the radio, she hoped she sounded more earthly. Sexy. She opened her mouth wide so that the
sound belled out, reaching up to the high shelves. In the garden, she hummed through her closed lips, thinking of the wedding she had been to last week, the lowered lids of the bridesmaids, the rich folding of the bride’s gown as she knelt at the altar. Dove imagined herself kneeling that way, the whitened soles of her shoes showing under the froth of her skirt. She would have the longest train anyone could imagine, the longest veil, the whitest lace, the most sparkling ring. She picked tomatoes for Mrs. Knapik, putting the warm tomatoes into the front of her blouse and pulling the hem up to hold them. Mrs. Knapik never cooked for herself anymore, but she liked to eat tomatoes raw, like apples, or on a sandwich. Dove turned toward her neighbor’s house and saw Ellie coming out the side door, dragging her feet across the grass.

“I have to go out for a while tonight,” Dove said. “Just for a little while. I’m going to sing a set with Rudy’s friend’s band.”

Ellie nodded her head, trying to imitate Mrs. Knapik, with a little tremble at the end of each nod.

§

Mrs. Knapik leaned over the end of the sofa, looking out the window at Ellie and her mother. My, they looked sweet together, she thought. Sweet. The TV talked in a mumble behind her, but all her attention was on Ellie dancing from foot to foot, Dove smoothing down her hair with one hand, holding the front of her blouse up with the other. She could see their mouths move, as if they were in a silent movie. “Love,” she thought she saw Dove say, which was nice, love between a mother and daughter, or between anyone, for that matter. Mrs. Knapik sank back into the cushions of the sofa and sighed.

“Don’t listen to her,” she told the man on the TV screen, who was listening to the woman in the evening gown with a bemused expression. “She’s a two-face,” she advised him. Mrs. Knapik had never owned an evening gown, but she had had some very nice dresses, very nice indeed. The powder blue rayon she’d worn for her forty-fifth anniversary, for instance. Why not wait and have a party on your fiftieth, her sister had said. “If I’d listened to her, I’d have missed out.” She paused, watching the man on the TV watch the woman who was putting on lipstick very slowly. “He died on me, didn’t he.” She shook her head, thinking of the
powder blue rayon dress with its little raised collar, its satin buttons, the tricky draping of the bodice that gave her a certain fullness at the bosom. Your bosom was supposed to fill out when you had children, but they hadn’t been blessed.

“Mrs. K!” Ellie burst into the house. “I brought you tomatoes.”

“Set them on the table, dear,” Mrs. Knapik said. “I’ll make them into a nice salad.” She listened to Ellie run down the hall, the thump of the tomatoes onto the table, the slap of Ellie’s bare feet on the linoleum. “Get that pack of Oreos, will you honey? And put them into a bowl for us.”

“Mom’s going to sing tonight,” Ellie told her when she was settled on the sofa beside her.

“Oh, how we danced on the night we were wed,” Mrs. Knapik sang. “It’s a song,” she told Ellie.

“She’ll probably sing newer songs,” Ellie said.

“I suppose so.” Mrs. Knapik took an Oreo from the bowl and twisted the two halves apart so she could lick the creamy center.

§

At the bar, Rudy sat on a stool under the TV and watched Dove prepare to sing a song with the band. It was a band that played country and whatever else appealed to the lead singer, a fat man who wore cowboy boots and a derby hat. His weight was causing back problems, he was telling Dove onstage while the others tuned their guitars. “An operation would kill me,” he said, and Dove nodded, smiling, her fingers braiding the strips of leather fringe on her jacket. “They give me this here.” Rudy saw him pull out something that looked like a TV remote. “It gives me an electric shock, you know? If it gets too bad, I just zap myself.” He laughed, and Rudy watched, fascinated, as his belly rolled and shivered inside his pearl-snap shirt.

The bartender held up his arm and pointed at his watch. The singer hoisted himself off his stool and picked up the microphone, which squawked briefly. “Hey, everyone,” he said, smiling. “Listen, we’re back. And here’s a little lady who’s going to take over for this old cowboy for a spell. Her name’s Dove, and she’s as sweet as a dove, isn’t she? Give her a big hand, why don’t y’all?” He got himself back up on the stool and pulled a harmonica out of his pocket, nodding to Dove.
Dove stepped forward, smiling, her hands clasped in front of her. Rudy thought she looked like an orphan, her jacket too big, her light hair frizzed out around her face. She was wearing a pair of high heels that made her lean slightly forward. “Hi,” she said.

“Hi, beautiful,” someone said from the back, and Rudy turned around to see who it was.

“Hi,” Dove said again. The bar noise surged up and over her, and Rudy wanted to look away. “I’m going to sing ‘Old Flames,’” she said, and then added, “‘Old Flames Don’t Hold a Candle to You.’ It’s an old song but I hope you’ll like it.” She pulled the microphone out of its holder and held it clasped at her chin.

When she started singing, Rudy was surprised at the sound of her voice, rich and deep. He usually heard her singing in the kitchen or occasionally when she made him go to church, and he thought of her voice as pleasant, a thread of sound that was personal and intimate. But here in the bar, her voice had more to it, as if she was standing at the mouth of a cave, the air behind her buoying her up and pushing the words out before her. She clasped her hands around the mike as if she were in church, praying, and her knees were pressed together. He could see the whiteness of her knuckles. Her voice had taken on a quiver that was never there in church, for sure, and which made the men at the bar turn around and take another look at her, looking for the place in her that started that quivering. “No shit,” Rudy said to himself.

“Now that was real nice,” the lead singer was saying. “Let’s give her a hand, can we?” He clapped his hands heavily, his remote zapper hanging from his wrist.

“Do you remember how I sang for the talent show in fifth grade?” Dove said in the car on the way home. “My mother made me a dress for it.” When Rudy didn’t answer, she asked again. “Do you remember that?” It had been pink, the ruffles handsewn, starched, and pressed with the iron until they bloomed like a rose.

“You won.” Rudy turned the car sharply at the corner to their street.

“I did, didn’t I?” Dove smiled. “But do you remember that dress?” She turned in the seat to look at him. “Do you remember my mother, Rudy?”
Rudy pulled into the driveway. “Why wouldn’t I?” he said. His hands were still on the wheel and Dove knew he was waiting for her to say, come in, why don’t you? Come in and have a cup of coffee. Come and lie on my pillow.

Ellie sat in the middle of the Mrs. Knapik’s upstairs hall, listening. She had read a book about two children who found a ghost, and she wanted to try it. The most likely places, she felt, would be the basement or the attic. But the steps to Mrs. Knapik’s attic pulled down, which she wasn’t tall enough to do, and she was afraid of the basement. Mrs. Knapik was half sleeping in front of the TV, the colors on the screen washing over her. The upstairs hall was a little spooky with the lights off. The light from the streetlight came in through the front bedroom. Ellie climbed up on the bed carefully and lay back on one of the pillows. “Oh, darling,” she said. She turned her head toward the other pillow. “You are amazing.” She rolled around on the bed for a minute and then got up, smoothing over where she’d been. She sat down on the hall floor, crossing her legs.

She wouldn’t mind some children to hunt ghosts with, someone her own age or older. Ellie had made up stories to herself about a family moving in next door, a family with a boy and a girl. The girl would be just Ellie’s age, eight, the boy a year younger, so they could boss him around. Ellie had written in her notebook a list of the games they would play and where their hideout would be. She would even let them in on the secret dog, probably.

Ellie closed her eyes and waited. She could hear the drip of the bathroom tap and a car going by outside. In the book, the children had been alerted to the presence of the ghosts by music, and she strained to hear anything like that. The carpet in the hall scratched her legs. What would I do if a robber came in here? she thought, someone like the one who tried to steal Mrs. K’s purse. You could use your credit card to open doors, she knew. You cut wires to mess up the alarm system. But Mrs. K didn’t have one. The robber would look for valuables. “He didn’t get my valuables,” Mrs. K had said. Money or jewelry.
Her eyes closed, Ellie thought of her father, that bad person. He wasn’t dead, she was pretty sure, because her mother would have told her. Dove was a truthful person. He would be living far away, in a cabin in a forest maybe, chopping wood for a fire. She imagined him chopping down a tree so big that the top could not be seen. The beginnings of its fall were invisible, the leaves and branches cutting through the air with a sound like violins, high-pitched and squealing.

Downstairs, the hot summer air of the day was cooling, currents silently dividing around her bare ankles. Mrs. Knapik’s hands were clasped before her like Dove’s on the microphone. She looked as if she were thinking about something important, something she might do in the next moment, her lips pursed with concentration. Her hair, which she always braided before she went to bed, had come half undone. It fanned across her back, white and feathery over the padded, curved bones of her shoulders and spine. Her knees trembled a little with the strain of standing so still. On the TV, a pair of otters were tumbling and spinning in the froth of a waterfall.

The next morning Ellie’s eyes felt heavy. She was in her own bed but still wearing her clothes. Her mother sang at breakfast, and she sang when she pushed Ellie out the door. “Go and talk to those kids back there. Maybe they’ll want to play with you,” she said.

Ellie examined them through the screen of the lilac bush at the back of the yard. Babies, she thought. One of them was crying in their sandbox, and another was banging a shovel against the trunk of a little tree. The third one was nowhere to be seen. Ellie made a little noise, experimentally, a string of oooohs that rose musically. Putting her hands around her mouth, she did it again, trying to make it sound like something a ghost would say. “Ooooh,” she moaned, keeping well back in the bush. The baby in the sandbox turned to look toward Ellie, tears still rolling down her cheeks. “Ooohoo. Oooheeyooh.” Ellie made a scrabbling noise in the bush, rattling one branch against another. The shovel-banger stopped and turned his head. Ellie thrust her hands out of the bush and waved them like pompons without showing her face. “Mom!” he screamed. He threw his shovel down and ran into the house,
leaving the baby behind. “Oooh,” Ellie called to her more softly, singing without words. She looked back at the bush but didn’t move. Still looking, she began to suck her thumb.

Babies, Ellie thought. She backed out of the bush and sidled along the yard to Mrs. Knapik’s garage, opening the green door and sliding inside as if she were a spy. She sat on the floor and waited. The garage was empty, had been empty as long as Ellie could remember. Once Mrs. Knapik had a car, her husband’s, but she couldn’t drive, and so finally she sold it. Its smell, like the gas station, like something burning, was still here, a ghost of a smell. The floor was hard-packed dirt, and she put her hands down to feel its coolness. The air was dim, green with the leaves pressed against the windows. She could hear her mother calling, but she didn’t move, waiting, her eyes half closed. Soon she could hear a scratching, a tapping against the dirt. She put her hands out, curved to fit around a dog’s head. They liked to be scratched behind the ears, she knew. The dog’s name was Star.

“Ellie! Ellie!” Dove called, her voice rising.

Ellie squinted. Carefully, she moved her hand through the air, remembering the feel of the police dog she’d petted at school, a long time ago, last year. The dog had felt warm, his skin sliding over his bones, the glossy hair smooth against her palm. Fiercely, she remembered that now.

§

“Rudy’s going to stay here tonight,” Dove said. She was combing her hair and looking at herself in the mirror. “I have to work for Cindy.”

Ellie sat on the bed behind her. “Is Cindy sick?”

“Probably.” Dove tucked in her shirt, which had her name on the pocket, and “Convenient Food Mart” in red letters. Dissatisfied, she pulled it out again. The card the man in the bar had given her was on the tray where she kept her nail polish. “What would you think if we moved some day?”

“I don’t want to move.” Ellie had picked up her mother’s perfume and was pretending to spray herself with it.

“But what if we did? If I didn’t have to work at the store any more. People don’t live their whole lives in the same place.” Dove thought of
her family, scattered like a handful of seed. “You’d have new friends, maybe.”

“I’m already going to a new school,” Ellie said, as if this were all that could be asked of her.

Dove came and sat next to her on the bed. “Oh, Ellie.”

“Would he come and live with us?” Ellie said, thinking of her father. She imagined him packing his suitcase, closing the door to the log cabin, walking through the woods.

Dove looked at her, startled. “Who?” She smoothed her hand over the pillow, her heart beating faster. “You mean Rudy?”

“I don’t know,” Ellie said. She slid down the side of the bed and ran downstairs. Dove looked after her without moving. The air was heavy, waiting to rain. She put on her shoes and stood up to look in the mirror again, fluffing her hair out with her hands and smoothing it over her shoulders. She saw the bed behind her, the spread rucked up, and she blushed.

§

Rudy made macaroni and cheese from a box, which Ellie loved, and they sat at the kitchen table eating it. Rudy had brought in the little TV, and they watched “Wheel of Fortune” while they ate. “Mrs. K is good at guessing the phrases,” she told him. “She’d win for sure if she went on. But she says she doesn’t need the aggravation or the money.”

Rudy pushed the dish of sliced tomatoes Dove had left for them in the refrigerator across the table. “Got to eat your vegetables.”

“Tomatoes are fruits,” Ellie told him. “I saw it on TV.” She sat chewing, looking at Rudy. He was smoking a cigarette, his chair balanced on its back legs. “We could make a pie out of them if they’re fruits, right?”

Rudy was looking out the window, but there was nothing there to see.

“Mrs. K says she’ll eat anything in a pie.” Ellie slurped in a spoonful of noodles.

Rudy snorted. “I’ll bet she would.”

“Are you going to come and live with us in a new house?” Ellie kept her eyes on her plate, but she could see Rudy out of the corners.
Rudy thumped his chair down on the floor. “What are you talking about? What new house?”

“I don’t know,” Ellie said. She stabbed a tomato with her fork and watched the juice blend in with the cheese sauce—a milky pink color. “Do you know any bad people?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” They stared at each other for a minute, Ellie’s fork resting in her hand, Rudy’s palms flat on the table.

“You’re a crazy kid, you know? You watch too much TV.”

“I like TV,” Ellie said. Her forehead felt tight.

“You shouldn’t spend so much time over there with the old woman.”

“She’s my best friend,” Ellie said. She put the fork down and pushed her plate away.

Rudy studied her for a minute, looking as if he were going to say something else, and Ellie waited, holding her breath. “Shit,” he said. “Come on, let’s go for a ride. We’ll get some ice cream.”

Ellie got up and took his hand when he held it out. “Chocolate,” she said, “with a dip.”

§

After Ellie was asleep, Rudy went outside and stood in the driveway, smoking another cigarette. The streetlight was shaded by the leaves of the sycamore tree, and it was almost dark between the houses. Mrs. Knapik’s house was silent, although the lights were still on. Running up the electricity, crazy old woman. He stubbed his cigarette out and held himself still, listening, rubbing the tips of his fingers together. A car went by and then another. Rudy waited several moments longer and then walked up the porch steps. As if he were thinking, he paused, then grasped the handle of the screen door, using his handkerchief. When it opened, he nodded and paused again, holding his body still. Slowly he put his fingers on the doorknob and turned it, a fraction at a time. To his surprise, it was open. He pushed, the handkerchief between his palm and the wood, and slipped inside.

The TV was off, the couch in front of it abandoned, an afghan thrown over the back. A mixing bowl of candy sat askew among the cushions. No wonder Ellie had cavities, he thought. He looked around without moving, his back against the door. Everything looked like it was
from a hundred years ago, old people’s furniture, faded and worn, the only thing shiny the frames of the pictures on the piano. A piano—what did she need that for? He took a step into the room and stopped, sniffing the air—pills, old clothes, dust. His throat contracted. He took a miniature Hershey bar from the bowl and put it in his pocket.

He slid open the drawer of a desk in the corner and ran his hand through the contents—bills, snapshots, store receipts. He pulled out a letter and read it: “Dear Sonia, I don’t know if you heard about Eddie. He’s gone from the cancer, but it was quick at the end.” Rudy imagined himself an old man, sitting in a chair, his hands empty. He wouldn’t wait for it like that, he thought. He slipped across the rug, his feet noiseless and went to stand in the hall, looking up the dark stairs. All quiet, he thought. To his left he could see into the kitchen where the light was on over the sink. Old people sometimes hid things in the freezer, he’d heard. He could see some tomatoes on the table, one of them leaking juice. He breathed in deeply—he’d just check out the dining room and then leave. In the dish cabinet, the rows of plates and glasses gleamed and winked.

He stepped in and halted, his breath coming fast. Someone was standing on the other side of the table—the old woman, her hair hanging down like a veil. “I was just—” he said. “I was going to—” His ears roared as if they were filling up with blood.

Her eyes were fixed on him, but she hadn’t moved. She stood with her hand on the table, moving it over the tablecloth, smoothing it over and over, her eyes wide open and milky blue, her skin almost gray. He could hear the tiny rasp of her fingers on the cloth and her breathing, which was clotted and heavy. Rudy put one foot behind him as if he could back away, each step moving him away from now. But Mrs. Knapik was moving at last. Her arm bent, her head rolled back, her hand clawed at the table, taking the cloth with it, and even as Rudy jumped forward, she hit the floor. Christ, Rudy thought, as he tried to untangle her arms from the tablecloth. Her head lay awkwardly against the table leg, the eyes closed at last, and he lifted it, feeling the bone of her skull against his palm, the faint warmth of her skin under her thin hair.

§
Ellie stood in front of the full-length mirror in the hall. She had assembled the pieces of her uniform as quietly as she could, so Rudy wouldn’t hear her. He had the television on downstairs, a baseball game. She turned so she could see how the skirt looked in the back. It would be nice if it was a different color—pink, maybe, or golden. Why couldn’t a uniform look as nice as a bridesmaid dress? The pleats banged against her legs.

“Hi, I’m Ellie,” she whispered to the mirror. She smoothed her hair, tangled from lying in bed. She went into her mother’s room and got a purse out of the closet and went to stand in front of the mirror again. Her bare feet looked wrong, so she went to her room and got her old school shoes and put them on without socks, left them unlaced for comfort.

“Hi, I’m Ellie,” she said again, holding the purse in front of her. She knew the way to the new school—up one block, through the parking lot of the police station, then another three blocks. She’d be walking all by herself. The nuns were supposed to be mean. They were the brides of Christ, but they couldn’t have any children of their own. Ellie put out her hip and wagged her finger at her reflection. “I’m having Todd’s baby,” she said, “and I don’t care who knows it.”

Yawning, she sat down on the floor where she could still see herself in the mirror. She heard a noise and started to get up, but it wasn’t Rudy. It wasn’t inside the house. Holding the purse in front of her, she made a face at her reflection. “I’m perfectly fine, thank you.” Outside she could hear a siren. The sound rose and belled until it seemed to be right under the stair window, but she was too tired to go and look. Ellie lay down on the carpet with Dove’s purse for a pillow and went to sleep, waves of red light coming through the window and washing over her. She dreamed she heard someone talking, someone crying out. Her mother was singing, her father stood in the door of his cabin listening.
DEVI S. LASKAR

Untitled Western Country Song in Rubescent A Minor

Pigment and refraction, the way our bees don’t see red, strawberries kissing in a sun-dried field, a ditty on the radio about *Graceland*, root-beer-glazed chicken over a gluten-free waffle, hip hip chin chin

in a ruffled tulle skirt, sunrise smokestacks near the estuary as cirri-form clouds rubberneck, that drunk woman in the gravel lot parking too close,

Dixie pickup the color of taillights with a gun rack, a distortion of old glory unfurling in its unmade bed, bedraggled dianthus and plastic peonies at the gold rush churchyard, sprinklers going awry, the way our dogs don’t see red, aspens testing theoretical immortality, video arcades boarding neon vacancy signs, convex lips, an evaporating lake, *All in the Family* reruns,

million women marches, red-tail shark tank, Sanskrit psalms read from a red leather-bound book, the front man holds a red guitar he cannot play, misspelled henna tattoos, dog-eared clovers amid the poppies, that drunk woman inserting her room key into your back pocket, cathedrals of traffic jams and stop signs, a ruby-throated monologue about chainsaws watched through bloodshot eyes, sea crests of cinnamon toothpaste and farm troughs, the Sicilian lasagna I cook but cannot eat, the way our fathers have stopped seeing red, two dollars short of a bacon and eggs midnight diner breakfast,

that drunk woman tripping over rubicund spike heels, zinnias blossoming in her cheeks, blood roses’ ticker-tape parade, do you really believe the summer will never end? God love you lass, God love your ass.
RICHARD SCHEME | Yos[H]mite, 2013
32 x 30 inches | Oil on aluminum
Burying the Genizah

Tattered corpse of Torah, sprawling Hebrew prayer-books, outdated children’s religious school texts, famous midrashim, bindings broken. We take the genizah out of the closet like a coffin containing the burning bush. At the cemetery near deceased yeshiva scholars, holy texts and God’s name never erased are placed six feet under our feet. Tapping earth, our shovels collect, pour soil over pages, hard-covers kissed with dirt instead of Jewish lips.

We all recite Kaddish despite the lack of bones. Tongues kicking tones stuck in the shadows of prayer.

A man placing stones on his mother’s grave adds his frayed tallis to the heap before we leave the rest to gravediggers. We chant up through trees. Eyes closed, we listen to men operating a scoop machine, earth piled over worn grass. The genizah holds the prints of our skin to parchment, ancient writings we’ll read again and again even as we bury the torn alongside bitter bodies, seasons covered, children too unready when the sun struck.
The Windsurfer

My husband is made of cloth, the sea
staining his skin with salt
as it exhales. Pale, he’s used
to falling from the sky, wings
tangled in the wind. Each tear
is sewn shut by deft hands
and yet, his skin is threadbare,
dragged over rocks onshore
when he makes his descent. Like an arrow,
I draw a needle across the wounds,
waiting for the skin to give, the night
too perilous to excise, to run from. As long as he’s made
to fly without being able to see
the ground, I learn how to glide, to tread
water. But, we’re never freer than
when we’re falling. Death, take me
first, the wind in every hollow. I’m not afraid
of the sound a body makes
when it dips below sea level. I fear
steering the stretched sky alone, wind
tearing through space
he’s left like a song
to hang the hungry sea.
Rusted Charms: *Rough Knowledge*


It is fitting that a poet who uses language to capture commonplace locales, true stories, and the lives of real people won the first book prize bearing the name of Philip Levine—a poet renowned for writing about the working class. And in a poetic milieu where so much verse seems accessible only to poets, aspiring poets, and those with degrees in English, it is refreshing to read a book of poetry that maintains its ties with the common American idiom while fluently speaking the language of the tribe.

*Rough Knowledge* is accessible, but it is by no means light. Christine Poreba’s subjects are the big questions art continually returns to: motifs like marriage, loss, and dream-life recur throughout the collection. With a well-trained ear and a mind keen to see in the things of this world a series of trap doors through which we can access deep meaning, Poreba’s descriptions demonstrate her ability to bend our language enough to make it fresh without lapsing into obtuse smatterings of sensory detail. In “Flight,” the speaker describes a butterfly crushed on a car’s windshield:

But the mark left  
on the glass could  
look a bit like  
any human sorrow—

the way the stain spreads  
crooked in a corner  
and vibrant colors slur  
into a spot of white...
This depth and style permeate the collection. These poems are love letters to our interior lives, walks through the wilderness of our world, the register of a life lived deeply. Readers will not find themselves lost here: the poems portray gardening with in-laws, flying a model airplane, rebuilding a house. Made from the things of this world, Poreba’s poems have their doors flung open, and upon entering I found myself not in a maze but in the presence of language sculpted into experience.

For me, the most resonant poems in the collection are the ones in which Poreba uses her gifts for layering meaning. I found myself rereading “The Turn,” whose speaker contemplates the uncertainty that walks hand in hand with our thinking about the future and demonstrates Poreba’s ability to anchor her thoughts in physical detail: the speaker talks of knowing that

...around
a certain twist of road, a whole range
of blue ridges awaits. Yet the knowledge
never quite prepares us for the turn.

Although we know something of what is to come, in a world fraught with change and uncertainty, we are never fully prepared; returning to a photo of a garden the speaker had planted, the reader begins to feel an uneasiness around our ways of understanding what the future may hold. Reflecting on the newly planted seeds, the speaker notes in the final lines:

...we might have been dropping
stars into the sky for how little we knew
of which might collapse, and which,
in that wide stretch of dark, would brighten.

The garden, a symbol for growth and new beginnings, is complicated and enriched by the speaker’s vision. Planetary awareness and human consciousness join to conjure the excitement and uncertainty fundamental to our lives, to new beginnings, and to any glance into the future. Poreba’s best poems are like this. Arresting from the outset, their
turns are seductive, and the ends seem to come too soon, inviting the reader ponder and reread.

This is a hard book to put down. The poems’ speakers are emotionally honest, the language spellbinding, and the sentiment spot on. It is a great book to share with friends or family, especially those who are wary of poetry. Any reader will find at least a handful of poems that expand and grow with each reading, that call the reader back to re-walk their “worn and glorious tracks.”
Rhythmic History: *Doggerland: Ancestral Poems*


Reading Dicko King’s first poetry collection, *Doggerland: Ancestral Poems*, the first thing one notices is the deftness with which King explores time and place. The Ireland of this book is a place that constantly explores its own chronicled history, searching the primordial past for evidence of human evolution and the meaning of culture inherited. King strikes me as a poet focused on the prismatic and multivalent, and *Doggerland* does a wonderful job, both narratively and linguistically, of revealing the organic connection between humans and nature and the ways the truth behind that connection becomes skewed over centuries.

The poems here are chronological, but King’s understanding of chronology is cyclical. While the book progresses forward through time, the imagery constantly references the primitive birth and development of human behaviors like nomadism or vocal communication. The result is a constant unearthing of the human from the earth, a reminder that the difference between the King and Queen of Ireland and the first Neanderthal is merely one’s interpretation of history. King’s Irish ancestors emerge from nothingness to find themselves buried by landscape and time. Moreover, King manages to trace and connect about thirty thousand years of Irish bloodline and heritage. For example, he compares Irish migration with the Ice Age in “1905” and looks to pre-Celtic Portugal for clues to the evolution of Irish culture in “Henge.”

The language here is rich and tactile, filled with tightly packed rhymes and rhythms that provide fluidity. Simply put, this language is enjoyable to read. But it also reflects the closeness of the relationships King draws between man and nature, past and present. King’s style shines with lines such as those in “Cambrian Sea”:
Our fortune at the dug
of mud-borne luck,
and at the expense
of each beast
or slug unlucky
to have met us.

While this skill with sound is impressive in its own right, what is more remarkable about King’s poetry is his ability to convey narrative and theme while maintaining highly musical and rhythmic language. Each is in service of the other—rhythm and music compress the expansiveness of the narrative’s history while the narrative provides trajectory and direction for the language. “Separate” is one of many places where King exhibits this:

Without the wobble
of rapid change—the quickstep
a fix for the misstep—the hazelnut
trees grew into thick cover,
the lime and the oak grew
too. We took hold.

Throughout the book, King covers some large issues: the evolution of humanity, connection between humanity and nature, the validity of history. Yet King manages to craft poems that dance around and between these issues, finding the small moments that muddy the biggest questions. In “Speech” he wonders at the origin of the first words of the Neanderthal, “whether it was a weak larynx / or some predisposition to solitude.” In a later poem, “Myth/history,” King asserts,

never a frog prince
with a lover who wasn’t a frog. Or a toad blessed
with stories. Nothing stops a truth wending
its way to the lie…
Again and again, King comes back to the idea of history as fabrication, evolution as untruth. And exploring those ideas alone would probably be enough to carry a collection of poems. But King takes things a step further through his attention to the natural world, searching high and low throughout the Irish landscape for links between himself, his ancestors, and the primordial muck they were born from. As a reader, it feels like I have undergone the same transformation, which is at once a revelatory and mysterious feeling.

In his author biography, King states that his poems “have appeared out of nowhere.” Given the richness of Doggerland: Ancestral Poems, I hope they continue to do so. His poems in this book are expansive and engrossing, linguistically complex yet accessible, and at once a lesson in Irish history and a questioning of that history’s truth and purpose. King’s poems are tools to dig with, instruments of unearthing the meaning of what has been buried.
WILL JUSTICE DRAKE

Classical Made Colloquial: *The Poems of Catullus*


Prior to reading Uzzi and Thomson’s translation of Catullus’s “little book,” as he names it in his opening poem, I had experienced Catullus only in line-by-line literal translation. These two translators have produced a work both evocative and readable for the modern English speaker, resurrecting the spirit of Catullus in a modern body. The poems of Catullus are gritty and vulgar in their action. They are primal in emotion but witty in delivery. The translators’ task is to capture for the reader Catullus’s passion and still deliver his colloquial tone. Uzzi and Thomson certainly accomplish this feat.

Where literal translations leave Catullus sounding elevated, Uzzi and Thomson get dirty with Catullus. Translating lines such as “When he married a mere babe, / a bride greener than jailbait, / she begged to be watched like a juicy grape,” Uzzi and Thomson reimagine Catullus as a master of modern insults (“17: Hometown Hero”). They continue his street-speak with phrases such as “pitching a tent” in “32: Sweet Ipsitilla” and “I’ll assault the brothel door / with graffiti” in “37: Cathouse Tavern,” giving Catullus the feeling of a vandal rather than a bickering peer to his addressees.

Beyond the contents of these poems, Uzzi and Thomson extend their modern interpretation of Catullus by altering his titles. Catullus and other ancient writers did not title their poems, instead numbering them. Uzzi and Thomson supplement Catullus’s numbers with titles as today’s reader would expect, preparing the reader for the tone of the poem. They reinforce the colloquial language with titles like “BYOB,” a poem that invites rather than abuses one of Catullus’s acquaintances. In “Legalese,” the speaker pleads for his beloved’s pact to be sincere. “Low Rent” exposes sexual activities between a married woman and another man.
The speaker calls all involved parties by name in true Catullian defamation.

To maintain the quickness of Catullus’s delivery, Uzzi and Thomson liberate themselves from the original lines. For readers, this feels equally freeing. The translators supply all the necessary interpretation of Catullus’s mood, such as in the somber “70: Wind and Water,” which becomes seven lines rather than the original four in Latin. All his sharp, passionate, angry voice travels forward through time. The translators transport him to us, never asking us to work our own way to him via knowledge of historical context. We can visit an authentic Catullus in this text without needing to know the tendencies of Latin speech. As Uzzi says in her introduction, “even Charles Martin’s translation, by many accounts the best English language translation of Catullus to date, follows Catullus’ line breaks as if English-speaking readers had somehow internalized the Latin original.” She proves her point in poems such as “104: The Last Word on Lesbia,” in which she translates the original first single line into two lines to say, “You think I could say anything bad / about my love, my life...,” delivering Catullus’s irony in this translation. Catullus’s readers know he can certainly speak ill words, but the translators allow us to think during the short moment between lines that Catullus might be protesting that fact.

Though Uzzi and Thomson include much of themselves in this translation through a modern lexicon, they do not derail the work with excessive informalities, as when they preserve a sincere tone with the title “86: On Beauty,” in which Catullus weighs external beauty against his beloved’s charm. Further, Catullus’s love poems remind us that his passion manifests as more than just anger. Catullus desires deeply, and when he fails in his romantic endeavors, he turns to self-deprecation, addressing himself, “Who will want you? Who will think you’re worth it? / Who will you kiss? Who bite? / But you Catullus, come on: be a man” (“8: It’s Over”). The translators are also especially sensitive to his intention in the long poems situated in the middle of the work. The poems retain their mythic qualities and the emotional engagement Catullus earns from his readers.

Whether Catullus is wooing his beloved or slandering his enemies in his short poems, or invoking legends in his long verses, Uzzi and Thomson
speak honestly on his behalf when he summons “...Eros, who contaminate[s] joy with sorrow, / light passion in a suffering breast” (“64: Epyllion”).
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