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

Our editorial staff describes this volume as one that freely conveys humanness—through real-world issues such as addiction, homelessness, mental illness, and parenting.

Many of us enter the arts as a way to heal, and the arts demand an honesty that allows us to be resilient as we work to overcome our losses. There is no handshaking your way through this “business.” The arts is not sales. This is not about awards. This certainly isn’t about money or glory. This is about real people trying to make it in the world. We hope the work in this volume guides you to a better understanding of humankind.

*Raleigh Review* believes that great literature inspires empathy by allowing us to see through the eyes of our neighbors, whether across the street or across the globe. We hope you enjoy these pieces as much as we enjoy them.

—Rob Greene, editor & publisher
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### CONTRIBUTORS
Foretold

I say I’m moving toward mountains. I’ll work in an office. A stone’s throw from a river. The woman sitting next to me will be funny and loud. She won’t be an ace with technology. I am moving to Canada. I’ll live in Toronto, waitress in cafés, sing in piano bars most evenings. The baby is due in four years, seven months. He will be smiley, but prone to illness. Anyway, in two winters, I’ll head to Cambodia. Maybe I’ll see you on an escalator in Akron or, in another year, setting camp near the wolves of Isle Royale. In twelve winters, I’ll watch you buying canned artichokes in Pittsburgh. In nineteen summers, I’ll walk by you on a boardwalk in Sydney. In six months, I’ll have terrible dreams—my skin will fall off my body. In eight springs, I’ll take sleeping pills. This will all be necessary. In twelve autumns, I’ll really see you. It will be early morning. I’ll have just woken up.
CAROLYN COLBY | Eminence, 2016
Triptych 24 x 36 inches | Mixed media collage on canvas
It Doesn’t Have to Touch You

This is winter. Kurt follows the homeless men through the falling snow and into the abandoned lumber mill. They take the dilapidated staircase to the third floor. The men huddle around a barrel fire. There are three of them. Kurt strips off his schoolbag. He unzips it, and he pulls out a sack of stale Rold Gold pretzels. He gives it to the old man they call Nelson. He and the other two—Mel and William—sit in the dark on rotted office furniture. They gobble the pretzels, and the fire flickers yellow light over their sallow, dirty faces.

“Kid,” Nelson says. He opens his hand. He shows Kurt the red balloon. “You want it?”

Kurt takes the balloon. He shoves it into his pocket, and he says, “Thanks.”

“Wait,” Mel says. He grins. His teeth are brown. “We want to trade.”

“That that that that’s right,” William says. He licks a pretzel. “I found it.”

“We want real food. We want good food,” Nelson says. “Can you do that for us?”

Kurt nods. He grabs his schoolbag and he says, “Yeah.” He leaves the lumber mill. He covers the entrance with a busted sheet of plywood. Then he hurries into the field of dead yarrow weeds and wet snow. He hustles across the frozen creek. He climbs the hill. Kurt starts down the alley for home. Less than a month ago, he and his mother, Jess, moved to Alton—a dirty factory town—from St. Louis. After Jess married her boyfriend, Terry demanded they move out of the city. Jess told Kurt she needed this. She said change is good. She promised that.
Kurt opens the back door. He jiggles off his boots and skitters into the kitchen.

“Damn it,” Terry hollers. He blocks the hallway. His arms are crossed.

“What?” Kurt mutters. He takes off his schoolbag as he sits down at the round table.

“You know Jess worries. You know she doesn’t want you going to that mill.”

Jess caught Kurt at the lumber mill for the second time this week. She was driving home from work, and she saw Kurt crawling out a window. She pulled over and went after him. She pushed him in the car. There were dark circles around her eyes. She wore her dirty, wrinkled 7-Eleven work smock. Jess had worked a fourteen-hour shift that day. She had been working extra shifts because Terry had lost his job at Home Depot nearly a week before. “Why are you doing this?” she yelled as she got back in the car. Kurt tried to explain. He tried to tell her about the old men. But what he said was wrong. Jess wouldn’t listen. She shook her head. “No,” she said. She said that and she slapped him. When Kurt covered his face, Jess yelped, and she yanked her hair. “Just be a good boy for Terry and me,” she pleaded as she sped home.

Kurt takes off his coat, and the red balloon falls out his pocket. It lies on the tile floor.

“Huh?” Terry says. He nabs the balloon. He pulls on it. He stretches it.

Terry shakes out a Kool from his pack of cigarettes, and he lights it with a match. He takes a long drag. He smokes the Kool, inspecting the red balloon. Then he places the cigarette in a green ashtray. It was a wedding gift from his cousin, Ernie, who made it for the Drug Rehabilitation Art Program at Leavenworth. Terry takes a deep breath, and he puffs air in the balloon. He ties the lip into a knot. He grabs his Kool. Terry enjoys another drag. He exhales smoke, and he smirks at Kurt. He stabs the cigarette into the balloon. It explodes, and Kurt startles in the chair. Terry tosses the tangled and the twisted balloon on the table. He butts his cigarette out, and he opens the refrigerator. He grabs a Coors. Then he closes the door.

Terry sits down at the table. He opens the can, and the beer fizzes.
“Your mom needs a break. I need a break,” he says.
“Okay,” Kurt says. He stands, but Terry grabs his neck. He pushes him back in the seat.
“You’re just a damn kid. You will listen to me,” Terry huffs.
“I’ll be twelve this summer,” Kurt says.
“I won’t allow you to upset Jess anymore,” Terry says. “Do you understand?”
“That’s right,” Terry says. He sips the Coors. “That’s right.”

§

It’s 9:30 p.m. Kurt puts on his coat and eases down the hallway to the living room.
Terry’s passed out on the couch. This is where he sleeps now. He’s snoring. There are stinky cigarette filters piled in a plate on the coffee table. Terry’s Dell laptop is open. There’s a diagram of a Harley Davidson FXD on the screen. He wants to build his own bike. He told Kurt that. He wants to make it from salvaged parts he found at his Uncle Lee’s scrapyard. He plans to build the bike and drive it to Denver this spring. Terry was born in Colorado.
“I’ll do it,” Terry said. He told Kurt his plan the day he was fired from Home Depot.
Kurt said, “Okay,” and Terry showed him his travel route on the laptop.
Kurt sneaks to the kitchen. He collects his schoolbag off the floor and opens the refrigerator. He grabs the bologna, and he takes a jar of pickles, and he swipes the loaf of bread off the countertop. He stuffs it all in the bag. Kurt pushes out the back door. He returns to the lumber mill. It’s dark inside. He slogs the bag between the rusted saw machinery. He takes the staircase to the third floor where the barrel fire is still burning. The office is adorned like a house. There’s a ratty sofa positioned in the corner, and there’s a broken TV sitting on a milk crate. Kurt walks toward the bed. The mattress is surrounded by two cardboard boxes, and on each box, sits a broken lamp. Kurt moves closer. He sees that Nelson is lying on top of William. Nelson stirs from the covers, and he sits up. His eyes are bulged. He yells, “Hey,” and Kurt stumbles backward, spilling into Mel who’s crouched low to the concrete floor.
“Fuck,” Mel shouts. He is smoking a glass pipe. He isn’t wearing pants either.

“You bring food?” Nelson says as he rubs his eyes. He coughs, then hacks in his hand.

“Leave,” William says. He crawls off the bed. He grabs at the schoolbag. “Go go go go.”

Kurt dumps the food on the floor. He breaks for the door, and he tramples down the staircase, falling to his knees twice. He sprints out of the lumber mill. He runs down the alley. When Kurt arrives home, he slams the back door shut. He doesn’t care if he wakes Terry. He tears off his schoolbag and throws it and his coat onto the kitchen floor. He storms to his bedroom, and he dives in bed. He feels foolish. He feels betrayed. Kurt closes his eyes. He can see the old men. He can see Terry and his mother. They’re all scowling at him. They’re all so ugly with sorrow. That’s what Kurt thinks. He opens his eyes, and he gazes up at the ceiling.

Terry sulks in the bedroom. He turns on the light and says, “I know things didn’t turn—”

“You lied. Mom lied,” he says. “She only moved here because you promised—”


Kurt rolls to his side. He moans. He shuffles in the bed and he moans again.


“No,” Kurt says. He looks away, and he choked on his sobs. “No,” he says. “No.”


§

The next day, Terry picks up Kurt at the bus stop after school lets out, and they drive the old Toyota Camry to St. Louis. He takes Kurt to eat dinner at a barbecue joint on the docks. They sit at a table next to a dirty window. The place is nearly empty. “I haven’t been myself,” Terry says
while they read the menus. He sighs. “I was wrong. I shouldn’t have yelled at you. I’m—”

The waiter saunters over to their table. He sets down two glasses of cloudy water and arranges the silverware. Then he waits, holding the order pad.

“I don’t like barbecue,” Kurt says. He flips over the menu. He looks at it. “I—”


“I don’t,” Kurt says. “I don’t like it. Can I have ice cream? I want a milkshake.”

“No,” Terry says. He glances at the waiter. “We’ll have two Cokes and two briskets.”

The waiter scribbles this down as he goes back to the kitchen.

Kurt looks out the window. It’s snowing again, and the wind is whipping the flakes in sheets over the Mississippi River. Kurt watches a barge arrive at the docks across the street. The crewmen work in the heavy snow. They move the cargo with cranes and with forklifts. They load the crates that are labeled FRAGILE into all the trucks that are parked along the pier.

The waiter returns. He sets the briskets and the Cokes on the table, then strolls off.

Terry pulls the plate close. He smells the pork. “Oh baby,” he sings and begins to eat.

The front door opens, and a boatman from across the street scuttles into the restaurant. He calls, “Hey, doll,” to the lady bartender. He sits down at the bar. Kurt studies him. He listens to the man tell the bartender a story about how he caught a 150-pound catfish in a lake near some shanty parish in Louisiana. He says he caught the fish with a cane pole. He says that and the bartender laughs. The boatman calls the fish “Mr. Ballantine.” He moves away from the bar. He tells the bartender that he wrestled Mr. Ballantine onto the muddy bank. He says, “Like this.” The boatman throws himself around. He knocks into the bar top, and he bangs into the stools. He says that was how it happened. He smiles real big. “No, shit,” he hoots. “No, shit.”
“Here,” the bartender says. She gives the man a glass of frothy beer. “It’s on the house.”

The boatman gulps his beer, and Terry nudges Kurt and says, “Would you eat.”

Kurt rests his elbows on the table. He frowns, and Terry gobbles the brisket.

Kurt glances at the boatman and at the bartender. Mel worked on a boat like that man. He told Kurt about it the day he gave him old hush puppies from Captain D’s. This happened last week. Kurt found the food in a crumpled bag on the floor of his mother’s Jeep. So he took it to the lumber mill. Mel ate a hush puppy. He said he fished cod in Maine. He said it was a moral time back then. Kurt remembers this. Then he remembers last night. He recalls Mel’s hairy genitals and the glass pipe, and shame turns his face red. He looks at Terry. “What?” Terry says. He belches and picks his teeth. Terry pulls a clump of soggy pork out his molar. Then he eats it.

“Hey?” Terry says. He gestures at Kurt’s brisket. “Are you gonna eat that?”

Kurt scoots his plate to the side. Hey says, “No. I don’t like it.”

“What?” Terry says. He grabs the plate. “What do you know? What do you know?”

§

It’s dark now. Terry drives over the river on Highway I-70, and Kurt gazes out the passenger window. He looks at the Arch and at the buildings. The city is bright with lucent light in the night horizon. Kurt wishes his mother never met Terry at the Firemen’s Ball last August. He glances over at Terry. He sneers at him, and Terry reaches over and ruffles his hair. Kurt is sobered by a pang of guilt. So he stares out the window again. He looks at the full moon, and he presses his finger to the window. Kurt traces its shape over the surface of the cold glass.

When they get home, Terry pulls the Toyota in the garage. He asks, “Are we friends?”

“Yes,” Kurt says as they sit in the dark.

“Will you be my friend, and will you do me a favor?”

“Okay,” Kurt says. He goes for the door, but Terry hits the lock button.
“Promise me you’ll never go back to the mill?”
“I’m serious. I mean it,” Terry says.
“I know that,” Kurt answers.
Terry grabs the steering wheel. He says, “I think I’m cursed.”
“What do you mean?” Kurt asks.
“I mean that no matter what I do it never works out.”
Kurt jerks on his coat zipper. He moves the slider up and down.
“I won’t give up. I’ve got plans,” Terry says.
“Oh,” Kurt mumbles. He forces a smile.
Terry turns on the dome light and grabs a newspaper off the backseat.
“See?” he says and points at the classifieds.
Kurt looks. There’s an ad circled in red ink. It’s a custodial job.
“I’m gonna fix this. I will,” Terry says.
“I know,” Kurt says.
“You believe me?” Terry asks.
“Your mom. She doesn’t believe me. She says I’m a leech.”
Kurt shrugs. He pulls on the door handle again.
“Forget it,” Terry says. He unlocks the doors, and they go in the house.

§

Weeks pass and Terry begins to sleep in the basement on a cot. He does this after he and Jess argue about bills. A few days later, they fight again before she leaves for work. That night, Kurt can’t sleep. He sits in the dark playing Xbox in his bedroom. It’s midnight when he hears Terry stumble in the hallway. Kurt turns off the TV. He bustles to bed, and he covers himself with the bedspread. He pretends to sleep as Terry opens the door and staggers in the bedroom.

“Get up,” Terry says. He reeks of beer. He points to the window.
“There’s a fire outside.”
Kurt crawls out of bed. He tugs on his boots, and he follows Terry to the kitchen.
They put on their coats and hurry out the back door, and they tear across the hard snow. They tramp their way down the alley. There is smoke massing over the neighborhood. Porch lamps and garage lights flash on at the surrounding homes. People stare out their windows. Others stand in their driveways. Kurt and Terry see it. The lumber mill is on fire. Flames rage out of the windows, and fire surges out of the doors. Sections of the roof have collapsed. Yellow embers of burning pulp thread the frigid air. These glowing cinders scatter in the cold breeze, and they tremble across the night sky. All this fiery ash floats to the ground like lint.

There’s an explosion, and fire covers the building. Frantic neighbors crowd the alley.

A man calls 911 on his iPhone, and a woman with night cream on her face screams.

It’s Nelson. He scrambles out of the entrance flailing his arms around his head. His hair is lit up. It’s burning like a road flare. Nelson drops to the ground, thrashing madly in the snow and in the weeds. Kurt’s guts coil. He sees William next. He batters out the side door. His hands are on fire. Terry and the man who called 911 race down the snowy hillside. They tackle the old men. They get hold of them. They roll the old men in the snow until the flames are put out.

When Kurt breaks after them, Terry snarls. He shrieks, “No. Go back.”

Kurt looks. Nelson’s face is scorched black like soot. He is howling in pain as he frantically rocks back and forth. William is sitting in the sewage ditch. He holds out both of his hands, palms up, and he wails, “Oh oh oh oh.” His hands look bad. They look like raw stew meat. The skin is peeled back to the knuckles, and the fingers are shriveled down to the bone.

Terry yells. He yells, “Please go. Please go now, damn it. Go right now. I mean it.”

Kurt runs to the alley, and the woman with cream on her face says, “It’s all right.”

She takes Kurt in her arms. He hears more shouting. This time, it’s Mel. He lurches out of the smoke. He keels face-down into the snow. A
man and a woman run to him. They drag Mel, by the feet, away from the burning building.

Kurt wants to leave, but his legs feel rooted to the ground. He grabs hold of the woman. He buries his face into the front of her green parka jacket to hide the tears that slide down his face. He squeezes her. He really squeezes her.

“Stop,” the woman says. “Stop it.” She elbows at Kurt. “Stop,” she snickers. “Stop it.”

Kurt jabs his fists into his pockets. He says, “I’m cold. I just want to go home.”

“Look,” she cries and the people gathered in the alley cheer. “They’re here.”

Ambulances and fire trucks surround the lumber mill. Teams of firefighters run the jet hoses to the building. They blast water onto the fire. A police officer is posted next to his patrol car, the door open, yelling into the radio receiver. EMTs work on Nelson’s head. Mel is laid out in the snow, and there is a blue coat folded over his face. William is still weeping. He is wandering about aimlessly in the sewage ditch shaking his burnt hands, calling out for Mel.

Terry slinks through the weeds. He grabs Kurt by the hand, and they walk home.

\$

The kitchen is dark. Terry sits slouched at the round table. “Have a seat,” he says.

“Okay,” Kurt says. He shucks his coat off and reaches for the light switch.


Kurt sits down at the end of the table. Terry removes his coat, and he balls it up and sets the coat on the chair to his right. Then he fumbles a matchbook out of his shirt pocket. He tears one off. His hands are shaking. Kurt sees that. Terry strikes the match, and a burst of red flame shines his pale and his cold eyes from the dark. He lights a Kool. He smokes the cigarette with relish, and this is when Kurt notices the blood. It’s streaked across Terry’s knuckles like jelly.
“Are the men dead? I mean did the fire kill them?” Kurt asks. “I mean—”

“What?” Terry gasps. “No. They’ll be fine. The fire—it wasn’t as bad as it seemed.”

Terry butts the Kool in the green ashtray and trundles in the moonlight that slants into the kitchen window. He buckles at the sink. He gags, and he vomits, and Kurt hears the splatters. Terry turns on the faucet. He lets the water run for a while before he turns it off. He wobbles back to the table. He grabs Jess’s work smock and wipes his mouth with it. She left it draped over the chair. She told Terry to wash it for her. Kurt was eating Cheerios for breakfast. He heard his mother. She said, “Help me,” to Terry and she left for work.

Terry hurries to the bathroom in the hallway. He comes back with Pepto-Bismol.


“You expect the worst, just like Jess. The truth is you don’t know what you saw.”

Terry sits at the table. He takes off the bottle cap, and he drinks the Pepto. He says, “I want you to listen to me.” Terry speaks in a low voice. He talks about the old men. He tells Kurt they’re lucky. He insists it. He says, “Think about it. Just think about it.” Terry explains. He says the old men will get to eat a lovely hot meal. He says they’ll get to sleep in a warm bed tonight, and he says they’ll even get to watch TV. Terry talks on, and Kurt listens to the words, and the words fill Kurt with a joyful comfort. He listens to the words, and he wants Terry to keep talking.

Terry swigs the Pepto. He slides the bottle across the table. “Drink it,” he says.

Kurt sips the Pepto. It feels nice and cool and fine in his stomach.

“This doesn’t have to be a bad thing. It doesn’t have to be like that,” Terry says.

“Yeah,” Kurt says as he hands the Pepto over to Terry.

“You understand?” Terry says. He caps the Pepto and leaves it on the table. “Kurt?”

“Yes,” Kurt says. “Yes. I understand. The old men will be fine.”
“That’s right,” Terry says. He and Kurt stand. “Come on. It’s time for bed.”

§

Kurt and Terry walk down the hallway and enter the bedroom. Terry turns on the light.

“Here,” Terry says as he draws the bedcovers back.

Kurt sits on the bed. He takes off his boots, and he chucks them on the floor next to the closet door. Terry lingers next to the computer desk. He opens a drawer. Then he closes it. He drifts across the room in a frenzied gait, and he collects Kurt’s boots off the floor. He places them neatly in the corner. Kurt crawls into bed. Then he covers himself with the bedspread. Terry sits on the bed next to him. He holds out his left hand. He examines it, and he rubs at the dried blood that is caked over his fingers and his knuckles. He does this until there is no more blood.

“You can tell me. Did you know the old men? Did you know the bums?” Terry asks.

“No,” Kurt says. He sees Terry smile so he says it again: “No.”

“Good,” Terry says. He laughs. “That’s good.” He says, “That’s really good.”

Terry turns off the light. He smiles at Kurt as he shuts the door, then leaves.

Kurt lies in bed. He moves around. He kicks at the covers, and he turns to his side. Finally, he tosses the bedspread to the side. He gets up, and he walks to the bedroom window. He looks outside. The lumber mill is still burning. The fire shines bright in the distance. The smoke is everywhere now. It hovers over the field of snow, and it rolls down the alley. The smoke creeps over the backyard. It’s almost reached the house. But Kurt doesn’t worry. He grabs the window drapes. He pulls them closed, and then he steps through the dark and back to his bed.
Phantom Routes

A pseudo route or dummy route not associated with any carrier and programmed on a short scheme for a holdout.
—United States Postal Service, “Glossary of Postal Terms”

One starts near the horizon, another forms at the bottom of Lake Erie. The route a phantom must follow begins in a graveyard. Another labors along the length of a canyon.

One carries a satchel full of fog, another pushes a cart of silence and bandages.

The houses where they arrive are usually abandoned, sometimes demolished. Still, these couriers trudge onward. They know what they’re doing.

Look outside. What do you see?
A wine bottle bashed across the sidewalk?
A dog chasing a ball? Rain?

One phantom carries envelopes stuffed with whispers. Another specializes in parcels filled with ash, pencil shavings, bits of broken alarm clocks.

And who cares if the recipient is nameless, or exists only in photographs? I’ve seen these figures work, and they’re the best in the business.

There are things I wanted to say to you, times when I had no words—love,
I will be swept from this earth, erased—
and if I ever find a way,
these are the only messengers I’d trust.
A scrap of newspaper kicked up by the wind.
Tailights disappearing over the ridge.
A knock on the door when no one’s home.
Day Zero

_The date when a mailpiece enters the mailstream and the date when the clock starts for purposes of service performance measurement._

—United States Postal Service, “Glossary of Postal Terms”

An old man in an old house says, “Let there be light,” then flicks a switch on the living room wall and the house comes to life. The old man looks up and is pleased with his joke and claps his hands. Then he says, “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place” as he twists a steel knob, and the sea washes over the dishes in his sink. He smiles. Let there be bookcases, couches, a table made of oak. Let there be oolong in the kettle, a black molly in the aquarium, and a photo album to hold the memories of the dead. Loneliness. Quietude. Leaves falling in the front yard and no one to talk to. Suddenly, it’s not delightful anymore, and the man slumps into a rocking chair. He wants to tell you about this place, about the world he’s conjured while sleeping here. He writes your name on his favorite stationery. Seals an envelope. Walks to the mailbox at the end of the street. Tomorrow, he’ll do all of this again, but bigger, grander, more expensive. This is not like the book of Genesis, which starts on the first day. This is more like a dress rehearsal, the day before. Day Zero. The letter is in the mail. When it reaches you, everything begins.
Make Me a Stranger in This Place

for Malachi

I.
The hummingbird that has hatched at least a dozen dawns from the thick skin of slumber with the force of its green incoherence against our window has lost an egg to the rain barrel’s mirrored mouth seven feet below. The egg bobs instead of sinks & for days that white planet treads water across orbits whenever the hot lung of a passing train unsettles the surface with a lonesome bellow. Perhaps there’s more to the art of narrowing distance than dispatching the unremarkable, but I don’t yet know it the way I know the solar system, or subtraction.

II.
The neighbor who was fucking the pizza delivery boy has moved & the night is still for sleep & dreaming. I correct your absence by likening scarcities to one another, bonding other unlikely pairs: you & I are tough to beat down in my understanding of this city & I fight to filter my misplaced affection through a private lens. I try on your good-morrow, your tobacco; I strive to shake firm with one hand & make plans with the other; I love hard even when people are watching. I learn to work harder, even when people are not.
III.
Someday we’ll both be tied by our departure
from this place & I will sink myself into a saltless
town that does not refuse my body with its briny
shell. If this valley can make me stranger yet,
it can make me kinder, too: I am old-fashioned
about following dreams & older still than I
ever thought I’d be. You & I are in a troupe
of fools who resolved years ago to sidestep folly
as a way of staying alive for all the times we should’ve
died & didn’t. Still, we landed here. I don’t know
that it makes us brothers, but it does make us kin.
Call me by my other name, say you knew me
in the war; I’ll be the drought if you be the famine.
Indian Humpback Dolphin

The astrologer placed
on my pinky an emerald
to wear to ward off
Mercury’s malefic effects,
recessed in my birth chart.
Inside this Jaipur-cut jewel
a dark fleck I thought
trapped evil, that I was
a coconut afloat in the sea
leaving God’s own country.
I wanted to drown
my sinful self in the jade curls
of salt-waves; the shadow
wasn’t evil at all but wonder.
From Kanyakumari
I took the rail up Kerala
and into Varkala where
from a clay cliff I watched
a pod of black Sousa plumbea
spout then leap obsidian
and falcate dorsals
in the rice paddy sea.
RAJIV MOHABIR

Ketea Indikos

Come night
we count the animals
stitched together,
emerging from Paikô
Lagoon to graze—
hybrids of ram, lion,
and me Aryan,
Dravidian, Coolie, and
other things I can’t chart
nautically in the wild
limu flares in the dredged
wetland. A puffer fish bloats
with macabre gas.
I’m puzzled by belonging
and not, by being a shadow,
a story about sea
travel, a sleight of eye or
the light, stitched
of many parts. Here, I am
wolf; here, snake. But this
is not South India and before
this my hair was curly,
my eyes fish-round.
I want to wind
my coils around trees
to shake dates
down to feed you
my sweet before
I plunge into a dawn
sea, glowing pink
and orange a beautiful
danger. Quick
lick my palm before
any man sees and tries
to iron me out, to make
me a single body,
legible by picking the spines
out of my head
one by one until
I am nothing
of myself.
CAROLYN COLBY | Mistress of the Universe, 2011
30 x 40 inches | Mixed media collage on canvas
Winter Constellations

There was no Christmas in California that year. For Randy, the year before was the last real Christmas, when he and his family travelled back to Akron, his Bethlehem, although he never remembered living there. He saw, for the first time, a white Christmas, the yard driven with fresh virgin snow. He loved the feeling of playing in snap-cold weather, snot dripping from his numbed nose, as he and his older brother Joel built a snowman complete with its own dick and balls made from buckeyes. Randy laughed so hard he cried, and the tears froze on his cheek.

This Christmas, they were back on the West Coast, driving to his aunt and uncle’s house in wine country. Joel was on break from his last year of college up north.

“I don’t understand why we have to suffer through another haute bourgeois Christmas,” Joel said.

His mother turned. “Quality time with the family. It’s important.”

Randy didn’t understand his brother’s complaint. Uncle John and Aunt Nancy were nice and gave great presents and had a huge house, big enough for adventures. The house was on top of a hill, and the road leading up to it was narrow and steep. The property was surrounded on all sides by a grove of avocado and citrus trees, acres and acres of land. Beyond the grove was a nature reserve, real wilderness, and Randy felt the wonder of being in a place that was far from the rest of the people below.

When they parked on the circular driveway, his mother closed her eyes and breathed deep as if she were praying before bed.
“Give me a hand with these, boys,” his father said, in that calm authoritative voice that fathers master, but only cops perfect. He stacked wrapped presents from the trunk onto Randy’s outstretched arms. “I don’t want to hear any shit from you in there,” he said to Joel. “Be polite for your mother, the both of you.”

“Whatever,” Joel said.

Uncle John came out to greet them, his arm wrapped around Aunt Nancy’s shoulder. They both wore matching sweaters—hers green, his red, the same knitted snowflake pattern. His mother’s face beamed as she trotted over to her brother. She hugged them both, and then everybody hugged and smiled, except for his father who shook hands. Standing next to Uncle John, who was tall and lean, his father looked small.

His cousin Cassandra stood behind them, wiping loose flour from her dark apron, the dust billowing in clouds around her waist. Randy thought again of the snow. She was the prettiest girl he had ever known in real life. The smell of minty gum escaped from her smacking lips as she bent down to give him a thick, wet kiss on the cheek.

“Criminy, Randy,” she said. “You’re getting so big. My little man.” She hugged him, and he felt her soft blonde hair in his fingers. “I saved some cookies for you.” She dabbed a bit of flour on his nose.

“What do you say to your cousin?” his mother said.

“Thanks,” Randy said.

Cassandra made little effort to nod in Joel’s direction. “What’s up?”

“Not much,” he said.

Uncle John swept them into the foyer of the house. Randy saw the tree crowded with presents wrapped in gold and silver paper. The gifts shimmered as if producing their own light, and there were three or four times more boxes than Randy had seen under his own tree that morning. Their gifts, the ones they had brought, paled in comparison, wrapped in cartoonish paper purchased from Girl Scouts outside of the grocery store.

They were led to the backyard. The sun was shining, chasing away any trace of clouds or chill in the air. Aunt Nancy laid out a spread of crackers and hard cheeses. The cheese resembled chalk, if chalk, when left out in the rain, turned rancid with must. They sat in deep cushion chairs next to the infinity pool Uncle John had recently put in. He said it
was a reward for some product he designed, which many hospitals had used to save lives. The adults ate and drank beer and wine, talking on and on, even Cassandra. Randy tried to follow, but his eyes wandered out over the trees, the hills that rolled on to the ocean. It all belonged to Uncle John; he was king of the mountain.

“I can’t believe what you’ve done with the house,” his mother said.

“It feels like it will never end,” Aunt Nancy said. “Always something being renovated. John promised to get us out of here in the spring. Somewhere tropical. Barbados maybe.” Aunt Nancy’s eyes got big as she touched his mother’s arm. “You should go with us. Wouldn’t that be fun, frolicking on the beach together?”

“God,” his mother said, “that would be wonderful.”

Randy wondered why anyone would need to leave this place. Barbados seemed so far away, especially when the gift of the wilderness was right on their doorstep. He had the urge to explore those woods. He asked Joel if he would go, but Joel said no, because he didn’t want to work up a sweat or get twigs in his shoes. So Randy set off on his own. He went around the circular drive and veered off the private road. After only a few steps, he was beneath a dark canopy of trees.

At first he was a soldier, trudging a hot and sticky jungle with his unit as they stalked the enemy. He carried an imaginary rifle loosely around his hips, could almost feel its weight in his hands. The sound of his feet crunching the ground bounced around the twisted branches and made it seem like there were men beside and behind him. But there was no unit; he was alone.

He and Joel used to be rebels together. He often remembered the time they found a television on the curb, marked for donation, and took an ax to the glass screen. The tube exploded in a blue flash. The light came to him sometimes when he closed his eyes, like the flash of a camera that lingers just behind the eyelids. He imagined that blue flash as a star at the moment of its birth. Later, his brother swore him to secrecy about busting up the TV. Randy promised not to tell. He found no reason to share it with anyone else.

Surrounded by a ceiling of leaves that let in only spurts of sunlight, he crouched to the ground. The earth felt cool beneath him as an eerie, excited feeling rose in his chest. His surroundings were unrecognizable,
as if he had left the world of his family and had entered a wilder domain, uncharted territory, where no one was in charge.

He jogged deeper into the woods, marking the surroundings on the map in his mind. Jumping over fallen trees, rolling under low-hanging branches, he reached the edge of a ravine, a deep crevice in the earth, and rested on a rock. No, he was not a soldier; his unit had abandoned him. He was something like a drifter, a poor boy wandering onto a rich man’s land. He was looking for a place to stay, a little food he could skim off the top. Avocado sprinkled the ground next to his feet, ripe and squishy. He picked one up and threw it into the dry riverbed beneath him, splattering the guts everywhere. The mashing made a satisfying sound, so he threw another.

A strong, full-throated voice rang in the distance, the voice of his mother calling him. It rattled around the trees and drowned in the ravine. He wasn’t sure where the house was anymore. The feeling of unfamiliar surroundings, along with the sharp edge in his mother’s voice, sent a shiver of panic down his spine. He walked toward the sound, coming back to his senses, slowly at first. When the call became threatening, he ran in what turned out to be the right direction.

§

His mother stood in the driveway, arms crossed. “You’re filthy,” she said. She licked her thumb and wiped his cheeks. He squirmed, but it only made her rub harder. “Everyone’s been waiting for you.” She put her hand, softer now, on his shoulder, and took him inside the house.

Someone had made a fire in the living room, even though it was warm outside. The house felt stuffy. The setup looked staged; the family sat around in couches facing the tree, as if mimicking a photo someone had seen once, maybe one titled “Togetherness.” As Randy searched for his place in the arrangement, his father scowled. Randy could only guess that his disappearance had caused a disruption in the schedule, the agenda his father secretly followed. It was a careful timetable, designed to allow the least amount of time spent at Aunt Nancy and Uncle John’s. Avoiding his father, Randy found Joel sitting with their cousin on the love seat. They whispered, and Joel smiled, which, Randy realized, was something he hadn’t seen in a while. When she saw Randy, Cassandra patted the small space between them on the couch.
“You can squeeze in here,” she said to him.

His brother sighed, then went to another chair in the corner. Cassandra had removed her apron, but the scent of sweet cinnamon still lingered. Randy’s stomach tingled as his knee grazed her thigh in the shuffle. Aunt Nancy distributed gifts to the family, and soon, glowing presents were next to everyone’s feet. They all tore into them, discarding paper and cardboard on the floor. Randy got an itchy sweater and a book about a lonely man at sea. He had one gift left to open, the largest one, which he saved for last.

When Randy finally picked up the heavy box, Uncle John perked up. “Go on,” he said. “You’re gonna like this one.”

“I helped pick it out,” Cassandra said.

His mother looked skeptical, but Randy was too excited to let it bother him. He took his time unwrapping the paper, peeling the tape carefully along the edge to savor the moment. He glimpsed the side of the box, its contents still a mystery, until it was fully revealed: a GPS-enabled, computer-controlled telescope, complete with its own remote.

“Woah,” Randy said.

“You like it?” Uncle John said. “You can see the rings of Saturn with that thing.”

“Jesus, John,” his mother said. “That’s too much.”

“Don’t worry about it. I had one at his age.”

“But not anything like that.”

His father stood up and left the room.

Randy turned the box over in his hands and dreamed of the things he would discover in the darkness of space. “Thank you,” he said, but the words felt wrong, insufficient, and he thought he should apologize.

The excitement of the morning was over, leaving only tattered paper behind, a mess his mother was helping to clean up.

Turning the still boxed-up telescope in his hands, Randy heard Uncle John calling to him.

“Hey kid,” he said in a whisper. “I want to show you something.” Putting a finger to his lips, he led Randy out of the living room where his father had fallen asleep watching a basketball game. From the kitchen he heard his mother talking, going on about all of the appliances in Aunt Nancy’s collection.
Uncle John took him outside to the detached garage. The door rolled open, and there was the shape of a car under a drab gray cover. With the swift motion of a bull fighter, he whisked off the tarp to reveal a pearl white Ferrari. Randy’s heart raced. He had seen expensive cars before in parking lots and commercials, but this was different. It had the smooth curves of something tempting and dangerous.

“Pretty cool,” Randy said.

“Pretty cool? This is one of the fastest cars you can buy, kid.”

“Can I touch it?” He inched his finger closer to the sparkling white finish.

“Better not,” Uncle John snapped, and Randy jerked his hand away. “I just waxed it.” Uncle John walked around the car and opened the passenger door. “But I’ll do you one better. How about a ride?”

Randy slid onto the stiff brown leather of the passenger’s seat. The car sat so low that he felt like he was on the ground. When Uncle John started it up, the engine growled to life and then purred. The engine revved high until the exhaust released with a pop like a miniature sonic boom.

The sleek car inched down the long driveway and past the gate. The back roads outside the property twisted through the surrounding hills, and with each bend his uncle became bolder. The car sped through the turns. Randy’s stomach danced as he watched his uncle flick a paddle on the steering wheel and veer hard enough to make the tires squeal. His skin prickled as they came out of the turn going faster than ever. A sound bubbled up from deep in his gut, a hooting laugh mixed with a shriek, a defense against his fear.

The road straightened out, nothing but trees and hills all around them. Uncle John readjusted his grip on the steering wheel and pushed the car faster. From the passenger seat Randy saw the speedometer climb higher and higher—110 miles per hour, 120—until the rush was so great that he couldn’t tell the difference between fear and ecstasy. When the car reached 130 miles per hour, the world felt too real, inescapable, and he was overwhelmed with the awareness of his own beating heart.

Uncle John yawped like a dog and eased the car back to the speed limit. “Woo! It’s really something, isn’t it, kid? I’ll tell you, man wasn’t made to go that fast, but look at us. We did it anyway.” He breathed deep
and settled himself. “Don’t let anybody make you feel bad for doing something great. Those kinds of people will say it’s unfair, or they’re unlucky. It’s bullshit. Don’t forget that.”

§

With the car parked and tucked in under its cover, they returned to the house. Aunt Nancy was setting the table with Cassandra and his mother. Joel and his father were outside drinking beer, arms crossed as they argued about something. The warmth of the house was joined with the pleasant smell of cooked meat. Steaming food sat on the counter, ready to be eaten.

“Where in the world were you?” Aunt Nancy said.
“I was just showing the car to the kid.”
Aunt Nancy scrunched her brow. “You didn’t drive him around in that death trap, did you?”
“Of course not. We were just looking at it. I let him sit behind the wheel is all.” He winked at Randy.

Joel and his father came in from outside and sat at opposite ends of the table. Finding an empty chair, Randy settled in next to Cassandra while Uncle John poured wine for the others. His father thanked Uncle John for the offer, but stuck with the beer.

Everyone at the table was given a whole Cornish game hen. When it was plopped on his plate, Randy could see the whole shape of the bird, and he couldn’t help but imagine it still alive, with feathers and a beak, walking, eating, bobbing its head.

“Where’s the foie gras?” Uncle John said. “I thought you were going to put it out.”

Aunt Nancy looked around the table, a too-wide smile on her face.
“You really want to have it now?”

“Why not?” he said. “It’s family, right?” Uncle John went to the kitchen and returned with a glass jar of pinkish brown paste. “Ordered it from Paris. Who wants some?”

Joel dropped his fork on the plate. “This is barbaric. Do you know how they make that stuff?”

“Please,” his mother said to Joel in a heated whisper. “We’re guests.”

“It’s delicious,” Uncle John said. With a small, dull knife, he spread some of the paste on a cracker and handed it to Randy.
Looking at Joel and then his mother, Randy waited for some silent instruction. The eyes of his whole family were on him, and he wished at that moment he could blink and be someplace else.

Uncle John nudged him. “Come on, kid, you’ll love it.”
He took a bite of the cracker. He had never tasted anything so delicious in his short life.

“How’s school, Cassandra?” his mother asked with a nervous laugh.
“Have any boys come calling?”
Cassandra shifted her eyes toward her mother, but only briefly. “No, not really.”

“She’s always at the library, this one,” Aunt Nancy said. “Studying away. We’re so proud of her.” She put a hand on her daughter’s shoulder.

“There’s so much stress on kids these days,” his mother said. “Don’t you think? What with all the pressure to get into college. I had so much fun in high school.”

“Well, I graduated didn’t I?” his mother said in a huff. “Did pretty well in college, too. Oh Cassandra, you’ll love it. All the people you’ll meet.”

“And the degree,” Uncle John said. “Don’t forget the degree.”
“Amen,” his father said.
Joel cleared his throat as he poked around the food on his plate.

“Of course,” his mother said, “but I think there’s something to be said for experience. When else can you make mistakes but when you’re young?”

“And you don’t regret anything, huh?” Uncle John said.
“I didn’t say that,” his mother said, almost too quiet to hear. She brought a napkin to her lips and kept it there, as if she didn’t know what to do with it. Randy thought she’d crawl inside herself if that were possible.

“If you ask me,” Uncle John said, “the young ones should learn a thing or two from their parents. Mistakes and successes. Lord knows that all this didn’t fall out of the sky.” He gestured to the silk-draped table filled with food. “We worked damn hard for it. Cassandra knows that.
Tell them about the programs you’ve been looking into. Poli-sci at Duke maybe, then law school.”

“I don’t know if I’ve made up my mind yet,” Cassandra said.

“Your plate is full,” Joel said, rolling his eyes. “Why don’t you eat already?”

Cassandra stabbed a piece of roasted yam but didn’t eat it. She mumbled something into her napkin, then left the table.

For a moment, there was only the sounds of chewing and clinking silverware.

“I’m sorry about her,” Aunt Nancy said, still smiling. “You know how they can be.”

“Believe me,” his father said. “We know.”

His brother took his napkin from off his lap, dropped it on the plate, and he, too, walked away.

“Aren’t you going to thank them for dinner?” his mother said.

Uncle John spread more paste on a cracker and shoved it into his mouth. “This really is tasty. You guys should have some.”

His father finished the last of his beer and wiped the suds from his mustache. “I don’t know what to do with a kid like that.”

“You can’t teach them,” Uncle John said. “You have to show ’em. They’re like monkeys that way.”

“That kid,” his father pointed in the direction where Joel had stormed off, “is dropping out of school. I took the night shift to pay that tuition. Even dipped into the pension. The least he could do is take a job.”

“Or a loan,” Aunt Nancy said.

“They’re young,” his mother said. “Don’t you remember being that age?”

“He’s a fucking idiot is what he is.”

“Jim!” his mother said, gasping. “The language.”

They all looked at Randy, almost surprised to find him there.

“Who wants dessert?” Aunt Nancy said, her face bright red.

Randy used the moment to sneak away from the table. Outside it had grown dark, and from the window he could see the moon had risen. He thought Joel might help him set up his telescope so they could look at the moon and the winter constellations: Cancer, Leo, Taurus, all the beasts
in the sky he’d studied in star charts. But he didn’t know where his brother had gone. As he walked through the unlit hall, a strange fear came over him about what he might find behind all those closed doors.

He heard a noise, no more than a rustling, coming from one of the bedrooms. He pushed the door, cracking it open an inch or two. The glow of the moon came through the window, throwing big shadows on the wall. Two dark shapes rocked back and forth. He thought of calling out to his brother, but couldn’t find his voice. The shadows moved, and he could make out a leg wrapping around a back, a hand grabbing. It looked unnatural, the struggle. Or maybe it was too natural, like some things he saw on TV, the leopard that plunged its teeth into the neck of an antelope. Noises escaped from the figures, muted, as if squeals had been bottled up in whispers.

Randy stepped back. A wave of nausea churned inside him, and he wanted to throw up just to get it out of there.

He nearly ran out of the house, but he made himself slow down when he found his parents out by the pool, smoking cigarettes in silence. They looked tired. He tugged at his mother’s skirt and asked when they could go home.

“In a while, Randall,” his mother said.

Normally he hated when she used his full name, because she saved it for when he was in trouble. It wasn’t angry, her tone, but something different. Maybe he only heard it differently.

“Don’t you want dessert?” she said.

“I’m not hungry,” Randy said. “I want to go home.”

His mother held the cigarette to her mouth, letting out a little cloud of smoke. “Nobody likes a pouter,” she said.

“Where’s your brother?” His father crushed his cigarette under foot.

“I don’t know.” Randy felt the sour slush in his stomach.

When they went inside, Cassandra had returned to the kitchen, her hair a little more frazzled. She cut herself a piece of pie and sucked the excess crumbs from her fingers.

“I think we’re going to leave,” his mother said. “Someone here is getting tired.” She put a hand on Randy’s shoulder.

“Stay a little longer,” Uncle John said. “We’ll make some coffee.”
They found Joel sitting by himself on the couch, flipping through a large coffee table book.

“And where have you been?” his father said.

“Here and there,” he said and snapped the book closed.

Everyone gathered in the foyer as they hugged and said goodbye. Cassandra bent down to Randy, kissed his forehead, tousled his hair. “I hope you got everything you wanted for Christmas, my little man.”

§

The drive home was quiet, the kind of silence that amplified the sounds of the road. Randy felt as if he had been wearing a lead apron all day, like at the dentist, and even with his family, he couldn’t take it off. He was in back of the car, even though there was a seat open next to his brother. He had a strange wish then, from deep inside, for the car to go fast, as fast as his uncle’s, and then crash, catching fire on the side of the road. He could walk away from it all like the vagrant he imagined he was in the woods, only it would all be real this time. He didn’t want to be in the car when it happened. He only wanted to witness it.

As he looked at the moon and the stars through his window, he realized, in a moment of panic, they had forgotten his telescope. He sat up, and from his spot in the back, his parents seemed very far away. He wanted to tell his father to turn around, to go back for the gift. He’d have to shout to be heard. But instead, he said nothing. He sat for a minute, and then he settled back into his seat and closed his eyes. They had a long drive ahead of them, and even though he wanted his telescope, he knew, somehow, he was better off without it.
At Big Cypress National Preserve

In a clearing we find the woody stems of cabbage palm are quick-burning things.

* 

All afternoon we see to the fire, feeding fronds to its burning belly, our want thicker than the smoke that splits the light.

* 

All afternoon I have been looking for bears, waiting for a black head to rise in the distant hammock, grass burned blue in the falling sun.

* 

We follow a path pressed into the field, as though we are bobbing in a dark sea.

* 

A rash of inland birds release their cries.

* 

All afternoon we have followed the murmuring map of insects carved in our firewood.

* 

Hissing like fat, releasing steam, the wet logs make beasts of themselves.
VIEVEE FRANCIS

Doubt

my reflection, the bear in the mirror. 
Doubt you’ll do a thing about it. 
Doubt you know what you did. You 
know what you did. Doubt my hair 
will stop thinning. Mange. Yes. Mange. 
Doubt my thumbs will remain opposable, 
my ability to hold on to anything, or 
find the right word, the word to call you 
back. But you are a city person and want no 
part of the forest I inhabit. Doubt 
you’ll stop shooting the horse. Fucking horse. 
I was a horse once, but no one rode me, I 
was sent straight to the glue factory and reborn 
a bear. Look at my fur. My slick maw. Don’t 
you smell me coming. A bear’s scent never leaves 
the mind. Don’t doubt what you are seeing and 
don’t doubt it’s something to be afraid of. 
Doubt you could gather enough courage to save 
your life. You think I’ll eat you up. Swallow you 
whole. 

Don’t doubt it. Don’t mind if I do. It was you who 
fed the bear despite the signs. Who sits now 
so uncomfortable in your chair and you 
want to blame a bear for her hunger. Now, 
like a human I am given to doubt. I don’t trust you. 
Just look at your rug. All that dark fur. All those shoeprints.
Wolf OR-7 Passes the Site Where a Bounty Hunter Killed Oregon’s Last Known Wolf in 1946

The air was moved, and air has memory. The things it hears: a bullet shattering, bone’s bark riven. Echo and wave, a round bowl rung forever. And scent—triggers and flash, 280 million receptors set mysteriously waving. Buried in the bog of an old pine slough that feeds the Umpqua, there—fine scrapings, iron stain a trunk still tries to hide. A fleck. An atom. A gash.
Wolf OR-7 Shares a Carcass with Coyotes

Uneasy. Torn. Contentious
brothers not brothers.
Who are we but stars
of our own wilderness?
There was baring and approach,
thrust, feign, a show
of who had the upper hand.
Then reversal. I forget
who won. That taste—
something so long dead
and needles of hunger so hot
that I have to say
it was paradise, that mouthful
ripped in the presence
of who cares who,
their eyes hard on me
and waiting their turn.
Wolf OR-7 Fathers Three Pups

Used to be such a sheep killer. Used to howl all hours and stalk the flash-flood gullies. Drank some crazy moonlight alone. Now this invisible tether, small cries, damp tang, defensible den. To say they wear off your sharp edges presumes they have powers more than tumble and claw. And maybe they do, their ears knowing my chuff and step, imprinted with a joy that only the end of hunger makes. To think I once called and a hundred miles of no one would answer.
The Fidelity of Angles

Longing approaches us by froms—: from memory, from holy irreverence, from time zones apart

where another morning’s light creeps all across a distinct range of mountain,

stunning plateau birds into the original sweetness of song. We want to understand this—

according to our appetite for pulling a rare, angular music from the body’s dark cathedral. Or we grow stubborn for the wild severity of the wind

plying trees. We want the vastness of that motion, then sleep. We desire so much from more.
GEFFREY DAVIS

3:16 – Whosoever

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.”

—John 3:16

from the restaurant bar I smile and watch my only begotten sway
before the old musician who mimes my begotten’s sway

and strains to lift his bearded voice above the dining room din—
they’ve paid him to play below conversation but my only begotten sways
two feet away from his blue guitar giving him permission to push
his song out above the evening noise in fact my begotten’s sway

commands all eyes—the customers and young waitresses and old man fixed
even the purposeful darkness of the joint seems lit by my only begotten’s sway

so strange— how open to perish we have become how freed from
first intent how surrendered to believeth only as my begotten sways
GEFFREY DAVIS

3:16 – The Epistemology of Growing Pains

tonight our son writhes inside the almost
unbearable legs gripped by another hurt

we cannot reach—the newest metaphor
for the kind of trouble parenthood keeps

pitting against us: father or mother
pitching care into the everyday chasms

of worry despite the tender instinct
memory stops me from assuring him

that something soft and bright waits
on the other side of this bind

who am I to stay poised at the edge
of his suffering to merely tell the boy Growth

be like this sometimes who are we
in the morning the way we embrace

the unburdened light of his body—a
little larger now and leavened

by one more blood-song
for the marrowed ache and awe of tomorrow
Given to Rust, Given to Pain

Every time I open my mouth my teeth reveal more than I mean to. I can’t stop tonguing them, my teeth. Almost giddy to know they’re still there (my mother lost hers) but I am embarrassed nonetheless that even they aren’t pretty. Still, I did once like my voice, the way it moved through the gap in my teeth like birdsong in the morning, like the slow swirl of a creek at dusk. Just yesterday a woman closed her eyes as I read aloud, and said she wanted to sleep in the sound of it, my voice. I can still sing some. Early cancer didn’t stop the compulsion to sing but

there’s gravel now. An undercurrent that also reveals me. Time and disaster. A heavy landslide down the mountain. When you stopped speaking to me you really wanted me to stop speaking to you. I know. Didn’t want the quicksilver of my voice in your ear.

What does it mean to silence another? It means I ruminate on the hit of rain against the tin roof of childhood, the water rusting its way in, a tireless gesture. And me putting a pan over here and a pot over there to catch it.
CAROLYN COLBY | GiGi, 2010
48 x 48 inches | Mixed media collage on canvas
SARA FETHEROLF

Fourth Town

June and we carry
the pack of one
lucky cigarette
down Main Street, bridge

spiders trembling in new webs,
beyond the end
of houselights, into
grass, asphalt, brush

that greets us with its teeth,
the after-rain bloom, dog-mouth
night and the river.
Frogspawn. Spume. Speaking

tongues, licking our feet.
And the moon’s had its only eyelid
sliced off, can’t help itself
but stare.

This is the last town, the one
I can’t leave.
My sister lights the cigarette.
Passes its rabbit-eye flame

to me and I drag
the good smother
down. (At home
the TV preacher yawps on
about doomsday.)

I’m there—my sister
on the banks and me,
trying to get some message to

the river, water that rises
and seeps up
into our house on Main Street
when the rain comes—

Go back, go back, go back,
I’m trying to tell it. (At home the sympathy
lilies wilt like paper burning.)
Go back, go back,

go back we’re still not ready.
Chivo Expiatorio

“But the goat, on which the lot fell to be the scapegoat, shall be presented alive before the Lord, to make an atonement with him, and to let him go for a scapegoat into the wilderness.”

—Leviticus 16:10

Peligro you broken young thing you are a risk durmiendo naked in carros parqueados sobbing through curled teeth: My love is danger is escalofrios is squalor of the afternoon with the television on y el abanico struggling. Cuidado: they will test you on your ability to peel an orange in one long continuous unbroken spiral fallos will result in a body transmogrified by arroz blanco and sardines, fueled by cane juice and Sunday johnny cakes make it scared of nothing machete in hand no falles failure significa immolation tu cuerpo afire in the sinking Carib sun someone te susurra lumpen, no puedes tocar the body politic asleep and angelic on a pounded dirt floor yeah yeah tu dejaste the red dirt of the hills fled the conuco to the city who will anyway tho grab your hands in the flickering umbra of the movie theater press sus labios hard to the only forlorn hungry spot and leave you phantasmagoric and footsore with the electricity cut off y cuándo es que se fue la luz?
KAVEH AKBAR

Recovery Math

yes of course I am grateful even if
I don’t run around telling everyone like

some hyperactive monkey
I am busy teaching my bones to hold

a new person such things take time here are the steps
I have taken (one) placed my tongue on a scale (two) dis-

trusted the reading (three) filled a mason jar with
bourbon (four) waited for it to apologize (five)

gave up waiting (six) covered my hands and
knees in paint so I could (seven) crawl around

my floor painting the word humility over
and over (eight) scrubbed the floor which

wasn’t actually mine sorry sorry (nine)
allowed my lungs to inflate fully

for the first time in a decade (ten) took
time to notice how effortlessly my own

body pleased me (eleven) realized
I could repeat these steps until the sun’s

death or mine (twelve) came to believe
those would be separate events
Utah Winter

The neighbor’s sweet Rhodesian, chained & left all winter, disappeared one day & the air, which had been stiff with her discomfort, was different.

Every evening through the fence I touched her nose & let her lick my fingertips. When I washed dishes in my kitchen

I could hear her whimper & feel her stare. When are we no longer ourselves? When do those who have known us know

what is least true of us anymore, a lost version barking to the dark? All year I have wrestled with the facts of distance, with my many selves.

Every night I drive into the desert & leave one of us there.
Prairie Hill, Oklahoma

Its children say:

the crooked bur-oaks along the highway there
are improvisational bends of wisdom
beneath that big, blue sky. But you have to believe
your imagination to live there. You have to run
a long way to believe the things you love.

And a few fathers still talk about
that thin road north of the Red River
where they once begged for change, or rain,
or a long ride to Lincoln. They remember
a land as open and fragile as a preacher’s hand.
They remember a forgotten sky. They remember
a rise in the earth, a soft tilt toward the clouds,
a wind that taught the prairie grass to bend.
CAROLYN COLBY | Few Words Are Best, 2010
30 x 60 inches | Mixed media collage on canvas
The Mayfly’s Complaint to the Holy Family

*after Albrecht Dürer*

I have skirled the fleet obdurate hem
of holiness, alighted near ankles
too blessed to dance unsheathed in lightning grace,
prayed to hover over the cooing God
child, flouncing coddles from the Madonna
while the carpenter-father lolls undone
in the full June green of his strong belief.
I’ve seen the heavens open like a wound
made of happiness. I’ve brooded with dove
and haloed patriarch. I’ve seen angels
in the spars of passing ships and I’ve asked
that I might find a home in this damp patch
of dirt, this lap of reckless wildflowers,
this terrestrial star throbbing underfoot.
Emerson McGill’s Esso station was robbed on a Thursday afternoon. A man Mr. McGill said was even shorter than him walked in at closing time with pantyhose pulled over his head and asked for all the money in the register and a carton of Camel hard packs.

“I don’t think he could see too good through that underwear,” Mr. McGill said the next afternoon when I came by to roll my newspapers. Each day, the truck from Charleston dropped off the Evening Post just after lunch. Once school was over, I’d pedal to the Esso station on the big English racing bike my uncle gave me, the one my father converted into a paperboy special, with a huge wire basket on the front and high handlebars. Mr. McGill helped me with the papers every afternoon before my route. Some days, when I pulled up after school, he already had half of them rolled and stacked on the cement island near the gas pumps. It was my job to shut down the pumps every evening after my route. Mr. McGill was, for the most part, too drunk from a day of Old Crow and Sprite to remember. He paid me five dollars a week to keep folks from stealing free gas after dark. We had a deal.

Now that it was summer and I didn’t have school to worry about, I got to the Esso earlier in the day. If I pedaled hard, I could finish my route and still have time to head to the river before dark and fish or swim or watch the high school kids go parking at the turnaround on the sand road that led into the swamp. I’d heard about the robbery that morning from my mother. “I’m not sure about you going to the station today,” she said. “There might be aftermath.”
I wasn’t completely clear what she meant by aftermath, and when I pulled up to the Esso station, everything looked the same. No police cars, no broken glass, no chalk lines on the asphalt. Mr. McGill sat as usual, under the shade of the awning, on an empty, upturned bucket that used to hold the powdery stuff he’d spread on oil spills. The batch of newspapers lay stacked beside him. He’d already rolled a dozen or so. His coffee mug was within reach, next to the box of thin green rubber bands.

“You heard?” he said when I parked my bike.

“Sort of,” I said. My mother knew none of the details. Mr. McGill filled me in about the pantyhose and the short guy.

“He even had a little gun,” he said. “You’d think a little guy would want a bigger gun.”

He said there was only thirty-five dollars in the register. “He didn’t know what he was doing. He coulda grabbed things in the garage that he could sell for hundreds. The air drill. The battery charger. You can pawn those in Sumter for good coin. I’m starting to think he isn’t real good at robbing folks.”

I rolled papers twice as fast as Mr. McGill. He spent too much time getting the folds perfect before he slid a rubber band to the center with his tiny fingers. I told him a couple of times a week that he didn’t have to help me, but he said he liked doing it. He said he liked having an easy job he could finish.

He’d packed a big dip in his lower lip, which was new. He saw me staring when he spit over his shoulder. “Zona wants me to quit smoking,” he said. “This is what I like to call marital compromise.” He spit again, but I don’t think he needed to.

Mr. McGill’s wife was named after the state of Arizona. She was six feet tall and flat-footed. She never smiled. Other than the rare time she’d drop by the Esso station, I only saw them together at church, Zona towering over Mr. McGill, the two of them like a schoolteacher and a puny kindergarten kid. They came to church on communion Sundays and Easter. My mother said that was the only time God took attendance, anyway.

Mr. McGill stopped rolling. He sipped from his coffee mug. “You know,” he said, “it’s probably like lightning striking.” He paused,
waiting, I guess, for me to carry my weight in the conversation, but I wasn’t sure which direction he was headed.

“Lightning,” I said back.

“What I mean is, you get struck by lightning, your chances of getting hit again are pretty damn small. So now that I’ve been robbed, it probably won’t ever happen again.” He spit from his bottom lip and I wondered how he kept the Old Crow and Sprite and Bumblebee dip-spit from all mixing together into some sort of toxic brew inside his mouth. I thought I might throw up thinking about it.

“But, you know, I’m not taking any chances,” he said. “People do get struck by lightning twice, I hear. Come on back when you’re done with the papers, before you turn off the pumps, and I’ll show you what I got in mind. I been thinking on this.”

I couldn’t imagine the man with the pantyhose on his face showing up in the county again, much less at McGill’s Esso. He was hundreds of miles away by now, or at the very least, holed up somewhere back in the swamp, smoking Camels and drinking all the Miller High Life thirty-five dollars could buy.

When I finished rolling—and Mr. McGill finished talking—I layered the papers in my basket and took off on my route. I could finish in two hours if I hustled. I had somewhere around sixty customers, but most of them lived pretty close to one another. There were four machines on my route too. That’s where I made most of my money, in the machines. Unlocking the back of those machines in the afternoons was like breaking a rusty lock on a treasure chest. They were always full of change, especially the ones outside the Kingstree Inn and the IGA grocery. I could never figure out why all those people using the machines didn’t just get a subscription and let me sling a paper on their driveway every day, but I didn’t complain, as long as they kept shoving quarters and nickels and dimes in the little slots.

The Inn was my last stop of the day. After I refilled the machine with fresh, flat papers and emptied the change tray, I sat at the counter in the diner off the lobby and had a jelly doughnut from under the glass case, along with a fountain Coke. Marlene was the afternoon waitress. Sometimes she charged me, but sometimes she’d say, “I been known to
trade a doughnut for news of the world,” which meant I’d eat free if I left a Charleston Evening Post on the counter.

But I had no time for a doughnut. I was supposed to head back to the Esso station after I finished up. I hoped Marlene looked a little hurt when I pedaled by and waved through the big window of the restaurant. Sometimes Marlene’s waitress uniform puckered just to the right of where she pinned her nametag. She wore colored bras. The only kind I’d seen around my house were my mother’s white ones that hung in the bathroom. I didn’t know that bras were any other color than white until I became a paperboy.

I couldn’t spot Mr. McGill when I pulled up. He wasn’t sitting in the wicker chair in the shade of the garage. I heard a thin, metallic rasp when I leaned my bike against a pump, and inside the office, Mr. McGill squatted like a gas station gnome in front of the glass candy case, sawing at something between his legs. Scraps of shelving lumber and finishing nails littered the floor. A tape measure, the kind my mother kept in her sewing kit, coiled at his feet like a skinny snake. A drip of sweat dangled from the tip of Mr. McGill’s nose.

“I’m building a surprise,” he said without looking up at me. “Get yourself a PayDay if you want. I’m almost at a stopping place.”

I grabbed a candy bar from the other side of the case and put it in the soda box to cool it down a little. I didn’t know what was going on. He had plenty of shelves already. The walls were lined with tiny bottles of gas treatment and lubricants. I didn’t see room for more stuff.

“What’s the surprise?”

He finally turned around and grinned. “Oh, it’s loud,” he said. He put a couple of extra nails between his lips while he banged one into the shelving board. In a few minutes, he’d constructed what looked like two sides of a long, narrow box. The joints were neat and dovetailed.

“You’re pretty good at that,” I said.

He grinned again. “I worked construction in the Army,” he said. “I was too little to fight. That’s what they said, at least. I got assigned to carpentry.”

“I didn’t know you went in the Army.”
“The Army ain’t much of a conversation starter. I did meet Zona when I was building things for my country. I guess that’s something,” he said.

By the time I’d shoved the last cold piece of the PayDay in my mouth, I could see what Mr. McGill was up to. He’d constructed a secret compartment mounted in the corner of the glass case, directly beneath the drawer of the cash register. The compartment fit tightly against the top and side of the case with some right angle mounts. Mr. McGill could stand behind the register and reach into the new compartment without anyone seeing what he was grabbing. But from the front of the case, it would look like Mr. McGill was reaching straight into his cash drawer. It was illusion, sleight of hand.

“Surprise,” Mr. McGill said. “That’s it for the night. I’ll finish up tomorrow sometime. I’m taking off.” It was almost dark and Mr. McGill was never at the station when evening came on. He never thought about his pumps. While he put his tools away, I felt like I had just witnessed something important, but I wasn’t sure what it was. His coffee mug wasn’t anywhere in sight.

§

There was no school, so I used the mornings to count my money from the day before. I sorted the coins from the paper machines into dollar stacks and put the amounts into a little notebook I kept in a bank deposit bag. I had to be organized because twice a month, a woman from Charleston drove up to McGill’s in an Evening Post panel van, and I handed over all of the collections from people on my route, plus a percentage from the paper machines. The left-over was mine to keep. Mr. McGill called me a newspaper slave one day, told me I wasn’t bringing in enough money to make it worth my time, but I didn’t mind. I always ended up with something in my pocket when the math was done. And Miss DeWitt, the one who drove the van up from Charleston, told me I was doing a fine job, and the people in Charleston were very happy with my performance, which I didn’t believe. People in Charleston didn’t really care how anybody in my town performed, one way or the other. But I always smiled at her when she said it. I was a good employee.
The morning after Mr. McGill built his little secret shelf in the candy case, my mother walked into my room, still in her nurse’s uniform. She was sucking on a popsicle, so I knew she’d been to the grocery store after her shift ended early that morning. She always ate popsicles after she’d been to the IGA and stocked up on things for me and my brother. She never shopped for my old man. His stomach problems didn’t allow for him to eat much of anything that wasn’t the consistency of turkey gravy, and for that matter, I don’t think he was around much the summer everything went down at McGill’s.

She stood in the doorway, eating fast so the purple wouldn’t drip on her uniform. “I can’t let you start your paper route at the Esso station anymore. I wouldn’t be a good mother if I did.”

“What are you talking about?” I said. “That’s where they drop off the papers. Did you look at the machine when you were at the IGA? Have I sold a lot yet?” I knew that if the afternoon paper from the day before wasn’t sold by eight o’clock the next morning, it would end up in the trash can.

“I’m bothered by the robbery,” she said.

“The guy ain’t stealing papers,” I said. “Plus, that’s over with.”

Thinking back, I believe she knew she was leading me on, and she was enjoying the experience as much as the popsicle. “You haven’t heard, have you? That’s what you get for sleeping late. The world begins without you.”

I looked up from my coins. “Heard what?”

She took a long slurp on the popsicle. “That guy came back again. This morning, when Emerson opened the station. Walked right in again with the hose on his face and took everything out of the cash register. Took Emerson completely by surprise.”

I wanted to tell her that taking Mr. McGill by surprise wasn’t exactly newsworthy, but I knew that wouldn’t help matters any. “The same guy?” I asked. “At the same place?”

“Pretty brazen, I’d say.”

“I need to go down there,” I said, rising up from the bed. The stacks of coins collapsed onto the quilt.

“No, now, that’s just what I’m talking about. Don’t go near that place. I think I ought to forbid you.”
I cocked my head like she’d spoken a foreign language. My mother’s way wasn’t to forbid anyone to do anything. She’d much rather let all of us—all of the men in her life—screw up, then fix our own messes, as long as she got to supervise the cleanup. I’d seen her do that with my father. It didn’t seem like a very efficient system.

“I just want to see if Mr. Emerson’s okay,” I said. I knew that would appeal to the compassionate nurse in her.

“Just don’t linger,” she answered. The popsicle was gone and she was down to the purple-stained stick. I hit the bottom of the step when she called after me, “You shouldn’t leave all your money out. There are bad people around.”

The Esso station looked abandoned from a block away. Nobody parked at the pumps. I didn’t even see Mr. McGill’s pickup anywhere. I found him inside the office, pacing between the Coke cooler and an empty glass case.

“Can you believe that? Same little bastard, wearing the same panty on his head,” he said, marching a straight line like a sentry and spinning on his heel when he reached the cooler. “He took every single carton of cigarettes. Oh, and all the change for the day. Almost fifty dollars.”

Before I could ask Mr. McGill why he thought the guy had come back, he answered the question for me. “He knew I wouldn’t expect him. He banked on me figuring he was long gone. He may not look smart with that panty on his face, but I tell you, he has a razor sharp criminal mind. And you know, I was twenty minutes from outsmarting him.” He stopped his pacing and stood in front of the glass case. “If he’d come twenty minutes later . . . “ His voice trailed off and he motioned at me to come closer. “Twenty damn minutes.”

Mr. McGill pointed in the general direction of his new secret shelf. I bent down to look. When my eyes finally focused, I saw the outline of the shelf—the new, dark compartment he’d built the afternoon before. Inside the compartment, I saw a pair of circles, too close together to be eyes, but perfectly round. Mr. McGill walked behind the case register, reached below the drawer and, from inside the secret compartment, pulled out a sawed-off double barrel. It looked like maybe a 16 gauge. He slid it back in its hiding place. I didn’t like looking into loaded barrels of anything. I jumped back from the case.
“If he’d come twenty minutes later, when that little bastard asked me for all the money in the drawer, I’d have reached under here and pulled the trigger and taken out most of his midsection.” I heard a click. “He’d a never known where it came from. A surprise. I filed the triggers so both barrels go off at the same time. Double surprise. “

That afternoon a sheriff’s deputy pulled up while Mr. McGill and I rolled papers. He parked close enough that he could talk from inside his cruiser while we took papers off the big stack. Mr. McGill spit from his bottom lip before he talked. “You find that little bastard?” he said.

The deputy was a young guy I’d never seen before. He was new to our town, and his cruiser was spotless, like he’d hosed off every speck of dust that morning. He didn’t take his eyes off me when he answered. “No sign. Still at large.”

“I don’t see how he could just disappear,” Mr. McGill said. He started to reach for his mug but thought better of it, with a cop in front of him.

“You deliver every day?” The deputy was talking to me now. I thought: He’s new in town. Maybe he wants a subscription.

“Every day but Sunday,” I said. “Evening Post doesn’t have a Sunday paper. It’s a buck fifty a week. I collect on the first and third Saturdays of the month.”

“I don’t want a paper, kid,” he said. He swung his door open. When he stepped out, I could see he was big. The rolled-up sleeves on his khaki sheriff’s uniform strained tight against his arms. He probably lifted weights when he wasn’t being a cop.

“Oh for shit’s sake, Wesley,” Mr. McGill said. “You been reading too many police manuals.”

I was confused, like I’d been dropped into a half-done conversation. And I was surprised that somebody that big was named Wesley. It sounded like a smaller name.

“Wife gets killed, look at the husband. Store gets robbed, look at somebody who knows the owner. Policing one-oh-one,” Wesley said.

“I don’t get it,” I said. I had stopped rolling papers.

Mr. McGill reached for his mug and took a long swallow. Wesley’s eyes were still locked on me. “He thinks you were the one what robbed me,” he said. “Twice.”
“I wouldn’t rob you!” I stood up quickly, and Wesley could see how tall I was for my age. “My mother was the one that told me about what happened.”

“Wesley, get back in your fancy car and get on your radio and start telling everybody to look for a guy the size of a first grader. He’s probably got a panty in his back pocket and that little pea-shooter pistol tucked in his crotch, and when you find him, don’t even bring him back here, just take him out in the swamp and cut him loose. He’ll get eaten up by something before morning.” He took another sip. “But don’t come around here accusing the paperboy because you’ve been watching every episode of Hawaii Five-O. This ain’t Hawaii.”

“You say your mother knew what happened?” Wesley said. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a notebook.

“Get out of my station,” Mr. McGill said and jumped off his bucket. He pushed Wesley back into his car.

I’d never seen anyone touch a policeman like that. And I’d never been accused of a crime. My face burned. I felt dangerous for a few seconds, like I might really be able to do something wrong.

Wesley pulled away quickly. He tried to smoke the tires when he hit the street, but the car coughed and lurched when Wesley punched the gas.

“Those points need to be reset. Car that clean on the outside ought to run smoother,” Mr. McGill said, sitting back down on his bucket.

§

Two Saturdays a month, I collected from all my customers. Most of them remembered to leave the money in their mailboxes or thumbtacked to their front doors. All I had to do was gather up the envelopes. But there were always a half-dozen or so people I had to chase down, people who didn’t remember what Saturday meant in the paper route business.

Miss Byrd, who had been my third-grade teacher at Kingstree Elementary, was so old and addled, I wasn’t sure why she still ordered the paper. Every time I’d ring her bell and remind her it was Saturday, she received the news like I was a fortune teller presenting secret information. Then, I’d have to remind her she had to actually pay for the papers I threw on her porch every day. But she handed me the money
and probably forgot ten minutes later why she was missing a few dollars from the little red handbag she always swung on her forearm.

Clarence Harrell's was another bell I had to ring. He spent his Saturdays watching television in a blue terrycloth bathrobe. He lived alone at the end of Green Street, the final house on my route. My mother said his wife left him when their kids went off to college because they didn’t have anything left to worry about at that point. He owned the biggest color television I had ever seen. On Saturdays when I came to collect, he made me step inside the house and sit on the couch and watch the big TV while he hunted around for money. The television was the size of the Coke cooler at the Esso station. Clarence Harrell was one of those guys who, from the outside, looked like he might drink too much and live in a pup tent under a county bridge, but his house was huge, and I never smelled liquor on him the way I did with Mr. McGill.

This Saturday was no different. I came to the house on Green, grabbed the last paper out of my basket and headed for the door. It was cracked a bit. I heard Clarence yell from inside. “Come on in. I can’t leave the television right now.”

I knew my way to the den, and there sat Clarence in his usual robe, rubber shower shoes under his yellow feet. His recliner was cranked down, and he hunched forward, staring into the screen. “You follow horse racing?” he said.

On the screen, slick, dark race horses paraded around a dirt track. The colors on the screen hypnotized me immediately. The camera pushed in on one horse that pranced and pulled against its handler. “Oh, she’s a little anxious,” Clarence said, as if he were talking about a relative. “I can’t go looking for your money right now. I got to watch this race. Sit down.” He motioned to the couch.

Several newspapers that weren’t the Evening Post lay open on the table beside his recliner, as well as a notebook and a few pencils sharpened down to the last couple of inches. He tapped the floor with one of the shower shoes. I could smell that something had been fried in the last day or so. Fish sticks, maybe.

“You know what’s happening here, right?” he asked without pulling his focus away from the screen. “You follow horse racing?” he repeated.
“Sure,” I told him, and it wasn’t quite a lie. I didn’t follow horse racing, but I did read the sports pages of the *Evening Post*. I hadn’t been a paper reader until I started delivering them. Now, I’d save a day-old copy from a machine and bring it home after my route. I’d spread the pages out on the kitchen table and pore over them. I liked obituaries, liked reading about lives I didn’t know coming to an end. The comics bored me. The sports pages were all right. Most of the articles the last week or so had been about a horse named Canonero II. He’d won the Kentucky Derby and the Preakness and was supposed to win at Belmont this afternoon. I’d read articles about how the horse had shown up in Kentucky from Argentina, and nobody gave him much respect, and he won going away.

There had been articles about his jockey, a little Argentinean named Avila, who was about as unknown as the horse. The paper ran a picture of Avila one day. He was tiny as a cartoon. I thought about McGill’s robber and wondered if he was perhaps a jockey that had turned to small crime.

When Canonero II won the Preakness, it was probably a bigger surprise to everybody, but now—today—he wasn’t a secret anymore. The article I read on Friday said the crowd at Belmont was predicted to be the largest ever. The writer said it would be filled with people speaking Spanish. Clarence had been reading the same articles.

“They say Canonero’s got a foot infection, but I don’t believe it,” he said. “I think somebody’s just trying to pull the money away from him. Started a rumor about a foot infection.” For the first time, he turned toward me. “Can horses even get foot infections? I mean, they don’t have toes.”

I tried not to look down at Mr. Harrell’s shower shoes. I’d read something about the horse and his infection, and it sounded like the truth to me, but I kept my mouth shut. I was there for my collection.

The closer to the paddock the horses moved, the more nervous Clarence became. He picked up one of his little pencils and chewed on the good end. “That’s right. Rumor. I put all my money on Canonero even after I heard about that damn foot infection. Got to be a rumor. You a betting man?” he said.
I had no idea where anybody would bet on horse races in Kingstree, but I didn’t doubt that it could happen. My father put money down on college football games now and then when he had cash to lose to his friends. He bought parlay cards a couple times a year, too, from the liquor store. I wanted to sound older when I answered Clarence. I thought about the day before, when Wesley suspected me of pulling off robberies. Maybe I was growing up.

“I don’t shy away from a little action,” I said, repeating a line I’d probably heard on television, some show like Hawaii-Five O. My answer surprised Clarence.

“You don’t say?” He reached for his little notebook. “How much you carrying in that little bag of yours? Or maybe I should say, how much you willing to put on a horse?”

Now I was the surprised one. I didn’t know how to bet on horse races. In the paper, I’d read about things like trifectas and exactas and betting the box. And I didn’t have money to burn. I thought about the stacks of coins that collapsed on the bed. Miss DeWitt was driving up from Charleston on Monday to get her money, and I didn’t want to disappoint her or those mysterious people in Charleston who supposedly admired my performance.

“I don’t know, Mr. Harrell,” I said and he cut me off with a wave and a snort.

“Just what I thought. Big talker.”

I probably had somewhere in the neighborhood of fifty dollars in cash collections in the deposit bag. And I had all the change from the paper machines in there too, maybe five bucks. I decided I could part with the machine money.

“I got five dollars,” I said.

“Son, you been collecting for the paper all afternoon. You got a bag full of money. Five dollars won’t make you sweat. If you’re going to bet, you got to have risk to make you sweat. That’s what makes it fun. You got to bet enough, you feel the pain if you lose. And if you win, you feel like a thief what got away clean. That’s what betting is all about. Skin in the game. But I get it. You’re just a kid.”

I was a kid with fifty bucks in cash bulging inside a bank deposit bag. Clarence could no longer sit still. The horses had circled the track, led by
a stable hand on a second horse. Clarence started walking laps too, around his den. “You know how much money I got on that horse from south of the border? You don’t want to know—that’s how much,” he said. His robe had come open and I could see bright boxer shorts, almost like the silks the jockeys wore on the color television.

The horses reached the paddock and lined up to be loaded. The camera focused on Canonero II. He looked calm, almost bored with all the activity around him. “That’s what I like to see,” Clarence said, “nice and easy. Save all that energy. If you want to lay some money down, you got about forty-five seconds. You can’t bet on Canonero. I got him to win.”

I wouldn’t have bet on Canonero anyway. I didn’t believe the horse could pull off a surprise three times in a row. Two surprises was nearly a miracle. It seemed like an impossible, almost insane task. “I don’t know about any of the other horses,” I said.

“Tell you what,” he said, stopping his pacing, “I’ll give you the field. Any horse except Canonero wins, you double what’s in your bag. If mine wins, I get your Saturday collections.” He smiled and for the first time ever, I noticed the gap between his front teeth. “Skin in the game, son.” The smile wasn’t friendly. It didn’t match his eyes, which darted nervously in his face, like he was about to start running around the room.

I opened the deposit bag and turned my back while I counted my money. Forty-eight fifty. I felt pretty good about my odds. I didn’t see any reason why horses couldn’t get foot infections.

I’d never bet money on anything before. I wasn’t ready for the heavy, metallic ache in my stomach when the final horse was stuffed into the paddock, and my bet went down, officially. Once it had dollar signs in front of it, the field didn’t look so strong.

Clarence reached across to me and stuck out his hand for a shake, and I grabbed it, limply if I remember. “You got the field,” he said. “Sucker.” When he let go, I leaned toward the television and turned up the volume. The announcer’s tinny voice poured out of the little speaker with a Christmas-morning excitement coating his words. He recited the horses’ names one last time. I felt suddenly nauseated as the ache worked
its way toward my feet. I shoved the deposit bag between my knees and squeezed it there. Clarence perched on the edge of his recliner.

I don’t remember the bell ringing because there was a sudden rushing in my ears like blood trying to find a new path out, and I watched the horses bunch and scramble into the first turn. I could barely make out the now-faraway announcer who sounded as if he were yelling at us from inside a closet down the hall.

Clarence growled at the television. “Wire to wire, baby!” And he pointed at the screen. “Canonero’s already at the front.” He turned to me and I swear his eyes had gone red. I waited for foam to appear at the corners of his mouth. “Your field ain’t looking so swift.”

I squeezed my knees tighter and looked around for something I could throw up into, the taste of a sour stomach working its way up my throat. I thought about how I could make up the difference when I had to pay Miss DeWitt, started thinking about how maybe Mr. McGill would float me a loan. Then I remembered the robberies and figured he was running a little short. I couldn’t tell my mother about betting. She would just laugh and tell me to wipe up this particular mess on my own.

The horses swam in front of my eyes. Canonero II hit the back stretch holding onto his lead, and Clarence’s feet stomped in place as he bounced on his recliner, like he was running right alongside the horse. Then something happened. I think I might’ve noticed it before Clarence did. The lead began to shrink a few inches at a time. A couple of horses crept up on either side of Canonero II. Suddenly, it was like Avila threw out an anchor and the pair of horses swept past Canonero and each took a half-length lead—at least that’s what the man on the television said. Canonero’s stride even changed. He suddenly had a tiny hitch on one side. Foot infection, I thought. Things quickly had focus. I saw the horses clearly. The brightest of the silks came burning through the screen. The announcer was in my ear, telling me how Canonero had faded beyond recovery, how the distance was too much for him, how he’d never had to run a mile and half in South America, and I waited for him to add, And this is America, by God, but he didn’t.

Canonero finished fourth, which isn’t bad unless you’re trying to win a Triple Crown. Clarence didn’t glance at me, just kept his eyes glued on his big screen, like what he’d seen was a tease, a television
dream that wouldn’t be real when we all woke up. I did math in my head, wondering what I could buy with an extra forty-eight fifty. I felt stronger all of the sudden. I could have lifted that recliner Clarence slumped into.

“Dammit,” was what he finally said in almost a whisper, then recovered a bit. “Oh well, risk and reward.” He took his nub of a pencil and did some scribbling in his notebook. “I don’t reckon you’d take a check,” he asked, and I swear I didn’t shake my deposit bag on purpose, but when he heard the rattle of coins, he took that for an answer. “Right. I wouldn’t do business in nothing but cash either. I’ll be right back.”

While I waited for Clarence to return with my winnings, I watched Canonero cool down on the track. The camera spent more time on him than on the horse that had spoiled his Triple Crown, a light-colored one named Pass Catcher. Canonero didn’t seem all that upset that he had probably disappointed the whole of South America. Avila was stunned, his head hung down low on his silks. Canonero’s ears were up. He was unaffected. That’s how you need to handle bad things, I thought. That’s the look you need when you lose. Like nothing ever happened.

Clarence counted out the money into my hand—most of it in fives and ones. “Now get outta my house, you little thief,” he said, and I couldn’t tell if he was kidding. The smile was gone.

“You still owe me for the paper. It’s still Saturday,” I said. I didn’t want any of my horse money to pay for Clarence’s Charleston Evening Posts. He grumbled low in his chest and reached inside the pocket of his robe. The newspaper money had been tucked there the whole time. He was hoping I wouldn’t ask for it.

“Better make your goddamn getaway,” he said. “Come on back during football season. Give me a chance to make my money back.” He pointed toward the front door and slumped back down in his chair. On the screen, somebody’d draped a rose blanket on Pass Catcher’s back. The last thing I heard Clarence say before I closed the front door sounded like a lot like “foot infection.”

I was running later than normal for a Saturday, but I was richer, so time quit mattering. How many other things change when you got cash in your pocket? I headed back to McGill’s Esso to turn off the pumps. From Clarence Harrell’s house to the station was a slight uphill, and I
could usually feel it in my legs at the end of an afternoon, but today the bike seemed to pedal itself.

Saturday was always a drunker day for Mr. McGill because he knew he had an entire Sunday to recover. His tall wife didn’t make him go to church anymore because his snoring was loud enough to annoy the Christians. I remembered he owed me five dollars for a week of turning the pumps off at night. It seemed like my money was breeding more money, and I realized how rich people always got richer. I pedaled faster toward the far end of town. I’d have to pick up my money from Mr. McGill on Monday. I was sure he’d already locked up the office and headed for home.

I came around the bend in Longstreet Street and saw too many cars parked at the Esso station. It looked like they had pulled in from several directions at once. One of the cars was Wesley’s spotless cruiser. Its lights were on, blue and blinking, but no siren. I didn’t recognize the other cars, but they were serious-looking automobiles, all dark colors, all Fords. Some yellow tape fluttered across the doorway to the office. Mr. McGill’s tall wife stood on the other side of it, like she was trapped. But when I pulled up, Zona ducked under, carrying her husband’s coffee mug in her hand. It looked to be in a couple of large pieces.

Wesley fixed his eyes on me just like he had the day before. “This is a crime scene, paperboy,” he said. I had no idea why Wesley hated me. Some people just don’t click, I suppose.

I was scared to look into the office. I was sure they’d found the secret shelf and the sawed-off 16 gauge. I expected blood and body parts. As short as Mr. McGill said the robber stood, the blast might’ve taken his shoulders off. I didn’t want to see what had happened when two barrels of buckshot came through the candy case and surprised somebody.

Wesley told me to go home, that there was nothing to see, but I couldn’t look away, and I didn’t put any pressure on my pedals. I peered inside the door and the tall wife came over and stood by me. I could tell she’d been crying. Her face sagged.

“Where is he?” I said. I wanted Mr. McGill to come out from behind the counter and tell me about the look on the little thief’s panty-face in that split second when he heard the hammers fall on the primers, the
split second before the glass shattered and he launched backwards through the door. I still didn’t see blood.

Wesley thought he should talk for everybody. “They already took him to the hospital. I’m giving her a ride over there right now.”

“He was still alive?” I said. I couldn’t imagine anyone surviving the shotgun.

Wesley shot me that look again, like I had something to do with the story, like I was a suspect.

“Barely,” Zona whispered.

“But I don’t see how,” I said. “Both barrels. He had the triggers set up.”

Wesley leaned down in my face, but I didn’t back away any. I had won nearly fifty bucks on a horse race a half hour ago. The money had gone straight to my backbone. “What the hell are you talking about?” he asked.

“The shelf.” I leaned my bike against a pump (which was still on) and walked toward the taped-off door. Wesley didn’t stop me. Instead, he followed, even lifted up the tape for us. Cigarette cartons lay scattered across the floor. The door that led to the garage was open, and I smelled old oil and grease. When I ducked down, I could see the shotgun still in its hidden place. I pointed where I looked and stepped out of the way. Wesley bent down and stuck his eyes close to the glass. He recoiled like he’d seen a snake. “Damn,” he said. He walked behind the open register, reached down and pulled out the gun. He broke the breech and showed it to me. The chambers were empty. Mr. McGill had put an empty gun in his secret shelf.

On the ride home, I wondered about people who did things halfway. Mr. McGill had gone to all that trouble to build a hiding place and take a hacksaw to his old 16 gauge, and in the end, he couldn’t bring himself to slide a couple of shells in the chamber, couldn’t convince himself to pull the trigger and cut a tiny robber in half. He knew the guy with the panty over his face would come back. He’d been sure of it. Mr. McGill just couldn’t pull off the complete surprise.

When my mother walked in from her shift at the hospital, I waited for her in the kitchen. She told me as much of the story as she knew. Mr. McGill had a heart attack at some point during the third robbery.
Nobody knew exactly when. He wasn’t talking about it yet. And nobody knew how long he lay on the floor behind the counter once the little man took off. The tall wife found him there when he didn’t stumble home an hour or so before dark. My mother said he was going to be all right. He just might move slower. She said he could help himself if he didn’t spend so many of his waking hours drinking. They were going to close the station for a few weeks until he had enough energy to open things up again. My mother had already called the Charleston Evening Post and arranged for them to start delivering my papers to Parson’s Shell station on Monday. She smiled like it had all worked out fine for her. A week later, the little thief was caught trying to pawn a hydraulic jack in Lake City, and I opened a savings account and deposited most of my horse money in it. I figured something would come up later on, and I’d be glad I had a few dollars of my own.
CAROLYN COLBY | Where the Streets Have No Name, 2013
24 x36 inches | Mixed media collage on canvas
KAVEH AKBAR

Portait of the Alcoholic with Note Pinned to Chest

Nobody deserves this as much as you:
asleep,
    bottle resting in your lap
    like the skull of a saint.

Your own bones have dried to salt.

From your throat
    the humming of wasps.

From your lips
    a blooming iris.

Dreams whimper
inside their starry vault: make us dizzy in our bewilderment.

Wake with the bottle dry
    and need cut from your mouth.

    It will come back, babbling

and double-tongued.

When you are unimaginably lonely
it will return,
    real as any ghost.
Waiting for Gauguin

*after Van Gogh’s The Bedroom at Arles, 1889*

His room of vertigo, peeling paint.
Against blue walls, a translucent pitcher,
also blue, a dizzying room, lean-to
walls oppress the pine bed. Caned chairs,
plump and swayed like wheat stacks, sliding down
the too-green floors (the meadows seeping in the cracks).
How did he ever sleep?

This room so agitated, woozy.
But, too, around the room, the sung strokes
of exuberance, askew, aswirl.
The vibrant calling of a heart so tuned
to vibrations of the cirrus
clouds and the wind drafts of a crow.
Oh there must have been some ecstasies
of knowing? Still the mundane things inside:
pegs, bottles, jacket, stoic mirror
carry on their heated conversations
while his blanket—florid red,
a raw wound—opens to the light.
Frida Kahlo Lead Pencil Drawing of Her Bus Collision with a Trolley as a Teen

The handrail pierced her pelvis *like a sword through a bull*—
her description of how the metal took its course,

the boards splintering, tapping out DEATH in Morse—
the handrail pierced her pelvis *like a sword through a bull*;

others were amputated (the dead aren’t beautiful);
arm by leg by torso were assembled in due course.

The handrail pierced her pelvis *like a sword through a bull*—
her description of how the metal took its course.
Frida Kahlo’s Teen Boyfriend’s Memory of Her Bus-Trolley Collision

She was naked because it tore off all of her clothes—

a housepainter’s bag of gold dust burst over her body.

People cried la bailarina!—the gold ballerina is bloody!

She was naked because it tore off all of her clothes.

People believe they won’t die, but no one knows—

a bloody gold ballerina can be the last thing you see.

She was naked because it tore off all of her clothes.

A housepainter’s bag of gold dust burst over her body.
Rieker’s Prime Meats

Rolled into Philly with my father’s sixteen-wheeler spitting out sparks from the busted tire.

Rotten food in the glove compartment, we rode I-95 for thirty-six hours.

I am five years old.

My mother will leave him soon.

It is snowing like he says it always does in this city.

It is New Year’s Day 1992 when we cross the butcher’s shadow.

We unload the halves of pigs and I get blood on my neon green coat.

He says to wash it off with the hose in the unloading dock.

The water freezes.

I trace the cleaver with my eyes

and listen to the muscles clench in my thighs.
LAUREN GOODWIN SLAUGHTER

Tuberculosis Sanatorium Nurse, 1860

“If you expect to get well, you must work for it.”
—from “Piedmont Sanatorium Rules and Information for Patients”

For open-air they send their loved ones here
to take the tonic of crisp sky
from white concurrent

bedframe headstones.
See the bone-jut rows

in wall-less tents.
Order issues wellness: never

get out of bed; never run or walk fast; death

is not to be discussed,
chiefly at mealtime.

Living is the choice
to not sneeze. No singing.

*  
With cracked thumbs
I closed her eyes when Clara died,

sealed the planets spinning in her stare.

The muck-mooned nails
I rout with a knife,
and did my best to braid her sour nest. Little doll
flung to the floor

that she slept with, all the careful features
cuddled to erased. That girl, too,
will get boxed up.

Why did we tell them not to sing?
TRACY MISHKIN

Making Do

When you climb the stairs at ten, I say
I am not tired. I sprawl on the couch
until I grow lonely for my pillow.

Once the hills ran with acid rain, the rubble
of discarded hearts. We were blue marble,
streaked with regret, a banquet of ants at the bone.

You cook odd meals, walk dogs without a leash.
I work long hours, watch a man who drags
his leg struggle over icy sidewalks. Some nights
I don’t even call to say I will be late.

But see, I have restrung the loom, layered
other colors with the beige of this life.
Now texture, depth. Fire shadows that curl like lace.
In January the sun comes closest to the earth.
SUZANNE ROSZAK

My People Say the Rosary and Fold Their Hands

Incense burrows into the troughs
between your fingers, the murky folds
of your skirt. Done for today with
confessing, you file out a shadow of
the small devils you repeatedly claim
to be. Breath follows incantation
here, the chapel heaving with other
people’s losses, and in the silence
you almost mourn the brash noise
you used to make in the street, not yet
fearing a missed prayer could split
the long bridge in the middle.

Now, slumped behind the wheel, you
imagine cars sliding back in shock
toward the impossible land, two
concrete leaves drawing skyward in
a righteous display of spite and
engineering: a vision real enough to
make you sit for hours in the dusty
Ford, keys vibrating in your palm.
CAROLYN COLBY | Temporary Heroes, 2016
24 x 48 inches | Mixed media collage on canvas
Nobody’s Business

Ever since Ampelia was a girl, she has collected birth stories, the stranger the better. Stories of babies born in fields during a harvest, in rivers, in airplanes ten thousand miles above the earth. Babies born during disasters: earthquakes, floods, tornadoes. But even the most fantastical of those stories doesn’t seem as strange as what is happening now in the passenger seat of her husband’s car—Nena, her younger sister, panting through contractions as she grips the door’s handle, her belly undulating as if something is boiling inside her.

The pain recedes for a minute, and then it grips Nena again until she winces and bares her teeth. “Aye cabrón!” When she curses, it is always in Spanish.

Ampelia is about to tell her to watch her language—cursing is so ugly, but in the next moment, Nena’s water breaks. There is no warning, not a hissing or pop as when a balloon breaks, just a rush of water over the leather seats Jason cleaned this morning.

“Oh no,” Ampelia says, looking at the dark stain on her sister’s thighs.

“Que? Que paso?” their mother, sitting in the backseat, asks.

“Su agua!” Ampelia tells her, and when she turns her attention back to the road, she sees the light has turned red. She hits the brakes so hard Nena falls against the dashboard.

“Jesus Christ!”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”
“Do you see anyone else on the road? Just go through the light!” This is the first complete sentence Nena has spoken since Ampelia arrived to take her to the hospital.

Ampelia hesitates, looks both ways down the empty road and finally presses the accelerator, sure that at any moment a policeman will peel around the corner. The speedometer presses past fifty, then sixty. She has always obeyed traffic laws and breaking them now, however justified, fills her with anxiety. This car, a ‘65 GTO, was made to break laws, her husband, Jason, likes to say. He loves it because it cruises at ninety miles an hour like nobody’s business.

But Nena is right. This late at night, with a pale half moon as witness, they are the only three people out in the whole world. She would like to stop the car and look at her sister, really see her, but she must watch the road and can only glance. Rocking back and forth, Nena squeezes her eyes shut and hums. ”Mmmmm-uhah, mmm-uhah.” It is a strange sound, low and primal and weirdly private. Ampelia feels embarrassed, as if she’d walked in on her sister on the toilet, but Nena doesn’t seem to notice; she has gone down a tunnel, far away from them.

Ahead, the hospital’s lights bloom outward, revealing the edge of town—to the east, open fields as far as the eye can see, which, in the dark, is not far at all. The edge of the known world, Ampelia thinks. She pulls up to the emergency ward, opens the door, and runs around to the other side to help, but Nena has already swung her legs out. Her ankles puff out of her slippers like bread dough left to rise. How long have they been swollen like that, and why hadn’t Ampelia noticed? How could she not have seen?

“Don’t move,” Ampelia orders. She rushes inside for a nurse and is back a minute later, followed by an attendant pushing a wheelchair. He eases Nena into it and wheels her away while Ampelia shifts the car seat forward so her mother can step out.

“Espérate,” her mother says, fishing around the backseat for her rosary. When she finds it, she presses the tiny silver Jesus to her lips, and only then is she ready.

By the time they walk through the sliding glass doors, Nena is gone.

“My sister was just wheeled in,” Ampelia says to a nurse behind the counter.
The nurse nods. "She’s in the delivery room."

"Can we go back with her?"

Shaking her head, the nurse says, “Your sister has asked for privacy.”

“Privacy,” Ampelia repeats, stung. So Nena will do this alone, too. Ampelia won’t get to hold Nena’s hand, or wipe the sweat from her brow, or whisper encouragement into her ear. Nor will she watch the baby emerge, bloody and red-faced, she imagines, waving tight little fists. Ampelia may have collected unusual birth stories since she was a child, but her sister’s labor won’t be part of the anthology. Nena has made sure of that.

A nurse with a clipboard escorts them into an office with walls pale green like the inside of an avocado picked too early. She asks about Nena’s insurance, about her prenatal doctor. Ampelia can only shake her head. As far as she knows, Nena hasn’t seen a doctor in several years and has no job, no way to pay the bill.

“She had no prenatal care at all?”

“I don’t think so.”

Lips pursed, the nurse makes a slash mark down a long row of boxes. Ampelia wants to stay her hand, wants to tell her that they are respectable people, not the sort who don’t go to the doctor, who get pregnant out of nowhere like stray cats.

“What can you tell me about her history?”

“History?” Ampelia murmurs. A loaded word, a trick question, one she can no longer answer with any confidence.

“Her medical history,” the nurse clarifies.

“Oh. Nena has always been healthy. Lately, she’s complained of backaches. Now we know why.”

The nurse raises her eyebrows. “You didn’t know?”

Ampelia’s cheeks burn with embarrassment. What kind of people don’t notice a pregnancy? This is the question she sees in the nurse’s bald stare. She can only shake her head.

“Do you know who the father is?” the nurse asks.

She turns to her mother, whose clenched hands tell Ampelia she understood the nurse’s question. For some reason she will never be able to explain, Ampelia laughs. “The baby’s father! That’s the sixty-four
thousand dollar question.” She has to cover her mouth to keep from laughing again.

Her mother begins to cry, dabbing at her eyes with a crumpled napkin. From inside a drawer, the nurse produces a package of tissues and pushes it across the table. Her mother takes one.

“Keep it,” the nurse says. “That’s all for now. You can wait in the next room.”

Rising, Ampelia takes her mother by the elbow. “How long?”

“Not long,” the nurse says. “It’s good you got here when you did.”

Ampelia leads her mother to two chairs on the far side of the waiting room, which is empty except for a couple and their little girl. The mother is openly nursing the child; no blanket or towel covers her bare breast, and the father is using his long hair, bound in a ponytail, to tickle the child’s forehead. After a while, the child pulls away and looks at Ampelia with red, watery eyes. It isn’t a girl, Ampelia sees now, but a boy with long blond hair and flushed cherubic cheeks. Ordinarily Ampelia would have attempted to get a giggle from the boy—she loves children—but the woman’s exposed breast embarrasses her. The mothers Ampelia knows nurse their babies in back bedrooms, or if a room is not available, they drape a cloth over the baby’s head even if there is no man around.

Ampelia’s mother pulls out her rosary beads, makes the sign of the cross, and begins to pray. When she gets to the Ave Maria, Ampelia can hear the imploring tone in her mother’s voice. “Dios te salve María, llena eres de gracia, el Señor es contigo...” Ampelia has always believed in the power of prayer. Now though, prayer seems inadequate. Even if she knew for certain that God or Mary were listening, she wouldn’t know what to pray for. A safe delivery? Understanding? Or maybe for this never to have happened?

After a few minutes, Ampelia stands and paces. At the window, she sees the GTO parked in the drop-off zone. She tells her mother she must move it and hurries through the sliding glass doors, glad to have something to do.

When she opens the door and gets in, she sees that the seat is still damp, and, worse, there is a briny smell Jason will surely notice. Jason spends every Sunday cleaning the car—washing and polishing, vacuuming the floors, tinkering under the hood. Four years old, the car
still looks as new as the day he got it. She wipes the seat with her cardigan and stuffs it in the glove compartment.

The car starts easily. Though she doesn’t need to, Ampelia drives all the way around the hospital. She has always loved to drive. She is good at it, having learned when she was only twelve. That was almost fifteen years ago when they lived in the country and her mother, who never learned to drive, would send her on long errands into town. Slowly now, she makes two more laps, as if trailing an imaginary rope and lassoing everyone—doctors, nurses, mothers, babies. Finally, she finds a spot facing the hospital.

Across the way is the lighted EMERGENCY sign. The last three letters have gone out, so the sign reads EMERGE. The word seems prophetic to Ampelia. So much will emerge out of this night and not just a baby: bouquets of flowers, crocheted blankets and booties, diapers, bottles, pacifiers, a teddy bear. People, too—curious long-lost cousins from up and down the state, uncles and aunts visiting from Mexico. And things less tangible: shock, surprise, maybe a confession or a revelation.

When Ampelia comes back into the waiting room, she is glad to see that the hippie couple is gone. She picks up the latest issue of Life Magazine and sits next to her mother who is halfway down her string of white beads. On the cover is a picture from Woodstock. A young woman in a white and pink flowery dress has flung her arms out in a wild abandonment Ampelia cannot recognize or fathom. The girl’s head is thrown so far back that her features are obscured. Only the taut muscles of her neck stand out. She must be on drugs; that is the only way to explain such behavior.

Ampelia flips through the magazine until she finds more photographs of the concert. In one, thousands of people blanket the hillside. In another, naked men and women bathe openly in a river. She stares hard. She cannot relate to any of these scenes, nor can she imagine what she would do in such a place with all those sweaty, unwashed bodies pressing in on her, the constant thrumming of electric guitars and shouts and singers screaming into microphones. There’s a word for what she feels: old. She supposes someone her age should want to be there, but all she can think is thank God Jason didn’t suggest they drop work and head across the country for a weekend of free love.
Her mother stops suddenly in mid-prayer, turns to her. “Sabias?” she asks.

Ampelia shuts the magazine. Slowly, she shakes her head. “No, no sabia nada.”

This is not entirely true. Of course, she had noticed Nena’s weight gain—who hadn’t? Once, she suggested that Nena have her thyroid checked, and Nena, touchy about her size, had said, “My weight is nobody’s business, certainly not yours.” That shut Ampelia up until a month later when she read an article about some poor woman who had a hundred-pound tumor removed from her abdomen. Incredibly, the tumor had teeth and hair. How strange what the body could do! She’d taken the article to Nena, who only glanced at the headline before crumpling it. “You’re always in my business,” she said bitterly. “You think you know things.” Nena’s angry stare unnerved Ampelia, who took a step back. Then Nena sighed. “I’m just fat, okay?”

But something about the way her mother bites her bottom lip makes Ampelia narrow her eyes. “Y tú?”

Mumbling a prayer, her mother makes the sign of the cross again. It is a motion Ampelia has witnessed thousands of times over her life and has performed herself countless times, but the act has never looked more meaningless than it does now in the waiting room of a hospital she has never been in, her mother’s up-down-left-right motions nothing more than a strange tic.

“Mama!”

Her mother sighs. It was the persimmons, she tells Ampelia. One afternoon she spied Nena under the tree reaching up to pick the last of the orange fruit. On tiptoes, her stomach bulged even more than usual. But it wasn’t until she bit into one, and then another—Nena, who everyone knew hated persimmons—that her mother suspected. Here, her voice caught, and she could only shake her head.

“Y no tiene novio? Ella nunca salió?” But Ampelia already knows the answer. Nena has no boyfriend, and it has been several years since any young man has come to the door to ask permission to take her out.

“Nunca, nunca, nunca.”
Ampelia slaps her forehead. “Los Angeles! Recuerdes!” she says. It must have happened during the month Nena had spent with their aunt. She counts backward. The dates add up.

Ampelia’s mother grabs her hand and squeezes hard. The question she asks comes out in a strangled whisper.

“Raped,” Ampelia says in English. This possibility hadn’t occurred to her, but she rejects it immediately. “No, no. Tendría que estar enamorado por un hombre.” Nena must have fallen in love. Ampelia’s eyes drop to the magazine in her lap and sweep over the image of the Woodstock girl. She is gripping something. Ampelia notices now, a rope. It looks as if the girl might fly out of her own body, as if she might be carried away if she doesn’t hold on. But then Ampelia wonders if she has it wrong. Maybe the girl isn’t gripping something. Maybe something is gripping her.

“Y por todo el tiempo, ella nunca dijo nada a nadie! Por qué? Por qué?”

Her mother’s anguished cry is unbearable. Ampelia feels the tears pressing against her eyes. She wishes she had an answer, but though she has known her sister all her life, shared a bed with her for twenty years, worn the same clothes, the same makeup, shared even the same friends, she cannot look into her sister’s opaque heart. She blinks the tears back; for now she must keep them in check.

Her mother only stops crying when the nurse with the clipboard appears. ”Your sister has delivered a boy,” she tells Ampelia. “You can come back now.”

Ampelia rises. “Es niño,” she tells her mother. She pulls a clean tissue from the box, wipes her mother’s cheeks, and tells her that they have to be strong.

“Si, fuerte,” her mother murmurs.

They follow the nurse down several hallways to a dimly lit room. The nurse steps back, and they peek inside. Nena is asleep, her dark hair fanned across a white pillow, a baby cradled in her right arm. A baby! They hover in the doorway until Ampelia’s mother steps inside, clearing her throat.

Nena opens her eyes and regards them. “Mira,” she says finally.
Together, Ampelia and her mother lean over the baby. His head is elongated, and there are two red marks above his ears, but he has healthy pink cheeks and a mass of black hair.

“Aye, Dios,” their mother murmurs. She reaches out tentatively to stroke the baby’s hair, and Ampelia wonders if it’s as soft as it looks. “What happened here?” she asks, pointing to the mark, careful not to touch him. Immediately, she regrets the question fearing Nena will perceive it as criticism.

“Forceps. He’s big,” she said. “Almost nine pounds.”

“Tiene hambre,” her mother says when the baby’s lips make tiny sucking motions. Without asking, she picks him up and walks around the bed to the only chair and sits down. “Mi corazón,” she whispers. He is her first grandchild.

Ampelia walks to the window, presses her forehead against the cool glass. It gives her some comfort to see the GTO waiting for her. She wants to leave, to go home to Jason, who slept through her mother’s hysterical phone call, and is probably still asleep. She turns back in time to watch her mother run a hand over the baby’s hair. She wants to leave because the baby is so beautiful.

“You can hold him too.” Nena yawns.

“Tomorrow, I will.” Ampelia turns to her mother. “Mama, estan cansados.”

But her mother is enthralled. She has unwrapped the baby’s hands to look at his fingers, at his tiny perfect nails. The baby grabs on to her mother’s pinky. “Mira eso,” her mother says, marveling at the baby’s strong grip.

“Does he have a name?” Ampelia asks.

“Manuel,” Nena says without hesitation.

“Manuelito, Manuelito,” her mother sings, and the baby bursts into an angry howl, as if protesting his name, or her singing. Delighted, her mother laughs.

The sound of the baby’s raw cry makes its way down Ampelia’s eardrums into her throat where it smolders. She turns back to the window so that Nena won’t see her cry. Nena might think it was jealousy—everyone had assumed that Ampelia, being oldest and married, would have the first grandchild—but Ampelia isn’t jealous. It’s
the decisive way Nena said the baby’s name. She must have thought of many possibilities over the last nine months, must have deliberated, debated, the way any expectant mother would do, only she’d done it all alone, had asked for no opinions, taken no suggestions. And the naming of a baby—wasn’t that a family affair, something sisters did together?

But she must not question Nena tonight. She turns back only when she is sure her face has returned to a normal color and is surprised to see that Nena has pulled her hospital gown off one shoulder to reveal a bare breast lined with dark, ropy veins. She hasn’t seen her sister’s breasts since they were teenagers and shared a bedroom, not since she began her life with Jason, and though she knows that pregnancy changes the body, she is surprised at their size, their bovine heft.

Her mother hands over the squalling baby. At first he is too angry to latch on, so her mother lifts Nena’s breast and squeezes the nipple into his mouth. His cries die away. Nena winces—”It hurts!”—and finally relaxes back into her pillow.

Ampelia crosses to the door. “Mama, tenemos que ir.”

“Si, claro.” She makes the sign of the cross over both of them. This time it seems like a kind and generous act, as if her mother has cast a spell of protection over them, or a warm, invisible blanket.

On their way home, Ampelia’s mother, now in the front seat, cannot stop talking. She slips in and out of emotions like a woman trying on wigs, each one more dramatic than the last. Ampelia doesn’t listen to the actual words, only their tone—up, down, up, down, like a wave that pulls her over the roads. She turns down her parents’ street, cuts the engine, lets the car drift silently onto the driveway next to her father’s truck.

He’s going to be angry, she thinks. How will they tell him?

Her mother has been thinking the same thing. ”No le digas nada.”

Ampelia can hardly believe her ears. Not tell her father? “Aye, Mama. Estas loca?” One can hide a pregnancy, not a baby. To keep it a secret for one more day, she shakes her head. That’s what’s wrong with this family, all this secrecy.


Ampelia follows her mother to the front door, which they didn’t bother to lock in their haste and confusion. Her mother puts her finger
to her lips, and together they enter. The house is quiet, except for the ticking of a clock and her father’s jagged snoring, so loud she can hear it through the closed door. Nena’s room, the room they once shared, is at the end of the hallway. Ampelia steps inside, shuts the door behind her, and switches on the light. The room is a frightful mess. Nena has always been the messy one, but this—Ampelia observes the unmade bed, the piles of dirty laundry on the floor, and garbage: potato chip bags, the silver wrappers of the chocolate kisses she likes, even a glass of curdled milk. This is beyond even Nena. How could Nena think to bring a baby here? Then the thought strikes her—maybe Nena had never planned to bring her baby home. Maybe she was going to give him up for adoption or run away with him. Who knows? Who can fathom any of it?

Ampelia resists the urge to clean up; she will come back later with a garbage bag and a vacuum. For now, she is here to snoop. She attacks the drawers in the long dresser first, pulling out two small blouses that her sister hasn’t worn in a year and will probably never wear again. Had Nena really been that small? She puts them back, swirls her hand around, but there is nothing suspicious, no diary, no love letter. She looks under the bed, pulls out magazines, a romance novel, more candy wrappers, a pair of old huaraches, the braided leather frayed at the ankle. In the closet, there is only a row of summer dresses, several empty suitcases, and a red guitar, which Ampelia has never seen before. She plucks the thickest string; the deep twang is louder than she expects and somehow magnifies her disappointment.

She’s about to leave when she spots Nena’s jewelry box. It is wooden with three drawers and sides that open where the necklaces hang. The top drawer is for rings. Most are costume jewelry, but there is an expensive gold ring with a square emerald that Nena got at her quinceañera. She was so proud of it. Most likely, she stopped wearing it when her fingers swelled. Ampelia opens the second drawer, this one for earrings. Some of them are gifts from Ampelia—a pair of silver hoops for Nena’s eighteenth birthday, gold hearts for Christmas. She will take Nena a pair tomorrow so that she can put on a good face. She will take her the ring, too. Though her hands are swollen, Nena can wear it on her pinky, and then the nurses and doctors will know they are not poor Mexicans. They are middle class and have worked hard to get there.
Then she remembers the bill, the way the nurse frowned when she learned there was no insurance. Perhaps it wouldn’t be wise to bring such an expensive ring to their attention. She puts it back.

The last drawer is empty except for a photograph taken at a carnival or some kind of country fair. The blue lights of a Ferris wheel twinkle behind Nena in the dusky air as she holds a stick of cotton candy. One side of her peasant blouse has slipped off her shoulder, leaving her skin exposed like a piece of polished wood. Ampelia puts the picture into the soft glow of the bedside lamp. Nena is wearing gaudy hoop earrings and lipstick so red her teeth look whiter than piano keys. Her smile is coquettish, as if she is saying to the photographer, *come here, come closer*. This is the kind of picture a man takes of a woman he wants. The man who took this picture—and Ampelia is sure it is a man—might be the baby’s father. Ampelia wonders if he was handsome, the man who put his hands on Nena’s body, if he was dark or light, tall or short. Where did it and how? In a car? In a bed, and whose? She taps the picture against her open palm as if an answer might tumble out. She bets it was the backseat of an Oldsmobile—or no, a Cadillac, a car so big they could stretch out, move around. Then she flushes with shame. Why is she so curious about the logistics when what really matters are the questions of love: did Nena love him? Did he love her? Did they dream of a future together? Or had he only desired her?

Only desire. Why does she think *only*, as if desire is unimportant? Desire is something, even if he jilted her, and look at what it leads to, a whole new human life. Ampelia has a theory that if a baby is conceived on an ordinary night, when the sex is mechanical or perfunctory, then the baby will not have a passionate life. She pictures Nena’s baby, can still hear his lusty cry; he will have plenty of passion, she predicts.

She takes the picture with her to the car. It still has something to tell her, but what, exactly, she doesn’t know. For the fifth time that night, she starts the GTO, wondering, suddenly, why she took Jason’s car. She tries to remember the last time they rode in it together. They used to take Sunday drives, up and down country roads, stopping at little towns and burger joints, or once, when they were following a river, to swim, except that Ampelia couldn’t swim, so she watched him from the shore, calling
out occasionally for him to beware the hidden current, which carried away even the strongest swimmers.

The last time they went to the river, Jason implored her to drop her skirt and wade out in her underwear. "My underwear?" she'd said. "People will see!"

"What people?" He looked up and down the river. "We're alone."

It was true. Still, she couldn't bring herself to remove her clothes, not there.

"It's no different than a bikini."

She'd never worn a bikini, only modest one-pieces, but she didn't tell him that. "I'll drown."

He splashed her playfully, though she stood too far away to feel more than a few drops on her bare feet. "Don't you trust me?" With the water swirling around his waist, he grinned up at her. The sunlight made his red hair shine like a polished copper penny. He looked so sweet in that moment, still boyish. But in the end, she stayed stubbornly at the water's edge until he gave up and swam to a boulder in the middle of the river. On the drive home, he hardly talked to her.

Now she turns into the horizon, toward a thin band of pink light. A few more turns and she's in her neighborhood of new track homes. Her house is at the end of a cul-de-sac. Jason wanted a house on the curve with their slightly larger backyards for the children they thought they'd have by now.

The driveway is empty. Her car is in the garage. That's why she took the GTO; it was blocking her car. She looks at Nena's picture one last time; it is a flattering picture, she decides, not garish or gaudy at all but her sister in the prime of youth, a light in her eyes.

Ampelia leaves the window cracked open, leaves the picture and her cardigan inside and doesn't even bother to lock the door. She doesn't want to lose her nerve. She enters the house through the garage and makes her way to the bedroom. She pauses outside her own door, listening. Unlike her father, Jason does not snore; he is the soundest sleeper she has ever known. She cracks open the door, steps inside. Jason is in the same position he was in when she left four hours earlier. Has it only been four hours? It feels more like a year.
Undressing, she imagines how she will start the story. *You’re never going to believe it,* she will say, or *Guess what happened while you were sleeping?* Naked, she pulls the covers back, gets in the bed. In the beginning of their marriage, Jason was amused when she came to bed in her prim nightgowns. He’d tease her in an exaggerated British accent, “Why hello, Miss Mary Poppins! What are you doing in my bed?” But that, he hasn’t done in a while.

Jason turns over onto his back, one arm thrown over his eyes. The room is beginning to lighten. A few more minutes and he will be awake. Ampelia nestles into the pillow, presses down on the flat muscle of her abdomen. There could be a baby inside, just a few cells already dividing. She wants a girl, but she is not hopeful. They are three years into trying with no results, not even a missed period. Several well-meaning aunts and cousins had whispered advice. *Mija, do it in the morning, do it at night, under a full moon, eat spicy food for dinner, no! don’t eat spicy food, pray to the Virgin, stay in bed for at least two hours afterwards* and on and on. With increasing desperation, she has tried all of this advice. Now she knows they are all wrong.

She reaches out and pulls Jason’s arm from his eyes, puts his calloused hand on her breast. He mumbles something. She props herself on one elbow and looks down into his sleeping face. He blinks, smiles vaguely, and closes his eyes again. She wants him to open his eyes and see her in the dim light, see her climbing on top of him, and she wants to see his eyes widen in surprise when she grips his waist and holds on.
CAROLYN COLBY | Sisters of Charity, 2015
12 x 24 inches | Mixed media collage on canvas
Getting By Without a Fix

We are the dead in summer school. Failed subjects,

mostly math – its graffiti truth other gangs can read.

Our red-marked mob with skipped out parents,

Fs the street like heroin, looks for bloodlines

uncollapsed. You pass us off. We cut

our loss. No one any wiser.
Photograph: Unidentified Inmates
Pass the Time, c. 1955

Eastern State Penitentiary

In the vaulted skylit cell.
In the world’s first true penitentiary, designed to inspire penitence.
In the cell blocks spread out like the spokes of a wheel.

*  

We read: The project’s meaning has been forgotten.
The two prisoners sit together, heads bowed, eyes focused,
to link doll clothes on a string: a tiny apron, a miniature shawl.

*  

A strip of light drifts across an iron bed.
We walk on to the empty yard, dense with late summer light.
How to create regret. How to practice surveillance.

*  

Long dead, the two men are now becoming pure exhibit like the Escape Rope made from bedding, discovered in 1951.

*  

An apron, a miniature shawl. The guidebook says inmates were always hooded when outside their cells to prevent knowledge of the building.

*  

A strip of light: only the word of God, the Bible splayed open on the floor, the honest work to lead to penitence.

*
We stoop down to look in the hole, place of confinement. How to practice solitary.
But now the audio tour—

* 

Souvenir, from the French, to remember. 
Men out walking the rotunda, veiled. 
How do you create regret or who decides 

what will be forgotten, what is saved?
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