

at granny's house there is no context for this word
or why it mean aunty don't speak
to her father no more. your cousin says not to worry

says your daddy'd beat him blue
but her mom isn't as strong *ya know* and you know
your aunty's body is like thread unwinding

from its spindle, each strand a limb the wind
can carry. you forget to insist your daddy would fight
for all of you, still unsure about why you need

fighting for anyway. *my mom is just afraid*
it might happen to us too. you learn then
that it is something to be afraid

of, something that can happen, that it has happened.
whatever *it is*, whatever that means.

Carol LaHines

Quotidian Prayers

1.

They had consulted a lawyer and executed all of the necessary paperwork. They had designated a trustee (Rosemary, their daughter), and two alternates, the neighbor (Mrs. McShane), and an official at the local branch of Queens County Savings & Loan (Mr. Withersby). They had reciprocal wills with first-to-die clauses, provisions concerning what was to be done in the event, inter alia, that Violet predeceased George or George predeceased Violet or their son (Philip) predeceased either of them. Testamentary documents designed to minimize taxes and ensure that Philip continued to receive Medicaid, supplemental security income (SSI), and whatever else enabled him to subsist, propped up in a chair, nattering on about the *Wheel of Fortune* (VOW-EL!), at the group home for mentally challenged and developmentally disabled adults. Never having married, never having touched a girl, never having felt the wind off Montauk, never having told his mother or father *I love you*, or similar gesture of affection (the fists clenched, the muscle tone spastic), never having had the linguistic facility to utter more than monosyllabic entreaties or desperate imperatives (DA!), never having progressed beyond rudimentary sounds and open-throated vowels (AHHH!), or succeeded in mastering a normal gait (the toes inward, the legs scissored), the intellect (according

to Dr. Morris, the kindly man who had been occupied with Philip's care for a quarter century or more, before retiring) estimated to be that of a two-year-old.

2.

10:01 a.m.

George Fairweather arrived at the group home for mentally challenged and developmentally disabled adults at approximately 10 o'clock in the morning. The nurse at the front desk inquired after his daughter, living upstate (*How is she doing? How are the grandkids?*) He left a tin of short bread cookies at the nurses' station, where all could partake.

"How's my boy?" he asked. Janet looked at her chart and gave George the rundown: how many ounces of Ensure Philip had tolerated; whether he was getting out of his chair and pacing the hallways as ordered.

"His fingers are curled. He needs some stretching."

George was never accusatory, never brusque, but he insisted on being kept informed. He liked to be apprised of the vicissitudes in his son's moods or the degree of rigidity of his muscles.

George was an anomaly among the parents and caregivers. Most, too disheartened by their loved one's disabilities, found it easier not to visit. George visited every day or every

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other day. He knew Philip's inexplicable aversions, stimuli that would provoke howling or send him into motor ruts: his dislike of rough surfaces, friction of any kind; his opposition to Velcro. He and Violet had tended to the boy for most of his life, caring for him at home, admitting him to the group home only when their own limitations had become prohibitive.

"Is he in the solarium, Janet?" George asked.

"That he is, Sir." The nurse said that George had a way with the staff, a way of endearing and ingratiating himself.

"I'm going to check him out for the day," George said. He told the staff it was his wife's birthday (*Sixty-eight years old, can you believe it?*). They intended to have a small cake, after which he'd return Philip to the home. The nurse noticed nothing unusual about George's demeanor. He had the air of a man unconflicted, a man *at peace with the world*, is how she described him.

3.

According to the odometer, George drove 27 miles that day. Ten to and from the home, leaving seven miles unaccounted for. With normal traffic conditions prevailing, they ought to have arrived by 10:45. Instead, George was observed to pull into the drive at 12:30, nearly two hours late. He had enough time to travel to the Long Island Sound and back. The bull rushes shoulder high. The smell of brine and heartache. He used to bring Philip there when he was a child. They would sit on the shoal, watching the overhead span, the cars whirring by on the Throgs Neck Bridge.

4.

George and Violet were reasonably happy in the early years, their lives ones of tranquility and contentment. Violet found a part-time position close to home as a nurse in a medical practice. The hours were regular, predictable.

George had a steady stream of insurance defense work. It wasn't interesting, but it was lucrative.

Every other Sunday they took a drive upstate. George liked to see the mountain ridges, the exposed rock faces, glaciated rock millions of years old. It made him appreciate his own insignificance, his irrelevance in the history of the planet. *As it should be*, he said, irking Violet. She said he had a dour streak.

In the summer of 1975, Violet found herself unexpectedly pregnant. Violet did not experience any unusual symptoms or undue nausea. She was able to maintain her regular routines, and was not especially encumbered. Nonetheless, she went into premature labor at seven months. The doctors speculated that she may have suffered from a disorder of the blood, or her uterus was not well suited to carrying full-term. The cause was never definitively determined.

She remained at home for several hours, hoping the contractions would stop, determined to keep the child inside of her, to forestall its entry into the world. George found her passed out on the living room floor, with a weak pulse and almost entirely nonresponsive. It was too late to stop the progression of the labor.

She was delivered via C-section shortly after arrival at the hospital. The infant heard to cry weakly, his complexion noted to be gray. His lungs were immediately flooded with oxygen. His reflexes could not be assessed.

George remained outside, awaiting word. Life or death, a binary equation. He hadn't thought beyond the fundamental question—the sequallae, the after-effects, that which ineluctably follows.

Violet was discharged after three days. The baby remained in the hospital. He gained weight quickly after birth, but there were troublesome signs. His eyes did not appear to be focusing. He was loath to follow an object. He displayed no interest in the mobile above the crib, but stared into the distance. The doctors told them to keep the child stimulated, *sing to him*.

5.

Saturday mornings George and Philip would watch the cartoons. *BEEP-BEEP*, the Road Runner disappearing in a cloud of dust, evading Wile E. Coyote once again. Jerry escaping to the safety of his mouse hole while Tom pawed outside, *let me in*. The brute vectors of anvils or explosive kegs; the derision of the would-be victim.

BEEP BEEP Philip bellowed, *BEEP BEEP*.

BEEP BEEP George echoed. The T.V. was an old Zenith in a handsome wood cabinet, state-of-the-art for the time. Philip scowled when the reception was poor, when the Road Runner dissolved into wavy lines, the image breaking down, degraded. "It's all right son," George assured him, like he assured him when the rain hit his bare skin, upsetting him; like he assured him when the bedroom curtain rustled in the darkness; like he assured him when he was in a rut, unable to get out the words. "We'll get it up and running again."

George made them Eggo brand waffles. *Le-go*, Philip laughed, referencing the ubiquitous jingle, the marketing salvo *Leggo my eggo*, a cry for the ages, the cry of the hungry, the cry of the defiant, those determined to hang onto their share of buttery goodness. Philip liked a scoop of vanilla on his waffle—Breyer's only, lest he wrinkle up his nose, protest *na good, DA*. Philip knew his Breyer's from his Dolly Madison, knew his Eggos from the generic King Kullen imposter; knew the names of the minor personages on Tom & Jerry, refuting the notion of many, the doctors specifically, that he was not processing sensation, at least in any normal way; that his brain was not laying down traces, cementing memories, but was like a sieve, everything escaping it.

On weeknights, they watched Wheel of Fortune. The wheel spinning, round and round, boom or bust (*you've gone bankrupt*), the faces of the contestants signaling elation or gross disappointment, the rune gradually taking shape, the letters revealing themselves, *around the house or fun & games*.

Philip loved to watch the board light up; he shouted guesses, RR or TT usually, sometimes SS, those letters most likely to recur. George knew he must have the rudiments of an intelligence, more than the doctors had given him credit for, more than they could discern from his grunts and guttural entreaties and open-throated vowel sounds. Philip loved it when a contestant guessed the puzzle straightaway, bellowing with delight, DA-DA loo-, which he took to mean, *Look Dad*, always translating, always filling in the lacunae, searching for the meaning animating the gesture. He made Philip waffles with ice cream, the cold sensation awakening his tongue. The therapist advised against use of chocolate sprinkles, maraschino cherries, anything small that might become lodged in the windpipe, or *micro-aspirated*. There were so many advisories, hidden calculations, in tending to Philip.

Philip squealed in delight as the puzzles revealed themselves, murmuring, mouthing letters, eyes alight. How much, if anything, did he understand? Was it all reflexive, random neural firings, or somewhere, deep down, did he comprehend the larger meaning, recognize the solution to the puzzle, lacking only the oral motor facility to articulate his responses? *VO*, he urged the contestants, *buy a vowel*, something he had heard and was simply repeating, ad nauseam; or something more purposeful, a communique from the subconscious, *buy a vowel*.

6.

12:30 p.m.

The neighbor, Mrs. Elle McShane, observed George pulling into the driveway at approximately 12:30 p.m. Rosemary and Elle's boys had grown up together. They swung from monkey bars and played basketball and attended the local elementary.

Then there was Philip. She remembered the day they brought him home. He didn't move much. He didn't try to

roll over or to pull up but seemed content to just lie there, staring at the ceiling. She thought he may have been cross-eyed, but didn't want to say anything. Children outgrow such things, don't they?

Rosemary and Elle's boys graduated and went on to college. They married and started new lives elsewhere.

Philip grew, developed physically, but his mind remained that of a young child. George said he was *on his own timetable*. She never heard Philip utter more than a few words, *yes* or *no* or *not going*. They'd moved Philip into a home a few years ago. Violet was not well herself, her mind addled and her joints inflexible.

She gave them credit for enduring. She didn't know what she would do in their stead. Anyone could endure something for a time. At the end, you could look back and wonder *How did I survive?* But how to endure open-ended hardship?

She remembered waving at George. Murmuring *Hi, How are you?* or similar banality. George, ever courteous, replied, *Well, and you?* He gazed at her for a long time. She thinks about it now. What he kept bottled inside; what gnawed at him, inarticulable.

He opened the door for Philip. Said *We're here son*, and helped him out of the vehicle. It was a windy day, that she recalled. The wind blew George's fedora off his head. She thought to point it out, but stopped. She watched George guide Philip up the steps and into the house. The door shut behind them, and she heard nothing further. Only a muffled sound, later in the night (she professed to be a light sleeper, someone who would startle at the least sound). She thought nothing of it, and would have forgotten it entirely, if investigators hadn't insisted on probing her memory. A sound she described to them as a muted *thud*. She could think of no other apt descriptor.

7.

Philip needed to be stretched three times a day, every

day, lest he lose range of motion, succumb to rigidity. They worked on curling and uncurling his fists, the fingers tense, stuck together. *Just relax, son*, George would say, as he massaged each joint, manipulating from the base of his fingers to the tips. All of the tension bound up in his body, inhibiting his movement, causing uncontrollable spasms, long sighs of pain, the nerve signals lost in translation. *Just relax*, George said, gripping him by the forearm, firm pressure working best.

The rigidity compensated for weaknesses elsewhere—the floppy trunk, the turned-out knees, the slackened mouth—the body never in equilibrium.

They log rolled, rolled over balls, hung upside-down, upending his sense of self, recalibrating his senses, forcing him to contemplate the world from a different perspective, to recognize the constancy of the *I* across the spectrum. Philip loved speed, disorienting motion, the whiplash of revolution. They spun faster, the world blurring by, no fixed point of reference, no object on which to alight. *I got you, Philly*, he said, as he spun him clockwise, then reversed direction. *You'll always be my boy*. He would never grow up and marry, like Rosemary; he would never age; he would remain a child forever, expressing delight as the world spun around him, dissolving around the edges.

Once or twice a month, he took him to the field outside of LaGuardia airport. They lay on the hood of the car, watching the clouds drift by, imposing shapes and sense on fraying cumulus. *What do you think that is, son?* George asked, and Phil might reply DU (duck) or CA (cat) or MOO (cow), the two possessing a language of their own, an expressive shorthand. A jet would pass overhead, eclipsing the sky: The sound reverberating in their bones; the wind tamping down their hair, riffling through their clothes, a dispossessed spirit.

Again, Philip squealed.

After, they went to the Ice King in Corona. Philip liked the rainbow flavor, the way it stained his tongue blue. When he was a baby, the doctor shone a light in Philip's eyes and

said *Maybe one day he'd grow out of it, who knows?* As the years passed, no one offered even this consolation.

It was not Violet's birthday, as George had led the staff to believe. It was not her birthday, nor anyone else's, as far as investigators could ascertain. There was, however, golden cake with buttercream. The table was set as if for a celebration, with streamers and colorful napkins and paper plates. There were red-and-white balloons, long since deflated, which investigators had to step over as they went about investigating the scene. The cake was an Entenmann's brand store variety, Philip's favorite. A fine dusting of sugar particles coated the table. The imprint of a hand, by its breadth and whorls likely Philip's, was lifted from the table. Several more prints were lifted from the vicinity of the sink and the refrigerator handle, all Mr. Fairweather's. The investigators speculated that the family must have gathered around the table for one final repast before retiring to the living room to watch television.

The autopsy showed Mrs. Fairweather to have opioids in her system, enough to render her sleepy, semi-conscious, only dimly aware of her surroundings. Philip had lower levels of the drug in his system, enough to induce a pleasing state of torpor and to make him indifferent to pain. George's toxicological screen was negative for opioids; stomach contents indicated he ingested a final meal of angel's food cake and milk, chased down by intoxicating spirits. Rates of metabolism (more sluggish for Philip, consistent with nervous system compromise) tell us that he and Philip spent the hours from approximately 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. watching television. The television was on when investigators happened on the scene, tuned to the classic cartoon channel.

8.

1:00 p.m.

The visiting nurse, Jacinta Ramirez, was the last person to have seen the deceased. She recorded Violet's vital signs, checked for signs of adequate hydration. Violet described her

pain as an eight out of ten on the happy face scale: one being mild/slight irritation; ten being unbearable/excruciating.

The nurse described George as unfailingly courteous. He asked her that day, as always, whether she would like a refreshment. They had a tin of butter cookies, a gift from the neighbor. There was some marmalade in the refrigerator.

George often absented himself during visits. She couldn't blame him. Caregivers had a difficult lot, didn't they?

On the day of her last visit, George disappeared for several hours. He told the nurse he had errands to run. He was going to fetch Philip from the home. Violet hadn't seen him for a long time.

Violet sometimes called the nurse *Rosemary*. The daughter who called, from time to time, to inquire after her mother's well-being and pharmaceutical regimen.

The nurse wasn't sure it was a good idea to bring Philip home. It might only upset Violet. It might incline her to maudlin reminiscence. Violet's memory was subsiding; she could no longer remember the year, the name of the president, or the circumstances of her life.

She didn't feel it her place to dissuade George. It was her job to ensure that Violet's joints were reasonably flexible, that she wasn't developing pressure sores from extended bedrest. Her job to ensure that Violet was adequately nourished, her blood pressure stable, her vitals unvarying. It was not her job to meddle.

George returned with Philip at approximately one, near the end of her shift. He thanked the nurse for her help and said, *I can take it from here*.

Her mind alights on their conversation. As a nurse, she was trained to detect the signs of distress. To determine shifts, however slight, in a patient's mental status or symptomology.

She asked George how he was coping.

She recorded his responses. In the chart it is noted, "Patient's husband says he is coping. No increase in services warranted at this time."

In the chart it is noted "Patient's pain necessitates

Percocet prn. Patient has adequate support at home.” He did not ask whether there was something more to be done to alleviate her pain. He did not question the recommended changes to her diet. He ventured to say something, *Do you think she understands what’s going on?*, but stopped. She wasn’t certain she heard him correctly.

9.

George liked to take Philip to the marshes. It was a wild place, teeming with low-growth shrubs. There, they could be alone, contemplating the sky.

George liked to gaze at the stars. Ursa Major, Ursa Minor, the Andromeda constellation; the cattails up to their waists and the sky beyond.

He had wanted to be an astronomer. His own father had convinced him to alter his plans, *What are you going to do, studying that? Where’s it going to get you? Stay on earth, that’s what I say*, and George did not have the temerity to challenge him.

George pursued legal studies, accepted a position at a New York City firm. He specialized in appraising risk, in defending against the costs of calamity. A broken leg was worth a hundred thousand dollars; an addled brain one million or more. A marketplace for human tragedy, one designed to compensate for all harm said to flow naturally and proximately from acts of negligence.

George preferred the cosmos, realms light years’ away. Philip was of the earth. He liked to dig, unearthing all manner of buried things, earthworms, gnarled and twisted roots, the latticework of the underside. Violet scolded him for letting Philip *get dirty*, for dragging him through the muck.

Philip lived in a perpetual present, one in which the imperfect past or the conditional tense did not exist. Awash in the sensation of any given moment: the sharp wind off the Long Island Sound, the brine in their nostrils, the soft ground underfoot.

George wished he were able to see through the prism

of Philip’s eyes. It was untranslatable verse; experience that could never be deconstructed.

10.

12:00 p.m.

Surveillance footage from the drug store showed George entering at approximately 12:00 p.m. He proceeded straightaway to the pharmacist’s counter, where he asked for a refill on Violet’s prescription for oxycodone. Thirty purple capsules, time-released for continuous pain relief.

The pharmacist, Mr. Singh, had trouble locating the pills. He asked if George could return later that afternoon, after he had a chance to sort out the insurance paperwork. George—by all accounts a genteel man, one not inclined to harsh words or rash emotion—became irate. He stated that *his wife was suffering, insurance be damned*.

The pharmacist had filled the family’s prescriptions for years. Violet’s opiates, in lock-step milligram dosages. Pills designed to stave off memory loss, pills for the restoration of bone density. Philip’s anti-seizure prophylaxis, Baclofen for the relief of muscle rigidities. Medication for George’s ulcer, for the bile accruing in his liver, for the backflow of acid into the esophagus.

The computers were down that day. Insurance authorization impossible to verify. Nevertheless, he filled George’s prescription as a courtesy for a long-standing customer.

The surveillance footage showed George wandering up and down the aisles. It may be accurate to describe him as *pacing*, as if mulling over an unknowable problem.

The pharmacist asked George if he had any questions about the medications. He gave the usual advisories about taking the medication on a full stomach. The contraindications against usage with alcohol or other depressants, the synergistic effect of which might lead to respiratory compromise, lack of will to breathe.

George nodded his head and thanked him for his

courtesies. The pharmacist told George he would complete the insurance paperwork once the system was up and running. He placed the amber vials in a paper bag and thanked him for being a loyal customer of Northern Boulevard Chemists, *serving the neighborhood since 1975*.

11.

2:15 p.m.

George called Rosemary at approximately 2:00, shortly after discharging the nurse. He inquired after the grandchildren, asked his daughter about her job at the local hospital. Rosemary was a nurse like her mother, a designated caretaker, a surveyor of vital signs, the first to respond in event of an emergency. She worked on the cardiac ward, monitoring erratic heartbeats, notating long Q-intervals, disturbances in the electrical rhythms of the heart.

“How’s everything, Dad?” she asked.

“Fine, fine.” It was George’s habit to spare unnecessary details, to avoid the specter of undue worry.

“How’s mom?”

“You know,” he sighed. Rosemary detected a quavering in the voice. An uncommonly shrill note. She was perhaps shading in, cross-hatching, after the fact.

“We can get the nursing increased to twelve hours per day,” she offered.

“No need,” her father replied. She thinks of it, in retrospect. He did not reply *I can handle it*, or *I’m on it*, but *no need*, the plan already formulated. Her mind turning over things, evaluating every angle, unexpected refractions. She considers the choice of words, the timbre of the voice, the interstitial silences. She has nothing else to go on.

He inquired after the grandchildren, ten-year-old Lucas and twelve-year-old Peter, boys who wielded baseball bats and explored thickets and lived under a vast sky. George had given them a telescope—an old Sky Prodigy, its viewfinder

scratched. *I no longer have use for it, he said. Maybe they can enjoy it*. It remained in the box, in the plain brown wrapper, unopened.

“The boys are fine,” she said. Perhaps she ought to have described the goings-on in their lives more particularly. Made reference to Peter’s 12-0 shutout over a rival baseball club, or Lucas’ place on the honor roll. Lucas spoke of becoming an attorney, like his grandfather. He wanted to study the laws of man and the rules of a just society.

She ought to have invited him for a visit—a week or two at the old farmhouse, the sky his Exploratorium. He could swim in the old creek, skip stones across the water, the initial disturbance emanating outward. At night, he could sit on the porch, contemplating the gathering night.

She felt guilty for keeping at a distance. For carrying on, elsewhere. She wished she would have remained on the phone longer. Had she an inkling of what her father was planning, she might have been able to talk him out of it. It had all become too much for him, hadn’t it? The onus of Philip; and, in recent years, her mother’s decline. Her joints afflicted with rheumatism, her mind addled.

She confirmed that her father was the registered owner of a .38 caliber Smith & Wesson revolver, as well as an Excel 20-gauge shotgun, weaponry he purchased for self-protection, never wanting to be unprepared, ill-equipped in the face of danger. He kept them in a safe in the bedroom, the combination known to none but he.

12.

One day, George awoke to find Violet dressed and seated at the breakfast table, in grey flannel suit and emerald green silk blouse. *When are we leaving for the train? We’re going to be late*, she chided, though she hadn’t been to the office on Worth Street since 1975, though the office had ceased to exist, the partnership dissolved shortly after George’s retirement.

The internist surmised that she was in the middle to late stages of dementia. A condition that had afflicted Violet’s

mother, and her grandmother before. A twinned gene, a random mutation.

They were referred to a neurologist. Violet's short-term memory showed significant deficits. She could not recall words she had been instructed to remember not minutes earlier. Her long-term memory showed signs of impairment as well. She'd forgotten that Rosemary had moved away; the neighbor's name eluded her (Elle? Ellie?). She believed Philip to be residing upstairs, in his bedroom, when she remembered him at all. She called him to dinner, she reminded him to tie his shoes, the son in absentia. She complained about Rosemary consorting with Jeremy, railing against his impudence and lack of ambition. She called Ellie's husband a glutton, said fried eggs and bacon would be the death of him.

Her imaging studies showed signs of brain atrophy. Whole regions were no longer firing. The myelin sheaths dissolving, a lack of gray-white matter differentiation. The neurologist estimated that within five years she would no longer be able to remember where she lived, or the salient facts of her past, or George, for that matter. The ablation of memories, and with it, the revision of the individual, *nunc pro tunc*.

13.

10:15 a.m.

George waved hello, left a box of pastries from D'Aquila at the nurses' station—knowing Janet to enjoy the cannoli—and proceeded to Philip's room at the end of the hallway. The room was flooded with sunlight, every surface lustrous. "Are you ready to go, Philly?" Philip was seated in a recliner, watching the sports wrap-up. "It's going to be quite a game, son." He spoke about the weekend forecast. He talked about the Nor'Easter rolling in. He talked to himself, mostly.

He helped Philip maneuver into the chair. He'd done it so many times, over so many years, an engrained rhythm,

heave, drag, prop. His back muscles were thick, conditioned to the strain. "There you go, son," he said, breathing heavily, shielding his eyes from the light flooding in. He wheeled Philip down the hall, waving at the orderly, waving at the nurses, saying *enjoy the pastries*, or words to that effect, waiting for the doors to open onto the world.

The parking lot was near empty, as it was most days. The head nurse's compact, the orderly's beat-up sedan. The whir of the Cross Island Parkway beyond, the descending frequencies of passing vehicles.

He helped Philip into the front seat, folding the wheelchair and placing it in the trunk. "Let's go, son." He turned over the ignition. He drove a 2001 Ford sedan, unwilling to exchange it for a newer model.

It had been a long time since he and Philip had gone to the marshes. The smell of brine in their nostrils and on their clothes, baptizing them, sanctifying them, an anointing.

They headed east on Northern Boulevard. After an overcast morning, the day had cleared up, the clouds dispersing to the horizon, to the limit of vision. He heard the tremolo of the loon. He was never particularly good at bird calls, at approximating the sounds, staccato bursts and sustained *trumms*.

He helped Philip out of the car. His arms were strong, chiseled. His legs lacked muscle tone, atrophied from years of sitting. The muscles never in equipoise. The muscles stiffening, *rigidifying*, rapid contractions known as *clonus*, involuntary tremors.

"Just a little way," he assured Philip. They walked through the grove, George supporting Philip around the waist, steadying him, taking the brunt of his weight.

The loons called from their distant perches. The leaves rustling, twigs crackling, a percussive refrain. George liked to walk amidst the trees, to gaze up at the latticework of branches, everything interconnected, reaching toward something, straining toward the light, positioning themselves for resources. This was his sanctuary, his oracle, the profession

of his faith.

They walked the unmarked trail, George knowing every bend by heart. The air invigorating his lungs, making him feel alive, the basic exchange of oxygen for carbon dioxide, quid pro quo. The leaves underfoot and the world crackling around him, the sky a clear, heartbreaking blue. The stars he had glimpsed through the prism of the telescope, the vibrating world beyond.

They came upon the Giant and stopped. A tulip poplar, scientific name *Liriodendron tulipifera*, at four hundred years the oldest living thing in the City. The silent witness, observer throughout the centuries.

"GI," Philip uttered.

"That it is, my boy." George gripped him by the arm. The trees were denuded, arcing toward the sky. The relentless transformations of the world, green to flaming orange to burnt umber. The vertigo of the shape-shifting clouds. *Here a cow, there a locomotive, what can you see?*, the tenebrous lines of a letter O. Memories saturated by brine and longing. The smell of tilled air and decomposition. The loons headed south for the winter, time divined from the ambient temperature, the register of the wind.

All that was ineffable, inarticulable, inadequately conveyed by the spoken word. The infinitesimal gradations of blue, the inexorable revolutions of the planet, the unspoken calculus of gravity.

"I love you, Philly." He inhaled sharply. The boy he had hushed to sleep and comforted through nightmares. The boy for whom he acted as translator, procurer, spokesman. He wished he could inhabit his being. If only he could experience the world through his eyes, flat and unwavering, two-dimensional.

It was all an interstellar accident, the hyperbole of an expanding universe.

He drove, the road open-ended before him. Phil hummed along with the radio, *Radar Love*. He loved the motion, high

velocity physics, the sensation of hurtling through space. George remembered spinning him as a boy, taking hold of him, arms interlocked, and whirling him counter-clockwise, the world blurring boy, the green grass, the vacuous sky. Philip would scream *NO LET GO*, by which he meant to convey, *SPIN, SPIN*. George would spin him until his arms gave out, until his head pounded from vertigo, no longer able to keep Phil afloat.

George looked at Phil, strapped in the passenger seat. The lines were coalescing around his eyes, time etched on his face. Parenthetical creases formed around his lips, tightly puckered. His features soft, his skin subsiding.

The world rushed by. The long stretch of marshland, a medley of yellow. The window open, the strangling cry of the wind.

A day like any other day, late October, unseasonably warm, the leaves turning color, the sky devoid of cloud, the ground suppurating. The loons escaping to warmer climes, those inscribed in their genes, the place to which they unfailingly returned, the vagaries of the *life cycle*.

A day forecast to be in the high fifties, low sixties, an echo of summer. A day on which the mayor was scheduled to give a press conference. The Mets were not in the series, again. They had been eliminated weeks ago, shut out, statistically eliminated.

He pulled into the driveway, waved at the neighbor. She was always in the front sitting room, watching the world go by. She'd lived next door for forty years, but he couldn't remember being inside her house more than a handful of times. A drink to welcome him to the neighborhood. A Fourth of July barbecue on which he'd had the occasion to wander inside looking for tongs. Once or twice he'd had to fetch Rosemary, late for dinner. He'd never ventured beyond the living room.

He thanked the visiting nurse and said he could *take it from here*.

"You sure, Mr. Fairweather?" She always referred to him as Mr. Fairweather, unwilling to abandon the formal address.

"I'm sure."

"Take care of yourselves," she said.

He nodded.

"Good to see you, Phil." She gripped his shoulder.

2:30 p.m.

"Should we watch some T.V.? George proposed. Have some cake? I got the Entenmann's. It's a hot one out there, Violet. Never guess it was the end of October." He felt compelled to keep up the conversation, to murmur words, quotidian prayers.

"Did I forget the purse?"

"You have your purse, dear." Her mind had convinced her that she'd lost critical items, or was running late for appointments. Her memory had been ablated, but still she had this, the persistent worry, the anxiety.

"Do I have my purse?" A refrain. After a few beats, she would ask again. He would answer out of habit.

He cut her a slice of angel's food cake. Sweets never failed to delight her, the rush of sugary goodness. She would eat sweets morning, noon and night if left to her own devices. "Here's your cake, sweetheart." She still looked youthful, at least to him: the solidity of her body, the natural wave in her hair. She had cataracts now, impinging on her vision. Her mind overrun with plaques, her eyes clouded, time and memory occluded.

He retrieved a bowl from the cabinet and poured Cocoa Puffs for Phil. Philip had eaten Cocoa Puffs for the entirety of his existence. The same advertising slogan, the same mascot, the inane refrain. *Coo-coo for cocoa puffs. Coo-coo for cocoa puffs.* Phil had an ear for jingles, for slogans, anything with a catchy rhyme or a mellifluous ring. He was unable to memorize the times tables or to perform simple calculations, but

he knew the words to commercials by heart. *Trix is for kids.*

The same Saturday roster. Children's shows, educational programming. *The More You Know*, codifications of modern wisdom, public service announcements, oracles for the modern age. The same cartoons, the same familiar characters, the purple-cloaked avenger, the fierce warrior Xeno. The world imperiled by invaders from outer space, mutant germs, gamma radiation.

Cut to the commercial, Quik chocolate milk, nine essential vitamins and nutrients. Pop tarts bursting with flavor, insides gored and oozing. *Leggo my eggo*, the aphorisms of our times.

The unvarying tableau. The sofa against the far wall, right angle to Barcalounger. The heavy drapes, Violet always saying *no one needs to know our business. I don't want anyone spying on us.* The spray of flowers on the table, dusty rose petals and plastic stems. Philip derived comfort from the static, the sameness of his surroundings. A magazine on the coffee table instead of in the magazine rack a dissonance his mind could not abide.

George retreated to the kitchen. They had a wall phone, still, an orange relic. He hesitated before dialing. How long had it been since he'd spoken to Rosemary? He had difficulty remembering, one day blending into the next, undifferentiated, a monochromatic palette. He wanted to hear her voice, the reedy timbre of her phrases.

Commiserating over the Mets' recent losses, the home team's failure to win the pennant. "Mom is okay," he found himself saying.

"I'm on mega-doses of vitamins, don't you worry about me. I'm healthy as a horse." Rosemary was always after him about his cardiovascular health. Keeping the arteries free of plaques, maintaining a diastolic blood pressure of 140 or less, moderate exercise to keep the system going.

"Are you taking the beta blockers?" she asked.

"Yes," he lied, fumbling with the cord, wrapping it

around his knuckles. The drone of the television from the living room. *The more you know... Fortified with nutrients essential for bone health and muscle repair. Don't let concern over bladder leakage compromise your independence*, the metrics of a good life sturdy muscles and bladder integrity.

"You're not just saying that to get me off your case now?"

"No, no," he assured her. "How are my boys?" he asked.

The grandsons he hardly knew, the boys who roamed over soccer fields and drifted down the creek, awash in sunlight. "They enjoying the telescope?" He imagined them gazing up at Orion. Phobos and Deimos, the moons of Mars. They had just discovered a new planet on the edge of the galaxy, intuited its presence from mathematical anomalies and statistical extrapolation, a glitch in the data that admitted of no other explanation.

"Yes, Dad."

The boys, strong and able-bodied, would go on to study astronomy, or philosophy, wed, and have families of their own. He wondered if they would remember him, the grandfather they had seen on a handful of occasions. The grandfather who'd thrown them a few easy pitches, let them walk around the bases. The grandmother who gave them stale biscuits, called them *sweetie pie*, unable to recall their names or their relation to her. The uncle, the grown man, who reclined in a chair, braying nonsense, FA-FA-FA-DA-DA, words they could not apprehend.

"Well then," he sighed.

"Are you okay, Dad?"

"I love you Rosemary." He expelled air.

"Love you, too, Dad."

He cut himself a slice of cake. He wasn't a sweets man, didn't like desserts or sugary treats, but he appreciated a slice of Entenmann's angel's food cake, light and airy, a layer of powdered sugar on top. He'd eaten the same cake every day for years, cake with a small glass of milk to coat the stomach.

He took care to arrange the pillows on the sofa. He straightened the mirror, aligned it just right. Washed the

dishes. Violet never liked to leave a dirty plate in the sink, never liked a pillow out of place. *A tidy home is a Godly home*, she'd embroidered on a sampler. He pulled the drapes, giving them some privacy. What did the world know of him? The world had never known his private torments, the ache in his being. All if it untranslatable, an abstruse idiom.

He went into the hallway closet. Ascended a step ladder to the highest shelf, reached for the locked box. He'd cleaned the .38 caliber the night before, ensured it wouldn't jam. He put the bullets in the chamber, *click*.

He used a goose down pillow to muffle the sound. A momentary startle, and she was gone. Soul fluttering heavenward, toward all that cannot be known or quantified.

He stood behind Philip. He was watching *Wheel of Fortune*, mesmerized by the spinning wheel, the flashing lights, *I'll buy a vowel please*. He liked when contestants bought vowels, the board lighting up. *There are three Es*.

The clock advanced. The relentless revolutions of the earth, the trajectory of the planets, elliptical orbits dictated by Pythagorean formulae. He took comfort in the notion that the world would continue on. The Giant's roots were firmly embedded in the substrate. His grandsons had their sights on the heavens, at worlds beyond magnification, realms beyond divination.

He pulled gently, too gently. Summoned his resolve and fired again. The stain billowing outward, the pillow incarnadine. All that he would never understand, what he tried so desperately to fathom. Dura, white matter, nerve fibers, electrical transmissions across an unknowable synapse.

He emptied the shells in the trash. Left a note to *call Rosemary*, with the area code and number.

He muted the television, looked around. A ten-second coda, in which to take in the scene. He closed his eyes and aimed upward.

17.

Alerted by a call from Janet, the nurse supervisor,

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emergency crews were dispatched to the Fairweather residence in Bellerose, Queens. Investigators would describe the scene as tidy, contained. The bodies of the late Mrs. Fairweather and her son Philip, sixty-eight and forty-five years of age, respectively, appeared to have been ritually arranged. Their eyes closed, their hands folded across their chests in a position of repose. Mrs. Fairweather died instantaneously, as adjudged by the trajectory of the bullet and the limited exsanguination; Philip sustained a first, non-fatal shot, followed by a more decisive wound to the left temporal lobe at close range. The elder Mr. Fairweather was killed by a fatal shot into the palate, through the pons.

A note was left on the counter with instructions to call the decedent's daughter in Kingston. A manila folder contained the deed to the property, vital records, and the last wills and testaments of Mr. and Mrs. Fairweather, the documents indicating that in the event of their simultaneous deaths the entirety of their estate was to devolve upon their children, per stirpes.

The blood levels of Mrs. Fairweather and Philip indicated that they had received nonfatal doses of prescription opioids, enough to mitigate pain and induce a pleasant state of torpor. The stomach contents indicated that they had eaten a final meal of angel's food cake and milk.

Even taking into accounting rigor mortis and lividity, it was evident that Philip suffered from profound disabilities. His limbs were noticeably atrophied; his bones weakened; his body warped. His rib cage enlarged from years of hyperventilation; his legs withered from lack of weight bearing. His tongue thick and hypotonic, indicating a lack of speech mastery.

It is appropriate to classify the deaths as an apparent homicide/suicide. In contradistinction to Mrs. Fairweather and Philip, whose bodies were carefully arranged post-mortem, Mr. Fairweather was discovered with mouth agape, slumped over. The bullet, a .38 caliber PMC silver eRange,

went straight through, blowing a hole through the back of the skull. His eyes open, clouded over. Autopsy revealed him to be a reasonably fit man of seventy years of age; no scars or remarkable features save for a small healed incision on the right quadrant where the gallbladder had been excised. Examination of the organs revealed his heart and lungs to be in good shape and his brain to show no noticeable deficits or age-related plaques. Examination of the esophagus showed ulcers consistent with chronic heartburn.

Gunshot residue under the fingernails and on the clothing demonstrated conclusively that the shooter was the elder Mr. Fairweather. The angle of entry was consistent with that of a self-inflicted wound, permitting of no other reasonable inference. In moribund symmetry, the trajectories of Philip's and Mrs. Fairweather's wounds were inconsistent with any explanation other than shots fired at close range.

The police department declined to speculate on the deceased's motives and refrained from comment.

The home for the mentally challenged and the developmentally disabled released a brief statement indicating that they were "shocked" and "saddened" by the deaths and were endeavoring to reassure the other residents that what had transpired constituted an aberration.

The Society for the Dignity of the Disabled issued a statement condemning the actions of the elder Mr. Fairweather.

The neighbors, interviewed by the local paper, professed to be "shocked" and were unable to speak to the deceased's motives. One described the elder Mr. Fairweather as "preoccupied," consumed in thought. He was described as "even tempered" and "peaceable" by neighbors; none knew him to be a violent man or one given to fits of distemper. None had ever witnessed him in a fit of pique. He was noted to be "congenial," "unfailingly courteous," a man devoted to his family. ❁

Jim Peterson

Open House

One Sunday morning we drive
to Famous Anthony's as usual.
I have my regular pancakes
and you the French toast with bacon.
As we eat, silence gathers
between us like twisted sheets
asking "Is this all there is?"

We look into each other's faraway eyes
and know that this day calls
for the paper's list of open houses.
Here, among the sticky remains
of breakfast, we find the promise
of doors opening to us
at 1 p.m., 2 p.m., 3 p.m., and 4.

We rush home and put
our own house in order.
We dress in fresh jeans
and collared shirts. We look
into each other's eyes and know
the time has arrived.
We climb into our old Honda
and crank up the radio and the heat.