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RALEIGH REVIEW FOUNDED AS RIG POETRY
Robert Ian Greene
February 21, 2010
EDITOR’S NOTE

Bernard Fergusson’s opening lines to kick off this issue hold true for many of us personally. Though, unlike the speaker of “self-portrait with nostalgia,” who claims, “I was born once and it’s been downhill ever since,” Raleigh Review has continued to get better and better with every issue—and let me remind you that Vol. 1 had an outstanding debut in the Best of the Net series for our magazine’s launch eight years ago in 2010. Starting this magazine in my old home office that now serves as my eight-year-old daughter’s princess-decorated bedroom was so very easy, though continuing to grow, nurture, and raise this magazine through its infancy and through its toddlerhood has at times been difficult. But Raleigh Review is so worth the many sleepless nights and the very early mornings.

Yes, Raleigh Review is still a work-in-progress after eight years and counting. What kind of work? Well, we’ve bussed tables together at the Waffle House, we’ve seined in the Alaskan Gulf and shrimped in the Biloxi Back Bay, we’ve slung drinks to those who felt they needed them, some of us have been told “enough” when we’ve had our fill, we’ve filled up fuel tanks and commuted to work together, we’ve paid our taxes on time and balanced the budget, we’ve generated and signed contracts, some of us are raising kids while others have already raised theirs and have had their fill with that, and we’ve been both students and teachers.

All this is just to say that we are working people, after all, who continue to make this magazine happen. We’ve been through a lot together though our mission has remained the same. At Raleigh Review we believe that great literature inspires empathy by allowing us to see the world through the eyes of our neighbors everywhere in the world. Our mission is to foster exceptional works of experience that are emotionally and intellectually complex through a wide range of literary offerings—though none more important than this magazine in your hands.

So slide on over to the cashier. Who knows, one of us might be the one ringing you up.

—Rob Greene, editor & publisher
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self-portrait with nostalgia

i was born once & it’s been
downhill ever since

a bright collection of violence
here i am again today splurging

in ikea until everything is unrecognizable
i stand by what i said

it’s best this rendezvous end

the faces of those i am growing to love
are similar to the faces i have lost

to memory to dusk
my father again with a body or not

pulling me into the world by the shoulders
before he expands into smoke

i refuse this pressure of recall

to get the story right
else speak something new into existence

crawl back to me, darling
share what you’ve carried here

between your palms
show me how to make it hum

before you leave
only so many types of hunger you can pack onto an island before you’re surrounded

i tell my cousin i am fortunate to be so far inland that i have to go searching for trouble from the water / but it won't be long before he and everyone i love are swallowed by some closer threat of drowning / i tell him the oceans are only your friends until they become your most prominent enemy / when the shoreline comes licking at your toes and then grows hungry for more / but he is unfazed / he thinks there are sharper things lurking than the boil of a distant water / and he is telling me of how a child once mistook a woman waiting in traffic / as the enemy / and pressed the only kind of ice left on the island to her head / and then pulled the trigger / and he is also telling me of the young boy who sat in the back seat and watched / as his mother was made into a slow bloom of decay / and i have waded in enough darkness to know that if you hold a particular amount of grief in front of the eyes / any body can become untouchable by hope / and perhaps this is why my cousin is speaking of justice / and the lengths we must travel to hold it in our tired palms / of how he gifted a pack of cigarettes to one of the boys from around the block / and then walked / unflinching / into the undying summer / hoping to return later to a torrent of blood / and i know i have paid less for a smaller violence / and would sacrifice even more for the taste of a slow unfolding peace / and i know the flood swelling in my throat is at least a bit similar / to the flood pushing the ships back to shore / the flood and its own pair of young hands / growing even more desperate / as we speak
ALETA PIPPIN | Many Shades of Gray I, 2017
48 x 48 x 2 inches | Oil on canvas
Guts

Ben pulled off the highway and parked in front of the double-wide. Its off-white siding was dirty and smattered with sickly browns and greens. Vines and mud. Filth. He turned his head and looked at the hand-painted sign on the side of the highway, complete with blocky lettering: COLON THERAPY. Depictions of what looked like a hair dryer and a waffle maker filled in the empty space. These objects, if they were what they looked like, did not seem to match up at all with the idea of an alternative medicine shack on the side of a rural North Carolina highway.

Ben remembered the first time he’d noticed the place. He’d told his wife about it as soon as he got home from work at the chicken factory, but Karen hadn’t believed him. She told him it was a misspelling or a mistake and that there was no way the Health Department would allow a place like that to operate. Ben knew he hadn’t been fooled and that the Health Department didn’t have any real power, but he wasn’t in particular need of a colon cleanse or whatever else went on there, so he never looked into it. But he drove by every day, and he thought about it all the time—especially on the nights he was kept awake having sex or arguing with Karen.

He got out of the car and squinted through the setting sun at the trailer, then walked up the wooden steps and pulled the screen door open. He rapped on the door three times. He wasn’t timid about it—he had waited long enough to know what this place was and what it did to people—but he hoped his knock didn’t give away his sense of urgency. He waited another minute before knocking again. No one was home. Or they were too busy inside. He thought about walking around to the back of the trailer and trying to get a peek through a window, but something didn’t feel right about that. Whoever they were, he was positive they were doing noble, necessary work, so he resolved to come back tomorrow. Besides, Karen was staying
overnight in Charlotte for a work thing. The house was empty and still, and he had all night to think about what he would ask these people when they let him inside.

§

He got home and went straight to the fridge for a beer. He popped the top with the bottle opener from the silverware drawer and walked into the bedroom. The apartment was small, but he and Karen didn’t have much stuff. She liked limiting any attachment to material objects. So they had simple furniture and food and toilet paper. Essentials. Ben sat on the edge of their bed and sipped the beer. He held the bottle on his knee and looked at the label. It featured a photograph of an old push broom. It unnerved him.

Work had been especially brutal today and Ben was glad it was Friday. Left winger, that’s what they called him—he stood in line and pulled the left wing off every chicken that came down the belt. Supervisors wanted eighty chickens processed a minute, and Ben rarely missed his quota. But he hated it. It was messy and gave him too much time to think. And often those thoughts centered around his eight years of marriage and then immediately to the clinic he passed every day.

He took a look around the bedroom—Karen had even gotten rid of their television set two years ago. He finished his drink quickly.

Ben decided to go out for a few minutes before settling in for the night. He went to the kitchen and tossed his empty bottle in the trash. The house phone started to ring, but he ignored it. He knew it was Karen. She would want to talk about work.

Grabbing a fresh can of beer, Ben walked out the front door. The air was chilly as he stepped out of the apartment and down the stairs to the parking lot. He unlocked his car and climbed in, then cracked open his beer can and took a deep drink. He put the can in his cup holder and started the engine. The bar was close, only three minutes away—right around the corner. He pulled out of his spot and slowly made his way over the speed bumps that marked the lot. The cell phone in his pocket vibrated, and he knew it was Karen. He fished it out and looked at her picture on the LCD screen. Ben hit the green button, lifting the phone to his ear.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hey, baby.” Karen’s voice had only the slightest hint of Southern in it. She grew up in the city; she was removed from those deep accents that penetrated the more rural areas of North Carolina. “I called the house,” she said.
“I’m not home yet. Work was good?” he asked. He took another
drink from his beer and kept the wheel steady with his knees for a
second. He wasn’t all that interested in her answer.

“Oh, fantastic. They loved the presentation, and Chad said he was
real happy with it, too. I wish I could get home tonight, but there’s a
brunch in the morning I need to get to. Chad wants me talking to folks
and pushing the new program. I’ll be home in the evening. Should we
go out for dinner?”

Ben steered his car in front of the bar and parked. He tipped back
the beer and finished the can. His mind was on the trailer off the
highway. “What?” he said.

“Dinner,” she said.

“I haven’t eaten yet, I’m just pulling up to the house.”

“No, when I get home,” she said. “Let’s go out. We’ll make a night
of it.”

“Right, tomorrow. You’ll be home.” Ben looked out the windshield
at the flashing OPEN sign above the bar’s front door. It was pink and
ugly and distracting. “Is Chad there now?”

There was a quick silence. Ben knew she and Chad were sleeping
together. He knew Karen was pretending he didn’t know. They both
knew the other knew.

“Yes, he’s right here,” she said. Then, “Are you at the bar?”

“I’ve gotta go,” Ben said.

§

It was almost eleven when he exited the bar. He wasn’t drunk. He
drank a lot, and often, but he was rarely drunk. Ben sat on the hood of
his car and smoked a cigarette. His phone showed no missed calls and
no text messages. He was alone. He was thinking about the clinic.

A couple walked out of the bar and moved toward their pickup
truck. The man was talking to the woman, using his hands animatedly
and stumbling over his words.

The woman interrupted him. “You’re not listening to me,” she said.
“I just can’t stomach the whole thing. It’s not proper.”

“I’m only telling you so you know,” the man said.

“You’re not listening. It just makes me so sick,” she said.

§

Before heading home, Ben drove down 81 and again parked in front
of the double-wide. There were no vehicles in the driveway but his,
and he didn’t turn the car off or get out. Instead, he lit another
cigarette and smoked and thought about who might be inside. He
pictured the owners sleeping in a bedroom that shared a wall with one
of their treatment rooms. Ben envisioned himself lying down on a second-hand hospital stretcher and asking for the full work-up. The sheets were white and clean and smelled like bleach. The thought made him warm, and he finished his cigarette and drove home.

§

The next morning, Ben woke up and started a pot of coffee before he hopped in the shower. He could smell last night’s bourbon on his breath while he washed his body. The heat of the water coaxed the drink from his bones, but he didn’t feel clean afterwards. Karen hadn’t called after they spoke last night.

He got dressed and sipped his coffee and smoked at the kitchen table. It was nearly ten when he finally got up and walked out the door. It was easy to pretend to be calm. He and Karen had practice at pretending.

The day was warm, and Ben knew that the place would be open. There would be people inside, capably running things and ready to answer all his questions. They would welcome him. They would offer to take his jacket, if he were wearing one. Gastroenterologists—even the amateur, semi-holistic backwoods kind—needed politeness due to the inherent impoliteness in their work. It helped keep them clean.

The highway was empty as Ben smoked and drove. The artificial breeze from his cracked window kept him cool. He saw the sign ahead on the right and slowed down. The blow dryer painting made him uneasy today. It reminded him of his shower that didn’t quite do its job. When he pulled into the driveway, he was disappointed there were no other cars in front of the trailer. This did not help his nerves.

He got out of the car and lit a cigarette. He stood still and tried to make himself stop sweating. The double-wide looked the same as it did the day before. The mud was still there. He smoked, and when he was finished, he threw down the butt, flattened it under his shoe.

He walked up the wooden stairs. Smoking had calmed him down. He was ready and excited now. He felt the same sense of urgency that he felt yesterday start to creep inside of him. Knocking on the door, he waited, and knew they were inside. He could feel it in his gut. There was no answer. He knocked again, aggressively. He didn’t care if he betrayed himself and gave away his feelings. He was tired of acting.

The door opened, and in front of Ben stood a short woman with brown hair down to her shoulders. She looked to be in her mid-thirties, around Ben’s age. She was wearing a rust-colored apron with yellow flowers on it.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Ben said. “I saw the sign out front.”
Opening the door wider, she gestured with her arm for Ben to step inside. He entered the trailer, looking around for the first time. He was standing in a living room. Two vacant La-Z-Boys faced the corner where a television played a Western on the Hallmark channel. Cabinets bordered the walls, displaying china and collections of spoons and ceramic cat figurines.

“How can I help you?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Ben said.

The woman smiled warmly. “You saw the sign out front. Follow me.”

She turned and walked down the hallway to a door on the left. Ahead was the kitchen. Ben heard someone in there walking around and making noise but he couldn’t see the person. The woman opened the door and showed Ben inside. The room was a lot like he pictured it. An old stretcher with white sheets. A counter with a sink and a series of overhead cabinets. Ben saw gauze and plastic tubing and lots of white. Products of sterility.

“I’m Linda,” the woman said. “Daddy is making waffles. He’ll be right in.”

With that, she turned and closed the door, leaving Ben alone in the room. He sat on the edge of the stretcher and listened to his breathing. He wanted to know exactly what this place did. If they helped people. He was certain they did, but he wanted to know for sure. He had to know.

The door opened and in walked a man wearing a white doctor’s coat. He was tall, well over six feet. His brown hair was cropped close, and he held out his hand to Ben. He smelled like waffles.

Ben stood and shook his hand.

“Name’s Don,” the man said.

“Ben.”

“And you’re having trouble?” Don asked.

“Trouble?”

“Yes. Are you having trouble?”

Ben thought about this. He only wanted to know what went on in this place, but he should have seen this coming. His phone began to vibrate, and he turned it off through his pants.


“How do you do it?”

Don looked around the room slowly. His eyes scanned the cabinets and stopped on a square package wrapped in plastic that maintained its uncontaminated nature. “We flush it out,” he said. “We
take everything that’s bad and troubling inside of you, and we flush it out. It’s painless, you won’t feel a thing.”

“But I’m not really having trouble, I just—I want to be clean,” Ben said.

“I get that. And everything we do here is clean. We’ve passed all the necessary Health Department inspections. But we both know they don’t have any real power, don’t we?”

Ben wanted to laugh. He wanted to lie down like he imagined and let Don do his work. Instead he said, “There’s nothing wrong with me.”

He met Don’s gaze and they stared at each other for a moment before Don spoke.

“It’s Waffle Day anyway,” he said.

They looked at each other for another second and Don turned and opened the treatment room’s door. He walked back down the hallway and Ben followed. Don opened the front door and turned to face Ben, who stepped through the door and down the wooden steps. Ben looked toward the highway and saw the hair dryer on the sign again. He turned back to the trailer. Don was still towering in the doorway, watching him.

“You do help people, right?” Ben asked.

Don took off his white coat and hung it on a peg next to the door.

“Yes,” he said. “We do.”

§

Ben didn’t call Karen back, and that afternoon she walked through the front door calling his name. He helped bring her bag inside, and they both lay in bed facing each other. They shared a smoke between them and talked about Karen’s conference, and Chad never came up.

Karen leaned on her side and set the cigarette in the ashtray. She rolled back over to look at Ben. He looked back at her. They had sex without looking at each other again, and Ben knew she faked it.

Afterwards she showered and then mentioned dinner. She looked clean and Ben thought that was unfair.

“We can go wherever you want,” she said.

“Okay,” he said.

“You can order whatever you want.”

“Okay.”

“So what do you want?”

“I want waffles,” he said.

§

They settled for Yang’s Paradise a couple blocks away, despite the restaurant’s “B” rating, and ate the sesame chicken in silence. Ben
drank three warm beers. Their eyes only met while they were chewing. He paid the bill and opened the door for Karen on the way out.

In the car, he kept his hands squarely on the wheel and wished he had another drink. When they pulled into a spot at home, Karen got out, but he stayed in his seat with the car running. She bent down.

“Are you coming?” she asked.
“I think I want a television,” Ben said.

She was looking at him, but he kept looking straight ahead through the windshield. Her phone lit up in her hand, and she looked down at the screen.

“I think we should do what we want,” she said. There was a finality in her tone. “Are you going now?”
“I only think it’s fair,” he said.
“I’m going to get cleaned up.” Karen shut the door.
Fine, Ben thought. He was finally going to get cleaned up, too.

§

It was black outside, and he couldn’t see the sign off the highway, but he knew where to turn. He couldn’t see the hair dryer or the waffle maker, but he knew they sat on the edge of the highway like sirens calling to lost sailors. Once again, he pulled into an empty driveway. The gravel crunched underneath his tires as he crept forward and parked. He flipped his headlights off, and it seemed his cigarette was the only source of light for miles.

He climbed out of the car and up the steps to the front door. Ben knocked on the door loudly. He didn’t stop at three knocks or even fifteen knocks—he kept knocking. No one came. He looked back out toward the highway and the sign. Anxiety and worry and sweat were settling in. He needed help, he needed to get inside. He took a drag from his cigarette. Grabbing his phone, he used its flashlight to peer through the living room window beside the door, but the curtains were drawn. Ben had nowhere to go.

He walked to the back of the trailer. The glass of the kitchen window broke easily, and he cut himself on a sharp edge as he climbed inside. The kitchen still smelled like waffles and maple syrup from the morning, but it was empty. He checked the lights but none worked. His phone lit his way as he went through each room of the trailer, looking for Don or Linda or anyone who could flush him out. He would wake them when he found them and say, “Clean my guts.”

Both bedrooms were empty and plain. The recliners in the living room were unoccupied. Ben went to the treatment room Linda had guided him to earlier in the day, the only room he had not checked yet.
The door felt stuck but he pushed it open with a little force. He grabbed a gauze bandage from the counter and wiped his bleeding arm with it. The cut was deep, but it didn't hurt.

He sat on the stretcher and wondered where Don and Linda were. His phone vibrated in his hand, and he took the call.

“Did you get a TV?” Karen asked.

Ben didn’t say anything.

There was silence on both ends. He thought about asking if Chad was there, but he had stopped caring as soon as he shattered the window. Maybe before.

“Are you at the bar?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “I’m at the bar. I’ll be home soon.”

Ben hung up the phone and lay down on the stretcher. He looked up at the ceiling and cleaned more blood off his arm. It was starting to throb but still didn’t hurt. He needed a long shower, and looked forward to getting home to the soap and steam. His stomach felt funny, so he put his hand on his belly, feeling for where things had gone wrong.
ALETA PIPPIN | The Parting, 2013
30 x 30 inches | Oil on canvas
Collection: Michael Ethridge
Ritual for Sickness

I am ill again. Grandmother
warms milk and sugar on the stove,
pours it into a small teacup, tips
an egg yolk onto the white skin
that formed while she cracked
the shell in two. I down it all
in one hot swallow. Here, she says,
follow the river that drowns eggs
in the night. She traces a path
down my throat, my chest,
across my rib. My haggard breaths
fog the windowpane by my bed.

I imagine the yellow globe
sloshing around in my gut.

Wait for the sac to burst, she says,
to coat the lining of your stomach.

But my breaths remain jagged.
I slip into a haze, drift
from one current of blanket
to another. Still, the final step:
to change my name, confuse
the spirits who bring sickness.

Come inside this newly invented light.
So I pull on my wool socks, stagger
to the mirror, lock eyes with the girl I see. Her black hair clings to sallow skin.

*I am not who I am,* she intones.  
*I am like you: ghostly, a specter.*

Soon after, I retch the cream into the toilet bowl. The acid of curdled liquid soaks my tongue as my belly is emptied and cleansed.
Lazarus, Drugged Up

I’ve been trying to get back to sleep. I keep failing—this is no surprise. Endless swaths of white bandage litter the black floors. This morning, the kitchen sink coughed up a small heap of pale sand, speckled with the red limbs of ants slowly rebuilding their bodies into a colony. All is coming up from low places, blood draining back into marrow. I have all this love for my boy & where does he go but the wolves’ den. My chest is only precious for what it holds. The house takes off its roof, shakes out its curtains, sits by the water. I have never seen rooms as empty as these, so I put on a blindfold & now I hate how much I can hear. Every night for a month, my dead bird sang me the happy birthday song. There’s a bowl of cold milk sitting outside, for trauma, when it comes. Poor, wet, skinny kitten. I asked to live again, but not forever. I leave my bed unmade because everything here is new & that bothers me.
Three Witch Haibun

Vengeance. An arrow flies out from the gap between my teeth. Which means it came from my belly. I’m trying to say I did it to myself. Sometimes, the shame wraps itself around my throat, and I try to lie. I say my mother killed witches’ birds and fed them to us for dinner. Let me tell the truth, from the beginning. In Yorùbá, àjé pupa, the red witch, holds a knife in each hand, the only one with the power to kill. I picture her submerged in dark water, like my brain. A circling of acid, shifting poles. A kill switch in my own hand. Almost as malevolent as her is the black witch, àjé dúdú. She curses and haunts and follows. Like the eyes in my country, when I am touching the boys I love. These people terrify me. They would kill me if they could. They can’t—that is for me to do. Nothing is safe, except to say this: everything black hates everything queer. Later, I found the white witch. Àjé funfun. Protector, bearer of peace. Not God, no. Here, God is a spectator. One among many strange, luckless beings. The white witch weaves haven magic. But this is the truth of how it happened: When I was a child, I spoke as a child, gathered pebbles as a child, strung up my catapult as a child. When I was a child, I shot down the birds, I confess. After that, I put away childish things: my catapult, my songs, my protection spell. And now, they come for me.

first, the poison, red is calling for my warm blood gathering bad wind it wants to end me
until everything the heavy evil lingers in this storm that ruins my head and raises a fist then stands still as dawn
ALETA PIPPIN | Passion Infused, 2016
48 x 48 x 2 inches | Oil on canvas
Hive

*for Oyíndà*

Amid every jagged thing in the woodland, there is the clean line of a girl’s collarbone,

and the curve of her lover’s supple breasts. In the distance, the trickling of a river. These girls know wetness like history, & hiding like a second skin. A girl unlike her mother, silent. The other, her family’s upturned prayer. *But darling, imagine the shame. You are soft, you can fold yourself closed & stay locked away.* But here in the open, they are open. A woman’s body unfurls like spilling honey. Everything else is washed away.
A sheet of foil: the moon upon the ocean, 
before the ocean ever stirred, before 
the tide began to live its back and forth 
existence, before the waters snagged the night.

As a boy, I’d crumple sheets of foil 
in my fist, unfold them, each time the gleam 
more spidery. When I saw my mother cry 
at night, I wondered whose hands unfolded her.

Like a relationship, foil changes 
shape at every touch: my father’s hand, 
against my mother once, mirrored across 
a water that, once broken, stays broken.

I open up my fist to lines broken 
before the ocean ever stirred, before 
as a boy, I’d crumple sheets of foil, 
a water that, once broken, stays broken.
I won’t wait for you to be God

before loving. You can be that feral, unlovely need
that shadowed me into the woods and frightened me.
You can be half-hidden in your leaf-shadowed pelt.
You can sink in the muddiest stream.

I didn’t ask
for an angel of light to bare his perfect torso, to shed
severity all over the house. I know that scent
of suffering. I could track you a hundred miles
by all that is familiar. You’ve worn away
the stairs, and I’m still climbing.

I’m in the water.

I’m the light under the door you spoke to
on the fortieth day without miracles. I was already
listening before I had ears to listen. Even before.
ANNE DYER STUART

Playboy

I brought popcorn, not enough butter (ever the anorexic) to my brother and his friends, found them pored over *Playboy*, Madonna edition. In the pantry, Mama’s leftover birthday cake (white, chocolate frosting) hidden. One discovered it, mentioned it, and later killed himself with his father’s gun. I couldn’t get over it, *Playboy*, what it had to do with me, how I was supposed to be taken seriously. I was supposed to be taken. One morning a ripped-out page in the front yard: two women kissing strawberries off their nipples. My father told me models went to bed with empty stomachs. They learned how to live with hunger.
How Unlucky Are the Dead

The Pensacola drive-in-theater flea market that looked out over the Gulf of Mexico was one place. Books brought home from there were handpicked by my grandma Bish and uncle Jess. But most our books came from Tallahassee, Florida, in pokes from library book sales or in unexamined boxes bought at auction. Other books were dropped off, used, by “neighbors” who lived as far away as Valdosta, Georgia. There was some pride in that—folks giving us their books, even the ones decorated on the inside covers with curlicues of affections and with notes scribbled in their margins. Word was Naomi Bishop on Bread and Butter Road had more books than the state of Georgia, and folks seemed to like her for that.

True. Grandma Bish was book crazy. She used book backs to even out table legs, book jackets to insulate walls and shade windows, book pages to wrap up jelly glasses to stop their breaking. She piled books high to put up her feet. And, she liked reading. Her thrift and jelly store was the nearest thing to Pavo County, Georgia, having a library. Even though the books she’d gathered were up for sale, she was happy enough when customers sat and read for free. Many times folks filled the HERE WE HAVE IT, hands resting on old Reader’s Digest Book Club anthologies, laughing and amen-ing and swapping stories.

But, truth was, not all the best stories came straight from those books. Those with the up-close troubles came from my grandma’s deep knowledge of the folks of Pavo County, and it went along those lines with strangers too. Bish was the county’s undisputed diviner of need. She could see into you. Knew what was lacking. What comforted and inspired. So when she sold you something, anything at all, even something that seemed so simple as a used book or a glass of homemade jelly, she’d done you a good deed. She hardly ever held back with her goodness. The one thing, though, was that she didn’t let a book leave with its book jacket. And all of Pavo knew this. When a
book left the HERE WE HAVE IT, it left stripped down, shrouded in brown paper.

§

The day the New York woman came looking for Grandma Bish, a dark wind pressed down the road, jumped the culvert and side-windered toward us, lifting and reversing the garden rows until it caught up and tossed the woman against our door. As she stumbled into my grandma’s thrift and jelly store, she must have thought the store itself spun her around. Jammed full with old chairs and sofas, dry aquariums and empty cages, tables of glassware and knick-knacks, with a display case of curiosities on the faraway wall, the HERE WE HAVE IT was labyrinth-style disorganized.

“What fresh hell is this?” the woman said, reminding me of my surprise when I’d first landed in that incomprehensible mélange—not a word I knew back then—of used goods and found objects.

The New York woman, wearing a cotton print sundress with martini glasses and olives wheeling in circles, its skirt sticky from the Georgia heat, seemed otherwise ordinary and small. She had a deep voice kept modulated low. Words crackled on her tongue. We leaned in to hear, as we might to a staticky old radio, suspecting her every word might later be debated.

At first she said she was just needing to find a book to read on vacation with her husband. And Mr. Peck, the chicken farmer who lived down the road, stepped up to help. “Books everywhere,” he said with a broad gesture that took into account the piles that held the former church in place. A chorus rose from the other store regulars: “Lots of good reading … Find anything you want …”

“What kind of book you after?” asked Mr. Peck. He was the most outgoing of them all. How strangers took to him could be a little funny. Maybe they didn’t like the look of his beard, the way it unraveled over the bib of his overalls. Or maybe it was his laugh. His laugh pierced your thoughts like a thorn. “We’ve got a pile here,” he said, and heehawed the word, “fresh.”

The New York woman turned. Did her eyes stab Mr. Peck? I can’t swear it. But with her head held high, she walked wide the fresh pile of books to run a hand over the glassware without looking to see it. She fixed her gaze to the cathedral window, streaks of heat lightning penetrating the book jackets taped flat against the glass.

Outside, a hundred tiger lilies floated on four-foot stems. Raised high to heaven, their long, pale orange buds thrust back and forth like a congregation of wagging fingers. And then they commenced to rapping, rapping, rapping, banging against our window. Were the lady

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fingers waving us to come on out to the churchyard or to stay put within? Either way, admonition is the word that comes to mind.

“How lucky are the dead,” she said.

We were all knocked back by that. Mr. Peck, Ma Devereux, Augie Bone, and all us others held our breath as the New York woman nudged past. A word or two more sizzled on her tongue, but nothing we could make out. Then my grandma called from the back of the store and the woman shot a hot look in her direction. Without my being told, I went to pour a sweet tea for Grandma Bish to offer.

Just then, Aug Bone’s bloodhound started to wail in the bed of Aug’s pickup truck. That blood dog’s woeful cries wobbled across the Georgia fields, then jumped back at us between claps of thunder. This caused Bish’s cat to roll off the jelly cupboard. Thud, and he’d landed between the governor chairs and the New York woman’s feet.

“That’s it! That’s it!” the woman cried, pointing high at the cathedral window.

§

Dizzying is the word for it. Bending your ears into your shoulder bones and laddering your eyes all the way up the cathedral window and down and up again, stepping side to side, eyeballs rolling over a crazy quilt of book jackets—seeing everything and not seeing, not seeing the illustration Hazel Morse aimed a pretty finger at. For that was the name she gave herself: Hazel Morse, Mrs. Morse, born in New Jersey, and once she’d told us that much, her eyelids puffed up like blowfish under her penciled brows. It seemed her man, who sold ladies’ gloves to department stores, had set off for Birmingham and Biloxi and Gulfport and New Orleans, in no particular order, and left her waiting in a rooming house. He’d paid the rent all right and given her a book he knew she’d prize. He was banking on it to keep her waiting until he could get back for their reunion.

“I used to bite my fingernails,” she said to Bish, “but I don’t even do that anymore.”

§

By now the regulars were staring up. But the cat refused to budge, so we strained from where we stood and held a collective breath that burst, soon enough, into inspiring puffs of spittle: Agatha Christie (the world’s favorite writer), Graham Green (still alive there in England), Flannery O’Connor (who had lived with her peacocks just up the road), Mario Puzo (who lived faraway-different), J.D. Salinger (whose own children didn’t know where to look for him), and Philip K. Dick (who Bish had determined, for sure, lived in The Crack in Space). And so it
went, a repertory of authors forever bent on funneling us up and out of Pavo County, Georgia, into a tornado of colliding expectations. Flashes of stories riddled our splanchnic—a word I’d come to love—as quick as the lightning that jabbed at the window.

Yet not one of us, aside from Grandma Bish, could see the coveted book jacket and know the bleak urges it stirred in Mrs. Morse.

§

Once she’d stopped talking about herself—Mrs. Morse being a charter member of the Algonquin Round Table Society, and all that—she circled down her finger. My thought was she’d tired out her arm, but as Bish could see, there was meaning in that finger’s spiral. Next, Mrs. Morse dropped into a deep cushioned chair the color of artificial grass and pinched off a high-heeled shoe. That book jacket was rightfully hers, she said. Alan had purchased the book, and she had a right to its jacket. Then she quick-rubbed out a fit of New York tears.

“How like me to put all my eggs in one bastard,” she wept.

§

Bish signaled me to bring out the jelly and biscuits. The biscuits, cold since breakfast, were hard nuggets. Dough beaten by Uncle Jess with a hatchet on a tree stump just out the kitchen door. Cut into circles and baked. Best served with ham.

No matter that. Bish’s store was an emporium of homemade jellies that could satisfy a tongue as well as turn a mood. I took my time deciding. Which Depression glass best complemented our choices? Finally, I spooned the cherry jelly into a sugar bowl tinted the color of cobalt blue and ladled the peach preserves into an amber-tinted tureen. There was a tray, a delicate pink with air bubbles trapped deep in its glass, and I used it for the carrying.

When I offered our guest from New York a biscuit, she paid me no mind. So I blew the dust off a saucer that held the thin yellow glow of uranium green, and I handed it to her with a hard little biscuit on it. By that time, the regulars were catcalling: “Pass the biscuits! Pass the jelly!” But Bish bucked me up with a nod—so I took the time needed to spoon the jellies to the sides of her biscuit. That biscuit was for sopping the jelly.

Mrs. Morse, fixed on the window, ignored the jelly and set upon the biscuit with her red polished nails. Biscuit crumbs dropped like pebbles.

§
Before my grandma’s dark hair had salted and her old pappy, Pastor Ernest Bishop, had passed away, the store church window had been, “by the grace of God,” said Grandma Bish, “ablaze with pure heavenly light”: vivid shades of blue and jewel-like greens with grays and browns and sparkling reds, with Jesus of Nazareth embracing a bitty white lamb. As Grandma Bish said, it made a pretty picture, but she confessed it blocked her view up Bread and Butter Road and was worth more to her in trade. She’d swapped it out for clear glass and a truck load of jelly paraphernalia—her word not mine—and built herself a business selling jellies so refreshing as to turn a sour person sweet-tempered, or so peppery as to freeze a hateful tongue. Once she’d got that going, she and Uncle Jess were no longer dependent on prayers and a collection plate. She’d re-established the Bread and Butter Zion Baptist Church as the HERE WE HAVE IT, a welcoming destination on the Georgia State Tourism Map. That’s how Mrs. Morse, and Alan, had come to find us.

§

As a preacher’s kid, little Naomi Bishop surely had been filled with cautionary wisdom, for in adulthood she was a vessel. Not only able to quote from the Bible, as were most our neighbors, she had her own turns of phrase. “We all have our blind spots,” she was fond to say—and was just as fond to add, “There’s just so much our eyes can see, and we make up the rest.” This had particular meaning, both when it came to the smallness of our pronouncing judgment upon one another and to the divining of needs. As a thirteen-year-old on my first summer visit and now again in my twenties, it was the divining of needs that had my interest. How did she come to know the rest she couldn’t see? And, to the contrary, she’d advise in her practical way, “There’re times when the leaves on trees will turn up their backsides to you—to give you warning—and then the storm will clean up and blow away.” And there was hope in that. But that’s not what happened the day Mrs. Morse came looking for her book jacket. On that day, the storm fixing outside was also fixing within.

One irregular ping at a time, a smattering of drop-pings jangled the tin roof until it was set upon by sledgehammers. And not one of the regulars thought to head home. Not even Aug Bone, whose ancient blood dog, roped so as not to run off, would nearly drown in the bed of Aug’s truck. And, well, Mrs. Morse had less of a place to go than any of them, and she certainly hadn’t settled her business.

§
At the top of the window, edged off to the side, a dull brown book jacket was taped ‘twixt those with colorful illustrations and promising titles, like *The Outsiders and Others* by H.P. Lovecraft and *Tender is the Night* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. The Lovecraft jacket was a deep violet blue with silver illustration: a mash-up of five-pointed-stars, each cradling an alien creature—or the one, if you knew how to look, could be seen was a naked lady—all with a flood of stars spotting the distant sky. Fitzgerald’s jacket was reds, oranges, and greens, lush vegetation and rosy roof tops, a curve of blue water floating up, a private cove strapped to the jacket by trees. The next jab of lightning brought Mrs. Morse’s book jacket briefly to view. “There, you do see it!” she cried.

And in a blink, Lucky, the jelly store cat, leapt from Mrs. Morse’s empty high-heeled shoe and up the cathedral window. The woman’s voice had set him off. The cat had extra perception—as well as extra toes. Lots of extra toes. Twice as many as a normal cat—thirty-six toes with thirty-six claws sharp and curved as quilting needles. Lucky was a Hemingway cat who’d wandered up from the Keys, which said something right there about his determination. A wince passed among us.

“Wherever I’ve gone, including here,” coughed Mrs. Morse, “it’s been against my better judgment.”

§

Including Mrs. Morse—being of flesh and blood—characters had a right to come and go. No disagreeing that. Books piled into the HERE WE HAVE IT were carried out again. No regrets. But book jackets stayed *in memoriam*, a term Aug Bone, who was county coroner, was fond to use. He preached that even the most unlikeable of characters was meant to be remembered. Some might argue it. Bish did not.

Though not a one of us had read *all* those books that fit into those empty jackets, we possessed *la mémoire collective*, said Bish, who had been educated all the way up and through the eighth grade. Those jackets called to mind all the characters who had passed among us. How else might we recall the children in *The Five Little Peppers and How They Grew* and how their widowed mother, Mrs. Pepper, struggled to support them? Characters reminded us of who we were—or thought we were—and who we ought not to be.

So while I figured Mrs. Morse wouldn’t get what she’d confessed to want, a look up at the window occasioned new concerns.

§

Spread out, no place to go, Lucky looked like a wall ornament.
Hard to say who or what that cat was looking at. Cats’ eyes are funny that way. Even when they stare close at you, their eyes seem set to distance. So it might have been that Lucky was just eyeballing the drop instead of eyeballing Mrs. Morse.

For the longest while no one said a word, not even Mr. Peck, who was known to drop a cent or two at times he shouldn’t. Then Grandma Bish started chanting in her here kitty voice and the cat blinked back to life. He worked his toes. He worked his toes and worked his toes. Book jackets puffed in and out. He shifted his weight from one paw to another, as if thinking his way down. Lucky let out a first meow. It was a pitiful little cry from such a handsome, confident cat that had hiked his way from Florida.

Uncle Jess set off to get the ladder, but quicker than he could squeeze back, jackets came crashing. As would the cat.

§

As the storm centered itself over the jelly store steeple, Lucky tightened himself to the window frame. His tail began to jerk. Jackets rattled. His black and white spots stood on end. He bunched his shoulders. Twitched. Hissed. Spat. Spun his head like an owl. Stared up at the ceiling. Cussed. Spun his head down at us. Sucked out all our breath. Yanked hard his toes. Yeowled. Bunched and yanked hard again. One fat paw flew loose. Lucky flopped sideways, panting. Hung half-rolled over, the jelly store cat beat his body against the window glass and cried like a baby.

Despite all claims that Lucky’s extrasensory perceptions had got him to the HERE WE HAVE IT, seemed he’d lost his foresight. He’d put himself in this pickle and didn’t even know that Uncle Jess was fetching the ladder.

With nothing for us to do, save shut our ears and say our prayers, Grandma Bish, Mrs. Morse, Ma Devereaux, Mr. Peck, Aug Bone, and me—we all watched as Fate exacted her lesson.

Then Ma Devereaux said in a voice both irritated and sad, “What’s he trying to do? Kill himself?”

But then Aug Bone, who had authority when it came to dying, calmed us down, saying not to worry. “Even the usual cat has nine lives.”

So how does a cat fall?

Folks who’ve seen a cat fly out the loft of a burning barn will tell you a cat always lands on its feet. But what happens when a cat backslides from church? The hip cat will head straight towards Hell—nose dive, quick twist its bottom, and kick its back legs up to its belly.
Otherwise that cat will somersault and not stop somersaulting until something gets in his way.

When Lucky tumbled tail-first, book jackets shook off the big window like apples off a tree. Then, crack! and Lucky’s somersault was broke by the checker table. Checkers bounced off and rolled about the store. Lucky bumped off the table, thunked his head on an ugly jug, and disappeared.

Anguish showed all-around. Even on Uncle Jess. Straightaway, he went to crawling, poking between the piles of books and boxes, under sofas stacked three deep, until he’d plucked up all the checkers. Finally, he grabbed hold of Lucky’s fat paws and dragged him out. A book jacket had ruffled itself to his claws.

“Flapper verse,” muttered Grandma Bish before pointing the toes of the unconscious cat at Mrs. Morse. “This what you was after?”

Disconsolate crackling came from the woman’s lips.

Soon as we’d picked his claws clean, Lucky opened his eyes. “Lucky enough,” Ma Devereaux said; whereupon, Lucky went to napping in Mrs. Morse’s lap. As the cat snored, lightning creased the darkened corners of the store, the wind howled like a drowning dog, and rain splintered the panes of window glass. And Bish set to sorting the book jacket straight.

It wasn’t long before she said she saw the big picture and asked us to Scotch it together: A bold 25¢ at the jacket’s top left was opposite a pale yellow line at the jacket’s top right—a loop that somehow looked a lot like a noose. The tail of that noose curled down the book’s cover, slipped under the book title, then dropped to the book author’s name.

Enough
Rope
by Dorothy Parker

By now the sound of lady fingers was only a faint, persistent thud, a drip on the splintered panes of glass. A gentle tap on the shoulder. True. A book didn’t leave with its jacket. But what about a book that had already left and the one to read it came storming back for its jacket?

As Grandma Bish and Mrs. Morse contemplated each other in silence, we were left to stare at the book jacket with its dire implications and to wonder what is left to la mémoire after death. Then Bish said, “I don’t know if there are books in Eternity, but it’d be mighty unlucky to go where there are no troubles to talk about.” That’s when we knew, for sure, no matter what, that the jacket, which had been ripped to shreds and put together again, was on its way back.
up that window. How better to recollect Mrs. Morse, the big blonde from New York who was small in stature and had short mousey brown hair and a gin bottle of man trouble?

§

A decade before Mrs. Morse dropped in to stake her claim, I’d spent my first summer on Bread and Butter Road reading and falling in love. First with the blue birds that lived in the fence post boxes, then with the moths that fluttered through the store and then the bees in the honey trunk, and then-and-forever with the polysyllabic words that tumbled across book pages with revelations tangled in their meanings. All that and then Heathcliff. And once I’d set him aside, a line of others followed.

Uncle Jess carried pokes of used books into the thrift and jelly each week. There were the books about English lords and ne’er-do-wells, sharecroppers and murderers, presidents and saints. Old favorites, like the book about Mrs. Pepper and her orphaned children, Ben, Polly, Joel, Davie, and Phronsie. I counted six copies. And crazy books, like Animal Farm and Ten Thousand Leagues Under the Sea. There was even a book about a spider named Charlotte. And some kinds of books surely begged to be carried out in brown wrappers. So it was only a little wrongheaded what the regulars had pressed the New York woman to believe: that she’d get what she was after.

§

At the close of that troubled afternoon of biscuit eating and jacket patching, Aug Bone found his half-drowned dog and carried him inside for Bish to bring back to life and offered the New York woman a ride in his truck: first to her rooming house and then to the Tallahassee train station. At the rooming house, she left a goodbye note for Alan and stuffed her belongings into the large sweet grass basket she’d bought at our store. Inside that basket, she’d find a glass of jalapeno pepper jelly and a book by Erica Jong. Deeper in, sleeping comfortably, a cat was resting up for a new life. Lucky was on his way to New York.

As for Grandma Bish and how she knew what the Big Blonde needed, I’d never know for sure. That knowledge, she explained, had come to her like a huge thunderclap in a soft rain.
Claire Unmoored

Claire is shopping for a dress to wear to her mother's funeral when she realizes she has lost her way. Claire’s mother is not dead, nor is she expected imminently to die—which is not to say she is necessarily well, Claire reminds herself, but it is not some certain knowledge of her mother’s ill health that has brought her here. This shopping for her mother’s funeral is a ritual Claire has observed with regularity since she was barely out of her teens. It is a kind of creative visualization, or is it sympathetic magic, perhaps? She once knew the exact meaning of these terms, could speak with wry, offhanded erudition about the meaning of culture and the culture of meaning, just as she once swam in a language the only remnant of which is the phrase repeating endlessly in her mind: *Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*, as she once moved in the golden light of a Florentine evening with the black-haired boy’s eyes on her and later his hands. Now sitting in the fitting room in jeans and bra, hugging her arms in the fluorescent chill, she does not know how she has found herself on this *cammin* that has lost her in the dark forests of her mind.

It is Fridays that have undone her, she thinks. Unmoored from the need to pick Connor up from school, faced with the long weekend of his absence while his father curries favor with a diet of pizza and movies, inbox empty and calls unreturned, each of the marketing and branding proposals she’s spent days preparing in hope and desperation chased one by one down its final rat-hole, clients unerringly detecting the stench of failure in the very documents she delivers—it was on Fridays she first began to celebrate surviving until lunch with a glass of wine, then some months later to top off her morning coffee with bourbon, and now three o’clock in the afternoon finds her more often than not in yoga clothes and running shoes, travel mug in hand, clinging to the dimpled metal pole of the 3 MIN
PICKUP ZONE sign in front of Connor’s school, grimacing in a boozy parody of friendliness at the parents who flow past her.

She was there, only yesterday—mug drained, forgotten, and about to be left behind on the pavement at her feet, unconsciously hunched and gazing enthralled at the way shadows slid across the opaque sheen of glare on the procession of SUVs beside her—when she found herself staring through an open window into a pair of eyes only a few feet away. The face, a taut study in planes and colors, sailed over a pair of tidy, round breasts: here in the fitting room, hugging her own arms, her own doughy chest, Claire recalls the curve of the farther breast, visible through a gap between the buttons of a white dress shirt, settled self-satisfiedly in its cup of lace. This was Jessica, the mother of a boy who was in Connor’s kindergarten class but is now a year behind, and Claire cannot look at her without imagining Jessica’s hands undressing her.

Claire is not certain that she recalls what Jessica said. Perhaps it was “See you tomorrow night?” Perhaps it was nothing. She played the (possibly imagined) words over in her mind as she walked Connor home—she does not drive when she has been drinking. This is one of the things that reminds her she is a good mother. And she is a good mother. She is patient, she is cautious, she fixes mouse-eared pancakes and after-school snacks, and since her son began to eat solid food she has fed herself on his leftovers, rescuing uneaten blueberries and cubes of cheese, biting the last crimson-and-white fragment of a strawberry away from the leaves, sneaking the rejected bit of mayonnaise-smeared turkey into her mouth with studied, deniable nonchalance.

She would be embarrassed to be caught at this, eating scraps, if anyone were watching; it is a shade of her own mother, a specter with sauce on her fingers, lurking in the kitchen with the guests’ ruined plates. But no one is watching. From the time when Connor was a tiny howling bundle, through babyhood, toddlerhood; through the divorce, when friends reconstructed their loyalties and her already circumscribed world closed in on itself; and in the years since, as work became scarce, the engine that turns her world has slowed, and her focal distance has gradually contracted, first to her son and finally no farther than the compass of her own body. It is this that she realizes in the ringing silence of the fitting room: she has lost her way.

It is Friday, and a phone call with her mother has sent her in a fugue to try on tailored black dresses, black pencil skirts in fine wool, black silk blouses to be spotted with the tears of her filial grief. Claire does not know, has never known, how to reply to her mother’s endless questions. This is because they are not questions, but rather the last,
unanswerable dispatches from a far-distant universe that swallowed itself millennia before. Her mother lives alone, except for a flatulent cat, and as Claire listened she imagined her mother already passed on, desiccating peacefully in the afternoon sun. When Claire was in high school, she would picture her mother dead, picture her own stoicism as she adjusted bravely to foster care, as she rose above her grief to make the most of her life. Once in college, the logistics of orphanhood simplified, and her visions began to center around the funeral: black leather jeans, black stilettos, a filmy, tailored black shirt that gapped between the buttons to show glimpses of curved flesh, just as Jessica’s crisp white cotton did.

Huddled on the hard little bench, Claire closes her eyes and clutches her body, seeking an anchor in her own solidity, her inescapable presence. Though she knows her body is, in a technical sense, barren—it was the strain of infertility, then the bureaucracy of adoption, that broke her marriage, she believes—she has always felt it as fecund: a sprawling, fleshy, stinking swamp, a morass of life. She thinks now of Jessica, of the geometrical precision of Jessica’s ass, so unlike her own. She recalls encounters at family nights and classroom parties, thrown into blushing confusion by the knowing, assessing curve of Jessica’s mouth. She imagines Jessica’s hands—strong and bony, nails blood red, skin just beginning to show the crêpe-iness of age—kneading great, voluptuous handfuls of thigh and breast. It is impossible, she knows. Yet, there was the electric sense of Jessica’s eyes on her—certainly not for the first time—and there were the words: “See you tomorrow night.”

The thought drives her from the fitting room to look for a particular dress on the rack—a jagged print, for once, not black, with a wrap top, the one that she remembers pushing aside a moment ago. She’d bought her ticket for the school auction a month ago, with no intention of going, meaning the price of her uneaten dinner and undrunk wine as her donation. But now, as she separates the draped cloth, searching, she sees the path ahead, climbing from the dark forest into the sunlight: she will go, she will be lovely and charming, she will invite husbandless Jessica for a drink afterwards. She finds the dress, lifts the hanger, lets the silky fabric slide over her hand. She knows that it will be perfect.

There is a sharp intake of breath behind her. She turns to see a clerk, arms folded, face tight.

“Let me help you with that,” the clerk says. But she is angry; she does not reach to take the dress. Claire, following the clerk’s eyes, looks down. The pallid flesh of her breasts pushes up in rolls, spilling over the top of her bra. She has forgotten to put her blouse back on.
She clutches handfuls of fabric, ears ringing, and retreats. In the fitting room, she does not try the dress on. She buttons and zips herself back into her clothes and fights a wave of embarrassment that clenches her stomach and buckles her knees. Then she gathers herself as best she can and walks with exaggerated care to the register. She shoves the dress and her credit card at the clerk, the same clerk, face still lined with what Claire can only assume is disgust.

Outside, on the downtown sidewalk, she checks the time. No need, on a Friday, to pick Connor up from school; his father will do that. But then they will come to Claire’s house to pick up the things that Connor needs for the weekend. On the bus, she leans her cheek against the cold glass. Unable to find the travel mug that morning, she hasn’t had a drink since home, and she is rapidly coming back to herself. She will brush her teeth. She will help Connor pack when he arrives, jeans and underpants and his iPad, and she will kiss him goodbye. She will chat with Connor’s father. Then they will leave, and she will get ready.

There will be wine at the auction, Claire knows; once Connor is seen off and she is showered and dressed, she limits herself to just one glass of Chardonnay, which she drinks standing in the kitchen in stocking feet. In the mirror in the hall, she admires the flush of anticipation in her cheeks. The dress is as perfect as she knew it would be. She walks the few blocks to the school in the cool, clear dusk. The horizon is streaked with violet and lemon, silhouetting angular rooftops, swooping power lines, a startling flight of swifts.

Claire edges through the chatting groups on the school steps and in the hallways, all smiles and greetings. She struggles to put names to faces without the prompt of accompanying children, but she knows she is not the only one; there is enough awkwardness around her to put her at ease. At a folding table outside the gym doors she collects her name tag and her table assignment from a woman she vaguely recognizes. At the door to the equipment room, filled with rolling racks and pressed into service as a coat-check, she surrenders her wrap to a pair of coltish eighth-graders in party dresses and unaccustomed makeup.

At the table, the conversation turns to prom memories—she overheard the same subject more than once as she picked her way across the room; the decorated gym makes the comparison unavoidable. These couples all have children in Connor’s class, and they are all much of the same age, so the remembered details of music and hairstyles resonate around the table, especially once the first bottle of wine is poured. The second bottle is a Chianti, and Claire finds herself telling a story of her time in Florence. It is a good one—missed trains and duplicitous cab drivers, an excursion salvaged by the
kindness of strangers and minor theft—and she knows that she is
telling it well. She feels herself glittering under their attention as they
gasp and laugh at all the right places, and when it is done, and the
conversation has shifted to the other side of the table, she settles back,
thinking of the black-haired boy. She leaves her plate almost
untouched. When she stands to go to the bathroom, they are
strategizing over the dessert dash, debating the relative merits of flan
and German chocolate, bonded in conviviality.

The hall is empty now, except for the eighth-graders at the coat-
check table, heads down over their phones; she hears the thunk of a
microphone being switched on as the gym door swings shut behind
her. The faculty bathrooms that parents are supposed to use are down
the hall, around the corner. The sound of Claire’s steps is strangely flat
as she passes closed doors scarred by long use, offices and classrooms
dark behind wire-webbed glass. It is the sound not of proms, but of
middle-school dances, and she blinks back the memory of a too-
childish dress, the astonishing firmness of a hand on her breast. She
can hear the muffled voice of the auctioneer, a sprinkle of laughter. As
she reaches the bathroom, the door opens, and with a feeling like her
heart has been dunked in ice water, she realizes that it is Jessica.

“Hi, Claire,” says Jessica, that smile, “having a good time?” and
there is no doubt that this is the moment. Before she can think she is
talking. Later, she will not be able to recall what she said; Have a drink
sometime? figures in it somewhere, and the part of herself that
watches is amazed she’s speaking fluently, without stumbling, but
perhaps too fast, and she is not sure she has actually spoken all of the
words she means to say; so to cover her uncertainty she meets
Jessica’s eyes with all the confidence she can muster, and she smiles.

Somehow, it works. A moment becomes a conversation. Jessica
steps closer, close enough that Claire realizes that Jessica is taller, that
she must look up, just a bit, close enough that she fights a moment of
fear. Her eyes focus on Jessica’s upper lip and she marvels at the
intricate topology of it. She murmurs and flirts and thinks she cannot
recall the last time she noticed someone’s upper lip, with all its
intimate flares and concavities, so different from the voluptuous
fullness of the lower. Then Jessica puts her head to one side, seeming
to consider, and suddenly Claire has been taken by the hand, pulled
off-balance, and they are in the bathroom. It is dark, the heavy wooden
door is closed and locked, and their bodies are pressed together.

In Italy, she thrashed and tangled with the black-haired boy in a
narrow bed in someone’s student apartment, the scuffling sounds
from her roommate and another boy on the couch drifting through the
half-open door of the bedroom and mingling with their own. There
was the unfamiliar taste of a joint in her mouth; the weed gave a jumbled clarity to her sensations, and desire seemed to fill her body to overflowing. There is none of that here. She finds the cold porcelain sink behind her, holds her breath, and grinds desperately against Jessica’s hip as they kiss. Then Jessica is pushing down on her shoulders, and Claire obediently kneels. She slides her hands up Jessica’s thighs, pushes up her skirt, and buries her face in Jessica’s crotch. Jessica laughs, a quiet, cold sound. Claire chooses to take it as encouragement, fumbles a moment, and pulls Jessica’s panties down. She presses her face into Jessica’s crotch again, neck bent awkwardly, seeking a better angle. She does not know if she is doing it right. She feels a hair stuck under the side of her tongue.

Then Jessica is pulling away from her. Claire hears clothing being rearranged and—finally—feels desire as her heightened senses search the blackness. There is the click of the lock turning, and Jessica is silhouetted in a column of light as she slips out the door. She looks both ways, then pauses.

“Nobody will believe you if you tell them about this,” Jessica says. Her voice is calm, reasonable. “They all know you’re a drunk.” Then the door is closed again, and Jessica’s even steps recede down the hall, accompanied by a distant round of applause.

Claire moves to the door, still on her knees, and locks it. She does not cry. She stands, fumbles for the light switch. In the mirror, the top of her dress is askew, her bra showing. She remembers Jessica’s hand pulling the cloth aside, but cannot place it in the sequence of events. Her cheeks are burning hot. She hears her mother’s voice in her memory, boring into shamed teenage silences, tearing out her secrets and dragging joy through the dirt. She sits on the toilet and pisses. She struggles to stand again under the sudden weight of her body.

In the raffle that ends the evening, Claire matches numbers with stinging eyes to find that she has won a prize. She passes Jessica’s table as she walks forward through perfunctory applause to receive it. Jessica is deep in conversation with the woman next to her. She claps; she does not look at Claire. The prize is a quilt, the cover pieced of squares painted with astronomical phenomena as conceived by kindergartners: grinning suns and rainbows, sausage-y crescent moons. The back is a deep midnight blue dotted with stars, and as she walks home later, quilt wrapped around her against the chill evening and the first drops of rain, she will notice that someone has used silver thread to embroider a tiny constellation in one corner, and she will bow her head and let the pole star lead her home.
Electric Snakes #5

Home, whatever home was. I cannot go there. Most boyhood friends are dead, desiccated by the blood-drying wind. The high desert wind. I hear them moaning, moaning my name & things I dare not speak aloud. I thought once I slouched past sixty-five, I’d be free to say anything. Any fucking thing I wanted to. But that’s not the way it’s come to be. Today, I shot an arrow into my foot. I said, “Sarah, you’re everything I could ask for. But I’m too ancient to ask.” Flabbergasted & hurt, Sarah booked. Boot-scooted out of my feeble life. My words saved her from my disintegrating self. She is free, free & not just another sordid tale spun by a flaccid Ulysses.
ALETA PIPPIN | Romantic Walk, 2009
5 x 5 x 2 inches | Oil on panel
Private collection
A Reasonable Nightmare

Underneath the piñon pine, 
a soft bed of fragrant needles. 
Down in the valley, a crystal 
clear creek with fat rainbows waiting to jump in a skillet. 
No wolves or bears here & no people, except for one & she is misty & incredibly pretty, dressed as she was while she slept in her coffin. 
Her eyes are milky & her once-red lips are withered. 
I tell her I am not afraid. 
“Let me join you,” I say & she shakes her head No. 
I awaken afraid & shivering in my unreasonable bed in my unreasonable nation. Tonight I will beg her again.
Because the Air Is Lavender and Wine

I know I’m not the first woman to love
on this land: buckshot of creek, slipstone orchard
in shade and clay. Not the first
to love the way sparrows tumble in each other’s
downy feathers or the taste of green garlic, crab apples.
How plants so willingly give fruit.

A red-faced fox showed himself this evening and I was alone
with the thought of what I might possess over creatures
who claw lines on the backs of birds. I know

I’m still nothing here, not the first to lay my naked chest
against yours, to trace your cottonwood skin. The way
you form clouds with your mouth when you speak

and everything you touch turns to silt and sugar peas. When you touch me I’m fields of rye,
tensed before rain. The last time I saw you

in the shower, you let me mouth the salt drips
on your lower back and I saw a distant woman ringing
a hen’s neck, pricking her finger

on wild blackberry. All the women who loved on this side
of the creek have seen waters wash the bank away.
Tender as a branch gracing the forehead, they watch

me in the shoulder of these woods. When you sleep curving
to me like a scythe, one’s in the kitchen licking jelly from her apron.
Another, young, couches in the V of a mimosa,

wrapped arms’ length in rain and sweat. Woodsmoke,
lavender, wine: smells of you present as the air in summer.
I’ve tried to bottle them in jars. Another
woman, once in the loamy eye of a storm with wind kicking up her dress, made a marking on the hill in sand. The before-women and their shadows: bobwhite quails diving over me.

Let loose, they scatter like seeds: tulsi, tobacco, ginger, larkspur, anything with a feel too dangerous to place a mouth around. Then break, like wildfire, through the surface of soil.
ALETA PIPPIN | Harvesting the Universe, 2017
18 x 54 x 2 inches | Acrylic on panel
Collection: Ray Naeini
Onset

I started hating Halloween in early adolescence, my body on the brink of becoming unfamiliar to me, the days more dark than light. A girl from a nearby school had gone missing, but I still trick-or-treated with friends. Walking through our neighborhood, I realized each door we approached opened to people capable of anything. Her body laid for months in a ditch until a jogger noticed blonde hair among the weeds. A police officer visited our class soon after and urged us to fight back at the site of an attack. If we were taken to a secondary location, odds are we wouldn’t come home alive. At camp the following summer, we sat around a bonfire and listened to stories about the cannibal serial killer who’d grown up a few miles away and just been arrested. He’d preyed on boys and young men, one of whom, though drugged, escaped only to have the police mistakenly release him to the custody of the killer. Returning to our cabin, I found my training bra hanging from the slats of the upper bunk so that the small, empty cups dangled above my pillow, and I cried. In the fall, while my friends watched a horror movie, I watched a middle-aged man leer at a college student a row ahead of him, then trail her out of the theater. Later that night, I curled up on my bedroom floor, shaking, not understanding I was having my first panic attack. I could think of nothing but saving her. I could not save her. I didn’t even know who she was, or where. Last I’d seen, she was unchaining her bike. It was dusk. Windy. She wore a coat, but I’d forgotten the color.
JOSALYN Knapic

Fawns

Last fall, fawns dropped dead all over Colorado. It’s common for a fawn to die before winter. But when my husband Bill came home for supper, he told me of farmers finding healthy fawns scattered dead along their property. No bite marks, no scratches. No blood. Just decided to lie down and die.

The wildlife department scoured thickets for tagged doe they kept track of every season. But fawns, small and camouflaged, were hard to see. Bill hadn’t sighted any dead in our fields but knew of another farm nearby miles off that had three turn up in one week.

Now early spring rain stroked the porch, lit by gray and violet clouds. It would be daylight soon. Wooden wind chimes carried hollow tones through the air. Hands in his pockets near our porch steps, Bill stayed where he was. He wore his soft-shell jacket and jeans stained with dirt from yesterday’s work.

“Did they ever find out about those deer?” I asked.

A rocking chair next to him began to rock endlessly, absently, but he didn’t stop it. He didn’t do anything but let the wind whip open his jacket. I wrapped my bathrobe tighter around my body. I leaned my head on the screen door’s frame.

“What deer?” Bill paused and then glanced at me, the wrinkles around his mouth more prominent. “You mean the fawns last year?”

Fractured mountain peaks jutted up behind a solitary barn, their white-tipped edges hidden by subtle darkness.

“Disease, they think,” he finally said.

I nodded, looked at the rocking chair, still moving back and forth. “I tried to save one. I didn’t know it was already dead.”

“You saw one here?” He stared at me intently now. I looked at his green eyes, same as mine, but brighter.

I pulled on my bathrobe sleeves, careful not to catch the gauze Bill had taped to my wrists the night before.
I said, “I was walking out past the coop, saw something speckled white. I found it hunched between two fence posts. I ran to the house, grabbed milk and a sheet and came back. You were gone. Its eyes. They were covered with a white film. The fawn didn’t move when I reached out to touch its leg.”

Bill let out a sigh. “It’s about knowing what you can and can’t do for each other,” he said.

Light was breaking.

I continued, “I left it there. Was thinking about going back and burying it, doing something for it, but didn’t.”

Bill leaned forward, took his hands out of his pockets, and placed one hand on the peeling porch railing.

“Beth,” he said, slightly turned toward me, slightly toward the land. “Did you really want to die?”

“Couldn’t,” I said.

Bill didn’t move.

“What?” he said.

The earth smelled heavy.

“Tell me I wasn’t wrong,” I said.

He didn’t say anything.

I was colder than I was before. I opened the screen door and walked inside.
ALETA PIPPIN | The Journey, 2017
54 x 18 x 2 inches | Oil on panel
JANNA MORETTI

The Three of Us

Lila told me that she was going to kill herself, and because she was my sister and because I loved her more than everyone else back then, I was distraught. I was seven years old. Lila was fifteen, and she wore her hair with big bangs swept up and to the right. She loved Guns-n-Roses, so I loved Guns-n-Roses. “I need you to promise not to tell Mom,” she said. “Or Eric. He might slip up and tell by accident.” Our brother, Eric, was only four.

Lila wanted to kill herself because of the fight she and Mom had just had downstairs when I was sitting at the kitchen table putting together a Mickey Mouse puzzle: Minnie Mouse leaned out of a castle window, and Mickey knelt below, his hands pressed to his heart. The piece with Mickey’s face was missing.

The fight had started like this: After Lila tucked Eric into bed, she came downstairs and said to Mom, who was sitting in the living room marking things off of her daily list, “Going out.”

Mom was in action-mode. She had just gotten home from working a double at her telemarketing job, and she hadn’t taken her insulin shot yet. Mom capped her pen and set it onto the coffee table, then straightened her back. She slit her eyes and said to Lila, “You’re doing what?”

Lila said, “I told some friends that I’d meet up with them tonight. Is that okay?” Her eyes were shadowed and lined in blue and black. She had high streaks of pink blush on her cheeks.

The exchange between Mom and Lila turned into something louder and more potent, and then, as was characteristic, Mom lost her temper. She pushed Lila onto the couch. Then she jumped on top of Lila and punched and slapped and pulled and scratched and punched and punched. And punched. Lila threw her hands in front of her face to cover herself, and in the tumult of solid body mass hitting solid
body mass, her shrieks were overwhelmed by my mother’s use of the word *fuck*.

I sat there looking at the puzzle, biting my nails. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t want Lila to get hit, but I didn’t want to get hit either. I cried. I said, “Mom please stop.” Then I shouted, “Mom, stop hitting her!” But she didn’t stop. I peeled a piece of skin off my lips and tasted that I had ripped the skin too deep—the blood on the end of my tongue, warm copper. It didn’t hurt.

The least I could do for Lila was keep the secret. She and I were in her room after the fight. Lila’s cheeks were black from the running mascara. Her upper lip was swollen and jutting out over her teeth. She said, “I’m gonna kill myself tonight,” and her words sounded like they came from a different person’s mouth. Heavy metal was on the radio in the background. The headphones cord fell in tangles from speaker to floor. On the walls were black band posters with jagged white lettering.

Lila sat on the floor, face to knees, knees to chest, arms wrapped around them, rocking. I bent down, and I hugged my sister; my hands could not reach around her back to touch. She smelled like Aqua Net hairspray—a chemical flower.

“But I’ll miss you,” I said to her, and she inhaled, and the breath was loud, and it was wet. In a higher voice than usual, she said, “I know, but I just can’t take this anymore.” She coiled deeper into herself with each shoulder-jerking weep. Then she said, “Don’t worry—you’re gonna be okay.”

I believed that this was the last time I’d be with my sister. In that moment, I thought of the day I had walked to the deep end of the pool at the trailer park our dad had moved to. My feet went from heels to toes to jumping toes to kicking underneath my body, my face bobbing for air before I figured out that I had to kick even harder. I stayed with Lila, hugging her. Around the rocking ball of my sister, one of my hands found the other on her back and they held, me crouched around something too big to understand.

Mom wasn’t always so mean to Lila. She still called her Lila Lilac, and she put more food on her plate because she was the oldest. Mom always said, “Lila’s my sweet kid.”

“I won’t tell Mom,” I said, and I meant it. I believed Lila knew what was best in that situation—that there were worse things than dying. And I knew, even at the age of seven, that I wanted to be the type of person who did the things I said I was going to do.

When I went into the bedroom that my brother and I shared, Eric appeared to be asleep in his bed. I said, “You sleeping?”

He said, “Yeah.”
I picked up my blanket with the yellow daisies on it and wiped my face, not wanting him to know that I had been crying. He said, “What's wrong?” I said, “Nothing.” “Wanna play?” he asked.

I sat on my bed, and he sat up in his bed. He took his Snuggle bear and shot him from a pretend cannon. The bear sailed across the room, and I caught him. Eric said, “I don’t like it when Mommy hits Lila.” I said “Me neither.”

I wrapped the bear’s own arms around its throat and made a choking noise, then threw the bear back to him. Eric laughed. He always laughed at the things I did to the Snuggle bear.

After Eric fell asleep, I lay awake listening to the sounds in the house that night. The cat was on my feet, kneading its claws, piercing through the blanket. I didn’t hear anything from Lila’s room, but I didn’t think she was going to do it until Mom was in bed. I watched headlights arc down my bedroom wall, and after I heard the creak from the third stair, I knew Mom was going to bed. It would be soon.

I listened for it, not knowing if the sound of death would be quiet like that summer afternoon when Eric napped and I got to color without sharing the crayons and a fly buzzed itself into a window, or maybe the sound would be thunderous like heartbeats felt in the throat, like the time that me and Lila and Eric were under a blanket, and I could hear Mom begging Dad not to do it, not to shoot. My heart beat like a child’s who doesn’t know if her father has a gun pointed at her mom or at himself, or worse. Did Dad point the gun at the three of us under that blanket? I didn’t know if death would sound like rage and Mom—like having a belt buckle swinging at my face and me moving away in time, but the belt swinging faster and harder the next time to make up for that missed swing and the sting of it hitting my face doing something to blend smell and taste and hearing into something that burned. Would I hear my sister die? Would she gasp? Would she sound like Mom did when Dad shoved the soil from the broken potted-plant into her mouth? A stuffed choking hack—thin threads of wind needling through the dirt until she poked her tongue through her packed mouth to say, “Fuck you, you fucking bastard,” as he hovered above her, wedging the top of the kitchen chair onto her throat and pressing down with his knees bent sharp, like an agile cat. The next day, the whites of my mother’s eyes were stained vessel-burst red.

I wondered if Lila would be in pain and cry out for help. I wanted to be awake in case she needed me.
In the morning, I woke up and I heard my mom crying, and I thought that Lila was dead. I jumped up and ran over to Eric and shook him.

I said, “I think Lila’s dead.”
He said, “What do you mean?”

We ran to Lila’s room, but the lights were off and she wasn’t in there. The bathroom rug and mirror and Lila’s toothbrush were still dry. I leaned at the top of the stairs and listened to the sounds below. Eric stood behind me and tugged at my nightshirt. The cat swiveled through my legs. Eric pushed his face onto my arm.

He said, “I don’t want to go down there.”
I put my finger over my lips and said, “Shh.”

I couldn’t hear anyone talking, just Mom crying. It sounded muffled. I thought maybe Mom was crying over Lila’s body, hugging her, feeling bad for making her kill herself. I wondered if Lila’s body would be cold. Or maybe the ambulance had already left with her, and Mom was crying into a pillow. Maybe Lila was at the hospital being brought back to life. I thought if I could see Lila again, I would hold her tighter and longer, if only. I started to cry, at first for Lila and then for myself. I was scared that Mom knew that I knew Lila was going to kill herself and I didn’t say anything.

Eric saw that I was crying, so he started crying. He said, “No, don’t,” when I stepped down the first stair. I held his hand, and we walked down together.

I heard Mom saying something in a shaky voice. In the living room, there was a cloud of cigarette smoke, and the blinds were closed. There she was, my mother standing, her back to us. She wore a shoulder-padded floral blazer, a starched skirt at mid-calf. We walked over to her. My mother’s hands cradled Lila’s face, alive. Her upper lip stuck out even farther than the night before, her left eye swollen shut. I ran over to them, and I hugged Lila. Eric held on to Lila’s leg.

My mom said, “I’m so sorry kids. I’m so sorry,” and wrapped her arms around the three of us, our family core, molten.

Mom stepped away and lit a cigarette, but we didn’t want to let go of Lila. Mom said, “I made some breakfast for us.”

The quiet shifted to something more normal, then Eric said, “Toast,” reached for a slice from the plate in the center of the table, and slid into his chair. We sat down, and Mom scraped eggs onto our plates and then split the toast between us, leaving one last piece on the plate in the center. Mom drank coffee and smoked.

She said, “I’m gonna be better for you kids. That’ll never happen again.”
Lila’s head bobbed. She believed Mom, or maybe she just wanted to believe her, or at least she was pretending. I sat there, mashing the eggs to the roof of my mouth with my tongue.

When it was clear Mom had finished eating, Lila asked if she wanted that last piece of toast, and Mom said, “No, you take it, Lila Lilac.”

Eric said, “Aw man, I wanted it.”

Lila said, “Thank you,” and reached across the table for the toast, but as her lovely white arm, gouged and scratched in trails of dried blood, as her hand, the nails polished silver—reached to the center of the table, I stuck out my hand and stole the toast for myself, before my sister even had the chance.
Let It Shine on Me

sings Blind Willie Johnson, a man who lived his last week in a burned-out house, who made his bed in the ashes,

& as he swings from faux-bass guttural of let your light to a slow clear lifted tenor shine with seven seconds left I ask him how he slept that week, just last night I spilled sleep meds on my grandmother’s obit.

What does forty years of blindness & dying of malaria do to a faith that sang My Lord He done just what he said—heal the sick & raise the dead?

The needle skips to God Don’t Never Change but I’ve always believed prayer moves Him, it must.

I’ve always hoped for a God generous enough to be wounded by this world, by our segregated churches, our segregated dead.

Sang & preached in the streets to strangers you couldn’t see. But no healing here. No grave—lost to the years. At the end, or just after

the end, how did you leave? Just close your eyes.

Or did the air suddenly smell of rain & myrrh, as someone led you by the hand from the roofless dwelling you made of defiance & cinders through the streets of sleep

to a house with many rooms,
a vase full of Texas wildflowers,
little lighthouse,
    shining in one?
Silence

*Milczenie* is the Polish word for silence that couldn't be translated—
not just silence, but not talking,
keeping quiet—
like the other end
of the disconnected rotary phone
in Japan, in a lone phone booth

on top of a hill, outside a cemetery—
or a blue begging bowl held up
to your ear.
As when the mourning doves go still
when I approach. Or how the dog
doesn't move while I wash his each & every paw,
then his belly, the pus
the vet can't explain matted in the winter fur.

Suds in the grass,
& fallen apple petals, the size of beads
on rosaries recovered in the Texas desert,

Galilee to Golgotha

in a heartbeat, where
are the fingers that counted prayers across
the border, across the years? Always there
& we never see them.
And so every road is an Emmaus road.

I talk so much. How often mercy
seems so far away it's almost
starlight. I've Hikmet on this phone right now

saying we must feel this sorrow
for the world must be loved this much

if you're going to say I lived
& again I don’t know what to say,  
I’m a word halfway 
migrated to another language, 

a guitar’s shadow,  
a hollow bone in red dirt, 

I’m footprints left in the Rio Grande.
WILLIAM BREWER

Pilgrims

It was the summer I knew the names of everyone that died—

the summer I worked for the monument maker,

hand-detailing clouds and dejected angels

onto headstones and memorial benches.

I was paid extra to forge the logo

for a premium brand of granite called “Rock of Ages”

onto the side of each piece, which the FBI later explained

had allowed my bosses to scam people for thousands of dollars,

and when an agent described to me where in New England

the stone was supposedly quarried, I suddenly remembered

that my father had taken me hiking there as a boy,

and how I’d wandered off, gotten lost, and in a fever

stumbled into a thicket where there stood,

in a shaft of gray light, one of my ancestors

kneeling in the rotted leaves—how he held

his musket like a shepherd’s crook,

placed his felt hat by his side with care, then lowered

his head to the dead deer before him

and prayed. The corners of his puritan collar
curling in the breeze like tongues.

The agent could sense the memory

cracking awake in me—a shuffling of the feet,

staring off at nothing—but I didn’t share it with them,

just as I didn’t with my father after we were reunited,

since I knew he’d only say something like

*how could you know why he lowered his head,*

before walking off, shaking his own.
MARISSA COON ROSE

Touring the White Trash Yards of the Rust Belt

He says: Ain't what they say it is,
is it: no tractor tire brimming with top soil
and nasturtium, no rebel flag, one gazing ball
without a pedestal—ring-less mood stone, heart

without measure. He says: see the angel garden?
Crop-haired dolls and one ceramic Holy Virgin rescued
from a red-letter endcap at the big-box;
heaven-sent crew encircling the paint-stirrer cross

and a faded photo of the dead. Bronze tin stars
nailed to a rental's clapboard siding, clover and pine
and diesel in the air, warped vinyl strips
basket-woven in the chain link,

abandoned parakeet cage turned
near the spilled pea gravel, metal door off the hinges
and no bird in sight.
She says: I am thinking on my Daddy,

the year he split the windshield
of a hollowed-out Impala on our property—
how the bees and ivy jumped through the glass
like some kind of loosened spirit,

even as the axels sank into the mud.
She says: everything a body can touch
is always half here and half gone. He says:
I suppose that's true. Around the corner—

broken-down couch on a wraparound porch,
maybe twenty, thirty wind chimes
clustered in the eaves. The long tubes tilt
and rustle, then cease.
Unveiling

On a Friday afternoon in April, as clouds darken the sky, I step off the school bus. A raindrop splashes inside my glasses, I blink, and a trickle of moisture slides down my cheek, reminding me of the last time I cried, fourteen months ago at my grandfather’s funeral. The downpour holds off until we gather our luggage to stand beneath a black metal awning in front of the high school. Three weeks earlier, the Enola High School band stayed with us. Now it’s our turn to stay with them.

I watch the other students scurry with their host families into the parking lot and ride away, splashing through puddles. My host family seems to have abandoned me. I gaze at misty mountains and listen to the downpour drumming on the metal roof. Last kid at the orphanage, I say to myself. Nobody wants the scruffy Jew boy.

“Don’t worry!” the Enola band director shouts through the drumming rain. “All the hosts confirmed this morning! Who’s your family?”

“The Burrells,” I shout over the drumming.

“Oh!” He shakes his head. “April is the cruelest month, breeding lilacs out of the dead land!” He stops and adds, “That’s all I know!”

After a two-hour bus ride—and now this downpour pounding the roof—I’m feeling queasy. I wonder where I’ll end up staying—not with the band director, I hope—and then, from out of the rain, a car races towards us, skids to a stop, and a white-haired little boy hops out. A moment later a stooped lady in a black dress emerges. Her face, framed by gray hair, looks sad and surprisingly young, like a high school student who’s been left back a few years.

The band director shouts, “Hello, Mrs. Burrell!”

“Sorry we’re late,” she calls in a soft voice that somehow cuts through the sound of hammering rain. “Junior can't be with us this
afternoon. He’s at baseball practice. I suppose they’re in the gym now. Junior’s the star pitcher on the team.”

The little white-haired boy grabs my bag, and we hurry to the car. Mrs. Burrell opens the trunk, and the boy throws the bag in, then sits with me in the back seat. He buckles his seatbelt, folds his hands in his lap, and stares straight ahead at his mother’s gray hair.

Mrs. Burrell gazes into the rearview mirror and says, “Buckle up for safety.”

The instant my seatbelt clicks we shoot across the parking lot and then out onto the street, cutting off one car and tailgating another.

“I have trouble driving in the rain,” Mrs. Burrell says, gazing into the rearview mirror at me. “People think I’m silly when I tell them why. It’s because I can’t keep my eyes off the wiper blades. Back and forth, back and forth. They hypnotize me.”

She turns a switch. The wipers stop in the middle of the windshield. She turns the switch again. The wipers disappear.

“I also have trouble taking my eyes off the windshield,” she says, “and the water smearing the glass. When Junior’s with me on a rainy day I let him drive. He loves to drive. Just like Daddy. I’m sorry he couldn’t be here to meet you this afternoon. He’s at baseball practice. I suppose they’re in the gym now. Junior’s the star pitcher on the team. Just like Daddy. Daddy loved this car. He bought it when he was sixteen—one year younger than Junior is now. All those years I kept telling Daddy trade it in, get something newer, but he never could part with this car.”

When Mrs. Burrell speaks to me in the rearview mirror, she takes her eyes off the road for far too long. I have the feeling she could be talking to anyone. Or no one. Or herself. And I wonder if this is really happening. Everything seems surreal, like a dream or a mildly entertaining nightmare. I’ve never been to Enola before. I never even heard of it until the band exchange program. It sounds made up, although I guess all names are made up. Mrs. Burrell swings the car into an old neighborhood. The houses remind me of the green plastic houses in the Monopoly game. She makes a quick left in front of an oncoming car onto a cracked asphalt driveway and slams on the brakes.

“Home sweet home,” she announces as horns blare behind us.

My fingers tremble unfastening the seat belt. I reach for the door handle, but it’s not there, so I slide across the seat and out of the car. The little white-haired boy slams the door shut behind me.

The rain has stopped, and the sun struggles to emerge from behind the clouds. The old ranch house looks diseased—peeling green
paint, gray shingles fallen from the roof into overgrown bushes, clumps of tall weeds in the lawn.

Mrs. Burrell opens the front door, and we're greeted by a picture of Jesus. Then I notice all the photographs on the living room walls. There are a few portraits of the little white-haired boy looking at the camera with a forced, goofy grin. When he was younger, his hair seemed darker. There are many more photographs of the older brother at various ages: scowling down from a pitcher's mound, wielding a bat menacingly, standing a head taller than everyone else in team pictures. He never smiles.

“Follow me to the bedroom,” Mrs. Burrell says with a nervous laugh. We walk down a narrow hallway. Her wet black dress clings to her hips, and for a moment I wonder if she’s leading me to her bed.

“Here we go,” she says, opening a door and stepping aside to let me pass. “You’ll stay in Franklin’s room. Make yourself comfortable. We’ll be in the living room if you need us.”

Dropping my suitcase on the worn carpet, I gaze at a silver crucifix on the wall and count the hours until Sunday afternoon, when I’ll board the bus for the two-hour drive home. I draw a Star of David in the dust on the nightstand, wipe it away, and decide to be sociable.

Mrs. Burrell and little Franklin are sitting together on the living room sofa. As I settle into the chair across from them, she jumps up and says, “Have some cookies,” leaning over me with a serving tray.

I try not to look at her breasts beneath the wet black dress.

“Junior loves my cookies. He eats ’em by the handful. He’s at baseball practice this afternoon. Otherwise he’d be here with us. He’s the star pitcher on the team. Cookies?”

I take two to be polite.

Franklin hops off the sofa and says, “Now can I have a cookie, Ma? You offered ’em to the guest and I’m tired of waiting.” He stuffs one in his mouth and grabs two more. “Junior’s a lefty,” Franklin says, spitting crumbs. “His fastball’s been clocked at ninety-three.”

Almost as fast as your mother drives, I think.

They return to the sofa, and Mrs. Burrell says, “Daddy was Junior’s biggest fan.”

“Me too,” Franklin adds.

“That’s right, dear,” Mrs. Burrell says, tousling Franklin’s silky white hair. “Now that Daddy’s gone, you’re Junior’s biggest fan.”

She turns to me with her rearview mirror gaze and says, “Daddy died on his thirty-fourth birthday. A year ago tomorrow. We never had a chance to give him his presents, those mugs up there on the shelf. WORLD’S GREATEST DAD and WORLD’S GREATEST HUSBAND. See? He would’ve liked those mugs a lot.”
Mrs. Burrell tells stories about her dead husband and Junior. Little Franklin doesn’t seem to mind that he has to listen to the same stories again and again and none of them are about him. At first he seems shy, but soon he warms up and chimes in, adding details and observations.

As Mrs. Burrell starts describing Junior’s perfect game—for the third time—the front door swings open and in walks the hero of the story, wearing a red baseball cap and a warm-up jacket splotched with rain.

“Hi, Junior.”
“Hi, Ma. Hi, Franklin.”

He drops a duffel bag and nods at me. Standing, I wipe my palms on my pants to shake hands, but Junior turns and walks down the narrow hallway. Nice to meet you, I think. Unlike Junior, I was not named after my father. I’ve never heard of a Jewish Junior. I don’t think Jewish boys are supposed to be named after their fathers. But what do I know? I’m not a practicing Jew. My parents aren’t either, although my grandparents were very religious. Both my grandfathers are gone. I was named after my mother’s father, who died before I was born.

“Junior never was what you’d call a chatterbox,” Mrs. Burrell says. “And since Daddy died he talks even less.”

“What about me, Ma?” Franklin asks. “Am I a chatterbox?”

“Yes, Franklin, we’re the chatterboxes of the family, you and me, and when Daddy died your hair turned white and mine turned gray. We’re two peas in a pod.” She tousles his hair, smiles, and turns to me. “Did you know that Junior pitched a perfect game?”

When Mrs. Burrell finishes telling the story, Franklin looks at me and says, “Enola spelled backwards is alone?”

“I didn’t know that.”
“You know what else?”
“What?”

He stands before me and takes a wristwatch from his pants pocket. “This was Daddy’s watch and Ma gave it to me. Now it’s mine. It’s broke, but I like it a lot. You can hold it if you promise not to drop it.”

He offers me the watch with both hands as if he’s passing a holy relic. I pretend to admire it. Behind the cracked crystal, the word Pulsar has been knocked loose and the letter a is impaled on the minute hand, stopped at 7:18 on Friday, April 21.

Junior emerges from the dark hallway. His warm-up jacket has been replaced by an Enola Band sweatshirt, stretched across his barrel chest, but he’s still wearing the same red baseball cap with the white E above the bill.

Outside I notice there’s just one car in the driveway. Someone must have dropped Junior off after baseball practice. I say a short prayer for Mrs. Burrell to let Junior drive, but the sky is clear, no rain in sight, and she opens the driver’s door. Junior rides shotgun and Franklin sits between his mother and brother. The back seat is all mine.

My mom says when I was a toddler, I used to talk non-stop, but for some reason in kindergarten I became quiet. I’m still not much of a talker. Compared to Junior, though, I’m a regular chatterbox, like Mrs. Burrell and Franklin. I decide to start a conversation. “What instrument do you play, Junior?” “Drums.” “Me too,” Franklin and I reply at the same time. Franklin giggles and adds, “I’m pretty good. But Junior’s way better. He’s way better at everything. Mom says perfect practice makes perfect. She says I’ll be good at stuff too. When I get older. If I keep practicing.”

“Junior pitched a perfect game,” Mrs. Burrell says, turning to gaze proudly at her son as she speeds down the road.

Pulling into the Burger King parking lot, Mrs. Burrell says, “Is it okay if we use the drive-through, boys?” Without waiting for an answer, she races ahead and then slams on the brakes. “Shout out your orders, boys.”

After paying for the food and handing the bags to Junior, she says, “Is it okay if we eat while we drive, boys?” Junior opens a Whopper. In his huge hand, it looks like finger food. Mrs. Burrell talks to me through the rearview mirror. “Every Friday, when Daddy came home from work, we drove to Burger King. Daddy always had three Whoppers, two large fries, and a large soda. By the time Junior was ten, he was having the same. Then for dessert, we drove to Dairy Queen. Daddy called it the Royal Bovine Feast. Get it? Burger King and Dairy Queen?”

I recall a time my grandfather took us out to eat. I ordered a hamburger and a milkshake. My grandfather shook his head. Later my dad explained why: milk with meat is not kosher.
The car hugs a wide curve on a deserted road. Suddenly Mrs. Burrell slams on the brakes. I look back to see if we hit something, a small animal maybe, but all I see are skid marks.

“Ma,” Junior says, stuffing his mouth with fries. “You can't stop in the middle of the road.”

Mrs. Burrell pulls over to the shoulder near a roadside memorial and puts the car in park, leaving the engine running. She pushes a straw through the lid of a soda, takes a sip, and studies a white cross surrounded by a mass of colorful flowers.

We eat without speaking until finally Franklin says, “I’m done. Can we get Dairy Queen now?”

“Sure thing,” Mrs. Burrell says, handing him her drink. She puts the car in gear and makes a U-turn. “What a glorious evening,” she announces as the wind rushes in through rolled down windows, messing up our hair. “Same as last year.”

We pull into the Dairy Queen, and Mrs. Burrell says, “Is it okay if we use the drive-through, boys?”

Waiting in line with the engine idling, Mrs. Burrell chatters away. Franklin joins in, while Junior and I listen. After we pick up our cones, I thank Mrs. Burrell for dinner and dessert.

“My pleasure,” she says, looking at me in the rearview mirror. “You should feel honored. You’re the first non-Burrell to have the Royal Bovine feast.”

This time it seems she’s really talking to me.

We roar off into the dusk. The red sun is slipping behind a mountain when I realize we’re missing band rehearsal. We were supposed to meet at the high school, have a pizza party, get to know each other, and then practice for the concert tomorrow night.

I shrug.

Mrs. Burrell slows the car to a stop in the middle of the road and turns off the ignition.

“Ma,” Junior protests. “Don’t.”

“This is where it happened,” she says, looking straight ahead as if hypnotized by windshield wipers.

“Ma. Don’t.”

“Some people put crosses and flowers on the side of the road. Little shrines. But we never did that.”

“Come on, Ma. Let’s go.”

“It was his thirty-fourth birthday. We got him two mugs. WORLD’S GREATEST DAD and WORLD’S GREATEST HUSBAND. Lots of dads and husbands get those mugs. He never saw them, never used them. Not really.”

“Ma. Stop.”
“He always said he wanted to be cremated. That’s where we put his ashes.”

“Ma. Please.”

“We put his ashes in the mugs.”

“Let’s go, Ma. We’re missing band practice.”

“Sometimes I think he loved this car more than me. But not the boys. He loved his boys more than anything. He bought the car when he was sixteen, one year younger than Junior. He used to say he’d keep it forever. Sometimes I almost believed him. Especially the part about forever. He was always so healthy. I thought he’d never die.”

“Come on, Ma.”

“It was Friday, and we were on our way home from the Royal Bovine Feast. I wanted to eat at a restaurant to celebrate Daddy’s birthday, but he insisted on Burger King and Dairy Queen. He said it was a family tradition. He was driving way too fast, pretending to be all excited about opening his presents, acting like he couldn’t wait to see what he was going to get, and then a deer ran out in the road. Daddy swerved and the car flipped . . . and flipped . . . and flipped . . . like a horrible carnival ride that was never going to end. We landed upright in the middle of the field. It was almost a miracle, but not quite. There was hardly a scratch on the kids and me. We always wear our seatbelts. There was hardly a scratch on the car. But Daddy never wore his seatbelt.”

“Ma,” Junior pleads.


“Mrs. Burrell,” I say, trying to sound calm. “We’re on a railroad track.”

“Start the car!” Junior shouts. “Get off the track, Ma!”

Mrs. Burrell doesn’t move.

Junior leans across the front seat and turns the ignition. Nothing happens. He tries again. Nothing. He curses and slams the shifter into park. Before he can turn the ignition again, Mrs. Burrell grabs the keys.

“What are you doing, Ma?”

“Everybody out!” she shouts as the train horn blares again, closer. I reach for the door handle—it’s not there—and scoot over to the other side, still holding my melting cone.

Junior hurries Franklin out of the car, then runs around to the driver’s side, opens the door, and shouts, “Give me the keys!”

Mrs. Burrell tosses them through the open passenger door.
“What are you doing? Get out of the car!”

Mrs. Burrell stares at the field.

Junior fumbles with the seat belt and lifts his mother as she presses her purse to her black dress. He carries her toward Franklin and me.

“Away from the car!” he commands.

We walk to what seems like a safe distance. Junior sets Mrs. Burrell on her feet. Franklin huddles close. I drop my soggy cone in the dirt.

To me it’s all guesswork. Religion. Faith. God. How we got here. Where we’re going. The meaning of it all. If I had to guess, I’d say the Burrells are Baptists. I’m agnostic, a secular Jew. I know almost nothing about the religion of my grandparents. A couple of months ago in February, a year after my grandfather died, we went to the cemetery for the unveiling. A rabbi recited psalms, my father gave a short eulogy, and my uncle removed the cloth that covered the headstone. Then we each placed a pebble on the frozen ground beneath my grandfather’s name.

Now, on a pleasant evening in April, I watch Mrs. Burrell quietly weeping as her son bends close to her ear and whispers. She hugs her purse, sobbing softly. I’ve never heard anyone cry so quietly. Junior strokes his mother’s hair and goes on whispering. It’s none of my business what he’s saying. Maybe he’s reciting his own psalms. Or a eulogy. The train approaches and the horn blares an unbelievably long time, drowning out everything.
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